



“Can I Be A Christian If . . . 7. I Don’t Believe Women Are Second-Class Disciples?”

Texts: Joshua 2: 1-21 & Luke 24:1-10

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I remember the day I was asked the question. “Pastor, what does your church believe about women?” The question came from a person who was unacquainted with our Presbyterian tradition and understanding and so I thought it was an innocent and honest question. I was about to have that thought erased. “Well,” I said, “we believe that women are equal to men in the church and beyond the church.” “What about women as pastors and teachers?” my inquisitor asked. “We’ve been ordaining women to ministry as pastor, ruling elders, and deacons since before I was born,” I told him. “So, you belong to an apostate church that feels free in breaking the laws of God and ignoring the teaching of the apostles?” “Uh, yeah, I’m totally comfortable with that.” I said. I was badgered for another half-hour by this person from another Christian tradition that, I assume, relegated the participation of women to the choir, Sunday School, and Women’s Auxiliary, which was probably established to keep the church from going out of business at the hands of enlightened leaders such as my conversational partner.

The reality is, my friends, that on this July morning in 2012, there are still churches that deny women full participation in the leadership and life of the local congregation and the regional and national church bodies. To set the record straight, Presbyterians have a long history of integrating women into the full leadership of the church. As early as 1917, Lillian Herrick Chapman was licensed to preach by the former Presbyterian Church (USA), though her license was revoked by the Synod of New York in 1919. Sarah E. Dickson became the first woman elder on June 6, 1930. Margaret Towner became the first woman ordained as a pastor by the former Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1956. Rachel Henderlite was the first woman ordained as a pastor by the former Presbyterian Church (US) on May 12, 1965. It was not long before other former “mainline” denominations, including the United Methodists, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist

Church, and others, began including women in the leadership and decision-making offices of the church.

But, others have resisted. There are still plenty of churches where women's leadership gifts are not recognized by ordination or even inclusion in the decision-making bodies of the church. They are welcome to take lesser, supporting roles, as teachers, choir members, cooks, and secretaries, but the actual leadership of the church remains in the hands of men.

What should we believe about the role of women in the church? What does the Bible say and what should our practice be? And, in 2012, should there be a "no women allowed" policy in the church today?

The stories of women being involved in the unfolding plan of God go all the way back to the Old Testament. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and even Rahab, whose story we heard again this morning, play critical roles in the story of Israel, as do Deborah, Ruth, Naomi, Miriam, the Egyptian midwives, Abigail, and many others. Yet, whenever we hear stories and sermons from the Old Testament, they too often focus on such women as Bathsheba, Lot's Wife (poor woman, we don't even know her name), and Jezebel, whose very name has come to mean trouble. A survey of the Old Testament will clearly show that God used just as many women as men to accomplish God's holy purpose.

When you look at how Jesus interacted with women, you see something very interesting. By the time of Jesus, the practice of his day was to segregate women and men in worship. Women were not to sit at the feet of rabbis. Women were not permitted to touch men who were not members of their families. Women were required to cover themselves lest they be seen by men.¹ In Jesus' practice of ministry, his traveling group included women, some of whom supported Jesus' work financially while others provided for the needs of the men in the group. Jesus did not hesitate to touch women or to be touched by women. He allowed a woman to anoint his feet. He spoke at length to a Samaritan woman at a well. And the first apostles – meaning "those who are sent" – were the women who came to prepare his body for burial on that first Easter morning, the story which we heard again this morning. Jesus broke with the customs and practices of his day that treated women as second-class citizens.

Go to the days of the early church and you'll find a grand group of women in places of leadership and influence. Mary, the mother of Jesus, Joanna, Lydia, Priscilla, Pheobe, Junia, Chloe, Euodia and Syntyche – the list goes on and on of women who played pivotal roles in the formation and expansion of the early church, serving as deacons, teachers, and financiers. It is not too much of a stretch to say that without these women, the church (as we know it today) would not exist.

Consider the great day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon men and women, fulfilling, at least in Luke's mind, the prophecy of Joel, "that your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." (Acts 2:18) The Spirit did not discriminate on Pentecost.

Which takes us to Paul. Hundreds of interpreters have struggled with

Paul's views on women, if for no other reason, than because they seem so contradictory. On the one hand, Paul seems to tell women to sit in the back of the bus. On the other hand, Paul seems to say that women are no longer second-class citizens. What are we to believe?

Depending on what you accept as Paul's actual work in the New Testament, there are few who would disagree with the statement we read last week, from the Letter to the Galatians: "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." (Galatians 3:28) Paul consistently celebrates the "new humanity" that is created by Jesus Christ, who came breaking down the walls of hostility and division. Surely, a new humanity created from breaking down the dividing walls would not be expected to continue to be governed by exclusivist teaching or practice.

So, while there are individual verses that seem to attempt to restrict the role of women in the church, the great bending arc of all scripture bends toward the full inclusion of women as full-fledged disciples of Jesus Christ and as leaders in the movement he began. In the Kingdom of God, there are no second-class disciples. In both lesson and practice, the Church must be moving toward recognizing and celebrating the leadership gifts of women.

There are great dangers if the church fails to move with the bending arc of scripture that seeks to include women in the full life of the church. If the church treats women as second-class disciples, what is to stop the world, in general, from mistreating and maltreating women? If the church fails to value women, why should the world value women? If the church abuses women, by relegating them to second-class status, what is to stop the world from abusing women in ways that can ultimately threaten their lives?

Within the past few months, Evansville, Indiana has seen a terrifying rise in domestic abuse, with four women being killed by those who said they loved them. Across Indiana, 62 people lost their lives to domestic violence, with 32 of them being women, and 9 of them being children. Last year in Evansville, the YWCA and the Albion Fellows Bacon Center alone provided 14,614 nights of safe shelter to over 1,100 women and children, representing a 10% increase over the previous year, and the demand for domestic violence services in our community continues to increase at an alarming rate.

When the church is silent about the equality of women, or when the church fails to practice the equality of women, could it be that the church becomes a "silent partner" in the abuse of women? Could it be that when we fail to celebrate the God-given gifts of women for ministry and leadership, we are seen as dismissing women as "not really that important," and opening the door to mistreatment? If the church fails to include women as full participants, is it any wonder that women are the objects of maltreatment and abuse by others world systems, including the business world, academia, and the family?

The church has a prophetic role to play in many matters, but none more important than the inclusion of women as full partners in ministry and mission. When the church embodies God's vision – the vision of an inclusive, borderless community of faith – then the world will have something to

emulate. As long as some parts of the church continue to practice the exclusion of women, the church is complacent and even conspiratorial in the abuse that women continue to suffer.

Some of you will not remember, and some of you are too young to know, but in the early days of the 1970s, before Title Nine, girls were not allowed to play full-court basketball. Girls basketball was a half-court game. It was believed, back then, that girls were too delicate to play a full-court game.

There are still places in the Church where women are relegated to a “half-court” ministry. There are still places in the Kingdom of God where women are given the role of “second-class” disciples. There are still too many places – even within the Presbyterian Church – that women are not welcomed. The number of women in the position of Senior Pastor, or Head of Staff, within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is still woefully low.

But the good news is that God welcomes all people – women and men, gay and straight, rich and poor, white collar and blue collar – God welcomes all people into the fullness of ministry and mission within the church. God’s Kingdom – and especially the part of it that is the Church – is a place where the distinctions and assigned roles of the world no longer hold sway. The good news is that Christ has come among us, breaking down the dividing walls, and creating for God a people committed to love and justice.

“Can I Be A Christian If I Don’t Believe Women are Second-Class Disciples?” You bet you can. God “calls women and men to all ministries of the church” and gifts them for that ministry.

So, let us celebrate the Spirit that calls us all to service and let us work together to expand God’s kingdom of love, both for now and evermore. Amen.

ⁱ Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, IVP Press, p. 318



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