

Celebrating the Gifts of Women

A sermon by David C Mauldin
Based on Galatians 3:27-29

Our church is a part of ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. As you know, I love ECO. For one thing, we are serious about scripture. Christians have to be. In ECO, we ordain women to all offices in the church. This means we have women who are elders, deacons, and pastors. Here at Palm City Presbyterian, we have women who are elders and deacons. Both our pastors happen to be men, but we have colleagues in our presbytery who are women. The Essential Tenets of ECO say, “We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ’s offices within the world beyond the church.” Furthermore, one of ECO’s Core Values is “Egalitarian Ministry: We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.”

Because not all churches ordain women as we do, we have a responsibility to explain how our practice is based on the Bible. We do not ordain women just because times have changed. We definitely do not say, “Well, the Bible may be against it, but ...” That would be disobedience to God. No, we ordain women because when we read the Bible, we find good reasons to. And this morning, I want to share those reason with you. My plan is simple. I am going to list the main reasons we ordain women. Then I am going to look at a couple of verses that seem to say we should not. And then I will close with a surprise ending.

We’ve got a lot of ground to cover. Let’s get to it.

Reason # 1: The Bible is full of women in leadership and ministry roles.

You will find a handy list on the back of the sermon note card inserted in your bulletin. There you see that, in the Old Testament, Deborah and Esther were rulers.

Throughout the Bible, women were prophets. Miriam (Exodus 15:20) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14) were prophets in the Old Testament. In the New, Philip’s daughters were prophets (Acts 21:9), and we know there were women who prophesied in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:5).

In addition, women served in leadership roles in the New Testament churches.

- Lydia (Acts 16:13-15, 40), Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:11), and Nympha (Colossians 4:15) were leaders of the churches that met in their homes.
- Priscilla, with her husband Aquila, was a teacher and missionary (Acts 18:18-26, Romans 16:3).
- Pheobe was a deacon (Romans 16:1).
- Junia was an apostle (Romans 16:7).
- Paul calls Tryphena and Tryphosa (Romans 16:12) “workers in the Lord.” And he calls Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2) fellow workers who labored side by side with him in the gospel.

That’s an impressive list, and these are just the ones we know! They are too many to write off as an aberration. God called women to be prophets. God called women to be leaders in the New Testament church.

Reason # 2: Jesus’ attitude toward women.

To appreciate this, you have to know how the culture of his day treated women. No self-respecting rabbi at that time would teach a woman. The Mishna was written down a bit later, but it reflects the values in Jewish culture at the time of Jesus' ministry. Two quotes will give you the idea: "Let thy house be a meeting-house for the Sages and sit amid the dust of their feet and drink in their words with thirst ... [but] talk not much with womankind" [*M. 'Abot* 1.4-5]. And, "better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman" [*y. Sotah* 3:19a,3]. Ouch!

Compare that to Jesus' attitude. When Mary sat at Jesus' feet in the posture of a disciple, a learner, what did he say? "Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" [Luke 10:42]. Wow! What a contrast! True, Jesus chose men for the 12 and when he sent out the 72. But Luke tells us he had women who were part of his traveling ministry team. Luke 8:1-3 says: "He went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means." Finally, Jesus made Mary Magdalene the first apostle when he sent her to tell the good news to his disciples on that first Easter morning. Contrary to the culture of the time, Jesus valued the gifts of women.

Reason # 3: Paul's attitude toward women.

Paul has a reputation for being a male chauvinist, but it is undeserved, especially when you compare him with the values of his day. We will look in a moment at a couple of passages from his letters that seem to disqualify women from church leadership. We want to make sure we are reading them rightly. Paul's letters show, however, that Paul worked side by side with women in the work of the gospel. He valued them as fellow laborers. Paul also wrote the radically egalitarian passage that was our main scripture reading: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And that is reason 4.

Reason # 4: In Christ, the old distinctions do not divide.

We need to be careful to hear what this passage is saying and what it isn't. It is not saying those distinctions no longer exist. We are still male and female, and that's a good thing! But, those distinctions do not divide. We are united in Christ. We are of equal value in Christ. There was a prayer that Jewish men in Paul's day frequently used to start the day. Paul probably prayed it himself many times before he knew Jesus. He may have had it in mind when he wrote our passage. It went like this: "Lord, I thank you that you did not make me a Gentile, a woman, or a slave." ... You see the difference Jesus makes? Before, Paul looked down on such people. He thought Gentiles were dogs, and he would rather burn the Torah than teach it to a woman. Once he came to faith in Christ, he was eating with Gentiles, teaching women, and honoring slaves. He could write, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." If in the body of Christ race does not matter, wealth and social standing does not matter, and male/female does not matter—shouldn't this truth inform whom we ordination?

Reason # 5: Women have the Holy Spirit.

The first Christians to ordain women to preach in the modern era were the Pentecostals. They started in the 19th century. For them, the question was simple: Do women have the Holy Spirit or not? They believed that one thing and one thing only makes a preacher: anointing with power by the Holy Spirit. They reasoned: because the Holy Spirit lives in believing women too, the Holy Spirit might anoint some of them to preach. And they were keen not to limit what the Holy Spirit might do. So when some women showed the ability to preach with power, they said, “Sister, go to it!”

As we look back at the biblical witness and church history, I think what we see is a rough and tumble New Testament church that exploded everywhere. In those early, heady days, women found opportunities for leadership. As time went on and church structures began to solidify, the church began to accommodate itself to the culture around it. Roman society was hierarchical, and the church became hierarchical. Roman society was patriarchal, and the church became patriarchal. Until women found themselves squeezed out of leadership roles. Once that happened, it was easy to ignore the women in the Bible who were prophets and leaders. It was easy to overlook Jesus’ attitude and Paul’s. It was easy to forget that the distinctions do not divide. When we ordain women today, we are trying to be faithful to the truth we find in scripture. Before I rest my case, however, I must say something about a couple of passages that seem to disqualify women from church leadership.

The first one is 1 Corinthians 14:33-35: “For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” ... OK, well, I’m glad we clear that up. Women should keep silent in church. Done and done. Right?

Well, ... wait a minute. In this same letter, back in chapter 11, verse 5, Paul told them this, “But every wife [or woman] who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.” Prophecy was an important part of worship in the church in Corinth. They would have a time in their service—and keep in mind they met in homes in relatively small groups—when believers who felt they had a word for the group would share. Women did this too. Paul tells these women that when they pray publically in worship or when they prophesy, they should cover their heads, for modesty’s sake.

Anyone confused yet? Why two different instructions? Should they pray and prophesy with heads covered or just stay silent? Or did they mime their prophecy? Paul was a brilliant thinker. He was not so incompetent that he would write contradictory instructions. The answer then must be that what he says about silence does not mean what we take it to mean at first glance. And there is an explanation. In chapter 14, Paul is talking about order in worship. It was customary in synagogues at the time—and the church may have picked up this model—for women and men to sit separately. The men were on one side, the women on the other. Or the men were up front and the women were in the back. The women were also tending to children, who sat with the women.

So imagine a worship service in Corinth. Paul is preaching, and a bunch of the women are chatting. When he asks them to be quiet, they say they were discussing the sermon, so he tells

them that if they have questions, they should ask their husbands later. That's roughly the picture of what I think was going on and the problem he was addressing in chapter 14. The whole chapter is about order in worship. He is not saying that women can have no leadership role. We know they were praying and prophesying. He's already told us that. His concern here is that the women's section should not be disruptive in worship.

The other passage that seems to disqualify women is 1 Timothy 2:1-15. It says: "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." Case closed, right? It seems straightforward enough, although how can we square this with all those women Paul identifies as co-laborers in the gospel? And the praying and prophesying? Priscilla was a woman, and she taught Apollos, who was a man. And Paul was in on that. What's going on here?

There are interpreters who believe Paul is not giving a blanket prohibition against women in leadership, but rather addressing a situation in the church at Ephesus, where Timothy was. They point out that the Greek word behind the English phrase "to exercise authority" is a rare and unusual term. In fact, this is the only time it appears in the whole Bible. When it is used outside the Bible, two-thirds of the time it carries a sinister connotation: to usurp authority, to act on one's own authority, to domineer. In this case, Paul would not be worried about a woman with rightful authority but those who usurp authority.

Whatever was going on in Ephesus and whatever nuance Paul intended this word to carry, one thing is certain. There is only one command in this passage. In Greek there is only one verb in the imperative mood. ... "Let a woman learn." Why would that be important? From the rest of the letter, it is clear Timothy faced a problem with false teachers in Ephesus. Women especially were being led astray. In 2 Timothy 3:6, Paul says of these false teachers: "For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions." Paul did not want the Christian women in Ephesus to follow these false teachers. The answer was for women to learn sound doctrine.

This makes sense of what Paul says about Adam and Eve. Adam was not deceived. He ate the fruit knowing full well what he was doing. He sinned on purpose. Eve, however, was deceived. She became a transgressor because she was deceived. Moral of the story: Don't let women be deceived. How do you prevent that? Teach them sound doctrine.

I admit I still have some questions about this passage. Given what I know about it, however, I am not prepared to set it alone against the rest of scripture to disqualify women from leadership in the church.

Now, I want to be clear that we base our teaching and practice on the Bible, not on our experiences or our preferences. With that in mind, I want to introduce you to a lady who has something to teach us. She is a woman I admire deeply. One of my heroes. And I doubt any of you has ever heard of her.

Here she is. Her name is Louisa Woosley. The Rev. Louisa Woosley. She was the first woman to be ordained as a Presbyterian minister. Here is her story. She was born in 1862, and obviously back then women were far from equal to men in American society. No one ordained women in those days. And yet, early in her life she felt a call to preach. Since her church and her culture told her there was no way that could be right, she assumed she was supposed to be a pastor's wife. She married at age 17, but her husband never showed the slightest inclination to be a preacher. As time went by, her sense of call increased. In the fall of 1882, she was 20 years old and had two small children to care for. In an effort to relieve her spiritual angst about her call, she read the Bible from cover to cover, marking every passage that mentioned women. Her exercise backfired. She became convinced that "God, being no respecter of persons, had not overlooked the women, but that he had a great work for them to do."

Still she resisted her call. She knew the church would not approve. Then her daughter became seriously ill. She feared it was because she had used her children as an excuse to resist God's call. She promised God that if her daughter got well, she would obey. Her daughter got well. She was still not ready to heed the call. She sank into depression and became ill herself. Finally, unable to stand it any longer, she promised God she would follow wherever he might lead her.

On January 1, 1887, the pastor of her church, the Macedonia Cumberland Presbyterian Church, was away, and the elders invited her to preach. More invitations followed. The next year, she was examined by Nolin Presbytery, which was in Kentucky, and licensed to preach. The record for her first year of ministry shows that she preached 267 sermons; 306 people made professions of faith in Jesus Christ; and 119 people joined the church. Astonished by this, her presbytery appointed her as an evangelist. And on November 5, 1889, they ordained her to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

As you might expect, this created a tremendous controversy. In the end, her ordination stood. She wrote a little book, *Shall Women Preach?* In it she laid out a biblical case for ordaining women. She argued that God created men and women as equal partners. The Fall, however, brought a change to women's status. With the brokenness of sin came the subordination of women. Christ, however, has freed us from the curse and restored women to full partnership with men. In Christ, there is neither male nor female. Woosley also appealed to the Holy Spirit argument. Because women too are led by the Holy Spirit, they are capable of preaching, teaching, and governing the church on an equal basis with men. She wrote:

Let the man and woman stand side by side, shoulder to shoulder, in defense of the cause of Christ. It necessarily follows, if they are heirs together of the grace of life, that each has a share (an equal share) in all that pertains to salvation through Christ; for the woman was created in the image of God just as was the man. And if she gains anything in Christ she gains equally as much as the man.

The Rev. Woosley travelled widely preaching revival services. She also pastored churches. By the time she was 50, she had preached 6,343 sermons; 7,664 people had responded by professing faith in Jesus Christ; and 2,506 members had been added to church rolls. She baptized 358 people. She served as Stated Clerk of Leitchfield Presbytery for 25 years. Three times she was a

commissioner to the General Assembly. And she was elected moderator of Kentucky Synod in 1938. She died in 1952 at 90 years of age.

Her obituary described her this way: “Mrs. Woosley filled the pulpit with grace and dignity. She was a small attractive, modestly dressed woman. With her culture, charm and knowledge of the Bible and God’s plans for saving souls she was an inspiration to all who heard her.”

May God send us more women—and men—like that!