

Women in Leadership Examined in 1 Corinthians

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Those who promoted limited roles for women in Church leadership point to biblical mandates that, if followed exactly, would almost entirely diminish women having any ecclesiastical authority, but owing to the prominent roles of many women in scripture the interpretation of those mandates is suspect. Yet it is insufficient to provide examples of great women in ministry. One could point to the example of Lot to dismiss universal commands on incest such as Lev 18:7, for scripture declares Lot to be a righteous man (2 Peter 2:7). On top of using examples we must examine the commandments employed to justify limiting women's role in ministry. The harsh words of 1st Corinthians 14:34-35 are so extremely restricting that, if taken literally, interdict all woman preachers, pastors, evangelists and possibly even worship leaders, but provide espousers of Biblical patriarchy a foundational verse. If this verse holds weight for the catholic church, then paradigms are an inadequate basis for forming biblically based dogma. Yet if we examine the context of Paul's didactic we can reconstruct his intent more accurately. Firstly, we must examine the historical setting of the Corinth in order to illuminate the problems Paul is addressing. Secondly, Paul clearly bases his commands on Old Testament imperatives, and a thorough examination of these verses will reveal a more subtle approach. Thus Paul's commands on women preaching may not be universal didactics, but common sense restrictions applied to a limited situational scope.

1st Corinthians was written by St. Paul to the Corinthian Church in order to address a series of problems arising in the nascent congregation. Many Epistles, like 1st Corinthians, are designed for individual audiences, who were facing unique problems (Klein 2004 427). 1st Corinthians was written in response to a letter by the Corinthian Church, which is referred to as Corinthians A. Scholars maintain that this letter is extant (Klein 2006 422). For this reason 1st Corinthians reads like a checklist against problems in the Church (Klein 2006 436). Corinthians A is a sender letter; it gives in-depth background details to familiarize the recipient with their situation. 1st Corinthians is a response letter; there will be sections of the letter that are in direct response to unique situations. Paul comments on situations without relaying the background details, as that would be redundant. Corinthians A would be an invaluable tool of

interpretation as it would paint a detailed background, but in its absence we need to recognize that Paul's comments are in responses to an initial letter.

Background of 1st Corinthians 14

Many Biblical commentators believe that 1st Cor 14:34-35 was responding to a unique situation, where a group of unruly women were loudly interrupting the church service. Some imagine a group of women were posing questions that would be “ineffective in edifying the entire church.” (Barton 1999 213) But this is an assumption. One could create a theoretical background for any commandment that could potentially invalidate them. As Francis Watson says “This vivid and imaginative portrayal of ‘the situation at Corinth’ derives, once again, from the hermeneutical assumption that interpretation must be controlled by a hypothetical ‘background’ reconstructed by the interpreter - even where the text itself is silent about any such background.” (Watson 2003 45) We must be careful not to fabricate a worldview that would abrogate Paul's words in order to suit our ideals. With this in mind it would be preferable to carefully recreate Paul's and the Corinthian's circumstances before interpreting.

A second popular view is that 1st Cor 14:34-35 is a later, non-pauline, interpolation as well as the parallel Pauline command in 1st Tim 2:9-15 (Klein 2004 498). Even Gordon Fee, who admits that 1st Cor 14:34-35 is present in all known manuscripts, dismisses the Pauline authorship of these verses (Fee 1987 699). The majority of Fee's research in his commentary is displaying evidence against Pauline authorship. Fee argues that these verses are inconsistent with Pauline style and the theology and is “not binding for Christians” (Fee 1987 708). Without commenting on the validity of questioning the authorship of 1st Cor 14:34-35, bringing its authoritative basis into question provides an easy justification for repudiating their supposed anti-egalitarian stance. There are several verses, and even entire books, where the traditional view on origins and authorship are challenged. Fee's methodology could potentially invalidate entire sections of authoritative scripture. It is shaky ground to depend on these challenges to support our theology. For the purposes of this study we will assume that Paul was the author of 1st Cor 14:34-35.

To begin our reconstruction of the Corinthian Church we should ask why would Paul want the women to be silent? Is there something unique about Corinthian women that may have caused them to be

censored in Church? Corinth was a major economic and cultural center of the Roman Empire. Historically, Corinth was notorious for its sex industry. It had a large population of prostitutes. In Corinth, like all seaports where money and women were readily available, sexual sin abounded (Fee 1987 3). It might be compared to a modern-day Bangkok. So much so, that the term “Corinthian girl” was a synonym for a prostitute. Famed geographer Strabo made exaggerated claims of there being one thousand temple prostitutes in Aphrodite’s shrine (Carson 2005 420). By the time Paul wrote his famous letter Corinth's was not as decadent as in Strabo's day, but undoubtedly the sex industry was still rampant. This may be why Paul's only commandment on avoiding prostitution is contained in Corinthians (1st Cor 6:15-16). The fact that the Church has historically sought out the destitute and disenfranchised would make it likely that it paid particular attention to prostitutes and hence had converted many from whoredom.

The Women of the Corinthian Church

Paul's statements seem to be in line with the general sentiment of chauvinist Greece, but there is evidence to suggest that the Corinthian Church held a higher view of women. Clement of Rome, a [student of Paul \(Phil 4:3\)](#), wrote an epistle to the Corinthians where he writes a short homily to those who bravely sacrifice themselves for others. Particular attention is paid to the female heroes of faith such as the Deuterocanonical character, Judith, the Nationalistic Esther (Clement of Rome, CHAP. LV), and even closes with a synopsis on the former prostitute Rahab stating that “there was not only faith, but prophecy, in this woman.” (Clement of Rome, CHAP. XII) One could derive that Clement was emphasizing the role of women played in the Church to highlight their abilities to a sexist congregation, but these character profiles were in amongst portrayals of men who achieved similar feats. They seem to be part of the natural flow of the letter and certainly not it's crux; Clement seems to take it for granted that women were viewed as an integral part of Church ministry and seems to assume the Corinthians would not find this unorthodox. Clement's letter gives us a glimpse into the Corinthian worldview and suggests that in the church at least women were held in high regard.

Holding women in high regard and seeking out the destitute would lead to a substantial number of former prostitutes in the church. These women would have characteristics of women from the sex industry,

such as ignorance. There has always been a connection between low education and prostitution (Kara 2009 30-31), but this may have taken a more organized turn in Corinth. As the sex trade was so prevalent we can imagine that women were uneducated as a principle. Education serves as an antidote to prostitution, so the influential pimps may have discouraged the women being educated. This would not have been hard as women were generally viewed as inferior to men in Greek society, and were barred from participating in political affairs (Ackerman 2008 167), but did have a role in religious matters, (Blundell 1995 160) which is not surprising considering the huge role of female temple prostitutes. The suppression of women was not universal, but they were not looked favorably upon. The Greek playwright Sophocles reiterates a Pauline like statement when declaring, "Silence confers grace upon a woman." (Barton 1999 212) If common women were given minimal opportunity for education and expression, it is almost certain ladies of ill repute were given considerably less. So one unique element of Corinthian women would be their lack of education.

Another common trait amongst people who were in the sex trade is post-traumatic stress disorder, which would heavily affect their social skills. Recent studies show that the overwhelming majority of people who have worked in the sex industry experience post-traumatic stress disorder, even if their vocation was in a legal or organized capacity (Farley 2003 36). A woman with post-traumatic stress disorder will experience depression, difficulty regulating emotions, altered self-perception and shifts in beliefs about the nature of the world (Farley 2003 58). The Corinthian Church would be well acquainted with the manifested psychological problems associated with former prostitutes. In a Church setting, people with post-traumatic stress disorder may have had emotional outbursts during Church services, they would be very needy of people's time, and their low education and shifting worldview would lead to a need for constant teaching and correction.

Exegesis of 1st Corinthians 14

Now that we have established some unique characteristics of a class of women in Corinth, Paul's statements take on a different light. We will reexamine these characteristics in relation to the text later. 1st Cor 14, where the comments in question are contained, is Paul's discourse on orderly worship where Paul

lays out suggested guidelines for the expression of spiritual gifts. It is important to note Paul is not condemning the expression of any gift but correcting methods of expression that diminish their natural usefulness or cause disruption. The instruction appears to be particular in nature; circumstances such as v. 26-31 would not be necessary to declare to the general church. Verse 30 even has Paul instructing on the concatenation of seating arrangements for potential Prophets. 1st Corinthians 14 reads as a checklist, where Paul seems to be responding to a vice list and advising tailor-made solutions, one can imagine Paul is systematically going through Corinthians A. The advice Paul offers could all be classified of “rules of silence,” as all the rules involve the cessation of verbal utterances for certain individuals at certain times. In fact Paul uses the same word “σιγάω” to ask the Corinthians to be silent on three occasions (v. 28, 30, 34). Even after some stringent rules on the expression of the gifts of the Spirit, Paul ends the chapter with a befitting summation “be eager to prophecy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.” Despite berating the Corinthian Church for abuses, Paul wants them to pursue such practices with the proper application. Tongues and Prophecy are still to be desired and celebrated but also regulated.

The regulation of expressions of gifts would be important in a congregation where many people have emotional problems. People with severe emotional problems, brought on by post-traumatic stress disorder, often manifest their issues in flamboyant and disruptive expressions. Expressions of Pentecostalism are often accused of being outlandish, so it is germane to ask if elements of the body accentuate this negative reputation. Dr Charlie Self describes this phenomenon in the modern church when connecting women with emotional problems with hyper-pentecostalism. “Hyper-pentecostals are usually women with bad marriages. Often women are compensating for deep emotional needs with hyper charismatic experiences. The problem with that is if you're a semi-intelligent person it imprints you” (Self 4 mins). 1st Corinthians 14 is responding to hyper-pentecostalism practices; and it fits perfectly that women with emotional issues are present in Corinth and are notorious for this practice.

Verses 34-35 seem to be a departure from the flow of thought; Paul was correcting the Corinthians for specific infringements of sought-after gifts and then makes blanket statements that do not relate to spiritual gifts or Corinth in particular. The initial comments offered by Paul were not something that would

affect the Church at large, as most did not have the same issues, but telling women to be silent would affect all churches as all churches had women. Paul is sticking with the topic of “rules of silence,” but appears to have abandoned his topic of expression of Spiritual gifts particular to Corinth.

There is nothing in v. 35 to suggest that Paul was discussing a distinct group of women. Paul appears to be emphatically creating precedence by essentially repeating himself first in the positive: “Women should remain silent in the churches.” And then in the negative: “They are not allowed to speak.” This double-punch seems to really get a point across. Paul is not suggesting modesty or restraint; he seems to be unreservedly instructing women to be entirely silent. The text takes an interesting turn when women are told they “must be in submission.” This term implies the women are married, for submission would imply submission to their husband. The word submission is “ὑποτάσσω” and when it occurs elsewhere in the New Testament with specific reference to a woman, it always refers to a married woman who was to be subject to her husband (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1, 5). (Walvoord 1983 1 Cor 14:33:40) The word translated as women, γυνή, is also translated as wife (1 Cor 5:1, 1 Cor 7:2) In Corinthians, Paul refers to women who were never married as virgins, (1 Cor 7:34) and Paul also says if women have a question they should ask their own husbands. So it would appear to be just addressing married women.

Quoting the Old Testament

This instruction is qualified in typical Pauline fashion of appealing to the Law. The question is, what Law is Paul referring to? Typically Paul cites the Law he is relying on but in this case he appears to neglect doing so, leaving the future interpreters with a conundrum. Most commentators believe that Paul was employing Gen 3:16 as the Law, others believe he was basing his authoritative stance from Numb. 30:3–12 or Genesis 2:21–23 but none of these Laws are related to silence in the Church. Paul is in fact pulling from the Deuterocanonical book of Sirach. 1st Cor 14:34 has essentially three commandments that can all be found in Sirach:

1. Women should remain silent in the churches. (Sirach 26:18)
2. They are not allowed to speak, (Sirach 32:10)
3. Be in submission (Sirach 25:30)

Although Paul generally pulls from one verse at a time in this case he pulls three from a single book.

Sirach talks at length about order in Church, social engagements and women's position in those instances. Sirach is often called *Liber Ecclesiasticus*, which is Latin for *Church Book*. It is aptly named because of the extensive use the Church made of this book in matters of morality and behavior in the Church. (NAB 1997 699) Sirach reads like the book of Proverbs for the Church. It gives us lists of what to do in certain Church situations, so it would seem very natural that Paul would consult and quote this book for the Corinthian situation.

As shown, there are several commands in Sirach that are particularly apposite to Paul's situation. Firstly there is Sirach 26:18: 'A silent and loving woman is a gift of the Lord; and there is nothing so much worth as a mind well instructed.' This Proverb has several parallels with the Corinthian situation, firstly, the surrounding verses show it is speaking of wives, secondly, it promotes silence with women, and thirdly, it promotes learning for women (Sirach wants women to be well instructed and Corinthians wants women to learn from asking their husbands). The presence of the word *silence* in both texts is interesting, because in Sirach it is not telling women to be silent specifically in Church, it is speaking generally. Common sense dictates Sirach was not suggesting it is positive for women to be permanently mute. Silence in this instance likely represents a type of modesty or submission. Silent and modest speech is promoted in 36:23 "If there be kindness, meekness, and comfort, in her tongue, then is not her husband like other men." Sirach also promotes the concept of a submissive wife in 25:30 "A woman, if she have superiority, is contrary to her husband." We can only assume that the word "silence" in 26:18 is speaking to counteract a usurping or immodest behavior that Sirach chastises. This may be why the New American Bible translates silence as "governed speech." Paul would have recognized the absurdity of taking *silence* literally, so when he quotes Sirach Paul would be doing so by using the word "silence" to demote usurping or immodest behavior.

Sirach speaks in great detail about social and church etiquette. Paul pulled from these instructions in order to remedy the Corinthian situation. Sirach even talks about the art of listening in chapter 32, where he advises "Hear in silence, and for thy reverence good grace shall come to thee." (v. 9). The thrust of 32:9-14 is being modest in speech. Sirach says we should fake ignorance as opposed to cutting others off,

and to rarely speak in company of elders (32:12). If Paul was depending on Sirach in telling women not to speak he may have borrowed from Sirach 32:9 where people are told to “speak scarcely”. If this is so, Paul was not demanding women to be entirely hushed, but to avoid loquaciousness during Church or during the Sermon.

Restraint and Education in Corinth

1st Corinthians 14:35 opens with the enlightening instructions on how to educate women. It is important that Paul wants the women to learn, but the method enlightens us. The women are not told to ask a Deacon or Teacher or scripture, they are told to “ask their husbands.” The fact that the women are not instructed to ask an expert may show the caliber of their question. If Paul believes all their layman husbands were able to answer their queries then they were probably simplistic. As we have previously shown the Corinthian Church almost certainly hosted a large population of uneducated women, so their questions would have been elementary. Women asking rudimentary questions may have held up the Church services. As we have also shown women with emotional problems exhibit shifts in beliefs about the nature of the world (Farley 2003 58). If women such as this were asking questions, their questions may be disordered and representative of an unstable worldview. The public venue of Church was not the place for such emotion maundering, nor is it today. One can imagine the frustration of constant interruptions of an emotional or elementary nature that do not educate or edify the masses, and the need to censure such activity.

Paul's reaction to women speaking in Church seems unnecessarily harsh by deeming it “disgraceful,” but constant interruptions may have greatly upset the natural flow and order of the Church service. The women who were continually exhibiting interruptive behavior were disgracing the Preacher. We have already seen in Sirach 32:12 that we are not to be garrulous when we are learning. A woman violating these rules would embarrass herself, her husband, and the Preacher. With this in mind we can understand Paul's severe proclamation.

Practical Application in for Other Nations

Today there are many nations that parallel the social problems that faced the Corinthian Church; one example would be the post-soviet nation country of Moldova. The Moldovan Church uses 1 Cor 14:35 to bar women from Pastoral ministries, but it is incorrect to say that they are misreading scripture. In fact, they are likely adopting the principles of 1st Corinthians 14 aptly. The Moldovan Church is well acquainted with situations such as those in Corinth. Poor education of women in Moldova is rampant, tens of thousands of women were victims of human trafficking into prostitution, also alcoholism and domestic abuse are major issues for many wives and children in the Moldovan household. Their situation is not dissimilar to that of Corinth. Moldova has a huge population of women that require special private attention. These women have issues that the Church gladly addresses in a private forum but would be inappropriate for discussion. If women had freedom to air those issues in the Public forum during service chaos would ensue. The current situation is problematic, but ensures order and appropriate expression in Church rules like those found in 1st Cor 14 are adopted.

As the social situation improves in Moldova, the ratio of women who can preach and teach to those who cannot will increase, so that the male dominated hierarchy will not need to be as wary of women in leadership. At present, they are well acquainted with women who express themselves in a manner resembling those in Corinth. As education becomes open to all and alcoholism is replaced with economic opportunity, women's roles will transform from being forlorn and perilous to ambitious and prosperous. As this happens, the Moldovan Church will encounter fewer examples of women who exhibit reasons to bar women from leadership and more women who display undeniable giftings. Women who display outstanding abilities will pioneer a new standard for the Church and the number of women who need to remain silent will diminish. A few decades after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, Clement of Rome wrote to comment on how the situation had improved in Corinth, "you instructed your wives to do all things with a blameless, becoming, and pure conscience, loving their husbands as in duty bound; and you taught them that, living in the rule of obedience, they should manage their household affairs becomingly, and be in every respect marked by discretion." (Clement of Rome, CHAP. I)

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