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God Speaks my Language

Patricia Magness

As I work on this essay for *Leaven*, I am sitting in the hospital room beside the bed of a great preacher: my preacher for the first eighteen years of my life, my father. His preaching was so vivid that I can still remember a few specific sermons: one, for example, on the importance of doubting your doubts and another asserting that some people are, indeed, indispensable. I also learned a great deal from my mother who taught us the Bible in “Junior Church”; she told the stories of the Bible so memorably that I have been surprised a few times over the years when I realized that some details were supplied by (to use her phrase) her “sanctified imagination” and not from the text itself. While I loved her teaching, it was always clear to me that she was not a preacher and that women did not preach. In the church of my youth, women also did not lead in prayer, preside at the communion table, serve communion, or collect the offering. Women reigned in the nursery and kitchen and as teachers of children, but men were the leaders of the church.

I was in my forties before I heard a woman preach from the pulpit and, while I had heard many great sermons before, this sermon touched a chord deep in my inner being. It helped that the woman preaching was articulate, theologically astute, personally devout, Biblically sound, and possessed of a resonant musical voice—but there was something more going on for me. In some way that I can scarcely understand myself, much less describe, I felt that I was hearing the gospel in a new, more personal way. The only analogy I have to help explain this experience comes from the world of Bible translation. Translators, literacy workers, and support teams devote their lives to getting the Bible translated into the “heart language,” the mother tongue of a people group, because time and time again when people hear the word of God in their heart language (not in an acquired English or some trade language), the word burns anew within them. They say, “God speaks my language. God knows me personally and intimately.” For the men reading this essay, I can only suggest a thought experiment: Imagine if you had never heard a man preach the gospel, only women who drew their illustrations from giving birth or being mothers or having husbands. Imagine if all the jokes had been about fathers-in-law or husbands. Imagine if all the church leaders wore skirts and high heels. What difference would it make if you then experienced a man preaching? What difference would it make when you realized that men could lead, that you could lead?

Experiencing women in leadership has, for me, been liberating and energizing. I feel like I have heard Jesus say, “Woman, be free” personally to me. I have had a burden lifted from my shoulders. Instead of constantly having to worry, “Can a woman do this? Should a woman do that?” I can simply respond as a Christian, as a person. It is also motivating because suddenly I can admit that the Great Commission applies to me as well as to my brothers. Women are commissioned to share the good news, and they have the freedom to respond to this commission. Seeing capable women lead in worship, teach the Bible, teach theology, teach worship leadership, serve as missionaries, translate the Bible, direct ministries, and participate in decision-making challenges me to discover, recognize, and use my own gifts with gratitude to God instead of tortured self-questioning.

Along with the freedom, of course, comes responsibility. I can remember at one time thinking that since only men could lead in the church, then only men had responsibility and thus I could just sit back and relax.

Part of the challenge of including women in leadership is that women become fully responsible, full participants, no longer able to blame someone else for poor judgment or be excused from the hard work of decision-making. The transition from women behind the scenes to women in recognized official positions is fraught with tensions. Those women who for decades excelled at unseen manipulations may find it difficult to give up old ways. We laughed at the scene in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* where the matriarch says, “The man may be the head but the woman is the neck that turns the head!” It is a good line but it reminds us that, for many women, power has been a matter of manipulation, and a new era of personal responsibility requires new skills as well as new confidence. It isn’t easy to enter into public leadership after a lifetime of being told and telling oneself that such a role is wrong. I have read many articles accusing women leaders in the church of being power seekers, but what I have seen in reality is women seeking shared service, shared responsibility, and shared respect.

As a writing teacher, I have worked with many young writers to help them “find their voice.” As a teacher of women’s literature, I have read and taught dozens of books in which a woman develops the courage to speak up and speak out and speak in her own voice. While I love hearing a man’s voice, from a resonant bass to a floating tenor, I have a woman’s voice—and when I hear a woman preach or pray or read scripture, I am hearing my own voice and being challenged to find my own voice and speak up in my own voice. As important as it is for an individual to find his or her own voice, it is equally important to be heard and to feel that one is being heard. When women’s voices join men’s voices in preaching, prayer, scripture reading, communion meditations, teaching, and discussion, all the voices together create a more complete story and a better sense of the whole of the church.

One of the most powerful aspects of having women assume leadership roles in the church is an expanded repertoire of images along with an increased range of imagination. When I first saw the book title *In Memory of Her*, I was offended—just sure that the writer was mocking the phrase “in remembrance of Him” that we use at the communion table.¹ Imagine my surprise to learn that the phrase “in memory of her” is a direct quote from the scripture, in fact, a direct quote from Jesus. Jesus is speaking of the woman who anointed his feet and declares that wherever the gospel is taught that this event would be told “in memory of her.” The event is recorded in the gospel of Matthew, and surely I have been taught about it. But until this book, I had never heard the story told specifically “in memory of her.” Only in recent decades as women have taken a more active role in teaching, writing, and preaching have we begun to hear the stories of the great women of faith, from the women in the Bible to the women preachers, teachers, and evangelists in our own Restoration Movement.

When I look back at the Sunday school and Vacation Bible School stories of my childhood, I realize that we studied only the men: David, Moses, Gideon, Paul, etc. We could have two weeks of Vacation Bible School and never mention a woman, a whole quarter of Sunday school without a woman. But when women lead, they notice the women of the Bible. They might be—as a recent book titles it—*Bad Girls of the Bible*, but the girls and women are there.² While I don’t have any scientific evidence, it is my observation that women teachers and preachers talk more about giving birth, more about nurturing, more about caregiving, more about compassion, more about children. Women find inspiration in and thus tell the stories of Miriam, Ruth, Esther, Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, Junia, Lydia, and others. When women preach and teach and write, they offer both memories of women who have gone before and anticipation and hope of what women can accomplish in the future.

In the church and in our culture as a whole, there has been a tendency to emphasize either the goodness or the evil of women. In the nineteenth century, there was a strong cultural emphasis on the goodness, piety, and saintliness of women. Women were haloed with a cloud of sentimental affection as they were encouraged to make their homes a sacred space of peace and tranquility, an oasis of calm and good in contrast to the evil

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984).

2. Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible: And What We Can Learn from Them* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 1999).

and temptations of the world outside. On the other hand, both the culture as a whole and the church in particular have often emphasized the evil and moral weakness of women. The stories of Jezebel and Delilah have often been applied to women in general, as if every woman were a greedy temptress. One of the many benefits of having women as teachers and leaders is that women are seen as whole, complex moral beings—capable of good and evil, neither better nor worse than men. Women are not held up for comparison to the idealized version of the Mother’s Day card, nor are they described as deficient in judgment. When women share leadership with men, the church offers a more realistic view of the shared humanity of men and women.

Recently I heard an excellent sermon focusing on the church as the bride of Christ; even as I was listening to this man, I wondered what new things I might learn from a preacher who had actually been a bride! I wondered what insights the preacher was missing as he reminisced about his own beautiful bride. I could tell that he struggled with the contradiction of having a bride and being a bride, as he tried to imagine what it might mean to be a bride. What could I learn—what could the whole church learn—from a rich heritage of women preachers, “bride preachers” exploring the implications of being the bride of Christ?

Even as I celebrate the full inclusion of women in the life and leadership of the church, and even as I see great results from this full inclusion, I also want to pause to celebrate the accomplishments of women through the centuries who have found ways to live and share the gospel in spite of many restrictions. Not allowed to preach? They taught. Not allowed to teach adults? They taught children. Not allowed to pray in the congregation? They prayed at home and in small groups. Not allowed to lead? They started women’s circles and women’s missionary groups. And in the nineteenth century women used the platform of creating moral homes and children to reach out to work to abolish slavery, to seek the right to vote, to gain the right to an education, to reform many tragic situations; church women were particularly active in establishing the modern missions movement. The metaphor that comes to my mind is foot-binding: when women can accomplish so much with their feet bound, just imagine what they can do when they can walk freely!

Having women in leadership in the church helps me, and perhaps all women and girls, to feel fully included, fully respected, fully responsible. I think that it would also help men to have a higher, truer regard for women—not a sentimentally high regard, but a respect based on real shared responsibility. Full inclusion releases the energy of women for ministry and recognizes that women are fully human, in need of God’s grace and capable of receiving that grace. For me personally, seeing women in leadership has helped me find my own voice and has encouraged me to see myself as a “partner in the gospel” with men in the church. My own benefit, however, offers just a glimpse of the true significance of having women in shared leadership in the church: the full participation of women in the life of the church makes the church a living testimony to the kingdom of God in which “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.” I learned this verse from my mother—and from my father.

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