

Chapter 8

THE CHURCH AS A SILENCING INSTITUTION

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

—1 Cor. 14:33–35

THIS TEXT, SOMETHING OF AN ODDITY AND OF A SCANDAL in the corpus of the Epistles, is a front-and-center study for our theme of silence. It directly and unambiguously prescribes the silencing of one element of the church community by another segment of the community. It is an oddity, but not singularly so, for the same prescription is commended elsewhere in the New Testament Epistles:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. (1 Tim. 2:12).

In a less direct way, other texts indicate the subordination of women to men in the church (see Titus 2:15; 2 Pet. 3:1).

Not surprisingly a good many critical questions arise concerning our text in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. We may wonder how this text belongs with others from Paul that clearly say otherwise. And if this text is not congruent with much of Paul, perhaps it is a later intrusion and does not come from Paul. But unless one is at work protecting Paul's reputation and legacy, this question does not matter greatly because the text is there in the epistle, and it has, over time, exercised immense pernicious influence in the church.

GENDER EQUITY IN PAUL'S COMMUNITY

We may begin reflecting more broadly with the evidence elsewhere from Paul concerning the relation of men and women in the church. First we should begin with the remarkable statement in Galatians 3:28 that is commonly taken to be a baptismal formula:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ.

To be "in Christ" is to be baptized into a different of set of social relationships:

Our oneness in Christ overcomes and delegitimizes the distinctions of race, social class, and gender that divided us when we were prisoners under the power of sin.¹

Krister Stendahl, in a reference now lost to me, has observed that Paul's own work concerned Jews and Gentiles and only belatedly has the church gotten to

the issue of slavery, and only in contemporary times, even more belatedly, has the church addressed the relation of "male and female." All of these social relationships, however, are inchoately present from the outset in the baptismal community, so that relationships in the new regime of Christ are radically changed from conventional practice.

Paul echoes the formula of Galatians 3:28 in 1 Corinthians 12:13:

He [Paul] did not understand the baptismal formula to prescribe merely a spiritual equality before God in a way that had no social implications. Furthermore, the evidence on the other two issues (slavery and male/female relationships) is sufficiently ambiguous to suggest that Paul's vision did, in fact, destabilize traditional assumptions about power in a way that had practical implications in his communities.²

Paul reiterates the formula in 1 Corinthians 12:13, though that usage is absent in the third element of "male and female."

Second, the large claim made in the baptismal formula is evidently worked out in practice in the life of the early church. Thus Paul's Epistles indicate the readiness of Paul to share ministry with a variety of women whom he names. This roster includes Phoebe, Euodia, Syntyche, Apphia, and Prisca. The recurrence of such women in the Epistles of Paul leads Paul Sampley to this verdict:

In the six undisputed letters apart from I Corinthians, no passage suggests any limitation on the role or function of women in the Pauline churches.³

There can be no doubt that in *its profession of faith* and in *its practice* the congregations planted by Paul were committed to gender equity that matched Paul's primary commitment to the equity of Jews and Gentiles in the church.

WHAT HAPPENS?

But then we are still left with our text, which unambiguously tells otherwise. Given the profession and practice indicated above, we are left with this prescription to the contrary. How shall we understand such a variance? At the outset we might judge that it is a long, hard step from sweeping profession to actual concrete practice. We have all experienced that in our own lives and in the life of the church. Thus Hayes is surely correct when he judges,

Of course the practical outworking of this vision of the new creation remains the ongoing task of the church in history as we "eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness" (5:5).⁴

The key is "practical outworking" that must deal with well-established practices in society all around the church. It is, moreover, not unlikely that Paul himself had impulses from the traditional practice of female subordination, impulses reflected in the belated articulations of Ephesians 5:22–24 and Colossians 3:18–19. And if these letters are not from Paul, they are certainly linked to the circles in which he lived and worked.

It may be, as many scholars contend, that our verses are a later intrusion into the epistle. If that is the case,

then the articulation of these verses may reflect a development of a more "institutional" way of thinking and organizing the community, a development often linked to the Pastoral Epistles (see glossary). Given such a development the early church may have been willing, as happens when movements become institutions, to compromise its most sweeping claims and to accommodate social reality and expectation. If we may allow for the lateness of our text, this suggests that derivative from Paul is a readiness to accommodate social resistance to equity, even in the name of Paul.

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The best that can be made of our verses is that the early church operated in an honor/shame society. Perhaps in that frame of reference outspoken women were an embarrassment for their husbands, that is, they brought social shame on them. Thus it would follow that the silencing is to be practiced in order to honor the male members of the community.

However the practical issues may be parsed, the fact remains that our text evidences the act of silencing whereby the voices of women are silenced in a way that contradicts the church's baptismal profession and the practice of much of the church. As always with imposed silence, the protection of power and privilege

proceeds without scruple in a worldly practice of domination.

SILENCING IS ALIVE AND WELL TODAY

Whatever may be our interpretation about the intention of this text in the early church in the orbit of Paul, the fact is that the text is there and has exercised an enormously pernicious influence in the life of the church. In appealing to this text in order to silence women in the church, there is no lingering over the question of Pauline authorship or concerning the slippage between profession and practice. The text rather has been treated as a flat absolute that seems obvious to those who have read and continue to read it uncritically. As a result, the practical outcome has been a long history of subordination of women in the church that has evoked hard struggle over the authorization of ordination for women and their empowerment in the church. For all that we know about the baptismal formula of Galatians 3:28, the struggle had not seen much success in the wider church until the middle or later part of the twentieth century. Institutions, even well-intentioned ones, are not readily open to the realignment of power and privilege. Indeed, a recent *New York Times* article told about a protest of Jewish women at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem for equal rights and privileges for women who want to pray at the Wall. In the photo these protesting women are carrying Torah scrolls, making visible their claim to legitimacy at the Wall.⁵ Prime Minister Netanyahu “accused the liberal Jewish women of causing ‘unnecessary friction’ and of ‘the unilateral violation

of the status quo of the Wailing Wall.” Of course, it is no different in the church; when the silence is broken there is indeed a unilateral violation of the status quo, and reaction is often swift.

We may therefore reflect on the church as a silencing institution in which the claims of the gospel have been commonly violated for the sake of control and privilege. That silencing has concerned women, but the silencing for the same reason has been extended to many populations that constitute the “other” to white-male, Western domination.

The Roman Catholic Church, with its well-ordered hierarchy and its commitment to centralization, is able to sustain silencing in a quite formal way by the practice of excommunication or, as in the noted cases of Hans Kung and Leonardo Boff, the church is said to “silence” its teachers who violate the absolutes of the “magisterium.” Those who are silenced of course are not made mute, but they are deauthorized and can claim no legitimacy in the church to which they have given their lives.

In 2016 Pope Francis (*even* Pope Francis) made clear, in the wake of an ecumenical meeting in Lund, Sweden, that the ordination of women would be prohibited forever.⁶ It was a statement freighted with irony because it followed a celebration of reconciliation with Lutherans at the anniversary of the Reformation. Francis yet again appealed to the ludicrous, often-repeated reason that Jesus had had no female disciples. Of course that long-standing prohibition is deeply at risk because serious Catholics can read the Gospel texts other than the prohibition in our text. But the opinions of many

Catholics, as well as the “nuns on the bus,” suggest that male domination may not have the last word, because the spirit may blow in other directions.

Other expressions of the Christian movement do not have the measured mechanics for silencing that belong more readily to a hierarchal church. But even sectarian movements in the church have the technique of “shunning,” an effective social maneuver that reads people out of the community if they violate the norms. The silencing works well in such a maneuver.

Such churches, not unlike the Catholic reliance on nuns, have been willing to utilize the cheap labor of women as long as that labor did not make any claim to authority.

More conservative, evangelical church communities share a long tradition of being wounding institutions. Very often such wounding revolves around an authoritarian pastor who takes for himself a voice of absolutism that can determine who is in and who is out. Such authoritarian churches have long silenced women or have excluded women’s voices in the teaching, pastoral office. Such churches, not unlike the Catholic reliance on nuns, have been willing to utilize the cheap labor of women as long as that labor did not make any claim to authority. The propensity to absolutism has been a ready tool for social control that has widely been in the service of racism and in the current struggle for the rights and legitimacy of homosexuals.

Given such absolutism such voices readily become equated with the truth of God.

The matter is slightly different in so-called progressive churches that profess to be all-inclusive and that prefer such slogans as “All are welcome.” In such traditions (including my own United Church of Christ), however, the actual practice of silence is done through ideological purity so that voices to the contrary result in exclusion. In progressive tradition, it is not women who are silenced but many others are who do not submit to the “liberal absolutism.”

I intend, by my comment on Catholics, sectarians, evangelical conservatives, and liberal progressives (with a glance at the struggle in Judaism) to suggest that in all parts of the church, readiness for silencing and wounding are alive and well. All of that, of course, cannot be blamed on our text. A review of such a propensity to silencing and wounding, however, does illuminate both why we have such a text in our canon and how such a text has continued to feed and legitimate that propensity.

There is no practical area in the life of the church in which reform is more urgent than in the church’s propensity (in all of its manifestations) to silence. Such reform, like every moment of reform, means a return to the core claims of the gospel. In this case, it is the core claim of the baptismal formula of Galatians 3:28 concerning the third element of “male and female.” As Stendhal observed, we are slowest about this third member of the triad.⁷ As the church in reform draws closer to its core confession, it inescapably embraces its

most radical vision that violates and contradicts conventional practice in its social context. What makes such reform difficult, moreover, is the fact that while we ponder the radical core claims of faith, we ourselves are variously enmeshed in conventional practices that are inimical to the gospel.

CHALLENGE ORIGINALISM

Finally, we are left with the text in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. It is a prescriptive statement to which easy appeal can be made. Our society has lately been beset by an epidemic of “strict constructionism” that was famously championed by the late conservative Supreme Court Justice Anthony Scalia. Scalia’s concern, of course, has been with the U.S. Constitution. In his reading, the original intent of the writers of the Constitution is the final word. It happened, of course, that Scalia’s original intent always tilted in a conservative direction and most often agreed with his own conservative propensity. This doctrine of originalism was a backward look to a society the way it used to be or the way it wanted itself to be remembered.

That doctrine of originalism is in fact only another version of fundamentalism, in which the literal meaning of a text is taken without critical attentiveness to context. When the doctrine is applied to Scripture, a judgment about the silencing of women, uncritically and without context, can be taken as an absolute prescription. This is the conclusion about silencing women that has been operative in much of the church.

But of course fundamentalism (or originalism) in

both Constitution and Scripture is not sustainable precisely because the human community is in process and under way. Such process requires that both the Constitution and the Bible be living documents that must always be reread afresh. And in fact at some level everyone accepts that reality, even if grudgingly. Thus, for example, almost no one believes any longer that African American persons (still very much indentured) are only three-fifths of a person, as the Constitution prescribes. Almost no one believes that homosexuals should be executed, as the Torah prescribes. We do rereadings of Constitution and Bible as circumstance requires, even if we do it grudgingly or if we do it without acknowledgment.

Thus our text on the silence of women in the church cannot be read as a flat absolute in the twenty-first century but must be read in context where critical thought tells against any silly judgment that Jesus had only male disciples. For that matter Jesus had only Jewish disciples, not a single Italian, Pole, German, or Argentinian.

This rereading of the text requires freedom, courage, and imagination that move beyond originalism and strict constructionism to see what the elemental claims of the gospel might be in new circumstances. We may note three recent rereadings of the Bible, in each case concerned with gender, that illuminate the Bible as a living document.

In 1993 a group of women in the Presbyterian Church organized the Re-Imagining Conference for women in Minneapolis. The program featured an extended roster of gifted feminist interpreters who variously explored

fresh articulations of God, Jesus, creation, and the church from a reconsideration of Scripture. The conference was a spectacular success. But what followed by way of reaction was even more stunning. The conference evoked immense hostility among church people and many others who were scandalized by such an act by women and by the daring act of reinterpretation that challenged long-settled consensus. The “re” part of “re-imagining” and “reinterpretation” indicated that old conclusions would not be honored and old consensus would not prevail. Women’s voices were indeed unleashed that broke the silence.

At about the same time, in 1992, a coalition was formed in the Presbyterian Church dubbed the More Light Churches Network. It was concerned with the rights of gays and lesbians. The More Light Church Network proposed to reinterpret Scripture and tradition in the church in a fresh and emancipatory way. The movement took its name from a phrase of John Robinson, the spiritual leader of the pilgrims who founded the Plymouth Colony. Robinson famously declared that “the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.” Robinson was clear that Scripture as “God’s word” continued to yield new revelatory truth, so that its truthfulness is not completed or exhausted in established readings. The Bible can do so because it is a venue for the Spirit. Specifically the network found that attention to Scripture will deliver news about the rights of gays and lesbians who had been long silenced and made invisible in the church. That “new light” of course disturbed and disrupted those who were committed to old patterns of silencing.

In a parallel development, my own church, the United Church of Christ, adopted the phrase “God Is Still Speaking.” The phrase, with direct reference to the rights of gays and lesbians, intended to affirm that the old assumptions of the Bible about such persons were not true because God’s spirit continues to live in the church in new and faithful ways.

All of these three emergents—*Re-imagining*, *More Light*, and *Still Speaking*—are evidence that the old silences are being broken. In each case, moreover, the gender issues are primary because the silencing of gays and lesbians is but the next step after silencing women. In each case, the insistence is that such silencing based on gender is no longer acceptable because the Spirit has led us elsewhere and otherwise.

The old pattern of silencing served old-time religion, and old-time religion is in the service of old-time politics of domination and old-time economics of privilege. Strict constructionism and originalism are always in the service of old-time religion, old-time economics, and old-time politics. The breaking of that silence for women and for many others depends on *Re-imagining*, *More Light*, and *Still Speaking*. It turns out that these emergent new readings place everything “old time” in jeopardy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How have you reconciled conflicting biblical texts about the role of women in the church previously? How has this chapter confirmed or challenged your previous thinking?

2. What do you think happened in biblical texts to make later writings go backwards in terms of inclusion of women? How does institutionalizing movements compromise more radical thinking?
3. Where else have you seen the modern church silence people on the margins?
4. How should the church challenge originalism?