

RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL

FREEDOM FOR BAPTIST WOMEN

The Rev. Dr. Molly T. Marshall

OVER 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 sagas of strength and resilience as women accompanied their husbands in mission at home and abroad, faithfully serving in the humility of untitled ministry. Who can consider the Judson story without reference to Ann Judson’s heroic efforts to save Adoniram’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 rather stratified and patriarchal understanding of proper roles, the calling and giftedness of women for ministry could not be utterly suppressed. Baptists of both North and South remember 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 it was more pleasant and edifying to hear her preach as she was noted for “her zeal and eloquence.”

Even though the Baptist experiment has been going on for more than 400 years, we know that receptivity to the ministry of women is far from robust. The default position for many congregations seeking pastoral leadership is to consider only men. Baptist identity, with its emphasis on freedom in scriptural interpretation, freedom in church governance, freedom in religion,

and “soul” freedom or liberty of conscience, however, stands as witness to the appropriateness of women serving in every avenue of ministry.

Over the last forty years I have seen significant progress for women called to ministry. More students preparing for Christian vocations are women, and there are more female professors in Baptist colleges and seminaries. More churches affirm, at least theoretically, the possibility of women as spiritual leaders for congregations. Mission boards appoint women to non-traditional ministries in larger numbers. Yet, there is more work to be done in educating our ecclesial family on this issue.

My approach in this brief brochure is to offer a theology of humanity that celebrates equality and a theology of vocation that is inclusive of male and female. It is my hope that this theological reflection will assist congregations and individuals in responding to God’s call in our day.

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 male 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. The Augustinian shadow has lingered, and her “priority in the Edenic fall,” as one tradition has put it, places her in an eternal position of subordination.

Nearly nine centuries later, Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* delineates the inequality that obtains between man and woman:

For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than

themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in men the discretion of reason predominates.

While Baptists laud the Reformers for their views on grace, faith, and the priority of Scripture to correct church tradition and doctrine, we have not sufficiently challenged their theology of humanity drawn from a traditionalist reading of Genesis. Martin Luther grounds his view in the story of the fall:

Never any good came out of female domination. God created Adam Master and lord of living creatures, but Eve spoilt it all when she persuaded him to set himself above God’s will.

And then he offers the pastoral application:

’Tis you women, with your tricks and artifices, that lead men into error. (Table Talk of Luther)

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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 ploy in earlier times as well as now. A recent text by Leon J. Podles, *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity*, argues that masculinity has been marginalized within Christianity and, without virility, 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.

Three affirmations undergird a balanced theology of humanity: men and women are equally created after

God’s likeness; women and men are equally suited to participate in the Reign of God; and men and women are equally called and gifted for ministry.

The first chapter of Genesis offers a compelling vision of gender equality. God created women and men after the divine likeness and offered them the dignity of being God’s unique representatives in creation (Genesis 1:26-29). Together they comprise the image of God; indeed, it is in human community of self-giving and diversity that we image the Triune God, who dwells in the richness of community eternally. Even though sinful betrayals mar this primal picture of equality, we know that it remained God’s intent for human relationality.

Jesus bears witness to this 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 Reign 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.

President Molly T. Marshall's great passion in life is preparing women and men for ministry excellence.

During her tenure as president which began in 2004, Central Baptist Theological Seminary has moved the campus to a new location, opened two extension sites, constructed a partnership with Myanmar Institute of Theology, and found new ways to focus the seminary's mission in congregational health and global Christianity. For the past thirty years Molly T. Marshall has been in theological education, her life's work. Her experience in ministry 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?*, *What it Means to Be Human*, and *Joining the Dance: a Theology of the Spirit*, as well as numerous chapters in books, dictionary and journal articles, and Bible study curricula. She has also published three volumes of *Trinitarian Soundings*, a collection of reflections on the lectionary.



Clearly, Jesus was calling both women and men to participate in the great eschatological reversal that would flourish as they sowed their lives for the sake of his inaugurated reign (*basileia*).

God calls women to serve and grants them the supply of the Spirit, expressed through appropriate gifting for ministry. When the Apostle Paul delineates

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charismata (grace gifts), he never assigns them according to gender (1 Corinthians 12:1-12, Ephesians 4:1-13). Ranking these gifts according to importance and then assigning the higher ones to men and the lower to women really does not work given the overall argument concerning the Body of Christ. Each is to demonstrate her or his calling by faithful demonstration of gifts granted by the Holy Spirit.

THEOLOGY OF VOCATION

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: *I . . . beg you to lead a life worthy of the vocation to which you have been called* (4:1). Addressed to all who name Christ as Lord, vocation is a larger reality than the shape of one's particular service. This text echoes the earliest Scriptural teaching, which affirms that God has called each of us into life, into faith, and into purposeful living.

How can one discern the direction of God's calling? To answer this, I will offer several insights that can form a theology of vocation.

■ *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 thus God called me to assist the seminary in teaching and embodying this new reality.

■ *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. While 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 God's.*

The old notion that God's will must be something we will hate and have to "surrender" to is far from authentic vocation. What makes our "hearts rise up" is usually a good indication of God's purpose for us. Experiencing a sense of being "at home" in preaching, pastoral care, or teaching can grant women clarity in vocational discernment. When we

are most "fully alive," we most fully reflect the glory of God, as St. Irenaeus winsomely observed.

■ *Vocation is that which keeps "making more out of us." (Evensong, Gail Godwin)*

Vocation is not static. There will be continuing opportunities to grow and learn. When we are young we might assume we would follow a particular path throughout life; however, while the vocation to follow Jesus remains focal, the form that might take will surely evolve. To be attentive to the dynamism of vocation, I have found it helpful to practice two aspects of Benedictine spirituality: the vows of stability and *conversatio morum* (conversion of all ways of life). Stability calls us to give ourselves to a people and a place rather than flitting about or running away when hard times of conflict or acedia (that despairing feeling that nothing is really worth doing) ensue. Add to stability the willingness to be continuously converted in practical virtue, and vocation can be both deeply grounded and open to new horizons.

WE CAN SEE IN OUR CALLING GOD'S INTIMATE LOVE FOR US, ALLOWING US TO DO WHAT FULFILLS OUR HOLY LONGING.

■ *Vocation always requires the assistance of the Holy Spirit.*

If we think we can accomplish the Lord's calling in our strength, we have not followed God's dream for us. Indwelt by the Spirit of God, we are lavished with the gifts of grace that engage the tasks of ministry with wisdom and courage. As women claim their rightful places in ministry, the empowering and persistent presence of the Spirit makes possible the realization of their calling. Of

course, such grace is accompanied by our effort. Yet we must remain mindful that God created us to be open to God's very breath—Holy Breath—which sustains us in the vocation to which God has beckoned.

■ *Vocation is for the Body of Christ and for the world; it is offered in community.*

God calls us to vocation for the sake of the Body of Christ, as well as for the larger world. We can see in our calling God's intimate love for us, allowing us to do what fulfills our holy longing. I give thanks that God allows me to serve through theological education; it is my deepest joy.

It is important that we remember that our gifts belong to everyone, however. Spiritual gifts that vivify 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.



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