

## what does the bible *really* say about women?

This morning I'm going to share some teaching that represents a drastic change in my own understanding of two passages of Scripture. In fact, I'll be sharing a perspective on women in the church that is 180 degrees away from – or a complete reversal – from my thinking when I first walked through the doors of this Church in 2000. 2000 was the year that the Southern Baptist Conference, over 16 million strong in the United States, reversed their former denominational position and stopped ordaining women as pastors.

Thankfully, the positive experience of serving alongside women in *this* church during the past 7 years has caused me to search for some harmony between what I once understood the Word to be saying, about women in leadership roles in the church, compared to the clear evidence of the Spirit's gifting individual women for roles here. The two proofs stood in contradiction.

### **First let's lay out some basics we'll follow to Interpret God's Word:**

1. . . . take the *common* meaning of the word in the original language (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) *at the time* it was written
2. . . . take the cultural context of the passage
3. . . . take the broadest, most documented position into consideration

Have you ever noticed that Words have multiple meanings. Is "blue" a color or is "blue" an emotional state or a popular hockey 'playoff' beverage? The correct answer in our Canadian culture is: "all of the above."

Not only do words have *many* meanings, the meanings may *change*. Scripture was written over a period of centuries – we can't *assume* that the meaning of a Hebrew word in 1600 B.C. or a Greek word in A.D. 60 is *always* the same as we understand it in English today.

An example of a word meaning that changed over the years is found in First Timothy 2:12. Here, Paul *appears* to *prohibit* women from holding a position of "authority" in the church.

But, the common usage of the word often translated as 'authority' at that time was a 'negative' one and referred to 'someone who exercises dominion over another'. The word was 'never' used with the thought of "leadership" until 200 years later.

One college professor, fed up with the way students were cherry-picking verses out of context, suggested we burn all our concordances, saying: "Maybe, if you have to look through the *entire* Bible each time you want to prove something, you'll see what *God* has to say, not just some verse to *prove* what you want to say."

His argument: 'With over twenty-three thousand verses to choose from, you can find a verse to prove your point on almost any subject.'

Burning concordances might be a little extreme, but keeping a view of interpretation that considers the 'whole Biblical message' is important when it comes to the two most quoted verses used to prohibit women in leadership (**1 Corinthians 14:34-35, 1 Timothy 2:11-12**).

In contrast to these two isolated passages, there are hundreds of verses describing Godly women in administrative and teaching roles:

Miriam (prophet); Deborah (prophet, judge, military leader); Esther (queen); Hulda (prophet); Noadiah (prophet); Anna (prophet); Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and "many others" (Christ's disciples); the daughters of Philip (prophets); Priscilla (teacher); Chloe (house church leader); Mary the mother of John (house church leader); Lydia (house church leader); Nympha of Laodicea (house church leader); Phoebe (deacon); and Junia (an apostle).

Still, what do we do with these two passages that seem to prohibit women in leadership? First, consider it possible that at that point in **time** (AD 50-60), **place** (Corinth and Ephesus), and **cultural setting** (where women were less educated), it may have been correct to not allow the women to teach.

But that doesn't necessarily mean Paul was speaking instruction for the church everywhere or for all time! How can we know his intent?

**Today, we'll have a close look at both these problematic passages:**

***First up: Let your women keep silent (1 Cor. 14:34, 35).***

At first glance, these verses seem to decisively support those who hold to a male 'chain of command' within the church. I once thought so. But taking a slightly wider view raises some troubling questions.

How can Paul in Chapter 11 speak of women praying and prophesying in a church meeting and three chapters later insist that women "keep silent"?

Has he forgotten what he just wrote? Has he changed his mind that quickly? Or does Chapter 14 now invalidate Chapter 11? No, that can't be it.

If we hold to an inspired Word of God, then we are convinced that Scripture cannot contradict itself. And yet verses 34 and 35 sound straight forward:

**(34) Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. (35) And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.**

***Thankfully, there are options for interpreting this meaning.***

When we look closely, we find a number of *difficulties* in these verses. Remember, that any interpretation we accept must be in agreement with the *principle* of the '**harmony of Scripture**'.

That is: we must *understand* these verses in a way that *fits* the '*immediate*' context, and our *understanding* must be in *harmony* with the '*rest*' of the New Testament.

*It may help if I share some general observations about the situation in 1 Corinthians.*

In chapters 11 through 14, Paul deals with *conduct for church meetings* in that particular congregation. He is writing in *response* to their letter to him – listing *their issues*, and he addresses several of those in these chapters.

He taught that women are not symbolically to *deny their gender* when praying or prophesying in church, the *head-covering* discussion (11:2–16).

He taught that believers are not to deny the significance of the Lord's Supper by turning the sacrament into an ordinary meal (11:17–34).

Paul taught that the church is not to deny the Spirit's ministry through **each** believer by overemphasizing the gift of tongues (12:1–13).

He taught that the true test of spirituality is not what gifts a person exercises but the *experience and expression* of Christ's love for others (13:1–13).

Finally, Paul taught that *church gatherings are to be focused on the edification* (that is the *instruction*) of believers (14:1–40).

First, Paul establishes the priority of instruction in assemblies where all are free to participate. He *then* goes on to examine **3 disruptive issues**: tongues, prophecy, and talkative women. We can summarize the **disruptions** Paul deals with as follows:

1 Corinthians Chapter 14: Disruptions

Verses	The problem	The solution	The result
27–28	tongues	Keep silent unless an interpreter is present.	The church will be edified.
29–33	prophets interrupt each other	Take turns and be silent when others are speaking.	The church will be edified.
34–35	talkative women	The women are to be silent and ask questions at home.	The church will be edified (implied).

**Chapter 14 verses 34-35** fall under this *theme of edification* in church meetings. It is in *this situation* of congregational *disruptions* that Paul tells **certain** women of Corinth to “keep silent.”

Or in other words – *no chattering - no 'sidebar' conversations.*

Our *interpretation* of this passage must be shaped by its *immediate* context. Then, our understanding must be *tested* against the *larger* picture of the New Testament’s *progressive view* of the *role of women in the church.*

What I am pointing-out is that this teaching is *situation-specific*. We can’t apply a *situation-specific restriction* as if it had *universal* application.

It is one thing to *accept* that Paul told *some* women to “keep silent”, and quite another thing to *use* that limited application to *justify and insist* that **all** women in **all** meetings of **every** church **throughout** history **keep silent.**

Yet this is just what some would have us do. Alternative interpretations are *still* hotly argued against each of these passages. Yet the *data* about the New Testament’s *overarching attitude toward women* makes one thing *clear*: **any interpretation of these passages which implies a universally negative or repressive view of women simply cannot be correct.**

Let’s see if the *original* text can shed some light on the *specific* situation and how Paul’s *instruction* to “keep silent” was *intended to correct it.*

**Verse 35: “It is shameful for women to speak in church”.**

**Two clues** to the *solution* are found in this verse. The **first** is in the **tense** of the words (“to speak”). While the Greek word *speak* doesn’t indicate any specific kind of speech, the original *tense* (present infinitive) points toward *continual speaking-up*. These women were *continually, repeatedly, and disruptively speaking-out* in church meetings.

The **second** clue is in “let them ask their own **husbands** at home, for it is shameful for women to speak in church.” This tells us that the word rendered “women” in 14:35 should be translated “wives” as it often is elsewhere. It is far more *natural* in this sentence to understand Paul to be speaking of the *wives* of the *husbands* he mentions rather than of *all* women.

These two *clues* suggest that the specific problem in Corinth involved *certain* wives (*not all women*), who were creating *chaos* by repeatedly *speaking-out* in church gatherings.

Paul simply tells them to *be silent* – *stop interrupting*. The *wives* were to allow the *teaching* to take place for the proper *edification* of the saints.

Paul addresses the women in verse 34, "**To be submissive, as the law also says**". He is calling on them to "submit themselves" to the principle that governs all Christian behaviour, the principle of mutual submission. Ephesians 5:21 expresses it, 'submitting to *one another* in the fear of God'.

In these verses Paul is appealing to the Corinthian wives – those whose interruptions were so disruptive to consider others – to voluntarily stop their continual speaking-out, in order that church meetings might be edifying.

### **How should we apply Paul's teaching?**

No-one today knows exactly what was happening in Corinth. But we also have no license to rip Paul's words out of the specific and to read them as a command to all women – that goes beyond what the text is saying.

To do this ignores Paul's own words in First Corinthians 11 about women praying and prophesying in the church.

It also ignores a great mass of evidence in the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's other Epistles that "in Christ" the consequences of sin have been reversed.

So I believe, that we can confidently say Paul's words are not addressed to all women; and that this teaching is not intended to exclude women from using the spiritual gifts poured out on them for Christ's glory and service.

**Of course women speaking leads us to a 2<sup>nd</sup> troublesome passage: *The prohibition against women teaching in 1 Tim. 2:9–15.***

### ***First we need some general background information.***

First Timothy is one of **3** "pastoral" letters written by Paul, and his purpose is in verse **3:15**: 'I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God.'

Now, Timothy was in Ephesus at the time he received this letter. Ephesus was a busy city in Asia Minor and the home of the Great Temple to Diana.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians, sent some years before this one, emphasized the priority of Christ as head of His Church and the lifestyle for Christians.

And we learn from Acts that Paul's missionary work here turned many to the Lord, as they abandoned the worship of Diana and other occult practices.

But, it's also obvious from First Timothy that many Ephesians had already strayed from that focus on 'Jesus and godly living'. In fact, by the time of this letter, **false teaching** had seriously corrupted the church in Ephesus.

Sound doctrine had been abandoned in favour of "fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification" (1:4).

Verse 1:7 says this false gospel was being promoted by persons "desiring to be teachers of the law", but who understood "neither what they say nor the things which they affirm". This misinformation had significantly corrupted the way the Ephesian Christians were living.

And Paul tells us that these false teachers were men, Hymenaeus and Alexander are named. These two, or others like them, had adopted a strategy of appealing to "gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts." (You can find this in 2 Tim 3:6.)

If you look at 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2:9-10 you'll notice how this description matches the women there who are displaying a superficial interest in their outer appearance, without concern for "propriety or moderation".

Against this background of false teaching we can better interpret what Paul writes in **1 Timothy 2:11-12**.

After rebuking the superficiality of those Ephesian women who were more interested in beauty-aids than in good works, the Apostle had this to say:

**(11) Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. (12) And I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man, but to be in silence.**

Again Paul's prohibition here seems absolute, but on closer examination several qualifications will come to light. Let's look at what he writes.

**"Let a woman learn" (1 Tim. 2:11).**

Paul's remarks begin with an imperative: women are told: "to learn."

This idea that women should "learn" was foreign to Judaism, and it wasn't a view commonly held in the Roman world either. In contrast Paul wants women to learn. This is a **positive** statement.

**"Learn in silence with all submission" (1 Tim. 2:11).**

Paul does instruct how the women he was addressing should learn. They should learn 1) in silence, and 2) with all submission.

But, the word translated "in silence" is *different* than the one used in First Corinthians **14:34** and this one is *better translated* as "in quietness." As the newest versions of the New American Standard and the New Living do.

Taken this way Paul is *not* so much demanding silence, but appealing for a *quiet demeanour*. Paul uses the *identical* word earlier in this same chapter where he urges all Christians to lead "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence" in verse **2:2**.

Paul's *call* on the women to adopt this 'quiet attitude' suggests that some women in Ephesus also *lacked* this quality and were being disruptive.

He may have had in mind the *younger* women mentioned in **5:13** who were "wandering about from house to house, and not only *idle* but also *gossips* and *busybodies*, saying things which they ought not."

The *second* phrase in verse 11 '*with all submission*' also refers to a basic *attitude*. The false teachers Paul *describes* are proud; obsessed with disputes; and given to envy, strife, and reviling (6:4, 5)—just the *opposite* of that attitude of *gentleness and mutual submission* with which Christians are to approach all relationships.

So, we can conclude that Paul's first instruction in verse 11 is not intended to *stifle* the women of Ephesus, but instead *encourages* a quiet and submissive *attitude* that would be helpful to their *learning* God's truth.

*Vs. 12: I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.* This verse is **the** "proof text" most frequently offered as *evidence* that *women* are to take a *secondary* and *silent* role in the church.

If this is what Paul *intended* us to understand, his other *references* to women *show* that he *violated* his *own* teaching, because Paul *welcomed* women as *co-workers* with him in the gospel. So *what* can Paul possibly *mean*?

**First**, the phrase "*to be in silence*" is again an *unfortunate* translation. The *same* word is used here, as in 2:2 and 2:11, refers to a *quiet demeanour*.

**Second**, the word translated "to have authority over" is not the word normally used for "authority". In fact it only occurs here in the New Testament (*authentein*) and the common understanding of its meaning at the time was "to domineer over."

Paul was *not* saying that *all* women are to '*sit silently under the instruction of men*'; but rather, *these* women are to '*stop resisting instruction*'.

These two prohibitions against “teaching” and “domineering over men” are not separate, but are linked in Paul’s thought and the situation in Ephesus.

The record of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy *fits* this understanding of the verse.

- Consider Paul’s emphasis on the *necessity* of the women *learning*
- his *frequent* references to *false teaching* that had corrupted both doctrine and lifestyle
- his call to the Ephesian women to re-order their *priorities* and show more concern for *godliness* than for *self-beautification*
- his description of false teachers as “proud, knowing nothing” and characterized by “envy, strife, reviling, and evil suspicions” (1 Tim. 6:4)
- and his comment from 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy that the women were being affected by the false teaching.

It all comes together to *shape* an *immediate* context for Paul’s words.

What then must be done in Ephesus? Are the women to be silenced and kept from participating in the ministry and mission of the church? Of course not!

The women must *learn*! The women must be *grounded* in God’s truth, so that they will *know* error when they see it! Then proper *balance* will be restored.

For this to happen, the women must *adopt* a ‘*quiet and submissive attitude*’ and become *teachable*.

Do you see how *different* this attitude is from a *competitive, know-it-all, domineering* attitude that the letter implies the Ephesian women held?

We’ve studied two passages that contain teaching for women. We’ve discovered that in each *case* they *can* and *should* be *understood* to speak to *local* problems. Grasped in this way they actually support the view that women are to be active participants with men in ministries in the church.

Rather than *limiting* women’s *participation* by *denying* them significant roles, these passages were intended to *correct* specific situations in Corinth and in Ephesus that prevented women ‘*praying, prophesying, and teaching*’ *effectively*.



Yet in all our discussion we have not mentioned one stunning affirmation found in Galatians 3:26 - 28. There Paul wrote:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

All believers – male and female – alike are lifted in Christ to the legal position held only by 'sons' in Roman law.

In the church all the old barriers are taken down.

Whether the barrier is ethnic, social, or gender-based – that barrier is irrelevant in the body of Christ.

We see each other as spiritual equals: as one in Christ Jesus.

At the same time, we should recognize that there are practical differences between the sexes in the here and now, and these will remain until Christ's return. God has created man and women to complement each other and nothing revealed from Paul's teaching negates that reality.

Edmison Heights Baptist Church quotes **Galatians 3:26-28** in its constitution as the key biblical principle concerning gender qualification for church leadership. I hope this teaching today helps you have a deeper appreciation for why we believe it is important and correct to do so; and more critically, why our position is in harmony with the Scriptures.

I believe that the Church open to build upon the strengths and recognize the limitations natural to both its masculine and feminine individuals will arrive at a balanced approach to ministry that does not grieve the Holy Spirit.