

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 6/16/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

This week the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) announced that it was expelling two large congregations, one in Kentucky, and Saddleback Church in Orange County, California. The reason: both churches had ordained women to serve as pastors. The church in Kentucky had been served by the same woman as pastor for more than thirty years and Saddleback last year had added a woman to serve as their pastor of campus ministry. This decision happened at the annual SBC convention where an overwhelming majority of the 13,000 men assembled voted in favor of expelling the two churches. Women are not permitted to vote in the Southern Baptist Convention, so they have no voice as to who can be leaders in the congregations where they worship.

I found it interesting that, when questioned about the reason for the decision, the SBC stated that not ordaining women is the way they had always done things. They gave no biblical support for their pronouncement; only tradition. Now, I know that there are biblical passages that can be cited as the basis for this position. Yet they did not give such a conclusion, only denominational history.

This event raises the question, “Why do we, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), ordain women while other denominations, including a number of Lutheran denominations, do not?” If we just went by tradition, we wouldn’t either, because, for most of its history, the Lutheran Church has not ordained women, and, as I just mentioned, many Lutheran bodies continue that practice. The Lutheran Church, however, has prided itself on being reforming and regularly seeking to understand GOD’S will for all of GOD’S people. And that means looking carefully and deeply at GOD’S word.

For many, including the SBC, Paul’s words in I Timothy 2:12 carry a great deal of weight: *I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.* Pretty clear and convincing. Until we do further study in ways that some faith traditions reject. One of these study techniques is to look at what the Bible says in the context of that time and place to see how it might relate to today. Timothy, the recipient of Paul’s letter, was the pastor of the church in Ephesus and was dealing with a number of newly converted women who were bringing some of their pagan practices with them and encouraging their inclusion in the Christian worship of the congregation. When Paul established this church, he spent several years meeting with the men there to teach them about the Christian faith and to be leaders in the church. Thus, his words in I Timothy 2:12 calling the church to listen to the men he had instructed. Note also that Paul writes, “*I do not...*” not “*GOD does not...*” This was Paul’s practice in this specific place. A second way that we look at passages is in light of what the rest of scripture says. Elsewhere, Paul seems to have no difficulty with women serving as leaders. Paul established the church in Philippi under the leadership of Lydia, a seller of purple cloth (unusual for a woman to be running her own business at the time). And several times, Paul sends greeting to Priscilla and Aquilla, his “partners in ministry.” Like Paul, they were missionaries, a wife and husband team. Paul recognized Priscilla first when referring to the couple, thus identifying her as the leader of these evangelists.

An even broader look at scripture leads us to ponder what JESUS’ view on the role of women in the church might be. Certainly, if HE had chosen some women to be part of HIS rabbinic school of twelve, we might have a clearer picture. That, however, was not the practice of the day, and it was radical enough that HE was choosing common folk to be HIS students. Nevertheless, JESUS did have

many women followers who were also the financiers of HIS ministry. And, when JESUS rose from the tomb, HIS choice for who would be the first to announce the resurrection was Mary Magdalene, a woman, who we can call “the Apostle to the Apostles.” So, it seems that in several ways JESUS was also inclusive and supportive of women having significant leadership roles in the Church. Some have accused the ELCA of giving into societal wishes or pressure. But these deeper views of scripture are what has truly led our denominational body to make the course corrections it has. Our desire to reflect the inclusivity of our GOD and recognize the giftedness of GOD’S people continued to guide us and reform us to be the church we are today. And, in response to the decision of the SBC and in recognition of the contributions of women to GOD’S mission throughout history, let me close with the words of this hymn:

GOD of the Women

SLANE ("Be Thou My Vision")

GOD of the women who answered YOUR call,
Trusting YOUR promises, giving their all,
Women like Sarah and Hannah and Ruth —
Give us their courage to live in YOUR truth.

GOD of the women who walked JESUS’ Way,
Giving their resources, learning to pray,
Mary, Joanna, Susanna, and more —
May we give freely as they did before.

GOD of the women long put to the test,
Left out of stories, forgotten, oppressed,
Quietly asking: "Who smiled at my birth?" —
In JESUS’ dying YOU show us our worth.

GOD of the women who ran from the tomb,
Prayed with the others in that upper room,
Then felt YOUR SPIRIT on Pentecost Day —
May we so gladly proclaim YOU today.

O GOD of Phoebe and ministers all,
May we be joyful in answering YOUR call.
Give us the strength of YOUR SPIRIT so near
That we may share in YOUR ministry here.

Tune: Traditional Irish melody ("Be Thou My Vision")

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In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey