

## **“Of the Tribe of Benjamin”**

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I would like to open with some preliminary remarks before getting into the body of my formal paper.

**Preliminary Remark #1:** Let me offer a word of thanks to Philip Payne, who in the lecture earlier today represented the very particular world of historical-critical biblical scholarship. The details of his argument are not meant to be grasped in one lecture nor even one reading of his book. But from his presentation we can quickly appreciate two things:

First, we can humbly give thanks for the pains-taking attention to detail in his careful reading of the Scriptures. I grew up believing that those who were left of us on the doctrinal spectrum did not take the Bible seriously, but rather toyed with the Word of God, reading it carelessly or not at all. I remember finding out that the exact opposite was true! I realized I had a lot of work to do to catch up with the (so-called) liberals, and not only on the subject of gender in Christ.

Secondly, let us not miss the nugget at the heart of Dr. Payne’s testimony last night, because it is a rare and beautiful thing to hear a Christian believer say, “Formerly, I thought thusly, but now, I believe otherwise.” We tend to believe that a person is converted one time, from not knowing God to knowing God. But some of us have found that many conversions are in store for those who believe that the living God is still speaking, still acting, in our lives and in the life of the world God has made and redeemed. Dr. Payne last night exemplified for us a faithful response to the Apostle Paul’s exhortation that we “be transformed by the renewal of our minds so that we may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2). Paul had in mind *Christian believers* when he urged transformation by the renewal of the mind, and Dr. Payne has been so good as to show us what that looks like, and we are grateful.

**Preliminary Remark #2:** My function here is quite different from Dr. Payne’s. Rather than working from scripture to make the broadest possible statement of equality between the women and men God has made and redeemed, I will offer an extremely particular account of just one life in Christ, my own. The details are not proof of anything except my own experience. It’s not easy for me to do; I will use more first-person singular pronouns this hour than I normally do in a year of preaching the gospel. But I remember how at critical points in my own spiritual development people shared with me their own stories, accounts of the journey from a little ways ahead on the same road I was trudging, and how it helped me to keep putting one foot in front of the other. It helped me to know that God was there, too, trudging alongside all those who are weary and heavy-laden. Alongside me, the whole way. Alongside you, too, in all the particulars of your story.

**Preliminary Remark #3:** Although the schedule says I’ll be speaking about my call to ministry, it’s actually more accurate to say that I’m trying to convey the experience of

what it feels like when the church one loves *will* not, or *can* not, and in either case *does* not confirm that call. Because as much as we would like to believe that we each stand autonomously before God, the truth is, we're all just body parts, and not terribly functional or even identifiable apart from the whole body of Christ. The call to ministry is answered from within the church, and so the church may thwart God's intentions if it cannot or will not be transformed by the renewing of its mind. Or at least, it can try.

**Preliminary Remark #4:** I'd like to introduce my mother, Glo Hays, who is my sister in Christ, and our sister Claudia Flippin, both from Tahoka, Texas, a tiny West Texas town. In the next few weeks, my mother and Claudia will both be confirmed as deacons in the Tahoka Church of Christ. This is a breathtaking first among many firsts for women in that church, and further evidence that the windy Spirit of God blows where it wills. Praise God.

With those preliminary remarks out of the way, let us hear the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 3:2-7.

*Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.*

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.*

"If anyone else has confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews." This is how Paul's résumé of "confidence in the flesh" begins in Philippians 3:4: with a recitation of his pedigree, his ancestry, the identity that is carried in his blood. "Who I am," he says, "is in the first place due to who my parents were, and their parents before them."

My own sense of belonging in the *a cappella* Churches of Christ began in very much the same way. I was simply born into it. My mother's parents made their home in Abilene, Texas, which for those of you outside the Church of Christ tradition is comparable to Jerusalem for our ancestors in faith. My mother's grandfather was a contractor who built much of downtown Abilene as well as church buildings for the 16<sup>th</sup> & Vine Church of Christ and the 10<sup>th</sup> & Woodlawn Church of Christ. Her father was a student at Abilene Christian College when he enlisted in the Army on December 8, 1941. My mother's mother worked in the Recruiting and Admissions office at ACU for 40 years. My own parents lived on ACU Hill when I was born. They planted a pecan tree in the front yard of that rent house to commemorate my birth; last time I drove by, it was still there.

We spent our school vacations at Grandmother and Granddaddy's house just two blocks from the ACU campus. We walked to church at University. I still make banana bread from the Women of ACU cookbook, whose meetings I attended with my grandmother from time to time.

At our home church in West Texas, I went with my dad to the bank when it was his turn in the deacons' rotation to deposit the Sunday collection. I sang alto with my mom from the time I was five, hearing the harmonies in my head before I could read the shaped notes on the page. We went to church three times a week, my sister and I happy to wear pants on Wednesday nights in the winter but never on Sundays, not until I was a teenager. Vacation Bible School was a staple of our summers, with its puppet shows and memory verses. We went twice each year, once at our home church and again with my paternal grandmother in New Mexico.

The Sword drills were my favorite. I trembled with excitement, holding my Bible stiffly by my side until the scripture was called out, and I almost never failed to be the first to read out the assigned verse, no matter how obscure the minor prophet or general epistle. The irony is clear to me now, that I was encouraged to read those verses right out loud, right there in the sanctuary – nay, the auditorium – during one week of every summer, but never any other time.

I cannot over-represent the percentage of family conversations that were about church, church people, church issues, church practice, church doctrine. Our local congregation was troubled for many years, and it was no small concern to my parents, who were respected leaders and teachers in certain seasons and distrusted nonconformists in others, depending on which way the wind was blowing, as it often was in West Texas. Away from home, when we visited relatives, the conversation was always, always about the wider church, or at least the part of the Church of Christ that orbited around Abilene. My extended family called Abilene preachers and professors by their first names.

Paul knew that the lion's share of his "confidence in the flesh" was due to the circumstance of his birth. You cannot make yourself a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews. You just are, like it or not.

But maybe you do like it, belonging so thoroughly in a system in which you know how to excel, because the rules are so clear, and so as you grow up you make choices that intensify the identity into which you were born. That's what Paul did. He was born a Hebrew of Hebrews, but he worked to become, as he continues in Philippians 3: "as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." You're not born a Pharisee or a persecutor; you have to work for that.

And so I did. The faith of my parents, and their parents, became my own, and along with the faith, the practice. I was baptized at 12. I was re-baptized at 15, after a couple of guilt-inducing years of adolescence, having become convinced that I didn't really "understand" baptism the first time. (I'm sure I "understood" it perfectly at 15 – about as well as I do at 43.) I evangelized my Baptist schoolmates by arguing against "once saved, always saved" on the playground and making an argument for the necessity of baptism for salvation by whispers in algebra class. I wrote letters to

relatives I thought had strayed from the narrow path. I did not, however, want to go to college in Abilene – I suppose it was just a little too close to home – so I traveled a different road for a while.

But the gravitational pull of that city was just too strong. After a couple of years spent studying engineering, I could not deny that I had spiritual yearnings, that I felt God tugging on my life, and where else could I go to answer that call? I truly could not imagine another place on earth where God would be more accessible to me. So I lived with my grandparents two short blocks from the campus for a little while, my family happy to have me back exactly where I was supposed to be.

I lasted for just a year in Abilene, then took one more year in Austin at the former Institute for Christian Studies, and finally went to Yale for divinity school – an acceptable place for serious C of C scholars, because there we could sharpen our historical-critical skills and further reinforce what we already knew to be true about scripture. Over those years I struggled to articulate a call to preach, or what I would now designate a call to “ordained ministry.” From my friends and mentors in the Church of Christ, I found personal support for women’s giftedness, or least my giftedness, privately. What I did not find was institutional embodiment of women’s giftedness, or mine either, other than at the Brookline church in Boston, until rumors reached my ears that certain congregations in certain places were opening doors for women’s gifts. The rumors fueled my hopes, and eventually a couple of them turned out to be true. After Div. school, my husband and I enjoyed eleven years of co-ministry in two, sure-nuff, genuine *a cappella* Churches of Christ, sharing equally in the responsibilities of preaching, teaching, administration, pastoral care, and taking out the trash. (I mean that literally, not metaphorically.)

For most of all those years we did our work in near-total isolation from other C of Cs, because our congregations were themselves ostracized for being so weird, and because my husband and I just didn’t seem to be on the radar of the wider church. Except, of course, for the mean-spirited guardians of denominational purity who occasionally “wrote us up” in that fine fundamentalist tradition of publishing nasty half-truths to stir up fear and loathing. But even they mostly kept quiet until somewhere around 2001, 2002, when a couple of Church of Christ universities went out on a limb and started inviting me to appear – to simply be present at an event, or to publish, and sometimes even to speak – in my official role as a minister-preacher-teacher.

That year, as my role became more public, a tremendous backlash occurred, a hornet’s nest of opposition to justice for women was stirred up, and I have a feeling lots of people got stung. I know for sure that my husband and I did – pumped full of the poisons of rage and doubt and despair. Even the congregation where we served felt the ill effects, as their relatives and friends in far-flung places began to ask if all they had heard about our renegade church and its ministers was true.

I cannot adequately relate the pain of those years in our personal and professional lives. It felt to us, to me, that friends and mentors who had been privately supportive for many years, and publicly so for a shorter time, were retrenching, withdrawing from the conversation as it got too hot. I know for sure that there were suddenly no more

invitations to publish or speak; we found ourselves underground again, disappeared from the ranks of the capable, despite our twin *summas* from Yale, despite our loyal performances wherever we were invited – where, by the way, we never pushed the gender justice agenda, except that I, simply by showing up, was perceived to be pressing the point.

Through it all, through the lonely years of isolation, the hope-filled year of participation and recognition, and the subsequent years of persecution and abandonment, here's what I did: I did my job. I served my church. I took direction from my elders. I preached the Word. I taught Sunday school. I organized outreach. I planned worship. I counseled the doubtful. I prayed for the sick. I blessed babies. I baptized believers. I held funerals and conducted weddings. I broke the bread and poured the cup.

Through the terrorist bombing of an abortion clinic just two blocks from my house in Birmingham, Alabama, an event that threatened an uneasy peace in the congregation I served, I did my job. Through the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center seen and smelled from our commuter suburb on Long Island, I did my job.

Through my own pregnancies and miscarriages and births and breastfeeding, I did my job. Through a diagnosis of autism for my older child, I did my job. Through marital crisis brought on in part by vocational crisis, I did my job.

And then, at a certain point, it became clear that doing my job was about to become impossible. At least, insofar as “doing my job” required institutional support from congregations wearing the name Church of Christ. See, the rumors had shut down. There were no more congregations in our tiny sub-denomination of gender-equitable C of Cs. There were four, just the same four there had been for years and years. I'm not talking about the ones where it was okay to talk openly about the possibilities of women's leadership, or where women were permitted to do certain things at certain times in ways more expansive than our recent history. I'm talking about places where any woman could do anything she was gifted by God's Spirit to do, just the same as any man, places where I could actually have a job as a minister. There were four, and I had preached in all of them, and I had been employed by half of them, and there was literally no place else to go.

Plus, my husband was about to make the healthiest decision of his life – to step out of the conflict altogether and put his considerable gifts to work in a Ph.D. program – and I was beginning to see that I would have had neither of my ministerial positions had I not been the female partner of a very talented male minister. If I was going to continue to “do my job,” I needed someplace new to do it.

And here's where the telling gets a little sticky. I have at times chosen to say simply that I needed to continue to earn a living with the skill set I worked hard to develop. If I could no longer do that in the Church of Christ, I would look for another denomination where the institutional support system would supply me with a paycheck for doing what I already knew how to do. Sometimes that explanation has been allowed to stand, and I have felt the relief of a mutual agreement between myself and whomever is listening to simply leave it there, not go any deeper than necessary. I had a

conversation once with an ACU administrator who said, concerning the training of women for ministry in the graduate school there, that he and his colleagues had begun “blessing them to leave” – that is, letting those young women know that it would be okay to earn their living as ministers elsewhere, since everybody knew they wouldn’t be able to do it in the Church of Christ.

But perhaps you already sense that that is not the truest recounting of my transfer of standing to another denomination; nor it is a simple economic decision for any of the women or men who, after years of faithful service, find themselves looking at the broader Christian landscape and wondering how hard it would be to move from here, a place of exclusion and suffering, to over there, a place of unknown opportunity in a land of strangers.

It’s not that simple, because we are of the tribe of Benjamin, Hebrews born of Hebrews, educated and devoted Pharisees, zealous and righteous, lawful and loyal. Reducing my choice to leave to a simple economic necessity would be to deny the anguish that it caused in my own heart. To imply that anything about it was simple would require me to lie about the toxic anger and childlike terror that battled for dominance in my sleepless nights. I would have to pretend to have forgotten how we told friends and mentors we were going for months and months, hoping that someone, anyone, would ask us to stay, would make room for us to stay, would actually take a stand in their own congregations or their positions of power in support, not of my job, but of my life. Because after three years of divinity school, after the laying on of hands by the elders in my first congregation, after eleven years of congregational service, after the difficult completion of a doctorate of ministry, that’s what ministry had become. Not my job, but my life, the only way I knew how to think of myself any more. Caring for broken people as if they were Christ himself, developing eyes to see and ears to hear God’s subtle but gorgeous work in the life of this world, crafting sermons and lessons to express the gracious and challenging truth of the gospel, sharing myself in order to share the news of God’s reign – it’s like breathing to me. It’s not what I do; it’s who I am.

The sickening realization that finally came to me was like discovering gray-green mold on the underside of the piece of bread you’re making a sandwich with. It was this: there wasn’t ever going to be room for me in the tribe of Benjamin; not all of me, not my full female self. It turns out that there was a piece of Paul’s résumé I could never claim, and it was more critical than I had allowed myself to believe: “circumcised on the eighth day,” he said, the very first item in his list of *bona fides*. I finally figured out that though widespread change might someday come – the windy Spirit blows where it will – it would not come in time for me.

I was done. I had reached escape velocity from the gravitational pull of my heritage, my family, my education, my social world. I had finally generated enough anger and enough desperation to break out of orbit and soar into space – but which way to go? I had never seriously considered leaving before. Harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd, I took a full year to figure it out.

I talked with everybody I could think of who had already left orbit. That is to say, all the ex-Church-of-Christ refugees out there who serve faithfully as clergy in other

denominations. Do you have any idea how many of them there are? I found them everywhere: Disciples, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics (which wouldn't have helped me much), community churches, everywhere. A friend who knew I was searching let me preside and preach in his Presbyterian congregation a few times while he was on sabbatical. A good fit theologically, but a liturgical strain for me. Another friend invited me to apply for an adult education job in a mega-Methodist congregation near my husband's Ph.D. program. It turns out I'm neither very mega nor very Methodist, but when they offered me that job, saying, "no, thank you" was about the most difficult "no" I'd ever said.

While I was in Georgia on the Methodists' money, however, I arranged a meeting with the regional minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I had been avoiding the liberal branch of the Stone-Campbell tree mainly because I was sick of all things Restoration. But it turns out that "restoration" isn't really a concern of the Disciples these days, unless you mean a restoration of the world as God imagined it in the first place, before the fall, before the male-female hierarchy that came as a consequence of our separation from God. So the regional minister of the Disciples in Georgia was happy to meet with me, and at the end of our long lunch together, she said words I had never heard before. She said, "Katie, it would be such a gift to us if you would come minister with us. Please come, and we will find you a job, and we will serve God side by side."

The sacramental moments in my life had always been somewhat murky – which of my two baptisms really counted, or how to relate the persistent but subtle drip-drip-drip of my call to ministry. But this one was perfectly clear. God's welcome was extended to me through the kind words and open arms of this woman, and the church she represented. I had found a new home.

And in my new home, all of me is welcome. I have colleagues who have become friends who think I am a little quirky, a little Pharisaical, but they understand it's because I used to belong to the tribe of Benjamin, and they think that's interesting and funny, but not tragic. I have served in two Disciples congregations now, untethered from my husband's calling, which is good for both of us. The first congregation, in Georgia, was proud to be the portal of welcome and healing for the battered, broken self I brought to them. My current church in Arlington doesn't even know very much about that – the bruises have faded, the swelling has gone down, the limp is gone, my heart is strong. I am able in this new, broad place simply to be the whole person God called me to be. It's not that hard.

What's hard is coming back to places where this conversation is still being had, where my identity and indeed the identity of all women in Christ is on the table to be examined; where all-male elderships still meet in closed conference rooms to figure out how to manage the issue without making anybody mad; where smart, energetic, hope-filled, young women are still told they can achieve anything they want in any part of the world except the church; where smart, energetic, hope-filled older women still find that their years of wisdom and experience cannot be institutionally acknowledged in the churches they have built with their back-breaking labors of love. That's what's hard.

And that's what many of you are doing every day, for yourselves, for your mothers, for your daughters, for your sisters in Christ, indeed for the health of the whole church, male and female, as none of us stands alone before the Lord. Let me say, though my saying it won't be enough, but let me say thank you for doing this hard thing. And as the poet prays in Psalm 118, let us also pray: *"Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!"*