

Women and Speech in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: March, 2012

Women Should Pray and Prophecy? (1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16)

^{11:2}Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. ³But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. ⁴Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. ⁵But **every woman** who has her head uncovered **while praying or prophesying** disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. ⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. ⁷For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; ⁹for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. ¹⁰Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹²For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. ¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman **to pray** to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, ¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God.

Women Should Not Say Anything at All? (1 Corinthians 14:20 – 40)

^{14:20}Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹In the Law it is written, 'BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME,' says the Lord. ²²So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe. ²³Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? ²⁴But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; ²⁵the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. ²⁶What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. ²⁷If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; ²⁸but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. ²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. ³⁰But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. ³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; ³²and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; ³³for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. ³⁴**The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.** ³⁵**If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.** ³⁶Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? ³⁷If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. ³⁸But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. ⁴⁰But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.

Relevance: 1 Cor.11:2 – 16 is related to 14:34 – 40, both thematically and literarily. To understand Paul's overall vision of community, worship, gender, and speech, we must interpret both simultaneously. They seem to say two very different things. How do we reconcile them?

Options:

Women in 14:34 – 40	Women in 11:2 – 16	Comments, pros and cons
Should always be silent	Irrelevant	It's quite a problem to dismiss 11:2 – 16 completely!
Should be silent in mixed gender meetings	Can pray and prophecy in women-only meetings	<p>There is no evidence for gender-specific services, either in 1 Corinthians, the New Testament, or history.</p> <p>Furthermore, he says, 'as the Law also says,' even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that women cannot speak in the worship assembly. Women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel's mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).</p>
Refers to a Jewish synagogue ordinance, which the Christians adopted as the pattern of their services, where men would question, object, and dispute points, but women would remain silent	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	<p>Adam Clarke, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, held this position.¹ While Clarke gives an accurate description of the Jewish synagogue position on gender roles, as several rabbinical opinions of women's speech was very negative, Clarke himself says that this Jewish custom was before the Spirit was given to men and women through Christ: 'This was their condition till the time of the Gospel, when, according to the prediction of Joel, the Spirit of God was to be poured out on the women as well as the men, that they might prophesy, i.e. teach. And that they did prophesy or teach is evident from what the apostle says, chap. xi. 5, where he lays down rules to regulate this part of their conduct while ministering in the church... All that the apostle opposes here is their questioning, finding fault, disputing, etc., in the Christian Church, as the Jewish men were permitted to do in their synagogues; together with the attempts to usurp any authority over the man, by setting up their judgment in opposition to them; for the apostle has in view, especially, acts of disobedience, arrogance, etc., of which no woman would be guilty who was under the influence of the Spirit of God.'</p> <p>Evidence does point to the Christian worship service being patterned after the Jewish synagogue service. But the older structure could not fully contain the newer content. It is not clear to me from 1 Cor. that Paul was addressing a section of the Christian service where people were being oppositional and argumentative with regards to the <i>content</i> of what they were saying. Paul does not refer to disruptiveness in particular, but to speech in general. I believe he was simply addressing the Corinthians' disorderliness and perhaps 'dominating the airtime,' and this is why he limits prophecies to two or three speakers, and tongues to two or three speakers.</p> <p>Clarke, moreover, wants to have it both ways: He says the old synagogue rules don't apply on the basis of the Spirit given to all, including women; thus Spirit-filled prophecy and tongues introduce new elements into the Christian service that were not present in the Jewish synagogue. This is indeed the entire basis for Paul's parameters for those speaking prophecies and tongues in 1 Cor.14. But then Clarke says that the portion of the old synagogue service where men disputed and women remained silent <i>does</i> still apply when it comes to managing the prophecy-speaking and tongues-speaking portion of the Christian service, which is ironically the part of the Christian service that was <i>new and completely different</i> from the Jewish synagogue. On what principle would Paul have brought in old rules that governed a different part of the service to govern the new portion? This gets at Clarke's view of gender roles.</p> <p>Clarke believes that Paul's reference to the Law refers to Genesis 3:16. It is plausible in certain situations that a wife's silence could be an expression of her deference to her husband, but it is not, first of all, clear that the fall's consequence – 'he shall rule over you' – is strictly maintained in Christ between husband and wife. That is the larger theological question. Secondly, in addition, for the consequence of the fall to be expressed in the form of 'a wife must, in disputed matters of prophecy and tongues, be silent in the worship assembly and ask her husband at home,' while she herself <i>could</i> teach, prophecy, and speak in tongues about non-disputed matters (?), is a rather questionable inference and reduction. Are prophecy and tongues to be used to trigger disputes in the congregation? Is that their function? That does not seem to be Paul's presumption in 1 Cor.14. The comparison to the Jewish synagogue again falters on this issue. Thirdly, it is unclear on what biblical basis Jewish synagogues adopted the practice of forbidding women from speaking – and specifically debating – in the synagogue assembly. Synagogues themselves were extra-biblical modes of assembly that the Old Testament never envisioned. And women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel's mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).</p>
Women generally should be silent when tongues are	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	But why would his language be so broad? I.e. 'speak in church' is very broad, and doesn't seem to refer to only specific times in the service.

¹ Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, Volume 6, I Corinthians 14:34. See also www.godrules.net/library/clarke/clarke.htm

being interpreted		Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that women cannot speak in the worship assembly. Women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).
Wives should be silent when tongues are being interpreted	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	<p>‘Gyne’ can be translated ‘wives’ and ‘women.’ The context must be consulted to determine which meaning is intended. Paul does refer to the ‘husbands’ in 14:35, which means that ‘gyne’ should be rendered ‘wives’ here. However, Paul had, in 11:2 – 16, just said that (presumably) wives ‘with the sign of authority on their head’ could still pray and prophecy, so there is still a basic disagreement between the two passages under this interpretation.</p> <p>This might also refer to a certain time of the service when tongues and prophecy are being uttered in a way that the husband-wife union is confused. But again, why would his language be so broad? I.e. ‘The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak...for it is improper for a woman to speak in church’ is very broad. Why would he make such a sweeping command, as opposed to a narrower one?</p> <p>Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that ‘wives’ cannot speak in the worship assembly. Wives did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).</p>
Refers to women or wives who were exercising a teaching role over men	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	<p>Paul establishes too strong of a basis for the silence for that. ‘The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak...for it is improper for a woman to speak in church’ is very broad, and doesn’t seem to refer to the situation of women teaching men.</p> <p>Moreover, Paul says the gift of prophecy is a ‘higher’ or more significant gift than that of teaching (1 Cor.12:28 and 14:1), so it does not make much sense to say that women can prophecy but not teach. It is not always possible to draw a strong demarcation between those gifts, either.</p> <p>Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues this.</p>
Refers to only certain women who were disruptive at the time.	Can pray and prophecy in meetings if they are not being disruptive.	<p>Paul establishes too strong of a basis for the silence for that. The verse refers to ‘women’ or ‘wives’ and does not refer to disruptiveness in particular, but to speech in general.</p> <p>Furthermore, he says, ‘as the Law also says,’ even though there is no such verse in the Torah (or Old Testament generally) that argues that women cannot speak in the worship assembly. Women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel’s mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).</p>
Paul is quoting sarcastically from the Corinthians, and reversing their verdict silencing women	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	<p>This fits with a pattern Paul employs in 1 Corinthians, where he quotes from the Corinthians but reverses or qualifies the quote:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings’ without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. (1 Cor.4:8) • ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are profitable. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be mastered by anything. ‘Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food,’ but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body. (1 Cor.6:12 – 13) • Now concerning the things about which you wrote, ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman.’ (1 Cor.7:1) • We know that ‘we all have knowledge.’ Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. (1 Cor.8:1) <p>This also connects with Paul’s vision of Christ reversing Greek ‘wisdom’ throughout the letter (1 Cor.1:18 – 25; 2:1 – 8; 3:18 – 20). Greek culture put women into the category of property, without many rights, especially if she were childless. I believe Paul was critiquing this Corinthian view.²</p> <p>The pronouns in 14:36 – 39 could be read in the masculine, rebuking the <i>men</i>: ‘Was it from you</p>

² Katharine C. Bushnell, (1889), who quotes 18th century lexicographer Johann Friedrich Schleusner and early 20th century Pauline scholar Sir William Ramsay in support also; Jessie Penn-Lewis, (1919); Helen Barrett Montgomery (1924); J. A. Anderson, (1933); Joyce Harper, (1974); Walter C. Kaiser, (1976); Guy B. Dunning, (1977); N. M. Flanagan and E. Hunter Snyder, (1981); Laurence R. Iannacone (1982); David W. Odell-Scott, (1983, 1987, 1989); Chris U. Manus, (1984); Charles H. Talbert, (1984, 1987); Gilbert Bilezikian, (1985); Gordon D. Fee, (1987); Robert W. Allison, (1988); Linda McKinnish Bridges, (1989, 1990). See also the sociological reasoning put forward in support of this position by Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1986), p.108.

		<p>[<i>brothers</i>] that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? If anyone thinks <i>he</i> is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.'</p> <p>This concurs with Luke's theological assessment of women speaking by the Holy Spirit. The words of women as Elizabeth, Mary, Anna the prophetess, etc. were considered to be inspired by the Spirit of God; this explains why these words were retained by the earliest Christians and enshrined as authoritative Scripture. Jesus welcomed women into his circle of disciples (e.g. Lk.8:1 – 4; 10:38 – 42) and commissioned women as the first verbal witnesses to both his conception and resurrection. Significantly, it is Luke who quotes Simon Peter quoting Joel 2 about women prophesying by the Spirit along with men, as a programmatic summary for all of Acts, as Jesus quoting Isaiah 61 about prophesying by the Spirit was programmatic for all of the Gospel of Luke. Apparently, Jesus encouraged his women disciples to pray and prophecy publicly, and this was handed down to 'the churches of God' (1 Cor.11:16) as 'the Lord's commandment' (1 Cor.14:37). There is a virtual identity between Paul's earlier concluding statement, 'we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God' (1 Cor.11:16), and this one, 'let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment' (1 Cor.14:37). It concurs with women leaders in the early NT church: Priscilla (Acts 18:18 – 26, Rom.16:3), Lydia, Chloe and Nympha (Acts 16:13 – 15, 40; 1 Cor.1:11, Col.4:15), Phoebe (Rom.16:1), Junia (Rom.16:7), Philip's daughters and other prophetesses (Acts 21:9), Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia, Syntyche (Rom.16:12; Phil.4:2).</p> <p>This also agrees with the fact that there is no reference in 'the Law' (OT) to women being silent in the assembly of Israel. In fact, it contradicts the fact that women did speak in Israel and to Israel (Miriam in Ex.15; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; Esther); a woman was the human source of some Scripture (Miriam in Ex.15; Deborah in Judg.4 – 5; arguably Ruth and Naomi; Hannah in 1 Sam.2; King Lemuel's mother in Proverbs 31); and the prophets envisioned women speaking by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2, quoted in Acts 2).</p> <p>Finally, this coincides with Paul's other references to 'the Law.' Whenever Paul in 1 Corinthians appeals to the Old Testament, he does so by citing a specific text. He never omits the text. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.' (1:19) • As it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.' (1:31) • As it is written, 'Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him.' (2:9) • For it is written, 'He is the One who catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again, 'The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.' (3:19 – 20) • For it is written in the Law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.' (9:9) • As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.' (10:7) • In the Law it is written, 'By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to Me,' says the Lord. (14:21) • It is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul.' (15:45) • Then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?' (15:54 – 55) <p>When citing the Law in 14:34 – 35, he does not use his standard formula. Why not? He is more likely rebuking an anti-woman rabbinic saying or Corinthian presumption. Furthermore, Paul normally quotes from the Old Testament in a stylistic manner to make his points, but, as Gordon Fee notes, he never quotes from the Law to draw a direct lesson about Christian ethics and behavior. He insists that we are free from the Mosaic/Sinaitic Law. Moreover, Paul wants his readers in Corinth to 'learn to not go beyond what is written' with regards to the Old Testament (4:6). His manner of argumentation using the Old Testament throughout 1 Corinthians strongly suggests that he is intercepting a Corinthian tendency to allegorize the Old Testament to achieve anti-Christian principles.</p>
This is a later scribal addition and not Paul's original thought.	Can pray and prophecy in meetings	Gordon Fee and Richard B. Hays believe this. It does explain the sudden appearance of this thought in 1 Cor.14 and the apparent change of mind from 1 Cor.11:2 – 16. Some Western Latin manuscripts (from northern Italy and Irish monastics, as Carroll Osburne shows) contain v.34 – 35 after v.40, and a few Latin fathers were reading the text that way, which Fee takes as indicative of v.34 – 35 being a scribal gloss, or an explanatory note. However, there are no physical manuscripts that we know of without v.34 – 35 altogether. Still, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. So this position is also quite possible.

Women Praying and Prophesying

When Paul discusses women speaking in the worshiping congregation in 14:34 – 35, he does so with the intention of integrating all he says, from 11:2 onward. This is strongly suggested by the chiasmic structure that Dr. Kenneth Bailey discerns in 11:2 – 14:40.³

- A. Women and Men in Worship, Prophets and How They Dress: 11:2 – 16
 - B. Order in Worship, the Lord's Supper: 11:17 – 34
 - C. Gifts and the Nature of the Body: 12:1 – 31
 - D. Love: 13:1 – 13
 - C'. Gifts and the Upbuilding of the Body: 14:1 – 25
 - B'. Order in Worship, Prophets and Speaking in Tongues: 14:26 – 33
 - A'. Women and Men in Worship, How They Speak: 14:34 – 40

It is noteworthy that Bailey believes that 1 Corinthians is structured as an interconnected tapestry of five such chiasmic structures. In each one, Paul is working with the concept of 'body.' If 1 Corinthians were a tapestry, it would look like a sequence of five rectangles: a blue rectangle at the top, underneath it a green rectangle second, then a purple rectangle third, a red rectangle fourth, and at the bottom, a rectangle that has all four colors – blue, green, purple, and red – brilliantly interwoven. The letter is composed of five major sections that are connected to each other in the fifth section. Each section has to do with our bodies and Jesus' body. In the first section, chapters 1 – 4, the issue is the unity of the corporate body, the community. That is tied to the last section, chapter 15, which is about Jesus' resurrection body and our future resurrection body. Because Jesus has one body, those who are 'the body of Christ' must also relate in a oneness – not in terms of worshiping in one place but in terms of good relationships. In the second section, chapters 5 – 7, the issue is sexuality and our individual bodies. That is tied to the last section, chapter 15, about Jesus' resurrection body and our future resurrection body. Because Jesus has a purified body, we are to have purified bodies. In the third section, chapters 8 – 10, the issue is about differences in food, cultures, and disciplining our bodies for Christian mission. That is tied to the last section, chapter 15, Jesus' resurrection body and our future resurrection body. Because Jesus offers his body to all humanity, so our mission is to offer our bodies to his mission. In the fourth section, chapters 11 – 14, the issue is worship as one body. That is also tied to the last section, chapter 15, Jesus' resurrection body and our future resurrection body. Because Jesus' body is physically filled with the love of God, so the Christian body – corporately – must be physically filled with the love of God.

What then does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16? Should women wear head coverings in order to speak, pray, prophesy, and teach? Paul is simply saying that when men and women pray and prophesy, they should look like men and women, respectively, with respect to each other in their cultural context. There were those who believed women needed to appear as men in hairstyle and dress, on the Greek conviction that women were defectively made men, a thought which shows up in the Gospel of Thomas verse 114 where that document says that women will become men in the soulful realm after death. But Paul was firmly against that Greek gnostic view because he was a Jewish creational theologian who believed that male and female represented God in some particular way. So women should not appear as if they were men because God's eschatological affirmation of women as women was clear in the Old Testament; Simon Peter in Acts 2 quoted Joel 2 about the Spirit speaking through both men and women, without collapsing women into men, or vice versa. Incidentally, I think this is why women's appearance as women represented the 'authority' (not subjection) given to them (1 Cor. 11:10): God gave them as women authority, like a crown, which was typically denied them in their cultures, to deliver His word in prayer and prophetic utterance. Notice that women's hair coverings did not connote 'authority' in pagan Greek culture, whereas taken up into the Christian argument for the equality of the sexes, it does in a general sense. That is, the particular form that women's dress or hairstyle took was not the precise issue, but rather its difference from men's dress and hairstyle. Men and women are to appear with respect to their genders as men and women – and that general difference is quite understandable across all cultures – for it plays a theological role in presenting God's redemption for both men and women equally, His missional-prophetic use of men and women as such in their gendered beings, especially God's granting women authority as women.

³ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), p.293ff., although my assessment of 14:34 – 35 does differ from Bailey's.

Note: When Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:14 uses the Greek word *physin* with respect to how men and women culturally present themselves in hairstyle and dress, he is not making an appeal in that regard to an ‘order of creation’ as he does in Romans 1:26 – 27. Paul read as well as we do that Adam and Eve were initially naked in the creation order, and certainly without hats and scissors. Nor is he making an appeal to some absolute ‘custom’ or ‘descent’ of dress and hairstyles, since fashion has never been a particularly stable facet of human life, with clear lineage and such. He is making a general argument that men and women have dressed differently and accentuated themselves differently, by gender.⁴

Confirmation of Exegesis with Historical Precedent

But is this just clever exegesis without any foundation in actual early Christian practice? Do we have any historical information outside of the New Testament writings which indicates that the early Christians encourage women to speak in the congregation? We do, and they did. This is helpful in further confirming our exegesis of 1 Corinthians with actual known liturgical practice among the early Christians.

T.F. Torrance wrote an article in 1992 called *The Ministry of Women* in which he highlights an amazing mural drawn in one of the earliest Roman catacombs in the *Capella Greca*, within a century after the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the mural, seven elders are seated around a table breaking bread and celebrating communion. This is called ‘The Catacomb of Priscilla’ because Priscilla is one of the seven elders seated next to the presiding elder, presumably her husband Aquila. The institution of the seven Christian elders is copied from the institution of seven Jewish elders that led smaller Jewish synagogue communities throughout the Jewish Diaspora, including in the city of Rome. This is impressive for various reasons, but it indicates that Priscilla was an elder in the Christian community at Rome, who presided at the Lord’s Supper and taught the congregation as an elder.

Another popular document called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* is significant for our purposes here. In this story, Thecla was a Christian woman who was gifted in teaching and purportedly accompanied Paul in some of his travels. It was widely circulated and read in an approved manner in the first few centuries, though Tertullian rejected it on the grounds that it legitimized a woman preaching and baptizing.⁵ While we can be relatively certain that some of

⁴ On the surface, there seems to be uncertainty, if not outright discontinuity, between the uses of the word *physin*. But the solution is found by comparing the thought categories of Hebrew and Greek. To begin with, the Hebrew language had no single word equivalent to the Greek term *physin*. In the Hebrew worldview, reality was fundamentally relational, constantly referencing God as Creator and extending into relationships. So the Hebrew language spoke of ‘the creation’ regularly but not of ‘nature’ per se, or of the ‘nature’ of something as an independent thing. Greek philosophical thought, however, moved in the opposite direction. And thus in Greek, to speak of ‘nature,’ or the ‘nature’ of something, immediately abstracted it from the Creator-creature relationship that the Hebrew worldview held so tightly. Aristotle, for instance, believed that to understand the essence of an object, you had to isolate it from all other relationships, and only once you had done this were you able to comprehend an object truly. But this foundational maxim in Greek thought had to be explicitly rejected in the Trinitarian debates because the Christian Nicene theologians of the 3rd and 4th centuries understood that God was fundamentally and indivisibly relational, and that the Hebrew mind was correct in perceiving ontological matters in a relational way. Relationships, they concluded, were fundamental to reality, and not incidental. Hence, theologian Thomas F. Torrance, after carefully studying the patristic sources, and following the great theologian Karl Barth in his own return to those sources, developed the phrase ‘onto-relational’ to say that ontological reality itself, as designed by God, is a relational reality. Thus, when we are dealing with the term *physin* in the Greek New Testament, we must attend to the immediate context in which it is being used. For the translation of a fundamentally Hebrew thought about ‘nature’, or the ‘nature’ of a particular object, into the Greek language involves relational categories by necessity. The questions we must attend to whenever a Hebrew writer uses the Greek word *physin* are: The nature of something with respect to what other being, thing, or question? What relationships are being discussed here? This immediately renders the mere ‘word study’ method of approaching *physin* in these three New Testament locations, or in other locations, to be inappropriate. Failure to do this lands everyone in vague puzzlement about Paul’s use of terms here and elsewhere. In Romans 1:26 – 27, Paul uses *physin* to refer to the original, intended relation between male and female genders from the Genesis creation order. In Romans 11:17 – 24, he uses *physin* to refer to the difference in cultivation between a wild and cultivated olive tree, but not as if its biological species had become different. In 1 Corinthians 11:2 – 16, he is speaking of social differences between men and women. In Galatians 2:15, he refers to those who are Jews ‘by nature,’ with respect to the covenantal difference between Jews and Gentiles but not as if there is now some genetic difference between them. In Galatians 4:8, he uses *physin* with reference to the ontological difference between angelic, elemental powers and the one true God. In Ephesians 2:3, he speaks of both Jews and Gentiles by nature being children of wrath, not with respect to how human beings were designed from God’s creation, but being now corrupted by sin internally. This shows that Paul uses *physin* in ways that highlight the relational context or issue he is speaking about. In James 1:23 and 5:17, James speaks of our ‘natural face’ and Elijah being a man with a nature like ours, respectively. In 2 Peter 1:4, Peter refers to the ‘divine nature.’

⁵ Edgar Johnson Goodspeed, ‘The Acts of Paul and Thecla’, *The Biblical World* 17.3 (March 1901, pp.185-190) p. 185.

the content of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* has been exaggerated, for our purposes here, what matters is that the early Christians cherished a document that featured a woman teaching prominently. In this story, Paul tells her, 'Go and teach the word of the Lord,' so 'she went to Seleucia and enlightened many in the knowledge of Christ...certain gentlewomen heard of the virgin Thecla and went to her to be instructed in the oracles of God' (ch.10). That is some of the historical attestation which confirms our exegesis of 1 Corinthians.

Torrance continues, 'In a mosaic still extant in the Church of Santa Praxeda in Rome, built by Pascal I toward the end of the ninth century in honor of four holy women, one of whom was his mother Theodora, we can still read around her head THEODORA EPISCOPA! And so we have papal authority for a woman bishop and an acknowledgement by the pope that he himself was the son of a woman bishop! The word episcopa was evidently used at times to refer to the wife of a bishop, as presbytera was sometimes used (and still is in Greece) to refer to the wife of a presbyter, but that does not seem to have been the case in this instance.'

One must consider 1 Timothy 2 – 3 as well, which I do in a separate essay. But in this case, it is not that Christians today have taken misogynist texts, overturned their true meanings, and constructed another, more progressive, interpretation in its place. Rather, they have recovered the original meaning of these particular texts, which squares with several other key data points, both in Scripture and in history.