

## Let the Women Preach

I recently decided to venture into the wilderness that is Twitter. I had set up an account some years ago and followed a lot of my favorite worship leaders and a few popular preachers, but it had remained dormant for some years. This time, when I crossed the threshold into the Twittersverse, I ran headlong into a heated discussion of the disfellowshipping of Saddleback Church (among others) by the Southern Baptist convention.

The reason that the SBC disfellowshipped Saddleback is clear. They appointed a woman, the wife of one of their pastors, as a teaching pastor. This led to a twitter-storm (relatively minor, I'm sure, by twitter standards) about the place of women in the pastorate. In particular, it led to the quoting of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 more than once. I wanted to scream. I am deathly tired of having to women against the straw man Paul that so many churches have thrown up to defend their patriarchal systems and continue to subjugate women.

First, let's look at the passage in question. I'm quoting the ESV. I think that's a relatively politically neutral translation.

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.

If the churches that use this verse to justify keeping women out of the pastorate are going to be consistent, they'd better take every single woman out of their churches out of any teaching position. That's going to make Sunday School a real treat to manage. You simply cannot take the part that suits your purposes and leave aside "I do not permit a woman to teach." They must not allow women to vote on any church matter, especially leadership, as that gives them authority over the men they elect. Yes, authority. If you have votes, the authority resides with the voters who *bestow* authority on the leadership. Indeed, they mustn't be allowed to speak at all in church meetings. They must remain quiet.

Setting aside the absurdity of the image that creates, I suppose it's possible that someone might actually decide to take every word of 1 Timothy that seriously. That would at least get them out from under their own inconsistency. But it doesn't solve their problem. It doesn't deal with what Paul actually did, giving pride of place to Prisca (Priscilla) twice over her husband Aquila in his letters, listing her first when speaking of the two of them, his co-laborers for the Gospel. But much more urgently, it doesn't resolve their difficulty that Paul very specifically contradicts that very teaching in 1 Corinthians 14. And he does.

Let's look at that passage.

1 Corinthians 14:33b–36

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?  
(ESV)

At first blush, this might appear to support the reading in 1 Timothy, not contradict it, but that's because we're reading it in English. If we read it in Greek, it comes out quite differently.

Two different scholars, coming at this passage from very different directions came to the same conclusion. Paul is not saying that women should be silent in the churches. He is contradicting the Corinthians, who have previously written to him that women should be silent. He is quoting their own letter back to them and then saying, rather strongly, "No!"

David Odell-Scott, in *Biblical Theology*, wrote an article in 1983 entitled "Let the Women Speak in Church." In it he reads the Greek text of this passage very carefully so as to demonstrate that the last the two questions of verse 36 "serve to refute the sentences which preceded it." It all revolves around the correct reading of a tiny word in Greek called a "particle." I didn't get into particles when I studied Greek. My niece who has a Ph.D. in classics recently told me, "I quit when I got to particles!" They're really strange, because they convey the "force, or vividness" of the text. In this case the particle that begins verse 36 is *e*. (eta with a smooth breathing mark and an accent grave) And this particle is *disjunctive*. That means basically that what comes after it means the opposite, contradicts what came before it.

Odell-Scott also shows that Paul's use of the particle *e* to set his own words in opposition to something the Corinthians have done or said occurs elsewhere in the letter. He does much the same thing in 1 Cor. 11:20-22.

So now we have Paul, contradicting someone in Corinth who wants to silence the women. Odell-Scott goes on to show that in verse 36, Paul's use of *monous*, (alone) in the masculine plural means that he is speaking to the *men* of Corinth. Yes, masculine

plural can be used to refer to men and women inclusively, but reading that inclusively against the attempt to silence the women makes little sense. Although, given the modern tendency among some evangelical women to teach (oops) that other women should be submissive, we might even read it inclusively. Regardless, Paul is saying “No!” to whomever is trying to tell the women to be quiet.

In another article Charles Talbert (Wake Forest, Paul’s Understanding of the Holy Spirit, Perspectives In Religious Studies, 1984) demonstrates that this quoting of a Corinthian assertion, only to disagree with it, marks the passage in question, too. He doesn’t go into detail with regard to the force of particles, but rather shows how this fits into a pattern established in the section just preceding 14:34 about tongues versus prophecy. (He also points to the masculine plural adjective *monous*, as Odell-Scott did.)

Given then that Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians the women’s right to speak in worship, and his correction of those who would silence them, anyone quoting 1 Timothy must first explain how both can be true.

I suppose that some will argue that allowing women to speak in church is not the same as giving a woman authority over a man, and that we should still at least honor that part of what is said in 1 Timothy. But I will answer, “You don’t get to cherry pick, as you accuse so many other Christians of doing. If you accept the one, you must accept the other.” In addition, someone who took issue with what I’m saying on Twitter helpfully pointed out that the verb *laleo*, here translated as “speak,” is often used in reference to teachers throughout the NT.

I have my own way of reconciling these two passages, and I might add them to an edit of this post at some point, but I’ve written elsewhere on The Vicar’s Keep about how I read Scripture, and I’m afraid that’ll have to do for now.

This is a link to Odell-Scott’s article on Sage. “[Let the Women Speak in Church.](#)” I regret that Talbot’s article does not appear to be available online.