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Living in the "Now" and the "Not Yet": The Amphibious Nature of Community Life in Christ

SHELLEY NEILSON

The task I accepted in writing this article was the preparation of a pastoral response to Ken Cukroski's exegetical work on 1 Cor 11:2–16 presented in this issue. While it certainly relieves me of the burden of being historically knowledgeable and interpretively detailed in my thoughts, this assignment is not without its challenges. Cukroski's examination of the text is both enlightening and thought provoking, but it is difficult; if not impossible, to make any sort of one-to-one application from the church in Corinth to the East County Church of Christ in Gresham, Oregon. As I read Paul's words to the Corinthians and learn from Cukrowski, it is clear that a definitive answer to what the "role of women" should be is not going to be found here. But in reflecting on our journey at East County, I believe our experience demonstrates the "amphibious" nature of the Christian existence Cukrowski identifies as a precipitating element in the Corinthian church's fractured fellowship. Therefore I will share some of our story, and some of my story. In doing this, I hope to demonstrate ways in which East County mirrors some of the same tensions the Corinthians were experiencing and present the choices we have made with which I think Paul would have been pleased.



A fifth Sunday approaches. On the East County Church of Christ calendar, these morning services have been designated Family Worship Sundays: a worship time dedicated to discerning the body of Christ in its fullness; a time to reaffirm that we—male and female, old and young, rich and poor, married, divorced, single, happy, sad, angry, healthy, sick—are all sinners on a journey together in grace. On Family Worship Sunday, as we do every Sunday, we will gather to worship the God who calls each of us into a personal relationship with him and into community with one another.

On Family Worship Sundays, the church celebrates the whole body, arranged according to God's choosing, by providing opportunity for hands and feet, eyes and ears, etc., to contribute to the worship of our creator and sustainer. Since Family Worship Sundays were inaugurated over two years ago, our memories have been imprinted with powerful images that belie what most of us in attendance each Sunday have known as traditional worship. The faces of children beaming as they are welcomed to sing with the worship team. A young boy standing with his father as they offer a lengthy prayer of praise in alternating lines. Hearing the voices of four children during the Lord's Supper (Bailey, Micah, Rebecca, and Travis) as they reflect on stories of Jesus that encourage them as they grow in the Lord. A mother and son singing a song together that calls us to remember God and his love for his children. Families at tables around the perimeter of the auditorium welcoming the congregation one row at a time to the table of the Lord. A potter with her wheel set up in the front of the auditorium calling the children forward, later fashioning a bowl from a lump of clay to talk about our relationship with God. A baby being dedicated—the child of an unwed mother—tears filling

her eyes as the congregation stands to covenant with her and to commit to being the arms that will extend the welcome of the Lord to her and to her child.

Poignant memories such as these seem to preclude the “discussions” I was exposed to as a young teen regarding “right worship”. As I plan for the next Family Worship Sunday, I am thankful for the freedom within the task of community formation assigned to me to consider creatively how our worship together as the body of Christ can celebrate our community of faith in all its diversity. And I smile realizing that after more than 25 years, God has powerfully answered the forgotten prayer of a confused teenager.

In the summer of 1974, an older, teenage girl—a young woman really—started a song during a devotional in a city park. Our youth group was subsequently treated to a diatribe concerning “right worship,” which included every scripture that concerned women and their “submissive role in the church”. I had forgotten the incident until last summer when I retrieved memorabilia my mother had been keeping for me, including a collection of diaries. I had recounted in great detail the summer park devotional incident. As I wrestled with the implications of that event, I wrote, “All she did was start a song, so what? Most of the guys in our youth group can’t or won’t sing. What does that have to do with ‘wives be in subjection to your husbands’? She’s not even married!” And then I poured out a surprisingly impassioned prayer to the Lord for understanding concerning my status before him. I am still a little embarrassed at my brazen posture, pointing out to God himself that his word said that “‘in Christ there was neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female’ and if that were truly the case then what was wrong with a girl starting a song during a devotional?” I concluded my entry with this: “I don’t think there is anything wrong with it. I think this is about tradition, and I’m too tired to think about that.”

In 1 Cor 11, Paul commends the Corinthians for maintaining the traditions as he delivered them to the church there. Traditions are important. They are part of the firm foundation upon which our fellowship continues to build and grow in its understanding of how we are to be salt and light in a culture in which Christianity is no longer the defining story of identity or values. Who we are has been shaped by our history, patterns of worship, and conversations over time, and our understanding of our commission to spread the gospel and serve “as eyewitnesses to what God is still doing in the real world today.”¹

But Paul also gives ample evidence that he is well aware of the tensions that exist for Christians striving to “be an alternative society that understands itself according to what God has revealed about his heart—that is his will for us”.² We are a people living a parallel existence, “in the world, but not of the world”, endeavoring to connect the story of the cross with a culture that rewards strength, not weakness. We live in a time in history when the battle for equality—whether it be racial, gender, or economic—is being fought on many levels, and congregations are striving to be welcoming and inclusive. We are challenged to be relevant without watering down those things of first importance that have been passed on to us.

The East County Church of Christ (where I have been a member for twenty years, and for whom I have been honored to serve on staff for the past six) has accepted this challenge. We are seeking to create a community where the unity of Christ is revealed in the diversity of those who worship together (young and old, male and female, married and single, etc.), and where the gospel of Christ is good news for all who hear it. “In many ways, East County is a pioneering church because we are taking the less traveled road. We look for renewing norms within our own story/tradition, in our case ‘a people of the book’. This allows a fresh,

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disciplined appropriation of scripture to provide models for discerning, as a body, the kind of congregation God is calling us to be."³

The tensions for us at East County do not lie in the issues of headcoverings or the desire to eliminate gender distinctions. Though we have devoted much time over the years to the study and discussion of gender roles within the church, intention has never been to overturn traditional positions in order to be culturally relevant or responsive. Our search for scriptural insight has not been motivated by a desire to justify a move toward a more egalitarian stance regarding women, but by our belief that the Bible is the living word of God, new every morning, discernible by communities of faith. We read scripture to see "what God was doing in and through the givens of the situation described and what God might do again" in this time, in this place.⁴ And that is a perilous process, for our community is made up of individuals who are at different places on their personal faith journeys and who hold varying opinions and beliefs regarding what is appropriate and right. But we are a community committed to one Lord, one faith and one baptism. We are a community committed to one another with a firm belief that the Holy Spirit will guide our efforts to discern God's will for us.

Our desire through the process of community discernment has been to reexamine continually who we are (corporately and individually) in order to understand more completely who God wants us to be. We hope that by identifying the gifts that members have and desire to use in service to the church, while at the same time searching the scriptures in order to come to a fuller knowledge of God and his relationship to his creation, that we will gain insight regarding the identity and purpose of the church in Gresham, Oregon. This must remain an open project, for, as Luke Johnson points out, "The church is inevitably and properly a community that is unstable, that must always make up its identity as it goes along."⁵

On any given Sunday, our services may look very much like services in Churches of Christ across the continent. However, should a guest visit on a Family Worship Sunday, or a Children's Sunday, or the day of a baby dedication, our worship together might look quite different—not because East County has a particular agenda regarding women's roles, but because we are "members of a community shaped by Christ's sacrifice".⁶ As Paul writes in chapter 12, we are a body with many members, united in one Spirit. The same Spirit grants gifts to young and old, male and female, rich and poor, etc., for the building up of the body, and East County has chosen to provide opportunities for women to contribute their gifts in undisguised ways.

What is of primary importance is our commitment to being the body of Christ, to providing freedom and encouragement for the various parts of the body to work for the building up of the body according to their nature and gifts.

There are some in our assembly every Sunday who are not comfortable with the inclusiveness of women at East County. Our congregation is the only Church of Christ in Portland to have a woman listed as a ministerial staff member. Women gifted in the area of public speaking are included in the rotation of those who share our family concerns (announcements)

on Sunday mornings. And women—recognized by members to be women of wisdom, leadership, and humility—serve in our Leadership Group and are charged with ministry oversight in a variety of areas.

To some of our members, this inclusiveness is unsettling, to say the least. But seated next to them are those who firmly believe that women should be permitted to serve side by side with men in every capacity for which they may be gifted and called. And yet we continue to worship together, revealing in part God's mystery that the love of Christ binds everything together and allows his peace to rule in our hearts.⁷

My initial thoughts regarding this article would have been better suited to one entitled “The Role of Women in the Church Today.” However, as I considered the task given to me, and Cukrowski’s explicit exegesis of the 1 Cor 11 passage, the move from ancient text to modern world seemed better bridged by the offering of this snapshot along the shared journey of the East County Church of Christ. Just as Paul was not censuring the praying and prophesying being done by women in the Corinthian church, neither can a case be made from this passage for excluding women from participation in worship even today. Paul does, however, seem to be concerned with the manner in which worship is being conducted within the context of that culture; this becomes even clearer in subsequent chapters. Paul is concerned that men and women understand that their primary role within the church ultimately is to glorify God, not by erasing gender differences, and not by asserting equal rights to participate.

Paul unambiguously describes the church as “a single organism comprised of many parts none of which exists independently from the other, all of which are related organically.”⁸ And the blood that flows through that body, nourishing it, combining parts dissimilar in form and function, enabling them together to share in the mystery of “the most excellent way,” is the blood of Christ. East County understands the same tensions the Corinthians were feeling. We too are living in the “now” and the “not yet,” struggling to exist in this present age of male and female while at the same time coexisting in the kingdom of God that renders “gender a matter of indifference.”⁹ It places choices on us regarding how we will respond to this “gospel of equality.” “Everything is permissible,” Paul quotes in 1 Cor 10, but not everything is beneficial or constructive. These words have meaning in the context of this discussion and hold great significance for East County members. For us, the gender question, while not inconsequential, is certainly relegated to matters of secondary importance. What is of primary importance is our commitment to being the body of Christ, to providing freedom and encouragement for the various parts of the body to work for the building up of the body according to their nature and gifts. We are determined to move forward on our journey of faith and service, welcoming voices of agreement and dissent. By staying together, we strive to demonstrate the unity of the Spirit in our diversity and, as one body, we hope to manifest Christ’s presence in this world.

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NOTES

- 1 James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1984), 75.
- 2 Marva J. Dawn, *Is it a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 34.
- 3 These are the words of Mark Love who served eleven years as Minister of the Word for the East County Church of Christ.
- 4 Sanders, 52.
- 5 Luke T. Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment, Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 55.
- 6 See Ken Cukrowski, “The Problem of Uncovered Prophets: Exploring 1 Cor 11:2-16,” in this issue on pages 138-145.
- 7 See Col 3.
- 8 Carl Holladay, “Love Embodied: Reading 1 Cor. 13 Autobiographically,” *Preaching Autobiography: Rochester College Lectures on Preaching*, vol. 2 (Abilene, Tex.: ACU Press, 2001), 129.
- 9 See Ken Cukrowski, “The Problem of Uncovered Prophets: Exploring 1 Cor 11:2-16,” in this issue on pages 138-145.