

FORUM

Does 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 Exclude Women from the Pastoral Office?

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The essay by Dr Lockwood is a further contribution by this journal to the ongoing discussion in the Lutheran Church of Australia on the ordination of women (cf LTJ vol 28, no 3; vol 29, nos 2 & 3).

— Editor

Introduction

The current debate about the ordination of women has prompted me to look again at the prickly passage in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where the apostle says that women are not to speak in the churches. In full, the text reads:

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor 14:34-35, NRSV)

It has long been noted that this apostolic ruling does not readily mesh with 1 Corinthians 11:5, where Paul raises no objection to the involvement of women in the public prayers and prophetic activity of the Corinthian congregation. In chapter 11 Paul only offers advice about the acceptable way for women to wear their hair at worship. The apparent contradiction between 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, especially verse 5, and 14:34-35 has presented New Testament commentators with an exciting challenge.

Of the many attempts to deal with the discrepancy between 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, possibly only three deserve serious attention. Two of these are attempts to harmonise the texts, whereas the third position insists on the stark fact that 1 Corinthians 11:5 and 14:34-35 are contradictory. This paper describes and offers an evaluation of each of the three proposals.¹

The first proposal is that the injunction to silence is not an absolute ban on women speaking in church but a ban on their involvement in the authoritative task of evaluating (*diakrinein*) prophecies. The second proposal is that the ruling does not apply to all women, but only to wives. It was culturally inappropriate in the Greco-Roman world for wives to be engaged in public discussion, especially dispute, with their husbands. The third proposal is that the *mulier taceat*² does not come from Paul's pen. It is inconsistent with the apostle's high regard for women, whose equality with men has been restored in Christ, and whose full participation in all aspects of worship is presupposed elsewhere in 1 Corinthians. Therefore the refusal to permit women to speak must have been a marginal gloss penned by a scribe opposed to women taking a leading role in worship. The note then found its way into the final form of the text. This means that 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is a non-Pauline interpolation.

1. Are women excluded from an office whose occupants evaluate prophecies?

Those who propose the first position claim that the *mulier taceat* is genuinely Pauline, and it applies to all women of all time, young or old, married or unmarried. This position seeks to reconcile chapters 11 and 14 by drawing a clear distinction between prophecy (allowed for women with the gift of prophecy) and the evaluation of prophecy (disallowed). Grudem, for example, says that Paul has no qualms about women exercising the gift of prophecy because prophecy is nothing more than reporting to the congregation what the Lord has revealed to the prophet (239-55). Prophecy does not involve the exercise of authority over men. Prophets are little more than mechanical channels for divine revelations. When Paul tells women to remain silent, Grudem claims, he is prohibiting them from becoming involved in the critical evaluation and discussion that follows the prophetic utterance. Women may prophesy, but they may not weigh (1 Cor 14:29) what has been said. That is an authoritative task given to the leaders of the congregation, who could only be male (cf Kleinig: 79).

A major appeal of this position is that it proposes a smooth connection between verses 29-33 and 34-35. Paul's basic instruction to prophets in verse 29 is followed by two modifications. The first modification is that those who prophesy are to cease prophesying during the time of discussion and evaluation (vv 30-33). The prophecy is not to continue unabated. That would be too disruptive, too chaotic. The second modification (vv 34-35) is that women are to remain silent during the evaluation session. Rather than verses 34-35 coming as 'a bolt from the blue' (Byrne: 62), the ruling has everything to do with the material which precedes it and follows it — the speaking and weighing of prophetic utterances. In other words, the silence of women in worship is not absolute; it is confined to that part (or those parts) of the service when prophecies are weighed. Weighing (*diakrinein*, v 29) prophecies involves careful scriptural interpretation and homiletical application of the Lord's words and deeds. The closest parallel in today's church would be the sermon. It is men's work. It involves the highest exercise of authority in the church. At that point, women are to remain silent in acknowledgment that they are subordinate.

This solution is highly problematical. First, it assumes that in addition to the apostles and prophets there was in fact a higher office of male congregational leaders in the Corinthian churches of Paul's day. But in Paul's list of church positions and grace gifts (1 Cor 12:28), such leaders vested with authority to apply the word of God and the teachings of Jesus in the light of the apostolic tradition are not mentioned.

Secondly, prophecy is far more than mechanical reporting of the Lord's words or other divine revelations, to be distinguished from an alleged office of scriptural interpretation and doctrinal and ethical application which outranks the office of prophet. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 14 those with the gift of prophecy are engaged in catechetical instruction (vv 19, 31), calling people to account for their sins (v 24), proclaiming the reconciling word of God that leads to faith and worship (v 25), and providing Christian encouragement to fellow believers (v 31) — virtually the same activities which would have been engaged in by those holding the hypothetical office of interpretation, teaching, and debate.

Thirdly, there is nothing to suggest that one and the same person could not on one occasion be engaged in giving a prophetic utterance, after which time he or she would be silent for the duration of the evaluation, and then on another occasion be engaged in the joint evaluation of another person's prophecy while that person remained quiet. In fact, Paul's words at verse 29 make it difficult to escape precisely that conclusion: 'Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said'. 'The others' certainly seems to imply the other prophets, among whom are included women, if not the whole congregation.

Fourthly, if Paul had wanted to prevent women from being involved in the weighing of prophecies, he would have said so. In verse 29 he has used the verb to speak (*lalein*) and the verb to weigh (*diakrinein*), each in connection with prophecy. The prophets speak, then they are silent while others weigh their words. All members of the congregation have the right and the privilege to speak, that is, to prophesy (14:5, 24, 31; see 1 Cor 11:5), as long as they have received the gift of prophecy. But at verse 34 Paul does not say that women may not weigh prophecies; he says they may not speak. Given that the two activities have been clearly distinguished in verse 29, it is extremely strange that Paul has not used the verb appropriate to the activity supposedly in mind in verse 34. Whereas they have been included previously, women are now completely excluded. It is a blanket prohibition, not a prohibition which shows signs of making a subtle distinction between the two parts of the service in which the prophets are involved.

2. Does the ruling apply to wives only?

The other chief way of dealing with the inconsistency between 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:34-35 is to argue that Paul is not speaking about women in general but only married women.³ The conclusion is hard to escape in the light of verse 35: 'If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands (*tous idiotous androus*) at home'. Strelan and Pfitzner (3) have shown that *gyne* and *gynaikes* mean wife and wives rather than woman and women in the vast majority of New Testament occurrences. Schüssler Fiorenza (230) says that,

according to Paul, single women were ideally suited to playing a leading role in the worship life of the congregation. Paul advised women to abstain from marriage (7:38), because singleness allowed them to remain totally devoted to the affairs of the Lord. Their loyalties could remain undivided, whereas married women, preoccupied as they were with domestic affairs, had divided loyalties (7:32, 34) and were hence unfit for prominent speaking and teaching positions in the church.

What would Paul have added to verse 35 to make his point clearer for readers of the twentieth century? Would he have said, 'Women may certainly prophesy, but they may not become involved in the biblical evaluation and homiletical application that follows the prophecy'? Or would he have said, 'Wives may not speak authoritatively in worship, but that does not prevent unmarried women from exercising their spiritual gifts to the full in the worship life of the congregation, so long as they abide by the regulations I have put in place'? Of the many arguments advanced against the proposal that Paul is only barring married women from speaking in the churches (Byrne: 64), two are particularly persuasive.⁴ The first is that Paul probably has all women in mind but speaks of wives as representatives of all women. At 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul speaks first of wives, then of women in general. The move from the particular to the general is almost imperceptible. So also in chapter 14 it is a reasonable assumption that the argument moves in the reverse direction, so that the ruling addressed to wives in particular is meant (without saying so *expressis verbis*) to cover women in general.

If wives were the only women forbidden to speak, it is reasonable to assume that Paul would have clarified the distinction he intended. There is little evidence that the unseemly behaviour of wives at church is one of the chief issues Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine Paul singling out married women for discriminatory treatment. Surely he would have had nothing but the highest regard for a married woman such as Priscilla, who is mentioned before her husband Aquila at Acts 18:26 and 2 Timothy 4:19, played a leading role in the expansion of the early church, and was instrumental in tempering the enthusiasm of Apollos with sound doctrinal instruction (Acts 18:26).

3. The *mulier taceat* is a non-Pauline interpolation

The most compelling way of accounting for the problems raised by 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is that the regulation does not come from Paul's hand at all. All attempts to harmonise the *mulier taceat* with 1 Corinthians 11:5 are exercises in wishful thinking. The contradictions are not apparent, but real. At one place women are allowed to speak. At another they are denied permission to speak. And the prohibition is absolute. Apart from proposing that Paul changed his mind, one can only conclude that the prohibition does not express Paul's opinion in the least. Rather, the *mulier taceat* was a marginal note that was incorporated into the text by a copyist who agreed with its ruling.⁵

Arguments in support of this position follow.

a) Textual criticism

Even though no New Testament manuscript omits verses 34-35,⁶ a number of Western manuscripts place them after verse 40 rather than after verse 33. Is this significant in determining the original form of the text?

There are three text critical possibilities⁷. First, some Western copyists may have moved the verses from their original home after verse 33 to the end of the chapter. Secondly, Paul wrote the verses after verse 40, but the majority of copyists moved them forward to a position after verse 33 on the assumption that they fitted there better. Or thirdly, the verses were originally written in the margin of the text by a zealous church member who shared Paul's concern about churchly disorder at Corinth but attached a major share of the blame to women. Marginal glosses often found their way into the biblical text with repeated copying. In this case, some scribes placed the verses after verse 33 because of the connection between words that appear in the *mulier taceat* and words that have already played a major role in chapter 14 ('churches', 'to be silent', 'to speak', and 'to submit'). Scribes of the Western tradition, on the other hand, placed the prohibitive words at the end of the chapter, possibly so that two passages about the behaviour of women in worship could bracket Paul's discussion of worship abuses at Corinth (1 Cor 11-14).

Textual criticism asks which form of the text is more likely to have given rise to the other. With the notable exception of the doxology at Romans 16:25-27, which some manuscripts place after Romans 14:23 and others after Romans 15:33, snippets of biblical text were seldom moved from one place to another. Reverence for the sacred text prevented copyists from handling it so freely. Given that the *mulier taceat* is reproduced by different manuscripts in different places, it is more likely that it did not form part of Paul's original text.

b) Charismata are being compared in 1 Corinthians 14, not men and women

Throughout 1 Corinthians 14 Paul argues consistently and more and more forcibly that the gift of prophecy is superior to the gift of speaking in tongues. He makes distinctions between gifts, not between people. On the other hand, verses 34-35 makes distinctions between people, between women and men. The *mulier taceat* disrupts the theme of the chapter.

c) Paul's theology always has a practical outcome

Paul bases his argument for the superiority of prophecy on its superior benefits. Speaking in tongues only builds up the individual, whereas prophecy encourages and consoles other people and builds up the church. Outsiders will conclude that believers are mad if they hear them speaking in tongues, but prophecy is clear and instructive; it leads strangers to confess their sins and bow down in worship of God. Repeatedly, Paul speaks of the benefits of prophecy. That is the main criterion by which he assesses gifts. If all true theology is practical, and its truth is demonstrated by its practicability, where is such a demonstration found in verses 34-35?⁸ Paul never argues elsewhere for

an ecclesiastical practice without at the same time speaking of its pastoral, ethical, or evangelistic application.

d) Paul's argument flows much better without verses 34-35

If it is true that verses 34-35 come as a rude interruption to the rhetorical progression of chapter 14,⁹ it follows that the argument of the chapter will flow smoothly if verses 34-35 are placed to one side. And that is in fact the case. Paul's concern for order and peace and consistent ecumenical practice (v 33) provides the fitting backdrop for his harsh words denouncing the Corinthians for their narrow and insensitive congregationalism (vv 36-38).

e) It is unprecedented for Paul to demand unqualified silence

The *mulier taceat* differs radically from the injunctions to silence addressed to those with the gifts of tongues and prophecy. The latter only have to be quiet under certain circumstances and for a period of time, whereas the command for women to be silent is absolute and unconditional. It has been said that this is an argument in favour of the placement of the *mulier taceat* after verse 33. The move from partial and temporary prohibitions to this blanket prohibition is an effective shock tactic, a deliberate rhetorical ploy. It is said that the contrast between the kinds of silence required underlines the seriousness of the problem; it shows how eager Paul is to nip the problem in the bud. The issue Paul has been building up to from the outset is the unauthorised and insubordinate speaking of women in worship. But if this were the case, it is strange that the topic should be dropped immediately and not mentioned again for the remainder of the chapter.

f) The prohibition is too bald

It is uncharacteristic of Paul to deal with a major issue so summarily. He invariably makes his case by announcing the topic, developing it by way of sustained argumentation while drawing on the full range of rhetorical tools, and then bringing the topic to a resounding conclusion, usually with an *ad hominem* thrust at his opponents and an appeal to his own apostolic authority.

Conclusion

It is a highly speculative exegesis which claims that the *mulier taceat* has limited application to a males-only office of the early church, which involved interpreting the scriptures, weighing prophecies, and teaching and preaching authoritatively in the church. There is no evidence for the existence of such an office in the New Testament church, no evidence for the claim that women were excluded from this hypothetical office, and no evidence for the claim that prophets (including women) occupied an office that was ranked far lower. When Paul ranks church office holders, prophets are second only to those who occupied the (defunct) office of apostles (1 Cor 12:28). And women are included among the prophets. The other main attempt to resolve the discrepancy between 1 Corinthians 11:5 and 14:34-35 is likewise untenable. The text of 1

Corinthians provides insufficient evidence to support the conclusion that only wives were forbidden to speak at 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

On the other hand, the fact that the ban on women speaking has been transmitted in two places in the text of chapter 14 casts serious doubts on its originality. According to the fundamental principle of textual criticism — which text is more likely to have given rise to the other? — the soundest assumption is that the *mulier taceat* did not commence life after verse 33 nor after verse 40, but as a marginal note written by a hand other than Paul's. That is the best way of accounting for the text's movability. Chief support for this text critical conclusion is that the two verses disturb the carefully developed argument of chapter 14, and the ruling clearly contradicts what Paul says elsewhere in 1 Corinthians about women's public involvement in worship.

But even if it could be irrefutably demonstrated that the *mulier taceat* was from Paul's own hand, its uncertain place in the text makes it impossible to demonstrate that either 'the command of the Lord' (v 37) or Paul's threat of excommunication against those who refuse to abide by his instructions (v 38) refers to the ban on women speaking in church. The evidence (given above) is compelling that Paul speaks of the Lord's command and issues the threat of excommunication for one reason alone, to undergird his regulations for the proper exercise of the gifts of tongues and prophecy in worship, his exclusive concern throughout 1 Corinthians 14.

Notes

1. Other proposals are that speaking in tongues is the kind of speaking which is forbidden to women, or disruptive chattering in the women's section of the congregation (for a comprehensive listing of proposals see Fee: 702-705).
2. *Mulier taceat* ('let the woman be silent') has become shorthand for the ban on women speaking. The Latin manuscripts of the NT, of course, follow the plural forms of the Greek text and so have *mulieres* (women, wives) and *taceant* or *sileant* (let them be silent).
3. This is the position, for example, of E. Schüssler Fiorenza (230) and Strelan and Pfitzner (3, 9-11).
4. The argument that young girls and single women are accorded a status denied to mature married women, if only wives are included under Paul's ruling, carries little weight. It is highly unlikely that a person who was not a mature Christian well versed in the scriptures would be regarded as having the charismatic gift of prophecy. And ultimately, gifts have to do with gracious divine endowment, presumably not age or marital status.
5. Of the authors I consulted, C. K. Barrett, Brendan Byrne, Hans Conzelmann, Gordon Fee, and Nigel Watson argue that the *mulier taceat* is a post-Pauline interpolation.
6. It is puzzling that the NRSV should place brackets around verses 33b-36 rather than verses 34-35, even though the NRSV footnote correctly identifies verses 34-35 as the unit in question. A number of commentators, including Conzelmann, also isolate verses 33b-36 for independent treatment. Neither verse 33b nor verse 36 belong to the *mulier taceat*. Surely the wider church practice Paul speaks of (v 33b)

provides additional support for the worship guidelines of verses 26-33 (so Strelan and Pfitzner: 9), while serving double duty as the ecumenical foundation for what follows, Paul's stinging attack on the individualism and congregationalism of his opponents at Corinth (vv 36-38).

7. For a full technical discussion of the text critical issue, see Fee: 699-702.
8. Certainly, the ban does not lack theological foundation. It is grounded in the law, which calls for the subordination of women; but to what practical or pastoral end? After giving such detailed descriptions of the beneficial effects of prophecy from a pastoral and evangelical perspective, and the negative effects of speaking in tongues, in the *mulier taceat* 'Paul' does nothing more than make a negative value judgment based on contemporary social sensitivities, by saying that it is shameful for women to speak publicly in worship.
9. The argument of 1 Corinthians 14 mounts clearly and consistently. The argument is summarised from the outset (vv 1-5), and all the threads are drawn together in a powerful conclusion (vv 36-40). The argument proper builds in three stages (vv 6-19, 20-25, and 26-33), each of which begins with a phrase containing the word 'brothers'.

Introduction: Without trying to dissuade people from speaking in tongues, Paul shows that prophecy is vastly superior, because prophecy builds up the church and encourages and consoles other people, whereas speaking in tongues only builds up the individual (Summary, vv 1-5).

1. **Foundation of argument:** Prophecy is superior because of its benefits. Due to the clarity and intelligibility of prophecy, the fellow worshipper, especially the outsider, can say amen to the thanksgiving, be built up, and receive clear catechesis. (*nun de adelphoi*, vv 6-19)
2. **Development of argument:** Prophecy is superior to speaking in tongues because of its benefits to outsiders and unbelievers. The mood is no longer descriptive but hortatory. Prophecy involves the reproof of unbelievers that leads to a confession of sin and ultimately the worship that springs from faith. (*adelphoi*, vv 20-25)
3. **Pastoral advice flowing from argument:** Knowing of the eagerness of members to display their *charismata* in worship, Paul provides guidelines for those who wish to speak in tongues and those who wish to prophesy. In both cases, Paul first tells them when and under what circumstances it is appropriate to speak, and secondly when they should keep silent. Once again, Paul's major concern is for the upbuilding and encouragement of other worshippers. By way of conclusion, Paul says that in view of God's concern for peace and harmony, the Corinthians ought to show far greater respect for ecumenical practice in ordering their worship. (*ti oun estin, adelphoi*, vv 26-33)

Conclusion: After castigating the Corinthians for adopting practices that are out of step with the wider church, mocking the 'prophets' who fail to see that his regulations ordering the exercise of gifts in the congregation come as a command of the Lord, and even threatening with excommunication those who buck his authority, Paul returns to his main theme — the proper exercise of the gifts of prophecy and tongues in the context of well-regulated worship services. Appropriately, the word *adelphoi* reappears in Paul's concluding remarks [v 39] (vv 36-40).

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