



Our DNA

We Are Egalitarian

1 Timothy 2-3

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Pastor Mark: Again, and again over the years, Chapel Hill members who moved away or left for university...came back saying, "We just can't find another Chapel Hill." At first, I'd nod sympathetically. But I've heard it enough to wonder if there is something distinctive about Chapel Hill. We are evangelical...conservative...biblical; we value the preached word. But many churches are like that.

So, we began to ask ourselves, "What are the qualities, the values which, taken together, make Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill." "What is our DNA?" Then post-pandemic we saw an influx of people from a variety of backgrounds. We realized it was only fair that we state clearly who and what we are. That way, visitors will understand what they are stepping into and whether it fits them.

Because, just like human DNA, there is no changing this. We've identified nine markers that are inherent and sacred to us. When they are present, it feels right...and if one of them were suddenly absent, it would feel like a violation. So...over the next nine weeks, we are going to talk about our DNA. The nine inherent, essential traits that, taken together, make us, us. You don't have to share all these values to be welcome. But these are non-negotiable for us...and you ought to know that upfront.

This morning, we start with a marker that is not the most important...but is most distinctive: We are Egalitarian. In church circles, this means that we ordain men and women equally to all offices of the church. And of course, the distinctive part is, we ordain women, also...to every office of the church. The contrasting word, "complementarian," means that men and women have "complementary" roles in the church...and that women are forbidden to take leadership. (BTW, I was a complementarian when I was first ordained. I didn't believe women were called to be leaders in the church. But my study of God's word changed me.)

It's pretty obvious that Chapel Hill is egalitarian. Today we ordained three women to the role of elder. In June, our Rosemary Lukens will become the first

moderator of our entire denomination who happens to be a woman. We sent Megan Hackman as our denomination's first woman lead pastor of a church plant. And we have two women pastors, Pastor Julie and Pastor Rachel, on our team. In fact, we've ordained eight women pastors (among them my daughter, Rachel) and have a ninth in the pipeline...more than any other church in our denomination.

So, we don't just tolerate women leaders. We champion them. And this conviction may be our single most distinctive DNA marker. You'll find other evangelical, Reformed, Spirit-filled churches...but rarely will they also be egalitarian.

Pastor Julie: In fact, for many who are new to us, this is often one of the big surprises. It is the number one question we deal with: why do you have women leaders? Let me begin by telling you that there was a time when I was a complementarian too. I know, surprising. And so, I have a lot of grace for brothers and sisters who aren't quite sure about a woman in the pulpit. But I also have a lot of hope that we can put on an attitude of love and charity towards one another...and of course, there is a part of me that hopes you will change your mind. However, I am called to be a minister of Word and Sacrament, so this isn't a soapbox moment for me. It's a call, not a cause.

Our text today is a doozy. It's one of two texts that gets quoted to me more often than you would think...it's a little awkward. In my younger days, I really wished that I could take a sharpie and just mark out these verses. Frankly, if we took a pair of scissors to this text and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, the biblical case for women in church leadership would be pretty evident. However, this text is part of God's inspired word to us. And, by the way, it is a passage that I have come to love dearly. So, let's tackle it! Hear now God's word for us today:

"I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; likewise, also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness—with good works. Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." 1 Timothy 2:8-12

Whole books have been written on these few verses, whole doctoral classes are taught on it, believe me...I took one. There is no way that we can cover the breadth and depth of this section in the time allotted. But we can take a closer look.

What is going on in this passage? Let's start with a little bit of context. 1 Timothy was written by the Apostle Paul to Timothy who was a church leader in Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was a bustling metropolis brimming with wealth. During the Roman Empire Ephesus was the place to be. It was a center of banking, art and culture, architecture, and theater.

And at the center of all life in Ephesus was the Temple of Artemis Ephesia. The temple was the largest building in the world. People from all over the known world traveled to visit the temple and pray to the goddess Artemis Ephesia who was like a mash-up of different goddesses in Roman and Greek religion: goddess of the moon, the hunt, childbirth, fertility, but also chastity, prosperity, power...That's quite the resume!

And while other goddesses might subdue and seduce people into devotion, Artemis Ephesia overwhelmed and overpowered. Artemis was dominating! The temple was manned by priestesses...hundreds of women, daughters of wealthy Ephesians. Serving at the temple was a symbol of status. These priestesses wielded tremendous power in Ephesus and beyond. They held the keys to prosperity, fertility, and life. So, in Ephesus, religious practice was marked by a powerful goddess and female dominance.

So, when Paul wrote, "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man..." it was in the shadow of a temple that was known the world around for having women who wielded an extreme amount of religious authority and where men were only religious spectators in worship. It is important to understand this context.

Nevertheless, these words from the Apostle Paul are in scripture and must be taken seriously. So, how do we understand what Paul is saying? Well, we start by remembering that the words were originally written in Greek, not English. And this is one of those places where the English translation doesn't do it justice. So, I want to point out a few surprises that can get glossed over.

First, do you realize how revolutionary it was for Paul to command Timothy...yes, it was a command....to "Let a woman learn..."? This was a society where common women were sequestered. If a respectable Jewish man saw a woman he was related to, like his wife or sister or mom, it would be considered improper for him to even greet her in public. Common women were hidden from view...and they certainly weren't being trained. But Paul commands Timothy: not only could Ephesian women learn about the Christian faith...they must be trained up in the faith.

The next surprise comes with the phrase "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority" ...the 14 other times the Greek word translated "do not

permit" is used in the New Testament...all refer to a temporary situation. There is a Greek word for that other "never, ever, ever permit" situation. In fact, Paul uses that word in 1 Timothy seven times. So, it's obvious he knew the word! But not here...he uses a phrase that means, "for the time being, I don't permit..."

And what about the word translated "exercise authority," which appears only here in the Bible? In other Greek writings, it is more commonly used to mean, "Don't dominate! Don't be a bully!" It was an extremely aggressive word.

So, I hope you can see that it's not quite as simple as saying, "I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man." A better translation for these two verses might be: "A woman must learn first as a good and quiet student. I do not permit them to take over and run the show."

Pastor Mark: As you heard, this letter was addressed to the church in Ephesus. I've had the opportunity to visit that ancient city several times. One of the most important discoveries made there is this statue of the goddess Artemis. This is the all-powerful, dominant goddess of whom Pastor Julie spoke; the one to whom the spectacular Ephesian temple was dedicated. A religion, I remind you, that was run entirely by a cult of priestesses. A religious culture in which men were irrelevant, dominated by exclusively female leaders.

That was the context Paul was addressing. We don't believe he was trying to silence all women, as some English interpretations of this text suggest. Rather, he was dealing with a unique situation in Ephesus, seeking to silence the false teachings of priestesses of a cult of female dominance, teachings that were infecting the early church. And he was calling passive Christian men to step up to their share of spiritual responsibilities.

That, we believe, is the better understanding of this passage. And if that were not so...if Paul really was insisting that women take no leadership role in the early church...then isn't that what we'd expect to find throughout the New Testament? The absence of women leaders? In fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. Again and again, from the gospels to Acts to Paul's letters, we find women playing prominent roles in the early church. And this is in the context of a Jewish culture that considered women inferior...and a Roman culture that treated women as possessions.

Those of us who believe women have an equal role in leadership must wrestle with a couple of verses from Paul's writings, which Pastor Julie has done well.

Pastor Julie: When we see these hard verses, we say that scripture must interpret scripture.

Pastor Mark: But those who oppose women in leadership, they must contend with a flood of examples of women who were esteemed in the early church; women who held prominent leadership roles.

Let's start with Jesus' treatment of women. No rabbi had ever treated women the way Jesus did. In John 4, Jesus spoke with a sinful Samaritan woman (a scandalous double whammy) who became the first Christian evangelist. Luke tells us that, as he sat at the table of a horrified Pharisee, Jesus received the worship of a "sinful woman" who anointed his feet with perfume. (Luke 7:26 ff.) In Mark 5, Jesus welcomed the healing touch of an "unclean" woman. Instead of being repulsed, he wanted to engage her and embrace her. And in John 8, Jesus saved the life of an adulterous woman about to be stoned. Jesus treated women, all women, with unparalleled kindness. He never shamed; never "put them in their place." This was one of the most revolutionary aspects of his ministry...at a time when rabbis avoided all contact with women to avoid being spiritually contaminated.

But he was more than kind. Jesus honored and valued his women followers. Luke 8 tells us he had a band of women disciples who traveled with him from town to town. John tells us that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, "sat at his feet" ...language normally reserved for a male disciple of a rabbi. Unthinkable at the time. But the most revolutionary female disciple of all? Mary Magdalene. All four gospels testify it was Mary who discovered the empty tomb of Jesus...Mary who first met the resurrected Christ...Mary who was commissioned by Jesus to take the news to his male disciples who were still in hiding. In fact, Mary was known to the early church as the "Apostle to the Apostles." And since, at the time, the testimony of women wasn't even allowed in a courtroom, it makes this all the more incredible. Yet credible. Who would make up such a thing if it weren't true?

So, Jesus had and honored women disciples even in a thoroughly paternalistic culture. Then we turn to Acts. There we discover remarkable Priscilla who was the mentor of a gifted but inexperienced preacher...a male preacher...named Apollos. (Acts 18:24-26).

Pastor Julie: Priscilla was also the person who planted the church in Ephesus.

Pastor Mark: And Lydia, the founder of the first church in Europe (Acts 16:14-15;). And four daughters of Philip who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9). And Tabitha and Rhoda and another Mary and Damaris. You get the point: Acts is replete with women leaders.

But what about Paul? He's the one who seems to limit women. Except...in other places, he commends the leading roles women played. In Philippians, he

affirms Euodia and Syntyche as fellow laborers. He acknowledges Chloe and Nympha as leaders of their home churches (I Corinthians 11:11; Colossians 4:15). In his greetings at the close of Romans, he commends Phoebe, a woman deacon...and, shockingly, a woman apostle named Junia (Romans 16:1; 6-7). "Apostle" was the highest office in the church. Paul called himself an "apostle." Yet here, Paul affirms a woman as "an apostle." As a matter of fact, when Paul lists the highest spiritual callings in Ephesians 4: (Apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor-teachers) ...every single one of those positions is found in other parts of the New Testament to be filled by a woman.

I know...a lot of information. But I needed to demonstrate to you the many, many examples of women leaders to be found in the New Testament. If you are going to say, "Women are not allowed to be leaders," then you are going to have to contend with the example...and the teachings...of Jesus...of Luke in Acts...and yes, even of Paul.

Pastor Julie: It's important for you to know that Chapel Hill did not decide to ordain women to leadership just because Chapel Hill wanted to. We did it because we believe the Bible tells us so. For all these reasons...these biblical reasons...we are egalitarian. We understand that other Bible-believing Christians differ with us on this point. In fact, our own denomination...the EPC...considers this a "non-essential"; a point of doctrine upon which sincere Christians may disagree. And like we said before, we aren't trying to win an argument here.

Pastor Mark: But for us here at Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church...this is what we believe. It is part of our DNA. Men...and women...are called to all the offices of the church. It is important that you understand that about us.

Pastor Julie: But more than that...and what we think is really at the heart of Paul's teaching here, is this: God has called all of us...men and women...and gifted all of us...men and women...to bring him worship...and to proclaim his gospel. God calls men to step up to the plate...to take their role in spiritual leadership...to set an example in heartfelt, genuine worship. God calls women to bring their unique perspectives and gifts to all roles in the life of the church. To join their brothers in leading with grace and humility.

Pastor Mark: It is a shame that the word complementarian has been hijacked to mean, "no women leaders." The Biblical witness suggests that men and women...both created in the image of God...are created to complement each other. And together in our worship, our leadership, in our service, we provide a healthy model to a world that is tearing itself apart along gender lines. The church of Jesus, following the example of Jesus, is called to something better. Higher. Nobler. Sweeter.

Let's commit ourselves to that by obeying Paul's admonition...all of us. Let's lift our hands...men and women...in prayer to Almighty God.