

Women + The Church

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I want to make it clear that this article is not attempting to discuss in any comprehensive way the differences that exist between [the genders of male and female](#), unique and important as they are, nor how God sees those differences working together in complementary ways within marriage.

In a world that, at times, seems to have been driven mad by competition and comparison, the unique differences between the genders are no longer celebrated or championed, as God intended them to be. Yet many of these differences are, in fact, deeply rooted at a biological level and are at the very essence of our individuality as humans. Men and women are the same in many ways but there are also fundamental differences between us, differences which are coded into our DNA and which have important implications for each gender. You can read more about some of these differences in the article '[The War On Gender](#)'.

The ongoing conversation about the 'role' of women; in the church, in marriage, and indeed, in society in general, is not something that is new, only specific to our own time, or a subject that the early Christians didn't also have to navigate and reevaluate, specifically in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's a subject that impacts me personally, both as a woman and as the mother of two daughters, and my understanding and position in relation to this topic was one of the first of many things to shift during the past few years of Christian journeying.

Christians generally fall into two camps on this subject, describing themselves as either complementarian, or

egalitarian, both descriptors being somewhat inadequate explanations of the entirety of each side's viewpoints. But, generally speaking:

– Christian Complementarianism is the view that men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities in marriage, family life, and religious life, particularly in areas deemed as 'leadership'.

– Christian Egalitarians "believe that the Bible mandates gender equality, which implies equal authority and responsibility for the family and the ability for women to exercise spiritual authority as clergy."

I was raised in a complementarian church, where the areas of leadership, speaking, leading, praying, and teaching were generally reserved for men. There were some (baffling) exceptions; women could teach Sunday school students (but only boys up to a certain age), women could lead worship (by way of playing the church organ), and women could vote in the general church elections for those who would serve for the year (but could not serve themselves in those roles). They could also publish written material, but not address the church publicly from the platform (although it was known that several wives would 'write their husband's preaching or sermon material', which would then be presented by and as if it were the husband's work).

It was also a head covering church, a subject I talk more about in my article 'Leaving'. This further added to the confusion for me around whether women could or should speak publicly in church. 1 Corinthians 11:4 seemed to permit women to (at the very least) pray and prophesy, as long as their heads were covered (yet this too was prohibited in the church in which I grew up).

It wasn't until I was in my mid-30s, with three children of my own, that I began to seriously reconsider this subject, among

many others, reexamining almost everything I had been told and thought I knew, in the light of scripture.

This particular conversation loomed large in my mind. It seemed to me, to be an important subject to be personally convicted and informed on, and one which I could see would have implications for my own relationship, my church life, and, into the future, the lives of my daughters particularly.

What was God's will for me as a woman and a Christian? Where or what was my place, if that was even the right word, as part of the wider Christian community and in terms of my giftings and calling? What did this all mean when outworked in the context of my marriage? And what sort of framework would I teach my daughters and my son about their status before God and their place in His story of redemption, particularly in their own relationships and church life?

Sincere Christians can be found on both sides of the argument and both will affirm the infallibility of the Bible and its authority over Christian believers in relation to faith and practice. Yet both sides arrive at vastly different conclusions. Which one is right – and does it even matter?

I came to see that the differences primarily lie in the interpretation of biblical texts and how these texts should then be applied within the context of our society and culture today. (I'll talk more about the specific texts that are interpreted by complementarians to restrict women in certain roles later in this article).

I also came to recognise that we all bring preconceptions and often unconscious biases when considering biblical texts. We absorb much from our upbringing, our world-view perspectives, our cultures, and the influences of our families and peers. These biases, whether we are conscious of them or not, often contribute to issues becoming much more than 'just a conversation'.

Even the time-consuming and difficult task of translating the native texts of the Bible into the many languages in which it can be read today involved some degree of personal interpretation by the translators, as they laboured over which word or phrase was best represented by the target language.

With all this in mind, any topic that carries such a degree of weight, which I think this topic does, needs to be considered in the light of several aspects: context, culture (relevant to the context), our own bias or interpretative understanding, and the overall scope and message of not just the immediate text but scripture in general.

The Importance Of Context

Context includes things like consideration of the surrounding text, not just the text in question, the overall flow of the immediate text, the audience the text was written for, the cultural expectations of the time and the language in which the text was originally written.

We also need to reconcile our interpretation of any text with the overall theme and message of the gospel – the primary narrative of the Bible. If a conclusion doesn't ring true according to the gospel, it must be reevaluated in this light. The gospel is the story in all the Bible. It's not just a message about our own personal salvation from sin but the story of what God has intended for all His creation. Its massive scope stretches from the first pages of Genesis through to the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

It's a compelling and all-encompassing narrative that includes lofty themes such as the glory and sovereignty of God, the creation and capacity of humanity to image God's glory, the fall and redemption of humanity, the purpose and kingship of Jesus, the new creation of a resurrected community of image-bearers and, finally, the arrival of 'the new heavens and new earth', when God will be all-in-all and the gospel story will

have reached its resolution.

Any conclusions we draw from particular passages in the Bible must align with these consistent gospel threads, woven throughout scripture.

Exposure to the gospel story often causes radical upheaval in our lives; challenging and contrasting our perceptions of 'what is' against 'what will be'. We're invited personally into the massive scope of the Bible's story, to see things from God's perspective and understand the greater purpose that is at work for all of humanity.

We will often recognise that our previous practices, beliefs, or worldviews must change and now be conformed to the purposes and ideals of a loving and just God, represented to us in the life and mission of His Son Jesus.

This was the experience of the first-century Christians, to whom many of the letters and epistles of the New Testament were written. These letters, from writers such as Paul the Apostle, and James the Just, highlight the many challenges these believers faced in their new life of faith and serve as valuable reminders to us today of just how radically the gospel reoriented their lives and realigned humanity, living at the time in the shadow of the Empire.

The letter to Philemon is one such example. This letter, written by Paul to a believing master concerning a slave who had found Christ, gives us important insight into how masters and slaves were to relate to one another as fellow believers. Slave owners, rich in property and persons, weren't to consider their slaves as possessions but as part of God's family. Their legal relationship might remain that of master and slave (and Paul gives valuable advice in other places to both masters and slaves who now found themselves believers of Christ), but, in reality, they were now family, bound together in Jesus, and it is this status that should dominate their new

relationship.

Jews who thought of themselves as God's unique and chosen people were now to consider Gentiles as family, loved by the same God, and this particular issue is highlighted in Paul's letters to the churches at Ephesus and Galatia.

Importantly for many women, men were to consider and treat women as equals in the purpose and plan of God for humanity; directly challenging a long and complex history of patriarchy.

What Is Patriarchy?

"Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. Some patriarchal societies are also patrilineal, meaning that property and title are inherited by the male lineage.

Patriarchy is associated with a set of ideas, a patriarchal ideology that acts to explain and justify this dominance and attributes it to inherent natural differences between men and women. Sociologists tend to see patriarchy as a social product and not as an outcome of innate differences between the sexes and they focus attention on the way that gender roles in a society affect power differentials between men and women.

Historically, patriarchy has manifested itself in the social, legal, political, religious, and economic organisation of a range of different cultures. Even if not explicitly defined to be by their own constitutions and laws, most contemporary societies are, in practice, patriarchal." (Wikipedia)

Patriarchy is a social system in which men are the primary authority figures in the areas of political leadership, moral authority, and control of property and this extends to control over other men (of lesser status, or slaves), women, slaves, and children.

Both Jewish and Roman societies were patriarchal and hierarchal, and it is into this context and these cultures that the gospel is preached, received, and adopted. This context serves as an enlightening framework for many of the issues that the early apostolic writers and fathers speak into.

Where To Start?

It's often hard to know where to start with this topic. Right at the beginning, in Genesis? Smack bang in the middle of the 'I suffer not a woman to teach' passages? At the dawn of early Christianity?

All have relevance to the conversation and, together, form a compelling picture of God's heart for His church, God's purpose for His people, and His will for men and women in His story. I talk a lot about the Genesis framework in my article ['Stop Promoting Gendered Hierarchy!'](#) as well as many of the differences between complementarian / egalitarian viewpoints, so if you're interested in reading more about that, head on over there.

In this article, I want to look particularly at:

- The position of women in the early church and the church's teaching on that, and
- Three passages in particular which have (in my opinion) been severed from their context and used to support a faulty interpretation in relation to Women and the Church.

1. Early Christianity And Women

The women who followed Jesus assumed ministry in the earliest Christian communities alongside men. Women were the last disciples to be found at the foot of the cross (Luke 23:55-56) and the first at the empty tomb, witnesses to the truth of the risen Christ (Luke 24:9-11). Women, at this time, were simply

not considered credible witnesses so the fact that the resurrection is announced first to the women who had followed Jesus is more significant than we perhaps realise.

We are given some insight into how the gospel would shift and reorient the relationship between men and women, and particularly the experience of women themselves, through many of the synoptic gospel stories.

One such story is that of Mary and Martha, two sisters who, with their brother Lazarus, had come to know Jesus through his itinerant ministry and had become very dear to him. It's recorded that Jesus visited Bethany, their hometown, at least 11 times, and it's one of these visits that's recorded for us in Luke 10.

It seems, at least from Luke's account, that Martha was the homeowner and it is she who welcomes Jesus and his disciples into her home, working quickly to prepare dinner for them. Her sister, Mary, in contrast, isn't concerned with thoughts of hospitality or guest room preparation but sits at Jesus' feet listening to what he taught.

The import of this is likely to be quite lost on us, reading this story, as we do, several centuries removed and in our native English translation. Without understanding the cultural context of this passage, we may miss what is actually quite profound.

Mary's posture – '*sitting at Jesus' feet*' was what a disciple would do when learning from a rabbi. Paul the Apostle, later in Acts 22:3, speaks about being 'educated as the feet of Gamaliel', who was an esteemed rabbi in Israel.

One of the primary duties of a rabbi, or teacher, was to teach Torah. A rabbi would train disciples to emulate him (and even surpass him in knowledge and the practical application of the Torah). However, this was an exclusively male domain – women were completely excluded from interacting with or studying the

Torah.

Throughout the generations, from the destruction of the Temple, Jewish creative and spiritual life revolved around Torah study. All forms of literary expression and spiritual creativity came from Torah study and their purpose was to enrich and deepen it. Jewish history throughout all those generations found expression in spiritual creativity, not in any other form (such as politics). From this we can deduce that women's exclusion from Torah study removed them from the heart of existence, and they were not considered important in passing on the heritage and tradition to future generations. Women had no part in the bet midrash, the center of spiritual creativity, or in the religious courts, the seat of the Jewish community's autonomy, because a rabbinic judge must have comprehensive Torah knowledge. Women did not serve in community positions because these roles were identified with knowledge of Torah. | [Torah Study](#)

Yet the gospel of Luke makes it clear that Mary was assuming the posture of a disciple, that she was listening and learning at the feet of an esteemed 'teacher in Israel', and further, that Jesus commended Mary's actions and refused to enforce the religious norms of the day in order to exclude her from this circle of learning. She was encouraged to take her place among the men, learning in quietness as was the acceptable posture of all rabbinic students. These are thoughts that Paul the Apostle will pick up in his letter to Timothy (one of the sticky passages I'll look at later on in this article).

"Jesus's valuing of women through the gospels is unmistakable. In a culture in which women were devalued and often exploited, it underscores their equal status before God and his desire for personal relationship with them." | [Confronting Christianity, Rebecca McLaughlin](#)

Women actively participated in praying and prophesying within

the early church (Luke 2:36, Acts 21:9, 1 Corinthians 11:5) and were equal recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4, Acts 2:17, Acts 10:45). They preached the good news alongside Jesus and later Paul, taught the new believers 'the way of God', and provided pastoral care and discipleship in the early church (Romans 16:1-2, Romans 16:3-5, Luke 8:1-3, Acts 18:24-26, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Philippians 4:2-3). The reality of their significant involvement is shown throughout Paul's letters, in the Acts of the Apostles, and other early Christian writings.

The last chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 16) begins with a commendation of 'Phoebe, a deacon (greek: δίακονον (diakonon) – meaning 'an attendant or servant; especially, a Christian teacher and pastor' – Strong's Exhaustive Concordance) of the church of Cenchreae', followed by a mention of married couple Priscilla and Aquila, as 'co-workers' with Paul (and their home as 'the meeting place of the church'). The letter concludes with a compiled list of 26 other church leaders whom Paul wishes to recommend, ten of whom are women. Paul's letters constitute the earliest Christian manuscripts available and provide strong historical evidence of the important involvement of both men and women in the new Christian church.

Power couple Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned several times in scripture, always together, and were pivotal supporters of the newly planted church at Ephesus (Acts 18:). It's while they're here that they instruct Apollos, recently arrived from Egypt, an eloquent speaker and a follower of Jesus who knew the scriptures well, more accurately in the way of God (Acts 18:26). Priscilla's name appears first here in the record (and in three other places), perhaps signaling her higher social status than that of her husband, or perhaps her superior teaching capabilities and gifting. Together, however, they exercised leadership among the fledgling churches and were both held in high esteem, with their partnership highlighting

one model of ministry in the early church (Romans 16:7; 1 Corinthians 9:5).

Scripture reveals that throughout God's story, women have shared significantly in contributing to the 'kingdom mission' of God (Exodus 15:20, Judges 4:4, Isaiah 8:3, 2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22, Proverbs 31:1, Luke 2:37-38).

What becomes abundantly clear in the New Testament is, that despite the cultural norms or preconceived notions of the people to whom the gospel was preached, a seismic shift occurred in how people: men and women, slaves and masters, Jews and Gentiles – related to and viewed one another, as followers of Jesus.

The church – the body of Christ – is made up of all of God's people, who participate together as a 'kingdom of priests' and 'ministers of reconciliation', entrusted with God's vital message for humanity (1 Peter 2:9, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19). We see demonstrated in the church not just redeemed and sanctified individuals but a collective community of people who live a 'resurrected life' in the light and glory of the King – Jesus. They are a new kind of human, a new creation, and, through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, can fully participate in the mission and purpose God had intended for humanity from the beginning.

The kind of church that Paul had in mind when he wrote is organic – a living, breathing body, in which every member, both men and women contribute to the function, health and growth of that body. "What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up." (1 Corinthians 14:26, see also Hebrews 3:12-13, Hebrews 10:33-35)

"The term organic church does not refer to a particular model

of church. (We believe that no perfect model exists.) Instead, we believe that the New Testament vision of church is organic. An organic church is a living, breathing, dynamic, mutually participatory, every-member-functioning, Christ-centered, communal expression of the body of Christ.”
– Frank Viola, [Pagan Christianity: Exposing the Roots of Our Church Practices](#)

Every member of the church is a valued part of the body of Christ and the Apostle Paul gives a great deal of loving instruction in his letters as to how each person in the church is to behave towards and care for ‘the other’.

Both men and women are included in the instructions to love one another (Romans 13:34), to bear with and forgive one another (Romans 15:7, Ephesians 4:2), to honour one another (Ephesians 4:2), to be kind, tender-hearted and compassionate towards one another (Ephesians 4:32), to serve and submit to one another (Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 5:21), to encourage, instruct, teach and admonish one another (Hebrews 13:16, Romans 15:14, Colossians 3:16), to be hospitable and share with one another (1 Peter 4:9, Hebrews 13:16), to pray for and confess to one another (James 5:16) and to carry one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2).

A Word Of Caution From The Apostle Paul

The collision of the gospel with first-century Roman/Jewish life resulted in a massive upheaval of many commonly held beliefs and practices, as it often still does for us today. Long-held perceptions were challenged by the larger scope of the gospel story. In a highly patriarchal, hierarchical society, the gospel insisted that anyone could seek and find God, that He was ‘no respecter of persons’, and that all could participate in the kingdom and priesthood of Jesus.

Women, particularly, experienced Christian life in radically

different ways from what was permitted or acceptable within Roman or Jewish society. Women's position – as humans, as spiritual creations, as participants in the body of Christ – was elevated and placed directly alongside their male counterparts, as equal participants in the mission and story of God, as God had intended from the beginning

Yet Paul the Apostle, who wrote a large portion of the New Testament letters, is also at pains to impress upon the believers in the early church that while in this new life of faith women are not lesser than men, neither are they greater (1 Corinthians 11). He returns to the earliest account in the scriptures, the story of the creation, and corrects erroneous beliefs that were being promoted (that women had been created first and were therefore superior) (2 Timothy 2:13-15).

He also overturns other long-held cultural beliefs (that women were inferior and that their usefulness or their contribution were essentially negligible). Men and women 'in the Lord' are interdependent, Paul states, regardless of how the surrounding culture may view this relationship. Neither one is without the other – and all things come from God. (1 Corinthians 11:8-12).

The counter-cultural practices that were permitted and encouraged within church life had the potential to be misunderstood, resulting in unhealthy church teaching and possibly poor gospel witness to unbelievers, and Paul sought to instruct and guide the new believers on many different matters that arose as a result of these changed dynamics. There were a multitude of factors that needed to be considered for men and women in this largely unknown landscape.

Women, The Church, And Moving Out Of The First Century

One of the best-kept secrets in Christianity is the enormous role that women played in the early church. Though they leave much unsaid, still, both Christian and secular writers of the

time attest many times to the significant involvement of women in the early growth of Christianity. – [Christian History Institute](#)

The early centuries of Christianity show clear evidence of a great deal of activity by women in the life of the congregations (Romans 16:1-2, Romans 16:3-5, Romans 16:6, Romans 16:12-15, Acts 1:12-14, Acts 5:1-2, Acts 9:36-37, Acts 17:34, Luke 8:1-3, Philippians 4:2-3, Philemon 2, 1 Corinthians 16:19).

However, as Christianity became more established in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the church itself began to change – moving from primarily meeting in private spaces to meeting in the public sphere. Christianity became legitimised and was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire (313AD). It moved toward becoming more formal in organisation and a male hierarchy of the clergy began to develop.

The conversion to Christianity of Emperor Constantine is seen as the great turning point for Christianity and by 380AD, Emperor Theodosius had issued the Edict of Thessalonica, which made Christianity, specifically Nicene Christianity, the official religion of the Roman Empire. This era (circa 100AD to either 451AD or 787AD), later known as the Patristic era, was heavily influenced by theological writers such as Tertullian, St Jerome, Augustine, and St Clement of Alexandria, who had one or two unfortunate things to say in relation to women:

“The curse God pronounced on your sex still weighs on the world. ...You are the devil’s gateway... You are the first that deserted the divine laws. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, Adam. Because you deserved death, it was the son of God who had to die”. – Tertullian

“Fierce is the dragon and cunning the asp; But women have the malice of both.” – Gregory of Nazianzus

"...The consciousness of their own nature must evoke feelings of shame". – St Clement of Alexandria

"...Woman is the root of all evil." (Like most early Christian theologians, Jerome glorified virginity and looked down on marriage. His reasoning was also rooted in Genesis:) "Eve in paradise was a virgin ... understand that virginity is natural and that marriage comes after the Fall." – St Jerome

In the early days, women had found a level of power in Christian communities that they lacked in the Roman Empire at the time, and were instrumental in its success. However, as time went on, women lost the authority that they had had, and were increasingly subjugated and pushed out of important roles.

By the close of the Patristic era, almost all roles within ministry in the church had become reserved only for men.

The attitude toward women in areas of leadership and teaching in the church looked more like the attitudes of the early Jewish rabbis, famously summarised by the stinging opinion of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: *"The words of the Torah should be burned rather than entrusted to women."*

"Yet throughout the centuries, the teachings and practices of many Christian leaders continued to contribute to the oppression and silencing of women and the diminishing of their value and contribution to the work of the church, a very different attitude to the radical egalitarianism lived and preached by the early Christian believers." | Women And Their Roles In Early Christianity

As Thomas Wilson, in *The Arte of Rhetorique*, 1560 comments: *"What becometh a woman best, and first of all? Silence. What second? Silence. What third? Silence. What fourth? Silence. Yea, if a man should ask me till Domes daie I would still crie silence, silence."*

2. 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 there are three specific texts or passages in the New Testament that have been interpreted in such a way as to seemingly contradict the early church's egalitarian message preached and practiced in other places.

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 said at the outset, 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. To that end, I’ll recommend some great resources at the end of this article.

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.

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.

2. 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).

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.

If you would like to read more on this subject by other authors, I’d recommend the following: Rediscovering

Scripture's Vision For Women (Lucy Peppiatt), Gender Roles And The People Of God (Alice Matthews), The Blue Parakeet (Scot McKnight), Man And Woman: One In Christ (Philip B Payne), Pagan Christianity (Frank Viola), and Reimagining Church (Frank Viola). I'd also recommend listening to the Kingdom Roots Podcast by Scot McKnight (there are over 200 episodes and he covers many topics, including the question of gender equality, so I've linked one specifically [here](#) to get you started.) This article was first published 15 November 2020 and has been reworked 15 March 2024