

Woman Must Keep Silent?

The Troubling Texts

There is a great deal of evidence of [women's participation in the early church](#) and the role they played in early Christianity. Certainly, scripture and history itself show that women actively participated in the life of the early church in all areas, including leading, teaching, disciplining, praying, and prophesying.

Yet it's claimed that women must keep silent in church, with three New Testament texts put forward as proof. But is this what the Bible teaches?

The verses in question are found in *1 Corinthians 14:34-36*, *1 Timothy 2:11-12*, and *1 Corinthians 11:1-16*.

These verses are sticking points for many people, and form the basis for the framework adopted by the church I grew up, as well as many other churches today. The practical outworking of this framework stretches to accommodate what is known as 'soft complementarianism' (meaning women are generally involved in many aspects of ministry, although the role of the senior minister or pastor, and often eldership, is reserved for men), through to a more traditional understanding of complementarianism, in which women are restricted from most areas deemed authoritative, leadership, or teaching, as was the church I grew up in.

As I elaborate on further in my article '[Women + The Church](#)', my understanding and position have shifted dramatically. I have had the opportunity to read the texts for myself, from multiple translations, and with a wealth of scholarly critique and commentary available alongside. My previous approach to scripture – essentially proof-texting or cherry-picking verses, is now quite different. Context is king – and whole

letters are included in my consideration of interpretation and application, not just a verse or sentence on either side. Additionally, I have the clear framework of Genesis at my disposal – God’s original intention for humanity:

The book of Genesis is a means to a theological end; its purpose is to illustrate God’s relationship to creation and His intention of dwelling with us. “The whole purpose of Genesis 1 is to set the ideal human community – a place in which the image of God, or the imitation of God, is actually going to be realised. That, of course, gets distorted in Genesis 3 when humans disobey God. But the first chapter outlines the ideal.” (Professor C. John Collins) (emphasis mine).

With all this in mind, here are my thoughts on the ‘troubling texts’. My conclusions are summarised for brevity and I’ve arrived at these conclusions from the many different resources I’ve personally read, listened to, and watched. I certainly don’t expect my reader to consider them, alone, to be conclusive arguments for an egalitarian position. I would urge anyone interested or unsure about this topic to make a point of studying both the passages and reading or listening to the resources and commentaries (both for and against) for themselves.

1 Timothy 2:11-12 – Firstly, the context of the letter to Timothy is important. Paul is writing to his young associate Timothy, who was helping train new believers and carrying Paul’s letters back and forward between Paul and the newly planted churches. Paul writes to encourage and guide in the development of healthy leadership within the church – not ego-driven or self-centered but governed by mutual submission to Christ (Ephesians 5:22). The best kind of leadership is always the kind modeled by Jesus, who came as a servant to minister in truth and humility and who is the life-force of the church (John 15:5). Badly formed and misguided leadership can cause

great damage (and this is why 1 Timothy is still such a relevant passage for us today).

But before Paul begins to even discuss leadership, he encourages men to first focus on intimately praying with God and the women likewise (worship). A humble relationship with God (Micah 6:8) must precede any kind of leadership. Paul then addresses the men, commenting that he wants them to ensure they are free from anger and controversy *in every place of worship*, and the women, stating they are not to be obsessed with the latest fashions or beauty routines but focused on true beauty: God's message of salvation in Jesus.

However, the significant issue that Paul bookends his letter with is that of false teaching. He had already urged Timothy to stay in Ephesus (where he was when this letter was written) and *stop those whose teaching is contrary to the truth*. (1 Timothy 3:3). He now writes again to instruct the believers *to be filled with love, have a clear conscience, and genuine faith*. Some, however, *had missed the whole point and were speaking confidently as teachers, even though they didn't know what they were talking about* (1 Timothy 1:5-7).

Paul urges Timothy to command the false teachers to stop teaching false doctrines. These 'teachers' were *devoted to myths and endless genealogies, abusing the law, and forbidding marriage and certain foods*. For a church to be healthy and flourish, it needed to be grounded in truth and empowered by genuine faith, its leaders devoted to sound teaching and holy worship, things that the church at Ephesus was in danger of losing sight of.

The subject of false teaching and how to combat it in a church context is a recurring theme throughout the letter and it seems clear that this is the overarching context of Paul's comments.

Approaching the first 'troubling text', then, "*Women should*

learn quietly and submissively. I am not permitting women to teach men or have authority over them; Let them listen quietly" (1 Timothy 2: 11-12), there are several ways in which this passage can be interpreted. In light of the context, culture, and the framework of Genesis, the one that I believe makes the most sense is this:

This passage is not a prohibition on women speaking or teaching, universally or for all time, but a time-limited injunction to deal with a specific and local issue. Paul's comments are instructions for how the believers in Ephesus, both men and women, are to generally conduct themselves in church affairs, and for women, particularly, how they ought to behave in matters of learning and teaching.

False teaching was an issue, that's clear, and it seems that women, who had long been barred from the traditional all-male sphere of learning Torah and rabbinic study, were behind the eight-ball, so to speak. By-passing the appropriate framework for adequate instruction would result in *godless ideas and old wives tales*, and the church at Ephesus needed to pay greater attention and give specific focus to sound teaching, for both genders but particularly in relation to the women, who had no experience in this area.

Women were to learn in quietness and obedience, just like everyone else. This is the posture advocated for students of rabbis – catch the connection to the story of Mary I commented on earlier – and Paul, rather than silencing women, is actually advocating equality and liberation for women in Jesus, far surpassing what they may have experienced in their culture. But it must be done properly, and not at the expense of the equality of men or at the cost of false or shallow teaching. Women must first learn, then they can teach, with the same attributes of faith, truthfulness, and love in leadership to be shown by both men and women (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

The original word translated as *authority* in English is the Greek word *authenteō*, used only once in all of the New Testament, and is not the usual word used in Greek to mean authority, as we would understand it.

Over the course of its history this verb and its associated noun have had a wide semantic range, including some bizarre meanings, such as committing suicide, murdering one's parents, and being sexually aggressive. Some studies have been marred by a selective and improper use of the evidence. The issue is compounded by the fact that this word is found only once in the New Testament, and is not common in immediately proximate Greek literature. | [CBM Resources](#)

It's important to ask why Paul uses this rare word when he could have used other more common words to convey *authority*, if that's what he meant. A single word can't be severed from its context, so the entire letter and surrounding text particularly need to be taken into account when trying to understand and interpret Paul's use of this word and his overall meaning.

I believe what he was getting at was this: concerning their learning and teaching, women aren't to take over, act in domineering ways, or tell everyone else what to do (just because they are now 'free in Christ'). Neither are they to use their gender as a weapon, either sexually or authoritatively, claiming superiority over men or absorbing the cultural myth (that Eve was formed first and was therefore more important).

Paul concludes this section by reminding the believers of the dangers of false teaching and poor leadership, which results in deception and transgression. He recounts the Genesis story of humanity's fall, giving the example of Eve who was deceived by the serpent's false teaching (and sinned first), with Adam right behind her (who, although not being deceived, sinned

anyway). Yet, although Adam was made first (and could be considered by the men as 'more important'), it was through Eve that salvation came about.

This passage isn't about prohibiting all women, for all time, from leadership or teaching, but about matters of faithful church leadership and careful church teaching, specifically for the church at Ephesus, but still applicable to us today.

Links: <https://bit.ly/2wMnDXk>, <https://bit.ly/3dGijp9>
<https://bit.ly/39z4Ufm>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdTtr0NvrCo>
<https://shorturl.at/eikC2>

1 Corinthians 14:34-36 – These two verses are a somewhat jarring and odd inclusion in a long dialogue from Paul about spiritual gifts, which begins in chapter 12. In fact, they are at direct odds with the force of Paul's argument and, quite frankly, do not seem to fit the context through these previous chapters in which Paul is discussing the 'body of believers' – those who gather together in Jesus' name – and what that looks like in real terms. He uses phrases like "To **each person** has been given the ability to manifest the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7), "As it is, there are **many parts**, but **one body**" (1 Corinthians 12:20), "Now you are the **body of Christ**, and **each of you** is a **member** of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27) and "Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have **all been baptised** into one body by **one Spirit**, and we **all share** the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The context of the first epistle to the Corinthians is one of a church in disarray and Paul tackles all manner of issues that had arisen in this church – irresponsibility, promiscuity, immorality, quarrelling, and disunity. In short, the Corinthians had forgotten that they were God's church – the body of Jesus, set apart for a spirit-led life – and that the knowledge of their salvation in Jesus was meant to

transform them, in love, to a life in common 'with Jesus'. When we get to Chapter 14, Paul is still discussing the importance of acting for 'the greater good' of the church, in relation to spiritual gifts. There are three explanations around verses 34-36, which are as follows:

1. These verses are considered to be a reader-added marginal gloss. They were added at some point in the translation process, probably very early on, as a notation in the margin by a scribe. Subsequent translations either added them in position between verses 33 and 36 or place them at the end of the chapter, after verse 40. The fact that they 'float' in several translations, in terms of positioning, does lend weight to this idea, along with the presence of a distigme (two dots) in the margin, the general symbol marking the location of any kind of textual variant. You can read more about this here: <https://bit.ly/3arPNp2>. You will notice that if you skip over these verses (as if they never existed in the original letter), the flow of the chapter remains intact and Paul's conclusion to his dialogue makes perfect sense. Commentators have noted that 'this 'gloss view' explains all the external and internal data, preserves the chiasmic structure and integrity of Paul's argument, and avoids conflict with Paul's other teachings.
2. If these verses **are** original, then it is an entirely reasonable conclusion that they were written to address a specific issue in, admittedly, a very messed up church. Given we know that women *did* pray and prophesy from other passages in the Bible (Luke 2:36, Acts 21:7-9, 1 Corinthians 11:5-11), the seeming prohibition on the women in these verses must be specific and contextual, rather than general and unlimited in time, much like the injunction in 1 Timothy 2.
3. 1 Corinthians is largely Paul's response to a large number of topics that the church had written to him

about, seeking clarity and instructive advice (1 Corinthians 7:1 "*Now for the matters you wrote about:*"). From Chapter 7 onwards, he speaks to a number of topics the Corinth church had asked him about, at times quoting their statements or comments verbatim. We certainly don't take those comments themselves to *instructive* or *inspired*, merely Paul's reiteration of certain questions asked (followed by his replies or comments in relation to those questions). We see this pattern at the beginning of Chapter 7 ('concerning sexual relations/married life), Chapter 8 ('concerning food offered to idols'), Chapter 11 ('concerning worship and the Lord's supper'), and Chapter 12 ('concerning spiritual gifts'). 1 Corinthians 14 is a continuation of Paul's thoughts in relation to spiritual gifts, and the passage in question (1 Corinthians 14:34-36) can quite easily be read as '*the matters you wrote about*' (forbidding women to exercise their spiritual gift of prophecy or tongues). His comments, including a refutation to this question/statement are in verses 36-40, which makes it clear that they ("*my brothers and sisters*") "*should be eager to prophesy, and are not to forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.*"

Any one of these explanations would be acceptable to me. The one that doesn't make sense is that women are being prohibited from 'speaking in church', universally and in perpetuity. Here's why:

– Paul's comments are intended for both men and women. Some English translations may inadvertently obscure this by their use of the word '*brethren*' or '*brothers*' but the correct understanding of the original Greek (ἀδελφοί (adelphoi – meaning *brothers* or *siblings*) is that Paul is addressing men and women both – the believers as a whole, who are *the family of Christ*.

– The context is a call to orderly worship and, in particular, the appropriate use of spiritual gifts, such as prophesying, speaking in tongues, interpretation, and special revelation. We know that these gifts were given to both men and women (Acts 1:14, 2:4, 17-18, Acts 21:9-10), and in fact, only a few chapters earlier Paul had instructed the church on the culturally correct way this gift was to be exercised (either by a man or a woman) (1 Corinthians 11:4,5). It would seem rather odd that only a few chapters later, he would reverse this entirely and silence women, especially those who had been gifted with prophecy, tongues, or interpretation.

– These gifts were given for the edification of the church ie they were intended to be heard aloud by all, and not for personal or private edification.

– The context of the immediate text in question is '*if they have questions, they should ask their husbands at home*'. Some differentiation seems to be being made here, that the women in question are possibly '*wives with questions*', not just the women in the congregation in general. Again, the context is orderly and edifying worship for all, and wives who have questions are instructed to ask those at home, rather than during congregational worship where it would be distracting and disorderly. (The Greek word for *woman* and *wife* (as for *man* and *husband*) is the same, so several differing interpretations could be drawn from this alone.)

– Paul concludes his thoughts by encouraging everyone to be eager to prophesy and not to forbid speaking in tongues. His caveat (and the actual context of the chapter) is that everything should be done *in a fitting and orderly way*.

Links: <https://bit.ly/3arPNp2> and <https://bit.ly/2wD2G15>

1 Corinthians 11:1-16 This is by far the largest section of verses and can initially appear somewhat confusing and challenging to interpret. In fact, these verses are regarded

by commentators as ‘one of the most obscure passages in the Pauline letters’.

Again, we must remember the context of this epistle – that is, it was written to a church in disarray with a multitude of issues that Paul was speaking into. The particular issue he is addressing here, in these verses, distinctly relates to the cultural context of Corinth. Particularly, Paul is referencing the issues of homosexuality, gender fluidity, and immorality rampant in that culture, and which influences we know the Corinthian church were floundering under.

The particular passage that seems to indicate hierarchy is this: *“But I want you to realise that the head (κεφαλή (kephalē) of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”* (1 Corinthians 11:3-4). However, there are fourteen primary reasons to interpret head as referring to “source” rather than “authority” in this passage (see links below), and this alternate translation changes the meaning of the passage entirely. (Incidentally, this same word is used by Paul in Ephesians 5 – the ‘husbands and wives’ chapter, where, once again, *source* rather than *head* seems to be a much better translation of the original word and better fits the overall context of the passage. I write more specifically about this passage in my article [‘Husbands and Wives’](#)).

I believe 1 Corinthians 11 is not describing a system of hierarchy, as is sometimes supposed, but rather is speaking to the fact that men and women within the church should present themselves in ways that honour the uniqueness of their own created gender, particularly in the light of their gospel witness, as well as honouring the source of each gender.

These verses (particularly 4-5) are, again, a striking affirmation of women’s equal standing with men in church leadership in that Paul simply assumes that “every woman,” like “every man,” could prophesy and pray in public.

To briefly summarise, Paul is addressing the importance of believers exercising their freedom in Christ carefully, so as to not bring disrepute to their witness of the gospel. Christians need to be mindful and culturally aware not to display themselves in ways that malign the gospel or damage its credibility. Their 'oneness in Christ' does not mean that markers of gender are no longer relevant or valued. As Ronald W Pierce comments, "*General decency or even one's cultural preferences should never distract from the message being preached.*"

The relationship between men and women in the church is an important one and the overall principles of respect, mutual submission, and love shown by all are continually argued for in all Paul's writings. However, one of the most important principles that is being emphasised in this passage **is the importance of the way a Christian behaves (here, particularly in relation to their gender signaling), so as to be a credible witness for the gospel**, a theme also picked up by Peter in his first letter to the early church (1 Peter 1-5). You can read more about these ideas and the context of Peter's first letter [here](#)

The message [of 1 Corinthians 11] is, "Don't use your freedom in Christ as an excuse to dress immodestly. In demeanour and word keep it clean!" Furthermore, men and women should show respect to each other, honouring the opposite sex as their source. As Paul stresses in the climax of this passage, believers must affirm the equal rights and privileges of women and men in the Lord. Women, as well as men, may lead in public Christian worship. Since in the Lord woman and man are not separate, women who are gifted and called by God ought to be welcomed into ministry just as men are." – Philip B Payne, Ph.D New Testament Studies

Links: <https://bit.ly/2QVZa8I> and <https://bit.ly/3auVuCP>

Conclusion

I believe these ‘troubling texts’ have often been mistranslated, have long been misinterpreted, and largely misunderstood, leading to a faulty understanding of God’s will for Christian women and their place in the church. They have been used to build a flimsy framework that does not stand up to close analysis and which runs contrary to Scripture itself, the historical and biblical evidence of women’s full involvement in church ministry, and the greater scope of the gospel story.

I believe that when they are read and understood correctly, as Paul intended them to be, they affirm women’s active and fully participatory role in the church alongside their male counterparts and provide a robust and inspiring framework for the church today, as they did in Paul’s day, recognising that wherever the church gathers together, it’s most basic principle is to incarnate Christ.

I haven’t adopted this position *simply because I wanted to*, because I’m a *raging feminist*, or because I have no regard for what scripture *really teaches*. I’ve arrived at my position – egalitarian – because I genuinely and wholeheartedly believe this is what scripture consistently and cohesively teaches about women and the church.

This might be your position also, or it might not. Either way, I’d love to hear from you. Don’t hesitate to get in touch via the contact form or drop a comment below.

This article was first published 17 October 2023. You can read the entire articles relating to “Women + The Church [here](#)’

Loving The Church

“You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honour.” | James 3:18, MSG

Loving the church can be hard.. Frankly, at times, she can seem like a big, fat disappointment.

Infighting. Divisions. The failure of leaders and the apathy of congregants. The assimilation to culture. A preoccupation with prestige and power. Intolerance. Liberality.

Sometimes the church is hard to love.

“It is clear that the church regularly breaks our hearts, disappoints, and even damages us. Both history and our current headlines reveal a church that can be a deeply flawed, sinful, and unhealthy institution, marred by acts of injustice, corruption, abuse, misogyny, and oppression. The contemporary [American] church is wrecked with bickering and division, celebrity worship and unaccountable leaders, false and shallow teaching, and a Christian industrial complex formed around greed and vanity.” | Tish Harrison, A Church Called Tov

Negative experiences often lead people to ‘give up on church’. They decide they will ‘follow Jesus’ but reject the church. Their solution: to walk an individual and untroubled path, to become a solitary lighthouse bravely resisting the wild seas alone.

And I get it. I do.

It's an unsettling reality that many people who've left the church and moved away from Christian community have suffered real disappointment and hurt at the hands of the church. For many, their view of the church has been (justifiably) tarnished by their negative experiences within it.

People can be very wounded by the church, unfortunately, because it's made up of imperfect people who often mess up.

But here's the rub.

We are the church.

All of us, together, collectively, communally.

There's not *ourselves* and then, over there, *the church*. There's not *me*, in my own personal little faith bubble, and then, over there, the raging, incompetent screw-up of a *church* that I, personally, have no connection to (and neither do I want to).

There aren't *some Christians* who just love doing church and other Christians who, well, it's just *really not their thing*.

'An individual Christian does not a church make.'

We are the church

Christianity is, by definition, collective, and communal. There is no church, without all of us.

Too often we separate out Jesus and 'the church' in our minds as if they're two different identities. We say we love Jesus but we're less enthusiastic about his people.

But the church is Jesus' body. Loving Jesus means loving the church too. It's part of him and he's part of it. He died for the church, for his people, and it's in his death and resurrection that we are brought together in community.

Jesus said that he would build his church, purchased with his own blood, and of which he is the chief cornerstone (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:28, Ephesians 2:20). His language is organic, inclusive, and corporate. He is in the house-building business and we are each his individual stones, selected and fitted together, according to his good pleasure (1 Peter 2:5).

We therefore can't say we love Jesus but we hate his people/body... it's simply incongruous.

Loving the church isn't an optional extra to our life of faith. It's an intrinsic part of it, with all its joy, pain, and disappointment. She is us and we are her.

3 Reasons To Love The Church:

1. Because Jesus Asked Us To (And Because He Loves Her)

Jesus brings real people, diverse and divided in life, into common union together, into relationship, into the messy, untidy reality that is the church, not because they are worthy, but because Jesus died for them and that is enough.

It's around the Passover table, over the first Christian communion, and right before Jesus was betrayed, sentenced to death, and then crucified, that he gives his disciples a new commandment to live by once he is gone.

"...love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." | John 13:34-35, ESV

By loving one another as he has loved us, all the world will know that we are his disciples. The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the king.

Love isn't always easy, but it is the more excellent way. And it's the way that Jesus has asked us to take.

First, we were loved, now we love.

Sure, we will have to work at it at times (and 1 Corinthians 13 is full of pastoral advice on how to go about this) but, quite simply, loving each other – loving the church – is what Jesus has asked us to do.

He loves her and he wants us to love her too.

2. Because The Church Is The Hope Of The World (Despite Her Flaws)

Around that communion table, Jesus could see the seeds of the church – his church – that was soon to be born. His small band of followers represented the expansive and diverse family that God would build through him, for the glory of His name and in pursuit of His purpose.

“You are my ambassadors”, Jesus had told them, *“and behold, I am with you, even until the end of time.”* (Matthew 28:20).

From the dark soil of an empty tomb, the seeds of Jesus' church sprang forth, bringing new life and hope.

The church – full of saved sinners – is the place that tells of God's goodness and faithfulness, and His enduring love for humanity.

The church is the place that speaks hope, shining the light of the gospel into a dark world.

The church is the place where broken and damaged people find healing and redemption, basking in the warmth of God's radical grace.

The church is the heart of God's kingdom mission, spilling over into the world and showing that a different way is

possible: life that gives life, in abundance.

We love the church because, despite her flaws, she is the hope of the world, the place where people finally come home.

3. Because We Were Made For God's Community

We were made for community and we grow and are nurtured in community. (Yes, we are wounded in community but it's also in community that we heal. *"Healing might not come from the community where the wounding took place, but community is needed for healing nonetheless."* | Rich Villodas)

It was in the very beginning that God said, 'let us make humanity in our image and after our likeness.' To be with God and to be like God, together: this is what we were made for and the purpose of human existence. This is why we all feel that deep longing to belong, why we continually search for meaning in the mundane. God has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We aren't really 'Christian' in its fullest sense unless we're doing life together within the God-community we were created for. Otherwise, we're just like a random toe or finger, disconnected from a body and essentially useless (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) (in this analogy, that is; please don't read that to be saying 'you are useless'!).

The Apostle Paul has this to say about the body of Christ: *"A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. That's how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another."* (Romans 12:4-5, CEV)

Each one of us, brought together, makes up the body and, as Ephesians 5:29 comments, "None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church."

This is what we were made for! Relationship with God and relationship with His people. Church people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that are “connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

We love the church because she is the community of God.

Finally...

Sometimes the church can feel hard to love. Sometimes we rub up against people who don't exactly show Jesus as we think he ought to be seen. *Sometimes we are those people.*

But for those who have been disillusioned by the church, please know that she is full of people who really are the real deal; people who love Jesus, love his people, and are working every day in his kingdom mission with sincerity and authenticity. I know, because I've met them!

So, don't give up hope in the church, in finding your place in it, and in loving her, despite her flaws.

She is us.

We are the church.

This article was first published 16 November 2022

Beyond The Pale

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

“By the 14th century, the Norman invasion of Ireland was struggling. Too many Normans had “gone native”, assimilated into Irish life. The remaining settlers had retreated to just four eastern counties: Louth, Meath, Dublin, and Kildare. These four “obedient shires” were the only part of Ireland still under the control of the English crown. The king’s perimeter was marked with wooden fence posts pounded into the Irish turf. These were called “pales,” from the Latin palus, meaning “stake.”

Over the following centuries, the English settlement fortified its boundaries by turning the fenceline into an impressive barrier: a ten-foot-deep ditch surrounded by eight-foot banks on each side and ringed by a thorny hedge. These ramparts were never meant to be an impregnable wall, but they did provide a daunting obstacle to raiders stealing across the borders for English cattle. Within the Pale ditch, settlers lived under the protection of the crown. But once you passed “the Pale,” you were outside the authority and safety of English law, and subject to all the savageries of [rural Ireland](#). “Beyond the pale” then became a colloquial phrase meaning “outside the limits of acceptable behaviour or judgment.” | [C N Traveler](#)

I [recently wrote about my separation from](#) the religious community I grew up in and the overwhelming response to my article was both encouraging and thought-provoking.

Many people wrote to me, both publicly and privately, to let me know that the article had deeply resonated with them. They expressed that they, too, have had many questions over the years, wrestling with inconsistencies while attempting to find their place in a system they secretly suspected they didn’t fit.

Not many people feel free to speak publicly of their reservations or doubts and I understand this fear and

hesitancy. They want to avoid similar censure and they know the penalty for dissenting is potentially severe; loss of relationship, rejection, and ostracisation.

Many also wrote expressing their distress at my experience (regardless of whether it had been theirs or not) and offering their blessing on my continued journey. I deeply appreciated their warmth, kindness, and understanding.

Others expressed dismay that I was no longer part of the community; how would I receive *nurture and support*? With whom would I now *fellowship*? Couldn't I have just stayed to *change the culture*? Beneath their words there seemed the suggestion of a more serious question; wasn't this just the beginning of a descent into loss of faith and the inevitable and eventual drift from God?

Others were less complimentary with their feedback. My article was deemed to be slanderous and inaccurate, and I, the author, simply a narcissistic, bitter ex-member, obsessed, while I was "in", about my 'rights' being impinged upon or 'the (annoying) call of true discipleship interfering with my personal life'.

Now that I was "out", I was simply an aggressive and confrontational vandal, looking to break something with whatever stones I could throw.

My 'questions' were excuses, and, they implied, I ought to be cancelled.

While I thought a lot about the people for whom this article resonated, and I deeply appreciated that they had shared their thoughts with me, I thought more about the other two kinds of responses.

Firstly, I wondered about those who had simply dismissed me and what I had to say. I pondered the mentality that refused to acknowledge any part of my experience as valid, believable, or worthy of discussion.

I wondered at the psychology that would paint me as the intolerant troublemaker rather than the wounded truth-teller.

And I wondered at such blind certainty of their supposed privileged position and their categorical dismissal that God could legitimately be found anywhere outside their own walls. Their confirmation bias was on full display by the way in which they chose to interpret and respond to my narrative.

I thought, secondly, about those who now considered me beyond the pale, out beyond the protection and comfort of the only community that was able to provide such things. Blessings and opportunities galore had been mine for the taking, had I only just remained within the palisade walls. No such blessings or opportunities (or if there were some to be found, they would be few and far between), awaited me outside those walls.

No one survives out there, they seemed to be whispering to one another. She'll die, for sure.

Well, I didn't die.

It hasn't been an easy journey, I'll not pretend otherwise, but outside those walls is not the wilderness you might imagine it to be. I'd been told that there was nothing worthwhile out there, but I discovered those are simply the words of fearful men, hemmed in by their own definitions and not living free in the Spirit of Christ.

God is out there. He is everywhere, and the more you listen for Him, the clearer He speaks. He is with us always, even when it feels like we're wandering through a wilderness, even if we're walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Beyond the pale, I found men and women, fellow Christians, who deeply love Jesus and are committed to following him. I found people who are not afraid of difference but are compelled by the love of Christ to listen, to reason together, and sharpen iron one with another. To my astonishment, I discovered that

they knew the names of the faithful; Abraham, David, Deborah, Isaiah, Mary of Magdala, Paul, and many more.

I discovered my place in the history of the church and learned the names of people from long, long ago – *Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Iraneus, Polycarp, Junia, Prisca, and Quintilla*, brothers and sisters in the great family of God.

I became reacquainted with Scripture in new ways, seeing the Bible as a book to marvel at and pore over, the spirit-breathed and living words of Heaven's Creator, active and able to deeply transform our hearts and lives, shaping us for His purpose. I learned to loosen my grip on needing *to know and understand everything* right now, and learned instead to say, "God, show me more of *You*."

My way of thinking about the Christian life shifted dramatically. It became very simple (note that I use the word *simple*, not *easy*): *Confess Jesus is Lord and Saviour (believe the story of Jesus as told us in the gospel) and then take up your cross and follow him, bearing the fruit of a life of repentance.* All else is just noise.

I discovered the messy but vital reality of the local church; filled with sinning and flawed humans who are being renewed daily by the grace of God, asking their questions and voicing their doubts along the way.

I learned what it felt like to be pastored to and personally prayed over, concepts that, bizarrely for a Christian, felt foreign and strange to me.

I discovered some churches that weren't for me and found others that were. The Christian world is nothing if not perfectly imperfect and there's a lot of diversity out there. It's not for me to judge the legitimacy of their place as one of the Lord's lampstands (Revelation 2:5), but it is my responsibility to use discernment when choosing a church home (1 John 4:1-5).

I found myself asking: what am I responsible to *bring* and what am I responsible to *nurture*? *In this sea of Christianity, how do I best serve and represent Jesus in the place where I now find myself?*

Let me now answer some of the questions that have been put to me. It may be that these are questions on your mind too.

Who Do I Fellowship With?

Well, other Christians of course. A Christian is someone who has “*confessed that Jesus is Lord and believes in their heart that God raised him from the dead.*” (Romans 10:9). They’ve demonstrated their belief by repenting of their former way of life and by being baptised into the saving name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). They’ve been transferred out of the dominion of darkness and into the kingdom of the Son of God’s love, [a kingdom of life and light](#).

The first letter of John puts it this way:

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in Him. If we say, “We have fellowship with Him,” and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. If we [walk in the light](#) as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus

His Son cleanses us from all sin.” | 1 John 1:1-7, CSB

If we abide in Jesus, then we are in common union – community – with all those who are also abiding in him, both in our present time and throughout the ages, a great cloud of faithful witnesses of the risen King, [the people of the kingdom](#) (1 John 2:28, John 15:1-27, Hebrews 12:1-2). We are connected to one another by the precious blood of the lamb and nothing can separate us from the love of God, apart from us choosing to leave the light and walk again in darkness (Romans 8:31-39).

The [ordinance of communion](#) – taking bread and wine together – is an important part of our Christian life, as members of Jesus’ body and God’s family. It is a key element of Jesus’ covenant with each one of us individually and collectively as his church, the price of which was his own blood.

Written about 300 years after the birth of Christ, [the Apostles’ Creed](#) summarises the foundational Christian beliefs taught by the early church and is a bold declaration of Christian faith in Jesus Christ. It particularly affirms the teachings regarding Jesus, that of his virgin birth, his crucifixion, his death, and his subsequent resurrection; core elements of the gospel of good news.

It is a primary statement of faith shared by Christians around the world, uniting them in common with the work achieved in and through Jesus. No Christian worth their salt denies this creed.

The church, the universal church, exists outside denominational walls and extends beyond historical boundaries. There is only *one body* of Jesus Christ, and holding to this spiritual reality means holding to the reality that *fellowship with the body happens when we abide in the body*.

Why Couldn't I Stay And Change The Culture?

Cultures don't happen overnight. Made up of an interconnecting set of goals, roles, processes, values, practices, attitudes, and assumptions, the culture of an organisation is practically its DNA.

Changing a culture takes committed leadership, and often requires years of concerted and consistent effort, including intensive work to communicate and reinforce new ways of thinking, desired values, and changed behaviours. In fact, in the case of organisational transformation (such as church), it can take a minimum of seven to 10 years to change the culture.

But we humans are very resistant to change in general and attempting to change the culture of an organisation is particularly difficult as it's deeply embedded in the system. When people believe that their culture is superior to other cultures, they tend to resist any influence other cultures may bring (you can read more about this [here](#)).

I came to realise that I didn't have 15 years, or 10 years or even seven years up my sleeve. My children had reached their formative and impressionable years and there were many aspects of this culture that I didn't want them to absorb or be absorbed into. I also realised that while I had been hopeful of the possibility of a shift in culture, I had not fully understood how deeply embedded it was in the heart of a system so strongly resistant to change.

This was a culture that has existed for years and years, unchanged and unchallenged. It did not want to change and it saw no need for change. I began to understand it would take many years of sustained and concentrated effort by many more persons than myself, to see any kind of tangible difference.

I felt I had more hope of reaching the moon than I did of

changing this culture by staying.

Have I Lost My Faith?

I said that this journey hasn't been easy. And it hasn't.

When a person experiences loss of community, they also have to contend with what can feel like loss of identity. While we would all agree in theory that our identity rests, or should rest, in Jesus, in practice we are also deeply shaped by our place within community, in knowing and being known by the people who surround us.

Beyond the pale is initially daunting and lonely. Everyone you ever knew is on the other side of that fence.

I was [reminded during this time](#) of the story of Hagar, who had been driven into the wilderness by the harsh treatment of her mistress Sarah (Genesis 16:6-13).

Miserable, lonely, and afraid, the Lord found Hagar beside a spring in the wilderness and spoke words of comfort and hope to her. She names God in that place as 'El Roi', meaning, "You are the God who sees me."

I have repeated this to myself many times in the past few years when doubt and discomfort has crept in. Not doubt *in* God, but doubt that He still had His hand over my life, that He was the God who looks after me, that I was still seen and known.

Having faith is firstly a posture of the heart, an orientation of trust in or towards something or someone. My faith was placed in Jesus at 16 years old and my trust in God remains firm. I remain confident that the Spirit will lead me in all truth and that the important things God wishes me to know, He will make known.

I trust Him, even when I am confused about His plans for me,

even when I don't understand the lessons He's teaching me, even when I can't see what the future holds.

I trust Him even when I'm wracked with anxiety and overwhelmed by uncertainty. I trust Him even when life is challenging and change is necessary. I trust Him because I believe that the same Spirit that rose Jesus from the dead *lives in me*. If God is for me, who can be against me?

This journey has challenged me in ways I never imagined and I've wondered many, many times, *how did I get here?* But I know, for sure, He is still the God who sees me and takes care of me.

I have not lost my faith.

Where Would I Find Nurture And Support?

The wilderness is an unforgiving landscape, where all reliance on self is brutally highlighted for what it is, inadequate, insufficient, a lie. To my dismay, I initially found myself echoing the murmurs of the children of Israel in the wilderness. I wondered, had God brought me out here to die?

This was the first lesson I had to learn: Jesus never promised this Christian life would be easy.

The second was this: God always provides.

It was not the wilderness I imagined it to be. God sent people into my life during this time: good, loving, solid, Jesus-loving people, who prayed with me, ate with me, opened their homes and shared their lives with me.

They personally testified to God's goodness in both good times and bad. They encouraged me to persevere in faith, nurture forgiveness, run after grace, and ground myself in God's love. "*Love bears all things*", they reminded me, "*believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*"

Like the children of Israel who had wandered in the wilderness, God had ensured I was still provided for.

***“There’s honey in the rock
Water in the stone
Manna on the ground
No matter where I go
I don’t need to worry now that I know
Everything I need You’ve got”***

Honey In The Rock | Brooke Ligertwood

Where To From Here?

I am a Christian for the rest of my days. *I believe in Jesus Christ, descended from David, risen from the dead. This is my gospel.*

But as to the next step? *I don’t know* what God has in store for my future.

I hope to be a part of a flourishing and vibrant church. I hope to serve and witness alongside people whom I get to love and know deeply, and by whom I feel seen and loved in return.

I hope to be a worthy example of faith for my children and a trusted companion and woman of valour to my husband.

I hope that God uses me in many small, indiscernible ways to help grow His kingdom here on earth. If He has larger, more visible plans in mind, I hope I have the courage to step into His calling for me.

I hope to avoid pain and difficulty and loss, but I know these will inevitably come my way, so I hope to be brave and true when they do.

And in all these things, I recognise that I will be flawed, always flawed, but I continue to give thanks for the grace of God and the blood of Jesus, which cleanses us from all sin.

Most of all, I hope to hear the words of the king on that final day: *“Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”*

The Story’s Not Over Yet...

“Walking, stumbling, on these shadow feet; toward home, a land that I’ve never seen. I am changing: less and less asleep, made of different stuff than when I began and I have sensed it all along, fast approaching is the day.” | Brooke Fraser

These lyrics are from a song by Brooke Fraser, which I think really speak to our hearts as Christians. When I listen to this song, I feel as if I catch a glimpse of the real world beyond the veil, the world that exists beyond these shadowlands. For a brief moment, it seems as if I catch sight of the home that I know to be an unseen reality, that one day I’ll see, in all its fullness, for myself.

God’s Story

I want to share a few thoughts about God’s Story, the story we see laid out in poetry, prose, prophecy and parable in the book we call the Bible.

We might be inclined to describe the Bible as merely ‘the story of the drama of human history’ – but, in truth, it’s not history yet. History, defined as *“something that happened or ended a long time ago and is not important now, or a person who is not important now, although they were in the past”*, does not accurately describe the reality that is the Word of

God.

The Story of God, of which the Bible contains many important aspects, won't become history until the arrival of "the new heavens and the new earth, the passing away of the first earth and the moment a loud voice proclaims *"behold, the dwelling place of our God is with humanity and God is all in all"* (Revelation 21: 1-3, ESV)

It would also be too simplistic to state that the Bible is merely a catalogue of continuous human drama. The Bible isn't just a collection of stories about characters and events that happened in the past, nor merely information about cultures or civilisations that have now ceased to exist. Neither is it simply a compilation of recommended principles by which to live an honest and upright life (although it does contain these things and other helpful advice besides!).

The Bible's overarching story can't be relegated to simply ancient history or human drama alone.

"For the Word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." | Hebrews 4:12, NIV

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." | 2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV

The Bible is the living, Spirit-breathed [Word of God](#), the written revelation of what God has been doing in the past and what He is still doing right now. It's a record of how and when God communicated His intent and purpose with humanity in the past and how He has communicated to us today.

Far from being just black text on white pages alone; this book

unveils the purpose, intentionality and creative action of the Eternal One; breathed out, captured by way of quill and scroll by the faithful scribes who heard 'the voice of God', and recorded the Story of God for all to read. The words on these pages capture the historical reality of God's powerful, creative activities throughout the history of humanity.

When Jesus was sent into the world, the story of what the Creator was doing was demonstrated literally, in Jesus himself, who was the Word-Made-Flesh. Jesus showed to humanity all the fullness and glory of God and His purpose, [embodied in flesh and bone](#) and tabernacling amongst us.

Powerful. Authoritative. Prince of Peace. Emmanuel (*God With Us*).

"On many past occasions and in many different ways, God spoke to our fathers through the prophets. But in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe... His Word, made flesh and who dwelt among us" | Hebrews 1:1, John 1:1, ESV

By communicating through vision, in person, [through prophets](#) and finally, through His Son, we are challenged to move from simply thinking of the Bible as a book of facts or information and to instead see it as a visual recounting of what God has and is still communicating with us – the Story of God's rule and reign and the redemption of humanity demonstrated in His Son's life and death and resurrection.

This Story of God, of which the Bible contains many important details, is still being written, all around us every day. The Bible is simply the paper record of a living transformative event, of the real and ongoing story. It provides the relevant information for us to know and understand this centuries-long event, as participants in that story and as recipients of the invitation to the Kingdom of Heaven. It contains the details

we're supposed to be paying attention to so we can not just understand the story being told but choose which kind of character we'll be in that story.

The promise – that God will dwell with humanity again – is the great thread of the Bible and it's the **real story** that's being written every day, all around us in a thousand different ways.

God's kingdom in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but God's sovereign rule coming 'on earth as it is in heaven.' . . . Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of ordinary life – God's dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last, He will remake both and join them together forever. The end times are not the end of the world – they are the beginning of the real world – in biblical understanding.” | N T Wright

The Story Begins...

The Bible opens with an account about the beginning of all things:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the [Spirit of God](#) was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created humans in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living

thing that moves on the earth.” | Genesis 1:1-2, 26, NIV

We can tend to read this account as if it's a completed narrative. As if the statement '*Let us create humanity in our image*' was a single event that occurred in the past, one which we perhaps give little real thought to today. Yet, if we view it from a different perspective, stretching our minds a little higher, a little farther, we realise that God is still *creating humans in His image*. This is not history, this is the present reality we are living in and surrounded by.

God is doing magic, right under our noses, every single day!

[God's Spirit](#) is still hovering and continues to move in new and astonishing ways. His Word – His living Word, which brought all of the natural world into being, is continuing its creative work through redemption and regeneration in Jesus Christ, the Word-Made-Flesh. Light is still entering darkness, new life is being ignited and men and women are being reborn in God's image, to become His representatives and perfect image-bearers on this earth.

The Bible is, therefore, the only book in the world which contains snippets and segments of a real-life story that hasn't finished being told. We know what the ending will be, but we're still in it, right now, living and breathing it, every moment of our lives.

The [stories we read about in the Bible](#) then take on new significance. They're supposed to engage all our senses and connect us in very real ways to the people and situations we read about, to help us understand our place in the story that is not just theirs, but ours too. And we know that every story, every moment, has been recorded with intentionality, to enable the reader to participate, but we also know there's plenty more, left untold, that time and space couldn't allow for:

“What else can I say? There isn’t enough time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets.” Hebrews 11:32, CEV

“And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which, if they were written one by one, I suppose not even the world itself could contain the books that would be written.” | John 21:25, HCSB

The Bible Is Our Own Personal Origin Story

Everyone’s probably familiar with the idea of origin stories. An origin story is an account or back-story revealing how a character or group of people become a protagonist or antagonist in the main story. It adds complexity to a narrative, often giving reasons for the characters’ intentions and choices.

The Bible is therefore our own [personal origin story](#). It tells us where we’ve come from and where we’re going and invites us personally into the main story. The primary character in this story is the King of the Earth, God, revealed in Jesus and the antagonist, the Prince of this World – Sin. There are two kingdoms in this story – one of darkness and one of the Son of God, a Kingdom of Light. We don’t get a choice about which kingdom we start out in but we certainly get to decide which kingdom we finish up in

When we read the Bible, we’re not just reading **about** a story, we’re actually **in** this story and it’s unfolding all around us. This is a story of creative magic, impossible realities, futility, despair and death, rescue and redemption, light, salt, allegiance and exaltation. Most of all, it’s a story of hope.

It’s the story of the creation of the **real world**, not this

shadow world that we live in now. It's the story of how God's Will will be done on earth, as in heaven and how God will once again walk with us in paradise. It is the story of the Creator's divine life flowing into ours if we allow it.

This narrative gives shape and purpose to our human experience and [hope for our future](#).

"If we think that this life is all there is to life, then there is no interpretation of our problems, our pain, not even of our privileges. But everything changes when we open up to the possibility that God's story is really our story too." | Max Lucado

*"Your life flows into mine, pure as a garden spring. A well of living water springs up from within you, like a mountain brook flowing into my heart! Then may your awakening breath blow upon my life until I am fully yours. Breathe upon me with your Spirit wind. Stir up the sweet spice of your life within me. Spare nothing as you make me your fruitful garden. Hold nothing back until I release your fragrance. Come walk with me as you once walked in your paradise garden. Come taste the fruits of your life in me. I have come to you, for you are my paradise garden! Come walk with me until I am fully yours. Come taste the fruits of your life in me." |
☐☐Song of Songs☐ ☐4:15-16,☐ ☐TPT☐☐*

Not If, But How?

The question for us all, then, is not **if** we want to be a part of this story, but **how**.

As descendants of Adam and Eve, we're all born into the kingdom of darkness. Their story is our story and we're participants in that reality, whether we're willing or not. But the Master Storyteller hasn't left the world in darkness. He has crafted a narrative of redemption and light and offers

a way, through the sacrifice of His Son, for us to be transferred from that dominion of darkness and into [His glorious Kingdom](#).

Jesus came, preaching that kingdom, urging people to choose a better way and to give their allegiance to him. *“Repent, he said, for the kingdom of God is here. I have arrived, proclaiming God’s rule and bringing His salvation to humanity.”* (Isaiah 52:10, Luke 17: 20-21, Luke 2:30)

“What I love about the Bible is that the story isn’t over. There are still prophets in our midst. There are still dragons and beasts. It might not look like it, but the Resistance is winning. The light is breaking through. So listen to the weirdos. Listen to the voices crying from the wilderness. They are pointing us to a new King and a better kingdom.” | Rachel Held Evans

If you still belong to the kingdom of darkness, if you haven’t yet given your life and allegiance to the King, I repeat the appeal of Paul to you: *“Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God Himself were making His appeal through us. We plead on Christ’s behalf: let God change you from enemies into His friends!”* (2 Corinthians 5:20)

If you have given your life to Jesus through baptism, then Good News: So Glorious! You’ve been transferred into the Kingdom of Light. **Don’t be a passive participant in the Story.**

You are a child of God, a member of the household of faith, a character in God’s story whose name is written in the book of life! (Psalm 56:8, Daniel 12:1, Malachi 3:16, Philippians 4:3)

Boldly take hold of your place in the story. Be [strong and courageous](#) and don’t fear the enemy who surrounds you. [Jesus, your King](#) reassures you: *“In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have overcome the world!”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17, BSB)

“All of their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: Now, at last, they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. | C S Lewis, The Last Battle