

# Voices: In Christ, there is no longer male and female

February 7, 2017

A couple of weeks ago, Libby Rankin handed me a plate with broken crackers as I was sitting at the end of the pew at First Baptist Church in Abilene. In a few minutes, she handed me the plate with the tiny cups of juice.



Rev. Sarah Greenfield stood at the front of the sanctuary behind the Lord's table. She had preached an eloquent sermon and now was serving the elements of the Lord's Supper to the congregation. She took bread and broke it and then repeated the words of Jesus, "Take and eat." She poured juice from a silver pitcher into a cup and spoke Jesus' words, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

And we received the bread and cup to eat and drink, to remember. It was sacred. It was life-giving. It was grace.

# **“Why don’t we ...?”**

Over 20 years ago, First Baptist in Abilene began ordaining women as deacons. Our church’s tradition before that time was to pass around a list of all the men in the church when it came time to nominate deacons. One year as the process was about to begin, a male deacon asked the innocent question, “Why don’t we have the names of church members who are women on the list, too?”

The question led to a careful process of studying Scripture and discerning God’s leadership. There are many examples of women in spiritual leadership positions in the Bible, including a direct reference to the deaconess Phoebe (Romans 16:1).

After careful consideration, our church determined opening the deacon body to women was an important step for us to take in following Christ. Since then, many capable women have served as deacons, and they continue to do so. In fact, someone called to my attention one year that laywomen were serving as the chair of the deacons and chairs of each major committee in the church. Without any sort of gender-based “affirmative action,” that particular year, our church simply found women were the best choices for leadership in each of those positions.

## **Barriers come down**

We are learning that in Christ, the barriers come down.

Sarah Greenfield, who recently served the Lord’s Supper to us, was ordained by our church in 2014. A graduate of Logsdon Seminary, she now leads our congregation as the pastor for emerging adults. Through the years, First Baptist has ordained a number of other women for ministry,

including Venantie Uwishyaka, whom we ordained earlier this year. She is a Rwandan who earned a degree in family ministry at Logsdon Seminary and now has returned to her country to begin a center for Christian counseling and ministry to women and families.

To be sure, Texas Baptist churches are at different points in the journey of women's leadership in the church. We are familiar with the way in which the Apostle Paul gave instructions to early churches about how to behave within their contexts in order to further the gospel most effectively. At one point, he called for women to be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:11-12), and at another, he talked about how women who publicly pray and prophesy in church should do so with heads covered, as was the custom of the day (1 Corinthians 11:5). One assumes the ancient context sometimes limited and sometimes permitted women in public church ministry.

## **A better way ...**

We remember the profound words of gender-equality in Genesis, declaring God has created both women and men in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). There is the tragic story of human sinfulness in Genesis 3, which led to the divine prediction that husbands will rule over wives in the future (3:16). My view is that the passage is describing, rather than prescribing, what lies ahead for the sinful couple. But whatever one's interpretation of the statement, the passage clearly indicates male dominance of women is a result of human sinfulness. The good news is Jesus has come to show us a better way: He breaks down barriers; he sets us free. Paul summarizes the gospel lesson so profoundly: "For in Christ Jesus ... there is no longer male and female, for you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28).

Perhaps we also remember how the book of Joel speaks of God's dream for God's people: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (2:28). Texas Baptist churches are becoming

increasingly open to ways in which the Spirit is breaking down barriers and leading women with new freedom to minister within congregations and the world.

I encourage you to participate in the 2017 Women in Ministry Conference sponsored by Texas Baptist Women in Ministry and Logsdon Seminary. The conference will be at Logsdon's campus in Abilene Feb. 10-11. The event is designed to encourage all ministers, men and women, and especially to provide an affirming context for thinking about how women who are called by God can serve our churches effectively. To register for the conference, [click here](#).

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