

“Who May Serve God?”
1 Corinthians 14:26-40 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15
October 15/18, 2006

In an essay entitled, “A Call Deferred,” the Reverend Leigh Gillis, a female Presbyterian minister from Elizabeth City, North Carolina, describes the earliest days of her long and rocky path to pastoral ministry.

She writes, “In 1971, when I was a high school junior, we each had scheduled appointments with the school’s guidance counselor. As we considered what colleges to apply for, I asked her, ‘Where do you go to be a minister?’ Her reply was, ‘Women can’t do that, what else do you want to do?’” (1)

My story is a little different than Leigh’s. I never set out to be a minister. As a high school junior, I had only been a Christian for a year. When I took the standard vocational aptitude tests, I was told that I would excel as a mortician, or perhaps as a teacher, but certainly not as a pastor.

After I finished college with a degree in education and a graduate degree in counseling, I was invited by a Presbyterian church in Salem, Oregon to serve as a youth director, and later as a church educator. I hadn’t set out in this direction by design, but there I was feeling like a duck in the right pond. Ministry certainly was a “good fit.”

Before too long, dear people in my congregation began posing a question I had never seriously considered before. Why didn’t I go to seminary and become a pastor?

I can tell you honestly that my reaction was, “I’m not sure a woman can do that.” Remember, up to this point in my life, all the ministers I had known were men. I had never heard a woman minister preach.

Most importantly, I wrestled with the question of what Scripture had to say about the ordination of women to any leadership office in the church: deacon, elder or minister. I had certainly heard from some Christians along the way that Scripture prohibited women from exercising ordained leadership. I can't emphasize enough how important it became for me in my mid-20's to understand what Scripture really said on this matter.

I know that I am not the only one who has struggled to understand the position of Scripture on the ordination of women to primary leadership positions in the church! This summer, a member of our congregation posed this question of faith for us to ponder together. "When Presbyterians decided to allow women to be elders, deacons and ministers, what were the Biblical authorities identified?" Clearly, the question behind this question is: Does Scripture support the ordination of women to the positions of deacon, elder and minister?

I can tell you without reservation; I am convinced that Scripture does support the ordination of both women and men to all positions of leadership in the church. This morning, I am going to take you on a brief tour of what Scripture has to say about this important matter. I'm going to start in what might feel like an unusual place to you. Our second Scripture reading for today is 1 Timothy 2:8-15, which may be found on page 208 of the New Testament in your pew Bible. I can tell you that this is the Scripture passage most often cited as "proof positive" that women should be barred from leadership ministries in the church. Let's listen now for God's Word.

In August of this year, the First Baptist Church of Watertown, New York dismissed 81-year-old, Mary Lambert, from her position as the teacher of the 9:30 Sunday morning adult Bible study...a position she had filled for 54 years! In a letter to

Mary, the church board explained that they were adopting a literal interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” Therefore, Mary was no longer allowed to teach men. (2)

If we’re honest, there is no question that the passage we just read from 1 Timothy, and the passage we read earlier from 1 Corinthians, both penned by the Apostle Paul, clearly prohibit certain behaviors on the part of women. In 1 Corinthians, women are prohibited from speaking during worship services. In 1 Timothy, women are once again admonished to be silent, and prohibited from teaching or having authority over men.

The critical question that must be addressed to both passages is: Was Paul speaking a specific word of prohibition to be applied to women in particular times and places, or did Paul mean his prohibitions to be universally applied to all women in all times and places? In other words, are Paul’s prohibitions addressed only to 1st century women in Corinth and Ephesus, or are Paul’s prohibitions applicable to 21st century women living in Spokane, Washington or Watertown, New York?

If Paul meant his prohibitions to be universally applied, then the board of Watertown’s First Baptist Church was completely justified in relieving Mary Lambert of her teaching duties, and Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church should never have called me to be one of its pastors!

Now, while I want you to understand that there is a range of opinion among sincere Christian biblical scholars on this matter, the majority of contemporary Bible scholars would tell us that Paul’s words of prohibition in both 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, constitute specific pastoral words that Paul hoped would correct specific situations in two churches.

Let me explain what I mean. Paul's overarching purpose in 1 Corinthians 14 was to urge the Corinthian Christians to get some order in their worship services. They obviously weren't Presbyterians! Apparently, Corinthian worship was a bit of a free for all, complete with noisy exuberance and many speaking in tongues at the same time. Making a bad situation worse, Corinthian women, who were homebound and socially isolated much of the time, were noisily interrupting worship with their visiting. To these particular women in this particular church, Paul says: "Be silent...you aren't permitted to speak!" The word in the original language for speak literally means, talk or chatter. Quite literally, Paul is saying, "Cut out the chatter and quit disrupting worship."

For many years, sincere Christians interpreted these verses to mean that women should never be allowed to speak, teach, preach or pray aloud in church. Nothing could be further from Paul's meaning! In fact, a few chapters earlier in Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, he describes the "dress code" that women should observe in church when they are prophesying. This word "prophesy" literally means to preach. In other words, Paul expected women to preach in church!

Now, let's turn to 1 Timothy 2. Are Paul's words of prohibition in this text intended for a particular church situation, or should these prohibitions regarding teaching and the exercise of authority be applied to the church today?

Again, let me emphasize that sincere Christian Bible scholars have disagreed about this passage, but most contemporary Bible scholars believe that Paul's words were intended to address a very specific and difficult situation in the church at Ephesus.

Paul writes to his protégé, Timothy, who was a pastoral leader of the church at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus had been plagued from the beginning by false teachers

seeking to infiltrate and influence members of the church. He writes to Timothy to urge him to stay on top of things in the Ephesian church and nip false teaching in the bud. Listen to his admonition to Timothy in the first chapter of this letter, “When I left for Macedonia, I urged you to stay there in Ephesus and stop those who are teaching wrong doctrine” (NLT, 1 Timothy 1:3).

Who are those teaching this wrong doctrine? Well, apparently there were many false teachers, but, at least some of those who were teaching wrong doctrine were women in the church. To those women, Paul says: “Be silent!”

In 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul says, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man...” The word used for “teach” in this verse is most often used in the context of false teaching. The word used for “authority” literally means to exercise illegitimate authority. In other words, Paul is calling for these particular women in the Ephesian church, who have been heavily influenced by false teachers and are aggressively sharing this false teaching, to stop and be quiet.

Friends, an honest examination of this passage in its original context brings us to the conclusion that Paul is speaking a specific pastoral word of prohibition to a specific group of 1st century Christian women in the church at Ephesus.

And yet, this passage, probably more than any other in all of Scripture, has been cited to prohibit women for the last 2,000 years from exercising leadership in the church.

So, we have examined the two Scripture passages that are most often utilized as “proof texts” barring women from exercising leadership in the church. We find that they constitute particular words to particular situations in early Christian congregations, and in no way universally prohibit women from exercising ordained leadership in the church.

But, what about the rest of Scripture? Does the rest of the Bible lend support to the exercise of ordained leadership by women?

I believe that the answer is: yes. If we go back to Genesis, to the Creation accounts, we find that God created men and women to be equal partners in life. In the remainder of the Old Testament, we discover women like Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Esther exercising strong leadership during every stage of Israel's history.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, he taught women and included them in his circle of disciples. And, significantly, women were the first to bear witness to the resurrection of Christ.

In Acts 2:17, we are reminded that God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh and both sons and daughters shall prophesy, which is to say, they will preach! Also in the book of Acts, it is abundantly clear that women had prominent leadership roles in the early church.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, offers thanks for his partners in ministry by name – several of these partners are women. Significantly, in the conclusion to his letter to the church at Rome, Paul greets and praises several of his co-workers in Christ who are obviously women.

All of these passages of Scripture support the reality that, from the very beginning, women have exercised leadership among the people of God. But, as important as all of these passages are, there is still one more critical passage that for us, as Presbyterians, provides our most basic understanding of who may serve God.

The passage is Galatians 3:27-28, which is the passage that called us to worship this morning. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with

Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

With these words, the Apostle Paul wants us to understand that, when we are baptized, everything changes. All the roles that once defined us: Jew, Gentile, slave, free, man or woman, are now laid aside. They are now secondary to our primary identity as a follower of Christ. In our baptism, all of us are called by God and equipped by the Holy Spirit for service in the world. In our baptism, we are all joined to the ministry of Jesus Christ. Baptism propels all of us, men and women, into ministry for a lifetime. In addition, some of us, both women and men, will be called to serve and build up the church as ordained leaders: deacons, elders and ministers. In my judgement, here at HPPC we bear witness to ministry as it should be: man and women serving in all roles side by side.

I want to close with an excerpt from a terrific sermon preached by the Reverend Chuck Poole. His sermon, which was entitled, “We Ordain Women Because We Baptize Girls,” succinctly summarizes why the Presbyterian Church ordains women to exercise leadership in the church.

He says, “If anyone should ask you why your church ordains women, just tell them that, based on a careful reading of the Bible, your church discovered that if you were going to refuse ordination to women, you’d first have to refuse baptism to girls because Galatians 3 says that once a person has been baptized, their gender is no more an issue in the church than the color of their eyes or their hair or their skin. Tell them that based on a careful reading of Galatians 3:27-29, your church ordains men and women because your church baptizes boys and girls.” (3)

So, who may serve God? I guess it depends on who you ask. But, in the spirit of Galatians 3:27-29, the Presbyterian Church, USA says that all of us: regardless of our gender, race, age, or social status are called to serve God and to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). May it be so that all glory and honor may be given to the One who has been revealed to us as Maker, Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

Notes:

- (1) Gillis, Leigh B. "A Call Deferred." Church and Society, January/February 2006, p. 43.
- (2) Taken from "Sunday School Teacher Dumped for Being Female," CNN.com, August 21, 2006.
- (3) Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Chuck Poole, "We Ordain Women Because We Baptize Girls," Lifeshare Community Ministries in Jackson, Mississippi, 2001.