

“Your Daughters Shall Prophecy”: How Can We Keep Silent?¹

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The full title of this essay consists of a biblical quotation and allusion, both of which are important for my argument. My central point is that women teachers of the Bible are essential guides for faithful interpretation of the Bible. This grows out of observations in my setting of a church-related institution of higher education; however, I believe that this point is also widely applicable in the church. Below, I engage in a brief exegesis of the title’s biblical references, reflect on experiences of some Christian women in relation to the Bible, and provide a pedagogical lens that highlights the importance of female interpreters of the Bible.

What’s in a Title?

The quotation, “your daughters shall prophecy” is originally found in Joel 2:28 and then picked up in Acts in one of Peter’s speeches (Acts 2:17-18). The quotation in Joel is set within the context of God relenting from showing wrath to Israelites for disobedience to their covenant with God. After the ruin of the countryside from locusts and an unspecified foreign army, the Lord has pity on the people. God promises to restore them and says, “Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophecy.”² This is to happen after their repentance and restoration; God’s spirit will descend upon all people before the day of the Lord comes (Joel 2:32). In Acts, Peter modifies Joel’s lead statement; the “afterward” becomes “in the last days.”³ The apostles’ situation must have felt like the last days, the days when Joel’s prophecy is fulfilled. Just a few verses earlier, Peter and the other apostles were sitting in a house in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Acts reports that “suddenly from heaven came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting” (2:2). This is what the resurrected Jesus had promised to them before he ascended. They were to receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (1:8). On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit did come upon them and

they “began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (2:4). No wonder Peter likens this situation to the last days spoken of by the prophet Joel. He stands up to his critics who believe that the apostles are merely drunk and declares with prophetic authority,

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

It is clear that Peter is given great power in the Holy Spirit. After his impassioned speech, crowds came forward to be baptized, and Acts reports that about 3,000 people were added on that day (2:41). Acts indicates that divine authority can be discerned by being attuned to how the Lord is pouring out the Holy Spirit in the world. I suggest that this should continue to be an interpretive principle for our own church communities, in which I include church-sponsored academic institutions.

As a biblical scholar, I exist in a field of study that has traditionally been peopled by men.⁴ Further, by nature of my calling and my training I am an interpreter of holy scriptures, but these very scriptures report at some points that I should have no authority to teach or interpret, particularly to men. However, bolstered by the texts from Joel and Acts, I impertinently raise the question, How can women keep silent?

The subtitle, then, of this essay is an allusion to several passages in the New Testament. The first is to 1 Timothy, where we read “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” (2:11-12).⁵ It is difficult for me to see how this admonition can be generalized outside of the context that the author is addressing, particularly since he follows this with the “encouragement” that a woman “will be saved through childbearing, provided they⁶ continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty”

(2:15). It is remarkable that a Christian, claiming to write with the authority of the Apostle Paul, can say that salvation comes through any means other than Jesus Christ.⁷

My question in the subtitle – how can we keep silent? – also refers to a passage in an undisputed letter of Paul.⁸ In 1 Cor. 14:34-35 we find that “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.” Those who oppose women in church leadership (including being a biblical scholar at a church institution) often look here to demonstrate their position. Again, this is not easily generalized to all women; in fact, if given the opportunity to discuss this with Paul, I would probably question him about how serious he is.⁹ In this passage, he is concerned about orderly worship. He addresses the proper protocol for speaking in tongues, prophesying, and women speaking in church (14:26-40). He seems particularly concerned about order for the sake of outsiders and unbelievers who may observe church in session and have reason to be turned off (14:23-24). In addition, we know from chapter 11 that Paul is thinking that the Corinthian women are already getting a bit out of hand because they are not covering their heads when they pray.¹⁰

So, it is clear that Paul is nervous about the liberties that women are taking in worship. However, in chapter 14, before he addresses who needs to keep silent in church, he points to the possibility that the whole church, regardless of gender, could come together to speak in tongues (14:23); all of the people could even prophesy (14:24). In the face of this assertion, it is strange that Paul tells married women (for how can single women consult their husbands when they get home?) to be silent altogether. Further, Paul’s counsel to men and women alike in chapter 7 about marriage and service to the Lord indicates that he considers them equally affected by these things. The advice is strikingly balanced throughout, without distinction in expectations between men and women. Paul writes to the Corinthian women that “the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband” (7:34); this follows his parallel observations about unmarried and

married men (7:32-33).

Up to this point I have completely neglected Paul’s famous proclamation in Gal. 3:28 that as Christians “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.” This does not mesh well with the passage on silence in 1 Cor. 14 that unequally affects women. If Paul did write 1 Cor. 14:34-35 in sincerity, either he must have done so because of a particular situation in Corinth at that time or he must have been altering his previously-held notion (just ten verses earlier) that male and female are equal in Christ.

I suppose if I should ever gain my much longed-for chat session with the Apostle Paul, I would pose my question – how can we keep silent? – with a third biblical allusion in mind. The verse contains Jesus’ response to the Pharisees in Luke 19. Here, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem triumphantly on the back of a colt to the cheers of a “whole multitude of disciples” (19:37).¹¹ The Pharisees in the crowd asked Jesus to order his disciples to stop; Jesus answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (19:40). How, then, can women accept admonitions to keep silent? This becomes particularly pressing if we believe the early apostles that the Holy Spirit is already moving among Christian believers and may cause both sons and daughters to prophesy.

Experiences of Young Women

Perhaps the issue of women as authorities in matters of biblical interpretation is passé. It could be that we exist in a time when women no longer hear that we are not as worthy or as reliable as men in positions of authority. Perhaps Biola University is correct to be worried that things have actually tipped in the other direction and that there is a feminization of church institutions, meaning that there is a preference for women leaders that is driving men away.¹² However, my own experience does not bear this out.

I will point to only three instances here. I received the message that women are inferior to men in my home congregation; this was particularly clear after our male pastor, who had been at my church during my high school years, was asked to leave. The reasons I heard for this were that he preached that men and women were created as equals and that he did not use a gendered pronoun for God, among other things. I also heard messages from

my family about the untrustworthiness of women in leadership. Just before I embarked on my academic pursuit to become an interpreter of the Bible, a relative quoted 1 Tim. 2:12 to me, the passage about women not being allowed to teach or to have any authority over men. Finally, that same verse was quoted defiantly by a fellow camp counselor to the female director of the church camp where we were working for the summer. That young man used the verse to disregard what this much older and wiser person had to say about how to be a good camp counselor. It has been my experience that some people of faith will marshal arguments from the Bible to show that women are not legitimate biblical interpreters.

As a teacher, I adhere to the philosophy that personal experience facilitates learning. What I study is reinforced or challenged by what I experience, and vice versa. This is typically called an action-reflection model of learning.¹³ In the classroom, I invite students into reflection about their experiences as a way to reinforce material. In a similar manner, I asked several of my women students at Bluffton University what their experience has taught them about appropriate roles for women in church-based settings.

Among the responses, I found there are still strong messages from home and church that women are less trusted interpreters of scripture than are men.¹⁴ Of the women I interviewed, those who had received positive messages had mothers who were ministers. Most of these young women admitted to having problems or being confused about women in leadership roles when reading the biblical text. However, despite some unease with the Bible about women, they all thought that they could put together a biblical case for women in ministry. In one e-mail I received, a woman said, "In reading the Bible I have been challenged to find examples of female leadership, but I have found them despite the sometimes overwhelmingly patriarchal language. Strong female leadership is visible in the Bible and it has challenged me not to buy into a restrictive understanding [of] gender roles."¹⁵

My experience is that biblical evidence can be exploited for what seem to be less-than-honorable agendas; and while churchgoers may be growing more accepting of women as interpreters of the Bible, my interviews with just a few Bluffton students indicate that we are not yet fully comfortable

with this view. There is still work to do. Instead of allowing people to tell women that it is appropriate for us to keep silent, we must insist that when God pours out the Holy Spirit even the daughters will prophesy.

Importance of Role Models: A Pedagogical Lens

I have come to believe in the importance of role models, particularly for females seeking to sort through the various messages in society and church about what it is to be a proper woman. These role models are both living and dead. Along these lines, I suggest that it is good for women and men to learn from women Bible scholars. The Bible is a text that contains shocking stories about the use and abuse of women. For our own strength and wisdom in this world, it is good to know about these “texts of terror,”¹⁶ to develop interpretive strategies about them, and to celebrate the strength of our foremothers. Just as the Bible often deconstructs and challenges the use and abuse of women in the ancient Near Eastern cultures (including the Israelite culture), it is important for us to be witnesses to the leadership and strength of biblical women. Further, I believe that women are uniquely positioned to teach those stories.

The Bible has a wide range of both encouraging and dreadful stories of women. Here are some examples. Women are often talked about as objects that can be taken or given as men please, such as Jephthah’s daughter (Judges 11), the women of Shiloh (Judges 21), the unnamed Levite’s concubine (Judges 19), and Hagar (Genesis 16, 21). Often women are depicted as sexual objects, such as Tamar who was raped by her brother (2 Samuel 13), Gomer (Hosea), and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12). Women are also understood to be dangerous, particularly because their sexual allure might entice otherwise steadfast men into idolatry, as was the case with the Moabite women in the Baal Peor incident (Numbers 25) and the women of the land who were set aside by returning Israelite exiles (Ezra 10; Nehemiah 13). It is important to know these stories because we, then, have a glimpse of what our spiritual foremothers endured. In knowing them, we have a firsthand appreciation of the rare occasions in which dignity and authority are afforded women of the Bible. Specifically, in the world of the prophet Joel, it is remarkably counter-cultural for him to portray God’s Spirit pouring out on men and women alike, allowing both to prophesy.

These are important stories to know. As a teacher, I highlight them

because they are challenging and do not allow for “pat” answers in regard to scripture. I teach Tribble’s *Texts of Terror* to senior religion majors and it is unsettling for us all; however, hard texts do not go away by ignoring them. In fact, Tribble makes a compelling case that studying hard texts is important because it “undercuts triumphalism.”¹⁷ There are always people who are hurt, always people who are run over by dominant stories, even in the Bible. Thus it is good for us to learn to pause in our pursuit of comfort, to take the time to look and listen; if Christians do not learn to notice and deal with distress, how can we possibly reach out to “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40)? Moreover, who will sit with us when it is we who are in distress?

Not all of the stories of the women in the Bible are terrible and degrading, so we should cherish the stories of strong leader-women all the more. Here we find wise women and prophets, like Deborah (Judges 4-5), Huldah (2 Kings 22), Miriam (Exodus 15), Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Anna (Luke 2), and Paul’s prophet women in 1 Corinthians 14. Jesus’ most faithful companions were women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Martha, Salome, Joanna, and the woman who anointed him before his death and who seem to understand him better than the Twelve (Mark 14//Matthew 26//John 12). Even some of the sexually “shady” women, like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary are given pride of place in Matthew’s genealogy and story of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1). We also read about women who were leaders in the early church, like Junia (Rom. 16:7), Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1), Priscilla (Acts 18; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), and Lydia (Acts 16). Finally, there are women who conversed with God, like Hagar (Genesis 16; 21) and the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman (Matthew 15//Mark 7).

Women and men alike can draw strength from these stories, knowing that God loves women who are leaders – strong, wise, and articulate. In addition to teaching these biblical stories, I can offer encouragement to my students because I am a biblical interpreter and authority figure. I serve as a mentor to them, sometimes sharing personal stories and passing on hope. Words of encouragement can go a long way. I have been lucky enough to have several women professors who prompted me to continue in my studies and to become a teacher.¹⁸ Role models can make a difference in people’s lives. Without my role models, I would not be a Bible professor and church leader.

In sum, here I suggest that the Bible itself helps us learn how to read it, and that it matters who is teaching it. My eyes are sensitive to the stories of women in the Bible because I can relate to their fears and joys. Further, I am not afraid to teach difficult texts like those listed above, because I know from experience that it is better to speak up than to remain silent on issues that scare us. We teachers do our students a disservice when we skip over hard texts; we are not helping them to develop interpretive strategies for these difficulties. In a world in which acts of violence against women still occur and women are often not treated as honorably as men, I believe that my unique place as a woman biblical scholar benefits my female and male students, both as teacher and role model. We talk about hard texts together and we develop strategies to resist oppressive readings. I teach them that our primary tool of resistance is the Bible itself. We learn from its pages that God desires to grace all of us with the Holy Spirit.

In Acts Peter assures all his hearers, including us, that the Spirit of the Lord is poured out and we should expect it to fall on us to do great things. We can take heart from the stories of the Bible and from the stories of women around us who are living in the Spirit. Indeed, we have the interpretive onus to declare that the Lord is coming and that the Lord’s Spirit is poured out. We must discern the movement of the Spirit and give ear to those who prophesy, sons and daughters alike.¹⁹ I believe that reading the Bible with attention to women’s experience, both in and out of the Bible, can help Christians in discerning the Spirit. For that, women Bible teachers are essential.

So, how can we keep silent?

Notes

¹ A version of this essay was originally delivered in honor of Bluffton University’s president, Dr. Lee Snyder, upon her retirement; the event was called “Lee Snyder, Bluffton University, and Women in the Academy,” April 19, 2006.

² All biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

³ As a matter of convenience, I say here that the quotation from Peter is “modified.” It could be that the author has joined the opening words of Isaiah’s oracle in 2:2 with the passage from Joel. However, there were multiple Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible in circulation in the first century CE, so the Joel quotation in Acts may also be as it appeared in the scripture that Luke knew. This is a debated and technical point; the reader may refer to Kenneth Duncan Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the History of God’s*

People Intertextually. Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 282, ed. Mark Goodacre (London: T & T Clark International, 2005), 1-7, for a more thorough overview of these issues.

⁴ This reality in the field is also mirrored in my institution, Bluffton University, where I am the only woman in a 6-person department (History and Religion). In a staff of 63 full-time teaching faculty, there are 22 women (35 percent of the whole). This information is from a personal e-mail from Dr. Sally Weaver Sommer, Vice President and Dean of Academic Affairs, received December 14, 2009.

⁵ On the topic of submission, see also Titus 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18.

⁶ The “they” here is difficult. It could refer to the woman as the RSV translates it, or to the children as the NRSV translates it. The latter is more likely, given that “woman” is singular in 2:15 in the Greek, as it is throughout 1 Tim 2:11-15.

⁷ Cf. Paul in 1 Cor. 3:11, “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

⁸ I use the word “undisputed” here because Pauline authorship of the Pastoral epistles (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) is not generally accepted by scholars.

⁹ Of course, there is always the question as to whether these verses are authentically Pauline. Some scholars consider this an interpolation, given its similarity to the Pastoral position. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor is representative of the case against Pauline authorship: “In all probability Paul did not write 14:34-35 (though the point is disputed). Not only does it contradict 11:5, ... the injunctions reflect the misogyny of 1 Tim 2:11-14, and stem from the same patriarchal, postpauline circles which could not accept the full equality of women which Paul espoused (11:11).” See “1 and 2 Corinthians” in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 82.

¹⁰ He gives several reasons for why women’s heads should be covered, some more comprehensible than others. They should have something on their heads because of angels (1 Cor. 11:10), because women and men are interdependent (11:11), and because nature teaches that women should have long hair, which is their covering (11:14). When it comes down to it, Paul closes by appealing to tradition: there should be no more discussion because it is the custom (11:16).

¹¹ The plural use of “disciples” makes it impossible to tell if only males were hailing Jesus as he came into town; however, the author emphasizes the largeness of the crowd, which points to the likelihood that it was a mixture of men and women.

¹² The reference is to an article in Biola University’s alumni magazine: Holly Pivec, “The Feminization of the Church: Why Its Music, Messages and Ministries Are Driving Men Away,” *Biola Connections* (Spring 2006): 10-17.

¹³ The reader may recognize this as a truncated version of the “praxis” step of critical pedagogy, made famous by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, originally published in Portuguese in 1968. I was first introduced to this model of teaching and learning by Dr. Daniel Schipani during a teaching practicum at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary several years after I had graduated from college.

¹⁴ The sentiment was stronger against women engaged in pastoral ministry than against women as Bible teachers.

¹⁵ Personal e-mail, April 18, 2006.

¹⁶ This is a reference to Phyllis Trible’s significant book, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Other classic texts on feminist hermeneutics are Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

¹⁷ Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 3.

¹⁸ In fact, one of my undergraduate professors was Dr. Lee Snyder, then also the academic dean of Eastern Mennonite University. She was one of the people who encouraged me to pursue graduate studies and to consider teaching at a Mennonite college.

¹⁹ This is akin to Peter’s declaration in Acts 10:47, when the early church was reckoning with how the Lord was working in new and mysterious ways with Gentiles, “Can we withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

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