



Student Work

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I was six years old, sandals just brushing the floor in the sanctuary of a foreign church, where my grandparents and I sat to witness my cousin's baptism. The building was remarkably like ours at home—toddlers hollering in the fellowship hall, coffee percolating in the kitchen for post-service gossip.

But at the close of the prelude, I straightened in the pew. There behind the pulpit was not the suited figure I was accustomed to, but a woman in a brilliant pink blazer who raised her hands, blessing the congregation into the house of God. My grandma must have noticed my change in posture, for after the service, she nudged me towards the woman. "This is Pastor Joy," she said. My eyes grew all the wider—our names were too similar for this to be an accident.

That day in my cousin's church thirteen years ago was the first and last time I heard a woman preach in person. In the Christian Reformed Church, the question of women in the ecclesial offices is left to individual churches. My congregation falls on the "traditional" side of this issue, championing texts like 1 Timothy 2:11-12. "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she is to remain quiet."

My father, with good intention, pointed me to this verse when I came to him, years after that service with Pastor Joy, with my questions about being a girl who loved God and wanted to talk about it from a pulpit. Convinced Paul's words weren't really all that simple, I rushed to *Desiring God*, my family's second Bible. I won't—I can't—forget the plummeting of my stomach when I read, "To the degree that a woman's leadership of man is personal and directive, it will generally offend a man's God-given sense of responsibility and leadership and thus controvert God's created order."

I tried to obey, I really did. In the years following, I found more Piper. Listened to more male pastors. Read the Bible about as much as I could stand and tried to keep my mouth shut. When I finally realized I couldn't pray myself into submission, I was left with what felt like a sinful secret. I was just as equipped as my brothers and male classmates, maybe even more so, to read and share the Bible. Yet when it came to my church, there

was nothing for me to do but “remain quiet,” or, according to my solemn adolescent perspective, face the fires of hell.

This submission was my legacy—how many times had my mom thoughtfully critiqued an error in our pastor’s sermon? Or prayed more beautifully and powerfully than any man I ever heard? Yet her gifts were largely confined to our church’s Sunday school rooms, where nobody but children could hear her speak.

At age fifteen, my long-suppressed tangle of emotions bubbled to the surface in front of a teacher. He sat quietly while I explained, then rifled through his desk drawer, emerging with J. Lee Grady’s *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women*. “Here,” he said. “Let me know what you think.” I tore through the book, especially awed by the troves of biblical women unearthed. Women like Huldah, Anna, Phoebe, Junia, Salome, and Johanna did not live into the quietness I was taught to inhabit, but filled authoritative positions where God called them to raise their voices in accordance with their spiritual gifts.

And yet, my secret remained. Here I was in a congregation composed of loving people who had raised me from infancy and held the view that my call was to quietness. While these congregants encouraged me on nearly every other level, their patriarchy was ingrained and pervasive. Even those who view this as a topic that leads to “two different perspectives and convictions” often are unaware of the emotional and practical impact. Opening or closing the door of ministry is not merely an intellectual matter of getting it “right.” There are living, breathing consequences. Women are not only prevented from exercising the full range of their spiritual gifts, but grapple with the message this sends about their worth as church members and simply as humans.

I have witnessed many female congregants, including my mother, subjected to this understanding of church-bound quietness. Throughout the past two decades my mother has planned and led music for worship services, taught Sunday school and children’s ministries, organized choirs and programs, orchestrated outreach projects and vacation Bible schools, and engaged in countless other volunteer activities. Her contributions often surpass those of the male office holders of our church.

This would be slightly more palatable if our male church council sought input from her or other women congregational volunteers before passing decisions that dramatically affect these women and their unofficial ministries. I can recall specific instances when my mom learned from a congregational announcement that the program she planned had been cancelled or rescheduled, or that the pastor made an executive call on her Sunday school or church music with little expertise and no forewarning, or that the resources she and the other volunteers needed to complete their expected duties had been cut.

And in my community, where the religious and social and familial combine inextricably, this expectation of silent endurance from women continues. It was there in my eleventh-grade doctrine class, when I summoned the courage to present my views on women in

church leadership and a male classmate punctured the post-presentation silence with a sexist comment, dismantling weeks of work with one misogynist “joke.” It was there in my first week of tenth grade, when I approached my principal, having learned that two of my male classmates created a list ranking all the women in my class by specific body parts, and the principal told me not to worry because he had done something similar to his female classmates in college, just “not as bad.” It was there when a male professor repeatedly ignored the points I made but praised a male student for raising the same comments. It’s there every time my boss chooses to comment not on my skill or work ethic but some aspect of my appearance. It’s there when men I love and respect dismiss the toxic comments of male theologians (who convinced me in childhood that I would go to hell for using my spiritual gifts), in favor of holding onto the parts of their theology they enjoy. The message endures: I am to remain quiet.

I know my church’s message. I recognize the foundation of male headship and female subjugation that my community is built upon, and I have counted the cost of disrupting this structure. But I also know I cannot remain quiet any longer.