

Celebrating Women's  
Leadership in the Church

# EQUALLY CALLED

## INDIVIDUAL STUDY GUIDE

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# BAPTIST WOMEN IN MINISTRY

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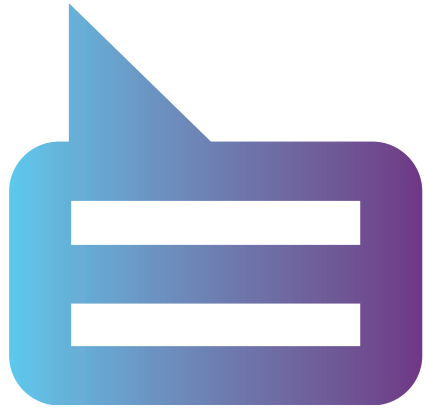
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## Celebrating Women's Leadership in the Church

# EQUALLY CALLED

## SESSION 1 Creation and Fall

### THE SCRIPTURE

**Genesis 1:26-2:4a, 2:4b-25, and 3:1-23**

The story of creation—God’s naming-into-being of the cosmos and God’s breathing-to-life of the first humans—may well be the first story we ever heard about God. Even as children we could recognize the world we live in and feel its blessedness every time God says, “It is good.” We learned that God made the heavens and the earth and every named and unnamed being, all the way across time and place to us, here, now.

But. (There is always a “but.”) Even children understand actions and consequences. The tricky snake came. The two people were tempted to eat of the forbidden tree. They chose to rebel against

God’s best for them. Then the two people had to live with the fallout from that choice. God made them leave the beautiful garden and the goodness of God’s creation started to tarnish.

What this means is that the world is no longer how God intended it; instead, we live with broken relationships with our Creator, broken relationships with creation and broken relationships with people. God’s ordered world has become disordered. This disordered creation manifests in many ways throughout history, but one of the dominant human expressions of it is something we call patriarchy.

Play the following [YouTube video](#) and ask the reflection questions below:

1. What is patriarchy, and how has it affected women’s lives?
2. In the video, the mother tells the girl child that although we have made progress, we must continue to question what isn’t working in our societies when it comes to the freedom and rights of women. What do you think isn’t working well when it comes to women’s experiences in our society?

## IN GOD'S IMAGE

Patriarchy continues to limit women's contributions to society and cause suffering for girls and women around the world today. Believe it or not, churches can participate and promote patriarchy without even realizing they are doing it. One Christian theology that promotes patriarchal structures and practices is called complementarianism. Complementarians believe that God created men and women for different roles in the family and society. Men, they assert, should be the leaders in religious and familial settings and women should serve in helping roles only. In order to back up these beliefs, complementarians adopt a patriarchal interpretation of Genesis 1-3, one that is woven deeply into American Christianity. Let's take a look at these Genesis passages in their historical and literary contexts so we can understand better what they say about men and women and their responsibilities in the world.

Genesis 1 is widely thought by biblical scholars to be a text from the time when the people of Israel lived in exile under Babylonian oppression, around the 6th century BC. Many scholars believe these verses, with their poetic form and repetition, might even have been a liturgical text that the people used in worship. Even in exile, they believed in God who cared enough to call every aspect of creation into being and give it purpose. Even in exile, they could join in the refrain, "And God saw that it was good."

God's purpose-full creation includes *adam*. This Hebrew word is both generic and specific. In Genesis 1:26-27 it is generic: God says, "Let us make humankind in our own image, according to our likeness." Then God acts on this plan and creates "humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Where the NRSV translates "humankind," the word is *adam*, not yet the capital-A proper name of the human man. The two humans are created together, in one word from God.

The Hebrew people were forbidden to make images of God (Ex 20:4). Instead, from the first moment of the creation of *adam*, "male and female," the Israelites' God is "imaged" in people themselves. God's creation of humanity is a

stunning expression of divine self-reflection. In the ancient Near East, people understood kings to be reflections and representatives of the gods. God's people—*adam*—are not powerful kings but everyday folks, and not only man but woman. God's stated intention is that humanity itself, not one kingly class and not one particular sex, is "in our image."

God calls *adam* into being, names them, and blesses them with purpose. God even shares God's own power with them, commissioning them to care for all that God has made and to "be fruitful" (Gen 1:28) as God was fruitful in creation. God calls *adam* into being and blesses—not burdens—they with responsibility. God does not define an empire, a power structure, or even a patriarchy; rather, in God's self-giving image, God calls *adam* together to share in God's own care for creation.

## UNITY, NOT HIERARCHY

Scholars believe the story that begins in Genesis 2:4 predates the more poetic telling in chapter 1. In this narrative, the man is created first, when God scoops up some dirt and "forms man from the dust of the ground" and then blows "into his nostrils the breath of life" (Gen 2:7). Here, the word *adam* is specific: this one man is *adam*.

God makes Adam the garden's caretaker (v. 15) and leads him on a tour of the land for which he is responsible. Then God realizes that Adam's solitary existence is not good (v. 18), so God makes a bunch of other creatures who, it turns out, are not appropriate partners for the man (v. 20). Finally, God takes from Adam's side to create a woman while Adam sleeps (v. 21). In this telling, when he awakes, Adam invents a new vocabulary, calling her woman, *ishshah*, and himself man, *ish* (v. 23). In Genesis 3:20 he will give her the proper name Eve. Complementarians (and others) have interpreted the order and acts of creation in Genesis 2 to indicate a God-ordained power structure, where the woman is subordinate to the man because she was created after him, is called his "helper" (v. 18), is made out of his body, and is named by him.

Other biblical texts can offer perspective on all these assumptions. In Genesis 1, *adam* is God's last and highest creation; if the same logic applies to Genesis 2, the woman holds that position. The description "helper" is not a subordinate role; the psalmist and the prophet Isaiah both refer to God as helper (Ps 121:1-2, Is 41:10). Naming is an act of recognition, not power; in Genesis 16:13, Hagar (a woman!) names God. Terence Fretheim notes that "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" is "a phrase that specifies kinship," as in Genesis 29:14 and 2 Samuel 19:12-13 (Fretheim, 353). God's forming the woman from Adam's flesh and bone is not a sign of subordination but of singularity; they are, quite literally, "one flesh" (v. 24). Their relationship is divinely designed oneness, not a hierarchy of power, status or role.

## GOD'S GARDEN OF MUTUALITY

Complementarians also trace the subordination of women to the "fall" of the humans from Eden in Genesis 3. They blame Eve for deceiving and being deceived, or assume God's punishment sets a permanent new pattern for human hierarchy. It is worth noting that Eve had not yet been created when God forbade Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge (Gen 2:16-17). In the Hebrew, the "you" in "you shall not" (Gen 2:17) is singular; at that point, the only "you" around was Adam. The woman received the prohibition secondhand, but she took it to heart; in Genesis 3:2 her language is plural.

Tradition has cast the woman in the role of seducer, tempting her husband to eat the forbidden fruit; but in fact the man and the woman share in this experience as they share in everything. The humans also share in experiencing the world's first shame. They hide their now-shocking nakedness behind fig leaves (Gen 3:7), then they hide their new leafy wardrobe (Gen 3:10) so God won't know what they've been up to. Adam blames the woman, and he even blames God for giving him the woman in the first place (Gen 3:12); but Adam's desperate attempt to pass the buck and to separate himself

from her does not work. When all is revealed, God lays out the parallel consequences of their choice in a poetic passage (Gen 3:14-19). They are one flesh (Gen 2:24), and God knows they are in this together. They are still to care for the land (Gen 2:15) and be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28), but now those responsibilities will be burdensome, not just blessed. Their choice will affect every area of their lives, including the relationship between them.

The line from this section that tends to be the focus of modern interpreters (and has often been misinterpreted and misapplied) is a statement about the woman: "...your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16). This verse, when viewed as a command, has excused and fueled hierarchical abuses in many communities. We should think of it less command or a curse (as we often call it) but more of a prophecy of the patriarchal structure that would plague humanity until today. The disordering of God's good and unified world, then, results in patriarchy and hierarchy. That, however, is not God's intent for creation.

Walter Brueggemann says, "In God's garden, as God wills it, there is mutuality and equity. In God's garden now, permeated by distrust, there is control and distortion. But that distortion is not for one moment accepted as the will of the Gardener" (Brueggemann, 51). The will of the Gardener is grace. God does not leave the humans shivering in their fig leaves, but makes them warm, soft clothing of skins. They must leave the garden, and eventually "to dust they will return" (Gen 3:19b), but God does not forsake them. The rest of the Bible's grand story describes, again and again, how "God makes a gracious, unconditional commitment to stay with the world, come what may in the wake of human sinfulness" (Fretheim, 337). If God will redeem humanity from the curse of death (1 Cor 15:55-57), perhaps even the curse of patriarchy is not the final word.

## THE PRESENT

The stories of creation are the starting point for assumptions and presumptions about God's intentions for women—and about a hierarchy of men over women—that have stretched through all of church history. The themes of Eden have been interpreted through a lens of human culture instead of holy companionship, and sometimes the lessons of the garden are simply willfully misconstrued. These interpretations have supported patriarchal power structures for centuries, both in and outside of the church.

The 2021 *State of Women in Baptist Life* (SWBL) report details some of the ways the structures we have inherited continue to prevent women from joining as full partners in the work of God in the world. Although Baptists connected to the CBF claim to be egalitarian (as opposed to complementarian) and support a reading of Genesis that recognizes the intimate mutuality of men and women, many respondents to the SWBL survey noted that their ministry settings do not always treat men and women as equals. There are examples of women being directly undervalued compared to men: “72% of women in ministry said they had to provide more evidence of their competence than their male counterpart(s) did” and “49% of women in ministry said they were not paid equally to their male counterpart(s)” (SWBL, 5). There is also evidence of subtle but pervasive competitiveness: “57% said that men get credit for their ideas,” and “67% said men interrupt or talk over them in meetings” (SWBL, 6).

Based on these statistics, 50-75% of respondents had experienced some discrimination in direct contrast to (and sometimes in conflict with) the men they work alongside. This reality does not testify to a culture of respect for other people, much less to a faith that includes biblical oneness and partnership. A belief that God intends humanity to be mutually responsible in caring for one another and the world would not tolerate inequity, competitiveness or a culture of power-wrangling—no matter how subtle.

## REFLECTING ON THE PRESENT

- How do the church and the surrounding culture coincide to perpetuate patriarchal systems and structures? How does your church support egalitarianism in its structures, teachings and practices?
- How are both women and men hurt by understanding the story of creation as a story of power and hierarchy? How do both women and men lose out when there is a lack of true partnership?
- Why do you think many Christian churches have preferred to interpret this story as a model of power and hierarchy rather than a story of mutuality and grace?
- Who benefits from reading these texts as a support of patriarchy? Who would benefit from reading these texts as a support of equality and mutuality?

## THE FUTURE

The world around us is changing rapidly, but the call to reject the subordination of women is not a newfangled notion. The goal of mutuality between women and men goes back to the beginning, when God created *adam* in God's own image. If we believe all people are created with purpose as a reflection of God's image, then the way we treat one another is a direct expression of what we believe about God. If we take seriously this fundamental understanding, we cannot practice dominion over any person, regardless of gender—or ethnicity, or ability or any other human category.

The way we read and understand the ancient stories of creation has direct implications on the way we treat one another today. Both these biblical origins and our commitment to following their model will have direct implications on the ways generations to come will know God's presence, live in relationship with God and one another, and

experience God's call on their lives. As people of faith and as bodies of believers, we can reclaim the mutuality and grace of God's good garden, so all people—all *adam*—can walk with God, care for the earth, and take up God's blessed work together.

## REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE

- What do you believe about the role of women and men in the world? How do those roles play out in your daily life? In your home? In your work? What models did you grow up with? How have you accepted or rejected those models?
- What feelings arise when you think of the word “patriarchy”? Did you (or do you) accept patriarchy as a reality (“it is what it is”)? Do you feel called to work toward a new model of relationship and society? Why or why not?
- How do you think your home, your church, your job, your community or the world might be different if it fully embraced and enacted God's intention of mutuality?
- What does it mean to you to be created in God's image (both men and women)?

# SESSION 2

## The Jesus Model

### A NOTE ABOUT INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

**Matt 1:1-17, Luke 8:1-3, Luke 10:38-42, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:1-18**

When we read the books in Scripture, written in different ancient contexts and cultures, it is important that we engage their stories with an awareness of how they fit within their own times. We must acknowledge that many stories in the Old Testament reflect the culture of their Ancient Near Eastern context. When we read about abusive practices like Abraham and Sarah forcing their servant Hagar to conceive a child, or kings treating women like property to be acquired, we should read such customs as *descriptive* of their culture, not *prescriptive*, as if God condones them. There are moments in Scripture, however, that provide redemptive trajectories pointing us beyond the limits of ancient patriarchal traditions. In the last session, we explored the accounts of creation in Genesis, noticing how God created

all humans in God's image and how the man and the woman shared the responsibility and consequences of their choice in the garden. This counter-cultural element of mutuality shows us God's egalitarian vision for humanity, one that would become clouded by the selfishness and disobedience of people. The Bible contains other counter-cultural stories that provide us glimpses of God's ideal of gender equality. Throughout the Old Testament, we see women serving God as prophets (like Huldah, in 2 Kings 14:20, and Miriam, in Exodus 15), as judges (like Deborah, in Judges 4-5), as heroes (like the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, in Exodus 1, and Esther) and as examples of faithfulness (like Rahab in Joshua 2 and Ruth).

### WOMEN IN THE GOSPELS ARE DISCIPLES OF JESUS

God's egalitarian vision for humanity becomes clearer as we read about Jesus' life and ministry in the Gospels. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, which serves as an introduction to the Gospel and the New Testament canon, demonstrates the importance of women to the salvation story. Matthew purposefully includes women in Jesus' genealogy even though this was not a common Jewish practice. The women he names are ones who push against their patriarchal contexts with courage and faithfulness: Tamar (Mt 1:3), Rahab and Ruth (Mt 1:5), Bathsheba (Mt 1:6), and Jesus' mother Mary (Mt 1:16). The presence of these women in the lineage of Jesus heralds the upside-down nature of the kingdom Jesus brings—women may have been overlooked and marginalized in history, but they are exemplars of faithfulness who would become central in the ministry of Jesus and the formation of the Church.

All of the Gospels mention that there were women followers of Jesus, but Luke is the one who focuses the most on the contributions of women. This is probably because Luke's gospel is concerned with the stories of people who were considered "lowly" in first-century culture. Unmarried mothers (Lk 1:26-38) and those "getting on in years" (Lk 1:7), shepherds (Lk 2:8-20), fishermen (Lk 5), and even children (Lk 18:15-17) participate in the Good News of Jesus in Luke. First, the story of Jesus's birth focuses on the perspective of Mary, highlighting her role as a prophet and disciple who gives over her life in obedience to God (Peeler, 152-163). In addition, Luke tends to present parallel stories of men and women, highlighting



the mutuality involved in God's kingdom. There are the couples Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph (Lk 1-2), prophets Simeon and Anna (Lk 2), healings like those of the centurion's servant and the widow of Nain (Lk 7:1-17), and the main characters in parables like a shepherd and a woman with a coin (Lk 15:1-10).

Luke's story also emphasizes the reality that women were faithful followers and active disciples whom Jesus called, respected, ministered to and taught. As a parallel to the 12 male disciples (Lk 6:12-16), the list of women in Luke 8:1-3 shows us that the women disciples not only receive the Good News, but share in it by their faithful service, and they are with Jesus until the end (Lk 23:49, 55). In response to what they have experienced, these women provide for Jesus and the 12 male disciples "out of their resources." One of Luke's concerns throughout his gospel is the proper use of possessions; he records Jesus frequently teaching and warning about wealth and greed (as in Lk 12:13-34) and blatantly telling his listeners that they must give up possessions to be his disciples (Lk 14:33). The women who follow Jesus do just that. Some of them are connected to the high ranks of society, like Joanna, whose husband serves King Herod. Fred Craddock writes, "The risks associated with discipleship are compounded for these women" (Craddock, 107), and he points out that their commitment to Jesus would have been socially and politically costly. That reality makes it "not only commendable but remarkable that they found ways to put both money and power in submission to the gospel" (Craddock, 107).

## WOMEN IN THE GOSPELS ARE EXEMPLARS OF DISCIPLESHIP

The list of women followers in Luke 8:1-3 sets the stage for the sisters Mary and Martha, who also commit their resources to welcoming and providing for Jesus. Their story is the pair to the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). In the parable, Jesus illustrates what it looks like to "hear the word of God and do it"—it requires sacrificial servanthood and neighbor love for enemy. The

Mary and Martha story also provides an example of what discipleship looks like. Martha fulfills the commandment to love neighbor; she performs the important task of hospitality (like the Samaritan in the parable). Martha's "work" (v. 40) is described as *diakonia*, service, the same word that will designate deacons of the Early Church. When Luke tells the story of the first deacons in Acts 6, they perform the same tasks that Martha has done for Jesus here.

Mary, on the other hand, exemplifies what it looks like to love God (the other part of the Great Commandment). She sits at Jesus' feet, taking the posture of a student, and learns from her divine teacher as if she were a man learning from a revered rabbi. Mary prioritizes loving God over the cultural expectation that only men could be disciples of a rabbi. She breaks social order and behaves shamefully, but Jesus commends her choice, effectively blessing her role as a disciple and a future teacher herself.

Together, Mary and Martha provide a model for what loving God and loving neighbor looks like in their context and the fact that Luke portrays them as exemplars of discipleship represents a significant break with their patriarchal, Jewish context.

## WOMEN DISCIPLES PROVIDE PRESENCE AND PROCLAMATION

The women who were with Jesus early in his Galilean ministry (Lk 8:1-3) are still there at the end, when he is crucified (Lk 23:49) and buried (Lk 23:55). The women's presence at the cross serves as the comforting presence of God for Jesus in his most challenging hour. This ministry of presence is often overlooked in our Good Friday services; however, it is key to the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death.

The Gospel writers also tell us that only women came to the tomb on Sunday morning, which means women were the witnesses to the resurrection. They saw the stone rolled away and heard the words from the angel that would become the foundational message for the entire Christian faith. It is incredibly significant that the divine

messenger entrusted the news of Jesus' resurrection to a group of women disciples (Mt 28). In the first-century Jewish culture, women could not serve as witnesses in a court. Much of the ancient world had the misconception that women's minds were inferior to men's, that they shouldn't even be educated. Despite this, the divine messenger chooses women to carry the Gospel message to the other disciples, to serve as witnesses to the history-changing event of the resurrection. And the angel is not the only one who commissions the women with the Gospel news; Jesus does so as well in Matt 28:10. The women become the divinely-sent proclaimers of the resurrection—the first preachers of the Easter message.

The resurrection narrative in John's Gospel is a deeply personal, emotional and dramatic story, and it too communicates a woman's faithful discipleship and apostleship on the day of resurrection. In John, Mary Magdalene goes alone to the tomb but, finding it opened, she immediately runs to alert Simon Peter. The male disciples return with her and witness the empty tomb; but when they have gone, Mary sees and hears her "Rabbouni" for herself (v. 16).

All four Gospels note Mary Magdalene's presence at the tomb; besides these scenes, the only place she is mentioned in the Bible is in the list of women disciples in Luke 8:1-3. Many assumptions and legends have taken shape around her, but what is certain from John's Gospel is that she is a faithful disciple and the first to see and hear the risen Christ and to tell of Jesus' resurrection to his companions. Jesus asks her the same question he asked the very first disciples in John 1:38: "Who are you looking for?" She hears and knows Jesus' voice when he calls her name in the garden, just as a beloved sheep knows its shepherd (Jn 10). She answers Jesus' call not only to share her experience but to proclaim Jesus' own message to the other disciples. In fact, in the Early Church, Mary Magdalene is often known as the *apostola apostolorum*, or the apostle to the apostles, in recognition of the apostolic role she fulfills by believing Jesus, then being sent out by Jesus, and finally proclaiming the gospel of the risen Lord to the other disciples (Dorothy Lee, 88).

## THE PRESENT

Jesus' female disciples are models of every aspect of discipleship. They give of their own resources to provide for Jesus' ministry. They learn from him as devoted students and they "go and do" God's work, fulfilling the two greatest commandments. They provide the ministry of presence at Jesus's crucifixion, they witness the empty tomb, and they testify to the truth of Jesus's resurrection. They even proclaim Jesus' own message to the other disciples. In this way, women are the first apostles and first preachers of the Good News of resurrection.

The role of these women has often been downplayed in the Church. They have not been considered disciples, much less apostles. Even the word "*diakonos*" when applied to a woman has been translated "worker" or "servant" and disconnected from the word "deacon." Today, women in ministry experience this same kind of dismissiveness. According to the *State of Women in Baptist Life* report, "30% of women surveyed said they held a different ministerial title than their male counterpart(s)" (SWBL, 4). Biblical women were the first to experience and proclaim the resurrection, but the SWBL notes that, ironically, "59% of women in ministry said they are overlooked and silenced in their ministry settings" (SWBL, 3). Even more disturbing, the report finds that among Baptists, CBF "was the only group to have fewer women serving in pastoral roles in 2021 than in 2015" (SWBL, 21). We must do better to follow the example laid out for us in Jesus' ministry and in the Gospels; we cannot continue to downplay or hinder the leadership roles of women in the Church.

## REFLECTING ON THE PRESENT

- What are the qualities of the women who were Jesus' disciples? What are some common perceptions (and misperceptions) of biblical women? How do these qualities and perceptions still get applied to women in churches today?
- What constitutes good preaching? Leading? Working? Discipleship? Apostleship?

- How have women influenced your faith life? Can you think of women in your life who have been models of discipleship by the way they give, work, learn, witness and testify?
- Why do you think the models of the women who were Jesus' disciples have been downplayed in favor of other texts and teachings? Why do language and interpretation matter? For example, who benefits from translating *diakonos* as "deacon" only when it applies to men? Who suffers?

## THE FUTURE

The *SWBL* reflects on statistics from 2015 through 2021, including the year(s) of pandemic change and challenge. Over any six-year period, trends may indicate not only what has happened in the past but what is expected in the near future, and the realities of COVID-19 on ministry and church life have hastened and intensified some of these trends. As we anticipate the ongoing outcomes of this season, it is perhaps more important than ever to recognize that preaching and pastoral leadership are not male roles only. God calls and gifts people for discipleship, apostleship and leadership without regard to gender. Churches that recognize the gifts of women and receive the preaching of women can experience the Good News of Christ *through* and *for* all his disciples.

We have to be the ones to make sure the future for women in ministry is different. Baptists in CBF may have been supporting women in ministry since its inception, but we have not called enough women to pastoral positions, advocated for women in the ways they need, or given them the support that helps them flourish. We must do more to encourage young women who feel a call to church leadership. We must bring more women into pulpits in congregations that don't have women preaching consistently. We must elect more women to deacon councils, read more commentaries and books written by women scholars, and support organizations like Baptist Women in Ministry that equip women pastors and seminary students. There is so much we can do to change the current reality.

## REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE

- Why do you think there are so few women pastors in Baptist life? Do you know anyone who belongs to another denomination where women are regularly called as pastors? How is their experience like and unlike yours?
- Have you ever felt God's call to participate in ministry in a way that your church leaders would not allow? How did you know whether to trust God's call or your leaders' discernment?
- What difference do you think it will make in the next six years of Baptist life if more women are called and ordained to pastoral leadership? In the next 16 years? In the next 60 years?
- Do you know any young women or girls who seem to you to have gifts for ministry? What opportunities do you see for them in the future? What support and learning opportunities are available for them today?
- What is your church doing to advocate for women in ministry, to encourage women as senior pastors, to elect women deacons, and to equip the next generation of women ministers? How might you be able to do more?

# SESSION 3

## The Early Church

### SCRIPTURE

**Acts 16:11-15, Galatians 3:27-29, Romans 16:1-16**

The Apostle Paul had a ministry that was both in-person and long-distance. In person, he made multiple journeys during which he taught, preached and established churches. By long distance, he advised, encouraged and corrected churches through his letters, sometimes addressing concerns and crises in these early Christian communities. The best way to describe the literary form, or genre, of Greco-Roman letters is as occasional literature. Epistles in the ancient Mediterranean world were written to particular people in particular contexts and dealt with occasions or situations that arose among these people. This is certainly true of Paul's epistles. As we read Paul's letters today, we have access to his words but not to the problems, issues and social conditions that prompted him to write. It is like listening to one side of a two-sided conversation. These will always be aspects of Paul's writing that lie just beyond our comprehension since we are only hearing one side of the conversation.

Because of the nature of occasional letters, it is often difficult to understand why Paul dispenses some of his more confusing bits of advice, especially when they seem to conflict with his words elsewhere. For example, why does Paul write about women's silence and submission in places like 1 Cor 14:34-40 and 1 Tim 2:8-15

when it is clear from Acts and Paul's own writings that he ministers alongside women (Phil 4:2-3), commends them as church leaders and apostles (Rom 16), and assumes they are prophesying and praying in worship (1 Cor 11:5)? How can we tell which of Paul's instructions were meant to be universal and which were situation-specific solutions to problems that first century churches struggled with in their contexts?

The answer is two-fold: We must remember cultural context, and we should always look at the big picture. Perhaps there were certain situations where women's silence in church was needed to preserve "good order" (1 Cor 14:30). Perhaps societal expectations of the first century prompted certain rules (as in 1 Tim 2 which prohibits women from braiding their hair or wearing gold, pearls, or expensive clothes). We need to take into account all of Paul's writings and consider the ministry of the Early Church before we start teaching that Paul wants to silence all women in all churches for all time or that he forbids women from teaching and preaching.

In this session, then, we will take a look at the larger witness of Paul's ministry and writings when it comes to women in the ministry of the Early Church. The lesson will model how important it is to look at the literary and historical context of letters to understand their messages.

## WOMEN WERE EARLY CHURCH LEADERS

Acts describes the spread of the Christian story from its roots in Jerusalem through the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys into Asia Minor. In Acts 16, this story takes an unexpected new direction after Paul is called to Macedonia in a dream (Acts 16:9) and his ministry reroutes into what is modern-day Europe. Paul and his companions make their way to Philippi, a Roman colony and "leading city" (Acts 16:12) that apparently has few Jewish inhabitants. When they get there, they find some people—women, in particular—gathering at a makeshift synagogue, a "place for prayer," outside the city gates.

Paul seems to take on the role of a rabbi to teach those who have gathered to pray. Among them is Lydia, a Gentile woman who will become the first European Christian convert, as far as we know from Acts. When Paul arrives, Lydia is already a "worshiper of God" and a woman of means and status; she will become an enthusiastic Jesus-follower, Paul's host in Philippi, and likely the head of a house church in her city (v. 40). It is not Paul's teaching skills, but rather God who brings Lydia to conversion, as verse 14 says: "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly" to the Apostle's words. Her story mirrors that of the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:1-8; Lydia is already a follower of God, and God works in her heart to make way for the Apostle's teaching. God is responsible for both Paul's presence in Philippi (Acts 16:6-10) and Lydia's willing reception of Paul's teachings.

Immediately upon her conversion, Lydia puts her resources at the disposal of Paul and his companions. Lydia never mentions a husband, but she refers to "my home" (v. 15), implying that she is the head of her own household. As a "dealer in purple cloth" (v. 14), she rubs shoulders with royalty and high society. Her response to God's opening her heart is to offer her resources and her hospitality, and she has the autonomy to do so. She will become a leader in her own house church and in her community. Some years later, Paul will write to the Philippian church, "when I

left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone" (Phil 4:15). Perhaps Lydia's generous discipleship and leadership were a model for her church, so that Paul could tell them truthfully, "I thank my God every time I remember you" (Phil 1:3).

## CHRIST MAKES US ONE

As Christianity spread, believers began to gather, first in the synagogues and later in the homes of trustworthy local leaders. Paul continued to guide the churches with his letters of encouragement and correction. The way of Christ had begun in Jerusalem among Jewish people, but as Paul and his companions traveled, God brought surprising new believers and leaders into the faith, including non-Jews who did not share the ancestral traditions of Jesus and his earliest followers. Lydia is an example of one Gentile woman whose openness to God led her to accept Paul's message and to commit her hospitality, resources and leadership to the church.

In the region of Galatia, the church faced a crisis. These Gentile believers had accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ through Paul's teaching; but now some Jewish-Christian visitors were proclaiming "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). These new teachers insist that the Gentile Galatians must ascribe to Jewish law, specifically circumcision, to be part of the family of Abraham. Paul rejects that teaching and the disunity that it stirs up in the Galatian church. Being part of God's family does not require satisfying any outer condition. Whether "Jew or Greek," circumcised or not, believers can experience God's grace and join in God's family. Salvation is God's work and, in Christ, distinctions between people no longer dictate worthiness.

"Jew or Greek" is not the only distinction that is equalized by God's grace and Christ's crucifixion. Paul writes, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Being "clothed with Christ" (Gal 3:27) in baptism does not magically erase these differences, but it does eliminate the status-seeking and power-grasping that these differences often

prompt. Baptism in Christ creates “a community in which gender distinctions,” along with ethnic and social-class distinctions, “have lost their power to divide and oppress” (Hays, 273). In this body where “all of you are one” (v. 28b), “the barriers, the hostility, the chauvinism, and the sense of superiority and inferiority... are destroyed” (Cousar, 86). There is no turning back to the old ways of judging, classifying and ranking God’s people against each other; in Christ, they are one.

## WOMEN AND MEN WORK SIDE BY SIDE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Lydia is not the only woman who answers the call to discipleship and puts her skills and resources to use in service to the gospel. Paul travels widely and starts churches across Asia Minor and into Europe, and when he writes pastoral letters to these congregations, he often sends greetings to the people he knows. Romans 16 includes a long list of names of those who are Paul’s coworkers in Christ in that city. It includes more names than all the rest of Paul’s epistles combined, and nearly half the names on it are women. (For a complete list of women workers in the Pauline corpus, see Lee, 106.)

Paul greets women whose work is remarkable, beginning with Phoebe (v. 2), who is a deacon (*diakonos*, a servant of the church) and financial benefactor. It is likely Phoebe is the person Paul trusted to deliver this letter. He names his co-worker and fellow tentmaker Prisca (v. 3, also known as Priscilla, Acts 18:1-3); Mary (v. 6) “who has worked very hard among you;” and “workers in the Lord” Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (v. 12). Paul refers to Junia (v. 7) as a “relative,” which may mean she is Jewish. She was imprisoned with Paul and he considers her an apostle; she was “with Christ before I was.” Other female family members make the list—Rufus’ mother (v. 13) and Nereus’ sister (v. 15)—and Paul also names women who presumably lead or co-lead house churches (Lee, 105).

This list seems to omit no one. Paul Achtemeier suggests that Paul is conscious “of being part of

a larger Christian fellowship within which God’s Spirit is at work to accomplish God’s plan” (Achtemeier, 238). That fellowship includes—and God accomplishes God’s plan through—faithful women. These are Paul’s trusted coworkers in the gospel in a time when the church is “small, vulnerable,” and needs “to know and trust one another.” They have “enormous potential” and face “huge risks” (Wright, 763). When Paul names names, he is not simply being polite to old friends; he is honoring those whose ministries he personally values and whose work brings the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world even in difficult, dangerous times and places.

## THE PRESENT

Paul wrote to churches that were facing specific challenges in their own times and places. Today, churches are still deeply affected by the contexts in which they exist. The social expectations, political divisions and financial challenges of our communities influence how our churches operate and how we are called to share the gospel. We can learn from the Early Churches’ ways of functioning and ministering without assuming that their specific experiences are a permanent template for all churches for all time. Instead of focusing on narrow interpretations of a few passages, we can look at the wide testimony of Paul’s own ministry and we can follow the model of women who served as leaders and workers alongside the Apostle himself.

In contrast to Paul’s recognition and appreciation of women who worked alongside him, the *State of Women in Baptist Life* indicates that in modern Baptist churches, women’s work is often underrecognized and underappreciated. It reports that “63 percent of women in ministry said they have to fight for a seat at the table” (*SWBL*, 3), “50 percent... said their judgment was questioned in their area of expertise,” and “49 percent... said they were not paid equally to their male counterpart(s)” (*SWBL*, 5).

Paul taught the Galatian church that all are one in Christ, no matter their ethnicity, social status or gender. This should confirm God’s

original intent for oneness among humanity; but women in ministry still report serious breaches of this belief. For example, one in four respondents said they have “personally experienced sexual harassment, misconduct or assault” in their ministry settings (*SWBL*, 7). Among women of color who answered the survey, 43 percent reported hearing or overhearing “demeaning remarks about me or people like me” (*SWBL*, 8). The Church is certainly not operating as “one in Christ” when its women clergy and clergy of color continue to experience such disrespect and abuse in their congregations. To lean into the unity that Jesus and the Spirit provide the Church, we must listen to the experiences of these women, confront sexism and racism in our ministries, and work toward structures and policies that respect the dignity and equality of all people.

## REFLECTING ON THE PRESENT

- How do you feel about women in leadership in the secular world? Do you think the Church should have different expectations for women in leadership and for the overall treatment of women than do secular organizations, businesses or even governments?
- What Scriptures have been used to silence women in the generations before ours? What texts have affected your own understanding of what God might call you to do? Have other people interpreted Scripture in ways that prevented you from following God’s call?
- What obstacles for women in ministry come from our culture’s standards and expectations? What obstacles come from interpretations of Scripture?
- What is the church’s testimony of unity in Christ when sexual misconduct and race-based discrimination are commonplace?

## THE FUTURE

Nearly two thousand years after the Apostle Paul wrote his letters, his teachings still have huge impacts on the life of the Church. Paul himself probably could not have imagined that his epistles would have such importance. The beliefs we claim and the choices we make today will also affect churches—and the women God calls to ministry—in a future that we cannot imagine. The role of the congregation is vital: The *SWBL* reports that “87 percent of women in ministry said that their congregation’s/context’s support of them as a woman in ministry had a direct impact on their ability to thrive” (*SWBL*, 11). With Paul as a model, church and denominational leaders can teach and lead congregations to understand and embrace oneness in Christ, and to call and support women in the work of ministry. When we practice true unity in Christ’s body and true partnership in God’s work, the “one who began a good work” in us “will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

## REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE

- How do you think the way we interpret Scripture today will affect the congregations and ministers who will follow us? Why is it necessary not to elevate certain texts? Why is it vital to understand the original intent of texts as we interpret them for our own place and time?
- How can we be faithful to God’s word so that the generations to come can experience God’s call and take up God’s work?
- Do you consider yourself to be in “unity” with your congregation? With your denomination? With believers of the past and of the future? What difference does it make in your behavior if you believe you are truly “one in Christ” with other Christians?

# SESSION 4

## The Reign of God

### SCRIPTURE

Joel 2:18-32, Acts 2:14-36

The creation of women in God's image and the role of women in God's service echo through the whole Bible. From the garden of Eden to the Early Church—and even to us today—faithful women inhabit the stories of God's people, share in the life and ministry of Jesus, and shape the life of the church. When women contribute their voices, the word of God is heard. When women commit their gifts, the work of God is taken up. When women's voices and gifts are welcomed, all God's people can thrive.

Today, the Church is facing a harsh reality: Membership is declining. Many pastors are retiring or simply leaving the ministry. Seminaries are shrinking and even closing their doors. In this challenging time, the full participation of women in the life and leadership of the church is not just a practical necessity or a problem-solving measure. It is a call to those who yearn for

God's reign to be realized in our world. It is an opportunity to join God's Spirit at work, here and now.

During the difficult time of the Israelites' exile, the Old Testament prophets looked forward to "the day of the Lord," when God's enemies would be judged and God's people made whole. The prophet Joel proclaimed a vision of that day when all (and, yes, *all means all*) God's people would experience and express God's poured-out presence. Centuries later, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus' disciple Peter quotes Joel's words, proclaiming that the day the prophet had foretold has come. Christ has died, risen and taken his place with God, and the Holy Spirit has come to fill *all* God's people. The reign of God will not be fully realized until Christ comes again; but we are no longer waiting for the day of the Lord. It has begun.

### THE DAY OF THE LORD

During the history of Israel, God's prophets had a multifaceted role. At times, they proclaimed God's judgment on the enemies of God's people. Often, they warned Israel that they were moving away from God's law and presence. During the exile, the prophets encouraged repentance—they offered hope that the people would be able to return to their land and to their God, who would be waiting to welcome them home. But the return to Jerusalem was not a "happily ever after." After the exile, God's people continued to face terrible troubles, from enemy armies to natural disasters (in Joel it is a plague of locusts). Joel calls the people to a season of prayer and fasting (Joel 2:12-17), then proclaims God's response: God will meet their needs abundantly. They will "eat in plenty and be satisfied" (v. 26) and "never again be put to shame" (v. 27). But the end of this present trouble is not the end of the promise.

Joel announces a day to come when not only the kingdom of Israel will be restored, but God's own reign will bring final justice. Then afterward, Joel says, pointing to that future "day of the Lord," people will experience God's presence in undeniable ways. There will be natural signs and wonders (Joel 2:30-31) and a dramatic pouring-out of God's Spirit (2:28). All people—sons and daughters, young and old, male and female—will know and proclaim God. In the past, only select individuals had holy dreams and



visions; only a few were called and gifted prophets and messengers. But on the day of the Lord, when God's Spirit comes to be with God's people, the Spirit will pour into all and through all.

The Hebrew word for "spirit" is *ruach*, which is also the word for "wind." In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is a powerful force that accomplishes divine work. God's *ruach* "swept over the face of the waters" at creation (Gen 1:2) and took Ezekiel to the valley of bones (Eze 37:1). God sent a *ruach* to turn the Red Sea into a dry escape route (Ex 14:21) and to upend Jonah's boat (Jonah 1:4). Joel proclaims that in the day of the Lord, this same powerful, purpose-full Spirit will come upon all people. All—young and old, men and women—will overflow with God's *ruach*; they will dream God's dreams, envision God's ways and prophesy God's words. The Spirit who has been at work all along will work through all who "call on the name of the Lord" and all "those whom the Lord calls" (v. 32).

## THE DAY OF PENTECOST

After Jesus' death and resurrection, he spent time with his followers, and some asked him, "Is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). They may have been thinking of Israel's political power—or lack thereof—but when Jesus responds, he points to a future that sounds more like Joel's prophecy than like a political uprising. He says, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). His last words to them are the promise of God's Spirit and the commission to proclaim the name of the Lord everywhere, forevermore.

The Spirit's coming was nearer than the disciples might have thought. Acts 1:3 says Jesus was with them for 40 days before his ascension, as recorded in Acts 1:9-10. Just a few days later, the disciples gather with a crowd in Jerusalem to observe the festival of Pentecost, marking 50 days after Passover. There, the promised Spirit comes with a rush of wind and tongues of fire (Acts 2:2-3). The Spirit filled "all of them" and they "began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4).

When some observers thought the disciples must be drunk (v. 13), Peter "raise[s] his voice" (v. 14) and begins to preach, declaring that this day is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. Elizabeth Achtemeier writes that from the day of Pentecost, "The believer will begin now to live in the powers of that new age heralded by the pouring out of the gift of the Spirit" (Achtemeier, 328). Joel's message of who will receive the Spirit and how they will live in the Spirit has not changed. Sons and daughters, young and old, men and women will dream, have visions and prophesy. Just as Joel foretold, the divine empowering that was once reserved for only a few is available to all, here and now. Here. Now. *All*.

The people in the crowd know the Scriptures, including Joel's prophecy of the day of the Lord. But knowing the Scriptures does not mean they recognize what is happening in front of them: That day had come. Peter confirms that "having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit," Jesus has "poured out this that you both see and hear" (Acts 2:33). Whether they realize it or not, they have seen and heard Joel's prophecy fulfilled, and the Spirit is pouring out here, now, on all who believe. And just as the Spirit worked powerfully and purposefully throughout the history of God's people, the Spirit still prompts those who receive it toward powerful, purpose-full work: They will be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth (1:8).

## THE DAY HAS COME

William Willimon points out that Acts was likely written down for the benefit of early Christians, "who were struggling to retain the boldness, faith, and confidence in the face of new internal and/or external struggles" (Willimon, 35). Peter's audience is a festival crowd in Jerusalem, but the audience of the book of Acts is a church struggling with "skepticism, doubt, and despair" (Willimon, 35). Joel's prophecy encouraged the Israelites in a time of trouble; Peter's sermon encouraged the crowd to recognize the new age of God's Spirit beginning; the book of Acts encourages troubled Christians to remember that they are living *now* in this new

age. God gives “what the church most desperately needs” (Willimon, 27): God’s own Spirit pouring into them and working in and through them.

At least some in Peter’s audience that day were “cut to the heart,” and they asked Peter and the other disciples, “What should we do?” (Acts 2:37). The power of Peter’s message and the presence of the Holy Spirit cause people to ask the question that the Church still asks today: If we believe that the Spirit is still pouring into and through us, still calling us to dream, envision and prophesy, then what do we do now? If we believe that all means all, and that *all* means *us*, we ask: How are we to respond to what we have heard and seen? What should we do?

God still gives what the Church desperately needs: people who are “empowered by the Spirit... to take the story of God’s mighty deeds to the ends of the earth” (Limburg, 73). This Spirit “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8). This Spirit gives gifts for the good of Christ’s body (1 Cor 12) and gifts for the good of our souls (Gal 5:22-26, 1 Cor 13). This Spirit is still pouring out; still surprising, calling, equipping and sending God’s people. This Holy Spirit is still giving us dreams, prompting us to prophesy, and planting within us the vision of a day that is already breaking. The day has come when the voices and gifts of all God’s people— young and old, women and men—will witness throughout the earth that God’s reign has begun.

## THE PRESENT

Peter’s Pentecost audience was a crowd of people who knew the Scriptures but did not understand that they were witnessing the fulfillment of the prophets’ dreams. Today, much of the resistance to women’s Spirit-led ministry comes from people, churches and denominations who are very familiar with Scripture. The *State of Women in Baptist Life* report notes the importance of the role of the Bible “as a source of authority on the equality of women” (SWBL, 15). When we proclaim the Gospel “to the ends of the earth,” that may include an audience who knows what the Bible says, but does not realize the work of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, asking for God’s “kingdom come” and for God’s will to be done, we are yearning for the day when *all* will experience the Spirit’s outpouring, and all will recognize the Spirit at work, just as the Scriptures describe.

The SWBL notes that “86 percent of women in ministry experience obstacles to their ministry because of their gender” (SWBL, 3). The Spirit may be pouring out abundantly, but denominations, churches and people continue to raise obstacles to the Spirit’s work. No matter how well we know the Scriptures—the prophet’s vision and the promises of Pentecost—we cannot be a witness to the coming day of the Lord if we refuse to live into the day that is already here.

## REFLECTING ON THE PRESENT

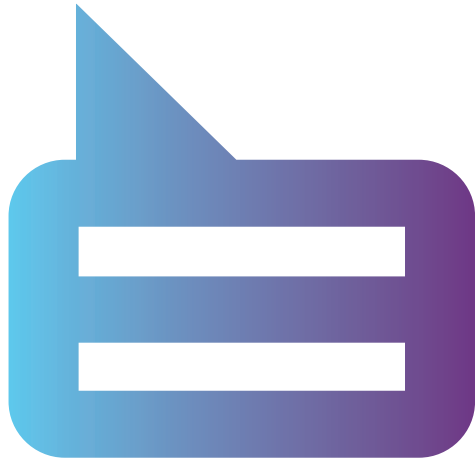
- How can the Church—the body of Christ—function and thrive when women are not allowed to use the gifts God has given them? If 86% of women in ministry experience obstacles to using their gifts, what impact does that have on a local church? On a community? On the spread of the Gospel “to the ends of the earth”?
- What do you imagine when you say the words “thy kingdom come”? What do you hope and dream God’s reign will be like? How do you think God’s reign is already a present reality?
- Why is it important for the church to behave as if God’s reign—and the pouring-out of God’s Spirit on all people—is at work in our world, here and now? How does this affect our witness in the world?
- We may state that we affirm women in ministry, but the SWBL statistics suggest that there are still significant obstacles to pastoral placement, personal support, professional equity and full inclusion. What do you think we need to do to bridge the gap between what we believe and the actual experience of women in ministry? How would these steps get us closer to living into the reign of God today?

## THE FUTURE

When the prophet Joel's words were fulfilled at Pentecost, God was not really doing a "new" thing. From the time when the *ruach* swept over the waters of creation, God intended women and men to experience God's full presence and to live in mutuality. Throughout the history of God's people, women as well as men have served God, been faithful disciples, and contributed to the life of God's people. Now, in the reign of God, the divine intention is renewed and realized, and the Spirit has poured out on all. We can respond just as some of Peter's audience did: We may be "cut to the heart" and ask, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37). Our answer to that question will impact the future of the Church and the ability of the Church to serve, meet needs and take the Good News of Jesus Christ "to the ends of the earth," until Christ comes again.

## REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE

- How does the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost connect us today with the biblical narratives of God's creative intent (in Genesis), Jesus' disciples (in the Gospels), and the Early Church's servants and leaders (in Acts and the epistles)?
- What challenges do you think the church will have to face in the future? How can the full inclusion of women in ministry help to meet those challenges?
- How is God prompting you to answer the question "What should I do in response to the Spirit?" What do you need to explore? What questions do you need to ask? What assumptions do you need to challenge in yourself and others?
- Are there changes happening in your mind and heart regarding women in ministry? What do you need to say aloud to be clear about what you believe about God's calling and equipping women for ministry?



## Celebrating Women's Leadership in the Church

# EQUALLY CALLED

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