

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Reformed and Always Reforming: Women in Church Leadership
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Judges 4:1-10; Romans 16:1-7

Three moments in time. The first was when I was doing continuing education at a Catholic seminary in San Antonio. During a break, one of the priests asked our lecturer, Sister Sarah, what she thought about the Pope's latest pronouncement. Her response was, "You mean my response to the thing that I am not allowed to talk about?" All the priests around her smiled and laughed. She then said, "I can't talk about it." The second deals with a wonderful Baptist church close to where Cindy and I used to live in San Antonio. I had known about it because one of my mother-in-law's neighbors was part of their choir. But one day they made the San Antonio paper, not for their choir, but because they had been expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention. The third event happened the year I graduated from high school. In 1973, a significant number of churches from the PCUS (my original denomination), or old southern Presbyterian Church, disaffiliated themselves and formed a new denomination, called the Presbyterian Church in America. So, what do these three moments have in common? The answer is women in church leadership.

Sister Sarah, along with all other Catholics had been ordered to not even speak of having women deacons or priests. The church in San Antonio had the audacity to ordain a female seminary graduate as a minister of education. And finally, the PCA was formed because the PCUS had decided that not only could churches ordain women as deacons, elders and pastors, but that they should. This was too much for hundreds of congregations. Though our church has, and will later today, ordain women to be deacons and elders, and pastors such as Rev. Bethany, most churches in the world still do not do this. Why is that? I would argue it mainly has to do with male dominated traditions, but those opposing women in leadership would argue that this prohibition is Biblical, meaning the scriptures expressly prohibit placing women in positions of leadership. That being the case the question is why do we ordain women to positions of leadership? To explain why we do so, we will apply my Biblical interpretive proposal from last week to this issue. So, this morning let's begin in the trenches and then take to the higher ground.

Those who seek to prohibit women from church leadership, will quote several verses, but in reality, there are **only two verses** that speak directly against women in leadership in the life of the church. These are 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34. These say, "*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.*" And "*...women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.*" These are the main passages used to prohibit women from church leadership. Fine, but from our trench we can load up **at least twenty verses** that imply that women are to have equal opportunity to lead in the church. I will only reference two of those scriptures, the ones we read this morning. First, we have the judge Deborah. A judge was the leader of God's people and the people respected, supported and relied on her for leadership. Thus, God chose a woman to lead God's people. The second reference here comes from the end of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In it he commends Phoebe who is a deacon, Prisca and Aquila, who are a husband and wife church leadership duo, and Junia, who is an Apostle, which means that not only does Junia lead a single church, but that she

has authority to oversee multiple churches. Though people want to claim that Paul prohibits women in leadership, he certainly seems supportive of it here. Now, on to the higher ground.

For those of you who were not with us last week, the higher ground refers to looking at issues of Biblical interpretation through the entire scope of scripture. God is the giver and lover of life, and we are those who are to be God's co-workers in making life and love the framework for interpretation. Let's begin with God as the giver and lover of life. In Genesis, God is described as the one who creates all of life, including men and women. When God creates them, God creates them in complete equality. In fact, in some Jewish rabbinic traditions it is believed that God only created one being, which was part male and part female, carrying characteristics of both genders. And even in the second creation story in Genesis 2, when God creates Adam first, God realizes that Adam is incomplete and so creates Eve to complete him, and the sharing of the "rib" links the two together as a single person. This concept of equality extends into the New Testament when it is made clear that the Spirit of God not only sees men and women as equals but gives spiritual gifts to both in equal measure. In fact, nowhere in scripture does it say that God only shares the fullness of God's gifts and love with only men and not women. I would even go so far as to argue that to assume God would only give the fullness of life to men would be antithetical to God's nature as revealed in the scriptures.

The second thing we are to look at is who we are supposed to be. As I said a moment ago, we are to be those who are God's co-workers in creating a world in which God's life and love flourish. What this means is that we are to be those who take the spiritual gifts we are given and put them to work; that we as men and women are to not neglect the gifts we have. An interesting historical note is that the first churches to ordain women as deacons, priests and bishops were the Montanists in the first and second century. These were Christians who believed that the Spirit empowered all persons to fulfill the Apostle Paul's vision that all persons are spiritually gifted, and not simply one group of men. But if we listen to Paul, we hear him saying, "*I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy*" (1 Corinthians 14:5) or the Apostle Peter, "*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.*" In addition, Jesus accepts female disciples such as Mary, who sit at his feet and learn. This allows us to understand that we are supposed to see ourselves as men and women, gifted by God with the fullness of life and the ability to serve, lead and teach. In other words, if a woman, or a man for that matter, is gifted by God to help others reach for the fullness of life, they would be doing a disservice to God and to the church, by not leading.

It is with great joy this morning that we ordain men and women into service and leadership. It is with great joy that we welcome their gifts into the life and work of Everybody's Church. And I have to say, it is always with great joy that I am able to share in leadership here with Rev. Bethany, Cindy Merten, and all of our deacons and elders, both men and women. My challenge is to all of us as we answer the congregational questions for the ordination and installation of these elders and deacons, that we celebrate their willingness to share the gifts they have been given.

More Scripture References

Paul said, when "brothers and sisters ... come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. ..." (1 Cor 14:26)

The Apostle Paul said, when “the whole church comes together ... if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming ‘God is really among you!’” (1 Corinthians 14:23-25; see also 1 Cor 11:5, 14:6, 20)

Paul said “you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.” (1 Cor 14:31; see also 14:23-25, 26, 39-40; 11:5; 1:1-2)

Paul said, to women and men, “... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:18-20)

The Apostle Peter said, to women and men, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 4:10-11)

Paul, recommending his example to women and men, explains that when the whole church comes together, he would “pray with my understanding; Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.” (1 Cor 14:5, 12-17; see also 1:1-2; 14:6, 23, 26)

Paul said, “I praise you Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ... For long hair is given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.” (1 Cor 11:2, 4-5, 13-16)

Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.” (Acts 18:24-26)

Likewise, teach the older women (presbytidias) to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. 4 Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.” (Titus 2:3-5) (presbytidias is the feminine version of the Greek word that is translated elders in Titus 1:4)

Female prophets include Anna, who prophesied in the Temple to men (Luke 2:36-38), Deborah (Judges 4-5), Philips’ daughters (Acts 21:8-9), Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Noadiah (Neh 6:14), and many others (e.g., Isaiah 8:3; Acts 2:17-18; 1 Cor 11:5; 1 Cor 14:1-39).

Peter said ““In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” (Acts 2:17-18 (see Joel 2:28-29))