

Gender and Shame in Paul's Churches: Intersections Between Theology and Culture

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This paper will examine the Pauline restrictions on women within the context of the honor–shame culture prevalent in the first century, with a particular focus on 1 Cor 11, 14, 7. Suggestions will then be made about Paul's possible theological-cultural agenda. Some concluding observations will also be made in terms of the relevance of these issues for the church today.

One of the features of Paul's churches, and indeed Paul's understanding of the gospel, was its universalism, not in the sense of universal salvation, but in the sense of its inclusiveness. One senses that there is at least an element of truth to French philosopher Alain Badiou's claim that the "sheer radicality" of Paul's universalism has been underestimated in the ongoing intense scholarly debate that tries to situate Paul in his Jewish and Gentile contexts.¹

Paul does not start with what divides us. Indeed, for Paul, all of humanity starts from a point of commonality, in the experience of being under sin. Similarly, humanity can enter into a common experience in the new community in Jesus, so that Paul can say: "[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). As Bassler comments,

¹ Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 36-39; see also the review by Mawson, "Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism," *Stimulus* 12.4 (2004), 47.

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“[t]hese were extraordinary words for the first century, daring to proclaim and difficult to actualize even within the walls of the church.”²

It is apparent that Paul faced accusations of inconsistency throughout his ministry,³ and these have persisted even to our time. Of all the issues that have given rise to these accusations, and that have most polarized opinions, few stand out as starkly as that of his attitude towards women in the church. In this paper, I would like to suggest perspectives that clarify some of Paul's most puzzling statements about women in the church. This necessarily requires us to consider the Pauline churches in their historical context.

The explicit problem is that we seemingly see Paul contradicting himself. On the one hand, as we have noted above, we have Paul's statement that we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28); yet on the other, he appears to place some significant restrictions on women. So, for example, he specifies their hair length, and that their heads are to be covered in church in 1 Cor 11. In 1 Cor 14 there is an apparent injunction to silence. Finally, in 1 Cor 7, Paul gives specific instructions regarding the activities of widows.⁴

It is perhaps not coincidental that when we look at the broader society of the first century Greco-Roman world, we also seemingly find somewhat of a contradiction. On the one hand, as Cotter⁵ notes, women were excluded from the public and political arenas, and they were expected to refrain from any formal “public behavior.” Yet on the other hand, in the centuries

² J. M. Bassler, “The Widows's Tale: A Fresh Look at 1 Tim 5:3-16,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103.1 (1984): 24.

³ We find in 2 Cor 1:17-18 that Paul is defending himself exactly against charges of inconsistency. Paul writes: “17 Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or what I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there will be yes, yes and no, no at the same time? 18 But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no.” (Note that all Scriptural references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.)

⁴ See also 1 Tim 5.

⁵ W. Cotter, “Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?” *Novum Testamentum* 36.4 (1994), 366-367.

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before Christianity, it appears that a gradual “liberation” of women was already underway in the Greco-Roman world.”⁶

Within this context, the question is, was Paul responsible for the repression of women in early Christianity? Some scholars envisage a pre-Pauline Christianity where there was “no more male and female,” and they see Paul as explicitly rejecting this position and as being responsible for the repression of women in the church.⁷ In this vein, Massey maintains that we should stop trying to rationalize Paul, and that rather we should just accept his doctrine as “simply less than ideal.”⁸

When we turn to specifically consider Paul’s restrictions on women, there is a crucial concept that relates them all together. This is signaled by the use of the word αἴσχρον. In 1 Cor 11:6, it appears in the following context: “it is *disgraceful* [αἴσχρον] for a woman to have her hair cut or her head shaved.” Similarly, the term αἴσχρον appears in 1 Cor 14:35, where Paul writes: “it is *improper* for a woman to speak in church.” (γάρ ἐστιν γυναιξὶν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ λαλεῖν.)

Bultmann defines this term as referring to “that which is disgraceful in the judgment of men.”⁹ Danker notes that the word pertains “to being socially or morally unacceptable, *shameful, base*.”¹⁰ Significantly, he observes that it is “[a] term esp. significant in honor–shame oriented society; gener. in ref. to that which fails to meet expected moral and cultural standards.”¹¹

⁶ Bassler, “Widow’s Tale”, 25. Ian Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004) 2, notes, for example, that “[a]ristocratic women in the Hellenistic period benefitted from greater opportunities to receive a literary education. There are considerably more [female] authors attested from this period.”

⁷ R. R. Reuther, “Gender and Redemption in Christian Theological History,” *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology*. (May 1999, Issue 21, 1999), 99-100; Lesley F. Massey, *Women in the Church: Moving Towards Equality* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2002), cited in G. J. Stearns, *National Women’s Studies Association Journal*, 115.2 (2003): 185-191.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bultmann, *Theological Dictionary*, v.1, 190.

¹⁰ F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 29.

¹¹ Ibid.

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The honor–shame culture of the first century is a fundamental social background against which Paul's epistles must be understood. Malina points out that honor and shame are an “important motivation” and “pivotal values” in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹² Similarly, “[h]onor and shame were pivotal values for the persons presented in the New Testament.”¹³ It is against this background that the broader social context of 1 Cor 11:6 should be considered.

In this vein, Bruce Winter provides a well-supported rationale for Paul's instructions regarding women's hair and head coverings in 1 Cor 11:6-15.¹⁴ Winter's explanation situates the Pauline text appropriately within the social and cultural environment of the Corinthian community, without reading back into the text subsequent Christian understandings and traditions. Sebesta notes that “[a]s the veil symbolized the husband's

¹² J. D. G. Dunn, *1 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 74, quoting B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 108. See also Dunn, *1 Corinthians*, 74. H. Moxnes, “The Quest for Honor and the Unity of the Community in Romans 12 and in the Orations of Dio Chrysostom” in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen, 229, examines the Orations of Dio Chrysostom together with Paul's epistle to the Romans, and notes how both Paul and Dio, “from different positions within Hellenistic society, witness to the all-pervasive character of Greco-Roman culture as an honor culture. That was the given framework within which they and their audiences lived. . . without doubt the honor system was more than a ‘cultural’ element in the modern sense of the word, it expressed the very character of the political system, it was power made visible.”

¹³ B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1983), 58. Carolyn Osiek and Jennifer Pouya, “Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World” in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, ed. D. Neufeld and R. DeMaris (Abingdom: Routledge, 2010), 49, observe that “[i]n 11:4-6, Paul is concerned with honor and shame.” To cite another instance from 1 Cor, referring to 6:2-3, L. E. Vaage in *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 2006), 253-278, comments that here “Paul's outrage at the Corinthian community's practice expresses not diplomatic anxiety about imprudent behavior or a strategic misstep but, rather, reflects the standard anxieties of ancient honor.” While I concur with Vaage to some extent, I would also suggest that Paul's outrage has a far deeper base than merely “standard anxieties.”

¹⁴ Bruce Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003).

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authority over his wife, the omission of the veil by a married woman was a sign of her “withdrawing” herself from the marriage.”¹⁵

Within Roman culture, for a woman to have her head shaved (1 Cor 11:5) was the same as removing the marriage veil. Indeed, Dio Chrysostom informs us that, “a woman guilty of adultery shall have her hair cut off according to the law and play the prostitute.”¹⁶ A shaved head was therefore by law associated with the shame of adultery and prostitution. Indeed, Winter¹⁷ notes that a prostitute, by implication, “could no longer wear the traditional mantle to signify marriage and hence pull it over the top of her head in public.”¹⁸

Similar social forces are at work as the background to Paul’s comments in 1 Cor 14:35. Here Paul writes that “[i]t is improper for a woman to speak in church.”¹⁹ In this regard, Terence Paige argues forcefully that Paul does in fact grant women a positive role in the churches.²⁰ Davidson points out from the book of Romans the early Christian leader, Phoebe, who is designated as a “deacon,” the leader and teacher Priscilla, and Junia, who is mentioned as an apostle.²¹ Paige notes that Paul’s injunction was not

¹⁵ J. L. Sebesta, “Symbolism in the Costume of the Roman Woman” in *The World of Roman Costume*, edited by L. Bonfante and J. L. Sebesta (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), p. 48, and n. 41, quoted in Winter, *Roman Wives*, 81.

¹⁶ *Dio Chrysostom*, Orations, tr. H. Lamar Crosby, in *Dio Chrysostom*, vol. 5, Oration 64:3. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978-1979.

¹⁷ Winter, *Roman Wives*, 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Various sources indicate that in Greco-Roman Palestine, the practice of women covering their heads when they ventured out in public was also considered appropriate decorum for women in Greco-Roman Palestine, and “unbound hair on a woman is depicted as compromising her modesty.” See Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 130, citing b.Ket. 72a; Sifre Num. 11, p.17 ed. Horovitz; and Susanna 32.

¹⁹ Osiek and Pouya, in “Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World,” 50, note the use of the role of shame here, commenting that “[i]n these verses we see again Paul’s overriding concern about potential shame for the community. Paul claims that women’s speech in worship is shameful (*aischron*).”

²⁰ T. Paige, “The Social Matrix of Women’s Speech at Corinth: The Context and Meaning of the Command to Silence in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12.2 (2002): 217-242.

²¹ Jo Ann Davidson, “Women in Scripture: A Survey and Evaluation,” 216 in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Nancy Vyhmeister, Special Committee, SDA Theological Seminary (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press), 1998. Regarding Junia, see Robert M. Johnston, “Shapes of Ministry in the New Testament and Early Church,” 47 in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, edited

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meant to prevent women's participation in sacral speech, but rather to prevent casual interaction between married women and non-family men in the worship setting.²²

In the Greek and Roman context, this kind of behavior by married women was seen as sexually aggressive, bringing shame on these women and the church in the eyes of society. It was a contravention of the custom of the time (1 Cor 14:35) for women to engage in public discussions with men. Indeed, in the Greek cities it was only the courtesans (*hetaerae*) who engaged in public discussions with men.²³ It was considered similarly shameful for Roman women to speak in public in a casual setting to males who were not members of their family.

Livy records the following, in a speech he attributes to Cato, which appears to parallel Paul's concern in 1 Cor 14:3–35:

It was not without painful emotion of shame, that I, just now, made my way into the Forum, through the midst of a band of women [*equidem non sine rubore quodam paulo ante per medium agmen mulierum in forum perueni*]. Had I not been restrained by respect for the modesty and dignity [*maiestatis et pudoris*] of some individuals among them. . . I should not have refrained from saying to them, 'What sort of practice is this, of running out into public, besetting the streets, and addressing other women's husbands [*uiros alienos appellandi*]?' Could not each have made the same request to her husband at home [*istud ipsum suos quaeque domi rogare non potuistis*]?' Are your blandishments more seducing [*blandiores*] in public than in private; and with other women's husbands than with your own?' . . . What are they doing, at this moment, in your streets and lanes? What but arguing, some in support of the motion of tribunes; others, contending for the repeal of the law? Will you give the reins to their intractable nature, [*iniquo animo feminae*] and then expect that they themselves should set bounds to their licentiousness [*licentiam*], and without your interference!²⁴

by Nancy Vyhmeister, Special Committee, SDA Theological Seminary (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press), 1998.

²² Paige, "Women's Speech" 217-242.

²³ R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Surrey Hills: Anzea, 1979), 143.

²⁴ Livy, *Titi Livi Ab Urbe Condita*, R. Conway, & C. Walters, eds. (Oxford University Press, 1914), 34:2.

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Livy clearly associates this kind of behavior by specifically married women with sexuality, using terms such as “seduction” and “licentiousness.” While it may be argued that this evidence is early, and limited only to one section of society, the fact that this series of laws was passed commencing in 17 BC to regulate the public morality of aristocratic women indicates the widespread nature of the perceived problems posed by the new attitudes of at least some women. These laws may allow us to bridge the time between Livy and Paul, and to see the existence of a long-term trend in society.

This passage, although in Latin, can be considered profitably as a parallel to Paul’s counsel to women in 1 Cor 14:33-35, particularly its invocation of the concepts of shame and sexual impropriety, and in its call for women to ask their husbands at home. Against such a background, Paul’s apparent “injunction to silence” may readily be understood.

Another passage that illustrates the cultural mores that form the background to Paul’s injunction is a passage in Plutarch’s *Conjugalia Praecepta*, written in the late first century, or perhaps very early in the second century. In this passage, Plutarch draws a moral lesson from an episode on the life of Theano, narrating that

Theano, when putting on her cloak, exposed her arm. A man said, “Your arm is beautiful.” She said, “But it is private.” Not just her arm, but also a virtuous woman’s speech should be private; she should be modest and careful about saying anything in the hearing of people who aren’t family, since this would be exposing herself. (δεῖ δὲ μὴ μόνον τὸν πῆχυν ἀλλὰ μηδὲ τὸν λόγον δημόσιον εἶναι τῆς σώφρονος, καὶ τὴν φωνὴν ὡς ἀπογύμνωσιν αἰδεῖσθαι καὶ φυλάττεσθαι πρὸς τοὺς ἐκτός).²⁵

Greek literature provides us with more examples, since in many respects this social attitude was common across Greek and Roman cultures. Accordingly, in Euripides’ *Electra*, a peasant enters and sees strangers talking to Electra. He exclaims, “Oh! who are these strangers I see at my door? . . . For it is shameful for a woman to be standing with young men.”

²⁵ Plutarch, *Conjugalia Praecepta*, *Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library, ed. Babbitt (London: Heinemann, 1928), 142c-d.

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(γυναικί τοι αἰσχρὸν μετ' ἀνδρῶν ἐστάναι νεανιῶν).²⁶ A little later in the same play, Electra complains of how wrong it is when a man marries a woman who is above his rank, and calls this “a shameful thing” (αἰσχρὸν).²⁷ Xenophon, in his *Hellenica*, refers to Mania, who was a female satrap, and of this, people said that it was “a disgraceful thing” (αἰσχρὸν).²⁸ These examples all help illustrate the semantic field of the word αἰσχρὸν. This is a word that occurs very few times in the New Testament, and therefore external evidence is particularly required in order to bring out its meaning and connotations. In each of these examples, in their contexts, the word αἰσχρὸν connotes improper relationships between men and women, with overtones of sexuality and immorality always present.

Having seen some Graeco-Roman evidence, the evidence directly from within Judaism itself perhaps also provides an illuminating comparison and contrast. The literary evidence marshaled by Ilan certainly suggests that the social situation described here was similar in Graeco-Roman Palestine, where it was deemed inappropriate for a woman to engage in casual conversation in public with men who were not their husbands.²⁹

However, this must also be considered together with the material evidence of the Jewish Diaspora. In this regard, Bernadette Brooten has marshaled an impressive array of inscriptional evidence that women in the ancient synagogue most probably enjoyed significant leadership roles with titles such as “head of the synagogue” (ἀρχισυνάγωγος/ἀρχισυνάγωγισσα),³⁰ “leader” of the synagogue (ἀρχήγισσα),³¹ “elder” of the synagogue (πρεσβυτέρα/πρεσβυτέρισσα), and “mother” of the synagogue.³² Brooten rightly comments that “[t]his collection of inscriptions should challenge historians of religion to question the

²⁶ Euripides, *Electra*, tr. E.P. Coleridge, in Volume 2 of *The Complete Greek Drama*. Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., eds. (New York: Random House, 1938), line 344.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, lines 931-932.

²⁸ Xenophon, *Hellenica*, 3.1.14.3.

²⁹ Ilan, Tal, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine: An Inquiry into Image and Status*. Text and Studien zum Antiken Judentum: herausgegeben von Martin Hengel and Peter Schäfer 44, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 126, citing m.Abot 1.5; b.Ned. 20a; b. Ber. 43b; and Abot de Rabbi Nathan 2, p.9 ed., Schechter.

³⁰ Bernadette J. Brooten, “Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue,” *Brown Judaic Studies* 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), 5-34.

³¹ Brooten, “Women Leaders,” 35-40.

³² Brooten, “Women Leaders,” 57-72.

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prevailing view of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman period as a religion all forms of which a priori excluded women from leadership roles.”³³

Returning now to the Pauline texts, 1 Cor 14:35 indicates that Paul is specifically referring to married women; he writes, “let them ask their husbands,” and therefore by implication this injunction must be seen within the context of the marriage relationship. Furthermore, verse 35 also indicates that the tension is between an appropriate private setting, “at home,” and the more public setting for the church. Paul invokes the same notion of “shame” in both 1 Cor 11:6-15 and in 14:3-35. Within an honor–shame culture, this would likely invoke issues of sexuality, and in this particular context, improper behavior by married women that was perceived to be sexually aggressive.

In 1 Tim 5:13-16 we have another example of this phenomenon, yet again involving women. In this case the activities of young widows are restricted as a response to the community being slandered by outsiders. Paul therefore writes: “Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach” (1 Tim 5:14).

In his letter to Timothy, Paul’s issues with regard to the widows are specifically concerned with their actual or potential sexual indiscretions, as is demonstrated by his use of the word *καταστηνιάσωσιν* in 1 Tim 5:11, which is translated in the NASB “they feel sensual desires.” This word (*καταστηνιάω*) is variously defined as “to behave wantonly”³⁴ and “to feel the impulses of sensual desire.”³⁵ Bruce Winter points out that within the Roman context this implied that they were guilty of *stuprum*, a term which was used in Roman law “to describe the sexual indiscretions of single women, widows, and divorcees.”³⁶

³³ Brooten, “Women Leaders,” 149. In this regard, Brooten (p.150) notes the existence of possible connections between Judaism and earliest Christianity, and suggests further research in terms of passages such as Rom 16:7; Acts 18:2,18,26; Rom 16:3-4; 1 Cor 16:19; and 2 Tim 4:19.

³⁴ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. Edited and revised by H. S. Jones and others (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

³⁵ J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1901).

³⁶ The *Digesta Iustiniani* 48.5.6.1 accordingly refers to *stuprum vero in virginem viduamve committitur*. See discussions in Winter, “Roman Wives,” 124; and Adele C. Scafuro, *The Forensic Stage: Settling Disputes in Graeco-Roman New Comedy* (Cambridge:

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It would appear, therefore, that καταστηνιάσωσιν, with its connotations of sexual impropriety, belongs to the same semantic field as αἴσχρον. It is within this context that Paul's concern here is that there be no cause for "slander" (NIV; Gk. – λοιδορίας). He specifically mentions younger widows who "go around from house to house" and who are "not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, talking about things not proper to mention" (λαλοῦσαι τὰ μὴ δέοντα – v.13). The context therefore is a public context, and Paul's concern is with the potential for "reproach" (NASB) or "slander" of the Christian community.

Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, and in another context, the "things that are not proper to mention" are "mentioned" again: "it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret" τὰ γὰρ κρυφῇ γινόμενα ὑπ' αὐτῶν αἰσχρόν ἐστιν καὶ λέγειν (Eph 5:12).

The word "disgraceful" is αἴσχρον, the same word which is used in 1 Cor 11:6 and 14:35. Here in Eph 5:12, it refers to unmentionable things that are done in secret. Summarizing the argument to this point, we can see how the word αἴσχρον expresses a central concept within the honor–shame culture, and can therefore often carry sexual connotations, as has been argued above for its use in 1 Corinthians. This is reinforced again in 1 Tim 5:11 by Paul's use of the term καταστηνιάσωσιν in a similar context.

So now we are perhaps in a position to step back and attempt to understand what Paul is doing here. Paul's mission essentially involved "the creation of a new identity and of new social structures. His letters. . . must be read as attempts to do this not only for himself, but as a collective enterprise. Beyond and behind the individual topics that he discusses lies a larger purpose, that of creating a 'new world' for his readers, of building a 'space' for their new existence."³⁷

Within this "new world" which Paul is creating, he does not break completely with the honor–shame culture, but rather transforms and reinterprets it.³⁸ Instead of putting one's honor in the center, Paul expects his communities to put the honor of others in the center, as so he writes,

Cambridge University Press, 1997), 216.

³⁷ H. Moxnes, "The Quest for Honor and the Unity of the Community in Romans 12 and in the Orations of Dio Chrysostom," 216-217 in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context*, edited by Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

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“[b]e devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.”³⁹

A crucial point is that in the Mediterranean cultures, social concepts of honor–shame had a very close relationship to sexuality and gender distinctions.⁴⁰ It therefore appears to be no coincidence, as we have seen, that when Paul places restrictions on women, it is always in the context of the concepts of honor and shame. Paul was concerned with defining the identity of his communities, and consequently with their honor, both in terms of their own internal identity as well as in terms of how they were perceived by society.

Morgan, Levandowski, and Rogers apply a relational systems approach to the conflicts at Corinth.⁴¹ Perspectives from this work are helpful in terms of understanding how Paul may have viewed the practical application of his universal gospel. Morgan et al. note that “[e]very system has a boundary which separates it from things outside.”⁴² In this regard, Robertson’s analysis suggests that the fundamental issue in 1 Cor 1-4 was a theme to which Paul continually returns in his letters. This theme was, “not a tension between those of different social status (1.26) or between this subgroup and that subgroup (1.11ff.) as much as it was a confusion surrounding the identity and operative boundaries of the ἐκκλησία in the midst of its environment.”⁴³

The church in Corinth was a new church, where the community was undergoing change in terms of entering into a new order of relationships both within themselves and with those who were outside the ἐκκλησία. Morgan et al., consequently distinguish between two types of change within a relational system:

³⁹ Rom 12:10; See also 1 Cor 12:23-26.

⁴⁰ David D. Gilmore, “Introduction: The Shame of Dishonor,” in *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean*. Special Publication No. 22. Edited by David D. Gilmore (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1987), 3.

⁴¹ D. D. Morgan, D. H. Levandowski, and M. L. Rogers, “The Apostle Paul: Problem Formation and Problem Resolution from a Systems Perspective,” *JPT* 9.2 (1981): 136-143, cited in C. K. Robertson, *Conflict in Corinth: Redefining the System* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 119.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ C. K. Robertson, *Conflict in Corinth: Redefining the System* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 16.

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first-order change is that which is acceptable to those within a network or system, for it involves minor changes that are familiar and not threatening to the integrity or balance of the overall structure of the system. *Second-order change*, however, is that which threatens to alter the actual homeostatic balance of the entire system.⁴⁴

We now therefore need to consider how Paul relates to the cultural norms of his day. To do this, we also need to examine the heart of his understanding of the gospel.⁴⁵ In 1 Cor and elsewhere, Paul highlights the centrality of the cross as the key *identity and boundary marker* for the ἐκκλησία. Paul accordingly writes, “but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to the Gentiles foolishness” (1 Cor 1:23).

The cross of Christ represented the death of the old and the familiar. It is the cross that relativizes all other distinctions, such as circumcision, and it is the cross that establishes the boundaries of the new community in Christ.⁴⁶ As the primary identity marker and an instrument of second-order change, the cross therefore serves as more than just a *divider* between those who are wholly set apart and who belong to the crucified Christ (1.2); it also serves as a *unifier* for those within the Christian network.⁴⁷ With particular reference to 1 Cor 1:17-24, Robertson therefore comments that

The cross – ο σταυρος – was offered here as the primary identity marker for those in the Christian ἐκκλησία. . . For Paul, the cross created a new all-encompassing dichotomy that effectively reconstituted the Corinthians’ relational universe, replacing the more familiar dichotomies of Jew and Greek (1.2–24), foolish and wise (1.26–27), weak and strong. Instead of multiple *overlapping* networks. . . now there were only two *mutually exclusive* ones: “those who are perishing” . . . and “those who are being saved.” The message of the cross was the instrument of

⁴⁴ Morgan, “The Apostle Paul,” 137-138, cited in Robertson, *Conflict*, 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁶ Paul clearly expresses this understanding in Galatians: “14 But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. 16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God,” (Gal 6:14-16).

⁴⁷ Morgan et al, “The Apostle Paul,” 139.v.

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“second-order change,” as it were, by which those two networks were distinguished one from another.⁴⁸

Paul conceives of the relationship between Christ and the ἐκκλησία as a marriage relationship.⁴⁹ Accordingly, Paul writes to the Corinthian church:

15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! **16** Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body with her? For He says, “THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH.” **17** But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. **18** Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. **19** Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? **20** For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor 6:15-25).

Paul’s argument here is that because of the cross (v. 20) the bodies of the members of the ἐκκλησία have been bought by God so that they no longer have authority over themselves (v. 19). When a person “joins himself to the Lord” (v. 17), he or she becomes part of the “body of Christ.”⁵⁰ Indeed, the “body of Christ” is the ἐκκλησία itself, so that the boundaries of the ἐκκλησία *are* the boundaries of the “body of Christ.”

For Paul, sexual immorality means to “take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute.” In other words, the issue of sexual immorality is an issue that deals with the heart of one’s identity as a Christian; it has to do with the very boundaries of the Christian community, so that the one who is sexually immoral has effectively crossed over the boundary of the ἐκκλησία. For this reason, Paul describes immorality as a sin of a different order, in that “the immoral man sins against his own body” (v. 18). It is a sin against the whole body of Christ; the entire ἐκκλησία. Immorality is a repudiation of the cross, which Paul

⁴⁸ Robertson, *Conflict in Corinth: Redefining the System*, 136-137.

⁴⁹ 2 Cor 11:2; see also Eph 5:22-28.

⁵⁰ Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:27.

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presents as the prime identity marker for the Pauline communities, as well as the basis of God's presence within the community.⁵¹

Paul therefore scrupulously emphasizes sexual purity in his letters, as in 1 Cor 6:9-10 and Gal 5:18-20. For Paul, to cross over this boundary of the community was in Morgan et al.'s definition,⁵² a second-order change. It was not to be countenanced; in Paul's words, "[m]ay it never be!" (1 Cor 6:15). Accordingly Paul protects the homeostatic balance of the community by safeguarding it from any association with sexual impurity or adultery.

It is also noteworthy that the injunctions against fornication apply equally to men as to women, as 1 Cor 6:15-25 illustrates. However, the culture of Paul's time had specific markers of sexual aggression and adultery that applied to women, and it was these that Paul enforced. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see Paul's restrictions on women as merely a surrender of Christian liberty to the prevailing cultural mores of the day. These restrictions were not driven solely or even principally by the perceptions of outsiders. Rather, these restrictions arose from the heart of Paul's understanding of the gospel, which is why his restrictions on women are so clear and unambiguous. Paul vigorously opposes the markers of sexual immorality that were then current in the culture of his day.

We cannot apply the cultural norms of first-century Mediterranean society to our own day and practice, although we must certainly understand and apply the principles that pertain to the way in which the body of Christ should function. It is clear that in the culture in which Paul established his communities, it was considered immodest for women to speak to males who were not members of their family *in a casual setting*. At the same time, and in apparent contraposition to this, we have a solid body of evidence that women exercised significant leadership roles in the Pauline Christian communities.⁵³

⁵¹ M. Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 104.

⁵² Morgan et al, "The Apostle Paul," 137-138.

⁵³ On these instances, see the analysis and discussion in Robert Johnston, "Shapes of Ministry," 45-58; Jo Ann Davidson, "Women in Scripture," 176-179; and Richard M. Davidson, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 259-262.

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How can these two bodies of evidence be reconciled? The evidence points to the concept that where women had functional roles within society, it was appropriate that they spoke and interacted as necessary in the exercise of their functions. The evidence for women in leadership roles within the synagogues of the Diaspora is difficult to explain in any other way. This similarly aligns with the New Testament evidence of women exercising leadership roles in the Pauline Christian communities. Although a clear distinction between “casual speech” and what we might call “functional speech” may not resonate within our contemporary culture, it is certainly one that appears to be supported by the ancient evidence.⁵⁴

In conclusion, this paper has sought to demonstrate the kinds of insights that a sound understanding of history can contribute to the understanding of Scriptural passages that appear to be problematic today. More specifically, the evidence provided in this paper indicates that Paul’s agenda was not the restriction of women, but rather the creation of a community based on the cross of Christ. Paul’s prime concern was with the threat that was posed to the identity and boundaries of the ἐκκλησία by sexual immorality, within the constructs of an honor–shame culture.

We may reflect on the thought that perhaps Paul’s concerns *should* be our concerns, although the changes in culture mean that the specific cultural markers with which he was dealing are largely no longer relevant in our society. However, it is certain that the identity and boundaries of the church are as much an issue today as they were in Paul’s day. This begs the key question: if Paul were alive today, what would be the issues that he would insist on in terms of the cultural markers of immorality in our society, and therefore of the boundaries of the church?

⁵⁴ This would seem to be a simpler explanation than Larry Richards’ proposal in “How Does a Woman Prophecy and Keep Silence at the Same Time?” *Women in Ministry: Biblical and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 311-332, that Paul’s restrictions of women in public worship settings are best understood within the context of gnosticism within the Corinthian church. Furthermore, the notion of applying the term “gnostic” to the Corinthian church in the time of Paul in the first century has been seriously challenged. See Edward Adams and David Horrell, editors, *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 19-22.

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