

We Ordain Women Because We Baptize Girls
Galatians 3:27-29 By Chuck Poole
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“Something there is that does not love a wall, that wants it down,” wrote Robert Frost, leaving us to wonder exactly what that something is that so opposes a wall. For one possible answer, we might see Paul; specifically, what Paul said to the Galatians in chapter three, verses 27-29. In Galatians 3:27-29, Paul tells us something that does not love a wall. In Paul’s mouth, the something that wants walls down is water. Not just any water, though. Paul is talking about the swift, strong, deep, division-drowning water of baptism. Indeed, rarely has anyone thrown such cold water on such old walls as Paul did when he wrote, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.”

One imagines that Paul’s words about baptism made quite a splash in Galatia. The idea that the walls of race, class and gender are washed away in the water of baptism ran counter to the conventional wisdom of Paul’s world, conventional wisdom that is captured in a popular “men-only” prayer which went like this: “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who hast not made me a Gentile. Blessed art thou, O Lord Our God, who hast not made me a slave. Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, who hast not made me a woman.” What Paul told the Galatians was that, in the water of baptism, those divisions are swept away.¹ “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul told the church at Galatia that they could not embrace the water of baptism while also holding onto the walls of division. Their neat, settled, familiar categories of race, class and gender had been washed away in the water of baptism.

If that’s what Galatians 3:27-29 meant for them then, what does it mean for us, now? I believe it means here what it meant there: In the water of baptism, our culture’s walls of division are washed away. Race, class, and gender remain as human realities, but for those who have been baptized they can no longer be relevant to who’s in or who’s out, who leads by serving or who serves by leading. Men are still male and women are still female, but in the baptized family of faith, in the church of Jesus Christ, it just doesn’t matter. That’s what Galatians 3:27-29 means.

So why have some baptized Christians so steadfastly maintained their denial of certain roles in the church to people based on nothing more than the fact they happened to have been born female? I think they would say, “Because of what the Bible says.” After all, in I Corinthians 14:34-35, the Bible says, “Women should keep silent in the church. They are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate. If there is anything they want to know they should ask their husbands at home. It is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” And then there is I Timothy 2:11 and 12, which says, “Let a woman learn in silence, in full submission. I permit no woman to teach a man.” So, there you go. That’s what the Bible says. End of story. Right? Well, not exactly! The same Bible that gives us I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:11-12, also gives us Acts 2:17-18, which says, “Thus says the Lord, I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.” Here, God specifically includes daughters and sisters as preachers and proclaimers. Then, of course, there is I Corinthians 11:5, “Any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head.” Obviously, Paul is expecting women to help lead worship, otherwise why would he establish a dress-code for women worship leaders?

Let's be honest. Here, as in other cases, the Bible speaks with more than one voice. (That's why we must always interpret any single passage of scripture in conversation with, not in isolation from, the rest of the Bible.) When it comes to the roles of women in the church, the Bible is in a tie. (With itself!)

"But what about the gospels? Didn't Jesus pick only men for the twelve apostles?" Yes, but weren't the first voices to proclaim the most important message ever told all women and only women, on the morning of the resurrection? And what about Luke 8:3, which lists the many women who went about with Jesus and the apostles? (And, on a much deeper level, those who would exclude women from ministry on the basis of the Bible probably don't want to call too much attention to the four gospels. After all, the gospels say that we must give to everyone who begs from us (Matthew 5:42), we must not resist evildoers (Matthew 5:39), we must not own more than one coat as long as anyone has no coat (Luke 3:11), we must make loans without seeking repayment (Luke 6:35), and we must sell our possessions and give the proceeds to the poor if we want to follow Jesus. (Luke 14:33). I know many people who deny women a place in ministry on the grounds that they "believe the Bible," but who dismiss, with a wink and a nod, the most radical sayings of Jesus, which leaves one to wonder how a person can use two or three verses of scripture to exclude someone from serving God, while simultaneously ignoring many verses of scripture just because they don't fit the conventional wisdom of North American culture.)

Let's just be honest about all this. The Bible does not speak with one seamless, homogenized, unanimous voice on the question of the roles of women in the church. If all we have to go on are the words on the page, then the Bible is pretty much in a tie. (With itself!)

So, what breaks the tie? For me, the tie is broken by the boundary-shattering, wall-removing, fence-climbing, gate-opening Spirit of Christ. But if the Spirit of Jesus is too subjective, if we must limit ourselves to that which is written in black-and-white on the pages of scripture, I would say that the tiebreaker is Galatians 3:27-29, which tells us that we cannot embrace our baptism while also maintaining distinctions in the church between male and female.

Based on all of that, I offer this modest proposal: If anyone should ever ask why your church ordains women, just tell them that, based on a careful reading of the Bible, your church discovered that if you were going to refuse ordination to women, you'd first have to refuse baptism to girls because Galatians 3 says that once a person has been baptized, their gender is no more an issue in the church than the color of their eyes or their hair or their skin. Tell them that based on a careful reading of Galatians 3:27-29, your church ordains men and women because your church baptizes boys and girls.

¹ This part of this sermon was spawned for me by John Timmer's "Owning up to Baptism."