

What Makes a Church: Males or Females?
Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 24-26

June 19, 2005
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Perhaps the battle of the sexes has been going on since the beginning of time. At least the jokes go all the way back to Adam and Eve. One joke says that when God finished the creation of Adam, He stepped back, scratched His head and said, *"I can surely do better than that."* Then He created Eve. Another joke says Adam became lonely after a few weeks in the Garden, so he asked the Lord for a companion. The Lord said, *"Let me think it over and get back to you."* So the next day the Lord said to Adam, *"Here's the deal, I'll make you a beautiful woman who cooks, cleans, and never complains, but it will cost you an arm and a leg."* Adam thought for a moment and replied, "What could I get for just a rib?"

So the bantering goes on. Author John Gray made millions back in the 1990's with a book called Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus. A person whom I did not know came up to me at Annual Conference this week and asked, "If a man says something in the middle of the forest and there isn't a woman around to hear him, is he still wrong?" He must have just heard the report of the Role and Status of Women. When my staff read the sermon title for today, two female staff members put me on notice that they would be listening closely to what I say. Well, here we go anyway. "What makes a Church, males or females?"

THE CHURCH NEEDS MEN TO BE SPIRITUAL LEADERS. It's Father's Day. Mother's Day is one of the best Sundays of the year for church attendance, ranking just behind Christmas and Easter. Not so with Father's Day, there are plenty of empty pews. Families seldom make an effort to attend church in honor of fathers. We buy him a tie and then fail to take him anywhere to wear it.

- In 1952, the typical Protestant worship service drew an adult crowd that was 47% male. Today the average is 39%.
- On a given Sunday in this country there are thirteen million fewer men than women sitting in the pews.
- One-fourth of all married church-going women attend services without their husbands.
- Sociologist George Barna reports that men lag behind women in every area of Christian endeavor except that of senior pastor.

So where are all the men on Sunday morning? Are they sleeping, playing golf, working, goofing off, or simply disinterested in spiritual matters? I am not sure that I know the answer to that question, but I do know statistically that there is a truth that we ought to drive home today and that is this: Children whose fathers take them to church are much more likely to practice the faith as adults than those who don't.

If kids see religion as "mom's thing" they are likely to become disenchanted. But,

if dad leads by example, children are twenty-two times more likely to become life-long church goers.

Dad, it's critical that you assume your role as spiritual leader. Provide for your children, protect your children, and give your children spiritual instruction. Pray with them; teach their Sunday school classes or become a scout leader or a youth counselor. Sit with them in worship; bless them in the name of the Lord. It will make an eternal difference in their lives. You are critically important in the life of your son or daughter, or grandson or granddaughter.

Aquila, a refugee from Rome, was a tentmaker by profession, but a colleague of Paul by vocation. He and Paul made tents by day and preached the Gospel on weekends. When Paul went to Ephesus to establish a church, Aquila expanded his tent-making business to that city as well, and went along. They made a team together.

Rise up, O Men of God, the Church needs your expertise; your family needs your spiritual guidance; the world needs your moral leadership.

Wake up, O Church of God, and make the gospel relevant to men. While there are effective men's prayer groups scattered throughout this congregation, there is a radical need for a strong, challenging, adventurous, spiritual ministry to men.

John Elderidge in his book Wild at Heart says men are looking for a battle to fight, an adventure to live, a beauty to rescue and all they get in church is a general suggestion that they be nice. Men want to be dangerous, passionate, alive, and free. Meanwhile the church teaches them to be passive and bored to death. Men have settled for killing time and it's killing them.

Howard Macey says, "The spiritual life cannot be made suburban. It is always frontier and we who live in it must accept and even rejoice that it remains untamed." May we catch the wild side of God in our faith. The church needs men as spiritual leaders; the family needs it, the world needs it, your church needs it.

THE CHURCH NEEDS WOMEN TO BE SPIRITUAL LEADERS. The refugee Aquila had a wife whose name was Priscilla. Priscilla was no flower on the wall; she was a force for the Gospel. Paul introduces them in Verse 2 of Chapter 18 as Aquila and Priscilla. In every other reference to them, Versus 18, 19, and 26 he refers to them as Priscilla and Aquila. Do you think Paul is trying to say something here by that inversion in the order of that couple?

- It's Priscilla who instructs Apollos in the Faith.
- It's Priscilla who opens her home to believers.

When Paul writes his letter to Rome, he says in Chapter 16, Verse 3, "*Greet Priscilla and Aquila. They risked their lives for me. Not only I, but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.*" My hunch is that Priscilla was the pastor of the church.

How can that be? Paul himself told Timothy to let the women learn in quietness. Do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent (I Timothy 2:11-12). Was this gag order a permanent restraint or a particular situation in which Paul was trying to distinguish between the Christian Church and the Greek Temple of Aphrodite, which was famous for its proliferation of prostitution in the name of religion? I suggest the latter, because if you read the context around it, things about how you fix your hair, or how much jewelry you wear, it is all referring to distinguishing the early church as a Christian church, not a Greek place to practice prostitution.

If Paul intended the statement as a general instruction, he certainly never practiced what he preached, given his listing of women ministers including Priscilla, Phoebe, Nympha, Lydia and numerous others who hosted churches in their houses. The largest institution in America which still denies equal rights to women is the Christian Church.

In an era when gender discrimination is being eliminated in employment, education, and accommodations, the Church lags far behind. Will religious institutions operate at a lower ethical standard than the general public? In 1920 women won the right to vote. It was not until 1956 that the Methodist Church allowed women full clergy rights. We could brag today that we have more women clergy than any other denomination in this country, but we still have a long way to go. Churches, including the Roman Catholics, Mormons, Southern Baptists, and most independent churches continue to deny ordination rights to women.

A very large church in Louisville, Kentucky claims no creed but Christ and no discipline but the Bible. They allow no leadership from women beyond elementary Sunday school. Every time I get the chance I ask their leaders, "What part of Christ do you choose to follow? How much of the Bible are you willing to embrace?"

- Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.
- Women were the first to announce the Resurrection.
- Women were among the one hundred twenty leaders in the upper room at Pentecost.
- In Galatians 3:28, Paul said, "*In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

The overwhelming teaching of the Gospel is that women are equal partners with men in the Kingdom of God and the leadership of the Church. I believe that with all of my heart.

I've had the opportunity to join only one church in my lifetime. That was the church of my childhood. But, if I were going to join a church today, there are some questions I would want to ask at the door. Among them would be these:

1. I'd want to know who they are going to let in and who they are going to keep out. I don't want to be a member of a church where the board votes on my admission as a country club might do.

2. I'd want to know who is invited to the Table of Holy Communion. Is it for members only? Is everyone who truly and earnestly repents of their sins welcome?

3. I'd want to know who is included or excluded from all levels of leadership including ordination.

4. I'd want those questions answered for my sake and the sake of my children who are going to learn by observation, as well as by instruction.

Church is more than a matter of where my friends attend, who has the best show in town, what music rocks and which minister rolls. It's about the truth of the Gospel and our inclusion in Christ.

What the Church needs now is every believer working with every other believer, giving everything they have to let everyone else know every wonderful thing about Jesus. That takes men and women, boys and girls, young and old, the ten talented and the one talented, the beginners and the elders, united in one great fellowship of love for the cause of Christ. That's why we need you on this team.

Amen.

