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## The Women's "Speaking" at Corinth (1 Cor 14:34): Does Paul Limit Disruptive Speech or Wrongful Teaching of the Word of God?

John G. Nordling

Paul states that the women at Corinth "are not permitted to speak [οὐ . . . ἐπιτρέπεται λαλεῖν], but should be in submission" (1 Cor 14:34, ESV).<sup>1</sup> But what is the context surrounding the statement?<sup>2</sup>

### Disruptive Speech?

Here a wide range of possibilities exist, extending from the plausible to the more speculative. For example, the apostle could be barring the women from mimicking the ecstatic frenzy of certain pagan cults.<sup>3</sup> Or Paul could be trying to prevent some form of disruptive speech: "The Corinthian women were publicly contradicting or embarrassing their husbands by asking questions about a particular prophecy or tongue."<sup>4</sup> Or the apostle could have been thinking about the tendency of women to

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical texts are translated by the author.

<sup>2</sup> The present study was undertaken at the request of a Lutheran pastor in our sister church in Brazil (the Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil, IELB), which recently addressed this topic: "CTRE – Documento de Estudo Ordenação de Mulheres para o Ministério Pastoral?" The initials CTRE refer to Comissão de Teologia e Relações Eclesiais, that commission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil which produces official documents on different topics in theology—roughly equivalent to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

<sup>3</sup> Richard and Catherine Kroeger, "Pandemonium and Silence at Corinth," in *Women and the Ministries of Christ*, ed. R. Hestenes and L. Curley (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), 49–55; Catherine Kroeger, "Strange Tongues or Plain Talk," *Daughters of Sarah* 12 (1986): 10–13. "As the law says" (1 Cor 14:34) would then refer to *Roman* law since, as the Kroegers point out, there were a number of legislative attempts to regulate religious frenzy generated by the cults of Dionysus/Bacchus. See Linda L. Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 198 n. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church*, 160. See also C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 332; W. F. Orr and J. A. Walther, *I Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 312–313; Daniel C. Arichea, "The Silence of Women in the Church: Theology and Translation in 1 Corinthians 14.33b–36," *The Bible Translator* 46, no. 1 (January 1995): 105; Ann Jervis, "1 Corinthians 14:34–35: A Reconsideration of Paul's Limitation of the Free Speech of

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chatter (or gossip) during worship, and thus disturb those around them.<sup>5</sup> Or a possibility increasingly making the rounds in some circles is that certain *male* members of the Corinthian congregation were preventing women from more active participation in the speaking ministries of the church by appealing to a biblical (or cultural) tradition of female submission.<sup>6</sup> This possibility has proven attractive to critics who suppose Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 the (hostile) Corinthian view that women were not to speak in the assemblies—countered in 1 Corinthians 14:36 by the apostle’s own more egalitarian stance toward women exhibited elsewhere (e.g., Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 11:5, 13).<sup>7</sup>

These featured views—and possibly more could be added—have to do with Paul’s attempt to limit the women’s disruptive “speaking” at Corinth. And that possibility has injected all kinds of plausible-sounding nonsense into the interpretation of verse 34—such as the possibility that Paul was responding to disrespectful women learners who may have been whispering (or at least talking out of turn) during the public instruction, a not unlikely scenario even today.<sup>8</sup> However,

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Some Corinthian Women,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 58 (1995): 60–73; Craig S. Keener, “Learning in the Assemblies: 1 Corinthians 14:34–35,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 164–170.

<sup>5</sup> G. Engel, “Let the Woman Learn in Silence, II,” *Expository Times* 16 (1904–1905): 189–190; S. Scott Bartchy, “Power, Submission and Sexual Identity among the Early Christians,” in *Essays on New Testament Christianity: A Festschrift in Honor of Dean E. Walker*, ed. C. Robert Wetzel (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1978), 68–70; Keener, “Learning in the Assemblies,” 166–167.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Neal Flanagan and Edwina Snyder, “Did Paul Put Down Women in 1 Cor. 14:34–36?,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 11 (1981): 10–12; Chris U. Manus, “The Subordination of the Women in the Church: 1 Cor. 14:33b–36 Reconsidered,” *Revue africaine de théologie* 8 (1984): 183–195; David Odell-Scott, “Let the Women Speak in Church: An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b–36,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 13 (1983): 90–93; David Odell-Scott, “In Defense of an Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34–36: A Reply to Murphy-O’Connor’s Critique,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17 (1987): 100–103; Linda M. Bridges, “Silencing the Corinthian Men, Not the Women,” in *The New Has Come*, ed. A. T. Neil and V. G. Neely (Washington, D.C.: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1989), 40–50.

<sup>7</sup> Thus, Charles H. Talbert, “Biblical Criticism’s Role: The Pauline View of Women as a Case in Point,” in *The Unfettered Word: Southern Baptists Confront the Authority-Inerrancy Question*, ed. Robison B. James (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 62–68.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., “While the worship service tends to be a fairly staid affair in more traditional churches (and so an unlikely context for talking), as an instructor I inevitably encounter one or two people in Sunday school classes who constantly whisper to their spouse or friend the entire time. I also have students (both male and female) who do this during class. Most are simply asking questions of the person sitting next to them and are totally unaware of how disruptive their activity is to the instructor and to those around them. When the volume gets above a whisper, it is hard not to attach the label *disrespectful* to the talking—even though the whisperers involved may be oblivious to the impact on those around them. So it is easy for me to see why Paul would use the term *disgraceful* [cf. αἰσχρόν, 1 Cor 14:35] of this kind of activity. It is not appropriate today, and it was not acceptable back then” (Belleville, *Women Leaders and the Church*, 161, original emphases).

I posit that the possibility of Paul's trying to limit the women's disruptive speech at Corinth pushes our understanding off in directions that are speculative at best, and harmful at worst. For example, it should be highly *offensive* to women nowadays that the apostle apparently pillories them for being "chatty" at church—when Paul is concerned throughout the chapter with order (see especially 14:33, 40). It plainly is *not* the case that the apostle singled out women for special censure (14:34)—when he also enjoins "silence" upon any would-be tongue-speaker (if there is no one to interpret, 14:27–28), or prophet (that if a revelation is made to another sitting there, the first should keep silent, 14:30). There was something about these situations that Paul found harmful to the orderly transmission of the word of God in a Christian assembly—which apparently had applicability not only in the original situation but for the well-being of the church in every time and place, including our own. What only a few have realized is that the apostle set himself against the Corinthians' exaggerated estimation of their own theological maturity and spiritual gifts.<sup>9</sup> This in turn would lead to the most fatal of consequences:

The exaggerated esteem of glossolalia, of prophesying, and of *gnosis* had le[d] to the neglect of *agape*, of Christ Himself, of the direct revelation of God in Him. If Christ and His commands were neglected one could not count on belonging [to] those who had been saved when the day of judgment would come. Among the *paradoxeis* [traditions] which the apostle himself had received and delivered to the churches [cf. 1 Cor 11:23] there was more than one *logion* which proved that those who acted in this way would hear these words from the mouth of the Lord, "I do not know (recognize) you; depart from me, you transgressors of the law" [Matt 7:23; Luke 13:27].<sup>10</sup>

### What Does *Λαλέω* Mean?

Much of the confusion stems from substandard understandings of the verb "speak" (*λαλέω*) in Paul's statement that the women are "not permitted to speak [*λαλεῖν*]" in verse 34. The meaning "talk, chat, prattle" is apparently possible for *λαλέω* in older Greek,<sup>11</sup> and an influential lexicon opines that Paul was attempting

<sup>9</sup> "He [Paul] saw that in Corinth men had begun to wander on the path which, in our terminology, we would call the way of the gnostics and fanatics." Nils Johansson, *Women and the Church's Ministry: An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 11–14* (Ottawa: St. Barnabas, 1972), 56.

<sup>10</sup> Johansson, *Women and the Church's Ministry*, 56.

<sup>11</sup> So, H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. With revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 1025, on the basis of Aristophanes *Ecclesiazusae* 1058 (cf. *Vespae* 1135); Philemo 208; Plato *Euthydemus* 287d. Also, "they prattle, indeed, but they do not communicate [*λαλοῦσι μὲν . . . , οὐ φράζουσι δέ*]" (Pseudo Plutarch *Placita philosophorum* 909A, line 5 [of dogs and apes], my translation). See also Joseph H. Thayer, ed. and trans., *A Greek-*

to limit the women from “expressing themselves” since a congregational assembly would engage not only in worship but in discussion of congregational affairs: “it was contrary to custom for Hellenic women . . . to participate in public deliberations.”<sup>12</sup> However, the view that the apostle was attempting to curtail female prophets’ business proceedings<sup>13</sup> (but *not* their preaching activities!<sup>14</sup>) does not ring true; the latter possibility rests upon a rather obscure instruction about speech-making in an inscription dating to before 178 BC.<sup>15</sup> It requires special pleading to link the obscure instruction to the supposed likelihood of women’s preaching at Corinth—even if Paul’s approach reflects “the secondary position” accorded to priestesses in relation to their priest-husbands in Greco-Roman cults.<sup>16</sup> To be sure, it appears that *some* of the women speaking at Corinth were married, and that Paul expected them to ask “their own husbands” at home in case they wanted to learn something (14:35a). However, it requires a huge leap to imagine that these same women were preaching prophets, as were their husbands.<sup>17</sup> There is nothing about the text as it stands to suggest such a thing—and in fact the apostle states quite clearly that the women are not permitted “to *keep* speaking [λαλεῖν]” at Corinth (14:34a).<sup>18</sup> In case there is any doubt, Paul repeats the infinitive a verse later, stipulating that it is shameful for a woman “to keep speaking [λαλεῖν] *at church* [ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ]” (14:35b, added emphasis). It is this speaking *at church* in particular that

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*English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: American Book Company, 1886 and 1889), 368.

<sup>12</sup> So, W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; hereafter cited as BDAG), 582, on the basis of insights presented in Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982), 164.

<sup>13</sup> Such as expulsion from the assembly (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–8) or conflicts between members (1 Cor 6:1–6).

<sup>14</sup> So Danker (*Benefactor*, 164), who describes an “affirmation” of the women’s “right to preach.”

<sup>15</sup> “No one shall deliver a speech [μηδείς . . . ἔπος φωνεῖτω] without recognition by the priest or the vice-priest. Violation of this statute shall result in a fine of 30 light drachmai” (*Inscriptiones Graecae* II<sup>2</sup> 1368.107–9, trans. By Danker in *Benefactor*, 159).

<sup>16</sup> Danker, *Benefactor*, 164. Apparently, a kind of “priority” was given to the husband of a priestess in these cultic assemblies. See Franz Poland, *Geschichte des Griechischen Vereinswesens* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909), 345–346, 352.

<sup>17</sup> John Reumann mentions the possibility (“What in Scripture Speaks to the Ordination of Women?,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 44, no. 1 [January 1973]: 16 n. 39) that Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 11:2–6 involved “possibly ordained” married prophetesses who spoke under the Spirit at cultic gatherings and so constituted a part of the ministry at Corinth.

<sup>18</sup> The present tense denotes imperfect aspect—that is, an ongoing unfolding of an event or state, such as that of a parade passing directly in front of a reporter. So Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 42.

connects it to public preaching or proclamation.<sup>19</sup> The clarity of the prohibition is not in doubt to most readers as it stands—although many interpreters nowadays have done their utmost to make it seem that the plain words of Scripture must mean something else.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the lexical explanation in BDAG overlooks the fact that λαλέω can be synonymous with authoritative teaching—for example,

The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, “*I have spoken* [λελάληκα] openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. *I have said* [ἐλάλησα] nothing in secret.” (John 18:19–20, ESV, added emphases)

Λαλέω works similarly in a good many other passages as well, and each repays careful study: Matthew 9:18; 28:18; Acts 4:1; 18:25; 1 Corinthians 2:6–7; 2 Corinthians 2:17; Hebrews 13:7.<sup>21</sup> The point is that while BDAG accounts for quite a number of these passages in other connections, it fails to account for the authoritative nature of λαλέω in the abundance of passages specified in the preceding sentence and footnote—leaving the impression that the word’s meaning is exhausted by the mere sound of words: “the actual ‘speaking,’ as it were.”<sup>22</sup> However, there must have been much more to λαλέω in the original situation than mere “noise production,” to put the matter baldly.<sup>23</sup> Scholars opposed to women’s ordination point out that the absolute form for “speaking” in 1 Corinthians 14:34 is nothing less than a technical term for someone authorized to speak in an official

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<sup>19</sup> Johansson, *Women and the Church’s Ministry*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> I shall grapple with this disconnect below, pp. 250–251.

<sup>21</sup> These are the examples John W. Kleinig identifies as authoritative in “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 29, no. 2 (August 1995): 79. Bo Giertz adds Ephesians 5:19; Philippians 1:14; and Titus 2:15, in “Twenty-Three Theses on the Holy Scriptures, the Woman, and the Office of the Ministry,” *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 254. William Weinrich adds Matthew 12:46; Mark 2:2; Luke 9:11; John 8:12; Acts 8:25; 13:43; 2 Corinthians 12:19; and Ephesians 6:20, in “‘It Is Not Given to Women to Teach’: A *Lex* in Search of a *Ratio*,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 475.

<sup>22</sup> So Paul D. Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 635—the idea being that whereas λέγω (“to say”) refers to the *content* of what is spoken, λαλέω supposedly refers to the *sound of the words*. Thus, Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 368. However, the two words occur (with no appreciable difference) in Romans 3:19.

<sup>23</sup> Another big problem with BDAG is that it fails to list several of the passages most demonstrative of the authoritative nature of λαλέω (see note 21 above). Thus, it fails to account for the authoritative nature of λαλέω in Matthew 9:18; John 18:19–20; Acts 13:43; 18:25; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 12:19; Ephesians 5:19; 6:20; Titus 2:15; and Hebrews 13:7—a considerable oversight, in my opinion.

capacity.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, context demonstrates that Paul insisted upon relative (as opposed to absolute) silence from the women at Corinth since the latter were part of the “all” who spoke in tongues (1 Cor 14:5, 23), engaged in prophecy (1 Cor 11:5; 14:5, 23, 31), and participated in liturgical prayer (1 Cor 11:5; cf. 1 Tim 2:1–10). Still, women’s participation in these activities would not have violated the clear Pauline prohibitions (1 Cor 14:33b–35; 1 Tim 2:11–12), but rather resembled the praying, praising, and giving thanks of the entire body of Christ at the Divine Service still today where only the suitably prepared, called, ordained, and male pastor should preach publicly.

### Godly Women *Can* Prophecy!<sup>25</sup>

Of course, biblically speaking (e.g., Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:17–18; 21:9) women *can* prophesy.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, prophecy differs from preaching in that prophecy was directly received through the Spirit. One either possessed the gift of prophecy or one did not—somewhat akin to healing.<sup>27</sup> It was always the case in the Christian assemblies, however, that prophecy was weighed, evaluated, and thus subjected to various norms.<sup>28</sup> Women with charismatic gifts—like Miriam, Huldah, Deborah, the Virgin Mary, and Philip’s daughters—did not yield to any internal impulses to preach (*vocatio interna*). “Keeping silence” must have meant originally (and still now) that gifted women deliberately refrain from activity that could be construed as preaching in the liturgical assembly: “They loved their Lord and knew that they had to obey his command.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Thus, Johansson, *Women and the Church’s Ministry*, 53–54; Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 80; Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 533; John W. Kleinig, “Disciples But Not Teachers: 1 Corinthians 14:33b–38 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> My comments in this section are based in large part upon my review of the first edition of Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless, eds., *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* [hereinafter cited as CTQ] 72 (2008): 377–380.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Kriewaldt, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38, 1 Timothy 2:11–14, and the Ordination of Women,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 64; Giertz, “Twenty-Three Theses,” 259–260; Peter Brunner, “The Ministry and the Ministry of Women,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 277; David P. Scaer, “May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 316–317 n. 40; Hermann Sasse, “Ordination of Women?,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 346–347; Weinrich, “It Is Not Given to Women to Teach,” 467.

<sup>27</sup> Brunner, “The Ministry and the Ministry of Women,” 276.

<sup>28</sup> Kriewaldt, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38, 1 Timothy 2:11–14,” 64–65. Also, Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 80; Kleinig, “Disciples But Not Teachers,” 54–55; Brunner, “The Ministry and the Ministry of Women,” 279–280.

<sup>29</sup> Sasse, “Ordination of Women?,” 348.



Again, the Pauline prohibitions need not mean that women cannot speak at all during the worship service,<sup>30</sup> or that Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19) and other godly women (e.g., Lydia, Acts 16:14–15; Phoebe, Rom 16:1–2; Euodia and Syntyche, Phil 4:2–3) did not instruct their own households in the faith. Nonetheless, Priscilla's teaching was done privately—outside the context of the liturgical assembly<sup>31</sup>—or even exceptionally.<sup>32</sup> And the "servant [δίακονος]" Phoebe (Rom 16:1, ESV), whom the apostle trusted to get one of his most important letters to Rome and receive the congregation's full hospitality there (Rom 16:2), likewise did not herself aspire to the pastoral office but rather upheld and supported it in a serving role (she had been Paul and others' personal patroness!)—providing an example for deaconesses still today in the confessional Lutheran church.<sup>33</sup> At any rate, there is no evidence that prophesying of the sort that Paul seems to countenance in 1 Corinthians 11:5 was the same thing as preaching or leading worship.<sup>34</sup> Rather, the apostle describes there a deportment at worship wherein all Christians engage.

### The Wrongful Teaching of the Word of God

I take it, then, that the women's "speaking" at Corinth was not merely disruptive (yet certainly it *was* that, given the overall tendency of the possibilities<sup>35</sup>), but that it represented a *wrongful teaching of the word of God* that Paul recognized as being particularly harmful to the church and to Christian worship everywhere. This could be established, first, by the tone of the apostle's later remarks, which were rather heated (or possibly "ironic,"<sup>36</sup> or even "sarcastic"<sup>37</sup>):

"For it is *shameful* [αἰσχρόν] for a woman to speak [λαλεῖν] in church!" (14:35c);

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<sup>30</sup> Such as to teach Sunday School or direct the choir. Thus, Scaer, "May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?," 310; Gregory J. Lockwood, "The Women's Ordination Debate in the Lutheran Church of Australia," in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 361.

<sup>31</sup> Sasse, "Ordination of Women?," 347; Lockwood, "The Women's Ordination Debate," 365.

<sup>32</sup> Weinrich, "It Is Not Given to Women to Teach," 462.

<sup>33</sup> Cynthia Lumley, "Phoebe: A Role Model for Deaconesses Today," in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 35–49. For the open-ended hospitality to which Phoebe was entitled by the apostle's endorsement, see Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 945–946; Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 9–16*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 1554–1555.

<sup>34</sup> Scaer, "May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?," 317.

<sup>35</sup> As presented above in the section "Disruptive Speech?"

<sup>36</sup> "With heavy irony . . . Paul challenges the Corinthians' sense of their own importance" (Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 510).

<sup>37</sup> "In contrast to 'all the churches' (v. 33c) Paul sarcastically points out that the Corinthians are ploughing their own furrow, as if God had only spoken to them" (Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, 637).

“Or was it *from you* [ἢ ἀφ’ ὑμῶν] that the word of God came?!” (14:36a);

“Or are you *the only ones* [ἢ εἰς ὑμᾶς μόνους] it has reached?!” (14:36b).

The translations are those of the ESV; I have added the italicization and exclamation points to highlight what I take to have been Paul’s scornful tone over against the Corinthians who thought they were so smart and advanced in the gospel. Well, they *were not* (smart, that is) but rather “puffed up” (φυσιώω, 4:6, 18–19; 5:2; 8:1) by their own spiritual insights and accomplishments, and so were nothing but “infants in Christ” (3:1 ESV). The disjunctive particles ἢ . . . ἢ<sup>38</sup> were part of the rhetorical questions intended to shut discussion down, not seriously to advance it.<sup>39</sup> Hence Paul was more than a little steamed at the Corinthians for allowing (or even encouraging?) the women to speak *shamefully* at worship.<sup>40</sup> If this seems harsh, consider that—in ways both great and small—the apostle was hardly the sort to suffer fools gladly.<sup>41</sup> Paul possessed a kind of white-hot anger against any innovation that wormed its way into his congregational assemblies. So it might be imagined that he would look askance at those churches nowadays that go their own way and ordain women—“as if their own cultural situation somehow justified it or they now possessed superior wisdom to the church of previous generations.”<sup>42</sup> Such would not have been the case in the original situation, and such is not the case now.

Second, the apostle writes that the silence of the women involves submission: “For they are not permitted to speak, but *should be in submission* [ὑποτασσέσθωσαν]” (14:34, ESV, added emphasis).<sup>43</sup> Significantly, Paul does not mention here just what

<sup>38</sup> Which some translate “so tell me . . . ? Or tell me . . . ?” Thus, Gardner, *I Corinthians*, 637.

<sup>39</sup> “As in 1 Cor. 12:29–30, he ends the discussion with rhetorical questions . . . and apparently anticipates some opposition to his rulings” (David E. Garland, *I Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003], 673). Paul often uses the particle ἢ to introduce rhetorical questions in the letter: 1:13; 6:2, 9, 16, 19; 9:6; 10:22; 11:22; cf. 2 Cor 3:1; 11:7. Most of these indicate the apostle’s perplexity (if not utter incredulity!) at the Corinthians’ obtuseness.

<sup>40</sup> “Just as it was ‘shameful’ for a woman to appear at public worship without a head-covering (αἰσχρόν, 11:6), so it is ‘shameful’ for her to assume a teaching role on those occasions (αἰσχρόν, 14:35). The formula ‘it is shameful’ covers what is offensive to God as well as what causes social offense (cf. αἰσχρόν, ‘shameful,’ also in Eph 5:12)” (Lockwood, *I Corinthians*, 510). Cf. Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 81; Kleinig, “Disciples But Not Teachers,” 55.

<sup>41</sup> For irony “of the sharpest kind” (so F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 262, § 495), see 1 Corinthians 4:8 and 2 Corinthians 11:19–20. For similar tirades against dim-witted epistolary recipients, see 2 Corinthians 11:2–4, 7–8; 12:11–13; Galatians 1:8–9; 3:1–3; 4:9–11; 5:2–4, 15, etc.

<sup>42</sup> Lockwood, *I Corinthians*, 511.

<sup>43</sup> In the New Testament, “submission” means being in an ordered relation to someone else who is above the first. See John G. Nordling, “Does Ephesians 5:21 Support Mutual Submission?,”

the object of their submission was: it could have involved the submission of wives to their husbands in general (Col 3:18; Titus 2:4–5; 1 Pet 3:5) since, after all, the apostle commands the former to ask “their own husbands” at home “if they want to learn something” (14:35a).<sup>44</sup> The latter consideration demonstrates, indeed, that the women could be accomplished *learners* (if not speaking teachers) of the word<sup>45</sup>—although, once again, I wonder if Pauline contempt intrudes even here since, in a not dissimilar situation, Paul had wondered—irascibly—if the Corinthians could not eat or drink (or even get drunk!) *at home* rather than profane the Lord’s Supper (11:22). A similar situation obtains in 1 Corinthians 14, at the climax of which the apostle unleashes his notorious prohibition against the women’s wrongful speaking. The weighing of prophecy was going on (14:27–33a) amid circumstances that could have tended toward chaos and confusion. Why were the prophecies weighed? Answer: because they did not have the same authoritative status as the Old Testament texts, the commands of Jesus, and the apostolic tradition to which the Corinthian prophets were expected to acquiesce (14:37–38).<sup>46</sup> This, despite the fact that the actual weighing of prophecy was in some sense a group effort (see “the others” mentioned in 14:29), and quite possibly the women—and any other member of the Corinthian congregation—were involved in the process.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, there was to be a “submission” on the part of the women (and all others) to those male leaders of the congregation charged with the subordinating of tongues and prophecy to what in fact was edifying to the whole congregation, and in honoring the word of God that had come to them via the apostolic emissaries from Jerusalem (14:36; cf. Acts 1:8; 1 Thess 2:13).<sup>48</sup>

Already at Corinth there was the expectation that everything should be done “decently and in order” (14:40) through what we would call the Office of the Holy

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*Logia* 24, no. 4 (Reformation 2015): 20. Also, Kriewaldt, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38, 1 Timothy 2:11–14,” 66.

<sup>44</sup> See also the section “What Does Λαλέω Mean?” above.

<sup>45</sup> Which was in itself remarkable since in rabbinic Judaism women were regarded as “second-class members of the community.” So Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 518. Also, in the Jewish synagogues “women were assigned special places behind a screen” (Faculty of Christ Seminary—Seminex, “For the Ordination of Women,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 6, no. 3 [June 1979]: 134).

<sup>46</sup> Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 80; Kleinig, “Disciples But Not Teachers,” 54–55; Kriewaldt, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38, 1 Timothy 2:11–14,” 64–65.

<sup>47</sup> For this possibility, see Johansson, *Women and the Church’s Ministry*, 55, 65, 69; Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 79. In the analogous process of letter writing, Paul worked with a “staff”—and so not privately and individualistically. Rather, he was the leader of a team, but also “in charge.” Thus, E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 26, 32–33, 106, 119, 224.

<sup>48</sup> Johansson, *Women and the Church’s Ministry*, 55, 69–71; Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 80.

Ministry: “Women are therefore not allowed to be speakers in the liturgical assembly but must be subordinate to those who have been appointed to fulfill that role.”<sup>49</sup> This, in marked contrast to proponents of women’s ordination who have argued—incorrectly—that there was no such thing as an ordained ministry for pastors during the period of the New Testament.<sup>50</sup> However, the Pauline concern for submission to those who were weighing prophecy at Corinth would suggest quite otherwise. Paul was responding to a chaotic situation, to be sure, yet he was keen to regulate affairs at Corinth so that ministry there resembled the institution of Jesus, who likewise sent men to preach and heal in his name (Luke 10:5, 9, 16), loose and bind sins publicly (John 20:21–23), and make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching (Matt 28:19–20). Of course, the entire church is involved in these processes—not just a few male pastors! Nevertheless, something resembling the Office of the Ministry (as Lutherans have traditionally understood it) had been suggested already by the Lord Jesus Christ, not just Paul—and both Jesus and the apostle were in continuity with the Old Testament priesthood.<sup>51</sup>

Third, I would like to grapple with the opinion that women’s ordination is apparently permissible (in spite of the prohibitions against it)—while maintaining all the while the orthodox-sounding mantra that the word of God through St. Paul is authoritative for all time.<sup>52</sup> Such is hardly a new opinion. Krister Stendahl argued in the late 1950s that although women’s authoritative speaking in the church is disproven by clear texts exegetically (1 Cor 14:33b–38; 1 Tim 2:11–15), a new reality of redemption transcends and replaces the old order of creation, so that the distinction between male and female is rendered obsolete.<sup>53</sup> Stendahl recognized, already as a young doctoral student, that his more conservative professors at

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<sup>49</sup> Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 80.

<sup>50</sup> “‘Ordination,’ it is well to remember, does not appear, full-blown and in our sense of the term, in the Scriptures” (Reumann, “What in Scripture Speaks to the Ordination of Women?,” 5). Also (and on the same page): “Paul . . . and John know no rite of ordination”; “A uniform practice . . . akin to what we call ordination is not to be found in early Christianity.” The first statement is cited with approval by the Faculty of Christ Seminary—Seminex, “For the Ordination of Women,” 133 n. 5.

<sup>51</sup> See in particular Paul L. Schrieber, “Priests among Priests: The Office of the Ministry in Light of the Old Testament Priesthood,” *Concordia Journal* 14, no. 3 (July 1988): 215–228.

<sup>52</sup> Linda L. Belleville epitomizes this approach in my opinion. See a listing of her more influential publications at <https://www.cbeinternational.org/persons/linda-l-belleville>. Accessed December 30, 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Paul achieved an “evangelical breakthrough” in Galatians 3:28 as the distinction between male and female is rendered obsolete. See Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women*, trans. Emile Sander (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 33. Also, Reumann, “What in Scripture Speaks to the Ordination of Women?,” 14 n. 35, 15; Faculty of Christ Seminary—Seminex, “For the Ordination of Women,” 134–135.

Uppsala and Lund were exegetically correct in opposing women's ordination<sup>54</sup>—but that, nonetheless, modern theologians should be prepared to move beyond mere exegesis and so explore what the text may mean today. There is a “gap” between what the text meant in its original context and what it might mean in our own time.<sup>55</sup> I think it safe to say that such corrosive thinking sunders ancient text from modern reality: the “then and there” of the original document must ever be “re-contextualized” to suit the “here and now” of whatever modern man/woman may happen to be thinking or experiencing at the moment. Hence, if this “gap” is permitted to exist in the life of the church it would put many things at risk that are constitutive of the Christian religion, such as the ongoing relevance of the virgin birth, our Lord's resurrection from the dead, the forgiveness of sins, and the efficacy of the gospel and sacraments in every Christian congregation. Paul opposed women's speaking in the liturgical assembly then not simply because it was disruptive (for the local situation), but he intended that the prohibitions should apply to all churches everywhere (1 Cor 14:33b) and affirmed that these prohibitions came from God himself.<sup>56</sup> Quite a few interpreters are of the opinion, however, that women's ordination could (at least theoretically) be given a go, even though the practice patently contradicts the plain meaning of Scripture. At the very least, such a disconnect does not represent Lutheran hermeneutics at its best—for example, the clarity of Scripture.<sup>57</sup> At its worst, the prospect of women's ordination injects into the life of a Christian a very great *monstrum incertitudinis* (“horror of uncertainty”): either one must constantly “reinterpret” (or seriously second-guess) those texts that plainly forbid women to speak publicly in the liturgical assembly, or one must

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<sup>54</sup> See Stendahl's personal reminiscences in Krister Stendahl, “Dethroning Biblical Imperialism in Theology,” in *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, ed. Heikki Räisänen et al. (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2000), 62–63.

<sup>55</sup> John T. Pless calls this a “hermeneutic of distance.” See “The Ordination of Women: A Test Case for Biblical Authority,” in *My Savior's Guest: A Festschrift in Honor of Erling Trygve Teigen*, ed. Thomas Rank (Lake Mills, Iowa: Thomas Rank, 2021), 212. Someone else who addresses this unfortunate “gap” is Lockwood, “The Women's Ordination Debate,” 356. Reumann, however, argues (“What in Scripture Speaks to the Ordination of Women?,” 28–29) that the entire issue is one of hermeneutics, so some of the texts cited against ordaining women can be excluded (as glosses) or demoted in value (as deuterio-Pauline).

<sup>56</sup> Such represent a “command of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:37b) and are meant to “clinch the argument.” So Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 81; Kleinig, “Disciples But Not Teachers,” 55.

<sup>57</sup> “The clarity of Scripture means that the word of God, its presentation and proclamation, is not obscure or esoteric, but forthright and understandable to the common person who makes a reasonable effort to understand it. In other words, if we apply the same skills of reading and understanding to the Bible that we expect to apply to other books, the average reader will be able to understand its message” (Steven P. Mueller, *Called to Believe: A Brief Introduction to Christian Doctrine* [Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006], 27).

question the validity of an apparent “pastor” who obviously is a woman: what else about such a ministry is likewise suspect?

### Biblical Headship<sup>58</sup>

Today feminism diminishes many of the created differences between men and women. Another view sees sexual differences as a result of the fall into sin. However, God created the two sexes (“male and female he created them,” Gen 1:27, ESV), and so distinctions between men and women are part of God’s good creation. So-called “headship” is based in part on 1 Corinthians 11:3 (“But I want you to understand that the head of every man [παντὸς ἀνδρός] is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband [γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ], and the head of Christ is God,” ESV). The imagery here cannot be dismissed;<sup>59</sup> thus, the ever-increasing insistence for a pervasive unisexuality—which holds, for example, that distinctive differences between man and woman are interchangeable—is contrary to creation and should not be tolerated in the church. Sexuality matters for Christians who confess that God created man and woman as distinct and in a certain order from the beginning (Gen 1:27; cf. 1 Cor 11:3).<sup>60</sup>

The point is that men and women are *different* from each other, and so should occupy *different vocations* at home and in the church.<sup>61</sup> Hence, the rush to ordain theologically articulate women results, sadly, in a diminution of the service that women *can* render legitimately in the church<sup>62</sup> and has had a profoundly negative impact also on hearth and home: “[T]he ordination of women contradicts the spiritual vocation of men as husbands and fathers and empties marriage and family life of much of their spiritual significance.”<sup>63</sup> Moreover, the ordination of women in some Lutheran and Anglican communions has prepared the way for the ordination of homosexuals.<sup>64</sup> Of course, as several proponents of women’s ordination insist, the

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<sup>58</sup> My comments in this section are based in large part upon my review of the 2008 edition of Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, in *CTQ* 72 (2008), 377–380, and Nordling, “Does Ephesians 5:21 Support Mutual Submission?,” 23.

<sup>59</sup> Scaer, “May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?,” 315.

<sup>60</sup> Charles A. Gieschen, “Ordained Proclaimers or Quiet Learners? Women in Worship in Light of 1 Timothy 2,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 100 n. 56; John W. Kleinig, “The Ordination of Women and the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 295–302.

<sup>61</sup> Giertz, “Twenty-Three Theses,” 256, 260; Lockwood, “The Women’s Ordination Debate,” 366 n. 27.

<sup>62</sup> Giertz, “Twenty-Three Theses,” 260; Brunner, “The Ministry and the Ministry of Women,” 292–293; Reinhard Slenczka, “The Ordination of Women into the Office of the Church,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 391; Louis A. Smith, “How My Mind Has Changed,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 517.

<sup>63</sup> Kleinig, “The Ordination of Women and the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” 300.

<sup>64</sup> John T. Pless, “The Ordination of Women and the Ecclesial Endorsement of Homosexuality: Are They Related?,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 231–245.

ordination of women and the ordination of homosexuals represent two separate categories: "These issues are not of the same order."<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, the pattern of argumentation for both illicit ordinations follows similar trajectories: first, the appeal to Galatians 3:28 ("no male and female"); and second, the idea that the biblical writers were conditioned by their time and culture, so that "what a text meant" then is not necessarily the same as "what it means" for us today.<sup>66</sup>

However, to take the second point first, it should be pointed out that the argument against meaning often runs counter to Christianity itself, which holds that the word of God is sufficient for believers in every time and place—including our own (2 Tim 3:16–17). Being a Christian involves some sense that texts from hoary antiquity have ultimate meaning for one now, regardless of what one may happen to experience at the moment or with respect to the structures of this world which, in its present form, "is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31, ESV; cf. 2 Cor 5:17; 1 John 2:17; Rev 21:1). Second, the problem with Galatians 3:28 being used to justify women's or homosexual ordination is that one's standing before God through faith in Christ Jesus in no wise abolishes relationships of the created order that are meant to last until the end of the world. Consider Paul's rather ironical questions in 1 Corinthians 12:29: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?" (ESV). The grammatical form of these questions requires a negative answer.<sup>67</sup> Thus, "all are equal before God," as Galatians 3:28 clearly teaches, but "equality hardly suggests interchangeability."<sup>68</sup> Others point out that equality before God through faith in Christ Jesus does not erase created sexual distinctions between male and female: "[T]he gender distinction is a fact since the creation of mankind."<sup>69</sup> Thus, in the life of the redeemed here below, sexuality matters quite a lot, particularly in those relationships shared at home and at church.

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<sup>65</sup> Craig R. Koester, "The Bible and Sexual Boundaries," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1993): 388. Similar cases are made by R. T. France, "From Romans to the Real World: Biblical Principles and Cultural Change in Relation to Homosexuality and the Ministry of Women," in Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright, eds., *Romans and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 234–253; and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 441–443.

<sup>66</sup> See Pless, "The Ordination of Women," 241 nn. 38, 40–41, for scholars adopting this position.

<sup>67</sup> Μὴ πάντες ἀπόστολοι; μὴ πάντες προφῆται; μὴ πάντες διδάσκαλοι; μὴ πάντες δυνάμεις; (1 Cor 12:29). The negative particle μὴ in a question requires the answer no. Thus, H. W. Smyth, *A Greek Grammar for Colleges* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920), § 2651; James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*, 4th rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 261.

<sup>68</sup> Scaer, "May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?," 323.

<sup>69</sup> Christos P. Tsekrekos, "The Eschatological Character of Christian Marriage," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2014): 308.

### Conclusion

Scholars who focus overmuch on what may have been the circumstances surrounding Paul's prohibition against women's speaking at Corinth often have the not-so-hidden agenda of allowing them to speak now as female pastors or priestesses in the church—a wrongful teaching of the word of God. Although it cannot be substantiated, it is at least *tempting* to hypothesize that the apostle became angry at some version of the ersatz “gospel” of equality and fairness that is still so prevalent in the church of today—and thus made his rather pointed prohibitions against women speaking in the congregational assemblies.<sup>70</sup> Mere anger is not what prompted Paul's statements against the women's speaking, however, but rather apostolic conformity to the “order of creation,”<sup>71</sup> which might be defined in basic terms as “the right relationship between man and woman.”<sup>72</sup> Just this had been violated at Corinth somehow.<sup>73</sup> Obviously, of more significance in this regard was the patience with which Paul dealt with the problem, for the matter of women's speaking illicitly would have seemed indicative of a church “in full decay.”<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, the apostle conducted his ministry becomingly and in the full conviction that—despite the problems—there was still a church at Corinth where Christ was present. For the word of God was present among the Corinthians, and Christ, the Good Shepherd, was still the Christians' righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor 1:30). Such an understanding rightly encourages brothers and sisters in Christ to resist women's ordination at present, take God at his word, and walk humbly along the paths God has set for men and women in their respective vocations:

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<sup>70</sup> In addition to 1 Corinthians 14:33b–35, see also the prohibition against women's speaking in 1 Timothy 2:11–12. The latter text actually is a commentary on the former, and both come from St. Paul himself. Thus, Scaer, “May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?,” 318. It seems worth noting that some have justified the ordination of women if “occasioned by the Gospel.” Thus, Faculty of Christ Seminary—Seminex, “For the Ordination of Women,” 136.

<sup>71</sup> For some scholars who mention this order favorably, see Kriewaldt, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38, 1 Timothy 2:11–14,” 69; Giertz, “Twenty-Three Theses,” 256; Brunner, “The Ministry and the Ministry of Women,” 282; Sasse, “Ordination of Women?,” 348; Lockwood, “The Women's Ordination Debate,” 354, 369; Robert Schaibley, “Gender Considerations on the Pastoral Office,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 457–458; Weinrich, “It Is Not Given to Women to Teach,” 482–483.

<sup>72</sup> Bertil Gärtner, “*Didaskalos*,” in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 27.

<sup>73</sup> See guarded comments in Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 287; Kleinig, “Scripture and the Exclusion of Women from the Pastorate (I),” 79; Gärtner, “*Didaskalos*,” 21–22; Kriewaldt, “1 Corinthians 14:33b–38, 1 Timothy 2:11–14,” 65; Scaer, “May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?,” 303 n. 4; Sasse, “Ordination of Women?,” 345.

<sup>74</sup> Sasse, “Ordination of Women?,” 345.



God is faithful. He does not leave His children alone to suffer through the issues and implications of the two sexes. He sends faithful pastors and strong laymen to illustrate what it means to be men. He raises up pious, humble women to serve as confident examples of what it means to be women. Yes, He remembers what He has created, and He waits with eagerness for the day when He can gather the faithful to Himself. He longs to restore male and female alike to wholeness, and in that day, He will rejoice as they know, for the first time, the perfection—the completeness—that He intended for their unique identities.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Adriane Dorr, "Giver to Receiver: God's Design for the Sexes," in Harrison and Pless, *Women Pastors?*, 429.