

## *Making Sense of the Bible*

### *“Women in the Bible”*

#### [1 Corinthians 14:33-35](#)

Through our current sermon series, “Making Sense of the Bible,” we are examining some of the challenging scriptures found in the Bible. On the first Sunday, we examined passages of God’s violence and considered how they reveal more about the people who wrote them and the times they were living in than about the God in whose name they committed such terrible acts of violence. On the second Sunday, we reflected on the Creation stories found in the book of Genesis, wondering if they were ever meant to be in conflict with the theory of evolution. We explored the purpose these two different Creation stories served and still do serve as works of divine wisdom, warning us to be humble and remember who we are even as we celebrate the great scientific progress and innovation we have made. This week’s text addresses the issue of women’s leadership in the life of the church.

There are two scriptures in the Bible that clearly prohibit women’s leadership in church. The passage we have just heard is one, and the other one is 1 Timothy, chapter 2, verses 11-12, in which the Apostle Paul writes, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” Based on these two texts, churches, for a long time, did not allow women to serve in any leadership position over men, especially in ministries of teaching and preaching.

Thankfully, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement recognized women’s leadership in the church by granting a preaching license to Sarah Crosby in 1761. He was perhaps heavily influenced to do so because of the upbringing he had. It was his mother, Susanna Wesley, who taught Scripture to John and Charles, as well as all the other children of their large household, and led a Sunday afternoon family worship service. As word spread about these family worship services, they began to attract people from town, with the guests sometimes numbering into the hundreds!

However, it was not until the late 1800’s that women were ordained in the Methodist traditions. The Methodist Episcopal Church granted women the right to preach in 1920, and decided to ordain women as local deacons and local elders in 1924. The 1956 General Conference approved full clergy rights for women, and that year, Maude Jensen in the Central Pennsylvania Conference and 26 additional women in other annual conferences were ordained as full clergy members. And, in 1980, the United Methodist Church became the first mainline Christian denomination to have a woman bishop, when we elected Bishop Marjorie Swank Matthews.

As of 2016, there were more than 10,300 United Methodist clergywomen, both active and retired. And, in total, 33 women bishops have been elected in our denomination. As of 2019, 17 women bishops were active, 15 of them serving in the United States. Women now represent 25 percent of the total United Methodist clergy in our nation, and it is not unusual to find a UM church with an all women pastoral staff. Thankfully, we are now no longer the only denomination that recognizes women’s ordination. There are many other major Christian denominations that ordain women. However, there are still many other denominational and non-denominational churches as well as the Catholic church that do not allow women to be ordained. Some of the churches do not even allow

women to be in any kind of ministry of teaching and preaching. The official position statement of the Southern Baptist Convention talks about women's equal participation with men in the priesthood of all believers but limits pastoral leadership only to men. Despite the abundant evidence of the fruits of women's teaching and preaching throughout its history, the largest Protestant denomination has not changed its position on women's leadership in the church.

Last year, Beth Moore, the popular Southern Baptist speaker, teacher, and writer suggested in a tweet that she was preaching at a Southern Baptist church, and so she renewed the over-300-year-old debate on women's leadership in the church. Of course, immediately, she was met by harsh criticism from many Baptist church leaders. They accused her of defying God's word. The president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary said, "I think there's just something about the order of creation that means that God intends for the preaching voice to be a male voice."

How about the Catholic Church? Since his election in 2013, Pope Francis has surprised the world by his radical remarks and actions of inclusivity. He said that he wants to see a greater role for women in Catholicism, including participation in the important decisions, where the authority of the Church is exercised. He also said that he wants a "deeper theology" about the place of women in the faith, one that will emphasize the critically important contributions they make.

Recently, the Catholic Church took two small steps for women's leadership. Last October, bishops suggested that Pope Francis reconvene a commission he had created to study the ordination of women as permanent deacons who are allowed to perform some of the duties of priests except saying Mass or hearing confessions. This month, the Pope named the first woman to a managerial position in the Vatican's most important office, the Secretariat of State. But, his position on the possibility of the ordination of women has not changed. He said, "the Church has spoken and says 'No.'... That is closed, that door."

The Catholic Church's official argument for opposing the ordination of women is this: When Jesus chose his 12 disciples, he picked only men. And, the church has consistently excluded women from the priesthood in accordance with God's plan for his church. So, we must follow Jesus' example and keep the church's practice. But, as we explored over the last two Sundays, all the books of the Bible reflect the cultures and customs of the worlds their authors lived in. So, I am sure that, 2000 years ago for Jesus, creating a ministry team of all men was as natural as creating an inclusive church council for us today.

For many conservative churches, the exclusion of women from church leadership and certain ministries of the church is grounded in what the Apostle Paul wrote in his letters, where he says, "Women should be silent in the church. They are not permitted to speak." While the Catholic church argues that they must follow Jesus' example of choosing all men to be church leaders, these conservative churches argue that God spoke through the Apostle Paul about women's proper place in the church and his words must be applied to all churches, at all times.

But, we know that this is simply not true. We know it is not true because, in the Bible, there is plenty of evidence showing women playing a crucial role in God's acts of salvation. Here are the Old Testament names you will recognize: Sarah, the wife of Abraham; Jochebed, the mother of Moses; Miriam, the sister of Moses; Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who prevented the genocide of Hebrew children in Egypt; Deborah, the judge over Israel; Huldah, the prophet; Hannah, the mother of Samuel.

In the New Testament, among Jesus' followers, there were many women who traveled with him (Luke 8:1-3), and the Gospel writers recorded some of their names: Mary Magdalene, Joananna, and Susanna. And, most importantly, the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were all women! Even the Apostle Paul himself had many female partners in ministry. A number of them appear in his letter to the Romans (16:1-16): Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Julia, and Nereus' sister. He mentions Chloe in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:11) and Euodia and Syntyche in his letter to the Philippians (Philippians 4:2-3). They all had significant roles in the early church, and Paul recognized and affirmed their ministries despite the gender bias of his time. He writes in his letter to the Galatian church, "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" (Galatians 3:28).

Then, why did Paul write those terrible, horrible, no good and offensive words about women's leadership in the church? I will answer the question by quoting Dr. Robert Jewett, who was my New Testament professor at Garrett Evangelical-Theological Seminary. He said, "Think about it. If women had been silent in the church, Paul would not have needed to tell them to be silent!"

How true is that! Paul said those words because, highly likely, women became quite vocal in the church, and it was becoming a problem. Empowered by Jesus who included them in his ministry, women played important roles in the early church, including teaching and preaching. Soon, the men who were not used to such strong leadership of women began to complain about the situation. So, for the sake of the unity of the church, to bring peace into the life of the church, he urged women to be quiet. And he based his prohibition against women speaking in the Creation story found in the book of Genesis, chapter 2 and the fall story in the following chapter. He writes to Timothy, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor"(1 Timothy 2:13-14).

Unfortunately, for centuries, the Church has used the story of Creation and Fall in the book of Genesis as one of the grounds for prohibiting women from the leadership of the church. Both of my parents went to seminary, but only my father was ordained. Despite her clear sense of calling into ordained ministry, despite all her wonderful gifts and leadership qualities to become a great pastor, my mother could not be ordained simply because she was a woman!

My late father, a Methodist preacher, told me that, when I was 3 years old, he dedicated me for God's work. He said, actually I dedicated myself by repeating after him. He did so because I was his first child. Yet, when I told him that I was going to be ordained, his response was simply, "Hmm..". Apparently, women's ordination was still a foreign concept to his culturally and theologically biased mind. By the way, when I was in Korea last summer, I had an opportunity to visit the church in which I dedicated myself. I stood with my pastor son in front of the altar where I made the innocent promise to live as God's servant 58 years ago. Truly, it was a humbling experience...

As we learned last Sunday, in the book of Genesis, there is another Creation story. According to this account, God created male and female in the image of God. God blessed them and told them to be fruitful, to multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:27-28). Adam and Eve were created at the same time, and neither was given dominance over the other. They were partners in the work of caring for God's creation. And, God saw that it was good. In other words, equal partnership between men and women is God's will for humanity.

In his book, *Making Sense of the Bible*, Hamilton makes an argument about women's leadership in the Bible and in the church:

John's Gospel offers a powerful perspective on what Jesus did while on the cross... John begins his Gospel "In the beginning..." - words that are meant to point the reader to the Garden of Eden. [Later,] Jesus is crucified in a garden, and buried in a garden. He is raised in a garden.... Here's a point: Jesus came to reverse the curse of Eden. Part of that curse is the subordination of women. The curse has been addressed in Christ. Paul told that women were to keep silent in the church because of Eve's sin and, by implication, the curse placed upon her. Even if you take that story literally, Christ came to reverse the curse and to heal paradise. (*Making Sense of the Bible*, p. 260)

Let me conclude today's reflection with the questions Hamilton further raises: "Shouldn't the ideal of redemption be a return to partnership and an end to the subordination of women? And if this is the case, is it not time to recognize that Paul's words about women remaining silent do not reflect God's timeless will for the role women are to play in the church?" Amen!