

What Did Women Do in the Bible?

Adapted from Dr. Scot McKnight

Many people, when a discussion arises about women in church ministries, gravitate to Paul's two famous statements — that women should be silent in the churches:

Women should remain *silent* in the churches. They are *not allowed to speak*, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Corinthians 14:34–35, emphasis added)

A woman should learn *in quietness and full submission*. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; *she must be quiet*. (1 Timothy 2:11–12, emphasis added)

Some people are for and some are against women serving in leadership ministries. And it seems that both kinds of people gravitate to these “prohibitive” texts. In some ways, this a bit like asking about marriage in the Bible and gravitating toward the divorce texts. Yes, these statements by Paul about silence are important and they need to be looked at carefully, but there are other important passages in the Bible that we need to look at as well.

The Story of the Bible

Throughout its pages, the Bible tells us many stories about women in various roles of servant leadership. To name some of the more obvious women, think of Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah; think of Esther and the woman in the Song of Songs; think of Priscilla, Junia, and Phoebe. Consider Mary, mother of Jesus, whose influence on Jesus, James, and other early Christians is largely ignored. Many more names could be mentioned.

What did these women do? They were prophets, they were teachers, they were ministry leaders, they were civic leaders, they were apostles, and they were local church mentors.

As people committed to restoring, in our church, the vision of the Bible, we need to wrestle with the key question: Do we permit women to do in our churches what women did in the Bible and in the early churches?

Whatever Paul meant by *silence*, he did not mean to say that the passages that tell us what women were doing in the early church were obsolete after he wrote about silence. We are understanding and applying the silence Paul talks about, in biblical ways, *only if we permit women to do today what women can be found doing in the Bible*.

So now we ask: What did women do in the Bible? If we want to be biblical, this question needs to be asked and answered.

The place to begin is with an all-encompassing text — the creation narrative — that establishes how the Bible's story is to be read.

Creation and New Creation

If we read the Bible as an, “Epic Story,” we begin all questions of the Bible at the beginning, with Genesis 1–3. And if we begin there, the entire story is reshaped. We learn from these chapters that God created male and female as mutuals — made for each other — and they were at one with each another. The fall distorted mutuality by turning women against men and men against women; oneness became otherness and rivalry for power. Here are the climactic words of judgement from Genesis 3:16: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

The fall turned the woman to seek dominance over the man, and the fall turned the man to seek dominance over the woman. A life of struggling for control is the way of life for the fallen. But the good news story of the Bible is that the fall eventually gives way to new creation; the fallen can be reborn and re-created. Sadly, the church has far too often *perpetuated the fall as a permanent condition*. Perpetuating the fall entails failing to *restore creation conditions* when it

comes to male and female relationships. This goes against both Jesus and Paul, who each read the Bible as a story that moves from creation (oneness) to new creation (oneness).

For example, Jesus informed his disciples that although Moses permitted divorce (which annihilates the Creator's designed union in marriage), *divorce was not God's original intention*. Permanence, love, oneness, and mutuality were God's intent in original creation. Jesus, then, appeals to the biblical story, to the original creation, to show how God's people are supposed to live in the new creation. Moses' permission for divorce pertains, it appears, to a life too deeply marred by the fall. The Jesus community undoes the distortions of the fall because it seeks to live out the fullness of the entire biblical story.

Additionally, the apostle Paul twice appeals to original creation to explain God's redemption. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says: "If anyone is in Christ, *the new creation* has come: The old [the fall] has gone, the new [new creation] is here!" (emphasis added). What can this mean but that the implications of the fall are being *undone* for those who are in Christ? This draws us directly back to Genesis 3:16 to see that the otherness struggle between the sexes for control has been ended because we are now living together in the new creation. New creation means we are being restored to the equality and mutuality of Genesis 1–2.

Again, Paul does much the same in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, *neither male nor female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (emphasis added). The words Paul uses for "male ... female" are quoted directly from Genesis 1:27, the original creation story. The word "one" evokes God's oneness and God's design for oneness among his created beings. What is Paul claiming here? He is — and notice this carefully — contending that in Christ we return to Eden's mutuality. He is contending that life in Christ creates unity, equality, and oneness.

What we learn from Genesis 1–2, then, is that God originally made Adam and Eve as mutuals, that the fall distorted that relationship, and that the story of the Bible's plot leads us to see redemption in Christ as new creation. *Both Jesus and Paul see in Genesis 1–2 the original design for what Christ's redemption brings to men and women in this world.*

If there is any place in the world where this mutuality should be restored, it should be in the church.

We now move to some specific women in the Old Testament, taking into consideration concrete examples of what women did in the Bible.

What Did Women Do in the Old Testament? Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah

That God could raise up women into public roles of servant leadership can be seen in three women who come alive in the pages of the Old Testament. They are part of Israel's story, and no storytelling is complete and balanced if it does not include them. Miriam was one of Israel's spiritual servant leaders, Deborah was a civic leader of God's people, and Huldah was a prophet outstanding among other prophets.

Miriam: Spiritual Servant-Leader

Miriam was one-third of ancient Israel's original leadership team: Moses as lawgiver, Aaron as priest, and Miriam as *prophetess*. When the children of Israel escaped the clutches of Pharaoh, it was Miriam who led the Israelites into worship with these inspired words:

*Sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea. (Exodus 15:21)*

The Song of Moses, found now at Exodus 15:1–18, may well have been composed under inspiration by Miriam. Other women are found singing within the pages of the Bible’s story — women like Deborah (Judges 5:1–31), Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10), and Mary (Luke 1:46–55). Singing was connected to the gift of prophecy in the Bible (1 Chronicles 25:1–8). When a later prophet, Micah, spoke of Israel’s deliverance, he saw three leaders in Israel: “I brought you up out of Egypt ... I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam” (Micah 6:4).

Miriam was the one who fetched Moses from the Nile; as Moses’ older sister she no doubt participated in Moses’ own family celebrations of Passover in Egypt; and as older sister she sang alongside Moses and Aaron about God’s deliverance, and helped offer guidance to the people of God.

Deborah: Civic Leader

Judges 4–5 reveals that God called women — it is not mentioned that Deborah is an “exception” — to lead his people. But her story reveals she was truly exceptional.

Like Miriam, Deborah was a *prophet*: “Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading [Hebrew word: *shapat*] Israel at that time” (Judges 4:4). When the Bible says she was “leading” Israel, it uses the term for the *judge* of Israel. She was to her generation what Moses was to his.

The word translated “judged” (*shapat*) combines the ideas of “national leadership,” “judicial decisions,” and “political, military deliverer.” If we ask what did women did in the Bible, and we ask this question of Deborah, we learn that women could speak for God as a prophet, render decisions in a law court as a judge, exercise civic leadership over the entire nation of Israel, and be a military commander who brought Israel to victory.

Huldah: Prophet

When King Josiah is informed of the discovery of the long-lost Torah in the temple, a certain Shaphan reads the text to Josiah. The king, who has “the most responsive royal heart since the hearing heart of Solomon,” realizes the nation has failed to live according to God’s covenant. He falls apart in godly repentance and needs discernment. What should he do? To which of God’s prophets shall he send word to consult?

Here are his options: he can consult Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, or Huldah. The first four have books in Israel’s collection of prophets. But he chooses the female prophet, Huldah, *above the rest*. Huldah is not chosen because no men were available; she is chosen because she is truly exceptional among the prophets.

She confirms that the scroll is indeed God’s Torah and this, in some sense, authorizes this text as Israel’s Scriptures from this time on. Furthermore, prophetess Huldah, unafraid to tell the truth, informs Josiah that indeed God’s wrath is against the disobedience of this nation. But, she adds, because the king has humbled himself before God, he will be gathered to his ancestors in peace. All of this is found in 2 Kings 22.

Conclusion

From this brief sketch, we can repeat the question: What did women do?

They spoke for God;
they led the nation of Israel;
they sanctioned Scripture; and
they guided nations back to the path of righteousness.

But that was then, and this is now. What about in the New Testament? Did women’s roles decrease or increase? If one takes into consideration the story form of the Bible and one considers that Jesus ushers in the beginning of new creation, one should not be surprised to learn that women begin where the Old Testament leaves off and take on new responsibilities.

What Did Women Do in the New Testament? Mary, Junia, Priscilla, Phoebe

We start to respond to this question with Mary, the mother of Jesus. As we dig deeper into her story and other New Testament women, an overarching theme of oneness — of God’s restoring men and women to be one in Christ — begins to take on concrete realities.

Mary: A Woman of Influence

To begin with, Mary was the mother of the Messiah, and it was no small vocation to be part of forming Jesus the Messiah as he matured. Furthermore, if early historical tradition is accurate, Mary was a widow, so when we look at her influence in the early church, we are looking at a widow. As we look carefully at scripture, Mary’s influence emerges in her training of Jesus and of his brother James, and she was critical in the formation of our Gospels.

Mary had a powerful influence on her sons—including Jesus. Theological themes from Mary’s majestic *Magnificat* show up centrally both in the teachings of Jesus and in the letter of James, making it clear that Mary *taught* and was involved in the *spiritual formation* of Jesus and James.

No one would claim that Jesus learned *only* from Mary; of course he learned from Joseph and from others. But can we expect that God would give Mary to Jesus as a mother and *not* qualify her to be a singular and godly influence on him? Absolutely not.

Junia: Outstanding Among the Apostles

Here is all we know about Junia: “Greet Andronicus and *Junia*, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are *outstanding among the apostles*, and they were in Christ before I was” (Romans 16:7, emphasis added). Here are words that have been silenced perhaps more than any other words in the Bible about women: “outstanding among the apostles.” Junia is an outstanding (female) apostle, though to be sure, being a woman had little to do with it. What mattered were her intelligence, her giftedness, and her calling.

Junia and her husband, Andronicus, also an apostle, were relatives of Paul. They came to faith in Christ prior to Paul’s own conversion, and they were imprisoned with Paul (no doubt because they were believers and leaders among the Christians).

But more importantly, Andronicus and Junia are “outstanding” or “prominent” among the apostles. This could mean they were recognized as leaders by the apostles, but the evidence in the early church is that everyone translated this expression as “prominent apostles” among the first generation of Christians. Perhaps we should take a deep breath and get our bearings before we go any further. A statement by St. Chrysostom, a famous preacher and theologian who read and preached in Greek, seals the deal; italics used for the most significant words:

“Greet Andronicus and Junia...who are outstanding among the apostles”: *To be an apostle* is something great. *But to be outstanding among the apostles* — just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. *Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle.*

It is clear that Junia was a woman and Junia was an apostle. But what kind of apostle? She clearly was not one of the twelve apostles chosen and sent out by Jesus. So, what kind was she? The answer is in the Bible. As the story of the Bible unfolds, not only were there the twelve apostles but there were some “lesser” apostles—what Wheaton Professor Doug Moo calls “traveling missionaries.” There were others in the New Testament called “apostle” in this sense, including Barnabas (Acts 14:14), James (Galatians 1:19), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25), and those who are called “apostles of the churches” (2 Corinthians 8:23). Even if we rank Junia among the missionary apostles, she is still an apostle and is considered top drawer for her work.

What kind of work did that involve? Otherwise stated, what did women do as traveling missionaries and church founders? We cannot be absolutely sure, but those gifts had to include such things as evangelizing, teaching, and establishing as well as helping to guide church ministries through servant leadership. Underneath it all would have been an exemplary character of godliness and love that provided a template for others to observe and imitate.

Priscilla: A Teacher of Scripture and Theology

We know much more about Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, than we do of Junia. Aquila and Priscilla were from Rome (Acts 18:2); they were kicked out of Rome when Claudius ordered all “Jews” to evacuate. They became acquainted with the Apostle Paul in Corinth and began to make tents together (18:3). This friendship led to their traveling with Paul to Ephesus, where — and here we are offered another glimpse into what women did in the early churches — Priscilla and Aquila “explained to [Apollos] the way of God more adequately” (18:26). This husband and wife, instead of fighting for power with one another (cf. Genesis 3:16), worked together in powerful ways for the gospel. The mutuality theme is clearly present in their marriage relationship.

There are some details here that deserve a careful look. First, Priscilla’s name is almost always given first. Listing a woman’s name first was not impossible in the ancient world, but it was definitely unusual. Notice these references: Acts 18:18, 19, 26; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19. The only exceptions are Acts 18:2 and 1 Corinthians 16:19.

More importantly, “they” — and again her name is first — “explained” to the scholar Apollos “the way of God more adequately.” Priscilla knew her theology and her Bible, and she knew it so well she could lead Apollos from a John-the-Baptist-faith to a Jesus-faith.

This husband-wife ministry team taught Apollos so well he was able — two verses later — to refute nonmessianic Jews in public debate by opening up the Scriptures for them (Acts 18:28). Clearly Priscilla was a theological teacher. This is why Priscilla and Aquila are called Paul’s “co-workers” in Romans 16:3. “Co-worker” was Paul’s special term for his associates in church ministries. What did they do? They — including Priscilla — shared with Paul in being called by God, in preaching the gospel, in carrying on pastoral work with churches, and in risking their lives for their faith.

What did women do in the New Testament church? We have one woman who was an apostle and another one who was a fellow worker and teacher. We must look at one more — a woman who was at a minimum the official interpreter of Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Phoebe: Deacon and Benefactor

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *deacon* of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the *benefactor* of many people, including me. (Romans 16:1–2, emphasis added)

One of the most noticeable features of women in the earliest churches was that they directed their own households. So, when the churches moved into the homes, these household-directing women became de facto directors and leaders of local household churches. A good example is Phoebe. Unlike Priscilla and Junia, who were both married, Phoebe’s husband is never mentioned. This could very well indicate that she was single. Perhaps she was a widow. We cannot be sure. She stands in this text alone as a single woman. What matters is her calling from God and her giftedness. Paul tells us that she was from Cenchreae, a city just outside of Corinth in Greece, and that she had traveled to Rome.

What did Phoebe do? To begin with, Phoebe is called a “deacon.” This word “deacon” is the same word in the New Testament, whether the person is a man or a woman, for a leader in the church. When Paul calls Phoebe a “deacon,” he is describing her as one who exercised a ministry, or service, in the church.

What kind of ministry? Deacons are often connected to “ministry/service of the word” in Paul’s letters — see, for example, 1 Corinthians 3:5–9.6 But, since Phoebe is called “a deacon of the church in Cenchreae,” we should think of her “ministry” in terms of the list of qualifications and ministries we find in 1 Timothy 3:8–12. Doug Moo describes a safe conclusion: “It is likely that deacons were charged with visitation of the sick, poor relief, and perhaps financial oversight.” Others think more is involved, that is, that “deacon” describes an official ministry of God’s Word.

At some level Phoebe was a “minister.” When Paul asks the church at Rome to “receive her,” he surely has in mind that they are to roll out a red carpet of hospitality — the way they do for “saints.”

But it is also possible that Phoebe, a benefactor or wealthy patron of Paul’s ministry of bringing the gospel to the Roman Empire, was responsible for getting this letter to the right people. Most scholars today think Phoebe was Paul’s courier for the letter to the Romans. Since couriers were charged with responsibility to explain their letters, Phoebe probably read the letter aloud and answered questions the Christians in Rome may have had. Phoebe, to put this directly, can thus be seen as the first “commentator” on the letter to the Romans.

One more point. One of Phoebe’s most important contributions was providing funds. It is worth noting that in the fourth century, in an inscription found on Jerusalem’s Mount of Olives, a woman named Sophia was called the “new Phoebe” or the “second Phoebe” because of her financial support for Christian ministries.

What Did Women Do?

What did women do? Another way of asking this question is this: What did women do if we read the New Testament as Story? How do we see the oneness theme begin to take shape in the story of the New Testament?

Mary was influential with Jesus and James and gave to Luke crucial information for writing his gospel.

Junia was an apostle who was involved in missionary work.

Priscilla taught Bible and theology alongside her husband.

Phoebe financially supported the apostle Paul in his ministry, carried his letter to Rome, and helped to explain its contents as Paul prepared for his Spanish mission.

These women were influential, they were a source for stories about Jesus, they were church planters, they were teachers, they were benefactors and interpreters of Paul’s letters.

Furthermore, we learn a little more about each: Junia and Priscilla were married, but Mary was a widow and Phoebe may well have been single. There is no indication that women could teach and lead only if they were connected to a male who was also a leader. And, to tie these four women into the story of the Bible, each of these women exhibits the mutuality (or oneness) theme that begins in creation, is threatened by the fall, and begins to become more and more a reality in Christ.

If women did all this, why does Paul speak of silencing women in public assemblies? How does such silencing fit within the theme of oneness — of God’s work of redemption, restoring men and women into unity in Christ? This is where reading the Bible as Story, asking, “What did women do?” becomes important.

Furthermore, it means that though we may read the Bible *with* tradition (where women are silenced), we are at times called to challenge the tradition.

What Was Going On in Corinth and Ephesus?

We have already sketched some passages in the story of the Bible where we discover the presence of women in leadership and public ministries. We have called these passages the, “What did women do?” passages. Now for a theoretical point with enormous significance for women in ministry: some believe the “silencing” passages should control the, “What did women do?” passages. Such persons give any number of reasons, but the point needs to be made clear: such persons believe the silencing passages are permanent and there is no place in the local church today for women prophets, apostles, or servant leaders, or for women to perform any kind of teaching ministry.

There is a troubling irony in this approach, and it concerns whether we Christians are to live under the conditions of the fall or under the conditions of the new creation, whether we are to emphasize otherness or oneness. To understand this, look again at the words in Genesis 3:16: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” These words are not an ironclad rule for the rest of history.

Sadly, some think Genesis 3:16 is a *prescription* for the relationship of women and men for all time. Instead of a prescription, these two lines are a *prediction* of the fallen desire of fallen women and fallen men in a fallen condition in a fallen world. Fallen women yearn to dominate the man, and fallen men yearn to dominate women. The desire to dominate is a broken desire. The redeemed desire is to love in mutuality. In other words, Genesis 3, predicts a struggle of fallen wills; it does not prescribe how we are *supposed* to live.

Genesis 3:16 speaks of fallen humans seeking to control other people. But the fall is not the last word in the Bible, and surely the Song of Songs is a profound example of Israelites finding a better way than what is found in Genesis 3:16. Even more for the Christian we have to factor in new creation, the day God began to renew all things in Jesus Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Here is the most important verse in the Bible about new creation: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christian men and women are to live a life that moves beyond the fall, beyond the battle of wills. If new creation does anything, it unleashes the power to undo the fall in our world. This cannot be emphasized enough: the story of the Bible is the story of new creation in Christ. The words of Genesis 3:16, to put the matter directly, are overcome in new creation. These words in Genesis 3:16 are not words for anyone other than unredeemed, fallen women and men. Newly created followers of Christ can find a better way in mutuality. Paul teaches that we are all “one in Christ” and that in Christ there is “neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28).

Now for the troubling irony: seeking to control or limit the applicability of the, “What did women do?” passages by appealing to the silencing passages illustrates the fall, not the new creation. When men seek to control women by silencing them permanently in the church, we stand face-to-face with a contradiction of the very thing the new creation is designed to accomplish: to undo the fall. What we see in this desire to silence women is the desire to rule over women, a desire that pertains to the fall, not to the new creation. What the Spirit does when the Spirit is present is to release and liberate humans from their fallen condition so that God’s will can be completely done. The Spirit creates mutuality. Always.

A Brief Reminder

So, when we come upon the two silencing passages, we need to learn to read them out of the story of the Bible. We need to remind ourselves of this:

- women in the Old Testament exercised servant leadership;
- women in the Old Testament spoke for God as prophets;
- women in the New Testament era were gifted by God’s Spirit for such things as teaching and servant leadership;
- and new creation begins to undo the fall, which means that men and women are drawn back into being “one” in Christ.

Even if the Bible’s “what did women do?” actions by women were exceptional instead of the norm, God has always raised up women with such gifts. Someone could explain the Old Testament “What did women do?” passages as exceptions to the norm, but there’s more going on than exceptions in the New Testament. Something new is happening with women in the New Testament.

Another Important But Overlooked Passage

One of the most significant passages about women in church ministries is often ignored. The plot in the Bible’s story reveals that the messianic era would release the Spirit so that *women would also be gifted to exercise prophecy and servant leadership in the churches*. When the Spirit fell upon the Pentecostal assembly, including Mary and other women, Peter said:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

“In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy,

your young men will see visions,

your old men will dream dreams.

Even on my servants, *both men and women,*

I will pour out my Spirit in those days,

and *they will prophesy.*” (Acts 2:16–18, emphasis added)

Pentecost was the day the music of the fall died and the day new creation music began to be sung. Acts 2 makes it clear that something big and something new was happening, and that bigness and that newness included women. Pentecost, so the Bible tells us, leads us to think of an *increase* in women’s capacities to minister, not a decrease. Women’s ministries *expand* as the Bible’s plot moves forward; they do not shrink. Many today have shrunk the role of women in ministries, and when that happens, it flat-out contradicts the direction the Bible is asking us to move.

We must return to the point made in the previous chapters. We must ask, “what did women do?” We must ask about how the Story of God moves forward in the Bible. This kind of Bible reading means that when we read about women being silenced in Paul, you and I are drawn into a decision. Either we see Paul contradicting the way God has used women in the rest of the Bible or we are being asked to see the silence as a special kind of silence. That is the point we will sketch out for both 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:8–15.

Women at Corinth

The reason some believe in silencing women begins with 1 Corinthians 14:34–35.² Here are Paul’s words:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

Knowing what we know from our “what did women do?” reading about the role of women in the early churches, we are surprised that Paul would say “women should remain silent in the churches.” Furthermore, Paul himself gives instructions on women prophesying in the churches in this same letter to the Corinthians. One can’t prophesy (or pray) in public and remain completely silent; prophesying means talking in public! In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says this about women in public church gatherings: “But every woman who *prays or prophesies* with her head uncovered dishonors her head — it is the same as having her head shaved” (11:5, emphasis added). And we know from the book of Acts that women exercised the gift of prophecy in the churches. Peter saw this as a fulfillment of the prophet Joel (Acts 2:17–18; 21:9).

So, yes, we are surprised by the sudden appearance of a command for silence for women. Many of us, when reading these words about silence after we have absorbed the rest of the biblical witness, ask this: If women did

what we have already seen they did throughout scripture, and if Paul offers clear directions on how women should exercise their gift of prophecy in public gatherings, how can he suddenly say women should “remain silent”? Has he not contradicted himself? How do we explain 1 Corinthians 14?

Many biblical scholars today believe that Paul’s silencing of women is a *special kind of silencing*. In other words, Paul is not totally silencing women; that would contradict his own teaching. We are not completely sure what kind of special silence he has in mind, so let us sketch three options. Some think Paul prohibits women from *evaluating prophecies*. Others think Paul is asking women to be silent when it comes to *speaking in or interpreting tongues*, another special concern in this passage. The third option comes from Craig Keener, an expert scholar on the historical background to the New Testament, who keenly observes that Paul’s own words clarifies this best. Paul silences women in regard to *asking questions*: “If they want to *inquire about something*, they should ask their own husbands [if they are married] at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak [inquire about something they don’t yet understand] in the church.”

Why would Paul restrict the asking of questions? The best answer is because these women were not yet educated theologically or biblically as well as the men. When these women heard what was being said, they had questions. Paul thinks those sorts of questions should be asked elsewhere, probably because it interrupted the service. This conclusion has significant implications. Paul’s silencing of women at Corinth is then only a *temporary* silencing. Once the women with questions had been educated, they would be permitted then to ask questions in the gatherings of Christians.

An implication of Paul’s statements is the responsibility of Christian men and leaders to educate women, and this would have stood out in the ancient world as a progressive ideal. As Keener states it, Paul “supports learning before speaking.” He adds that such an educational process would not “prohibit women in very different cultural settings from speaking God’s word.” Furthermore, we must pay special attention to the fact that women today are not uneducated — in fact, some male pastors are! This passage testifies to the importance of education — of knowing the Bible and theology and having pastoral gifts and skills — and once those basics are met, anyone with gifts should be encouraged to use their gifts.

Women at Ephesus

Because Paul’s instruction for the elders in Ephesus (note that Timothy was in Ephesus when Paul wrote this letter to him; see 1 Timothy 1:3) to silence women is used by some to silence women, and because others think such a view is politically incorrect, the passage has itself been silenced by both sides! The fuller context of the passage is below.

Modesty: 1 Timothy 2:9-10

I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

First, Paul expects the women to whom he is speaking to dress modestly; by that he means they are not to dress elaborately or seductively and are to focus their attention on “good deeds.” The reason for this has to do with the respectability of the gospel and the church, and Paul is concerned with the influence of the new Roman women who threatened the reputation of the gospel.

Learning before Teaching: 1 Timothy 2:11-12

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

Second, Paul expects women first to learn in quietness and full submission to those who know, and only then does he say they are not to teach or exercise authority. *Learning* women — and this now sounds like 1 Corinthians 14 —

are to “be quiet.” Paul does not say that women are always to sit in the learning posture and never to be teachers; he does not say they are forever to remain silent, for that would contradict the known practices of the early churches.

Adam and Eve: 1 Timothy 2:13–14

For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.

Third, in these two verses Paul anchors the silencing of unlearned women in two points: (1) Adam was “formed first” and (2) Eve was first to be deceived. These two statements surprise the reader. It is entirely possible Paul is responding to Roman women. These “new Roman women” could have been claiming that the gender order should be reversed, with women subordinating men, and that the original creation was first females and then males.

We cannot be sure why Paul says what he says here. However one interprets these verses—and let’s be honest enough to say they are difficult—if we make them an inflexible rule that women should always be silent, we have a flat-out contradiction to the Story of the Bible, to the practices of Priscilla and Junia and Phoebe, and to Paul himself. It seems that Paul is responding to, and refuting, the claims of “new Roman women” that women were superior to men.

Childbearing and Salvation: 1 Timothy 2:15

But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Fourth, Paul continues to say that if women — and here he is speaking to married women — continue in the faith, they will be “saved through childbearing.” Once again, no one knows for certain what this verse means. Many today think the verse has something to do with the new Roman women’s avoidance of marriage while others also suggest that he is responding to the growing attraction on the part of the “new Roman women” to terminate their pregnancies. If this is so, we may have an allusion to abortion in the New Testament.

Paul discerns that these Christian (and married) women need to know that being married and being mothers are worthy vocations for women. Paul is not advocating that all women must be married.