

May Women Teach? An Exegesis of 1 Tim 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-40

“When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”
—John Maynard Keynes, responding to an accusation of inconsistency

While I was in college many years ago, I could never get myself to say it. I didn’t have the guts to come right out and tell my ministry partners and friends that I *did not* believe that women should teach men in religious settings. Whether in a dorm Bible study or from the pulpit, I thought that a woman shouldn’t have a leadership position over any man in the fellowship. But a position like this wouldn’t be popular with the ladies, a not-so trivial thing for a single college male. So I kept it to myself.

In fact, I tried to keep it *from* myself as well. I figured that if I didn’t think about it, then I wouldn’t have to deal with the issue head-on. Clearly I was in denial, but denial wasn’t a bad thing considering the alternative. Was I going to tell a female speaker to stop in the middle of a worship service? For Scripture seemed absolutely clear about it, “I do not permit women to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.”¹ I had a high view of Scripture back then—as I still do—and since it’s there in plain English, I would need to submit one day. But I didn’t have to like it.

I tried researching alternative points of view, but came up short. The other arguments seemed to cut Paul’s words right out of the text and toss them out like last week’s leftover meatloaf. The scholars in this camp did not seem to take the Bible as seriously as I did, either

¹ 1 Timothy 2:12, *NIV*.

dismissing Paul as a misogynist or ignoring his words altogether because he wrote in a different time and context that can't be applied to the modern era. Either way, their views didn't seem to uphold the Bible as an authoritative truth. Thus, as I entered seminary, I was still haunted by the following questions: should a women teach the Bible to men? Should they have positions of authority over men? In a mixed-gender setting, can they be senior pastors? What is the role of women in the church and ministry?

When Dr. Beale—known lovingly as “the Beast” for his love of Revelations and his exacting standards of our studies—gave us the chance to study the 1 Timothy 2:11-15 passage in my “Interpreting the New Testament” class, I jumped at it. I could spend the entire semester digging at those four verses, parsing each Greek word. Once and for all, I was going to have my questions answered. In the end, I came to some startling conclusions.

1 Timothy 2:11-15: let the women learn

Early in my studies, I analyzed the Biblical context. Paul had a specific purpose in mind when he wrote these letters to Timothy: to remind him of the authority he had to preach against false teachers and their distorted doctrines. The entire letter was soaked with the theme, beginning and ending like bookends with instructions to halt their spread. After encouraging Timothy to “fight the good fight” against these false teachers in chapter 1, Paul exhorted the Ephesian community to live out their true doctrines by living “peaceful and quiet lives” in chapter 2. In application, Paul spent the first part of the chapter addressing their conduct during worship services.

Then, I proceeded slowly through the text, marinating in each Greek word. I first noticed that the only command in the entire passage is “let a woman learn” in verse 11. Where Jewish custom often excluded women from the learning process, Paul pushed hard that they *should* learn.² Paul’s concern: Ephesian women in particular were being led astray by false teachers, as in 2 Timothy 3:6-7. In fact, two chapters later Paul decried that some were turning away and following Satan in 1 Timothy 5:15. Paul, therefore, demanded that the women of Ephesus learn sound doctrine to guard themselves from false teaching, so they wouldn’t be deceived. Through careful study, I realized that a passage that is often used to disempower women is actually an empowering one.

The next insight startled me even more. Verse 12 is often translated, “I do not permit women to teach or to have authority over a man.” The word “to have authority” in Greek has more insidious meanings: “instigating or perpetuating a crime” and “the active wielding of influence or the initiation of action.”³ The word doesn’t show up in the rest of Scripture, but 67% of the time in Classical literature, the word has this darker meaning. Therefore, its meaning is not authority in general, but an undue, stolen authority. When this word is linked in parallel grammatically with “to teach,” we have something akin to Hebrew poetry where one verb can, though not always, have an effect on the other.⁴

Then, the following insight floored me. Many modern translations have, “she must be *silent*” at the end of verse 12. This exact word also doesn’t show up elsewhere in Scripture, though

² Stanley Grenz with Denise Kjesbo, *Women in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: 1995), 128.

³ Andrew C. Perriman, “What Eve Did, What Women Shouldn’t Do: The Meaning of *auqentew* in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (January 1993), 134.

⁴ I admit this is the weakest link in this argument, though if the rest of the argument is strong, then it provides the context for this possible translation.

a different form of the word with the same root shows up twice—both in the very same chapter. It fascinated me that modern translations easily wrote “quietness” the other two times it shows up in Scripture,⁵ and then modified it to “silence” in verse 12, though its in the same context. Though “silence” falls within the range of semantic meaning, “quietness” is therefore better. It’s thus *not* a prohibition of speech. It also harmonizes well with the speaking of female prophets in 1 Corinthians 11. So, in its context, the entire verse should read that while a woman is learning, “I do not permit women to wrongfully teach or to exercise illegitimate authority over a man, but [she is] to be in humble quietness.”

But, the next three verses seemed to contradict my new understanding at first. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.” Paul, alluding back to Genesis, seemed to be saying that Adam is somehow superior. But, a little logic helped here. What did being physically “formed” first have to do with anything anyway? Adam was formed before Eve—did that make him superior? Then the animals must be superior to Adam, because they were formed before him. Perhaps Paul meant that Eve was formed from Adam—making him the source, and therefore superior. Yet again, Adam was formed from dirt, so does that make dirt superior? Walter Kaiser Jr., a seminary president and scholar, taught that the word “formed” doesn’t only mean physically, but also could mean spiritually, theologically, educationally, morally, emotionally and in other ways.⁶

If we take the word to mean “theologically formed,” then we have harmony with Genesis 2-3. In these passages, Adam received God’s commands in Genesis 2:16 before Eve comes on

⁵ 1 Tim 2:2, 11.

⁶ Kaiser, Walter, Jr. Lectures at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary from *Old Testament Ethics*. Spring 1998.

the scene. Eve, however, displayed a lack of accuracy in repeating God's commands to the Serpent in the following chapter. She makes an addition: "and *you must not touch it*, or you will die" in verse 3. God never said "and you must not touch it." So, Adam was supposed to teach Eve, but either Adam taught poorly or Eve learned poorly, and she was set up to be deceived. He was not superior, but was "theologically formed" first.

The next sentence then made a great deal of sense. "And Adam was not the one deceived, it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." But, Paul wasn't letting Adam off the hook. A quick look at Romans 5 showed me that Paul clearly understood that sin entered the world through one man. Adam's guilty. No doubt about it. But he wasn't deceived—he *rebelled*. He knew the truth, and disobeyed anyway—the far more heinous crime. Eve, however, was *deceived* because she didn't know God's commands. Thus, Genesis is an illustration of Paul's command to "let the women learn" in verse 11. The passage made sense as a whole, but not in the way I originally had thought.

The final sentence was difficult to translate, for dozens of interpretations compete for true understanding. But, here's where I finally landed.⁷ First, I assumed that Paul wasn't going back on his words elsewhere in Scripture, to think that giving birth was going to secure a woman's salvation. It was confirmed by a careful reading of the text. Here are a few things to note before putting it all together:

- The verb "will be saved" refers to a single female

⁷ Many interpretations are plausible here — and many have been written about — but it's important to note that whatever the interpretation may be, it does not affect the general flow of the argument.

- The word “childbearing” has a definite article before it in the Greek, thus reading “The Childbearing” or Jesus’ birth.⁸
- The Greek word for “if” here is better translated “when” or “when and if.”
- The word “women” before “to continue” is not present in the Greek.
- Lastly, “to continue,” is plural.

Thus, last verse reads, “But she [a woman] will be saved through the Childbearing—when and if they [all women] continue in faith, love, holiness and propriety.” So, if they wanted to put down women for being deceived, they had to remember that women would also be saved through Jesus in the end. In addition, with a clever play on words, Paul reminded them that the Messiah also came from a woman’s womb, so don’t knock a woman’s worth. Lastly, women will all be saved—yesterday, today and tomorrow—through Jesus by living out what they have learned, continuing in faith, love, holiness and propriety.

A careful study of this passage brought me to a new conclusion about women in ministry. When put together, I couldn’t believe that this passage was a prohibition of a woman teaching or leading anymore. It was just an encouragement for women to learn and live well, so they could avoid being deceived.

1 Corinthians 14:33-40: should a woman say anything at all?

Even if 2 Timothy allowed women to teach and lead, one other passage stumped me about women in ministry and leadership. But Walter Kaiser Jr. took a detour from our normal

⁸ Some scholars don’t place too much emphasis on the definite article, but given the huge variety of interpretations, I’ve decided to land here.

studies in Old Testament ethics to give us the following interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:33-40.

As in 1 Timothy 2, Paul was again addressing conduct during worship services in 1 Corinthians 14. It was surprising to read that Gordon Fee believes that verses 34-35 are not Paul's, but later added by other scribes.⁹ If anyone beside Gordon Fee said this, the comment would be easily dismissed, but considering the stature of his Evangelical scholarship, it is worth noting.

Yet, even if the passage stands, some insights led me to counter-intuitive conclusion. First, here's some background information. The word "silence" in verse 34 holds. It was a different word than the ones found in 1 Timothy 2, and was clearly defined as an absence of words, or "silence."

Here's one more piece of background information. In our English translations, we have punctuation marks, capitals and spaces to help us more easily understand what we're reading. But ancient papyrus was costly so they wrote in all capitals without spaces or punctuation marks to save space. For the native speaker, the text would be easy to decipher, such as:

DOYOUWANTMYMONEY

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 699.

Without the help of any other cues, you know that someone is offering you a good thing. And you understand implicitly that although it's missing a squiggly, backward "S" with a dot underneath at the end of the sentence, you still know that it's a question.

Now here was the surprising insight. In verse 34, the word in the Greek for "the Law" referred to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Yet, if I scoured the pages of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers or Deuteronomy, I wouldn't find that command. Paul, a great Biblical scholar under Gamaliel's tutelage, would never have made a mistake like that. So why would Paul mention the Law here? Walter Kaiser Jr. suggested that verses 34-35 should be in quotation marks, and that Paul was actually quoting the Corinthian church sarcastically.

Understanding the pronouns in following verses added to the argument. In verse 36, "only" is a *masculine* plural pronoun, though in the Greek, he could either be addressing a group that was mixed in gender or a group of men. So is the adjective "spiritual" in verse 37. The singular pronouns such as "anyone" and "he" in verses 37 and 38 are in the same way, masculine.

In this context, it could possibly read, "Did the word of God originate with *you, brothers*? Or are *you, brothers*, the only people it has reaches? If anybody thinks *he* is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let *him* acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command." Paul really needed to back this up with the Spirit's authority, because it was so counter-cultural. "If *he* ignores this, *he himself* will be ignored. Therefore, *my brothers and sisters*, be eager to prophesy, and *do not forbid* the speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting

and orderly way.” Paul, summing up his argument, addressed both *brothers and sisters*, encouraging both to prophecy while not forbidding the use of tongues. Instead of snuffing out women’s voices, he encouraged the Corinthians to prophesy in an orderly manner.

Thus, after mocking their quotation, Paul continued in full force to undermine their chauvinistic attitudes. Like Jesus, he was clearly ahead of his time.

It’s admittedly a weaker argument than what is found in 1 Timothy 2, but I don’t think it’s without merit. It also would make sense out of the female prophets Paul wrote about just three chapters earlier in the very same letter.

In all of Scripture, these two passages are the only ones found that seemingly forbid women to teach or to have authority over men, yet with careful study, they both seem to line up in the other direction.

The Biblical legacy

In addition, if I add the other examples of Biblical women in ministry, then I have a Bible that no longer contradicts itself, but is one seamless whole. Here’s a partial list of Biblical women leaders and ministers:

- *Miriam*, a prophet (Exodus 15)
- *Deborah*, a nation’s leader (Judges 4-5)
- *Esther*, an advocate (Esther)

- *Priscilla*, a teacher (Acts 18:18-26, Romans 16:3). Luke was purposeful in placing her name before her husband, just as he does with Paul and Barnabas when it was apparent that Paul was leading the Gentile mission.¹⁰ Paul did the same thing, signifying James as the leader of the church over Peter and John through name order in Galatians 2:9.¹¹
- *Lydia, Chloe & Nympha*, leaders of the church (Acts 16:13-15, 40; 1 Corinthians 1:11; Colossians 4:15). Chloe's *oikos*, translated "household" here but often translated as "church" as in Colossians 4:15, didn't just refer to her family but to the church that met in her home. These patrons were often given leadership responsibilities and authority, such as in 1 Corinthians 16:15-16.
- *Pheobe*, a deaconess (Romans 16:1). Though modern translations often prefer a more generalized term of "servant," the word clearly referred to a title because of the masculine form of the word *diakonos* rather than some feminine alternative, and because it's connected to the local church at Cenchreae.¹²
- *Junia*, an apostle (Romans 16:7). The earliest manuscripts and the early Christian Fathers know that Junia was a female, instead of the masculine version Junias.¹³
- *Philip's daughter's* & other women prophets (Acts 21:9, 1 Corinthians 11:5)
- *Tryphena & Tryphosa*, and *Euodia & Syntyche*, ministry partners (Romans 15:12, Philippians 4:2, cf. 1 Corinthians 16:16).

¹⁰ It was "Barnabas and Saul" five times until Acts 13:42, when it switches to "Paul and Barnabas." It switches in only two settings, once in Acts 14:14 where Barnabas was probably the primary instigator in the tearing of clothes in protest, and the other in Acts 15:12, where Barnabas was the lead explainer in the Jerusalem Council because he had more relational clout with the Apostles.

¹¹ James M. Boice, "Galatians," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1985), ed. Frank E. Gabelein. Taken from CD-ROM.

¹² Grenz with Kjesbo, *Women*, 88.

¹³ Grenz with Kjesbo, *Women*, 94-96.

This list is a female Hall of Fame of distinguished ministry leaders and teachers, and it's very hard to ignore.

Ultimately, when I graduated from seminary, I was stuck with only one conclusion: women are not forbidden to lead or teach in Christian churches. In fact, they're encouraged to lead and teach.

Anyway, what's the alternative? If you read these passages the former way, then a woman shouldn't even say a single word in your church: "she must remain silent." Yet almost every church in America breaks this rule. Or, if you read the Corinthians passage to say that she shouldn't *publically* say anything during a worship service, then at the very least, you shouldn't let her teach or pray during a worship setting, even with a single-gender congregation. And those who say that a woman can be a pastor, just not a senior pastor, are being frustratingly inconsistent and are avoiding the issue. Few churches actually attempt to be consistent with the former interpretations of these passages anyway.

So, at the very least, the Bible is unclear about the prohibitions on a woman's leadership and teaching. But, the rigorous study of the Scriptures—and not the dismissal of problem passages—led me to believe that women should be able to lead and teach at all levels of the Christian community. So, men, allow the women to lead and teach, even when they are called to the senior pastor position. God has given them spiritual gifts to be used "so that every person is equipped for every good work." Release, support and empower them to do what God has put on their hearts. And women, don't hide behind a faulty theology. You are

called to influence, and do so with the freedom of the Lord. God has given you gifts that are not meant to be kept under a lampshade, but to be lifted for all to see.

Nowadays, I don't keep my views to myself like I used to—for the truth has set me free.

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