RESPONDING TO GOD’S CALL
FREEDOM FOR BAPTIST WOMEN
The Rev. Dr. Molly T. Marshall

VER THE YEARS, BAPTISTS HAVE DEMONSTRATED BOTH LEADERSHIP AND RETICENCE IN AFFIRMING THE CALLING AND MINISTRY OF WOMEN.

Early on, the roles of women and men were more clearly delineated; men were the scholars, preachers, and missionaries, and women tended hearth and home and provided support as “helpmates.” We remember great sages of strength and resilience as women accompanied their husband’s call to mission at home and abroad, faithfully serving in the humility of unタイトル ministry. Who can consider the Judaism story without reference to Ann Judson’s iconic efforts to save Amunrah’s life? How would we tell the story of John Mason Peck without mentioning Sarah (Sally), his faithful companion in his itinerant mission work in the frontier West? Yet, the historians and biographers often place men as the primary actors in the narratives and women as bit players. Unexplored is the nature of their calling. Even in this earlier stratified and patriarchal understanding of proper roles, the calling and giftiveness of women for ministry could not be utterly suppressed. Baptists of both North and South remembered the pioneering work of Shubal Stearns, Daniel Marshall and Martha Stearns Marshall. Working together, they helped further the work of great revival sparked by the preaching of George Whitefield. Of the sister of Shubal Stearns and wife of Daniel Marshall some observed that she was noted for “her zeal and eloquence.” It was more pleasant and edifying to hear her preach as Stearns and wife of Daniel Marshall some observed that she was the primary actor in the narratives and women as bit players. Unexplored is the nature of their calling.

A THEOLOGY OF HUMANITY

Generations of biblical interpreters have constructed their understandings of the identity and roles of men and women from the perspective of the “fall” and post-Edenic realities. Ignoring God’s original blessing of man and female, both created in the image of God, interpreters have viewed women as seductive sirens, therefore the source of sin. Theologians have treated Eve as the cause of ruin; from her acquiescence to “tempting” has flowed the various ills of creation. Theologians have insisted “Adam Master and lord of living creatures, but Eve spoiled it all when she persuaded him to set himself above God’s will.” But then they offered the pastoral application: “To you women, with your tricks and artifices, that lead men into error. (Table Talk of Luther)

The amazing thing is that such views remain in the consciousness of persons who regard themselves as “Bible-believing” Christians.

Viewing equality of women and men as “domination” by women has been a rhetorical play in earlier times as well as now. A recent text by Leon J. Podles, The Church Imprisoned: The Feminization of Christianity, argues that masculinity has been marginalized within Christianity and, without vitality, modern expressions of Christian faith will be ineffective. His clear disdain for women in ecclesial leadership arises out of his theology of humanity, which sharpens differences between men and women in order to subjugate women further.

Theologmakers stand in their original intent when he was questioned about divorce laws in the time of Moses (Matthew 19:3-9). Jesus protested divorce because of the basic inequity of a patriarchal system in which women would be left destitute given the inheritance laws. Women and men are equally suited to welcome and participate in the Reing of God. Much has been made of the calling of the twelve disciples; however, it is later church tradition that elevates them far beyond the narratives in the Gospels. In fact, closer inspection of the stories of these men who were early followers found their faithfulness far from stellar. Female followers, e.g., Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary and Martha, Joanna, and Mary of Magdala, given only fleeting reference in these early apostolic writings, do exemplify the kind of believer Jesus was seeking.
Dear readers,

I was recently asked how one discerns the direction of God’s calling. It is constructive to regard vocation as a journey toward authentic living. Every capacity that we put in the service of God and others can be regarded as an expression of Christian vocation.

As the writer of Ephesians urges: 1: 1-2, “May you be richly endowed with all spiritual gifts through the rule and guidance of our Lord Jesus Christ. The purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the Body of Christ.” Each is to demonstrate her or his calling by faithful demonstration of gifts granted by the Holy Spirit.

GOD CALLS WOMEN TO SERVE AND GRANTS THEM THE SUPPLY OF THE SPIRIT, EXPRESSED THROUGH APPROPRIATE GIFTING FOR MINISTRY.

God has more to say to us than we can hear by ourselves. We need assistance as we seek God’s direction for our vocational direction. We need to learn to listen to the questions people ask us. When I was still an adolescent at a church camp, my pastor asked me: “Have you ever thought of working with young people when you grow up?” His engaging question caught my attention and became a formative part of my discernment. We also need to listen to key affirmations of our gifts. When a first-year seminary student, a favorite professor affirmed my work in his theology course. It kindled my great love for that discipline.

Vocation allows us to be most fully ourselves—and most fully alive. We are most “fully alive,” we most fully reflect the glory of God, as St. Ireneaus wistfully observed. God can speak to us through the world’s groaning need. Vocation often arises out of our concern about a deep need in the world. For me, it was a clear sense that God wants the church to accept its daughters as well as its sons in ministry, and that God called me to assist the seminary in teaching and embodying this new reality.

What it Means to Be Human

Oklahoma Baptist University, she received her M.Div. and Ph.D. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Her writings include three monographs—No Salvation Outside the Church?, Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit, and What it Means to Be Human. Her experience is varied. She has served as youth minister, campus minister, and pastor in churches across Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Kentucky. A graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University, she received her M.Div. and Ph.D. from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Her writings include three monographs—No Salvation Outside the Church?, Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit, and What it Means to Be Human.

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God’s intimate love for us, allowing us to do what fulfills our holy longing.

It is important that we remember that our gifts belong to everyone, however. Spiritual gifts that verify our calling are not possessions, but grace gifts to assist the common good—both within and without the congregation. No one possesses all the charismata, thus we exercise our calling as an integral part of the Body of Christ.

God continues to call women and men to serve as Christian leaders. Thankfully, our Baptist theology and polity articulate the freedom for congregations and responsive persons to answer this call. Freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of bondage (Galatians 5:1). I pray that we will cultivate the attentiveness to God’s call in our day so that all persons may respond in freedom.

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