

Paul does not write as fully and explicitly as we would wish about issues of equality. Nevertheless, the apocalyptic framework in which he sets Philemon makes explicit his petition for manumission in this instance of a baptized slave of a baptized slaveowner. No text is immune to harmful misinterpretation. Indeed the history of interpretation offers few more striking instances than Philemon and Galatians. Let them remind us of the responsibilities we face as scholars, and perhaps these two epistles can assist in each other's restoration.

PAUL ON THE RELATION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN*

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Sex is a minor concern within the foundational logic of Paul's moral vision. One sees this clearly in Romans: apart from the rhetorically charged depiction of sexual immorality as an outward and visible sign of humanity's alienation from God in Rom. 1.24–27, Paul has very little to say about sexual conduct in this most extensive of his teachings.

Nonetheless, Paul was compelled by circumstances to deal with issues of sexual behavior in his churches, particularly at Corinth; his responses in 1 Corinthians have been of fateful import historically for Christian teaching about sex. Furthermore, as issues of sexual conduct are hotly debated at the end of the twentieth century, Paul is alternately invoked or inveighed against by various disputants. Consequently, we cannot avoid asking how his understanding of sex fits into his larger moral vision.¹

Sex at the Turn of the Ages: 1 Corinthians 7

People who know nothing else about the apostle Paul may know that he wrote, 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman' (1 Cor. 7.1b). This statement, however, is surely one of the most widely misinterpreted texts in the New Testament. Precisely for that reason, it offers an excellent illustration of the importance of careful descriptive exegesis as the first step in the construction of New Testament ethics. On the basis of 1 Cor. 7.1, lifted out of its context, Paul is often castigated as a misogynistic character with pathological attitudes about sex. While the apostle's ideas certainly do not correspond to conventional late twentieth-century notions of 'healthy sexuality', it would be a serious mistake to treat this text as a polemic against sex. Let us examine the passage carefully.

First of all, we must remember that we are reading one side of a conversational exchange. Paul is not setting out to write a general treatise on sex and marriage; rather, he is responding to a Corinthian concern. This is made explicit at the beginning of the sentence: 'Now concerning the matters about which you wrote ...' (1 Cor. 7.1a). This is a major structural transition in the letter. Through the first six chapters, Paul has been responding to reports about the Corinthian community (1.11; 5.1); now he turns to questions they have raised directly in correspondence. Therefore, in order to understand Paul's response, we need to reconstruct the question they have asked and the situation it presupposes.

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¹ The topics of divorce and homosexuality are more thoroughly treated in Part 4 of *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (pp. 347–406); consequently, they will not be the focus of attention here.

Several times in 1 Corinthians Paul quotes a slogan popular among some of his readers in order to correct or qualify it, or to challenge the conclusions that the Corinthians were drawing from it. For example, in 1 Cor. 6.12–14, just a few lines before the passage we are considering, Paul scripts the following exchange:

Corinthians: 'All things are lawful for me.'

Paul: 'But not all things are beneficial.'

Corinthians: 'All things are lawful for me.'

Paul: 'But I will not be dominated by anything.'

Corinthians: 'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food', and God will destroy both one and the other.'

Paul: 'The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.'²

In ancient Greek manuscripts there were no quotation marks to set off the Corinthians' lines from Paul's responses, but readers at Corinth who were familiar with the slogans would have had no trouble in following the dialogical characters of this passage. The NRSV translators have provided quotation marks to help us read the dialogue rightly.

In 1 Cor. 8.1, which is structurally analogous to 7.1, we encounter a similar pattern: 'Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge". Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up' (cf. also vv. 4–6, 8–9). Paul does not attack the Corinthian slogan; he first accepts it, then deflates it. He is quoting (or perhaps characterizing) their position in order to set up a foil for his response.

Once we recognize this rhetorical pattern in the letter, it becomes clear that 1 Cor. 7.1 is another instance of the same technique:

Corinthians: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.'

Paul: 'But because of cases of sexual immortality, each man should have his wife and each woman her own husband.'

Thus, we see that the antisex slogan almost certainly comes from the Corinthians rather than from Paul himself.³ This is one of 'the matters about which you wrote' (7.1a). As the punctuation in the NRSV indicates, Paul is quoting a statement from their letter back to them to identify the topic of discussion.

Paul does not directly challenge the slogan; indeed, he is sympathetic with it (cf. v. 8). Nonetheless, he poses a corrective to it. What exactly is he trying to correct?

2 For analysis of the structure of vv. 13–14, see Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 253–57, who argues persuasively that the phrase 'God will destroy both one and the other' expresses not Paul's view but 'the Corinthian view of spirituality, which looked for a "spiritual" salvation that would finally be divested of the body' (p. 257).

3 For a thorough exegetical defense of this interpretation, see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 266–86. See also Victor P. Furnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (Minneapolis: Abingdon Press, 1968), pp. 70–79.

The key lies in the proper interpretation of v. 2: '... each man should *have* his own wife and each woman her own husband'. The sentence is often read as an encouragement for unmarried people to pair up and get married. Careful reflection will show, however, that this interpretation is impossible: Paul's advice to the unmarried in this same chapter is that they should remain unmarried if at all possible (vv. 8–9, 20, 24, 25–27, 39–40). What, then, does v. 2 mean? The passage makes perfect sense when we recognize that the verb ἔχειν ('to have') is a common euphemism for sexual intercourse. For instance, it occurs in this sense in 1 Cor. 5.1: 'It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among Gentiles: for a man to *have* his father's wife.' If this is the sense of the verb 'have' in 1 Cor. 7.2, then Paul must be speaking to those who are already married and urging them to continue to have sexual intercourse. This same exhortation is explicitly repeated in v. 3.

But why would such advice be necessary? To readers at the end of the twentieth century, this counsel to married couples may appear foolishly superfluous, as though Paul had written to remind his churches to breathe and eat. But in the first-century context, such teaching about sex was not at all unnecessary. In the first place, the correlation between piety and celibacy was a common feature of Hellenistic culture. The physical body, belonging to the material world, was deprecated and regarded as inferior to the rational soul; the goal of the wise philosopher was to discipline the body by bringing its animal urges under the control of reason. We find a reaction against such teachings in the letter to the Colossians:

Why do you submit to regulations: 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch'? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence (Col. 2.20b–23).

In many circles, ascetic wisdom was understood to entail sexual abstinence. Celibacy was seen as a sign of spiritual power, because it symbolized freedom from attachment to the crude realm of the material. In short, we might say aphoristically that in the ancient world celibacy had 'sex appeal'.

Second, it is not implausible that there were factors within the earliest Christian traditions that made sexual abstinence appear attractive or even mandatory for participants in this new faith. The baptismal formula that Paul cites in Gal. 3.28 declares that in Christ 'there is no longer male and female'. In other words, Gen. 1.27 ('So God created humankind in his image; ... male and female he created them') has been superseded by the new creation, in which sexual differences are abolished.⁴ How then can Christian couples continue to indulge their sexual desires? Is sex not incompatible with life in the new creation? (It is probably not coincidental that when Paul cites the baptismal formula to the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 12.13, he omits the 'no longer male and female' phrase.) Particularly if—as some scholars have argued—some of the Corinthians believed that they were already

4 For an account of the diverse ways in which this symbolism was interpreted in early Christianity, see Wayne A. Meeks, 'The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Pauline Christianity', in *Paul and the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 115–44.

living in the state of resurrection life (cf. 4.8), they might well have concluded that married couples should cease having sex. Consider the saying of Jesus reported in Lk. 20.34–36:

Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.

It is not at all improbable that some of the Corinthians, who understood themselves to be capable of speaking in 'the tongues of angels' (1 Cor. 13.1), might have regarded themselves as having been translated into such an angelic state.⁵

Thus, we propose the hypothesis that *Paul is seeking to counteract radical Corinthian asceticism*. Against an idealistic hyperspirituality that forswears sexual union even within existing marriages, Paul urges that married couples may and *must* continue to have sexual relations:

Let the husband give to his wife what is owed her, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does (1 Cor. 7.3–4).

The emphasis here on mutuality is striking. In contrast to a patriarchal culture that would assume a one-way hierarchical ordering of the husband's authority over the wife, Paul carefully prescribes *mutual submission*.⁶ Neither marriage partner controls his or her own body: in the marriage covenant, one surrenders authority over one's own body to the spouse. (In passing, we should note how sharply this picture of mutual submission contrasts to the twentieth-century notion of the sexual autonomy of each individual.) Those who have already entered marriage relationships, Paul directs, should continue to honor their commitments; to do otherwise is to deprive the spouse of what he or she might legitimately expect from a marriage partner.

Indeed, withdrawal into celibacy is not only a breach of faith with the spouse, it is also dangerous. Why? Because Satan may tempt the superspiritual ascetic to find sexual fulfillment elsewhere (7.5), perhaps through fornication with a prostitute. (Paul has just spoken sternly against such practices in 1 Cor. 6.12–20.) In order to understand Paul's concern, we must picture the sadly comic scenario in which a Christian married couple plays a charade of sexual abstinence with one another while indulging in clandestine extramarital affairs. Though the prospect seems ridiculous,

5 There is no indication in the letter that the Corinthians knew this specific tradition of Jesus teaching or that their self-imposed sexual abstinence was based on appeal to dominical tradition. The point is simply that the Lukan saying gives independent expression to the wider cultural assumption that sexuality is alien to eschatological existence.

6 Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, 3.1, Assen: Van Gorcum, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 107, while noting that Paul's teaching is parallel to rabbinic traditions that stress the wife's marital rights on the basis of Exod. 21.10, also observes that the 'remarkable

Paul is a realistic observer of the deceitfulness of the human heart,⁷ and he knows—as we have seen in recent sex scandals involving television evangelists—that hyperspiritual people are hardly immune to sexual temptations. Thus, he thinks it safer to counsel the continuance of normal sexual relations within marriage:

Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement (*ἐκ συγγνώμης*) for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (7.5).

Marriage partners may agree 'with a common voice' (*ἐκ συγγνώμης*) to temporary abstinence—*analogous to fasting*—for a special season of prayer, as long as the time is strictly bounded, with the understanding that they will resume sexual relations. This permission for a temporary moratorium on sex is the 'concession' mentioned in v. 6: 'This I say by way of concession, not of command.' Traditionally, the text has been interpreted to mean that Paul grudgingly concedes the legitimacy of sex within marriage. In view of the foregoing exegesis, however, the passage makes better sense if the pronoun *τοῦτο* ('this') in v. 6 is understood to refer to the immediately preceding v. 5: Paul's concession to the Corinthian ascetics is his cautious approval of a temporary suspension of sexual relations.

In light of these exegetical observations, we can construct a paraphrase of 1 Cor. 7.1–9, filling in some of the silences and gaps in the conversation. The words in *italics* are supplied as explanatory expansions to show how Paul's advice seeks to address the particular issues raised by the Corinthians.

- (1) Now I will respond to the matters about which you wrote. You propose that, for the sake of holiness and purity, married couples should abstain from sexual intercourse. As you say, 'It is a fine thing for a man not to touch a woman.' (2) But—since that is unrealistic—let each husband have sexual intercourse with his own wife, and let each wife have sexual intercourse with her own husband. (3) Marriage creates a mutual obligation for a couple to satisfy one another's needs; therefore, let the husband give the wife what he owes her, and likewise let the wife give what she owes to her husband. (4) For the wife does not rule her own body; the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not rule his own body; the wife does. (5) Do not deprive one another, unless you decide—in harmony with one another—to abstain from intercourse for a time so that both of you can devote yourselves to prayer. But (*when the time is up*) come together again, so that Satan will not be able to tempt you.
- (6) I am not commanding this *practice of temporary abstinence*; rather, I am saying this as a concession to your proposal (see v. 1, above). (7) I wish that everyone could be *in control of sexual desire* like me. Obviously, however, that is not the case. But each person has his/her own gift from God: *if not celibacy, then something else*, one in one way and another in some other way.
- (8) To the unmarried and to the widows, on the other hand, I say that it is a fine thing for them to remain *unmarried* as I am. (9) But if they are not in control of themselves, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

It is important to note what is not said in this passage about sex within marriage. Perhaps most striking is the absence of any reference to sexual union as an expression

⁷ See Dan O. Via, Jr., *Self-Deception and Wholeness in Paul and Matthew* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

of love. As we have already noted, Paul appeals to love as a motive for behavior when he addresses the problems of idol-meat and speaking in tongues, but he does not do so when he speaks of sex. Perhaps love is implied in Paul's call for mutual submission of marriage partners, but he does not make the point explicit. Second, nothing is said here about the procreative purpose of sex. Husband and wife are to continue having intercourse because sexual union is a part of the obligation of marriage and because it protects them against temptation, but nothing is said here about conceiving children. Presumably, Paul's belief in the imminent eschaton made him relatively indifferent to the raising of families; in this respect his teaching stands in stark contrast to Jewish tradition and to later Christian teaching about procreation as the fundamental purpose of marital sex. Finally, there is no suggestion whatever of differing standards for clergy and laity; indeed, the distinction is anachronistic. Paul knew nothing of a special class of 'ordained' persons who were subject to special standards of sexual behavior. In sum, we see that the passage has been subject to drastic interpretation. Rather than deprecating women or sex, Paul is actually arguing *against* those who regard sexual intercourse as inappropriate for Christians. He stoutly and realistically affirms the necessity of mutual sexual satisfaction within marriage.⁸

Why, then, does Paul advise the unmarried to remain unmarried (7.8)? At this point, we see the effects of his apocalyptic eschatology:

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away (7.29–31).

If the present order of things is about to be swept away, why enter into marriage? Paul's rule of thumb is stated clearly and insistently in 7.17–24: 'Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.' The only thing that matters in the present time between the times is 'unhindered devotion to the Lord'. Marriage inevitably brings with it a concern for the 'affairs of the world' and thereby hinders total devotion to the mission of the church at the turn of the ages (7.32–35). That mission is 'the present necessity'⁹ that leads Paul to opine that singleness is

8 This reading differs in emphasis from Daniel Boyarin's incisive and nuanced interpretation of the same passage (D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Cultural Identity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994], pp. 180–200). Boyarin stresses more heavily Paul's preference for a genderless, spiritualized ideal of Christian existence (as articulated in Gal. 3.28); thus, Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7 must be read as a reluctant compromise: 'Paul settled for something else, something less than his vision called for, and thus the continuation of the domestic slavery of marriage for those not called to the celibate life' (p. 193). My difference from Boyarin on the reading of this text is part of a larger debate between us about the extent to which Paul's anthropology parallels the systematic dualism expressed more clearly in Philo of Alexandria. Nonetheless, the differences are primarily matters of where to place the accents in Paul's discourse. I can agree entirely with Boyarin when he writes, 'Paul maintains a two-tiered system of thought regarding sexuality: celibacy as the higher state but marriage as a fully honorable condition for the believing Christian' (p. 192).

9 The translation 'impending crisis' (7.26), despite its appearance in the RSV and NRSV, is indefensible. The participle ἐνεστώσαν clearly means 'present', as in 1 Cor. 3.22, where it is juxtaposed to

preferable as his own opinion on a matter where he has no command of the Lord (7.25).

At the same time, Paul knows that the power of the present age still exercises influence over the lives of believers. They are subject to temptation and to burning physical desire. Unlike the hyperspiritual enthusiasts that he seeks to correct, he knows that the resurrection remains a future hope rather than a present reality. Consequently, the 'not yet' pole of his eschatology leads him to give sober realistic counsel to the Corinthians, permitting marriage and encouraging sexual relations within marriage. The important thing is that the members of the community, whether married or unmarried, remain in a state of watchful readiness and obedience.

Women and Men in the Ministry of the Pauline Churches

Apart from the questions of sex and marriage, what role did women play in the social organization and worship life of the Pauline churches? The letters seem to send mixed signals. On the one hand, we find the radical egalitarian declaration of Gal. 3.26–28:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

On the other hand, we find in 1 Cor. 14.34–35 a stringent suppression of the public role of women in the worshipping community:

Let women be silent in the churches. For it is not permitted to them to speak, but let them be subordinate, just as the Law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home. For it is a shameful thing for a woman to speak in church.

How is the tension between these texts to be understood? Are women equal partners with men within the community of faith, or does Paul assign them a subordinate role?

The best way to approach this question is to examine the evidence concerning the roles *actually* played by women in the Pauline communities. Since this matter has been studied extensively in recent New Testament scholarship, we can summarize the pertinent findings briefly here.¹⁰

First, we know from 1 Cor. 11.3–16 that Paul expected women to pray and prophesy in the community's worship. His major concern in this passage is that they should arrange their hair (or cover their heads)¹¹ in a seemly manner while

10 For more detailed discussion, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), pp. 226–30; Finnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, pp. 83–114; Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (SNTSMS, 59, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

11 For discussion of this disputed passage, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 226–30; Finnish, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, pp. 94–101; Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

praying and prophesying. Wayne Meeks summarizes the thrust of the passage aptly: 'In brief, he leaves unquestioned the right of women, led by the Spirit, to exercise the same leadership roles in the assembly as men, but insists only that the conventional symbols of sexual difference, in clothing and hair styles, be retained.'¹² Thus, this passage seems to stand in contradiction to the directive of 1 Cor. 14.34–35, which mandates silence for women in the assembly.

Second, numerous incidental references in Paul's letters show that women were included among Paul's co-workers. Some of these women exercised leadership roles in the communities. For example, Paul describes Phoebe as 'a deacon (δῆκονος) of the church at Cenchreae' (Rom. 16.1). It is not clear whether the term δῆκονος should be understood as designating a formal office in the church (as in Phil. 1.1), or whether it is simply a generic term for 'servant/minister', as in 1 Cor. 3.5 and 2 Cor. 3.6, where Paul uses exactly the same word to describe his own role. In either case, Paul thinks of Phoebe as having some important work to do at Rome, and he instructs the Romans to help her 'in whatever she may require of you', adding that 'she has been a benefactor (προοδότης) of many and of myself as well' (Rom. 16.2). The term προοδότης (literally 'one who stands before') can be used to describe one who leads or presides over a group; here it probably has the more general sense of 'patron' or 'benefactor'.

Prisca and Aquila, a wife and husband team, are among Paul's 'co-workers in Christ Jesus'. Paul mentions that 'all the churches of the Gentiles' give thanks for their ministry, and he mentions that they host a house-church in their home (Rom. 16.3–4; cf. Acts 18.18–28). None of Paul's comments about them suggests any subordination of the wife to the husband; she appears to be a full participant in ministry. Several other women appear as 'workers in the Lord' in Paul's long list of salutations in Rom. 16.1–16, including Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, and Junia, who along with Andronicus (perhaps her husband) is described as 'prominent among the apostles' (16.7). In Phil. 4.2–3 Paul urges the women Euodia and Syntyche—who have 'struggled beside me in the work of the gospel'—to mend their differences and 'be of the same mind in the Lord'. They are not explicitly described as leaders of the Philippian church, but the prominence that Paul accords them in this letter addressed to the whole church suggests that they are persons with an important role in the community.

The cumulative weight of this evidence suggests that women did play a significant role in the ministry of the Pauline churches, including serving as members of the apostolic mission teams. Certainly, women participated in the activity of prophecy, which had as its purpose the upbuilding of the church (1 Cor. 14.1–25). In many respects, women in these communities enjoyed a greater measure of freedom and dignity than they could have experienced in Greco-Roman society outside the Christian fellowship. Indeed, the relatively egalitarian social structure of the Pauline communities made them particularly attractive to 'upwardly mobile' urban women whose education or economic position ('achieved status') exceeded their hereditary position ('attributed status').¹³

12 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 220 n. 107.

13 Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, pp. 70–73.

How, then, are we to understand the injunction to silence in 1 Cor. 14.34–35? At least four different explanations have been proposed by scholars.

(1) The passage does not forbid women from exercising leadership or speaking in edifying ways to the community; rather, it forbids disruptive speech during the community's worship. Perhaps the women at Corinth, moving into a new position of freedom in the church, were interrupting worship with questions (v. 35) and creating disorder. Thus, the injunction is not a general rule but a pastoral directive aimed at a specific situation. This explanation makes sense of v. 35 ('If they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home'), but it overlooks the generalizing force of v. 34b ('Let them be subordinate, just as the Law also says') and requires a special narrow sense for the common verb *λάλειν* ('speak') in vv. 34 and 35; it would have to mean something like 'chatter'. If v. 33b ('as in all the churches of the saints') is read with v. 34, this argument becomes impossible, because Paul would be asserting female silence and subordination as a rule for all communities, not just for some particular problematical situation at Corinth.

(2) The passage refers only to married women, whereas the women who are permitted to pray and prophesy (1 Cor. 11.3–16) must be unmarried.¹⁴ Women who marry become subordinate to their husbands and should keep quiet. This interpretation resolves the apparent contradiction, but it requires us to supply a condition not stipulated in 1 Cor. 11.3–16 (that female prophets must be unmarried), and it overlooks the evidence that married women such as Prisca and Junia did play leadership roles in the Pauline communities.

(3) The passage is an interpolation,¹⁵ not written by Paul but added to his letter by a later scribe or editor, such as the author of the Pastoral Epistles (cf. 1 Tim. 2.8–15). This hypothesis finds some support in the existence of a number of ancient manuscripts that place vv. 34–35 at the end of the chapter rather than between vv. 33 and 36. The verses do appear intrusive in Paul's discussion of order in the exercise of prophetic gifts; when they are removed, the passage reads smoothly. Furthermore, on material grounds it is difficult to imagine these words coming from Paul's hand: the Paul who wrote 1 Cor. 11.3–16 certainly did not think that it was 'shameful for a woman to speak in church'. There are, however, no extant manuscripts that omit vv. 34–35; if these verses were added to the text secondarily, they were added at a very early stage.¹⁶

(4) Antoinette Wire, rejecting the interpolation theory, has recently argued that 1 Cor. 14.34–35 is the rhetorical goal and climax of the entire letter, which is constructed to lead up to Paul's silencing of female prophets at Corinth.¹⁷ (She leaves open the question of whether Paul intentionally structures the whole argument to

14 Schlüsler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 230–33.

15 For an extended defense of this argument, see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 699–708. For a counterargument defending the authenticity of the verses, see Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 149–52.

16 Significantly, however, a recent article by Philip Payne, 'Fuldenis, Sigla for Variants in Vaticanus, and 1 Cor. 14.34–35', *NTS* 41 (1995), pp. 240–62, identifies previously unnoticed evidence from the sixth-century Codex Fuldenis suggesting that vv. 34–35 were regarded as an interpolation by Bishop Victor of Capua, under whose authority the manuscript was produced. My thanks to Dr Payne for allowing me to consult a prepublication of his essay.

17 Wire, *Women Prophets*, pp. 135–58.

lead to this conclusion or whether he arrives at it through wrestling with the community's problems.) On this reading, 1 Cor. 11.3–16 is interpreted not as an endorsement of prophecy by women but as a preliminary restriction on the dress and behavior of the female prophets; having gained an inch rhetorically in ch. 11, Paul takes a mile in ch. 14, promulgating a far more comprehensive restriction on the Corinthian women. Of the four options considered here, this is the least plausible: it depends on an elaborate speculative reconstruction of the role of women prophets at Corinth, it construes the whole letter as an instance of manipulative and repressive rhetoric, and—most tellingly—it clashes flagrantly with the evidence enumerated above concerning the actual roles of women in Paul's churches.

All things considered, the third of these explanations—the interpolation theory—is the likeliest, the one most consistent with the picture that Paul's letters otherwise convey of the role of women in worship and ministry. Whether Paul wrote these words or not, however, they give expression to a theological judgment that appears again in the Pastoral Epistles; consequently, a New Testament ethic that seeks to be responsive to the full witness of the canonical New Testament must take 1 Cor. 14.34–35 into account in the synthetic and hermeneutical stages of normative reflection. In other words, we cannot end our consideration of this text by saying, 'Paul did not write it.' In a later stage of our work, we will have to deal with the New Testament's differing attitudes concerning the role of women in the church.

Regardless of our judgment concerning the interpretation of 1 Cor. 14.34–35, we must recognize a certain built-in tension concerning the role of women in Paul's symbolic world. The deepest logic of his gospel declares that men and women are one in Christ and ought to live in relations of loving mutuality. His instructions on marriage are remarkable for their time in their careful, egalitarian balancing of the obligations of husband and wife. In his missionary work he joyfully acknowledges the contributions of female colleagues, fellow 'workers in the Lord'. Yet in some passages, such as 1 Cor. 11.3–16, he insists—with labored and unpersuasive theological arguments—on the maintenance of traditional markers of sexual distinction; despite the ingenious efforts of exegetes at the end of the twentieth century, it is impossible to deny the hierarchical implications of such symbolic markers. Indeed, Paul seems to have found the Corinthian church's experiments in gender equality somewhat unsettling; consequently, he sought to constrain what he saw as excesses.

In this matter as in so many others, Paul's ethical stance is comprehensible only in light of his dialectical eschatology: already men and women enjoy equality in Christ; however, not yet can that equality sweep away all the constraints and distinctions of the fallen order. Sexual distinctions do persist, and sexual relations are fraught with danger. The transformation of gender roles was not a programmatic emphasis of Paul's mission; rather, it was an unintended consequence, as the Spirit worked in the churches. The calling of Christians at the turn of the ages, according to Paul, is to live sacrificially within the structures of marriage and community, recognizing the freedom of the Spirit to transform institutions and roles but waiting on the coming of the Lord to set all things right. In the meantime, apostle and community find themselves poised on a tightrope, seeking to discern the will of God in circumstances where old norms no longer hold. 'Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Rom. 12.2).

How does this exhortation work itself out in the community's understanding of the right relation of women and men? Perhaps on no other issue do we see Paul struggling so visibly to get it right. In that respect, the church today stands to learn something from Paul, since—as he wrote to the Philippians in another context—'you are having the same struggle that you saw I had' (Phil. 1.30).¹⁸ Any sexual ethic that takes its bearings from Paul will shape the community's discernment with respect to the three fundamental theological motifs that we have identified in Paul's thought: How do our actions manifest the presence of the new creation in a sin-dominated world, how do our actions correspond to the self-sacrificed love of the cross, and how do our actions serve the good of the community? We rightly understand Paul's particular teachings about sex only when we see them as attempts to answer these questions for the communities that he was forming.

18 As Boyarin remarks, 'People in the late antiquity had not thought their way out of a dilemma which catches us on its horns even now—in very late antiquity' (Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, p. 200).