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Paul D. Watson

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Are Women to Pray and Prophecy (1 Cor 11:5) or are Women to Remain Silent (1 Cor 14:34)?

Some Pastoral Implications of an Exegesis of 1 Cor 14:34–35

PAUL L. WATSON

In this pastoral response to Krystin Higgins' fine exegetical study of 1 Cor 14:34–35, I want first to focus on the tone and the attitude toward scripture (and toward fellow students of scripture) displayed in her study rather than on the results of that study. In other words, the way in which Krystin has gone about her work has as much to say to us pastorally as do the contents and conclusions of her work. That is not in any way meant to diminish the value of contents and conclusions, in Krystin's essay or in any other serious exegetical study. It is, rather, to remind ourselves that *how* we approach scripture—personally, congregationally, or as a “brotherhood”—can be every bit as important as *what* we find in scripture, if not more so.

It is obvious that Krystin has a high view of scripture, that she has approached her text with a high seriousness and with respect. So should we all whenever we come to study God's word. We should come to listen and to learn, not to inject the text with our own predispositions and preformed judgments, nor to find ammunition with which to shoot down the views of others.

Equally important is Krystin's attitude—and ours—toward those who have studied the text before us and whose comments we take into consideration as we ponder the text. In citing the viewpoints of various experts—Schüssler Fiorenza, Keener, Fee, etc.—Krystin is always fair, respectful, and appreciative, even as she is judicious and discriminating in critiquing those viewpoints. And therein, perhaps, lies the key: her critiques are critical analyses of the views, not criticisms of the viewers. By contrast, how often have we bludgeoned the reputations, the integrity of brothers and sisters—and of total strangers—with whom we disagree over a passage of scripture? How often have we impugned the motives of fellow truth-seekers simply because their conclusions on a given text do not coincide with our own conclusions?

There is an impressive modesty in Krystin's work, as evidenced by the first sentence of her conclusion: “Given the complexity of the issue and the convincing arguments for each position on 1 Cor 14:34–35, it is difficult to draw a decisive conclusion.” Along with this modesty is an appropriate humility, as expressed in these words:

We must consequently approach this text with humility, understanding that it is fraught with difficulties. In this humility we should also be aware of the implications our position on the passage have for the church—the serious implications such a position will have on the men and women of our churches.



Shouldn't the need for such humility and modesty be obvious, given the various difficulties inherent in the text and the wide range of approaches and “solutions” to the text? Unfortunately, it is not always so obvious—not to those who insist that every text must yield one clear, precise meaning and that *they* have, with great certainty, ascertained that meaning, not only for themselves but for everyone else as well.

Perhaps the most winsome feature of Krystin's study—and the one most instructive in a pastoral way—is her obvious conviction that this text is speaking to *her* and that she must listen carefully to it for herself before she tries to explain it to others. She recognizes her own biases—and none of us is bias-free, completely neutral when we come to scripture—when she says, “I realize that part of the problem with the text is me. I want the text to support *my* view on the ‘role’ of women in the church. Recognizing this, I must struggle all the more to approach the text openly, humbly, and prayerfully.”

WHEN WE'RE NOT SURE . . .

If I have read Kystin accurately, she does not reach a conclusion as to the correct or even the most likely interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34–35.¹ That is perfectly permissible for an exegete; in a church, it will not do—at least, not on a regular basis or over a prolonged period of time. Thus this second pastoral observation: A body of believers in a particular place and at a particular time—a local congregation, in other words—needs to make working, provisional decisions about difficult texts and move on. By “working,” I mean the implementation of the text in the life of the congregation. I do not mean “workable,” that is, practical, and I certainly do not mean to imply “comfortable”—a word that needs to be expunged from our theological vocabulary and our congregational conversations. A given text may confirm us in a certain practice or it may cause us to alter that practice, slightly or radically. But after we have studied a given text or set of texts, have discussed the text(s) freely and fully among ourselves, and—most importantly—have prayed to God for his Spirit's guidance in our deliberations, we need to implement the text(s) in our congregational life—whether such implementation is “practical” or not and whatever our “comfort level” with it may be.

By “provisional,” I mean “for now”—for the present, for the current time and circumstances in which we live and in which we must make the wisest, most faithful decisions that we can make about God's will for us. We certainly take the past—past interpretations of scripture, past applications of the text—into account as we make our decisions today. But we cannot let our decisions be determined by the past (“Well, in my home congregation when I was growing up we always took that passage to mean . . .”). The future may yield new information, new insights about a text, and we should be open to changing our minds, and our practices, when that happens. But “for now”—provisionally—we make the best decision that we can on a text, given the information and insights that we have shared with one another, and we move on.

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There is both a theological reason and a pastoral blessing for doing this. The theological reason is that we are justified by faith and not by works—including works of the mind. Perfect knowledge is no more an option for us than is perfect obedience. We shall no more reason our way to heaven than we shall get there by our good deeds. To urge that we can, and that we must, study a passage until all agree on what it means before we take any action is to trust implicitly in knowledge-righteousness. Does this mean that we should abandon reason, that we should forego the kind of careful rational effort that Krystin has put into her exegesis? “By no means,” as my apostolic namesake would say. What it does mean is that we must not depend upon our exegeses, or our congregational implementations of those exegeses, to save us. Only our Lord Jesus Christ can do that.

The pastoral blessing is the release and ultimately the joy that come from knowing that we are accepted by God even when our partial understandings and provisional applications of his word are deficient. Far

from immobilizing us, our for-this-time-and-place decisions actually empower us, for we are released from having always to be “right” and are enabled—by God’s grace—to do the best that we know to do, for now. Indeed, we are not only enabled, we are motivated to do so; for who can help but respond to a God who trusts us to trust in him?

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CORINTH . . .”

A final insight comes from the lines with which the apostle Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians, lines that may well embody the deepest pastoral insights in the epistle:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:2–3)

Whatever was wrong the women/wives speaking in the Corinthian assembly, one thing is sure: it was not the only problem that the church had! They were spiritually competitive. They were litigious. They were

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making a mockery of the Lord’s Supper. They were insensitive to sensitive consciences. And yet the apostle addresses them as “the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy . . .”

However many their differences, however great their problems, these Christians were not being urged to go their separate ways, but rather to stay together and work through their differences.² What a great pastoral word that is, especially to a movement that has divided over every conceivable issue: instrumental music, salaried ministers, church-conducted Bible classes, financial support for para-church institutions,

even the manner of distributing the fruit of the vine during the Lord’s Supper (one cup or many?).

There is nothing in the letter to suggest that working through differences or settling issues is easy. In reality, some issues may never be resolved to the satisfaction of all congregants. One wonders whether the church at Corinth came to full agreement on the complex issue of eating meat that had been offered to an idol before the meat was sold in the market place. Did they never again compare preachers? Did they settle all the issues pertaining to marriage and divorce? For that matter, will we ever agree in our congregations or across our fellowship about worship styles or the public roles for women in the church?

**“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CORINTH . . .
TOGETHER WITH ALL THOSE EVERYWHERE
WHO CALL ON THE NAME OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST”**

At the end of her first paragraph, Krystin writes, “Perhaps this study will also be helpful in allowing members of different views to dialog with each other, and to bring unity in the midst of a currently divisive issue.” That seems to me to be fully compatible with the tone and tenor of 1 Corinthians. Paul’s “near” goal was to correct specific abuses, to clear up misunderstandings, and to give direct instructions to the Corinthian church about how to live out their faith in Jesus Christ. To that end he quoted scripture, gave reasons, employed rhetorical devices—all in an effort to get them to see and to do. Undoubtedly, Paul expected those Christians to listen carefully, think carefully, act carefully. Undoubtedly, God expects the same of us in our congregations today. But Paul’s “far” goal, his ultimate intention, was the fuller realization of the great

reality that he touches on in 1:2: “the church of God in Corinth . . . sanctified in Christ Jesus . . . called to be holy . . . together with all those everywhere . . .” In the words of thanksgiving that immediately followed (1:4–9), the apostle makes clear how this ultimate goal will be realized: “I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. . . . God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

A PERSONAL POSTSCRIPT

As you will have noticed, just as Krystin did not propose a definitive interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34–35, neither have I proposed a definitive application of that text to our current situation. I trust that the reasons for this “omission” are clear. On the one hand, there is no generally accepted interpretation of the text—either by itself or in conjunction with other relevant passages (e.g., 1 Cor 11:5, Gal 3:28, Acts 18:24–26, and 1 Tim 2:11–15)—upon which to base such a definitive application. On the other hand, far more important than a definitive application are the three pastoral matters to which I have called attention: the *attitude* with which we approach the study of scripture, the liberating *necessity* of making faithful but provisional life decisions based on our best current understanding of scripture, and the *unity* in Christ (both intra-congregational and inter-congregational) to which we are called even as we make these decisions. To propose any course of action, however tentative, might be to blur these pastoral insights—or so it seemed to me. Yet neither do I want to leave the impression that no decisions can or should be made, no actions taken, because of the difficulties inherent in the texts. So, with no intention of proposing a solution or offering a model, let me instead tell you a story—a story of one congregation’s pilgrimage along the way, a story still in the process of being shaped and told.

The elders of this congregation have long championed the free, respectful expression of any individual viewpoint on any scriptural issue. Likewise important, these elders have long pursued congregational unity with regard to church structures and worship practices, but without binding individual consciences in such matters. In keeping with these two principles, the elders led a study on the role of women in both worship and church leadership in 1991. For a number of weeks, a sermon presentation on Sunday mornings was followed by elder-led discussions in small groups on Sunday evenings. Out of that process came a working statement—not a creedal definition—that said, among other things, that a woman could co-teach an adult class with a man but should not take a leading role in worship either on Sunday morning or in any other “open-to-the-public” gathering of the church (on site or off site). In their family devotionals or in private gatherings, members were encouraged to follow their individual consciences. It was also decided that women should not be appointed deacons or elders.

In 1999, at the request of a number of members, the elders reconsidered the whole issue—first among themselves at their mid-winter elders’ retreat, then with the congregation on Sunday evenings that summer. Out of that study came some modifications of the earlier statement. It was made clear that a woman may teach any adult Bible class, even one on a biblical text, subject to the same general supervision that the elders exercise over all classes and teachers. Furthermore, in small group gatherings (now held monthly on Sunday evenings), women may take any leadership role—in prayer, scripture reading, communion medita-

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tion, etc.—subject to the prior agreement of everyone in the group. Still again, women can and do lead many of the church's ministries—"senior saints," ministry to the homeless, ESL classes, and youth worship, to name a few—subject to the same elder supervision given to all the ministries of the church.

Over the course of time, the majority of the elders have come to believe that it is scripturally permissible and would be contextually faithful for a woman to serve in any visible capacity in the Sunday assembly (with the possible exception of preaching) and to serve the congregation as a deacon (but not as an elder). They became convinced that, scripturally, the clear trajectory of the New Testament as regards the place of women in the kingdom of God—from the teachings and actions of Jesus to the principle stated in Gal 3:28 to the examples of Priscilla and Phoebe, Chloe and Lydia—should govern their application of two problematic passages and not the other way around.³ Contextually, they see that whereas in New Testament times it might have been a hindrance to the spread of the gospel for women to be public leaders (and certainly so if they were disputatious or authoritarian), conversely, today it may be a hindrance to the spread of the gospel for women *not* to have public roles in the church.

At the same time, the elders have a strong sense that what may be *permissible* may not be *desirable* and could be *divisive* at this time and among their community of believers, given the strong, conscientiously held convictions of many members that run counter to the beliefs of most of the elders. Thus the elders struggle continuously with trying to balance what seems to be "lawful" with what seems to be "expedient" (shades of 1 Corinthians!).

What has been the outcome of this process? There has been no *outcome*; the journey of faith goes on. Along the way a few have left quietly to seek other faith communities where female leadership is more generally accepted and practiced. More have left quite vocally to form another "truer" church. Those who have stayed—the great majority—are still learning from one another, learning especially to love and appreciate one another, whatever their "position" on "the women's issue" might be. As one of those learning pilgrims, I am often perplexed by my fellow sojourners who have not come to see things as I do. I am sometimes angry, sometimes sad, regularly impatient, that our group does not move along more quickly. But I am always grateful to be a part of this loving, mutually supportive pilgrim band, and I am confident that God will lead us, day by day, into the full glory of his kingdom.

PAUL L. WATSON

Dr. Watson is an elder and the pulpit minister of the Cole Mill Road Church of Christ in Durham, North Carolina, and serves on the Editorial Board of *Leaven*.

NOTES

- 1 For the record, I am rather convinced that the "women" of v. 34 are the "wives" of the prophets who have been speaking in the Corinthian assembly. This accounts for the reference to "their own husbands" in v. 35, for Paul certainly knows that not all the women in the congregation have believing husbands whom they can consult (1 Cor 7:8–16). I envision a situation in which at least some of the prophets' wives were openly questioning, perhaps even challenging, their husbands as they prophesied. Paul says, "The assembly is no place for this; do it at home."
- 2 The case of the flagrantly sinful, unrepentant member in chapter 5 is an exception.
- 3 As for 1 Cor 14:34–35, it was their judgment that, whatever the correct understanding of that text and the situation behind it, 1 Cor 11 clearly envisions women praying and prophesying publicly (the issue being *how* they did this, not *that* they did this). As for 1 Tim 2:11–15, we could not see how one could take this passage as literally binding today without taking v. 8 and vv. 9–10 as literally binding also.