

Sermon Series: Misunderstood Scripture Sermon #1: Women Must be Silent?  
 1 Corinthians 14:36-40 August 4, 2019 Rev. Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church



Robert Estienne was a French scholar and printer who lived in Paris in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. He was a Protestant who was so highly regarded as a scholar and craftsman that the Catholic king of France made him the royal printer over the objections of the dominant church. In 1568 he printed a French translation of the New Testament. And he included a new innovation. He broke the text down into numbered verses. Christian Scripture was broken down into Chapters only in the 1300s. It was subdivided into verses in the mid-1500s.

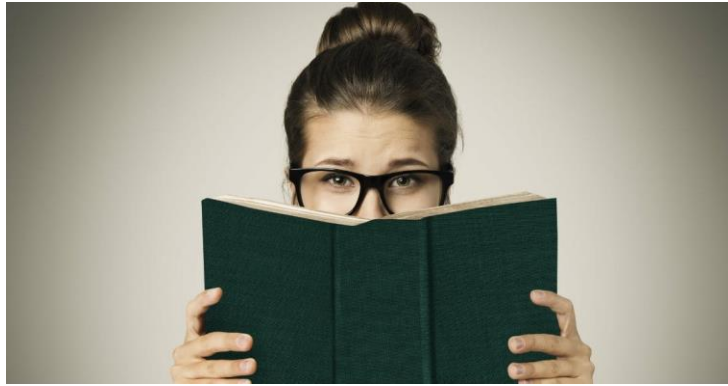
And in doing his work, Estienne did not take care to consider the verse marking carefully. He did this work while riding on horseback, travelling from Paris to Lyon. He was a great scholar but he did this work on the go.



When we open our Bibles we will see a text divided into chapter and verse. But this is a recent innovation; for most of Christian history the text flowed on undivided.

In 1551, Estienne added verse numbers to the chapter divisions inserted in Scripture in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This made navigating the text much easier, of course, but it caused a problem, too.

The numbering of individual sentences (or even phrases, sometimes), tempts the reader to take the text as a collection of discrete statements having meaning and application on their own, in isolation from the larger work, apart from the greater narrative.



In *The Merchant of Venice* William Shakespeare writes: “The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.”

Our Holy Book is sometimes used in a way that does violence to its true meaning and sometimes in a way that does violence to others.

Jesus said, for instance, ‘The poor you shall have with you always’ These words are sometimes quoted as a justification for ignoring the poor. Jesus said there will always be poor people so why bother addressing poverty and inequality? But to make this argument you must take the words from their context and then you would have to set aside 1000`s of scripture verses that speak out against inequality, human need and social injustice.

In one of the two Genesis Creation stories, the divine invitation to “have dominion over the earth” has been used in support of environmental degradation, ignoring the nearby image of humanity as the gardeners of the Earth, charged by their Creator to be tenders and keepers of what God has made...

There are 6 single verses in the Bible that are taken out and used like a cudgel against the LGBTQ2 community. Violence against sexual minorities may be rooted in what are called the *clobber verses*- 6 verses from a book of more than 31000 verses...

The devil can cite scripture in support of his own point of view and so can we. We even make up Bible verses to make our points “God helps those who help themselves.” that phrase isn’t even in the Bible but people quote it as if it is.

This week and for the next 3 summer Sunday when I am preaching, I am going to look at misunderstood Scripture, and a lot of the misunderstanding arises from words being pulled out in isolation from their greater context. Much of the misunderstanding arises from verses or sentences that are interpreted as if they stand alone.

So here we go...

*1 Corinthians 14: Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.*

1Cor 14

Historically, these words have been used to suppress the voices and contributions of women. Women must not speak in Christian community. Women must be quiet. I wonder how Alyce felt giving voice to these words for us today...

In some parts of the Christian tradition these words are still upheld. In our part of the tradition we have set these words aside. If we actually implemented these words, we would have a real problem. These are Rideau Park numbers and I am sure Emmanuel United would be similar... Our chair of Council, Co-Chairs of Worship and Music, of Christian Development, of Chair of Social Action, and Chair of Ministry and Personnel, 83.5% of our Sunday School volunteers, 2 thirds of ministry team... all of these are women.

Are we violating Scripture with our inclusion of women in places of leadership?

No...



The words we shared from 1 Corinthians 14 are part of a greater narrative and that Scriptural narrative is radically inclusive of women.

One of the first people named as a convert of Paul, and Paul is the writer of the words we shared today, was a woman - Lydia of Philippi, a dealer in purple dyes; Lydia and others are mentioned by Paul in his writings as being leaders in the early church. Paul mentions Apphia in the letter we read today. And he writes his letter to Corinth because of news he heard from a woman named Chloee. And earlier in his letter to Corinth, just verses ahead of the words we read a moment ago Paul writes of women taking public roles in the church.



In Romans, in that other reading we shared today, Paul mentions the leadership of the Roman church and it includes several women, including Junia, who is called by Paul: “Great among the Apostles”. No greater title is given to anyone who is a follower of Jesus in the New Testament than that title.

And the letter to the Romans was entrusted to Phoebe, “a deacon of the church” and in the tradition of the time she would not just have delivered Paul’s letter to the church in Rome but she also would have read it to the assembled gathering – not keeping silent but vocally and authoritatively acting as Paul’s ambassador.

*“Women must keep silent...”* Context is everything, lest we do violence to the text and its meaning.

Paul’s words shared today are found in an epistle, a letter. The words are written to a people and to a time and to circumstances that we sometimes can only make educated guesses about. We have with Paul’s words in the epistle and they reveal just one side of a two way conversation. He is writing to people he knows well in response to a letter written, or to issues raised, or to questions asked, or to circumstances that he knows but that we do not know.



Paul's words here were addressed to a Greek church, in Corinth. We know the Corinthians were a boisterous lot. Elsewhere Paul asks them not to eat and drink too much when they got together. Worship in Corinth was exuberant.

And Corinth was a Greek city; in ancient Mediterranean culture men and women had distinctive spheres of influence. Men led public lives and women lived domestic lives. Corinthian women rarely got out of the house and had no opportunity to be in public places together. So when women were allowed to come out to worship, they naturally began to talk when their isolation ended. And since they did not know to be quiet and to listen in a public gathering, as church was the first and only public gathering they were allowed into, they need instruction on how to behave. It was all new to them.

So Paul writes: *Let the women keep silent in the churches*. It's not that all women everywhere should always be silent. It's that a particular group of women in a small 1<sup>st</sup> Century Corinthian house church needed to settle down when they got together.

Women would lead in worship and were leaders in the ancient church. It was one of the few places in ancient Greek society where women could be part of a public gathered community. It's just that the women of Corinth needed guidance; they needed some ground rules on how to behave in worship.

And, as an aside, why is it that when Paul writes "women should be silent" some want to make that universal, but when he says "Greet each other with a Holy Kiss" , people just let that slide. Inconsistent application...



Think of the great women of the Christian story. The very first person to give voice to the good news of the Gospel was a woman, Mary Magdalene, first among apostles, witness to the resurrection.

We can be thankful that the other women did not keep silent!

May God bless all of our voices, that together we might share the great news of God's love and welcome for all.