



Raise Your Voice

'If she have the necessary gifts and feels herself called by the Spirit to preach, there is not a single word in the whole Book of God to restrain her, but many, very many, to urge and encourage her.'

Catherine Booth



**GOD'S DESIGN FOR
GENDER EQUITY**

A Bible study from creation
to Jesus, and beyond.

Chapter 6



Chapter 6

Raise Your Voice ... or Keep Silent?

by Major Ian Gainsford



*'It is odd when the
Holy Spirit says your
daughters shall prophesy,
and we say they shall not.'*

Nikolaus Zinzendorf

Let's start

Here's one of the great, unspoken truths about Bible study: it's difficult. Which is not to say that the Bible is always hard to follow, but rather that the process of trying to learn what a good interpretation looks like is far harder than we sometimes suppose. To start with, the idea that there is way, and only one way, to understand any passage of scripture is to fail before we begin.

As an illustration of this, let's begin looking at one of a difficult passage in the New Testament, which has been used to keep women silent for centuries—but, is this the best way to read this scripture?

Let's read

1 Timothy 2:11–15 (NIV)

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

Let's discuss

- What do you think the 'plain meaning' of this passage is?
- For what possible reason could the writer want to say that women should not be permitted to teach or assume authority over a man?
- Why might The Salvation Army have reached the conclusion that women have an equal part to play in teaching and leadership within the church, if this 'plain meaning' suggests otherwise?

Let's dig deeper

When we begin to take a deeper look at this passage, we quickly realise that the 'plain meaning' passage might actually be deceiving—in fact, we see this in almost the first word:

Instead of the word 'woman', The Common English Bible uses the word 'wife'. So it reads: 'A wife should learn quietly ...' Instantly, we can see that we are dealing with a difference in translation choice—which is to say, a difference in interpretation.

We are often inclined to look for the 'plain meaning' of the text without acknowledging that the text we read is itself the result of choices of interpretation—into a language and a culture that didn't exist at the time the words were written.

As N.T. Wright says, 'this passage far and away above all others... has been the sheet-anchor for those who want to deny women a place in the ordained ministry of the church'⁴⁰. So at the very least, when we look at a passage like this one, we owe it to God and to ourselves to read it carefully.

What was going on at Ephesus?

The letter of 1 Timothy is a pastoral letter written from Paul to Timothy, who was assigned to care for the church in Ephesus in Paul's absence. It is concerned with false teaching, and the rhythms of life within the growing Ephesian church—and both of these concerns shed light on the passage we are considering.

It's often said that context is a key part of good interpretations of scripture: What has led up to the verses being read? What follows? What can we learn from the historical context within which it was written? As much as anything else, these and other questions help us understand what interpretations are not so good.

In this case, we can go back earlier in Timothy 2, to verses 8–10, and see that there is an instruction for men to pray 'without anger or disputing', and for women to 'dress modestly ... not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls'.

It's helpful to know that this is written at a time when public discourse between men was in fact often characterised by loud debate and disagreement; and that Paul's hope was that Christian life and prayer would be marked by something better.

It's also helpful to know that this was a time in which women were often expected to conform to a stereotype of fussing over their 'look'. Paul is not really commenting on lifting up holy hands and dressing down; he's encouraging people to free themselves from social conformity for the sake of contributing to the community of faith, and to the society in which they live—that the adornment we should be looking for is that of 'good deeds'.⁴¹

A place for women to learn

When we turn to verse 11, then, it requires us to ask: 'what is this being written in response to?' Just as Paul's comments about how we dress are not intended to say there's no place for dressing up from time to time, is it possible that this is not saying that all women for all time must stay silent and not teach?

Let me suggest one immediate reason why this interpretation—which, again, has been used for centuries to keep women from leadership roles within the family of God on Earth—is unlikely. Verse 11 begins, 'A woman should learn'. This itself is remarkable: women, who were often regarded as second-class citizens at best, should be actively involved in learning about the Gospel. And in a letter written to address false teaching, we can conclude that this learning was especially important to combat the false ideas that had been leading the Ephesian Christians astray, and disrupting

their worship—learning in which the student submits to the teacher.

Artemis worship and the new converts

At the same time, it was being written when Timothy was most likely in Ephesus, which was home to a great temple dedicated to Artemis. This was a place led by women priests, who ruled the show and ‘kept men in their place’.⁴² In light of this, the word chosen by Paul that is translated here as ‘assume authority over a man’ actually has the sense of being bossy, or asserting control or domination. It’s almost as though Paul is saying ‘women mustn’t be set up to be domineering, or to rule over men the same way that men have always ruled over women’.

In fact, the recent *Passion* Bible translation makes the context in Ephesus explicit. Its translation of 1 Timothy 2:11 is: ‘Let the women who are new converts be willing to learn with all submission to their leaders’. This brings yet another nuance into how we interpret this difficult passage!

‘The only cultural context of worship was that women were the leaders,’ explains *The Passion* translation. Instead, Paul is saying that these new converts should ‘take a respectful posture of a disciple in this new way of worshipping the true God’.⁴³

Here, it is not so much about whether you are a man or woman, but about how to respectfully mature into your new faith.

But what about Adam and Eve?

Paul appears to give a rock-solid rationale for prohibiting women from speaking by invoking Eve’s first sin, but this also needs to be understood within its wider context. Theologian Marg Mowczko argues that this passage was actually aimed at one particular husband and wife—the clue is that Paul switches from using ‘men’ and ‘women’ earlier in the passage, to the more specific ‘man’ and ‘woman’ in these verses only.

Mowczko believes that Paul uses the story of Adam and Eve, not as a reason for women to be silent, but as a correction: ‘in order to guide Timothy about how to correct a corrupt version of the creation story.’⁴⁴

This is consistent with Paul correcting the Artemis-worldview that only women should be in charge. Again, Paul seems to be guiding us back to the concept of mutuality in relationship, which has been his theme in many other scriptures.

Even if this is simply a theory from Mowczko, what is not up for debate is that ‘Paul did not seem to consider the ministries of his female coworkers a problem. Paul makes no mention of restrictions regarding the ministries of Priscilla, Phoebe, Junia, Nympha, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis and others. Rather, he offers warm commendations and greetings. And in his general teaching on ministry ... Paul gives no hint that some of these ministries are only for men.’⁴⁵

Tips for interpreting scripture

There are often two equal errors that can be made with some of these difficult passages of scripture. One is to say that all we need to do is take the plain meaning of scripture and apply it—but this sometimes fails to understand the role of translation and context in how we read scripture. The other is to explain difficult passages away as only applying it in a particular place and time—that the instructions are cultural rather than theological. Sometimes this is true—but sometimes it fails to wrestle with a deeper point being made by the author. John Stott, a moderately conservative evangelical voice, clearly identifies the risks of both unthinking ‘literalism’, and ungrounded ‘liberalism’.⁴⁶

The Salvation Army’s theology has often leaned into what is known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (don’t worry, we don’t need to remember this name!). Simply put, this is the idea that what we believe relies on four

sources: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. This recognises that there is simply no way to read scripture without being influenced to some degree by the faith tradition we have learned in, our lived experiences, and our capacity to think things through.

In this chapter, we've begun to uncover what's under the surface of our scripture readings. Now, let's also look at:

Our tradition: What does our tradition tell us? Co-founder of The Salvation Army Catherine Booth wrote in 1859 that the 'mistaken and unjustifiable application of the passage, "Let your women keep silence in the churches" has resulted in more loss to the church, evil to the world, and dishonour to God, than any of the errors we have already referred to.'⁴⁷

William and Catherine Booth insisted from a very early point that any role in public ministry and any position of leadership could be performed by women as well as men; and in doing so were entirely consistent with a tradition that ran through Methodist practices, and the Holiness Movement of which the Army was a part. The release of women into public ministry and leadership was an indispensable aspect of stewarding the gifts, talents and abilities granted by God to both women and men—and to suppress or deny female ministry was therefore both to deny the grace of God, and do harm to the cause of God's kingdom.⁴⁸

Our experience: Again, Catherine speaks to this: 'the word and the Spirit cannot contradict each other'⁴⁹—in other words, if the Spirit equips women for ministry, which clearly was the case, the scriptures cannot be read in such a way as to forbid their ministry. A re-evaluation of biblical interpretation had to be made. As the 18th century protestant figure Nikolaus Zinzendorf put it, 'It is odd when the Holy Spirit says your daughters shall prophesy, and we say they shall not.'⁵⁰

Our reason: Reason might help us understand that virtually the only way

to demand the silence of women and keep them from leadership roles in the church, is if we read the English translation of this passage at face value, without any regard for the original language or original context. This may be an easy way to interpret the Bible—and it may be in keeping with the practices of many churches—but it is not a solution that takes the Bible seriously enough to actually scratch beneath the surface.

First, this letter was written in a context within which the women priests of Artemis were demanding obedience as a function of religious practice. Second, we need to set this alongside other writings from Paul which clearly talk about the submission of believers to one another. For instance, Philippians 2:3–4 tells us, 'Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.'

In Colossians 3, we have a number of instructions: wives, submit to your husbands; husbands, love your wives. Taken in the context of the verses before this, the clear impression built up throughout this chapter is one of mutuality. This is not about submission meaning one thing and love another, but of building each another up—being with one another and for one another. It would be very strange, then, for Paul to mean something entirely different when it comes to his message to Timothy.

The Salvation Army has long since decided that this cannot mean that women are not to lead or that they must stay silent. So how do we apply all this today?⁵¹

Let's discuss

- What might it mean for men and women to learn, lead and serve together without domination?
- What are some ways we could do better at making space for one another, instead of seeking control over one another? And what do we lose when we try to keep anyone silent?
- If men and women are equally equipped by God for service and leadership, it sometimes seems that there are nonetheless strengths each bring to leadership. How do we make the most of these without diminishing the place of either?

Final thought

'One of the leading principles upon which the Army is based is the right of women to have the right to an equal share with men in the work of publishing salvation to the world ... Women must be treated as equal with men in all the intellectual and social relationships in life.'

Orders and Regulations for Staff Officers of The Salvation Army in the United Kingdom⁵²