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When Landmarks Move: The Challenge of Feminism

1 Corinthians 11:4-10; 1 Timothy 2:8-15

In the sermon series we're doing this month on times when the church has changed its mind on important questions – “When Landmarks Move” – we have talked so far about science and slavery. In the case of science, we found that many of the statements found in scripture on scientific questions were based on the incomplete data and inaccurate ideas of the time the books were written. So, as science, not useful. But we also noted that at a deeper level, scripture fosters and encourages the scientific examination of nature. Then, the next week, we noted that the Bible never specifically opposes slavery. And yet, once again, we found that the deeper teachings of scripture conflict with that cultural assumption. Our Bible teaches that we are all, equally, made in the image of God, that our task on earth is to love God and our neighbor, and that our neighbor includes everyone. None of these can be reconciled with the idea of owning another person as property.

It seems that we have different layers of meaning in scripture. On the surface there might be statements that reflect the culture and historical context of the human writers, while beneath the surface there may be something quite different going on. I wonder if there are other examples of this phenomenon.

We read first from 1 Corinthians 11, verses 6-10:

⁶For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. ⁷For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. ⁸Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man. ¹⁰For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Second, we read from 1 Timothy 2, verses 8-15:

⁸I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; ⁹also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, ¹⁰but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. ¹¹Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. ¹²I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. ¹³For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. ¹⁵Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Okay, let's start with that last statement, that women are saved by bearing children. That doesn't even make sense. What about women who never have children? It happens, you know. And what about men? Many scientists think that men are part of the reproductive process as well, but men are saved under a different plan? Is this anywhere else in scripture? No. Is this contradicted elsewhere in scripture? Yes. Is this mind-numbing nonsense? Yes.

Now, what about all that biblical advice on women's fashions. They should have long hair, hidden under veils, not braided. No gold, no pearls, no ornaments, no nice clothes. Are we

to take all this as the eternal law of God? God has something against braids? (How do you feel about blue mohawks? Asking for a friend.) No, the kindest, most generous, way to deal with these passages is to acknowledge that they were written by men who lived in an extremely patriarchal society, who allowed their cultural presuppositions to show in the letters that they wrote. Women, you don't have to dress or act in the ways that these 1st century males in Greece would have preferred. This doesn't mean we must reject those letters in their entirety, but it does mean that we need to train ourselves to look beneath the surface for God. We'll try that next.

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In the 1980s a great Old Testament scholar named Phyllis Trible wrote a now-famous essay on "De-Patriarchalizing the Biblical Narratives." Now some might think this would involve re-writing scripture to remove anything sexist in the text, but that wasn't exactly what Dr. Trible set out to do. Instead, recognizing that our interpretations of scripture have all been influenced by thousands of years of earlier interpretations, nearly all of which were written by men, she simply tried to put aside those later interpretations and read the texts as they stand. And she's good at it. She started with the story of Adam and Eve, and it is amazing how many of our theological ideas about that story aren't actually in the text of Genesis 2 and 3. Even Paul and whoever wrote 1 Timothy add patriarchal interpretations that aren't in Genesis. Paul in 1 Corinthians says that Man is the image of God, and Woman is the image of Man. No, that is explicitly *not* what Genesis says. 1 Timothy says the fall was all women's fault. Woman sinned, but man didn't. Not what it says. In fact, Trible points out that the only difference between the two is that the woman argued with the serpent, whereas the man just took what was given to him. In a sense, Eve was the first theologian. Not a great theologian, maybe, but let's not hold that against her. There's a lot of that going around.

In fact, when you think about how patriarchal the ancient world was, the Bible is stunningly counter-cultural. The author of 1 Timothy says he doesn't let women teach or have authority. But God does. In the Hebrew Bible, there are two kinds of leaders: there are the ones that inherit their positions, like the priests, and there are the ones that are called individually to their roles by God, like the judges and the prophets. The priests are all male; judges and prophets are sometimes women. God calls who God wants to call and cares zero for cultural norms. Even in the New Testament, the story is way more complicated than the two passages we read. Whatever Paul might have said in some of his letters, he was emphatically not against women leaders. In Romans 16, an entire chapter of greetings and salutations to leaders of the church in Rome, more than half of the people Paul names are women, some with official church titles.

And then there's Jesus himself. Yes, as male clergy have pointed out *ad nauseum*, all the original twelve disciples were male. But they were not the only followers who traveled with Jesus and learned from him. Women were the first to meet the resurrected Christ; women were the first to be given the commission to tell the gospel story. And try as you might, you will find no example in the gospels of Jesus treating a woman differently than he treated a man. Not one. If you're looking for the deeper message of scripture, we end up back with Paul in Galatians: "In Christ there is no male or female."

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This week's divisive issue is a little different from those we have discussed in previous weeks. In the case of slavery, for instance, it was Christians, inspired by the example of Christ, who led the fight for abolition. But when it comes to equal respect for women, Christians have not been in

the lead. It would be more accurate to say we've been part of the resistance, especially here in America. We don't have time to go into detail, but if you're interested, the historian Kristin Du Mez, in her book *Jesus and John Wayne*, has described exhaustively how the dominant religion in America – Christianity – has melded with our national myth of the rugged, can-do, take-no-guff-from-anyone individualist with the result that Jesus has been reinvented by some branches of American Christianity as an Alpha Male, a macho action hero that bears no resemblance to the Jesus of the Gospels. Part of that myth is the adoring woman in the male hero's shadow, and that has crept into our Christianity. Theologically, this has taken the form of what is called "Complementarianism." Briefly, Complementarianism is the teaching that God made men and women equal, but with different, *complementary*, gifts and roles to play in the home and the church and society. One of the man's roles is to lead and to give orders, and one of the woman's roles is to follow and obey. But both roles are equally valued by God. So it's not sexist, see? Men and women are *equal*. And this doctrine continues to be taught in churches and seminaries all over the US, apparently with a straight face.

That's another difference between this issue and others we've discussed. This battle's still being waged. I have lived through one of the theaters of that war myself, during my years as a Southern Baptist. The Southern Baptist controversy of the 80s and 90s was fought almost entirely over the issue of whether women could be spiritual leaders. Those who said "no" won, and the rest of us left. And yet, as we have seen, the picture of God in the Bible, shown most clearly in the character of Jesus, is a picture of one who cares nothing for societal roles – a God who chooses leaders without reference to our gender norms, who even seems to delight in breaking human rules and flouting expectations.

Let me suggest a different model for "Complementarianism." The Kingdom of God is like a choir. Yes, different people have different kinds of voices, and generally speaking men and women do sing differently, but no one kind of voice is always in the lead, and there are no hard and fast rules about what part anyone has to sing. If a woman wants to sing tenor, then do it. (In fact, if she wants to crash the Men's Ensemble and make them change the name, go for it.) The point is not who has the main part, or who's permitted to sing what; the point is the music itself, and for the Kingdom of God, the music is love. Any rule or custom that gets in the way of that music is a boundary that needs to move.