

REIMAGINING A WOMAN'S ROLE IN THE CHURCH: AN OPEN LETTER

by Frank Viola

Subjugation of women, in fact, is a symptom of man's fallen nature. If the work of Christ involves the breaking of the entail [inherited consequences] of the fall, the implication of his work for the liberation of women is plain. Unwarranted assumptions have sometimes been drawn from the fact that all twelve of the original apostles were men. But in fact our Lord's male disciples cut a sorry figure alongside his female disciples, especially in his last hours; and it was to women that he first entrusted the privilege of carrying the news of his resurrection. He treated women in a completely natural and unselfconscious way as real persons. He imparted his teaching to the eager ears and heart of Mary of Bethany, while to the Samaritan woman (of all people) he revealed the nature of true worship. His disciples who found him thus engaged at the well were surprised to find him talking to a woman: for a religious teacher to do this was at best a waste of time and at worst a spiritual danger.

-F.F. Bruce

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy."

-Peter quoting the prophet Joel in Acts 2:17-18, NIV

Dear sister,
Thank you for your gracious letter. You've asked an excellent question. What is my view on a woman's role in the church and how I understand the "limiting passages" that seem to restrict their ministry?

To be honest, I'm monumentally disinterested in adding more noise to the ill-fated gender brawl that rages in some Christian circles. It is for this reason that I've been loathe to write on the subject. Yet I keep meeting women who have been spiritually straight-jacketed by what I find to be a wooden interpretation of certain Biblical texts. Their stories have provoked me to tread on this hazardous minefield. And for their sake, as well as for the sake of *all* my beloved sisters in Christ, I regret not having done so sooner.

With that said, I'm now ready to have my ears singed with the hand-wringing, nitpicking, nailbiting, and tooth-gnashing that may be generated by my response.

So let this letter forever settle the whole controversy. Here, dear sister, is *the* answer to your question. Here is *the* final word on the subject:

Paul put it plainly when he said that under no condition and under no circumstance may a woman speak in a church meeting. She must never, ever, under any situation,

say a word in the church. She must without exception keep absolutely, totally, and completely silent.

Unless . . .

she has her head covered!

Are you clear now?

I trust you are laughing, for I was being facetious. Yet I was also trying to make a point. The fact is that Paul seems to contradict himself on this subject. The so-called “limiting passages” are incredibly difficult to interpret. Given their obscurity, no one can be dogmatic as to what Paul really meant when he penned them. This being so, *every* interpretation that’s been given to these texts has shortcomings. And I will shamelessly admit that this applies to my own.

For the sake of those reading this letter over my shoulder, the “limiting passages” are those texts that seem to put some restriction on a woman’s ministry in the church. Interestingly, there are *only* two such passages in all the New Testament. Here they are:

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Corinthians 14:34-35, NASB)

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and become a transgressor. (1 Timothy 2:11-14, NRSV).

Before we discuss these two passages, let me explain how I arrived at my conclusions.

The Entire Thrust of the New Covenant

Long ago I learned an invaluable lesson: The New Testament should never be handled as a manual of floatable doctrines and isolated teachings. The New Testament is a whole. It’s essentially a story. What is written in the letters of Paul and others is part of that story.

The New Testament story contains a consistent message. It’s the message of the New Covenant. This covenant is *not* an updating of the Old Covenant. It doesn’t include a new set of rules to replace the old set of rules.

The Old Covenant contained a set of rules by which men and women were to live. It

also drew sharp distinctions between people—granting special privileges to certain ones. Some were worthy to be God’s people (Jews). Others were not (Gentiles). Among those who were worthy, some were given the honor of being nearest to God (the priests). Others were not (the people). Some were given special ministerial functions (the sons of Aaron). Others were given less important functions (the Levites). Still others were given virtually no function at all (the congregation).

When Jesus Christ entered the scene, all of this radically changed. Our Lord inaugurated a New Covenant which made the old one obsolete. The New Covenant did away with rules. It did away with earthly distinctions. And it abolished special classes of people who possessed special privileges.

Under the New Covenant, the Law of God has been written on the human heart by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has come to indwell all who call upon the Savior—including men and women. Including Jew and Gentile. Including slaves and non-slaves.

All earthly distinctions have been abolished by the New Covenant. All ministerial classes have been wiped out. To possess the Spirit means to have access to God—no one excluded.

In addition, possessing the Spirit means being granted the privilege to minister in God’s house. As Peter quotes the prophet Joel, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and *daughters* will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and *women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18, NIV).

Galatians 3:28 sums up the New Covenant nicely: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, *male nor female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” This passage summarizes Paul’s understanding of the effect of the gospel on cultural givens like racism, slavery, and gender oppression. Galatians 3:28 is not constricted to “salvation.” Instead, it holds social implications for everyone.

In short, the New Covenant erases all social and class distinctions. And it has afforded all to receive the Spirit and serve as priests in God’s house. That includes women.

With that said, whatever the “limiting passages” mean, they cannot in any way overturn the New Covenant. Neither can they contradict the entire thrust of the New Testament. Hence, the idea that women are excluded from speaking in God’s house is a catastrophic breach of the New Covenant. A covenant that has done away with earthly distinctions and treats both men and women as co-priests in God’s kingdom.

The Invisible Interpreter

Another lesson I learned in my spiritual journey has to do with the reality of the Holy Spirit. I’m a firm believer in the intuitive work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the

believer. I also hold squarely to the organic nature of the Body of Christ.

The indwelling Spirit gives every believer Divine instincts and impulses that are just as real as our physical senses. Because the Spirit and the Scripture are born out of Divine inspiration, the leading of the Spirit will *never* contradict Scripture. Nor will the Scripture contradict the instincts of the Spirit.

With that said, on a purely subjective level, all my spiritual instincts tell me that God wants women to function in the meetings of the church.

I have observed house church meetings and small group fellowships where the women were muzzled. They were prohibited from uttering a word. Only the men spoke. As I sat in those gatherings, everything inside me intuitively knew that this was amiss. There was something shamefully artificial about it all. Especially when there were women in the same room who were richer in spiritual life than many of the men. But they were vetoed from speaking simply because they were women.

This practice, to my mind, violates an important spiritual principle. Everything in the Lord's house is governed by "the measure of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). Yet these meetings were governed by external restrictions which produced spiritual limitation. When women who have a great spiritual contribution to make are restricted from speaking in the gatherings of the church, the Body suffers for it.

I'll articulate the clear impressions I had in those meetings as I watched the men wax eloquent (or ramble on) while the sisters passively spectated: Half the priesthood of God is being smothered and squelched. The sisters are banned from speaking simply because the brothers have intellectually interpreted the Bible to mean that they should be quiet. It seems they are blithely ignoring what their spiritual instincts are telling them about the practical fruit of this interpretation. This meeting is grossly lacking in spiritual richness. It reminds me of the so-called "real world" in the movie "The Matrix" — cold, colorless, and tasteless. Muting the sisters is a good recipe for producing highly academic, sterile meetings.

When I stepped back from that experience of watching the sisters sit in their seats dumbly, I had to ask myself a telling question: What clear message is sent by silencing the sisters in the church meetings? The answer is as arresting as it is alarming. The undeniable message is that *men cannot learn anything from women. Nor can they be ministered to spiritually by a woman.*

Please ponder that for a moment.

If every brother were honest with himself, he would be forced to admit that such a thought is absurd. It's also a poor fit with real life. My own observation is that those who hold to the idea that women must be silent in the church "because the Bible says so" are doing something that's quite plastic. I mean, what man in his right mind (provided that his IQ is higher than that of a carrot) really believes that he can't learn spiritual things from a woman? Such a belief strains the bounds of credulity until they break.

In my own experience, some of the most flooring insights shared in church meetings have come from the lips of women. Their contributions have been profoundly rich and meaningful. The women also bring an element in their sharing that men do not. It's the fragrance of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, throughout Scripture, when the aroma of the Lord is mentioned, women are always involved (Psalm 45:7-9; Luke 23:55-24:1; John 12:3). Women have a unique way of emitting the fragrance of Christ's life to others.

I shall argue, therefore, that the practice of silencing woman in a meeting is something outwardly imposed rather than the natural expression of authentic Body life.

What Would Happen If . . . ?

Imagine for a moment that the two "limiting texts" didn't appear in the New Testament. What would be the practice of those churches that don't allow their women to speak in the meetings? What would the women prefer to do?

Such an acute question—if it can be answered—is profoundly insightful. If the church would allow the sisters to speak in their gatherings, then one must question if the practice of silencing them contradicts the natural life of the Spirit.

To my mind, it does.

Interestingly, some of the men who hold to the "women-must-be-silent" doctrine have admitted to me that they are puzzled as to why God asks for such a thing. Some of them have highly lauded the contributions of their wives in spiritual matters . . . only to express confusion as to why they can't share such contributions in public gatherings.

I applaud these men's desire to be faithful to their understanding of Scripture. But I challenge the accuracy of that understanding on both spiritual and Biblical grounds. And I would urge them to re-examine their interpretation based on these deeper observations.

Parenthetically, I'm keenly aware that there do exist men who are chauvinistic, gender-hierarchical, patriarchal, sexist (pick-your-adjective) legalists who have been oppressing females all their lives. These befuddled souls are eager to latch onto any Bible verse that can be twisted to billy-club women. They are quite clever at masking their own personal biases against women with Scripture verses. And they will judge anyone who defends women speaking in the church as pursuing a modernist heresy. But I'm not appealing to such people in this letter. They probably couldn't get past the first page of this chapter.

On the flip side, I've been in scores of meetings where the women spoke with the men present. All of the churches I work with do so. The immense spiritual benefit to both the sisters and the brothers during such meetings is undeniable. In addition, the spirit of every believer in the room knows that it's both proper and necessary for women to function and share Christ. And the marks of the Holy Spirit's presence—"life and peace"—are unquestionably present (Romans 8:6).

In this connection, in every organic expression of the church that I'm aware of, the sisters function in the meetings as do the brothers. (This has been true in my own experience ever since I began meeting in homes in the late 1980s.) To my mind, it's only when we get exposed to the "limiting passages" and adopt a certain interpretation of them that things begin to change. When this happens, some Christians devolve from liberty to suppression. This is never a sign of God's fingerprints; for "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Now before someone reading this letter clips the previous paragraphs out of context and labels me a "spiritual subjectivist" . . . and before I'm accused of exalting my own subjective leadings above the Scriptures (which I predict someone will do) . . . let me repeat what I said at the front. The Scripture and the internal witness of the Spirit *always* go hand-in-hand.

Consequently, if our interpretation of the Bible smacks square in the face of what our human spirit is telling us . . . and if it flat-footedly denies what is practically real in our own lives (that men *can* learn spiritual things from women), this should force us to seriously re-examine our interpretation of certain Biblical passages.

I said all that to make a simple point: My interpretation of the "limiting passages" perfectly mirrors what my spirit tells me what is right, proper, natural, and spiritually viable in a church meeting. It also maps perfectly to those organic expressions of the church with which I'm familiar. Thus on a spiritual, practical, and intellectual plane, I'm at peace with it.

I would suggest that anyone who wishes to upgrade their thinking on this subject take all three elements (spiritual, practical, and intellectual) into consideration. Disregarding one can easily lead to a skewed perspective.

To put it another way, the culture of organic church life precludes any interpretation of the "limiting passages" that bans women from speaking in church meetings.

What Saith the Big Picture?

A basic question must be answered at this point: What is the overall teaching of the New Testament on a woman's role in the church? That is, what's the *big picture* about women in ministry?

You'll find that it's perfectly consistent with the broad principles of the New Covenant.

What follows, therefore, is a chronological survey of women in ministry in the New Testament. Since I don't have a concordance in front of me, I'm doing this from less than inspired memory:

- Elizabeth and Mary (not Zachariah and Joseph) are the first to receive the message of Christ's birth into the world. They are honored and blessed by angels. They are also the first to sing and prophesy about the Christ child.
- The prophetess Anna receives honorable mention as one who speaks of the Messiah to those who have waited for Him (Luke 2:36-38).
- During our Lord's earthly ministry, a group that Luke calls *the Women* were just as well known as *the Twelve* (Luke 8:1-3; 23:49, 55; 24:24). In fact, the twelve male disciples were a rather pitiful bunch when compared to the Lord's female disciples (see Chapter 16).
- Both the Twelve and the Women were among the 120 who waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). The Women, along with the men, spoke in tongues, declaring the "great things of God" (Acts 2:1-11).
- The Holy Spirit was poured out upon women and men alike—the result being that "your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).
- In Christ, all earthly barriers have been destroyed. Galatians 3:28 boldly declares, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." Women, therefore, are not second-class citizens in the church of God.
- Paul and Silas plant a church in Philippi. It begins with all women. Lydia is one of them. She hosts the church meetings in her home. It's inconceivable to think that the women in the church in Philippi could not speak or function in the meetings. The reason? The church was made up mostly of women (Acts 16:12ff.).
- Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, teach Apollos the way of the Lord more fully (Acts 18:26). It's noteworthy that four out of the six times that Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned in the New Testament, Priscilla's name appears first (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:19). This is ancient shorthand signifying that Priscilla was more spiritually prominent. Also, the fact that her name appears first when she and her husband instructed Apollos indicates that she led in that exchange (Acts 18:26, NASB and NIV).
- Philip the evangelist had four daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9). This means they prophesied. (Note that first-century prophecy was always done in and among the church. Question: If a woman is prophesying by God's Spirit, why on earth would a man be barred from hearing it?)

- In 1 Corinthians 11:4-5, Paul says that women may both pray and prophesy when the church comes together (1 Cor. 11:1-34). The context of this passage makes clear that Paul is referring to public meetings where both men and women are present (1 Cor. 11-14).
- When Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians, he honored the following women for their service in the church: Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, Julia, and the sister of Nereus (Rom. 16). Paul *lists* about twice as many men as women. But he *commends* more than twice as many women as he does men.
- In Romans 16:2, Paul calls Phoebe a *prostatis*, which means “one who stands in front of, superintends, guards, and provides care for others.” The word is a derivative of *proistemi*, which is used in Romans 12:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, and 1 Timothy 5:17.
- Paul mentions Junia as a fellow-apostle (Rom. 16:7). This is the most natural way to construe the statement “notable among the apostles.” And “Junia” is clearly a feminine name.⁵⁴
- In Philippians 4:2-3, Paul makes special mention of Euodias and Syntyche who helped him in the Lord’s work.
- Paul reminds Titus that the older women should be “teachers of good things.” They should also to teach the younger women (Titus 2:3-5).
- Paul commends Timothy’s mother and grandmother. We can reasonably infer that these two women taught Timothy the holy Scriptures since he was a child (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15).

Clearly, women were active in ministry in the first-century church. Because they were recipients of the Holy Spirit, they were just as much a part of the believing priesthood as were the men. We find them prophesying publicly. Praying publicly. Teaching publicly. We also find them “contending side by side” with Paul in God’s work. In addition, Paul calls some women “co-workers,” a term he uses for his male associates.

That said, some have interpreted the “limiting passages” to mean that women must *de facto* be excluded from sharing in a meeting when men are present. But this conclusion runs against the grain of the broad principles of the New Testament. For this reason, advocates of the “women-must-not-speak” position are forced into completely non-Scriptural dances distinguishing between “sharing” (when only sisters are present) and “teaching” (when men are present). But this is pure invention. And it’s dissonant

with the Biblical context.

There's no evidence anywhere that Paul or his entourage ever excluded anyone from ministry on the basis of gender. Paul happily worked alongside women like Priscilla, Euodias, and Syntyche without any supercilious hokum about Divinely ordained female inferiority. Further, there's no analog for the "women-cannot-speak-with-men-present" idea in any of Paul's other letters. In short, both Paul's letters are consistent with the revolutionary sentiment that he voiced in Galatians 3:28.

The truth of the matter is that the "limiting passages" are highly obscure. Anyone who asserts that they are clear and direct is living in a fog of presumption and academic naivety. For one thing, such an assertion reflects a benighted dismissal of texts like Acts 2:17, Galatians 3:28, and 1 Corinthians 11:5, 14:26, 31.

Pick up any decent commentary. Look up the "limiting passages," and you'll discover the various ways these texts can be interpreted due to the ambiguity of the language. The fact that competent evangelical scholars disagree on the meaning of Paul's word usage in these passages attests to their obscurity.

It's my opinion that we should always interpret the obscure by the clear, not the other way around. When we interpret the clear and consistent thrust of Scripture in light of one or two obscure passages, we end up rupturing the core message of the Bible. And we are forced to do all sorts of exegetical gymnastics to make the many clear passages fit our interpretation of the few obscure texts.

Therefore, when an obscure passage seems to be at odds with the clear thrust of Scripture, we must look carefully at context.

What Kind of "Silence" Is This?

Attention to context—historical, social, local, and spiritual—is crucial when it comes to rightly interpreting a passage of Scripture. So let's look at the local context of the first "limiting passage"—1 Corinthians 14:29-35:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first one keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches. Let the women keep SILENT in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in the church (NASB).

There are several things to consider here.

First, Paul has already encouraged the women to pray and prophesy earlier in the

letter (1 Cor. 11:5).

Second, Paul encourages the *whole* church to function in Chapter 14. He writes, “for *you can all* prophesy one by one” (v. 31) and “when you assemble, *every one of you* has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation . . .” (v. 26).

(To assert that these exhortations don’t include women is ludicrous. It’s to suggest that the church doesn’t include women, and the New Testament is only written to men. There is nothing in the flow of 1 Corinthians 14 that would suggest that Paul is addressing men only. In addition, Paul makes clear that the gift of prophecy—which women possess—is mainly to be exercised in the church meetings—1 Cor. 11:5; 14:4-5, 29, 31, 39)

Therefore, for Paul to suddenly say that women must never say a word in the church meeting is to completely contradict himself in the space of a few sentences.

New Testament scholars have put forth two scenarios that easily resolve the apparent discrepancy. Let’s examine each one.

Scenario 1

The meetings in Corinth were in utter chaos. Many of the members were speaking in tongues at the same time, and no one was interpreting what was being spoken. Some were prophesying jointly. And what some of the prophets were saying was in dire need of evaluation. But few people were doing this.

Some in the church were doubting the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Others were under the impression that visiting prostitutes and committing incest were acceptable. To their minds, since these things were done with the body and not the spirit, they were innocent activities (1 Cor. 5-6).

In the face of all this, the women were interrupting those prophesying with questions. Their motivation was to learn. But they were adding a further distraction to an already disruptive meeting.

It was common in the ancient world for hearers to interrupt someone who was teaching with questions. But it was considered rude if the questions reflected ignorance of the subject.

It must be noted that women in the first century—whether Jew or Gentile—tended to be uneducated. Any exceptions was rare. Women were essentially trained to be home-keepers. Thus for a woman to query or challenge a man in public was an embarrassing thing in the Greco-Roman world. When women interrupted the men with questions, the men were being interrogated by their social inferiors. Hence, it was considered “improper.”

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul deals with this entire mess. First, he handles the abuse and misuse of tongues and prescribes guidelines for their proper use (1 Cor. 14:1-28). He then switches to the subject of giving and evaluating prophetic words (1 Cor. 14:29-34).

So beginning with Chapter 14:29, Paul shifts his attention to the prophets and their role in the church. He tells the Corinthians that when someone prophesies, they shouldn't do so at the same time that someone else is speaking. Instead, those who prophesy should do so in turn.

It's within this very context that Paul shifts to the sisters and says that if they don't understand a prophetic word, they should ask their husbands about it in private. Their tutoring is to occur at home, not in the meeting. The meeting is not a question-answer session.

Look at the passage again with this thought in mind:

And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in the church.

Notice the undeniable connection between "learning" and "speaking." Therefore, the only kind of speaking that Paul is restricting in this passage is that of asking questions. Both leading-questions and ignorance-based questions.

It's also quite possible that the sisters were quizzing their own husbands, evaluating their prophetic words personally and pointedly. Paul doesn't want there to be any domestic disputes in the meetings, so he asks the women to question their husbands at home.

Either way, Paul's injunction for women to "keep silent" doesn't possess an absolute sense. It's a corrective to a specific problem. The context bears this out. Instead of publicly clamoring for explanations, the women were to learn from their husbands at home. However, when it came to speaking in the meeting to edify the church, they were free to speak (1 Cor. 11:5; 14:26, 31).

To strengthen the case, the Greek word "silent" in this verse is *sigao*. It means to hold one's peace temporarily. The word has the flavor of being quiet in order to listen to what another has to say. Paul uses the same word two other times in Chapter 14.

He first says that the person speaking in tongues should be silent (*sigao*) if there is no interpreter (v. 28). Does this mean that the one who speaks in tongues is never to speak in the meeting? Certainly not.

Paul uses the same word again when he says that if a person interrupts someone prophesying, the first one speaking should be silent (*sigao*), letting the other person interject his word (v. 30). Does this mean that the person prophesying should never speak again in the meeting after he has been interrupted? Certainly not.

In the same way, when a sister has a question during the church meeting, she ought to be silent (*sigao*). That is, she should hold her peace and yield the floor to the person who is speaking (v. 29-34). Does this mean that the sisters are never to speak in the meeting? Certainly not. Such an reflects a culturally biased misreading of Paul. It also puts Paul in stark contradiction with himself (11:5; 14:26, 31).

No, the “silence” here has a very restricted meaning. It applies to those times when a sister was confused by something spoken or when she overtly challenged a prophetic word. Paul was saying that in such cases, the sister should hold her peace and give way to the one speaking. She should then quiz her husband at home. For Paul, this would foster both order and peace to a once chaotic and confused meeting in Corinth (v. 33).

While I’m no fan of Bible paraphrases, I think Eugene Peterson’s translation reflects this scenario the best:

Wives must not disrupt worship, talking when they should be listening, asking questions that could more appropriately be asked of their husbands at home . . . Wives have no license to use the time of worship for unwarranted speaking (1 Corinthians 14:34-35, The Message).

Scenario 2

Some scholars have put forth a different interpretation of this text. Yet it leads to the same conclusion as the interpretation just described. In verse 34, Paul says, “but let them [the women] subject themselves just as the law also says.” Interestingly, there is no law in the Old Testament that calls women to silence or to subject themselves. The Old Testament seems to say the opposite. For example, Psalm 68:11 says, “The Lord gives the command; the women who proclaim the good tidings are a great host.”

What law could Paul be referring to here? Tellingly, the silencing of women was a Jewish ordinance in the ancient world. It came from the Talmud, which was the Jewish oral law during the time that Paul penned 1 Corinthians. According to the Talmud, women were not permitted to speak in the Jewish assembly or even ask questions. Consider the follow quotes from the Talmud.

A woman’s voice is prohibited because it is sexually provocative. (Talmud, Berachot 24a)

Women are sexually seductive, mentally inferior, socially embarrassing, and spiritually separated from the law of Moses; therefore, let them be silent. (Summary of Talmudic sayings)

It is a shame for a woman to let her voice be heard among men. (Talmud, Tractate Kiddushin)

The voice of a woman is filthy nakedness. (Talmud, Berachot Kiddushin)

In light of the above statements, the negative words about women in 1 Corinthians 34-35 may not have been Paul's words at all. Instead, he may have been quoting those in the Corinthian church who based their view of women on the Talmud. The Talmud taught that women couldn't speak in the assembly and added that their voices were

obscene and shameful, the very thoughts that we read in verses 35 and 36.

This is further confirmed in verse 36 where Paul exclaims, "What! Did the Word of God originate with you?" The "What!" indicates that Paul wasn't in harmony with the quotation in verses 34 and 35.

We know that various concerns and questions came to Paul from the Corinthians (1:11; 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1). Throughout 1 Corinthians, Paul quotes some of the people in the church and then responds to their arguments (6:12, 13; 7:1; 10:23).

If quotation marks are placed at the beginning and ending of verses 34 and 35, then the apparent contradiction between Paul's encouragement of female participation and his apparent silencing of them is resolved. Let's read the text with this scenario in mind.

Here's the stance of some of the Corinthians, as Paul quotes it:

"Let the women keep silence in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves just as the law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful and lewd for a woman to speak in church" (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

Here's Paul's rebuttal:

What! Was it from you that the Word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? (1 Corinthians 14:36).

In this text, Paul seems to be saying, "What! Who do you think you are, setting yourselves up as the sole proclaimers of God's Word when what you're saying contradicts the Word of God?"

Both of the above interpretations are feasible. And both are in harmony with the rest of New Testament teaching. Namely, that women may speak in the house of God.

What Kind of "Teaching" Is this?

Let's now turn our attention to the other "limiting passage." Before we look at the text, it's important to understand that 1st and 2nd Timothy are unique letters. Paul is writing to his apostolic apprentice—a man he's known for about fifteen years.

Such communication—between two closely-tied individuals—is known as "low context." This means that the author can assume an intimate knowledge of the reader's understanding of any particular statement he makes.

Let me unpack that.

Because Paul had a close relationship with Timothy, he could say things to him that he knew Timothy would understand. His statement had a particular context to it with which Timothy was familiar.

Suppose, for instance, I wrote a letter to one of my co-workers. And in the letter I made a statement about “apostolic priority.” Other people reading the letter would be lost as to what I was talking about. But my co-worker would be clear because we have had several in-person discussions about it.

In the same way, 1st and 2nd Timothy are very difficult letters to interpret because they are literally dripping with “low-context” statements—statements that have a context that only Paul and Timothy were privy to.

Therefore, the best we can do is try to piece together the exact situation that Timothy faced in Ephesus. Linguistic and historical scholars have uncovered several facts that throw light on the passage we are considering. And it meshes nicely with what we can uncover by mirror-reading the letter.⁵⁵

Putting all the facts together, the following scenario emerges: Paul’s warning to the church in Ephesus was finally coming to pass. Five years earlier he forewarned the Ephesian elders that wolves would penetrate the church and draw disciples after themselves with perverse teachings (Acts 20:28-30).

The wolves had appeared. So Paul exhorts a young Timothy to combat their perverse teachings (1 Tim. 1:3-7; 6:3-5). Since Timothy was well aware of the heresy, Paul doesn’t need to explain it in detail. However, it appears that it was a kind of proto-gnosticism.

Gnosticism was a heresy that appeared in the second century. The Gnostics taught that full salvation comes through special knowledge (*gnosis*) that only the initiated possess. What Timothy was battling in Ephesus appears to have been an extremely embryonic form of this heresy. (Paul seems to refer to the heresy when he says to Timothy, “Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge [Greek: *gnosis*]” —1 Timothy 6:20, NIV.)

According to the false teaching, both eating meat and engaging in marriage were forbidden (1 Tim. 4:1-3). Myths about the Law were also embraced (1 Tim. 1:4-7). We know from historical records that the Gnostics perverted the creation account. Eve was regarded as both a mediator and redeemer figure.⁵⁶ She pre-existed Adam. Man came into existence because of woman, and he was given enlightenment through woman. Since Eve was the first to take a bite from the Tree of Knowledge, she was regarded as the bearer of special spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*).

It is for this reason that those who accepted this heresy preferred the leadership of women over that of men. The heresy taught that women could still lead people to the illuminating *gnosis* that was represented by the Tree of Knowledge. It was further believed that redemption completely reversed the effects of the fall so that men were no longer subject to earthly authorities and women were no longer subject to their husbands.

While male teachers were spreading this doctrine (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17), it found fertile ground among the women in the church (2 Tim. 3:6-9). Worst still, their homes provided a network by which the false teaching spread rapidly (1 Tim. 5:13-15; 3:11).

Add to that, the main religion in Ephesus was a female-only cult. The priests who served the temple of Artemis (Diana) were all female. They ruled the religion and kept their men under their subjection. This mindset and influence appears to have crept into the Ephesian church. As a result, some of the women were acting bossy and seizing control over the men. They adopted the heresy and the attitude that goes along with it. And they began to peddle it in the church meetings. In short, the women were trying to take over the church with a false doctrine. This, I believe, is what provoked Paul to write the following passage:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and become a transgressor (1 Timothy 2:11-14, NRSV).

It's striking to discover that there are seven parallel words that appear in both this text and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Two of them are: *learn* and *silent*. In both passages, the word *learn* is translated from the same Greek word:

1 Timothy 2:11: "A woman should learn (*manthano*) in silence and full submission."

1 Corinthians 14:35: "And if they desire to learn (*manthano*) anything, let them ask their own husbands at home."

In the Timothy passage, Paul says that the sisters in Ephesus should *learn* in silence and full submission. Why? Because they were being deceived by a false teaching.

The Greek word for silence in this passage is *hesuchia*, and it means a temporary quietness, as in yielding the floor to let someone else speak. It also has the flavor of listening with studious attention. It's the same word that's used in Acts 22:2 — "When they heard him [Paul] speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet (*hesuchia*)."

In effect, 1 Timothy 2:11 is the same instruction that Paul appears to give the sisters in Corinth. That is, the women ought not to disrupt the meeting with questions and challenges. In the church meeting, they should *learn in quietness*.

So the first thing Paul says to Timothy is, "Let the sisters stop asking leading-questions to challenge the brothers. Instead, let them take on humility and learn with studious attention."

But then, Paul builds on this point and says that the sisters are not to *teach* the brothers (1 Tim. 2:12). The original Greek is illuminating. It's in the present active voice. For that reason, it can be translated as: "I am not now permitting a woman to teach."

New Testament scholar Ben Witherington writes, "In our study of 1 Tim 2.8-15, we find no universal prohibition of women speaking in church, but a dealing with serious

problems that caused the author to ban women from teaching and domineering men in Ephesus. We conjecture that this was a response to women being involved in false teaching and being lead astray into apostasy . . . There is nothing in this material that suggests a permanent ban on women engaging in the ministry of the word."⁵⁷

Consequently, Paul is not drafting a universal rule for women. Instead, he's dealing with a highly specific situation in Ephesus. He's speaking to those women in Ephesus who are peddling a false doctrine. As a result, Paul felt that they have forfeited their right to speak in the meetings.

Here is something else to consider. Timothy had known Paul for around fifteen years. Timothy had traveled with the aged apostle on two church planting trips.⁵⁸ He had also visited all the churches Paul founded. If Paul had universally banned women from teaching and speaking in the church meetings, why on earth would he have to explain this to Timothy in this letter? Timothy would have already known it.

Hmmm . . .

But there's more. Paul goes on to say that no woman in the church is to "*have authority over a man.*" The Greek verb translated "have authority" (or "usurp authority" as it stands in the KJV) is *authenteo*. Significantly, Paul didn't use the garden-variety word for authority (*exousia*) that he uses in his other epistles.

Authenteo is an obscure term. The best authorities say that it can either mean "to exercise authority over" or "to seize authority over." Given the context, the second meaning is to be favored: "To seize authority over."⁵⁹ The women in Ephesus were trying to dominate the men. And Paul stood against it.

After Paul instructs Timothy that the women can no longer teach in the church, he takes dead aim at the content of the heresy:

For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (1 Timothy 2:13-14, NIV)

Here Paul makes plain that Eve did not pre-exist Adam. He also states that it was Eve who was blameworthy. It was she who was deceived—just like the women in Ephesus. In all of Paul's other writings he always hangs the fall around Adam's neck. But given this particular situation, he sets his sights on Eve. And by doing so, he blows to bits the false teaching that some Ephesian sisters were promoting.

Repeat: Paul couldn't have been grounding a universal rule that forbade all women everywhere from teaching in the church meetings. This would contradict his own words. Consider the following:

- In 1 Corinthians, Paul states numerous times that women may prophesy in the church (1 Cor. 11:5; 14:26, 31). Prophecy contains instruction, for Paul writes, “for you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be *instructed* (taught) and encouraged” (1 Cor. 14:31).
- All Christians, including the women, are to *teach* and *admonish* one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16).
- The manifestation of the Holy Spirit, which includes prophecy, words of knowledge, and words of wisdom, is given to the whole church for the common good (1 Cor. 12:1-12). And these gifts are to function in the church meetings (1 Cor. 14). God bestows all spiritual gifts with undistinguishing regard on men and women alike. There’s no such thing as a gender-specific spiritual gift.
- The author of Hebrews tells the whole church, including the sisters, that given their relative spiritual age, they all should be *teachers* (Heb. 5:14).
- The author of Hebrews also encourages the whole assembly, brothers and sisters, to *exhort one another* when the church gathers (Heb. 10:24-25).

Again, 1 Timothy 2:12 shouldn’t be taken as a blanket statement that women may never minister in the church when men are present. To believe this would contradict the New Testament. Sisters would then have to cease from prophesying, exhorting, testifying, and operating in spiritual gifts—the things that Paul encourages.

The overall context of 1 Timothy indicates that a false teaching was afoot and some of the sisters in Ephesus were pushing it.

Once more, I think Eugene Peterson rightly captures the flavor of Paul’s message in this passage. He also throws light on verse 15—which is one of the most perplexing texts in the entire New Testament:

I don’t welcome women to take over and tell the men what to do. They should study to be quiet and obedient along with everyone else. Adam was made first, then Eve; woman was deceived first—our pioneer in sin!—with Adam right on her heels. On the other hand, her childbearing brought about salvation, reversing Eve. But this salvation only comes to those who continue in faith, love, holiness, gathering it all into maturity. You can depend on this (The Message).

The real issue in both 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 is the abuse of a God-given privilege. In both Corinth and Ephesus, Paul urges the sisters to give way to the brothers in the area of learning. Why? Because in Corinth, they were interrupting the

meetings due to their lack of spiritual maturity and education. In Ephesus, they were brazenly seizing authority over the men with a false doctrine.

But the genius of Paul's instruction is that the women *can* learn. They should be tutored by their husbands at home so as to eventually be put on an equal social footing with the men. In this regard, Paul was a progressive thinker and a champion of a woman's honor in his day. A day when the notion of male superiority was well-entrenched.

Paul's arguments, therefore, have nothing to do with ministry. They rather have to do with *order* in the meetings. Paul is arguing for proper order where there exists disorder. He's issuing a corrective to, not a denial of, the public speaking of women.

In summary, Paul of Tarsus was called by God to liberate men and women from the bondage of the Law. Ironically, he's treated by some today as a new law-giver. The scribes of our Lord's day applied the Old Testament without any regard to local context. Tragically, scribalism is still with us. Modern scribes have turned New Testament verses into oppressive laws without any regard to local and temporary conditions.

By contrast, Paul's message is one that promotes radical freedom rather than suppression. And that freedom liberally extends to men and women. Therefore, if our interpretation of Paul contradicts his message of freedom, then we are connecting the dots incorrectly.

The Bottom Line

So where does this leave us? I can't speak for anyone else, but it leaves me here: The "zipper-position" which takes away a woman's right to speak in a church meeting reflects a very brittle approach to the New Testament. It's an unwarranted assumption that's based on a common, but culturally generated misinterpretation of Paul.

The truth is that women are no less vital a part of the church than are men. Men are in dire need of women to show them Christ. (Keep in mind that the church—the *ekklesia*—is a female.) In addition, unlike the situation in the first century, women in our time are well educated. They are not our social inferiors.

Therefore, Paul's injunctions in the "limiting passages" only apply to women who are disrupting the church meetings by uninformed and disruptive questions. They also apply to women who are spreading false doctrines or seizing authority over men. In that light, consider this weighty text of Scripture:

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with

special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. (1 Corinthians 12:20-25, NIV)

To exclude women from functioning in the church gatherings is to resurrect the clergy system in new garb. The men become the new clergy caste. Only men are worth a hearing. The women become the new laity caste. What they have to say isn't as valuable. In fact, it's not valuable enough to even be heard. So they are closed off from functioning in God's house.

At bottom, if we give only men the right to speak in the gathering, we have unwittingly re-established the clergy-laity dichotomy. "One anothering" goes out the window. The old leaven of authoritarianism is dressed in new clothing. And all our rhetoric about restoring the priesthood of *all believers* devolves into just that—rhetoric. To call for fully participatory meetings, but only permit the males to speak is grossly inconsistent.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between the human race and God. In mediating us to God, He has established a new priesthood. And that priesthood includes both women and men. It would have been highly convenient for Paul to install some kind of restricted order of priests to water down a woman's high calling as Christ's kin. Sadly, the Lord's followers took that path rather quickly. But Paul himself refused to do so.

This is pretty diffuse, but I hope you get my drift: The New Covenant makes *all* of us priests, and Body life (which includes open-participatory church meetings) is the practical expression of that shared priesthood.

To put it in a sentence: Breaching the main thrust of the New Covenant and the entire message of Scripture on the basis of two obscure passages has the tragic side-effect of creating a male clergy caste.

Because the sisters are part of the royal priesthood (to borrow Peter's phrase), the New Testament invites them to testify, instruct, exhort, prophesy, sing, and pray in the meetings of the church (1 Cor. 11:5; 14:26, 31; Col. 3:16; Heb. 10:24-25). The sisters are free to open their mouths and feed their fellow brethren with Christ. In so doing, they glorify God and help build the church.

So dear sister, I implore you: We *need* your part in the church meetings. We *need* your unique contribution whenever we gather. We *need* the texture of your personality as you share Jesus Christ with us. We *need* your wisdom, your good sense, and your unique insight. We *need* the fragrance of Christ that you so beautifully emit.

To muzzle you is to mute half the priesthood. It's to cause a major part of Christ's Body to become paralyzed. The meetings of the church are the natural outflow of the spiritual experience of each Christian. To deprive you from participating in this outflow

is to bottle you up. It's to suppress your spirit.

To deny you the right to function is to suggest that you do not hear from God. To silence you in the gathering is contrary to the very fiber of the church.

We need your part in the church.

What About Wives Submitting to Their Husbands?

Once this chapter is published, some "which-side-are-you-on" consumers will hopelessly demarcate me into a warring camp. Unfortunately, hornets cannot be prevented from buzzing. But if the truth be told, I don't fit neatly into any category. I'm neither a touchy-feely "Christian-feminist" nor a slashy-burny "patriarchal traditionalist."

Alert: May the extremists on both sides prepare to descend into grunts.

As far as the marital relationship goes, the husband/wife relationship is an earthly picture of the heavenly reality of Christ and His Bride. So I take at face value Paul's injunction for wives to be subject to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; see also 1 Pet. 3:1-7). Yet I'm quick to add that this passage has been all-too often lifted out of its proper context and misused by controlling husbands who wish to brow-beat their wives. In addition, Paul is a strong proponent of Christians submitting to one another in the fear of Christ (Eph. 5:21). Therefore, in a sense, husbands must also submit to their wives.

Jesus Christ doesn't dominate nor subjugate His Bride. Male domination of women, therefore, is a symptom of man's fallen nature (Genesis 3:16). It's not a Divine mandate. Yet submission and subjugation are two very different things.

I drone on. Hopefully, somewhere in this lengthy epistle you've found an answer to your question. I trust that my other sisters in Christ who read it will find within these words liberty and freedom from religious suppression.

Perhaps more rounds are needed, but this is all I have time for at the moment. Maybe someday I'll try to redress the deficiencies. So please accept it in that vein: It's a stab at something, not a finished product.

Your brother in the costly but glorious quest,⁶⁰

Frank

54. See Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

55. Mirror-reading is the process of reconstructing the historical situation of a New Testament letter by reading the author's response in the letter. The author's response

“mirrors” the specific situation to which he is responding. In the words of F.F. Bruce, when reading the New Testament letters “we are in a position of people listening to one end of a telephone conversation; we have to infer what is being said at the other end in order to reconstruct the situation for ourselves” (*Answers to Questions*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972, p. 93).

56. Compare this idea with Paul’s statement in 1 Timothy 2:5.

57. For details, see Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), Chapter 3.

58. See Frank Viola, *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church* for the historical background of Paul’s entire ministry.

59. See Louw and Nida’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. They argue it means “to control in a domineering way . . . to dominate men.” Also see BAGD lexicon. *Young’s Literal Translation* translates this phrase as “nor to rule a husband.” Ben Witherington suggests it means to “rule over,” “master,” or “play the despot” over men.

60. For further information, see Ben Witherington’s *Women in the Earliest Churches* and *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, F.F. Bruce’s *A Mind for What Matters*, Chapter 17, and N.T. Wright’s *Paul for Everyone* series, (1 Corinthians and The Pastoral Letters). To my mind, Bruce, Witherington, and Wright are among the greatest New Testament scholars this century has produced.