

Translation Troubles: 1 Corinthians 14 as a Test Case

by Jeff Miller

The challenging complexity of the ministry of Bible translation should spark humility, among translators themselves and among those who critique them. I pledge to keep such humility in mind as I describe four types of shortcomings that can be found in Bible translations, using 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 as a test case.

1. Translating a word poorly or imprecisely

An example is the Greek word *sigao*, which occurs ten times in the New Testament, including 1 Corinthians 14. The NIV¹ uses “silent” to translate three of these ten occurrences (Luke 20:26, Acts 15:12, 1 Cor 14:34). The problem with translating *sigao* this way in 1 Corinthians 14:34 is not that the word can never mean “silent.” Most words have a range of meaning, and “silent” is indeed within that range for *sigao*. The problem, rather, is that “silent” does

not best fit the context—and context is always the key to a word’s meaning and translation. A few verses earlier, those in Corinth with the gift of prophecy are told to *sigao* in certain circumstances. A theological reason is then given for this instruction: “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (NIV). Thus the nature of the “silence” of 1 Corinthians 14 is grounded in order and peace. This contextual grounding helps us navigate the word’s range of meaning toward peacefulness and away from silence. As a result, translations that use “quiet” instead of “silent” in 14:34 (e.g., CEB, CEV, NCV) are preferable.

Two other words that are at risk of being inadequately translated or understood are *authentain* (“to have/ usurp authority”) and *kephale* (“head”). These words are not in 1 Corinthians 14, our test passage, but are worth mentioning because discerning their meaning is central to egalitarian concerns. See the sidebar for more on these.

Authentein and Kephale

These two words are critical to understanding what Paul says about gender. CBE has accessible and academic resources to help you learn more.

For more on *authentain*:

Visit cbe.today/authentein.

For more on *kephale*:

Check out “Misinterpreting ‘Head’ Can Perpetuate Abuse” on p. 12.

Visit cbe.today/head.

2. Leaving something out

It is sometimes true that a Hebrew or Greek word need not be represented in translation by a corresponding word. Nevertheless, a decision to omit presents risks, such as lack of clarity or shift of emphasis. An example from 1 Corinthians 14 is the definite article “the,” which begins verse 34. “The women should be quiet” is significantly different from “women should be quiet.”

Consider this example: If someone were to ask you right now what you are reading, you could answer, “a magazine.” Later, after you’re done reading, that same person would surely not ask, “Where’s a magazine you were reading?” Instead, they would say, “Where’s the magazine you were reading?” “A magazine” has become “the magazine” simply because both people in the conversation now know which magazine is meant.

In both Greek and English, this is a frequent function of the definite article (to refer to something that is known or “definite”). Similarly, Paul says “the women” because both he and his readers know who he means. Centuries later, we don’t know exactly who he means, but we can easily infer that he is referring to some women in Corinth who have been previously mentioned (most likely in a report Paul received from and/or about the Corinthian congregations).

Though the illustration above is rather simple, we must not underestimate its impact. Indeed, here in 1 Corinthians 14 the difference between “the women” and “women” is several billion people! Translations that include “the” at the beginning of verse 34 have avoided a significant pitfall. These include the CEB, CEV, CSB, ESV, NASB, and the NET Bible.

Another example of unnecessary omission is the word “own” in 1 Corinthians 14:35a: “If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home” (NIV). Admittedly, “their husbands” are the same people as “their own husbands.” But this simple fact suggests that the word “own” is present for emphasis and

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should therefore not be omitted. This sentence reveals a key to the passage: the type of speaking that certain women are to stop is the asking of questions. Paul is not addressing preaching or teaching. He is addressing behavior “in the pews.” The previous several verses have been about speaking in tongues and prophesying in an orderly and edifying way. Now Paul says that the asking of questions should also not be disruptive. *The Message* makes this clear: “Wives must not disrupt worship, talking when they should be listening, asking questions that could more appropriately be asked of their husbands at home.” Yet *The Message* still omits “own” from the phrase “their husbands.” The word “own” adds nuance to this understanding. Not only were certain women asking questions at the wrong time, they were also asking questions of the wrong people. That is, they were publicly asking other women’s husbands rather than their own husbands—a taboo in that culture.

3. Making an unwarranted insertion

An example from our test passage is the word “remain” in verse 34: “Women should remain silent in the churches” (NIV). To be clear, no word in the Greek text of this verse corresponds to “remain.” BibleGateway.com makes available fifty-seven English translations. Only five of them include the word “remain” here, and three of these five are in the NIV family (NIV, NIVUK, NIVUK). To add “remain” is to strengthen the already strong word “silent” (which all five translations use instead of “quiet”). The insertion serves to expand the command beyond the context the chapter is addressing, suggesting that women had been silent before and should remain silent after.

Sometimes the form of a Greek word (its tense, voice, or mood), requires that an additional word be added to its translation. But the addition of “remain” is not such a case, for the three occurrences of *sigao* in 1 Corinthians 14 are identical.

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Only one of the five translations which add “remain” regarding women in verse 34 also adds “remain” to the corresponding commands to tongue speakers in verse 28, and none of the five do so regarding prophets in verse 30. The biased inconsistency is palpable: tongue speakers and prophets should be quiet in certain circumstances, but women must “remain silent in the churches” regardless of circumstances.

4. Misuse of punctuation, paragraph divisions, subheadings, quotation marks, and capitalization.

Consider, for example, the second half of 1 Corinthians 14:34, “They [the women] are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says” (NIV). Several translations capitalize the word “Law” at the end of this verse, including the CEB, ESV, and NASB. To do so implies strongly that “law” here refers to the Torah. (Whether that is the intent, it is certainly the effect.) A few translations, such as the CEV, go even further and print “the Law of Moses.” The problem is that nothing in the Law of Moses says women must be in submission. Various theories about this difficulty exist, and all interpreters are of course free to hold to a theory. But translators should not do something to

the text (in this case, capitalize “Law”) that obscures even the fact that there is a difficulty to grapple with.

Outside our test passage, another example of a paratextual feature obscuring the text is the forced separation of two inseparable verses, Ephesians 5:21 and 5:22. Verse 21 is about mutual submission; verse 22 is about wives submitting to their husbands. The two verses are inseparable, because in the Greek text there is no verb “submit” in verse 22; it is inferred from the word “submit” in verse 21. To use one translation as an example,

The NIV [1984] . . . has done everything typographically possible to distance 5:21 from 5:22. A period, a double-spaced line, an italicized subheading, a second double-spaced line, a paragraph indentation, a verse number, and a capital letter all stand between these verses.²

Conclusion

Two verses of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, have provided sufficient data to illustrate four categories of translation difficulties. In addition, these illustrations together serve to demonstrate two overarching points.

First, there is no English Bible that avoids all pitfalls. This is true

in general, and also with regard to egalitarian concerns. It is surely the case that certain translations (notably, the NRSV, CEB, and NIV 2011) have made significant strides toward unbiased and accurate rendering of key texts. And it is also true that certain translations have not (notably, the ESV and CSB). Nevertheless, no single translation can be fairly called either “the egalitarian Bible” or “the complementarian Bible.”

Second, the illustrations above have demonstrated the point made at the beginning of this article: Bible translation is challenging and complex, and it therefore calls for humility on the part of those who undertake it and those who critique it. With this in mind, I close with Colossians 3:12, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience” (NIV).



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¹Abbreviations for translations mentioned in this article are CEB (*Common English Bible*, 2011), CEV (*Contemporary English Version*, 1995), ESV (*English Standard Version*, 2016), NASB (*New American Standard Bible*, 1995), NCV (*New Century Version*, 2005), NET Bible (*New English Translation*, 2006), NIV (*New International Reader’s Version*, 2014), NIV (*New International Version*, 2011), NIVUK (*New International Version—UK*, 2011), and NRSV (*New Revised Standard Version*, 1989).

² Jeff Miller, “Translating Paul’s Words About Women,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 12, no. 1 (spring 2009): 70.