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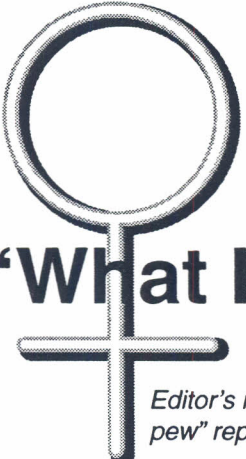
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“What I Need From the Pulpit”

Editor's note: We asked five women to tell what they need from the pulpit. These “women in the pew” represent the silent half of the church on the subject of preaching.



I Was Glad When They Said Unto Me “Let Us Go Into the House of the Lord”

By Claudia Ferguson

As a “Woman from the Pew,” I have seen and felt many worship experiences, some filled with joy and exaltation and others with something left to be desired or fulfilled. Entering into a place dedicated to praising and glorifying the Living God, creator and sustainer of the universe, deserves more awe and reverence than is often observed. Many congregations are now planning worship services with a Call to Worship, selected hymns of praise, and a communion meditation before the Lord’s Supper, preparing the worshippers with a feeling of the presence of the Lord Jesus, and a rededication of their lives to him.

As a “Woman from the Pew,” I frequently have difficulty with the corporate prayers in a worship service when they are inaudible, stilted, and so general they could be prayed on a court house square. I also am taken aback by the familiarity of addressing our God in the manner of Rich Uncle and “I want this and this.” Surely there are prayers of thanksgiving and prayers for forgiveness and guidance to which the congregation can truly say “amen.”

As a “Woman from the Pew,” I welcome the challenge and discipline of the sermons, the reminders of how the

“worries and riches and pleasures of life can destroy the word of God in believers,” and the caution of “take heed how you stand, lest you fall”; I also welcome the comfort and assistance, “and lo, I am with you even to the end of the world.” I breathe a prayer for strength and courage to remain faithful unto death.

As a “Woman from the Pew,” I also welcome the encouragement, “Be not weary in well-doing for in due season you shall reap if you faint not.” This encouragement comes from many sources: the minister, the elders, teachers, even the one beside you on the pew reminding you of the constant love of God and of the many opportunities for service in His name—the one just home from the hospital who needs a call; another who needs a “thank you” note; the aged couple confined to home who need a visit and a pie; the young mother who needs a “breather away from baby” just for a couple of hours; the childless widow who needs help with her errands; the Bible teacher who needs a substitute; the family who has lost a mother and needs loving arms around it along with a sympathizing tear. This encouragement also prompts encouragement to others,

young Christians, discouraged Christians who have given up their Christian walk, or taken time out. I am reminded that “he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins,” and I pray for tact and wisdom in reaching out to others.

As a “Woman from the Pew,” I am aware of the problem of spiritual growth. We give our children every consideration of care, special diet, and vitamins to ensure their physical growth. They are nurtured and loved, trained and taught. The maturation of our young Christians often becomes the “survival of the fittest.” Attaining spiritual maturity should be the ideal of each and every Christian, and then teaching others. What a tragedy to see an adult with a child’s body, and what an even greater one to see a Christian of ten, twenty, thirty years who has not assumed an active role in the Body of Christ. Are we reading too quickly “Now you are Christ’s body and individually members of it”? And are we applying to others “I beseech you therefore to present your bodies a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service”? I am confronted with the type of superficial follower of Christ I am; Dear Lord, forgive.

As a “Woman from the Pew,” I need more glimpses of eternity, of how blessed the thought of Heaven can be with the promises of God. I love the Kingdom of Heaven parables and cringe at the thought of “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?”

As a “Woman from the Pew,” I need the awareness of time—or the lack of it. Having recently had two friends to just go to sleep, never to wake in this life, the uncertainty

of this day, this hour, has become very real. “I know not when my Lord may come, at night or noontide fair, or if I’ll walk the vale with Him or meet Him in the air,

But I know whom I have believed
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I’ve committed
Unto Him against that day.” Amen.

As I leave the pew, I am refreshed and renewed, resolving to devote more time, study, and prayer to my walk with the Savior. I have not been in the pulpit, have not led a public prayer, have not presided at the Lord’s table, nor led the song service. I do not feel discriminated against nor unfulfilled, as I understand from scripture there are separate roles for “male and female created He them.” As a “Woman from the Pew,” there are so many opportunities each day for the Christian woman that men cannot do, or do not see, she could live a lifetime in the service of the Master—and still need more time.

CLAUDIA DUNN married Jerry Ferguson in 1944 and moved to Houston in 1945. She passed away on March 26, 1996, leaving an enormous legacy of Christian love with all who knew her, including the editor. She was a member of the Church of Christ for more than sixty years. Her father and uncles were the Dunn brothers, well known as a family of preachers in the Church of Christ early in this century.



We Need To Hear the “Good News”

By Joan VanReenen

From the south/midwest to the northeast to the west—these are the parts of the country where I have lived my life.

I grew up in the northeast corner of Arkansas, a hundred miles from Searcy. We rarely had our own preacher, so Harding College supplied our pulpit with a wide variety of preaching. My father was an elder as I was growing up, which helped me to have a strong sense of church connectedness. God and the church were my family’s priorities as we lived our day-to-day lives.

Gospel meetings were an important part of our summers. Our church always had a ten-day meeting, as did other congregations around us. My father was a song leader who also taught singing schools; thus, he was called upon to lead the singing for the meetings in the area. Often, our whole family accompanied him night after night. The preaching at those meetings was frightening, at least for a child. Invitation hymn after invitation hymn was led to bring people to repentance, with comments such as “lost, lost, lost” interspersed. Methods used in sermons included elec-

trical charts with the five-step salvation plan outlined. The entire chart would light up after the wires for all five steps were connected. The end of the world was vividly described in many of the sermons. My salvation seemed to be totally up to me, and I was anxious about any slip or negligence on my part. I can remember having nightmares about the end of the world. It has taken years to get the fear out of my heart and to replace it with joy.

Not all of the preaching I heard back then was the type I described above. There were a few who delivered hope-filled messages. Those are the men who helped me hold on to my faith, and I am indebted to them for that.

After spending time as a student at Harding College and at a business college in Nashville, I married and moved to a university town in Missouri where my new husband entered graduate school. On Sundays, we drove out in the country to a small church where he preached. He had majored in Bible and Communication at Harding and had taken some religion classes that turned his mind toward a grace approach to salvation and an exegetical style of preaching. My father had also come to understand God's grace, so I had these two wonderful men pointing me in that direction.

Our first job was located in the northeast. There, we found preaching that had a slant toward a particular sect of the church. After several years we joined with a group of

Christians to start a new church, which was a blessing for me. Again, grace and a careful study of scripture were featured in preaching as my husband served as a co-preacher.

For the last ten years, we have lived in southern California. I had been led to believe that California was an evil place—quite the contrary for me! Throughout our years here, especially the last two or three, I have heard preaching that has inspired me to realize God's grace and to praise him. My life has been directed toward the people around me who need Jesus.

When I think of biblical preaching, I am convinced that we need to hear the "good news," which provides grace-oriented encouragement for our daily Christian walk and a message of hope to those without Christ. I sincerely hope our future generations can hear "gospel" preaching. It will have a strong impact on the churches of Christ in years to come.

JOAN ALLISON VANRHEENEN has been a member of the Church of Christ for forty years. She and Dwayne have recently moved from Pepperdine University to Abilene where he is now Provost at Abilene Christian University. She is the mother of three grown children and has been active professionally as a university staff librarian.



Attending church has always been part of my life. My earliest memories of sitting in the pews meant sitting with my parents as a young child, sitting up straight and silent except when we stood to sing. I was not to make a sound, which was very difficult for a small child. To live in the world of silence and stillness, I needed a companion—whom I found by buttoning up my coat and setting it up next to me and imagining it to be a friend to whom I talked in my silence. I felt no connection to what was going on in the service, and there seemed to be no effort to make it so.

Even when I grew to an age where I was allowed to sit down front with my peers, I remember the requirement of silence and stillness being the most prominent part of my church service experience. I was not connected early on to the worship of God except through song, which in the

Church of Christ has the unique opportunity of a cappella music, the opportunity of being part of a harmony of voices. I have in my head the voices of many with whom I have sung and harmonized. Hymns, for me, carry many memories of corporate praise and worship of God.

To those in the pulpit, my recommendation is an intentionality of using metaphors, stories, and images that include all ages and both genders to capture the imagination of the congregation. My belief is that this would have been helpful to connect me to the worship of God and would have acknowledged my presence. I have wondered how a young girl might be included in a congregation; one of the most obvious ways, it seems to me, would be through the images and stories that the preacher chooses. I am a member of a group that is exploring ways to "sing our songs,"

which means developing the gifts we have to share. In our meeting on Saturday, the group leader created the focus of the meeting out of an image that a friend had given her. The image was the technique of using chicken wire around his bird feeder to protect it from squirrels. We were to take that image and to apply it to ourselves. I was the bird feeder. My chicken wire provided me the protection that freed me to “sing my soul’s song.”

Second, it is vital to me that the words from the pulpit give me hope. In this chaotic world, I need to hear that the choice I have made and the decision I live by to be a Christian makes sense. How can I be anchored if I do not have my moorings strengthened by the one who is guiding my worship?

As we gather on Sundays in the Brookline Church of Christ, I listen to initial greetings of the members to each other, most of whom have not seen each other during the week. I listen to the settling in, the announcements which

bring us up to date with each other, and I hear our movement into worship. The announcements include news of children, men, and women of the congregation, and alumni of the congregation. Women announce programs that they are providing. The leaders of the worship may be women or men. I often hear children respond spontaneously to what is said. To some, it might seem inappropriate; to me, it seems part of the fabric of our congregation. Sometimes the rhythm is jerky as the congregation begins to focus, but my experience of the service is synergistic. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The goal is not performance, but worship of God and connection to God in this place. I am comforted, and I am connected.

JAN COTHRAN RANDOLPH is on the staff of The Memorial Church in Harvard University and a member of the Brookline Church of Christ, Boston, Massachusetts, where her husband Robert M. Randolph is minister.



“The Rest Of Us Are Lagging Along”

By Gladys Jeffkins

Every congregation of the Lord’s church is unique; things that I would like to see change are just one person’s opinion in one particular congregation.

I think our preachers are doing an excellent job. It’s the rest of us that are lagging along. We need to get people in to hear the Gospel.

As a young wife and mother, I welcomed support and encouragement in teaching the children to know and serve God and in supporting my husband. To be God’s woman in today’s society is of great value, but I need lessons that challenge me in applying my Christianity and lessons of encouragement to keep on keeping on.

I have observed that the ladies in our congregation do a great deal of teaching and studying. We have morning and evening Bible studies as well as the regular weekly services. Our men meet every Wednesday for lunch at a restaurant with no study. I do not believe the women are slow learners, but I do wonder if they are more spiritual, and if that is a result of the nurturing and caring common to most women. Is that mothering instinct hormonally driven, or is it learned? I never considered myself a part of the “women’s

movement,” but I do see a change in attitude of some of our younger men that I believe has come because of their involvement with their children, due to working mothers.

I now see some of the young men (early forties, late thirties) showing much more feeling for new members, immigrants, etc. God has given men a great deal of responsibility. Also, most of them have a big ego that I think is taught, not hormonal. (I could be wrong—I was wrong once before.)

We have recently started weekly Bible talks in homes, where husband and wife teams are sharing the responsibility of teaching the lost—as did Priscilla and Aquilla. I wish we had more examples like them! I think it’s wrong to enjoy a sermon. I need to be reminded that I have “missed the target” and need to improve myself—even at this late age. I really believe we learn until we draw our last breath.

I find that preachers who draw on personal experiences seem to draw the attention of their listeners, but that is very difficult for a novice. However, it’s always refreshing and assuring to hear enthusiastic young men; there is nearly always an urgency about their message. I really believe our

preachers are reaching those who are in the pews, but we have to get busy and put more people in those pews.

GLADYS JEFKINS lives in Winnipeg, Canada. She is sixty-five years old, born and raised on a farm in Saskatchewan. She had training in psychiatric nursing but dropped out to

get married and has no regrets for not having had a career. She is the mother of three children, seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. She is a creative person who paints and designs and makes her own clothes. Gladys has blessed countless children as a Sunday school teacher.



"I Have Needed Encouragement for My Role as a Woman"

By Judi Eager

Growing up as a "P.K.," I have many vivid observations of the church family and leadership of churches. I am using the word "leadership" to include preachers, elders, and deacons. My only hesitation in writing my views is not wanting to be critical of my earthly father, the main preacher I was familiar with as a child. He was a product of his generation and the rigid, legalistic church he embraced—so with that in mind, I am writing about a group of leaders in the 1950s through the 1970s. Sadly, I am still seeing that same group of leaders today in the mid-nineties.

As a child, I observed a theme that successful service in God's kingdom was marked by the number of people filling pews, being baptized, or placing membership. The pride was in the amount of work a person did, not in the fact God had used him or her. The emphasis on service led a child to think the test of a Christian was usefulness, not relationship with God. I recall that when my father was asked about "his congregation," the report would be given in numbers of bodies, not what God was doing or where he was leading.

At age ten, a favorite game I played was with my new Timex watch. One elder in this particular congregation prayed the same prayer—word for word—each time he led prayer. When he thanked God for the crossing of the Red Sea, I knew we were ten minutes into the prayer and had another five minutes to go. The coldness of the prayer, as memorized, made an impression on a child that there was a lack of close relationship between this elder and his Maker.

Another strong emphasis from the leadership was how things looked to others. I remember my father putting me down for my opinions or preferences regarding specific meetings at church saying, "You don't seem to understand what we are trying to do here"; translated, "You are mak-

ing me look bad." I was also told when it was time for me to be baptized because I was an example to the other children in the church—it did not seem to matter that I wanted to make that important commitment on my own with my own timing.

Often, I felt my own gift of intelligence from the Father was insulted when points of a sermon were repeated three or four times in a sermon. I usually got it the first time.

As I grew, I was aware that the only goal for my life from the viewpoint of the leadership of the church was for me to marry a preacher or a song leader. I often puzzled over the notion that others thought I had nothing to offer in God's kingdom on my own without a husband in one of those two job descriptions. This is not a negative goal for a child, only limiting for the child and God's planning and timing.

I am thankful the leadership I knew gave me the gift of knowing God. He was kept in a box for the most part; however, that did not negate the gift or mean I was to keep limiting God in my life. The truth the leadership knew and spoke, I soaked up. I knew very young that a power was lacking in their teaching, singing, and living. The power available to them, the Holy Spirit, was never mentioned. I only learned of empowerment available for me when I was in my thirties.

In a sense, the truth I heard preached and taught in classes was often absent in application in the lives of the teachers. The truth was applied to others; the focus was limited to the listeners and not the teachers. I recently watched the movie "The Shawshank Redemption," and was reminded of leaders I have known. The warden in the movie was a pious man, bursting with scriptures to quote and ac-

cusations to make. His doctrine applied to others and not himself. I cried as I watched an actor live what I had seen as a child. Placing oneself on a pedestal/pulpit should be done only with radical dependence on the Holy Spirit. Listeners in an audience know so much more about the speaker than the speaker can imagine. A leader is known by little things—his wife’s face, his children’s attitudes, his willingness to confess, his humility or lack of it, and his willingness to allow himself to be vulnerable. The vulnerability in leaders denotes strength rather than weakness. It reaches to a body of believers to see that their leaders, husbands, fathers, are not perfect. This awareness of imperfection allows God’s spirit to move, convict, transform, and give God the glory he deserves.

I have needed encouragement in my role as a woman. I participate in the body fully, yet see leaders intimidated by a woman’s spiritual strength. There is a resistance to allow us to participate in roles that require leadership, causing anxious spirits. Our souls are shouting for a submission to our God that is for men as well as women. Our leadership and servant abilities are stifled simply because of our sex. Earthly, we are male and female—spiritually, and in God’s eyes, we are neither male nor female. Our growth and empowerment is limited. This earthly fact is in conflict with the spiritual truth, creating tension. I believe the empowerment of the Holy Spirit is not a respecter of sex, race, or

religious background. God wants to fill us all and lead us to be everything he has planned for us.

From the pulpit, I need to hear God’s truth, not man’s opinion, even at the expense of stepping on toes and losing financial support. I need a balance of his grace, love, and truth with permission to praise and follow God as I am directed by the Holy Spirit. I need to hear that God is not a God who keeps score. He is a forgiving and loving God full of compassion for my hurts. He is a God that sets limits and boundaries, yet gives us full reign and freedom as partakers of his grace and knowledge. I need to hear that “we can do all things through Christ.” We all, as believers, need to let God out of that box and cease from telling the body what he can and can’t do. I see a need to address the emotional, physical, financial, and spiritual needs of single parents. We need to emphasize dependence on God, radical dependence. It cannot be taught by leaders unless it is lived by leaders.

JUDI EAGER is a preacher’s daughter who has known the Church of Christ all her life. She and Cecil have recently moved from Abilene (where he was the Athletic Director for Abilene Christian University and she worked professionally as a trained psychotherapist) to New Braunfels, Texas. Judi has three children.