
IN DEFENSE OF AN EGALITARIAN INTERPRETATION OF 1 COR 14:34-36 A Reply to Murphy-O'Connor's Critique

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Abstract

In "Interpolations in 1 Cor" (CBQ 48:81-94) Murphy-O'Connor rejected the egalitarian interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b-36 argued by Odell-Scott in "Let the Women Speak In Church" (BTB 13:3) and re-asserted that the text is a post-Pauline interpolation. Odell-Scott argues that (1) Murphy-O'Connor's arguments that the text is an interpolation do not hold up under critical scrutiny, and that (2) the critical problems which the interpolation hypothesis attempts to solve are better resolved by the egalitarian interpretation.

In a recent article, "Interpolations in 1 Corinthians," Jerome Murphy-O'Connor identified seven passages in the First Epistle to the Corinthians which a growing number of biblical scholars have argued are post-Pauline interpolations. After examining the major arguments offered for and against the post-Pauline interpolation hypothesis with respect to each of the seven passages, Murphy-O'Connor concluded that, "Of the seven proposed interpolations examined . . . only two were judged to be buttressed by convincing arguments, viz., the addition of the scrupulous scribe in 4:6 and the prohibition of the male chauvinist in 14:34-35" (94).

In his examination of 1 Cor 14:34-35, Murphy-O'Connor offers several arguments against an interpretation of the text which he identifies only by its most recent writers "Flanagan, Hunter Snyder and Odell-Scott" in favor of the post-Pauline interpolation hypothesis (90-92). Being one of the authors of the interpretation which Murphy-O'Connor critiques and rejects, I wish to reply.

AN EGALITARIAN INTERPRETATION

First, a *very brief* summary of the interpretation I put forth in "Let The Women Speak In Church: An Egalitarian Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:33b-36." (It should be noted at this point that I now read the passage to begin at v 34 instead of at v 33b. My reasons for such an amendment will be presented below.) The text is two-fold. The first fold (vv 34-35) is a quote from the Corinthian correspondence to Paul which Paul traces in his return correspondence to the Corinthians. He traces from their letter to him in his reply to them for a very good reason. He wishes to make clear exactly which positions he is responding to. Paul traces letter for letter, word for word their position (vv 34-35).

¹⁴The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. ¹⁵If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (RSV)

To this trace from the Corinthian letter addressed to Paul, he replies (v 36).

¹⁶What! Did the word of God originate with you, or you the only ones it has reached?

The particle *e* (translated "What!" above) which introduces the interrogative sentence of 14:36 indicates that the negative rhetorical questions to follow will serve to refute the sentences which preceded. Thus it is my conclusion that given the *e* which introduces v 36, vv 33b-35 are to be emphatically refuted by the two-fold negative rhetorical query which follows the particle. The complete passage (vv 33b-36) is not an internally unified, straightforward argument against or condemnation of women who participate in the worship of the church. The silencing of women in the name of conformity to tradition and law is neither the last word nor the purpose of the text. The silencing of women in church is questioned, refuted and overcome by Paul's two-fold negative rhetorical query of v 36.

The "Perfect Ending"

Murphy-O'Connor concedes that my reading of v 36 is grammatically correct (91). But, he contends, I made "no

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effort to prove that it (v 36) must refute vv 34-35" (91 & 92). He goes on to assert that if one assumes the post-Pauline interpolation hypothesis, then "v 36 would be *perfectly* (emphasis mine) in place as a passionate outburst condemning the situation that required the directives of vv 26-33" (92).

On his first point (that I made no effort to prove that v 36 must refute vv 34-35) Murphy-O'Connor is simply mistaken. Nearly one-third of my article (the subsection entitled "The Audience") attempts to demonstrate how v 36 is Paul's reply which negates the positions being taken up in vv 34-35.

Upon closer reading of Murphy-O'Connor's comments, one gets the sense that the issue is not whether or not I made an effort to prove that v 36 refutes vv 34-35, but that (given his assumptions) I fail to show how v 36 does *not* refute vv 26-33! In other words, my lack of effort is *lacking* to the extent that I fail to offer arguments against his thesis that v 36 is the so called "perfect ending" to vv 26-33 and that vv 34-35 are written by another author. The claim that v 36 is the "perfect ending" to vv 26-33, and (in light of the egalitarian interpretation) not the ending of the passages which precede v 36 in the text (vv 34-35), deserves careful consideration. But, Murphy-O'Connor makes no effort in "Interpolations in 1 Corinthians" to address, let alone prove, that v 36 is the ending to vv 26-33.

However, Charles Talbert has put forth a very good reason why we should not accept Murphy-O'Connor's hypothesis that v 36 is an ending (perfect or otherwise) to vv 26-33. Talbert contends that the passage which runs from v 26 to v 33, *does not need an ending*. Verse 33b ("As in all the churches of the saints") is Paul's *conclusion* to the verses preceding it, *not an introduction* to the verses which follow (vv 34-35). At two other points in the epistle (4:17 and 11:16) Paul appeals to a general practice among the churches as a means of concluding his argument and ending the discussion.

Given Talbert's observation and convincing argument, I have amended my earlier interpretation. Instead of taking 14:33b to be the introduction of the text, I concur with Talbert's reading that the "text" begins at 14:34 and concludes at 14:36.

Murphy-O'Connor's contention that v 36 is the "perfect ending" to vv 26-33 is simply not possible. Verse 36 is clearly not the *perfect* ending to vv 26-33. If he means by "perfect ending" that the verse is expressive of how Paul has concluded other such discussions, then v 33b is the perfect ending.

Even if we bracket Talbert's counter-argument to Murphy-O'Connor's hypothesis, how are we to make sense of the relation of v 36 to v33 when the *negative* rhetorical questions of v 36 *call into question* v 33?

³³For God is not a God of confusion but of peace as in all the churches of the saints. ³⁶What! Did the word of

God originate with you? Are you all the only ones it has reached?

Verse 36 simply doesn't work as a reply to v 33, because v 33 is itself Paul's comment to the unbridled individualist at Corinth who disrupts the worship. And if it should be suggested that v 36 is Paul's reply to some other verse or phrase in the passage, I'm not sure that one can be found in which v 36 would make sense as a *negative* reply. There is lacking in v 26-33 any clear, direct quotation from a faction in the church to which Paul would forcefully reply.

Murphy-O'Connor offers another argument against my claim that v 36 refutes vv 34-35. He contends that v 36 is not an appropriate ending to vv 34-35 because,

Paul never dismisses a Corinthian slogan with the brutal passion evident in v 36. Even when he flatly contradicts a slogan it is always in the context of a calm, logical discussion of the issue. Passionate rhetorical questions, on the contrary, appear when Paul is confronted with a situation that he has heard about, but which, apparently, posed no problem for the Corinthians: e.g., divisions within the community (1 Cor 1:13, incest (1 Cor 5:2) and . . . selfishness at the eucharistic assembly. . . (92).

I must admit that I am baffled at this point. Is Murphy-O'Connor asserting that divisions in the community, incest and selfishness at the Lord's Supper are "not problems" for the church at Corinth? That is, that they do not see such things as problems? And that since they do not see such occurrences as *problems*, Paul is more "passionate" in his responses. In other words, *a la* Murphy-O'Connor, Paul is cool and collected when responding to those issues which the Corinthians themselves take to be problems, but he gets passionately involved when responding to incidents of which they seem to lack self-consciousness.

I am not so sure that we can find in the text of v 36 "Paul dismissing a Corinthian slogan with . . . *brutal passion*. . . ." I certainly did not suggest that Paul was being brutal in his reply. Skillfully cutting to the heart of the issue with his questions? Yes! Emphatic in his negation of the Corinthian quote by means of the particle *e?* Yes! The sarcastic tone of the reply suggests wit and intellect, not brutality.

The "Inept Interpolator" Hypothesis

I find what Murphy-O'Connor identifies as his second argument against the "egalitarian interpretation" in defense of the post-Pauline interpolation hypothesis more clearly and precisely stated than the above argument. It is his contention that "vv 34-35 are parallel to 1 Tim 2:11-15, not only in content but even in vocabulary" (92). I concur. I further concede, in fact, I agree with him, when he states that,

This latter passage (1 Tim 2:11-15) is an integral part of 1 Timothy, and therefore later than 1 Corinthians. Moreover, it is definitely un-Pauline in its attitude towards Adam and Eve: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor" (v 14). For Paul, on the contrary, Adam was the transgressor *par excellence* (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49); and Eve was the prototype of the entire Corinthian community and not merely of the feminine element (2 Cor 11:3) (92).

But here is where I must part company with Murphy-O'Connor. He continues,

The theoretical possibility that 1 Tim 2:11-15 is a return to a position once repudiated by Paul is discounted by what has been said above concerning v 36.

Murphy-O'Connor goes on to suggest that the author of 1 Timothy "was struck by the possibility that v 33b would make a good introduction to a community rule and simply misinterpreted v 36, as so many exegetes have done!" (92) Thus, on Murphy-O'Connor's terms, the post-Pauline editor/interpolator, preoccupied with denying the authority of women in church, put his hand to the text and foolishly traced the words

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immediately in front of a verse which emphatically negated his viewpoint (v 36). Such irony appeals to me. But, in this case, irony is not enough. According to Murphy-O'Connor, the interpolator, intent upon adding to the Pauline text his own position, notes a good lead for his own comments at v 33, adds his own lines (vv 34-35), but fails to see that v 36 undermines what he has just written. Maybe the interpolator was in a hurry and failed to re-read the text? Maybe he was just simply inept?

It is possible on Murphy-O'Connor's terms that the interpolator read (i.e., mis-read) the H (capitalized and free of breath and accent markings) to be the adverb ἡ which means "truly." But to so read the H as the adverb ἡ (truly) would suggest that the writer of 1 Timothy (assuming that he was the author of the interpolation at 14:34-35) was not very skilled in his language use. Such a reading of the H would pose a grammatical problem from the start. The difficulty lies in how to reconcile the adverb ἡ which asserts the truth of vv 34-35 with the negative rhetorical questions of v 36 which call for a negative answer.

I find it surprising that those who transcribed the text into Byzantine characters and punctuation, marked the H which introduces v 36 to be a particle ἡ and not an adverb ἡ. It is surprising in that the reading of the text offered by Flanagan, Snyder and myself must still have been readable to those who did the transcribing.

Who Wrote What?

Murphy-O'Connor's assertion that "the *theoretical possibility* (emphasis mine) that 1 Tim 2:11-15 is a return to a position once repudiated by Paul is discounted by what has been said above concerning v 36," assumes that the author of 1 Timothy intended to write a text which would imitate the texts written by Paul. But as Murphy-O'Connor himself points out (in the same paragraph as the above quote), 1 Timothy is "definitely un-Pauline" because it reverses the Adam-Eve metaphor as used by Paul in Romans and 1 Corinthians. Murphy-O'Connor thus provides the textual support with which to argue that the author of 1 Timothy does in fact reverse positions once held by Paul in the very paragraph in which he claims such is theoretically impossible.

I propose a less complicated hypothesis to explain the relationship between 1 Cor 14:34-36 and 1 Tim 2:11-15. Paul traces the position held by a certain faction in Corinth (vv 34-35) from their letter to him in his correspondence to them. Beginning with the particle *e* and continuing with the negative rhetorical questions of v 36, he replies. His reply silenced (at least for a time) those who would silence women in church. Paul's position was clear: women are to speak in church.

Those who later sought to standardize the beliefs and practices of christianity, deemed it politically necessary to neutralize a large number of the leaders (women) of a group in the church (the gnostics) they judged to be unorthodox. The author of 1 Timothy searched the letters of Paul for lines to support the silencing of women. In his (or her or their) search, he discovered what he wanted to find and nothing more. Without regard for the integrity of the text or the context (grammar) of the lines, this second century writer explicated and extracted those phrases which fit the emerging pattern of church doctrine and served his prejudices. What he in fact traced was not Paul's position, but Paul's tracing of the position of the legalist in Corinth whom Paul had refuted in his reply (v 36). Thus, we have Paul tracing the Corinthian letter, replying and rejecting the trace. A later writer returns to the text, ignores Paul's reply or possibly misreads it, and retraces the legalistic position which silences women.

Such a hermeneutic accounts for the parallel in content and vocabulary between 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-15, and resolves all the problems of textual incoherence which generated the post-Pauline interpolation hypothesis in the first place. And further, my interpretation accomplishes all of this without need of an elaborate scheme. The complexity of the text is accounted for without all the mess of un-raveling the text and the labor of having to then re-weave the text (with some of its threads/lines missing) according to some

elaborate pattern (e.g., the post-Pauline interpolation hypothesis).

Source Material

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