

**Northside Presbyterian Church**  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

*“Scripture is Not Plain”*  
Judges 4:4-10; I Timothy 2:8-14

*Sermon preached by Rev. Joe B. Martin, IV on September 10, 2006*

“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.” Paul also wrote to the church in Corinth, “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.”

There is a phrase I recently have heard bouncing around the denomination as people debate certain matters of our theology: “a plain reading of scripture.” Those who employ the phrase are asserting that in order to discern the will of God, turn to the Bible and take what you read there at face value. It is a compelling argument. In the Protestant Church, scripture is the final authority and witness to Jesus Christ. However, every major theological dispute in the protestant church from slavery to temperance has been, at its root, about the way we read and interpret scripture.

A plain reading of scripture: the phrase also has a rhetorical effect because, once said, any opposing argument has the appearance either of opposing scripture or the nature of its authority as our unique witness to Jesus Christ. But there is a problem with a plain reading of scripture. Scripture is not plain. God’s holy written word has depth and weight, and volume, context, complexity, and mystery. Scripture is not plain, so one cannot read scripture on a plane. Whoops, that was an ambiguous pun. You may feel free to read scripture on the airplane, but if we never look at God’s word beneath the surface plane, or layer, we often will miss the truth that lies beneath. A plain reading of scripture is just the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface, there may be an enormity that stretches in unexpected directions.

To be sure, there are passages of scripture that can be understood fully by a plain reading. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” is one among many. But usually, we learn more if we dig deeper.

Deborah gives us an example of that. Her name shares the same consonants as the Hebrew word for “word.” Since, in Hebrew, the vowels are not written down, but understood, this makes for a double meaning. How fitting then a name for the prophetess who speaks for God. And she is Deborah, wife of Lappidoth. At least we think so. We know nothing of any Lappidoth, but that word also could mean torch, so it may not be a marital designation at all. She could be Deborah, woman of the torch, word of illumination, the woman God gives words to light a fire under Barak, whose name means lightning. None of this information really changes what we probably would get from a plain reading of this text and we would get all this from a plain reading if we read Hebrew. However, it does take us deeper into this matter of God using a woman to shed light upon and fire up Israel.

Now, the more complex example that I want to use about the way we read scripture regards the role of women in the church and these verses from Paul. “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man.” “Women should be silent in the churches.” Until this point, I have avoided these passages because at their face value they appear to be irrefutable substantiation for the subjugation of women in the church. But concerning the role of women in the church and in the world, scripture has a great deal more to say than this. Paul even does. To lift out these two passages and allow them to formulate church doctrine is to take them out of their context and miss the iceberg of truth that lies beneath and all around them.

Scripture has context and the context matters. So lets look at what we can call the Pauline context for what Paul said about women. First of all, in the very same letter to the Corinthians in which Paul wrote, “Women should be silent in the churches,” he also wrote “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head.” In this, it would seem to be clear even in the plainest reading that Paul was recognizing the verbal participation of women in worship.

The book of Acts tells us that a woman named Lydia founded a church with Paul. In one of his letters, he commends Phoebe as a co-worker in the cause for Christ and uses her title of deacon. Some translations call her a deaconess, which centuries later would be a position women could hold in the church, though it was subordinate to the male deacons. However, Paul’s Greek plainly says, “Deacon,” clearly acknowledging Phoebe as an officer in the church. In other letters, Paul writes of Priscilla, sometimes called Prisca, as a leader in the church. Priscilla, side by side with her husband Aquila, preached in Rome and the Book of Acts tells us she taught sound theology to the good but misguided itinerant evangelist, Apollos.

So if Paul commends these three women for their work, what did he mean about women keeping silence? The verse that follows immediately afterward gives us a clue. “If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.”

Within Paul’s historical context, the place of women in the world was different than it is now. Furthermore, women were unaccustomed to participation in worship. In the synagogue, it had been a man’s world. In the Christian church scattered throughout Asia Minor and Europe, these women were less likely to be educated in the Hebrew and Greek language of the service. Perhaps they just did not know what was going on. Maybe they were disrupting the service asking their husbands questions. Maybe they were bored sitting there listening to a foreign language and started talking to their neighbor. At any rate, some scholars suggest that Paul does not seem to be addressing the issue of women leading worship, so much as he is trying to put a stop to chattering.

Whether or not that is true, we cannot take Paul’s words on the matter without looking at them in the greater context of the entirety of scripture. In the New Testament we have Mary, chosen to be the bearer of God. There is Anna the prophet, who saw the infant Jesus presented in the temple, recognized him as the promised Messiah, and became one of the first to proclaim to all who would listen that their redeemer had arrived. Mary Magdalene followed Jesus throughout his ministry and she became the first witness to and proclaimer of the resurrection. In his ministry, Jesus reached out to women and men alike.

In the Old Testament we find Deborah, a speaker of the word of God, without whom the general Barak would not go into battle. When she agreed to go, she added, “Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” This would end up being yet another woman, Jael, who feigned hospitality when general Sisera fled from Barak’s victorious army and then did what should have been Barak’s job by driving a tent peg through his temple – and so Israel was saved from the oppression of King Jabin by a woman. Earlier there had been Miriam. Later there would be Ruth and Esther, all women of faith through whom God chose to work and speak.

Why, exactly, Paul chose to write these words to the Corinthians, I don’t know, but the greater witness of scripture and even of Paul’s own work bears testimony to God’s desire that women may serve equally with men.

But the letter to Timothy brings up another matter. A plain reading of it is hard to dispute. “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.” This is not about chatter. Why are these words so much stronger? Regarding historical context, some note that in Timothy’s church in Ephesus there was a particularly contentious group of women who were dividing the church and so they suggest that this message was exclusively for that local congregation. However, if we look at the context here, we see that the next verse takes us deeper in the opposite and more universal direction. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”

And so in our quest to understand the depth, weight, and volume of scripture, we are sent back to the very beginning and the creation story of Genesis 2. There we will read that Eve was formed of Adam’s rib to be his “helper.” Some have sought to make this a subordinate role, but “ezer,” Hebrew for helper, is used 21 times in the Old Testament. Two of those are in reference to Eve. Three of the other references clearly place the helper on level ground with the one being helped and in the other 16 references, the helper is God! So Eve is in pretty good company at the start.

But with the entry of sin into the world, there is a move from “helper as his partner” to “He shall rule over you.” This was Eve’s punishment for her sin. But let us remember this: Eden was representative of God’s good and perfect creation and in that perfection, Eve was Adam’s equal. As we await the coming of the New Jerusalem, the other image of perfection at the conclusion of scripture and time, should we not be working to defeat what is wrong with the world? To continue to subordinate women in the church and in the world is to let sin reign, to give up rather than to strive toward the coming perfect kingdom of God.

As we live between Eden and the New Jerusalem, the scriptural lynchpin on this matter can be found provided again by Paul, this time to the Galatians. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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 Jesus.” All distinctions between us are leveled in Christ on the basis of our common baptism. So in the end, whatever our race, gender, or status, we are one in Christ and saved only by his grace.

So what then is the point of this exercise in Biblical exegesis regarding the role of women? In the Presbyterian Church (USA), I am preaching to the choir, or I should say, “Preaching to the session,” which here, more often than not, has more female elders than male on it. My point is this: Scripture is the unique and authoritative witness of Jesus Christ to the Church and God’s word to you. Read your Bible. But scripture is not plain, so read it deep and read it broad.

As we kickoff a new program year at Northside today, we recognize that everything we believe and everything we do stems from what God has revealed to us in Holy Scripture. It is a great time to start reading the Bible more often and more broadly. Begin a new personal devotion time or join me in making a commitment to trying to read the whole Bible in a year and find God’s word in its full context.

Or focus on reading deeper through study. Get in with a Sunday School class and get your children in one, too. Two Presbyterian Men groups meet on Mondays now. Presbyterian Women circles meet on several other days, including a new Friday morning study for moms. There’s a Thursday evening study at Vine Street Bakery and another for younger teenage women. There will be many opportunities for all ages throughout the year at Wednesday Night Live and the new library is almost open for business with commentaries and other resources that help us break through into the depths of God’s word that it might break through into the depths of our lives.

Together let us explore the depth, weight, and volume, context, complexity, and mystery of the witness God has given us to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and may that holy word light a fire in us to work to conform this world to his coming kingdom. Amen.