



ANTIOCH

GOING DEEPER: I CORINTHIANS 14.34-35

“The women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”

If lifted out of their context in Paul’s letter to the 1st-century church at Corinth, these verses would seem straightforward and easy to understand and apply. But in context they seem to make no sense whatever, and serious students of God’s Word have offered no satisfactory explanation for what Paul could have meant by including them here. Indeed, the extent to which these verses are contradictory to the rest of Paul’s writings has led some to believe that they represent not Paul’s own claims; rather, he is here quoting some of the Corinthians. On this view, all of Paul’s own instructions (before and after this quotation) are intended to refute this false belief within the Corinthian church. There is, however, a better and simpler explanation.

The seemingly intractable problem is that these words and sentiments are directly contrary to Paul’s beliefs about women in Christ as expressed throughout his letters, as seen in his own ministry experience, and as articulated in the argument in this letter of which they are allegedly a part.

For Paul, Christ’s redemptive work on the cross restored (among other things) women’s equality with men as made in the image of God and as heirs of eternal life, of Christ’s kingdom, and of all the benefits associated with that kingdom. In a succinct summary statement of this understanding, he writes to the church in Galatia that, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in

Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:28-29). In Ephesians 2, Paul describes Christ as having created a new humanity, one that is neither divided nor stratified by traditional roles of gender, ethnicity, or social status. And in chapter 12 of the letter before us, Paul's many-members-one-body metaphor is likewise intended to establish the equal importance of all believers to the work and worship of the church.

Paul's view of the equality of women in Christ had very practical implications in his own ministry. From the book of Acts and Paul's numerous letters, we learn of many women with whom he worked closely in ministry, and several of these are mentioned specifically in the context of teaching or prophesying. Some, including Junia (Rom. 16:7) and Claudia (II Tim. 4:21), are mentioned as fellow prisoners of Paul's. He refers to others as co-laborers, including Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3), Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom. 16:12), Apphia (Philemon 1:2), Chloe (I Cor. 1:11), and Priscilla (Rom. 16:3-5). Priscilla is also the leader of a house church (I Cor. 16:19), as are Nympha (Col. 4:15), Mary (Rom. 16:6), and Junia (Rom. 16:7). And Paul was acquainted with Philip's four daughters, each of whom was a prophetess (Acts. 21:9).

The two verses at issue are imbedded in a long argument, extending from chapter 11 through chapter 14, which is about how to use the gifts of the Spirit in an orderly manner during church gatherings. Toward the beginning of this argument (11:2-16), Paul's concern is with the physical appearance of some of those—men and women—who were praying aloud and prophesying during the corporate worship of the church in Corinth. Men, by wearing their hair long, and women, by wearing their long hair loose rather than fastened as a covering on their heads, were sending (given the culture of the time) messages of promiscuity. Paul's instructions here are not that women (or men) should cease praying aloud or prophesying, but that when they do so they should wear their hair in a manner that doesn't send mixed signals about their sexual morality.

In chapter 14—the very chapter in which these inexplicable verses are found—all believers are encouraged by Paul to prophesy (in vv. 1 and 5), to speak in tongues (v. 5), and to teach (v. 26). And in verse 39, all believers (brothers and sisters) are encouraged to earnestly desire the gift of prophesy. How can women prophesy, teach, or speak in tongues if they are made to

remain silent? Why would Paul encourage sisters in Corinth to desire these gifts, and then turn around and prohibit them from using them? Why is it (in 14:35) disgraceful for a woman to speak at all when (in 11:5) her prophesying is dishonorable only if she is wearing her hair in a seductive way?

Paul's arguments are often difficult for the English reader. They can be long, thorough, and complex. Added to this is the fact that we moderns are unfamiliar with some of the specific situations and problems that these arguments were written to address. Nonetheless, as we study such arguments and learn more about the relevant cultures and conditions, we discover both the brilliance and cohesion of Paul's writing. In addition, we believe that Paul's writing was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and so we expect to find cohesive and cogent argumentation. All of this is true of I Corinthians 11-14—except that 14:34-35 present a jarring inconsistency, not merely disrupting the train of thought but striking a disquieting note of complete incongruity. If Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, had actually included these words, he would have been guilty of contradicting himself and undermining everything else he had written.

But besides all of the inconsistencies already identified, there are at least two other compelling reasons for questioning whether these two verses were written by Paul. He writes (in v. 37) that "the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord." What ought to be clear is that this claim cannot apply to verses 34-35, since nowhere do we find Jesus himself teaching that women must remain silent in any assembly. To the contrary, Jesus went out of his way to speak with and seek the opinions of women of all sorts—even in public assemblies—and to encourage them to actively participate in his kingdom movement.

In addition, verse 34 appeals to "the Law" in support of the prohibition on women speaking and remaining in submission. Such an appeal in itself is characteristic of Paul, whose familiarity with the Torah was unsurpassed, and who was a master of tying the principles of the new covenant to those of the old (either by way of fulfillment or by way of contrast). But in every other case in which Paul appeals to "the Law," it is obvious to Bible scholars exactly which Old Testament passage Paul has in mind. As regards this claim ("women should keep silent and remain in submission"), there is not a single passage from the Torah that has even been proposed as possibly constituting support for it.

The question of the authenticity of a portion of the biblical text falls within the science known as textual criticism. For textual critics, it is customary to differentiate the available evidence into two categories, internal and external. All of the problems associated with I Corinthians 14:34-35 that we have already discussed constitute powerful (some might say overwhelming) internal evidence against the authenticity of these two verses. The question then becomes whether there is any external evidence— aspects of the manuscripts themselves—that would support the possibility that these verses were added by someone other than Paul.

At first glance, the external evidence is in favor of the authenticity of these verses. Every known extant copy of the Bible that includes the first letter to the Corinthians contains these verses. To put it the other way, we have no extant copies of this letter that omit these two verses entirely. But a closer examination is quite suggestive. Some old manuscripts place these two verses where they appear in our modern Bibles (after v. 33); but in other old manuscripts they appear after what we call verse 40 (at the end of chapter 14).

It is possible that Paul included these verses where they appear in our Bibles, and that some early scribe moved them down to the end of the paragraph. Alternatively, Paul may have included them at the end of the paragraph, and some early scribe subsequently moved them up to where they now appear. Neither of these scenarios is likely, though, since neither alleviates any of the many problems we have already identified and there is no plausible explanation for why any scribe would see a reason to change their positioning. In other words, the idea that they were authentic but moved by a scribe exacerbates already intractable problems.

This means that it is very likely that the two verses in question were originally found in the margin, not in the body of Paul's letter, and that they were subsequently moved into the body during the copying process. This still leaves two possibilities, however. It is possible that Paul added them as an afterthought, but found no room for them within the body of the text. This scenario is also highly unlikely. For one thing, it doesn't explain all the inconsistencies and incongruities that we have already identified. In addition, papyrus like that on which the original of this letter would have been written was quite valuable, and the writers of the New Testament would have utilized all the space available to them. That is, the scholarly

consensus is that margins are an aesthetic technique that arose some time after the completion of the autographs of the New Testament.

The remaining, and only plausible, scenario is that these verses represent a marginal note or gloss penned by an early scribe. He may have meant it as an editorial comment, never intending it to be ascribed to Paul. And since the timing of this gloss was almost certainly before the process of canonization had begun, such an editorial comment would not have been considered (in the mind of the scribe making it) sacrilegious tinkering. Subsequent scribes who found it, however, would have had the dilemma of whether or not to include it and, if so, where. And those who, by that time, realized that what they were copying was not just an important letter but actual Scripture, were much more likely to include than to omit such a gloss simply on the possibility that it was original and belonged.

The internal and external evidence already discussed would seem to be more than sufficient to cause textual critics—and the editors of our English versions—to conclude that these two verses do not belong in the Bible. But because there are no known ancient copies that are entirely lacking them, editors are reluctant to take the obvious step of expunging them. There is, however, good evidence that at least one such copy existed early in church history.

Dated at about AD 547, Codex Fuldensis remains one of the earliest extant Latin translations (and one of the earliest extant copies in any language) of the letter that we know as I Corinthians. It was commissioned by Bishop Victor of Capua, who himself made editorial comments directly on the finished copy. Although it contains the two dubious verses, it also includes comments that indicate Bishop Victor's awareness of one or more earlier and, in his opinion, better manuscripts that did not contain them.

Editorial marks that appear in Codex Vaticanus have likewise been interpreted as indicating that the scribe who made them (Scribe B, to textual critics) believed them to be a gloss that was incorrectly inserted into the text. Dated to about AD 325, Codex Vaticanus is considered to be the earliest known extant copy of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and it is in Greek, the language in which Paul wrote the letter.

In summary, we have evidence of three ancient variants with regard to these verses. One is their placement between verses 33 and 36; another is their placement after verse 40; the third is their not being in the passage at all. Furthermore, the evidence for the variant without these verses is just as early as that for the other two. Since both of the variants that include these verses present intractable problems associated with trying to explain both the external evidence and internal evidence, the only reasonable conclusion is that these verses were not written by Paul and do not belong in our New Testaments.

This conclusion—that what we call verses 34 and 35 were not written by Paul, do not belong in his first letter to the Corinthians, and are not Scripture—provides a satisfactory explanation for all of the relevant evidence. Without these added verses, I Corinthians 11-14 stands as a well-connected and consistent argument, one that also coheres with Paul's overall theology, his view of the church, and his own experience of ministry. Acknowledging that they don't belong alleviates the problems of direct contradictions, of the inaccurate citing of the Torah, and of the inappropriate appeal to a command of Jesus. Recognizing that they were added by someone other than Paul also provides the uniquely adequate explanation for the fact that they appear in different places in different manuscripts.

We should, of course, be reluctant to simply excise entire verses that we find in our Bibles, and a great deal of care must be taken in cases where we do. Nonetheless, there is plenty of precedent, in the form of other cases where textual critics have chosen to remove entire verses, deeming them to be inauthentic and unlikely to have been found in the autograph. As just one of several examples, in some modern English translations (including the ESV, NIV, and NRSV), chapter 5 of John's Gospel goes straight from verse 3 to verse 5. Textual critics (and editors) have concluded that the verse 4 that traditionally appeared here was likely added by an early scribe and subsequently became fixed in many subsequent copies.

In the case of John 5:4, the internal evidence is not nearly as compelling as it is with regard to I Corinthians 14:34-35. The traditional John 5:4 (which can still be found in the KJV and NKJV) serves as a clarification or explanation of the preceding verse; neither its inclusion nor its omission has any significant effect upon the meaning of the narrative of which it is (or is not) a part. By contrast, the dubious verses in I Corinthians 14 not only alter but completely contradict the message otherwise contained in the argument to which they have been

added. No harmful or unjust policies have been established on the basis of the traditional inclusion of John 5:4. But I Corinthians 14:34-35 have been wielded to promote harmful, unjust policies that have silenced women and denied them full participation in the worship and work of the church. And those policies are and always have been exactly contrary to the message that Paul's long argument to which they were added was intended to convey. It is time for every follower of Christ to accept that the words of I Corinthians 14:34-35 are not a part of Scripture and should have no part in our understanding of the gospel or in the ordering of our churches.