Rightly dividing words and sentences 1 Cor 14:33

(By Iver Larsen, revised October 2026)

Introduction: No translation without interpretation

Translation is a two-step process. First, the original text is interpreted, and it is of course important, but not always easy, to arrive at the correct interpretation. Quite often different people have different interpretations. The second step is to translate the interpreted meaning into another language so that the new audience as far as possible is able to reach the same understanding as the originally intended audience. Some people think that the goal is to ”translate without interpretation”, but that is an impossibility in actual translation work. You cannot translate meaningfully what you don’t understand. And you cannot understand a text without interpreting it first and choose among various possible meanings.

In the early Greek manuscripts words were not separated by spaces, and sentences were not marked by punctuation. Paragraph breaks were not indicated. An extreme position of “translating without interpretation” would be to NOT usewordbreaksin English and never use any punctuationbutwhatwou ldpeoplesaytothat. We are so used to word breaks as well as punctuation, that such a translation would be considered unreadable. No translation has gone to that extreme, so every translator MUST interpret how to break up the original text before a translation can be attempted.

There are many examples where it is a matter of interpretation whether a sentence is to be interpreted as a statement or a question. It is also a matter of interpretation where a speech quotation ends.

One or two sentences, right or wrong?

Sometimes it is not clear whether one or two sentences were intended. For instance, John 14:1b could be one sentence: Trust in God and trust also in me. Or it could be two sentences: You are trusting in God. Trust also in me. Apart from lack of punctuation, the Greek language does not differentiate between the present command form “Trust” and the indicative present “You are trusting”. NIV said: “Trust in God; trust also in me.” This was changed in NIV2011 to: “You believe in God; believe also in me.” The change is reasonable, since it would be a given that the disciples already believed in God. But at the same time it is a choice whether to say “trust” or “believe” in English. When the belief is directed towards a person rather than a statement or doctrine, the sense is more of trust than simply believe. The Greek text has an emphasis on *also in me* in the second part. Because of that it is more likely that the first part is a given and the second part is an addition to the first part, i.e. you already trust in God. Since you do that, (and since I have come from God,) you should also put the same trust in me. A third option, then, which is neither the old or new NIV could be: “You have already put your trust in God. Trust me, too.” Translation involves many choices. In many cases it is not simply a matter of right or wrong, but a relative degree of clarity and accuracy.

One or two words?

A different issue is found in Rom 7:14. There is a Greek word here which could be οἴδαμεν, (oidamen) meaning “we know”. However, it is quite possible that it should be broken apart into two words: οἶδα μὲν, (oida men) which means “while I know”. Both options fit the context, and both options have been

employed in translation. Which is correct? I don't know. We don't know. I lean towards "I know", but the tradition leans towards "we know".

One or two paragraphs?

The Greek text had no paragraph breaks, so again it is a matter of interpretation. As an illustration, let me discuss 1 Cor 14:33-36. The NET, RSV and others chose to have a paragraph from 33b-36. The old NIV had a paragraph from 33b-35. The new NIV and NLT have a paragraph from 34-35. So, it is a matter of interpretation both where to begin and where to end this paragraph. Most of the arguments for one or the other are underlyingly theological, although the translators and commentators usually deny that. I'll try to steer clear of theology.

First, a few manuscripts in the Western tradition do not even have verses 34-35, but put them after v. 40, where they do not fit very well. G. Fee is one of the very few who argue that these verses were not original at this place. The manuscript data is strongly in favour of these verses being at this place.

Second, is the phrase "As in all the congregations of the saints" to be attached to the preceding sentence: "After all, God is not a God of anarchy, but of peace"? This last sentence explains and gives background for v. 32 where Paul said that "the spirits of prophets are subordinated to prophets." The IVP Bible Background Commentary has a useful note about this: "In most contemporary Jewish teaching, prophecy involved complete possession by the Spirit; one dare not seek to control one's utterance. For Paul, however, inspiration can be regulated, and regulating the timing and manner of one's utterance is not the same as quenching it altogether. On regulating one's spirit, cf. Proverbs 16:32 and 25:28."

Some Corinthians may also have been comparing with ecstatic spiritual activity in contemporary pagan culture, but a true Christian prophet decides when and where to bring the word he or she has received. There is no force or ecstasy involved, although it does feel like a burden to share. Our God is a God of peace, not of anarchy, insurrection, rebellion and confusion (Greek: ἀκαταστασία - akatastasia). It would be very strange to add "as in all the churches" to this final statement as if God was only a God of peace in the churches. Verses 32 and 33a are general statements. Both the NA and UBS Greek texts introduce a paragraph break before 33b. If this comparative phrase is moved away from 34, we lose the introductory background to and logical basis for 34. Paul is correcting a misbehaviour in Corinthian congregations that did not take place in other church congregations in other cities. It was apparently caused by Greek culture and tradition. So, Paul appeals to the Corinthians to follow the practice that is found in all the other churches. This ties in well with the final sentence in the paragraph, namely v. 36: "Or did the word of God originate from YOU? Or are YOU the only ones who have received it?" These final rhetorical questions indicate a rebuke and also an admonition to the Corinthians to not think that they are unique and different from all other churches in other places. I won't discuss the controversial verses 34-35 except to quote from the IVP Background Commentary: "Informed listeners customarily asked questions during lectures, but it was considered rude for the ignorant to do so. Although by modern standards literacy was generally low in antiquity (less so in the cities), women were far less trained in the Scriptures and public reasoning than men were. Paul does not expect these uneducated women to refrain from learning (indeed, that most of their culture had kept them from learning was the problem). Instead he provides the most progressive model of his day: their husbands are to respect their intellectual capabilities and give them private instruction. He

wants them to stop interrupting the teaching period of the church service, however, because until they know more, they are distracting everyone and disrupting church order."