

# 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](#)’**