

## PREPARING WOMEN FOR MINISTRY IN 1 COR 14:34-35 AND 1 TIM 2:8-15 ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TEXTS

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In many denominations, women are ordained and appointed to leadership positions just like men. Such a position is based not only on denominational theological perspectives but, most importantly, is supported by multiple examples from Scripture. Paul, for example, claims equality between men and women (Gal 3:26-28). In Acts, the early church successfully wins men and women, who are called brothers and sisters, receive the Holy Spirit and share worship life together (cf. Acts 1:4; 16:13ff.; 17:4, 12). Jesus is described in the Gospels as the one who liberates women for mission and discipleship (John 4:7-42; Luke 10:38-42). The equality is based on the redemptive work of Christ (Gal 3:26-28; 2 Cor 5:17-21).

Despite these examples, there are other passages that obscure the role of women in the church. The two that appear to demonstrate that women are ordered to be silent in churches and be submissive are 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:8-15. Readers that come from the complementarian point of view read these texts as proof texts, that although women are equal to men in receiving salvation, God restricts women from serving in church leadership roles and instead calls women to serve in equally important, but complementary roles. So, while women can help or serve as helpers, they are not allowed to lead or teach men. Those who come from the egalitarian perspective believe that women and men are equal when it comes to functional roles in leadership and in the household. They argue that in a redemptive community, no human being is regarded as inferior on the basis of gender. They therefore want to understand what these passages mean and in what way they support or oppose women in leadership. What is a way forward to interpret these passages while staying faithful to our Scriptural texts?

When it comes to the text of the Bible evangelical Christians believe in its authority and read it as inspiration and guidance for their conduct. They forget, however, that the Bible consists of many smaller stories constructed over a long period of time, in many cultural contexts that were very different from our modern world, and in languages most of us do not speak or understand anymore. So, ignoring the fact that the Bible spoke to generations of believers before us in their own context and particularly to the context of these original readers or listeners would be a huge mistake on our part. Perhaps, critical historical examinations will help or deepen our understanding of scripture. It may also help us to determine, or come to the realisation, of what a scriptural text simply cannot mean.

Despite different stories in the Bible and despite its historical contexts, for readers now the whole Bible presents one continuous story that progressively reveals God's purposes for humanity, how God achieves God's purposes and how God establishes God's kingdom in Christ.<sup>1</sup> So, if we take seriously the unity of the story of God and Jesus Christ as God's final

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Khobnya, "The Good News of the Inaugurated Kingdom of God." Pages 35-52 in *Evangelicals and the Gospel of the Kingdom of God: An Examination* (edited by Albert Truesdale; Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2017), 35.

and radical revelation to humanity, then we must consider these two important implications for understanding the Bible. First, every biblical passage is located within a larger work and contributes to the aim of that work; it is a part of the entire story and needs to be looked at in the light of the whole Scripture! Secondly, we need to see and interpret the Scripture in the light of the gospel of Christ. V. Pizzuto has a helpful explanation of the priority of Christ in our interpretation, “Christian faith is not rooted in the Bible, but rather in the One to whom it is believed to testify (Jn 5:39). Only with this interpretive perspective can the Bible itself continue to speak a life-giving message.”<sup>2</sup> With these principles in mind let us turn to the passages of 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:8-15. Do they discourage preparing women for ministry in the church?

### *1 Corinthians 14:34-35*

This text indicates that women should be silent in the church; they are not allowed to speak; should be subordinate; and it is even shameful for them to speak in church. Should this not be enough to stop any woman from speaking in churches, not to mention serving as leaders? But if we are to take this text literally, and out of context, we have problems. Just a few chapters earlier, in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul clearly states that women are prophesying just like men in the church worship service and this is a proper practice in Corinthian churches. The only dispute there is regarding how they are dressed: women must be covered while men uncovered. In the same chapter (1 Cor 14:26, 31) Paul also sounds more inclusive than exclusive when he explains how to participate in worship and prophesy. If we extend our search for Paul’s views on women in the wider Pauline Corpus, we come across the whole list of women in ministry in Rom 16. Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2) is a deacon in Cenchreae. Other women are mentioned too; Prisca is even mentioned first, then her husband (does she play a more prominent role than him as a leader?).

This list implies that women were speaking and ministering like men and were welcomed by Paul in ministry of the church. In fact, in Paul’s other six undisputed letters there is no hint on the restrictions of women’s ministry. In Gal 3:28 Paul indicates that after coming to faith or for those who are in faith there is not difference whether they are slaves or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus. Of course, one can still say that this verse can only mean equality in terms of receiving salvation but cannot shed light on roles of men and women. But the question is why Paul spends so much time to emphasise the redeeming activity of Christ, literally obliterating the distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles in Christ if he still believes that when it comes to serving Christ there is still a difference or hierarchy? Overall, the apostle urges his churches to behave in humility regarding others as better than yourselves (Phil 2:3-4). He considers any gains as loss because of Christ (Phil 3:7). Pursuing his call in Christ he invites others to be of the same mind and asks others to help Euodia and Syntyche (his female co-companions in the ministry of the

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<sup>2</sup> Vincent Pizzuto, “Religious Terror and the Prophetic Voice of Reason: Unmasking our Myths of Righteousness.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 37 (2007): 50.

gospel) to resolve their differences for the sake of the gospel (Phil 4:2-3). All these examples testify to the fact that male and female disciples served in Paul's churches.

If the words in 1 Cor 14:34-36 contradict Paul's views on women elsewhere, could it be even Paul did not write them? This idea has been suggested because in different manuscripts verses 34-35 are located in a different place (after verse 40), which suggests alterations of these verses or their later addition.<sup>3</sup> Besides, other words of women's submission appear in other letters – though they are 'disputed letters' (1 Tim; Col; Eph). Although these reasons could challenge the authenticity of these verses, the fact is that 1 Cor 14:34-35 is part of our canon, analogical to 1 Tim 2:11-12,<sup>4</sup> and these verses are never missing from any known manuscripts. Thus, they have to be dealt with as a part of Paul's instructions to the church in Corinth.

Paul's letters present us only with a half of a two-way conversation. We do not have Paul's couriers on our side, people who probably accompanied his letters, were aware of the situations, Paul's thinking, and could clarify the writings further. We may not even have all Paul's letters written to Corinth (cf. 2 Cor 7:8 points to another of Paul's letter sent to the Corinthians now lost to us<sup>5</sup>). All we have is the text itself and these verses in the text (14:34-35) are not easily reconcilable with Paul's view on women in ministry in other places. The way forward to understand this passage is to recognise that 1 Cor 14:34-35 carries a situational character, namely that Paul deals with a particular situation in Corinth. For example, Paul is unhappy with a certain group of women, with their behaviour in the church, or the situation in Corinth which compels Paul to make his statements here. If so, who are these women, and does Paul provide us with any other clues that supports this theory? Let us study the context carefully.

These women may simply be uneducated disruptive women participating in church services. Although the idea of disruptive women in Corinth, who might be speaking inspired speeches other than prophecies or speaking prophecies or speaking in tongues that have not being interpreted or discerned as being from God is not new,<sup>6</sup> Paul's encouragement for them to

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<sup>3</sup> G. Fitzer, *Das Weib Schweige in der Gemeinde* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1963). See a helpful modern discussion Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699-708.

<sup>4</sup> The presence of analogical words of women's silence and submission in the later, most likely post-Pauline text of 1 Tim 2:11-12, is another argument that 1 Cor 14:34-36 is post-Pauline interpolation, "added by later scribes to bring Paul's teaching into line with instructions later developed in the Pauline school, such as 1 Timothy 2:11-12." G. Fee confirms that the text itself leads to the conclusion that it is not Paul's and certainly not binding for Christians, especially in a modern culture where it is not shameful for women to speak. See Fee, *Corinthians*, 708.

<sup>5</sup> See Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (The NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 365-6.

<sup>6</sup> This view is widely supported by scholars, for example, F.F. Bruce, *1 And 2 Corinthians* (NCC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 135; C. K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London: Bloomsbury Academic; rev. ed., 2004), 332. D. Carson, *Exegetical*

learn, μαρθάνω, in verse 35 has not been prioritized in scholarship enough. If women's lives were focused on managing the household and not all women were properly educated in the Graeco-Roman world (of course, their position and the level of education depended on wealth, social status of the family etc.) their desire to learn by asking questions and this way disrupting the order makes sense in 1 Cor 14. It would make sense within Paul's immediate discussion on order in the churches (see 1 Cor 14:13-33). For example, in verse 28 he says bluntly, "But if there is no one to interpret [speaking in tongues], let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God." In verses 29-30 he encourages order in prophesying when people speak, others have to weigh what is said or be silent. Some suggests that these words in verses 34-35 belong to Paul's opponents<sup>7</sup> (since there are no punctuation signs in the early manuscripts and the style of writing is as one having a conversation with an imagery interlocutor, which was not uncommon). If so, then Paul emphatically challenges their words in verse 36. In any case, though, the emphasis of verse 35 is that those women who want to learn are to be given an opportunity to do so. Why would the option of learning be considered if there is no application of such learning? Learning is always an investment to future changes and a positive outcome for women wanting to prepare themselves in the church for more. The process of learning, however, is conditioned.

These women should be subordinate, but the verse does not clarify to whom. In the light of verse 33 it means that they must have some sort of control over their spirit of prophecy if they prophesy. In the light of the overall conversation it seems that they have to be subject "to the church as a whole in its worship."<sup>8</sup> This might also explain the reference to the law in verse 34. Nowhere in the Torah can these words be found, so this law must be an oral understanding. We can only guess here intellectually and consider the law as an accepted understanding based on the proper behaviour for men and women leading worship, meaning, an understanding of the order of service (when to speak, what and when to weigh what is said etc.).

If these women desire to know how to behave properly or how to prophesy with integrity and respect for others, or to speak with interpretation, they have to learn at home (14:35). So, a possible space for education is at home from their husbands. In a male dominated society there were not many opportunities for women to learn or strive for any professional positions. Home seems to be an appropriate place to start learning. The disorder that these women bring in the public space may even have started at home. Ben Witherington suggests that these women may question "the veracity of their husbands or other men in regard to prophecy ... creating a situation where the Corinthian worship might become a family feud."<sup>9</sup> If so, then

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*Fallacies* (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 1984), 40; R. P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in 1 Corinthians 12-15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 85-88.

<sup>7</sup> N. M. Flanagan and E.H. Snyder, "Did Paul Put Down Women in 1 Cor 14:34-36?" *BTB* 11 (1981), 10-12.

<sup>8</sup> Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 707.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Witherington, *Women in the Early Churches* (SNTSM Series; Cambridge: CUP, repr., 2008), 102.

Paul's suggestion is to come to an understanding at home first. Verse 36 would be then Paul's direct address to these women reminding them that they are not the only ones receiving the word of God and the idea of learning from others is implicitly affirmed in this address. Or, verse 36 could be a bridge to the rest of the chapter, addressing men and women, where Paul reminds them that they are not the only ones to receive the word of God, they need to recognise each other, and Paul, who is speaking these words in the letter from the Lord (1 Cor 14:37). Moreover, Paul encourages everyone to prophesy and speak in tongues again but in a proper order (1 Cor 14:38-40).

In any scenario, Paul (if this is Paul) seems to be unhappy with a certain group of women or any women who are somehow improper (even shameful) in their behaviour in the church and suggests certain ways to deal with their behaviour by learning proper ways to participate fully alongside men in church activities.

### *1 Tim 2:8-15*

This passage describes an appropriate behaviour first for men, then for women in the church. Men are to pray when their anger ceases with hands raising up (1 Tim 2:8) and women are to pray<sup>10</sup> in appropriately modest clothes, with appropriate hair styles and without expensive jewellery (1 Tim 2:9-10). Overall, the idea of modesty and good works "springing from faith in Christ Jesus"<sup>11</sup> for men and women dominates these verses. Although the next few verses bring more controversy among interpreters, verses 8-10 commonly confirm that the focus here is not even on what to wear *per se* but on the "appropriate adornment, which is nothing other than the Christian character and practice expected of all believers."<sup>12</sup>

The next section addresses married women (or wives) although it may embrace women in general.<sup>13</sup> They are asked to learn in silence and in submission. While it is easy to see the adverbial phrases of "in silence" and "in all submission" (and most scholarly debates focus on these descriptors) the priority of the verb "to learn" should not be ignored. The discussion of women's further behaviour in the church literally starts with the imperative, "let a woman learn!" The verse is similar to 1 Cor 14:34. Does the author ask women to learn how to participate in the church service appropriately? This certainly fits the context of 1 Tim so far. If women were generally less educated in the Graeco-Roman world than men, then the call to learn is very understandable. Learning in silence and submission along the verses of 1 Cor 14 would mean learning in quietness, solitude, being silent when somebody else speaks and

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<sup>10</sup> Although the verb "pray" does not appear in verse 9, grammatically verses 8, 9 and 10 are connected and, it seems, that the verb "pray" still appears to be a main actional verb for men and women in all these verses. See on that W. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000), 105-6.

<sup>11</sup> George W. Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 137.

<sup>12</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (The ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 451.

<sup>13</sup> Greek term "γυνή" allows both variants, however references to husbands, to Eve and childbearing suggests that the matter concerns wives (at least in verses 11-15).

learning to listen with respect. This corresponds with 1 Tim 2:2 where quietness and life in peace is a prescribed quality for leaders. To learn in submission is not specified in relation to husbands<sup>14</sup> in this verse, but rather is to be understood more broadly as part of learning, thus implying “acceptance of the teaching and of the authority of the teacher”<sup>15</sup> who most likely were men/husbands in those days. What is the purpose of learning here? Definitely not to learn household duties (the context does not permit such implications) but to become proper worshipers of Christ; not to be concerned with the appearance or possessions, but to serve God’s redemptive purposes just like men and caring for the well-being of others! A. Robinson and R. Wall explain this succinctly, the women are to learn “to participate more effectively in the *missio Dei*.”<sup>16</sup> The call for women to learn and reach their potential is quite radical within the 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean world.

Verse 12 is quite controversial. Women are prohibited from teaching men although, as we noted before, women were speaking and teaching in churches (besides listed references above, see also Tit 2:3; Acts 18:26; 1 Tim 3:11; 5:9). What could be possible reasons for this prohibition?

It seems that the prohibition to teach men is related to exercising authority over them, which, in turn, suggests that “behind the present prohibition lies some particular false teaching by some women” who were assuming their roles as teachers in a way that was inappropriate and threatening to men.<sup>17</sup> It is known that in Ephesus, “The priestess of Artemis appears as the chief official of the cult of AD 104. She was in charge of the liturgy of the cult, and several different priestesses claimed to have celebrated the mysteries during the first and second centuries AD.”<sup>18</sup> If the women described in 1 Tim were coming from such views or any convictions that women should be in charge in this way, then Paul<sup>19</sup> is definitely correcting this reminding them of Eve who was deceived and sinned (verses 13-14). In Rom 5:12 Paul states that sin came into the world through Adam which means that the reference to Eve here is not to emphasise only women’s propensity to sin and, as such, in need of male domination to be controlled, but to make a point that women cannot simply assume teaching roles or authority.

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<sup>14</sup> There are other passages in Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Peter where wives are advised to submit to their husbands, but the reason of submission is based on relationships of mutual respect in a family serving Christ. Both husbands and wives are to demonstrate compassion, humility, love (and many other qualities) to each other and others that would help them together serve Christ. The idea there is that family relationships are to be exemplary and missional.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, *The Pastoral*, 454.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, Anthony, Robert W. Wall, *Called to Lead Paul's Letters to Timothy for a New Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 54.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall, *The Pastoral*, 458-9.

<sup>18</sup> Guy Maclean Rogers, *Sacred Identity of Ephesos: Foundation Myths of a Roman City* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 54

<sup>19</sup> Although the authorship of the Pastoral epistles is disputable, I will refer to Paul for convenience and to recognise that these epistles are part of the Pauline Corpus in the Bible.

I want to emphasise the connection of teaching on this verse with the priority of learning in the previous one. The image developed here is of a Christian woman as a modest person known for her good deeds; this image would be appropriate for the church setting and for society in those days; and every woman would be expected to learn this. The teaching in verse 12 corresponds to learning in verse 11. Learning in submission to the teacher is contrasted with teaching that abuses authority.<sup>20</sup> The instruction in 1 Tim for women is then to learn (in their context of a male dominated society) properly in submission to the leaders to become proper followers of Christ and leaders themselves; and not to be led astray by any false teaching or views of unhealthy domination or arrogance. If so, this is truly a Christian example of how women (and men) can be prepared to worship and to serve Christ.

Of course, some interpreters would read 1 Tim 11-15 as a proof text of women's submission to the male authority as a rule.<sup>21</sup> It is still difficult to reconcile this view with other passages in Paul that testify to women's serving in Paul's churches in leadership positions with no indication that these were female churches only. In fact, women were listed together with men. In addition, the example of childbearing would not make sense because it refers to the post-Fall experience when the things in the world and in the relationships between men and women were not right anymore (the consequence of the Fall is that men will rule over women, Gen 3:16). These relationships are restored in Christ (Gal 3:28). If Eve was deceived and sinned "she will be saved through childbearing" (verse 15). Does this example mean that women who do not have children will not experience salvation? No, because, firstly, salvation is never by any human effort according to the scripture and, secondly, this example still refers to a very specific story of Eve in Genesis, most likely to the moment when Eve gives birth to her first son and pronounces that she produced a man with the help of the LORD (Gen 4:1-2). This is the moment when she realises that she is in a restoring relationship with God<sup>22</sup> and that God continues to work in her and through her just as he promised after the Fall. So, this passage speaks about salvation (not leadership). In the same way, these women in Ephesus (and here Paul goes from the singular feminine pronoun "she" to the plural "they") can be transformed and restored in their understanding of God in Christ and serve him with appropriate modesty and integrity by learning how to do so. The relationships in Christ are no more the relationships of domination but full restoration (see again, Gal 3:28). Paul desires every person to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:24). Robinson and Wall conclude, "By such testimony, women 'likewise' come to know that God desires to save them from the self-destructive results of deception and sin and to transform them into persons known for their virtue – 'faith and love and holiness.' We take it that this would have been a radical idea in a male-centered world."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Marshall, *The Pastoral*, 458-9.

<sup>21</sup> W. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 148-9.

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, Wall, *Called*, 55-6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

### *Concluding remarks*

If the ancient societal context and norms of those days suggest that women must be domesticated into silence, 1 Timothy teaches the audience that women worship publicly and learn so that they can continue their Christian walk with men in faith and love and holiness. The paper argues that the encouragement for women to learn dominates the discussion in 1 Timothy and in 1 Cor 14:34-35. Although Paul did not intend to, or could not, change societal norms or views on women, he emphasises that in churches the matter of relationships is still different from the culture around it (women worship publicly, exercise their gifts in the church like men and learn). He urges women (and men) to reflect a good Christian character with modesty and develop themselves. It seems that good deeds are more important for people serving God than provocative behaviour. Having said that, it is important to recognise that a categorical statement “I permit no woman/wife to teach or to have authority over a man/husband; she is to keep silent” (1 Tim 2:12) is not a categorical prohibition for all times and situations but a motivation for women to learn (1 Tim 2:11) and serve with men in faith, love and holiness. If for any reason, it was shameful for women to speak in Corinth (1 Cor 14:35) or they were asked to learn rather than teach in Ephesus, Paul was more than happy to work with female co-workers in other churches and other cities. Our cultural/historical context is vastly different than Paul’s, and the family unit looks different in most of our societies. While Paul’s words to serve Christ publicly with modesty and integrity, in holiness and love must prevail always, it is less reasonable to transfer cultural family dynamics or prescriptions to particular circumstances of the 1st century into our social worlds and even less so into our churches. Overall, Paul never lists differences to emphasise that one quality is better than the other, or one gift is better than the other, or one gender is superior than the other. For Paul, all these differences equally serve the purpose of unity in Christ and mission of the church in the world. This paper suggests that Paul’s goal for men and women is learning to serve together in every and any capacity for the sake of the gospel.

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