



Women Are Called

Now what are we going to do about it?

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Susie had been paying attention during our summer sermon series. Several times I had mentioned that the Psalms had played a central role in my relationship with God. One Sunday after worship as I stood in my customary place in the foyer, she handed me a thin red book. It was *The Trinity Psalter*. Susie had long known the blessing of singing the Psalms, using her copy of this book, which provided words and suggested tunes for each one.

What a treasure her gift has been for me! Since receiving it, I still read the psalm for the week, but now I can also sing it. My devotional times have been deeply enriched by her generosity.

A couple months later I was in the middle of singing Psalm 68 and suddenly I was caught up short, my brow wrinkled with confusion. After forty years of immersing myself in the Psalms, the verse I was supposed to sing didn't sound right: "The LORD will give the word which he commanded to be shown; the women are a mighty host to make the tidings known."

The women are a mighty host? I looked over at my devotional Bible, the 1984 NIV, and found this translation of Psalm 68:11: "The Lord announced the word, and great was the company of those who proclaimed it." Using a Bible concordance to check other versions, I learned that I was singing correctly, as shown by the more literal translations. But the older NIV had chosen to change the word from women to company.

As one who has journeyed into a firm belief in equality in ministry for women, I found in this little gem another gift as King David's voice was added to the list of those who affirm the gift of women leaders to the people of God through the centuries.

There were a handful of periods in Old Testament history when our Lord gave this excellent gift to his people—female leaders and proclaimers like Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Esther—in the hope that the faith family would listen to them and honor them. Indeed, these women were acclaimed and their work was chronicled in the Bible, no small matter in Middle Eastern patriarchal cultures.

Were these gifts a total surprise? Not really. In ancient times, there seemed to be a strong sense that God would do whatever God wanted. But

the prophet Joel proclaimed that one day, as a new age dawned, this would become more common: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy.... Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days" (Joel 2:28-29, NIV).

Fast-forward a few centuries—how did the people of the New Testament era respond to this "new thing" God was doing? Jesus certainly modeled a new attitude toward women—he spoke to them, encouraged them to listen and

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follow (see Luke 8:1-3), and entrusted Mary with proclaiming the message of his resurrection to his disciples.

If you read the book of Acts without a presuppositional bias, it appears that the early church graciously received the gift of women leaders, and creatively learned how to put this gift into practice. Several women were among the number who proclaimed God's greatness in other tongues at Pentecost. Priscilla must have been a superb teacher; along with her husband she accompanied Paul on at least one of his missionary journeys, teaching a budding leader Apollos on the ways of God. (Some have wondered if she was the author of Hebrews, asking why the author chose to remain anonymous.) Philip the evangelist had four daughters who prophesied, and the young church in Philippi met in Lydia's home—surely not simply because she was a great host.

The last chapter of Romans, in which Paul sent greetings to his friends in the church in Rome, gives clear indicators that gifted women were serving the early church in many capacities. Phoebe was a deacon, Priscilla a coworker with Paul, and Junia an apostle. In these snapshots, we see that gender was not a qualifying issue in the congregational division of labor.

God had and still has a vision for his church. "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither ➤

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slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NIV). What an amazing time that must have been, as God’s people were learning to live into that reality.

Sometimes receiving an unexpected gift can be a challenge. The church in Rome apparently got it right, but undoubtedly other congregations struggled with the practical implications of equal leadership status for both men and women.

As I write this, U.S. Army generals are discussing whether to allow women to serve on special operations teams like the Rangers. Physical fitness requirements are an issue, of course, but cultural, social, and behavioral concerns loom larger. “I’m actually more concerned with the men and their reaction to women in their formations, quite frankly,” said Army Maj. Gen. Bennet Sacolick. If implemented, it is estimated that integration will require a four-year process. In other words, such a change will take some time to make it work.

If you think integrating male and female soldiers might be tough, imagine overturning centuries of patriarchal religious culture overnight. The early church wasn’t given a step-by-step implementation process for how to incorporate women into the leadership circle. Figure it out, boys; make it work.

In my opinion, that’s exactly what Paul was attempting to do in the two most often debated passages on this topic. He was helping the church live into this new way, and it was likely quite difficult. To the church in Corinth, he essentially told the women to quiet down during worship. After centuries of being sectioned off, imagine their enthusiasm. Paul was not telling them to refrain from speaking entirely; after all, just a

few chapters prior he directed women to wear a head covering *when* they prophesied.

What about Paul’s instructions to Timothy in Ephesus? As Mark Whitlock, a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, has noted, “Paul wrote these scriptures to guide a troubled first century church, not to create a discriminatory church policy in the 21st century.” Or any century, for that matter. I like Eugene Peterson’s translation of the first part of this passage: “I don’t let women take over and tell the men what to do. They should study to be quiet and obedient along with everyone else” (1 Timothy 2:11, *The Message*).

Where did we get the idea that Jesus thinks it’s permissible for any leaders—men or women—to tell others what to do? The church has been far too concerned with who gets to sit at the right and left sides of Jesus’s throne, and not concerned enough with how to serve him together.

What has God’s church done with the gift of women leaders? When change becomes too hard, it can be tempting to fall back into old patterns, and that’s exactly what has happened. We look and act in line with our old patriarchal ways.

Various branches of God’s larger church serve as illustrations of this regression. Citing a major 1994 document by his predecessor John Paul II, Pope Benedict stated that the ban on women priests was part of the [Catholic] Church’s “divine constitution.” The Orthodox Church also does not ordain women to the priesthood or episcopacy. “It is a matter of Holy Tradition....while there may be no strictly theological objection to the ordination of women, Holy Tradition has never supported it, and theological pursuits cannot be considered in

isolation from the ongoing life of God’s People known as Tradition,” writes John Matusiak, a priest in the Orthodox Church in America and managing editor of *The Orthodox Church* magazine.

And many conservative evangelicals agree. According to the Danvers Statement from the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men.”

How did the church come to set aside the gift of women leaders to the church, and to see that as perfectly acceptable to God? Tragically, it’s quite simple.

My cousin Klas-Erik from Sweden sent my wife, Linda, and me a traditional Swedish home crown, a colorful hanging decorative mobile. We were touched by his thoughtfulness, but it did not fit into our décor. Thanks, but...

That is exactly how the church has historically responded to God’s gift. Leaders acted—and still act—as though the decision to affirm or deny women a place in church leadership was one each age and tradition could make.

Wrong! The decision was already made by our God a long time ago. God chose and called gifted women to leadership positions; the Bible is full of examples of this truth. This is foundational, and not open to our exegetical interpretations or “holy tradition” to understand it differently. And nothing has changed; God still chooses and calls women to this day.

The King of kings and Lord of lords decided that his household—a strongly biblical term for the church—will have a distinctive motif of men and women prophesying and

servicing and making decisions together. Display this theme prominently, he says to the men of the church; don't put women on the lower shelf of leadership or assign them to the children's wing or the kitchen. It may not be your personal preference to have them lead with you. It will run counter to patriarchal cultures, where the guy gets to rule the roost. It may not be easy. But you need to get used to it.

"Surely not, Lord!" Opposition to the ways of God has been common, most notably by the Apostle Peter, who erupted with this outburst repeatedly (see Matthew 16:21ff., John 13:1ff., Acts 10). But each time, Peter repented, declaring to the leaders in Jerusalem, "Who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17).

Too often, in this matter the church has firmly echoed Peter's exclamation, "Surely not, Lord" in response to God's vision and work of women in leadership. Too often we have refused to repent and opted instead for the weaker translation of Psalm 68:11. In the thirteenth century church leaders changed the name of Junia to the unheard-of masculine form Junias, presumably because the concept of a female apostle didn't fit with tradition. Until recently, all English translations adopted that masculine form. Similarly, Phoebe was demoted to "deaconess" in Romans 16:1, rather than recognizing her as having the same status as deacons mentioned in Acts 6 and in Paul's letters. In some congregations we bestow the title of "director" upon female ministry staff to avoid recognizing them as "pastor." And we still refuse to consider names of qualified women candidates for lead or solo pastor positions.

Fortunately for Linda and me, my Swedish cousin never visited us after our wedding, sparing

us the awkward and embarrassing question, "What did you do with the gift I sent you?" But pastors and church leaders will someday stand before God and be held to answer that question.

I am convinced that I am simply following God's lead when I ask women to proclaim the message, to serve on the leadership team, or to help shepherd the church. For me, it has come down to one simple question: If God called and chose women to lead, why shouldn't I? Why wouldn't I?

The Covenant has been my home since birth, having grown up at First Covenant in Oakland, California, where there were clearly defined roles for men and women. I never questioned that through seminary or at the first church I served. But the more I studied in Escalon, California, where I served for twenty years, the less I retreated behind those two disputed passages in Paul's letters, and the more I intentionally looked at the whole of Scripture. I begin to identify with the title of the book edited by Alan Johnson, *How I Changed My Mind about Women in Leadership*.

Faith without works is dead, James tells us. In the past dozen years or so I've realized that theological agreement without pastoral advocacy is worthless. Part of a pastor's role is to help change the culture of the church. That means part of my calling is to help make it normative for men and women to serve in any and every role, including as pastor. If our sons and daughters only see men in leadership roles and only hear men preach, we send them a false message about how the Spirit distributes gifts to the

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church.

In the congregation I presently serve we have twice called women to serve as seminary interns. Each was given leadership positions and regular opportunities to preach. Each served and loved our congregation in many positive

ways. As lead pastor, I am expected to preach about 80 percent of the Sunday morning messages, but a priority for me is to ensure that women also are given an opportunity to speak. So far in 2013 we have had four women bring the message and our female pastor on the schedule to preach.

The Covenant has been ordaining women since 1976, but if you listen to the gifted women who serve among us, many of them will tell you that after the congratulatory hugs at their ordination service, the phone calls of inquiry come rarely. Objective consideration of their profiles by search committees is unlikely, especially for the role of lead pastor. Conference superintendents and the Commission for Biblical Gender Equality, whose mission is to be a voice and an advocate for continued progress, can only do so much.

My sincere hope is that pastors, leaders, and participants at congregational meetings will intentionally ask themselves these questions: what have we done with the gifts God has given to us? What more can we do? ■

For a list of gifted women pastors who will come preach at your church, contact the Department of the Ordered Ministry at (773) 583-3211. The Commission on Biblical Gender Equality will assist with transportation costs.