

# HEARING GOD'S WORD IN THE "SILENCE": A CANONICAL APPROACH TO 1 CORINTHIANS 14.34-35

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The Western, Evangelical church is polarized in "grid lock" over the question about how men and women should relate.

One side works from an egalitarian position which tends to dismiss differences by saying that women and men have the same nature. This *modernist* view minimizes human diversity by seeing both male and female as almost "one-dimensional." The favorite text is Galatians 3.28. The problem is that this "desexing" of humanity often amounts to the projection of one gender onto the other. One perspective, either female or male, is elevated as the norm for all people.

The other side works from a hierarchical position which usually overemphasizes differentiation by saying that men and women have very different natures. This *traditionalist* view is often used to restrict women from participation in certain roles. The favorite texts are 1 Corinthians 14.34-35 and 1 Timothy 2.11-15. This view also can be a form of projection—usually male projection. Often men determine what is and what is not appropriate for women.

## The Hermeneutical Problem

The underlying issue is hermeneutical. Take 1 Corinthians 14.26-40 for example. Traditionalists tend to hear only the "dualness" theme. They freeze for all time this particular way of expressing the differentness of female from male ("it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" vv.34-35) (see Piper and Grudem 1991). However, this interpretation fails to listen to the "oneness" voice in the text ("all are to learn" vv.31). It fails to reflect theologically on the whole of Scripture and it fails to discern what is actually driving this text.

Modernists, on the other hand, tend to hear only the "oneness" theme in the same text. They often ignore the restriction to silence (vv.34-35), claiming that it is not Pauline. Admittedly, there is some textual difficulty with verses 34-35. While they are found in all extant manuscripts, some manuscripts include them following v.33 and in others they follow v.40 (Metzger 1994:499-500). Since many modernists are uncomfortable with this seemingly "un-Pauline" way of speaking anyway, the two verses are often dismissed. The restriction is considered a later addition, representing a concession to cultural opinion which is no longer normative for today (Conzelmann 1975:246; Fee 1987:697-711). However, this dismissal fails to take seriously the shape of the canon in its final form. Even if vv. 34-35 were not written by Paul, to remove the restriction is to silence the "dualness" voice which the church has confessed is part of its canon or rule-of-faith. Like traditionalists, modernists also fail to reflect theologically on the text and they fail to discern what is actually driving the restriction.

## **Brevard S. Childs's Canonical Alternative**

A third approach is needed—a hermeneutical approach which is neither traditional nor modern. Brevard S. Childs's canonical approach (1970; 1972; 1974; 1979; 1984; 1986; 1992) is “a third way.” Childs challenges the church to read Scripture and to take the text seriously. He calls the church in every culture to reflect theologically on Scripture and to discern what is driving the particular text. His approach is based on the conviction that the Bible was shaped to contain critical theological norms which can be appropriated in every age. The Spirit continues to make the will of God accessible through the witness of Scripture.

This essay explores the alternative approach of Brevard S. Childs. Interaction with the so-called “restrictive” text of 1 Corinthians 14.34-35 provides a window into his approach which is neither traditional nor modern. My contention is that a canonical approach to Scripture is a viable alternative which provides a way through the “grid lock.”

## **Current Thinking on 1 Corinthians 14.34-35**

The debate on this text usually centers on two critical issues—authorship and authority. The current interpretations can be organized according to the response each gives to the following two questions: 1) Authorship. Is the restriction written by Paul or is it added later by someone other than Paul? 2) Authority. Is the restriction normative or is it not normative?

The current interpretations can be graphed along two axes according to their response to the question of authorship (vertical) and the question of authority (horizontal). Note that modernists and traditionalists divide on the question of authorship. Note also that they themselves divide into “new” and “old” versions based on the question of authority.

## The Four Dominant Interpretations of 1 Corinthians 14.34-35

Vertical axis = Authorship AND Horizontal axis = Authority

New Traditional <--- TRADITIONAL ---> Old Traditional

<p>The restriction does not contradict Paul. It is simply a temporary corrective. The text addresses either an isolated aberration or a temporary lack of qualified women leaders. This is an issue of church order not of creation order. The particular problem addressed in the text is no longer operative. Therefore, the restriction is a time-conditioned corrective and is not normative today.</p>	<p><b>PAUL</b></p>	<p>The restriction does not contradict Paul. Women are free to participate in ministry. They are only restricted from positions of authority like interpreting prophecy. Such leadership positions would violate the creation order. The husband is to exercise headship over his wife. Therefore, the restriction is not time-conditioned and it is normative for all time.</p>
<p><b>NOT NORMATIVE</b></p>		<p><b>NORMATIVE</b></p>
<p>The restriction contradicts Paul's egalitarian position. It is a later addition or Paul at his worst. The restriction reflects the church's concession to the oppressive social codes of the day. Texts like this must be removed (or ignored) in order to allow the truly counter-cultural, egalitarian voice of Scripture to be heard. Therefore, the restriction is a time-conditioned opinion and is not normative today.</p>	<p><b>NOT PAUL</b></p>	<p>While the restriction contradicts Paul at his best, it is normative. However, the norm is not prescriptive but functional. The restriction functions to relate the patriarchal context with Paul's basic egalitarian position. Every church must mediate the tension between the transformative mandates (egalitarianism) and the contextual mandates (social location) in new and changing ways. Therefore, only the process of mediating this tension is normative.</p>

Old Modern <--- MODERN ---> New Modern

## The Assumptions Guiding a Canonical Approach

Three assumptions (Childs 1984:387) guide the canonical approach to this text. They concern history, canonical shaping, and authority. A brief review of these assumptions will show how the canonical approach differs from both the modern and the traditional approaches.

The first assumption involves history. In the canonical approach, theological concerns take precedent over historical interests. No attempt is made to reconstruct a historical portrait of Paul in order to prove some point or to disprove another. There is no psychologizing based on what Paul could or could not have said. Rather, the theological task of discerning the canonical shape

of text is primary. Of course, literary and historical analyses are used. They help define the parameters of the text within which theological reflection is pursued in each new context. However, a canonical interpretation is not dependent on establishing the exact historical setting. The canonical text itself is the object of reflection.

The second assumption deals with canonical shaping. In the canonical approach, the shaping of the final form of the text yields the guidelines for applying the text in new contexts. The primary hermeneutical goal is to determine how the Pauline tradition extends to address new situations. This does not mean separating the text's "transformative vision" from its "contextual ideas." Since all Scripture is understood to be historically time-conditioned and contextual, it is impossible to separate the so-called "eternal values" from those which are "time-conditioned." Through the time-conditionedness of the whole canon, the canonical approach confesses that God's Word is revealed to successive time-conditioned generations of God's People. In this way, the ancient prophetic/apostolic tradition extends to address new situations in future believing communities.

The third assumption concerns authority. In the canonical approach, the subject matter to which the text gives witness is authoritative. The presence of particular time-conditioned practices in the text does not necessarily provide theological legitimization for their application in other contexts (e.g., ecclesiastical offices, political structures, church models, etc.). However, this is no warrant for blurring the line between the apostolic tradition and the church tradition; there are no "new expressions of God's rule" which leave the text behind! Rather, the important thing is to determine the role which Scripture, in all its time-conditionedness, plays in carrying the living Word of God. The canonical conviction is that Scripture functions as a "vehicle" through which the subject matter of text continues to speak. So, instead of assigning normative value to a particular historical understanding detached from its canonical form, the church is challenged to align itself theologically with the authoritative subject matter to which the text gives witness (Childs 1986:16).

In this way, the canonical approach provides a helpful check against narrow "biblicism" whether modernist (i.e., the restriction is not normative because Paul did not write it) or traditionalist (i.e., the restriction is normative because Paul wrote it).

## **A Canonical Approach to 1 Corinthians 14.34-35**

The canonical approach offers a welcome alternative to the debate over the so-called "restriction." It responds in the following way to the two test questions: 1) Authorship. The restriction may or may not be written by Paul. This is not an important distinction. The critical point to be made is that it is part of the church's received tradition and therefore should be taken seriously as Scripture. 2) Authority. The restriction is normative—but not necessarily in a literal way. The exegetical task is to determine the theological shape of the restriction—the subject matter to which the restriction gives witness. So, on both counts, authorship and authority, the canonical approach does not fit the grid of current interpretations. It is truly an alternative—neither traditional nor modern.

What is the theological shape of the restriction within the larger text unit, 1 Corinthians 14.26-

40? The shaping of this text reveals two theological dynamics which need to be maintained in creative tension in every context. The two directives, stated at the outset (v.26) and restated in the conclusion (v.40), make these explicit. The first critical norm is the “oneness of male and female.” This norm is conveyed through the instruction that Christian worship should encourage full participation from all members. Women and men are “to learn” and “to be encouraged.” The second critical norm is the “dualness of female and male.” This norm is embodied in the directive that Christian worship should be conducted orderly and decently. Men and women have distinct contributions to make to the church. These gender-based distinctions are mediated according to cultural laws in the best interests of the church. In this case, it was “shameful for a woman to speak in church” (v.35).

In other words, the church experienced tension between how women and men should relate according to God’s vision and how they should relate according to the culturally-informed social location. Not only was this the case then, but it still is true, and will always be the case until the consummation of God’s reign. For historical and cultural reasons, the “oneness” and “dualness” mandates of the reign of God were addressed among the first Christians by freeing women to learn yet restricting women from teaching and leading.

Historical-critical studies are helpful at this point in approximating the social and cultural location of the text. However, historical studies are not foundational for the whole interpretive process. Furthermore, any interpretation should be suspect if it depends on a complicated and tentative historical reconstruction. A canonical reading is not subject to a correct reconstruction of the times in order to determine the theological shape of the historically conditioned text. In this way, it is not absolutely necessary to determine the exact historical context of the text in order for that same text to carry meaning in another context. It is enough to say that during the canonization process, the Pauline tradition was filled out until it stabilized in its final form.

The point is that the whole text is fundamentally rooted in a time-conditioned setting. It is plausible that the restriction was motivated by the fact that women were not generally educated or that they were susceptible to proto-gnostic tendencies (e.g., goddess worship) and false teaching (2 Tim 3.6-7). But such historical analyses do not exhaust the church’s hermeneutical obligation. It is essential to take one more step in order to hear that to which the restriction gives witness. The confession of the church is that, through the time-conditioned Scripture, it can still discern the will of God.

Therefore, it is fundamentally wrong to dismiss the text as interpolation or time-conditioned or “old fashioned.” Likewise, it is wrong to freeze the precise restriction for all time. Both of these dominant approaches miss the role and function of canon. Both destroy the shape of the canonical text. Both traditionalist and modernist interpretations obstruct access to the subject matter to which the shaped text gives witness.

According to Childs (1972: 721), “the decisive factor in shaping the tradition was the concern to render it in a form so that it could be correctly understood and rightly appropriated by the succeeding generations of God’s people.” The basic hermeneutical objective of canon was to provide an authoritative guide in order to help the church move from the past to the present. The shaping of 1 Corinthians 14.26-40 is no exception. The apostolic tradition was extended through

the inclusion of vv.34-35 in order to faithfully witness to the vision of God intended for female and male relations.

It is the mandate of the church to continually challenge the culture in which it is located with this “biblical” vision for being female and male. It will involve speaking a word against those who seek to champion the “oneness” dimension. At the same time, it speaks a word against those who would overemphasize the “dualness” character. Nothing less than holding these two together in a “both/and” relation will do.

However, this is only the beginning of the theological reflection. Many available interpretations need to be tested against the theological norm. There is no one right interpretation. But the point is that God’s people have had the “initial critical norm” from which to construct an appropriate and culturally-sensitive interpretation right from its earliest traditions.

The task of the church in every generation is first to describe the theological norm from within the context of a shaped canon. Then the church must construct a corresponding systematic theology for its particular context and culture. In this way, the Word of God lives on in successive Christian communities.

Today the Western church finds itself in a cultural location where it is not “shameful for a woman to speak.” Since the argument in the text is based on this time-conditioned assumption, the restriction of women in ministry is not literally normative today. However, unlike the new-traditional and old-modern approach, the “theology” of the restriction is still relevant and even normative.

In what way is the text normative for the church? Through the canonical shaping of this text, a normative model is presented which can address the believing community in any context. The norm is for every Christian community to work through the balance between its “oneness” mandate and its “dualness” mandate. As the end-time People of God, the church has a mandate to celebrate the liberating “oneness” vision for humanity as male and female (i.e., all are to learn and all are encouraged to participate regardless of race, social status, or gender). As the end-time People of God, the church has a mandate to celebrate the liberating “dualness” vision for humanity as female and male (i.e., all done orderly and decently according to the current cultural practices).

In this way, the canonical shaping releases an authoritative Word which is ready for “actualization.” It is capable of “appropriation” both then and now. The norm is that the church in every context must address the tension between the “oneness” and “dualness” in humanity. This is God’s will for humanity.

The essential point is that we need not define or describe the differentiation between male and female. It is enough to celebrate the differences which will always be evident. More than this, these differences may vary depending on culture and time. In any case, there is no warrant to entrench certain roles for each gender.

It is important to underline that the tension described here is not one of church vs. culture but

more accurately as culturally-informed church vs. God's vision of humanity as female and male. The operative question is not whether the church is again "getting its cues" from culture. The church is in culture! The real question is how to be faithful to the alternative community of Jesus within society. As time unfolds, the church in every context must embrace the critical norms of Scripture in descriptive and constructive ways by asking: How can our culturally-informed church faithfully express the reign of God?

## **Spheres of Application**

The canonical approach has a significant contribution to make in the spheres of anthropology, ecclesiology, and hermeneutics.

First, a canonical approach to the restriction in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 helps in articulating a biblical anthropology. The modernist approach often assumes an Enlightenment egalitarian or "single" anthropology. In opposition, traditionalists tend to assume a hierarchical or "dual" anthropology. However, both of these views are often unconsciously conditioned by history. Biblical anthropology takes seriously the historical shaping factors and at the same time subjects anthropological thinking to theological reflection.

The canonical reading of the restriction within the larger text unit reveals the "building blocks" for an anthropology which also speaks to postmodern women and men. The text underlines that "oneness" (inclusiveness) and "dualness" (mutuality) is God's will for female and male interaction. It is significant to note that these two theological norms have operated within the People of God since the Genesis account. Genesis 1:26-31 proclaims the "oneness" of humanity, while Genesis 2:18-25 declares the corresponding "dualness" (Childs 1986:191-92). Although the shape may change, both "oneness" and "dualness" in male and female anthropology, have always functioned together as God's design.

Second, the canonical shaping of the text unit yields a specific ecclesiological challenge for church worship order which is applicable to any context. Christian worship practice must both: 1) challenge cultural norms by voicing the appropriate authoritative biblical norm and 2) respect cultural norms by celebrating the incarnation of God's Word in the particularity and time-conditionality of the church in any culture. In every context this mandate will take on a different shape, but both dimensions will always be present.

Today, in our Western context, the biblical norm of "oneness" and "dualness," requires that the church embrace more actively the full participation of men and women in its life and mission. This is no small matter. It requires much courage and grace on the part of individuals and institutions to express biblical norms in new ways. Concepts like "inclusive mutuality," "partnership," and "teamwork" need to be exercised more fully. Some specific ways this could be done include: using gender inclusive language when referring to both women and men; utilizing more of the Bible's "female" metaphors, characters, stories, histories; employing the gifts of women more readily in all of the churches ministries; and developing interdependence, mutuality and cooperation among women and men.

In the West, the "dualness" mandate no longer needs to be satisfied by subordinating women or

restricting women from leadership functions. The dualness mandate can be addressed by blessing women to share leadership roles according to their uniquely “other” perspective. Male leadership need not be threatened for they too will be blessed to fulfil their role in ways suited to their distinctly “other” outlook. Female and male church leaders working together would provide a model for parishioners and for families of “inclusive mutuality.”

Today, in the Western social context this “other” voice is growing louder. Women in today’s Western society are free to function out of their unique gender-based “otherness.” This new cultural location makes it even more imperative that non-male voices be heard in the church. Several decades ago this need may not have been as pressing. However, the dramatic social and technological changes in the Western world have caused the concept of “inclusive mutuality” to be reshaped. Church worship order and leadership must also be reshaped. This is in the best interests of the church. In the words of the text, it would be operating in a manner which is both orderly and decent.

Third, the study of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 provides an occasion to test an alternative hermeneutic. A change is necessary. Our increasingly post-Christian Western world has obligated the church to face again a massive paradigm shift. Our challenge is not to assume a traditional, “rear-guard” posture and fight change. Nor can we adopt a modern, “relativistic” posture where almost anything goes.

The canonical approach offers an alternative to the traditional and modern hermeneutical methods which dominate the current debate. It is not just another new method. It is an approach or vision. The canonical approach provides a way of reflecting theologically on the text. The aim is to determine the normative subject matter which must then be contextualized by every successive Christian community. Of course, interpretations will vary since the cultural and contextual locations vary, but the normative subject matter should be discernable in each interpretation. Therefore, the debate between those who hold differing canonical interpretations will be “familial” (Childs 1984:53). Although differing contextual systematizations will exist, they will bear a distinctive familial resemblance. The interaction will be between those who hold a canonical vision of interpreting the Bible as sacred Scripture of the church.

## **Conclusion**

The canonical approach is a welcome alternative to the current hermeneutical crisis. It does not transform the Bible into a timeless manual of right doctrine (traditional approach) nor does it dismiss biblical imperatives as merely time-conditioned opinion (modern approach). The canonical approach provides a way of reading and confessing the Bible as authoritative which cuts through the modern vs. traditional “grid lock.” The canonical approach moves boldly with the church as it continues to hear God’s living Word.

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