

1 CORINTHIANS 14:34–35: EVALUATION OF PROPHECY REVISITED

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Thomas Schreiner wrote: “I believe the role of women in the church is the most controversial and sensitive issue within evangelicalism today.”¹ Whether this is so or not, there can be little doubt that this topic has generated intense and divisive debates which have resulted in significant changes occurring in women’s roles in the church during the last half century.

One of the key texts in the debate concerning the public ministry of women is 1 Cor 14:34–35, where Paul writes,

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

Throughout history, the majority of commentators have held to a literal interpretation of these words and, as a result, women were not generally involved in public ministry in the church. However, in conjunction with the changing church practice over the past forty or fifty years, many scholars have reassessed this passage and proposed a variety of new interpretations.

Some believe that the passage is culturally conditioned. Others hold that what Paul prohibits in 1 Cor 14:34–35 is some kind of disruptive speech. Some take the word “speaking” in these verses to indicate speaking in tongues. Others have suggested that the women were largely uneducated and were interrupting the proceedings with questions, which were better dealt with by their husbands in their homes. Another suggestion is that Paul is quoting an assertion made by some in Corinth who wanted to exclude women from speaking in church.²

A view that has become more popular in recent years is that the words of 1 Cor 14:34–35 are a non Pauline interpolation. This position has been

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¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Women in Ministry”, *Two Views on Women in Ministry* (ed. J. Beck and C. Blomberg; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 177.

² For a summary of the various interpretations, see D. A. Carson, “Silent in the Churches: on the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b–36,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (ed. J. Piper and W. Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991) 140–51; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 664–74; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 1146–61.

extensively defended by Fee and has been revitalized by Payne and Ehrman,³ although Niccum and Miller have provided carefully reasoned responses.⁴

I. EVALUATION OF PROPHECY

Perhaps the most popular view among evangelical scholars today is that Paul's prohibition, though appearing universally applicable at first glance, relates only to evaluation of prophecy by women in church.⁵ It is this proposal that I would like to address in greater detail.

Let me begin by considering how this interpretation is generated from the text, and then I will proceed to discuss some of the problems associated with it. Those who adopt this position maintain that in 1 Cor 11:5 Paul gives approval to women to pray and prophesy in church as long as their heads are covered.⁶ This then creates a discrepancy with the straightforward interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34–35, suggesting that the latter is not the comprehensive prohibition it at first appears to be.

If 1 Cor 14:34–35 is not an unrestricted statement, to what does Paul's prohibition pertain? The solution is developed along these lines. In verse 29, Paul instructs the Corinthians: "let two or three prophets speak and let the others pass judgment." The apostle then separately expands the two parts of this verse. First of all, his injunction that "two or three prophets should speak" is enlarged in verses 30–33a, where he gives directions concerning the uttering of prophecies. The second part of verse 29, "and others should weigh carefully what is said," is elaborated in verses 33b–36, where certain

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 699–702; Philip B. Payne, "Fuldensis, Sigla for Variants in Vaticanus, and 1 Cor. 14:34–5," *NTS* 41 (1995) 240–62; Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005) 183–84.

⁴ Curt Niccum, "The Voice of the Manuscripts on the Silence of Women: The External Evidence for 1 Cor 14:34–35," *NTS* 43 (1997) 242–55; J. Edward Miller "Some Observations on the Text-Critical Function of the Umlauts in Vaticanus, with Special Attention to 1 Corinthians 14:34–35," *JSNT* 26 (2003) 217–36.

⁵ See, for example: Carson, "Silent in the Churches" 188–93; John Piper and Wayne Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 71; Thomas R. Schreiner, "Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity," in *ibid.* 124; Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 281; Simon J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 512; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 118; Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* 140–53; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 668–69; Andreas Kostenberger, "1 Timothy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12: *Ephesians-Philemon* (rev. ed.; ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 518.

⁶ This assumes that 1 Cor 11:5 should control our interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34–35. Many older commentators, and some recent ones, have judged that the reverse is true, and have opted for one of two approaches to 1 Cor 11:5. Some, including Warfield and MacArthur, hold that 11:2–16 refers, not to formal Sunday church services, but to smaller house groups, since Paul does not explicitly locate the practice to Sunday services. Others, such as Calvin and Hodge, hold that, while Paul is dealing with a church practice, he addresses one issue at a time: in 1 Cor 11:5, he focuses on the topic of head coverings and defers until 1 Cor 14:34–35 his judgment on the issue of women speaking in church.

restrictions are placed on the evaluation of prophecies.⁷ Apparently, wives were asking questions or raising objections to their husbands' prophecies. This led to an undermining of the husbands' authority over their wives, and was "shameful" conduct. Of course, it is argued, women may take part in prophesying, as was established in 1 Cor 11:5. However, they may not take part in the weighing of prophecies: it is in this sense that they may not speak.

Paul bases his argument on the law, probably taking it from Gen 2:20–24, where the woman was created in subjection to the man. This submission would be overturned if a woman were to judge the prophecies given by a man. Paul would not allow any woman to exercise a teaching ministry over men (1 Tim 2:11–12), and the assessment of prophecies falls under that umbrella. (The responsibility for evaluating prophecies fell ultimately to the elders, who were men). The women should instead ask their husbands at home any questions they have about these prophecies. Thus, according to this view, in verses 34–35, Paul is prohibiting women only from participation in the oral sifting of prophecies.

II. DIFFICULTIES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS VIEW

The view of 1 Cor 14:34–35 that I have outlined is attractive in that it appears to tie together prophecy with its practice, on the one hand, and weighing of prophecy with its restrictions, on the other. Furthermore, it has the advantage of neatly reconciling 1 Cor 11:5 and 1 Cor 14:34–35. However, I have five concerns about this interpretation. Let me address each of these in turn.

1. *Prophecy more authoritative than evaluation.* My first concern is that, according to this view, women may prophesy but not evaluate prophecy. However, discerning of prophecies exercises less authority than does uttering prophecies. In response to this, it might be protested that the converse is more likely to be the case. Surely those who assess prophecies are exercising authority over the prophets? Although this line of reasoning appears inviting, a combination of considerations renders it highly unlikely.

a. *The authority of prophecy.* The first of these relates to the authority vested in prophecy. Since this authority is dependent on its identity, let me begin by asking, what is NT prophecy? Although this question has been debated by scholars, the text of the NT provides adequate information to allow us to formulate a working definition of prophecy. Whereas teachers prepared their messages over a period of time, prophets received intelligible verbal messages by direct revelation, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14:6, 26, 30; Rev 1:1, 3). This means that prophecy articulates God's

⁷ See Carson, "Silent in the Churches" 152, who follows Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982) 239–55.

otherwise unknowable will and purposes concerning issues of the moment (1 Cor 13:2; Rev 2–3). Sometimes a predictive element is present (Acts 11:27–28; 21:10–11; Rev 1:3, 22:9). In short, then, NT prophecy is the declaration of a Spirit-inspired revelation.

Some scholars contend that NT prophecy is discontinuous with, and carries less authority than, its OT counterpart.⁸ However, the Septuagint uses προφήτης to translate נָבִי, the common Hebrew word for an Old Testament prophet. By exclusively applying the same term (προφήτης) to inspired spokesmen under the new covenant, the NT authors were consciously acknowledging their continuity with OT prophets.⁹ Furthermore, in his watershed sermon at Pentecost, Peter identifies the events of Acts 2:1–13 with Joel's prediction that, under the new covenant, believers would prophesy (Joel 2:28–32). Joel thus anticipates a continuity between the two forms of prophecy, and Peter's declaration confirms their unity (Acts 2:17–21).¹⁰

For Paul, prophets occupied a particularly authoritative office. In 1 Cor 12:28, he writes: "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers. . . ." The enumeration, "first . . . second . . . third . . ." establishes a hierarchy for the gifts, recording them in descending order of priority.¹¹ Any doubt that this was Paul's intention is removed by his insistence immediately afterwards that his hearers "eagerly desire the greater gifts" (1 Cor 12:31). Thus, in Paul's mind, the prophet held a position in the church second only to the apostles, and ahead of teachers.

Furthermore, to suppress prophecy was to "quench the Spirit" (1 Thess. 5:19), because prophecy was a "manifestation of the Spirit" (1 Cor 14:12). That is why the NT prophet could proclaim "Thus says the Holy Spirit" (Acts 21:11), reflecting the OT prophetic formula "Thus says the Lord."¹² In fact, Paul classed prophets alongside apostles as the foundation on which the church was erected (Eph 2:20; 3:5). Thus, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that, throughout the NT, prophecy is anything other than uniformly revelatory, inspired, and authoritative.

b. *Who may prophesy?* My next task is to consider the question, who utters prophecies? Is the exercise of this gift confined to a certain few or might anyone prophesy? Throughout 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is addressing the topic

⁸ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy* 18, 51–69. Much of his position is supported by D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 91–100.

⁹ David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 195.

¹⁰ This argument is expanded by F. David Farnell, "Fallible New Testament Prophecy/Prophets? A Critique of Wayne Grudem's Hypothesis," in *The Master's Perspective on Contemporary Issues* (ed. R. Thomas; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 40–47.

¹¹ Similarly, prophets are placed second in another of Paul's lists of church offices (Eph 4:11), and first in Rom 12:6, ahead of teaching.

¹² Grudem and Carson assert that errors are contained in Agabus's prophecy. However, the observations of Gaffin and Bock counterbalance their arguments. Grudem, *Gift of the Spirit* 79–82; Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 97–98; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 85–86; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 638.

of spiritual gifts (vv. 12:1, 4). He makes it clear that the person who possesses the gift of prophecy (v. 10) occupies the office of prophet (v. 28). Paul's distributive statement: "to another prophecy" (v. 10), and his rhetorical question: "all are not prophets, are they?" (v. 29) attest that only some of many possess this gift.

At the beginning of 1 Corinthians 14, Paul clearly establishes that he is continuing his discussion of spiritual gifts from chapter 12, and he proceeds to focus on the gifts of prophecy and tongues. In 1 Cor 14:26, 29–32, he inseparably links revelation, prophesying, prophecy and prophets. Those who are given revelations to utter (v. 26), he calls "prophets" in verse 29. Furthermore, his concluding exhortation, "be eager to prophesy" (1 Cor 14:39), harks back to his opening statement, which sets the scene for the chapter: "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor 14:1). This foundational verse renders the act of prophesying dependent upon possession of the gift of prophecy. Thus, there is no suggestion in these passages that believers may prophesy without receiving the gift of prophecy (and becoming prophets).¹³

c. Evaluation of prophecy does not diminish its authority. Paul's instruction that NT prophecy be evaluated (by all the hearers as I will later argue) does not necessarily diminish its authority. Wherever genuine manifestations of the Spirit occur, there will be accompanying counterfeits which must be detected. In any case, testing of prophecy was no new thing. There were false prophets in the OT and guidelines were provided there for determining if a prophet was genuine or otherwise (Deut 13:1–5; 18:20–22).

It might further be contended that, if evaluation of a particular prophecy can render it invalid, the appraisal itself possesses greater authority than the prophecy. To address this proposal, we need to consider what Paul means when, in verse 29, he writes: *καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι διακρινέτωσαν* ("and let the others evaluate"). I will address the meaning of *διακρίνειν* in greater detail later, but for the moment Thiselton's comment is helpful: "as BDAG and other lexicographical studies make clear, the most frequent and most characteristic force of *διακρίνω* in the active voice is *to differentiate* or *to distinguish between*."¹⁴ This suggests that, as they listen to prophecies, the hearers are being called on to distinguish between what is from the Spirit and what is not. This interpretation is supported by Paul's instructions in 1 Thess 5:19–22. After admonishing his readers not to forbid prophecy, he insists, on the other hand, that they should not accept uncritically all that is attributed to the Holy Spirit. The reason for this, of course, was the prevalence of false prophecy (1 Cor 12:1–3; 2 Thess 2:2). Paul therefore prevails upon the Thessalonians to "test" (v. 21) all that claimed to be inspired speech. He employs the verb *δοκιμάζειν*, which means "to make a critical examination of something

¹³ The arguments to the contrary are not compelling: 1 Cor 14:24 appears to indicate a hypothetical situation and 1 Cor 14:31 to refer to all the prophets rather than the entire congregation. In any case, this issue is not crucial to my thesis since the authority of prophecy is derived from its inspired origin, not its human channel.

¹⁴ Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* 1140–41.

in order to determine its genuineness.”¹⁵ John uses the very same word when he similarly enjoins his readers not to embrace credulously every prophetic spirit, but to “test” whether they are from God (1 John 4:1–3).

Paul and John thus indicate that they are not calling on their hearers to stand in authority over the prophecies in order to assess their strengths and weaknesses, or grade them as we might a speech or a piece of writing. What the apostles expect, instead, is that their readers scrutinize what they hear and make an informed decision as to whether each prophecy is genuine or spurious. Once this process verifies the proclamation’s divine origin, the hearers are constrained to submit to its superior authority and accede to its dictates. Genuine prophecy, then, always exercises sway over the congregation; the prophecy’s identity, however, must first be verified by evaluation before it can be accorded its due respect.

One of the tenets of the interpretation we are considering is that women may not evaluate prophecy or teach but may prophesy. However, as Chrysostom observes, because prophecy was entirely from the Spirit, and teaching only partly so, prophecy was invested with a greater authority than teaching.¹⁶ For the same reason prophecy possesses superior authority to evaluation.¹⁷ Therefore it is unlikely that Paul would allow women to voice prophecies in church but forbid them from evaluating prophecy or teaching when the former is a more authoritative ministry.

2. Learning or evaluation? A second concern I have with this interpretation is that the words “if they want to learn anything” (v. 35) do not signify the authoritative weighing of prophecies. These words suggest that the women did not understand what was being said and that they were asking questions to learn, not that they were passing judgments on what they heard. Certainly, questions could form a part of an evaluation process, but the view under consideration does not postulate that women were simply asking questions about prophecies, but providing assessments of them. Surely, the latter idea would be expressed quite differently. Learning is not the same as evaluating: the words are virtual antonyms.

3. Audible or silent evaluation? A third problem has been highlighted by J. Carl Laney.¹⁸ When Paul directs the Corinthians to judge prophecies (v. 29), he does not specify that this evaluation is to be expressed audibly.

a. Paul’s use of διακρίνειν. The apostle employs the term διακρινέτωσαν, the present subjunctive of the compound verb διακρίνειν, which means “to

¹⁵ W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3d ed.; ed. F. W. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 255

¹⁶ “The homilies of St John Chrysostom on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians”, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. P. Schaff; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1889) 256.

¹⁷ Aune, *Prophecy*, 204, notes that the prophet “was unique among early Christian leaders in that, unlike other functionaries, he claimed no personal part in the communication which he conveyed.” As a result, the prophet claimed a “transcendent authority.”

¹⁸ J. Carl Laney, “Gender Based Boundaries for Gathered Congregations: an Interpretive History of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35,” *JBMW* 7/1 (Spring 2002).

differentiate by separating,” “to conclude that there is a difference,” or “to make a distinction.”¹⁹ In Heb 5:14, this word is used of discerning good from evil, and in Acts 15:9 it means to distinguish between Jewish and Gentile believers. The word can denote either audible speaking or silent appraisal. The former is indicated in Acts 11:2, and the latter at 1 Cor 11:31, where people are told to judge themselves. Applied to 1 Cor 14:29, the word signifies the process by which each hearer listens carefully to the prophecies given and evaluates whether what was said was true or false.²⁰ The emphasis contained in the word διακρίνειν is on the deliberative process itself. While its use does not preclude the possibility that the assessment of prophecy was to be vocalized, it does not necessarily indicate that this was to take place.²¹

b. *Verse 26 contains no reference to evaluation of prophecy.* Several considerations, in fact, suggest that Paul intends a silent evaluation. In his list of the various modes of public speaking which take place in church (1 Cor 14:26), Paul does not include assessment of prophecies. While this list is not exhaustive, throughout chapter 14, the apostle’s attention is primarily on prophecy and tongues. In verse 26, he cites prophecy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues as modes of public speaking in church, all of which he examines in greater detail in subsequent verses. Yet he makes no mention of evaluation of prophecy at this point. Surely if he was so concerned about this form of utterance that he was about to forbid women from taking part in it, he would have included it as one of the modes of church speaking in verse 26. On the other hand, if Paul regarded weighing of prophecy as a silent appraisal, this would explain his failure to mention it.

c. *Evaluation of prophecy and interpretation of tongues.* At a first glance, one might consider that evaluation of prophecy is comparable to interpretation of tongues. However, this is not the case. The latter involves translation of a language not intelligible to the hearers. Evaluation of prophecy, on the other hand, entails judging whether the statements made by prophets are true or false. Tongues, once interpreted, closely approximate prophecy and

¹⁹ BDAG, 231.

²⁰ The difficulty confronting Christians was that, whereas genuine prophecy contains only truth, false prophecy often contained truth mixed with error, because the devil disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14–15). This meant that a constant vigilance was necessary on the part of the hearers to detect error. Yet, no criteria are provided here for distinguishing between genuine and false prophecy. However, statements elsewhere provide hints as to the basis for this determination. One test involves the speaker’s conception of Christ. According to Smalley, this requires “a right estimate of his identity (an eternal deity and an historical humanity; cf. Stott 155), together with (on this basis) a personal acknowledgement of his Lordship (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11)” (Stephen S. Smalley *1,2,3 John* [WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1984] 224). Furthermore, Jesus explained that we can detect false prophets by their fruits, just as a tree is recognized by the quality of its fruit (Matt 7:15–21). Jezebel, for example, incited her compatriots to sin, demonstrating she was a false prophet (Rev 2:20–24). Finally, just as the Bereans carefully examined Paul’s teachings in the light of Scripture (Acts 17:11), prophets’ statements can be examined in the light of accepted Christian teaching and norms. Additional assessment criteria are provided by James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 293–97.

²¹ Laney, “Gender Based Boundaries” 11.

require evaluation, since they are communicated by revelation.²² However, Paul makes no mention of any examination of tongues following their interpretation. It is likely, then, that his direction to evaluate prophecy signifies that the Corinthians are to exercise a theological discrimination, which should also, by implication, be applied to tongues once they are interpreted.

d. *No directions as to how many should evaluate.* Furthermore, Paul makes no mention as to *how many* are to take part in the evaluation of prophecy. When he provides instructions about speaking in tongues and interpretation, he directs that two or three may speak in tongues, and that εἷς (“one person”) is to interpret each tongue (v. 27). Similarly, he directs that two or three may prophesy. However, instead of specifying a particular number who are to assess prophecies, Paul instructs “the others” (οἱ ἄλλοι) to do so (v. 29). The expression οἱ ἄλλοι is a term used to signify the remaining ones of a number, as distinct from the subject previously specified. In this case, the subject they are distinguished from is the person who utters the prophecy. Now, it is possible that οἱ ἄλλοι denotes “the other prophets.”²³ However, it is unlikely that apostles, elders, teachers, and other leaders, who did not possess the gift of prophecy, were excluded from weighing prophecy. Furthermore, D. A. Carson, following Godet, points out that if Paul had intended to indicate “the rest of the same class (that is, the prophets)” he is more likely to have written οἱ λοιποὶ, (cf. 9:5: οἱ λοιποὶ ἀπόστολοι; “the other apostles”) instead of οἱ ἄλλοι.²⁴ Therefore, it is far more likely that οἱ ἄλλοι denotes all the listeners who are not speaking at the time.²⁵ The fact that Paul does not instruct a particular number of people to assess prophecies, but assigns this task to the whole congregation, suggests that he has a silent appraisal rather than a public evaluation in mind.

e. *Absence of directions regarding the evaluation process.* Moreover, despite giving detailed instructions for the uttering of tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecy, Paul provides no criteria as to how the appraisal of prophecies is to proceed. Yet, to engage in this activity audibly would interrupt the church service, as one person after another expressed an opinion. J. Carl Laney writes,

Paul forbids interruptions (14:27, 30) including the raising of questions (14:35). The verbal judging or interrogation of prophets during the meeting of the church

²² Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* 278.

²³ Aune, *Prophecy* 221; Thomas W. Gillespie, *The First Theologians. A Study in Early Christian Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 163; Farnell, “Fallible New Testament Prophecy” 44–45.

²⁴ Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 120.

²⁵ This interpretation is bolstered by Paul’s directions in 1 Thess 5:19–22 where he places the responsibility for weighing of prophecy on all the members of the congregation. Similarly, John’s injunction in 1 John 4:1–3 to test the spirits of the prophets is not addressed to a selected few, but to all his readers. Of course, some Christians possess the gift of discernment (1 Cor 12:10). However, Paul has made it clear that the Holy Spirit endows believers with spiritual perception so that they can detect error (1 Cor 2:13–16). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Paul expects *all* the hearers to listen to the prophecies as they are uttered and quietly weigh in their own minds what is said in the light of Scripture and Christian doctrine.

would seem to be inconsistent with the requirement that the service proceed in an orderly manner. (14:40)²⁶

Paul has been taking great pains to provide directions which will promote order in the church. If he intended weighing of prophecy to be a public activity, his brief mention of it and his failure to provide directions concerning the evaluation process is at variance with the instructions he has just provided concerning tongues, interpretation of tongues, and prophecy.

So, then, διακρίνειν does not necessarily denote audible evaluation. It is likely that all the congregation, rather than a specific limited number, are expected to weigh the prophecies, no instructions are provided as to how to undertake the evaluation process and no mention is made of weighing of prophecy as a form of public speaking in verse 26. Therefore, to suggest that judging of prophecies was expressed audibly during the assemblies is to read more into Paul's words than he actually says. It is far more likely that οἱ ἄλλοι διακρινέτωσαν denotes a silent appraisal by the audience.

4. Can “speaking” mean “evaluation?” A fourth concern I have about this view is that, in verses 34–35, Paul does not use the word we would expect if he was referring to weighing of prophecy. Earlier, in verse 29, when Paul had spoken about evaluating prophecies, he employed the term διακρίνειν, which, as I indicated above, means to “to differentiate by separating,” “to make a distinction,” and so on.²⁷ However, instead of employing this term, he uses the word λαλεῖν, which means “to speak.” The semantic range of the latter word is clearly established. Neither Paul's usage in other places nor the standard Greek lexicon suggests that λαλεῖν can mean “to judge” or “to evaluate.”²⁸ If this had been his desire, Paul could have explicitly stated that women must not judge prophecies by using διακρίνειν as he did earlier. The presence of this word would then have provided the necessary link with verse 29 to signal that he had weighing of prophecy in mind. Why did he not do so if judging prophecies was his intended meaning?

The evaluation of prophecy view holds that, in 1 Cor 14:34–35, Paul employs λαλεῖν in a restricted rather than an absolute sense. However, elsewhere in the letter and throughout chapter 14, when he intended to limit the meaning of λαλεῖν to a certain kind of speaking, Paul did so by adding a modifier. For example, when he refers to speaking in tongues, he usually adds γλώσση (“in a tongue”) to λαλεῖν to make his meaning clear (1 Cor 14:2, 4, 5, 6, 13, 18, 23, 27). Yet now in verses 34–35 he uses λαλεῖν in its unqualified form.

This raises an issue with respect to the perspicuity of Scripture. Wayne Grudem, who is an advocate of the evaluation of prophecy view, in his book *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians*, makes an observation which is highly relevant at this point. Commenting on Paul's use of οἱ ἄλλοι in verse 29, he writes:

²⁶ Laney, “Gender Based Boundaries” 12.

²⁷ Similarly, when he spoke earlier about judging of spirits Paul used the noun διακρίσεις (1 Cor 12:10).

²⁸ BDAG 582–83.

if Paul had meant to restrict his instructions in 14:29 to those with this gift (i.e. of distinguishing between spirits), he would not have used such a general term as οἱ ἄλλοι and left it without further specification. Such a restricted meaning would not have been clear to his readers.²⁹

Grudem rightly establishes the important principle of Scripture interpretation that, in the absence of a clear contextual clue, a general term should not be interpreted in a restricted sense. However, if this principle can be appealed to with respect to οἱ ἄλλοι in verse 29, it is equally applicable to Paul's use of λαλεῖν in verses 34–35. If Paul had intended to limit his instructions to a certain kind of speaking (that is, judging prophecy), why did he employ a general term such as λαλεῖν and leave it unqualified? He could have spelled it out as he has done elsewhere, instead of making universal statements when he did not intend them to be understood in an absolute sense. It is doubtful, to say the least, whether such general statements as “they are not permitted to speak,” “they must be silent,” and such an emphatic statement as “it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” should be taken to mean no more than that a woman may not evaluate prophecies. As Grudem comments above concerning οἱ ἄλλοι, “such a restricted meaning would not have been clear to his readers.”

5. Does the interpretation flow naturally from the text? A final difficulty with this modern view of 1 Cor 14:34–35 concerns whether it issues naturally from the text and would be apparent to the average reader. Some authors state that this interpretation of the passage fits the flow of thought found in chapter 14 and suggest, as mentioned above, that verses 30–33a expand the first part of verse 29, while verses 33b–36 elaborate the second part of the verse, which deals with the evaluation of prophecies. However, there is some distance between the isolated mention of evaluation of prophecy in verse 29 and verses 34–35, and no contextual indicator appears in the latter to signal that they refer only to sifting of prophecies. A number of different kinds of speech are mentioned in verses 26–32. Why should we conclude that verses 34 and 35 point back to verse 29?

When I first read the interpretation that identifies “speaking” in verses 34–35 with weighing of prophecies, though I had no reason at the time to question it, I was aware that it would never have occurred to me. And I believe that it would not occur to the average reader. In fact, this view is an innovation which, as far as I can determine, first appeared in the second half of the twentieth Century. It was initially proposed by W. Klein in 1962, and again advanced by M. Thrall in 1965.³⁰ It was then expanded by J. Hurley in 1973, further developed by W. Grudem in 1982, and adopted by others

²⁹ Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy* 60.

³⁰ W. Klein, “The Church and its Prophets,” *ATR* 44 (1962) 8. For this information I am indebted to Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech In Early Christianity and its Hellenistic Environment* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995) 272. See also M. E. Thrall, *I & II Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 102. Interestingly, this coincided with the rise of the feminist movement, which, after it had been quiescent for some time, experienced a resurgence in the 1960s.

later in the century.³¹ One of the guidelines proposed by Piper and Grudem to determine whether a Scripture interpretation is influenced by culture or background is to test our conclusions by the history of exegesis.³² Applying this guideline to the weighing of prophecy interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34–35, we find this view first appeared in the history of the church some forty years ago. It had not been detected by nineteen hundred years of insightful teachers and expositors—who were hardly devoid of the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment. This raises an important question: if this interpretation was not identified in the past by astute interpreters and would not occur to the vast majority of readers, would it have occurred to the Corinthians themselves?

We must be careful to distinguish between an interpretation, which scholars can impose on the text by finding relationships between words and ideas that are not readily apparent, and that interpretation which is naturally derived from the meaning of the words and the flow of thought. It is only this latter meaning that is likely to reflect authorial intent.

III. CONCLUSION

In summary, then, certain difficulties are associated with the view that 1 Cor 14:34–35 prohibits only evaluation of prophecy by women. First of all, this explanation allows women to prophesy but not evaluate prophecy or teach, when the former exercises more authority. Furthermore, Paul’s words, “if they want to learn anything,” seem incompatible with the authoritative evaluation of prophecies. Rather than denoting an audible evaluation, it is far more likely that διακρίνειν in verse 29 indicates a silent appraisal of prophecy by the congregation. In addition, Paul’s unqualified use of λαλεῖν is incompatible with a limited form of speaking such as weighing of prophecy. In the absence of a clear contextual clue, such as the presence of διακρίνειν in verses 34–35, verse 29 is too remote, and the reference to evaluation of prophecy too brief, to conclude that weighing of prophecy is the controlling subject of the call to silence. Since this modern interpretation of the verses does not flow naturally from the text, and had not been detected by commentators for nineteen hundred years, serious questions must be raised as to whether the Corinthians themselves would have interpreted it in this way, or whether it was intended by the author.

I realize that, in evangelical circles, this view of 1 Cor 14:34–35 is extremely popular. However, we should not fear to subject biblical interpretations to further scrutiny. If they are accurate and reflect the intention of the divine author, re-evaluation will succeed only in strengthening them, just as a tree grows strong in response to the winds that buffet it. On the other hand, if this reappraisal brings to light insoluble problems, our loyalty to the text of Scripture must take precedence over adhering to views that are found to be inadequate.

³¹ J. B. Hurley, “Did Paul Require Veils or the Silence of Women?,” *WTJ* 35 (1973) 216–18. See also *idem*, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 135–94; Grudem, *Gift of Prophecy* 239–55.

³² Piper and Grudem, “Overview of Central Concerns” 84.