

CELEBRATE THE GIFTS OF WOMEN

SUNDAY MARCH 8, 2009

Celebrating Women During This Year of Calvin's Jubilee

by Dale Lindsay Morgan

Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday is observed on the second Sunday of March to honor women who contribute their talents to the church. This date was selected to embrace the worldwide celebration of International Women's Day, March 8, which this year falls exactly on that second Sunday. This year's celebration also comes during the year of Calvin's Jubilee, commemorating the 500th birthday of John Calvin, Protestant Reformer and foreparent of the Presbyterian Church. Your congregation or women's groups may, however, use this resource on any date that you choose to celebrate women.



CALL TO WORSHIP

From *Psalms 22:23–31**

Leader: You who worship Our God, give praise!

People: I will fulfill my vows in the presence of your worshipers.

Leader: The whole earth, from one end to the other,
will remember and come back to you;
All the families of the nations
will bow down to you.

**People: For yours is the kingdom,
You ruler of nations!**

**All: But my children will be faithful to you,
and they will be told about Our God
for generations to come.
They will come and proclaim your justice
to a people yet unborn:
“All this Our God has done!”**

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Based on *Mark 8:31–38*

Loving God, we confess that we have set our minds on human things and not on things divine. Jesus taught that we are to care for others, to deny ourselves and take up the cross daily for the sake of the gospel, yet still we spend our days in personal self-absorption, preoccupied with our own concerns. May we take up the cross today and every day as we reach out with food for the hungry, forgiveness for those who need pardon and unconditional acceptance for any who need to feel your love. In the quiet, hear our confessions, we pray.

SILENT PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Based on *Romans 4:13–25*

The apostle Paul reminded the church in Rome that we are saved by faith through the grace of Jesus Christ. This salvation comes to those who believe in the promises of God “who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” Friends, believe the good news of the gospel; in Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God!

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

based on readings for March 8 in

The Revised Common Lectionary

Genesis 17:1–7; 15–16

“The God of Abraham Praise,” PH #488

Psalms 22:23–31

“Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty,” PH #482

Mark 8:31–38

“Take Up Your Cross, the Savior Said,” PH #393

Romans 4:13–25

“Canto de Esperanza”/“Song of Hope,” PH #432

PH: *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1990)

PROGRAM SUGGESTIONS

The lectionary readings might inspire worship planners to consider ways the faith has been passed on by women in the congregation as mothers, teachers, elders, deacons and leaders in mission. Women’s faith could be remembered with flowers in the chancel, by names printed in the bulletin or on helium balloons or acknowledged in the service. A photo gallery of women’s ministries could be displayed. Each congregation will have its own way of celebrating the gifts of their women of faith.

A DRAMATIC APPROACH

As noted, this day set aside to celebrate the gifts of women comes in the Jubilee Year of John Calvin. As today’s reading from *Genesis* remembers Abraham, the “father of many nations,” so it could be said that John Calvin was the “father of the Reformed tradition.”

To apply Calvin’s thoughts to women’s leadership in the church today, the following skit may be used in worship. Calvin’s words are excerpts from his two-volume work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, although obviously taken out of context. The numbers in parentheses—indicating book, chapter and subject heading—should not be read aloud, but are included for reference. Note: This skit is not a debate, but a conversation. The women—and Calvin!—should smile.

The scene begins as two women convene the celebration in worship.

* From *The Inclusive Hebrew Scriptures, Volume III: The Writings* (Rowman & Littlefield). Copyright © 1999 by Priests for Equality. Used by permission.

Woman 1: Today we celebrate the gifts of women in the Presbyterian Church.

Woman 2: And the gifts of women here at [name of church].

Woman 1: This year also is the birthday year of the father of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin. It's called a Jubilee celebration because Calvin was born in 1509.

Woman 2: This is John Calvin's 500th birthday? He's really old! Or he would be if he hadn't died. . . . He is dead, isn't he?

Woman 1: Sadly, yes; but even so, his spirit still lives in the church. In fact, I think I see Calvin's spirit now, coming down the aisle!

Calvin—who can be played by either a man or a woman—enters, wearing a black coat and trousers, soft black hat and reading glasses. He carries three books: in one hand is a Bible and in the other his two-volume Institutes of the Christian Religion. If you don't have these in the church library, you may substitute two plain, dark books. As Calvin arrives he hands Institutes to a puzzled Woman 2.

Woman 1: Dr. Calvin, is that a Bible in your hand?

Calvin: Yes. Just as old and bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision . . . can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles (*here Calvin might adjust his reading glasses*) will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds. . . . clearly shows us the true God (1.6.1).

Woman 1: Put simply, the Bible expresses the word and will of God?

Calvin: No one can even get the

slightest taste of . . . sound doctrine unless he be a pupil of Scripture (1.6.2).

Woman 2: What are these two books then, Dr. Calvin?

Calvin: Although Holy Scripture contains a perfect doctrine, to which we can add nothing . . . yet a person has to know what to look for in it (*Introduction to Institutes*).

Woman 2: (*reading title Institutes of the Christian Religion*). This is where you explain how to read the scriptures and celebrate our gifts?

Calvin: Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men . . . (3.7.6).

Woman 2: Dr. Calvin, there are not only "men" (as you say) in the church, but there are women also! In fact, today we are celebrating the gifts that women *in particular* bring to the ministries of the Presbyterian Church.

Calvin: Often when Scripture sets out a list of human beings, it names only the males. . . . Why, even children know that women are included under the term "men" (2.8.3)!

Woman 2: I hope my children know that I'm not a man!

Woman 1: Today we are celebrating the gifts of women who teach in the church. Let's have all the women teachers in the congregation stand—church school and vacation Bible school teachers, youth and adult education leaders—all stand! (*They do.*)

Calvin: God . . . not only desires us to be attentive to [the scriptures'] reading, but also

appoints instructors to help us by their effort (4.1.5).

Woman 1: These women have helped many by their effort! As they are seated (*teachers sit*), we celebrate the gifts of women deacons—and we have you to thank, Dr. Calvin, for lifting up from the scriptures the offices of lay persons in the church—elders and deacons—leaders called by God and ordained by the church to serve alongside clergy. Will all the women in the congregation who have been ordained as deacons please stand? (*They do.*)

Woman 2: (*Looking at the volumes in her hand*) Did you write about women deacons in your *Institutes*?

Calvin: Their origin, institution, and office are described by Luke in *Acts*. . . . The apostles . . . asked the multitude to choose seven upright men to whom they might entrust this task (4.3.9).

Woman 2: The church had only upright *men*? But what about Phoebe, the deacon whom Paul mentions in *Romans 16*: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (Ken-cray-uh), so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints"?

Woman 1: For centuries, in the Reformed tradition, only men served as deacons. Then, in 1906, Presbyterian women were finally ordained to serve.

Calvin: No one should assume public office in the church without being called (4.3.10).

Woman 2: Oh, they were called, Dr. Calvin, but for centuries women were not permitted to answer that call. But now—you see?—they can and do! We

celebrate the gifts of these women deacons!

Woman 1: And as they are seated once again (*deacons sit*), we invite all women who are elders to stand. (*They do.*) The Presbyterian Church voted to ordain women as elders in 1930.

Calvin: [If] we wish to provide for the safety of the church, we must attend with all diligence to Paul's command that "all things be done decently and in order" (4.10.27).

Woman 1: The General Assembly had three resolutions before it that year. One was to ordain women as elders. A second was to ordain women as elders and preachers. The third was to license women as preachers.

Woman 2: The Assembly wasn't ready to ordain or license women preachers!

Woman 1: So the resolution to ordain women elders was the one the Assembly approved. And look at the elders who stand here today! We celebrate the gifts these women bring to our congregation and to the wider church. You elders work so hard, you'd better sit down! (*They sit.*)

Calvin: [An early father of the church named] Tertullian . . . held that a woman was not allowed to speak in the church, and also not to teach or to baptize . . . This was that she might not claim for herself the function of any man, much less that of a priest (4.15.21).

Woman 2: I can think of lots of women in the Gospels who proclaimed Christ. The testimony of the woman at the well brought her whole village to see Jesus! Mary of Magdala was sent by Christ himself to go and tell the Easter news.

Calvin: Christ's words [to the apostles] are plain: "Go, teach all nations, and baptize." Seeing that he ordained the same *men* as heralds and ministers of baptism . . . whoever baptizes without a lawful call usurps another's office (4.15.22).

Woman 1: But you see, Dr. Calvin, we have extended the ordination you made available to lay men to include lay women. Our women teach and witness to the gospel. Not only that, we now ordain women to the pastoral ministries of the church—and we have been doing this for 50 years!

(*Note: if there are women clergy in your congregation, they may be recognized now.*)

Calvin: . . . this is the . . . most useful exercise in humility, when God accustoms us to obey his Word, even though it be preached . . . by those less worthy than we are. . . . For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink, are so necessary to nourish . . . the present life as the . . . pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth (4.3.1, 2).

Woman 1: Dr. Calvin, it has been a gift to have you here to celebrate the gifts of women in the church this year, to celebrate women serving in offices you reclaimed for the people from the scriptures—the offices of teacher, deacon and elder. We thank God for their faith—and for yours!

Calvin: [To] have faith is to strengthen the mind with constant assurance and perfect confidence, to have a place to rest and plant your foot (3.13.3).

Woman 1: Your faith has made you an "ancestor of nations," so numerous are your descendants in the Reformed tradition! Happy birthday, Dr. Calvin!

Calvin: (*As he collects his books and makes his way back up the aisle*) I count myself one of the number of those who write as they learn and learn as they write (*Preface to Institutes*).

Woman 2: And we count ourselves as women who celebrate the gifts we have been given by God!

Woman 1: As John Calvin would say, "To God be the glory!"

Dale Lindsay Morgan is an honorably retired Presbyterian pastor and the author of two *Horizons* Bible studies, *What She Said: Quotable Women in Scripture* and *Jubilee! Luke's Gospel for the Poor*.

RESOURCES

Douglass, Jane Dempsey. *Women, Freedom, and Calvin*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985.

Douglass, Jane Dempsey and Margit Ernst-Habib. "Calvin, Ecumenism, and Justice." *Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 19*. PDS item 70420-06-007**

McKee, Elsie Anne, Trans./Ed. *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001.

**Order through Presbyterian Distribution Service, 800/524-2612