

“I ain’t going to get in God’s way,” Warren Carr told the deacon board at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina. “I ain’t going to get in God’s way...What I hear is a call, and I hear it as a genuine call...I believe that God has called [Davis], and I do not intend to impair that, to hinder that in any way.” Davis was a member of Watts Street and had in the past served as the director of education at another Baptist church in the same state. Ministry was in Davis’ blood. So was leadership. If you looked at Davis’ resume, you’d see a line that read “Dean of Students” at Alderson-Braudus College in Phillippi, West Virginia. But, Davis felt not just the call to the ministry but the call to preach, and so decided to go to seminary at Southeastern Baptist in Wake Forest. Davis then started attending Carr’s Watts Street Baptist Church early on in 1963.

It didn’t take long before the question of ordination came up, and for months Davis and Carr, who was the pastor of Watts Street at the time, talked about it. There was no denying that Davis had the passion and the skills and the experience. And it was becoming increasingly clear that Davis also had a divine compulsion to preach. In the end, Carr came away with one conclusion, that Davis really had been called. In fact, preaching was the only thing Davis could do, which meant that Davis needed to be ordained. And Watts Street was just the church to do it.

There was only one problem. Addie Davis was a woman.

Some Methodist and Presbyterian denominations had started ordaining women in the 1950s, at least officially. And if you looked at the

American Baptists, we'd technically been doing it since the turn of the 20th century, but it was rare. But, Addie Davis was Southern Baptist and so was Watts Street, and there had never been a woman ordained by a Southern Baptist church in the history of the denomination.

Ordination in the '60s in Southern Baptist life was like it is for us American Baptists today. The local church recognizes your call and recommends you to the local association of churches. Then you have to go before a special committee made up of people from across the association, and it's that committee which finally decides whether or not you'll be ordained. Most of the time, what they're looking for is doctrinal orthodoxy and evidence of a call. They want to know if your theology is right and if God really wants you to preach. But in Addie's case, there was something else going on. Addie was a woman, and for most folks at the time, the Bible was clear. Women don't preach. They're not allowed. Much of the talk surrounded a couple verses in 1 Timothy where the apostle Paul tells us that he doesn't let women "teach or have authority over men." In fact, he says, they're to "keep silent."

Davis' home church in Covington, Virginia, had refused to even consider her for ordination because their reading of the Bible said it wasn't even possible. God doesn't call women to preach – the Bible told them so. And that's the short and sweet of it. So, if God doesn't call women to preach, then the only conclusion they could see was that Addie must be delusional. Whatever she *thinks* God is telling her, she's wrong. That's it. God does not call women to preach.

So, Warren Carr and Watts Street Baptist Church were walking right into the thick of it when they recommended Addie Davis to the local association. Carr was emphatic. He told them that they should consider Addie on her merits alone. Was she orthodox? Did her life and her story clearly show that God had called her to preach? He said that if they came in saying that women just can't be ordained because that's just not what is done, then they'd be prejudiced, and he'd have to organize his own ordination council. Consider her on her merits, he said. But don't go in prejudiced. Instead, go in open. Go in really trying to figure out what God is doing here. Don't go in thinking you already know what God has said and done. Don't go in prejudiced.

The committee had two candidates for ordination: Addie and this young, male campus minister. The campus minister went first, and when it came time for him to talk about the virgin birth, he wavered. As the story goes, he wasn't willing to affirm it or deny it, and the committee didn't like that. For most people at the time, the virgin birth was considered part and parcel of Baptist belief. I mean, a decade earlier there was something like a rash of Southern Baptist ministers who started to deny the virgin birth, and it got a number of them fired. Somebody put it this way: "A man who doesn't believe in the virgin birth is no more a Baptist than the Pope of Rome." All around, I think that gives you a good idea of just how touchy the virgin birth was for them and the mess that this campus minister had gotten himself into.

So, when Addie got up there, things were already tense. But she blazed through. Her theology was spot on; she passed with flying colors.

Except that two of the members of the council said that they could not in good conscience approve of her ordination because she was a woman. One historian put it this way, and this is funny: “A heated argument ensued, and they were about to vote her down, when a young minister on the council named John Keith spoke out. He said, ‘Brethren, you leave me confused. In the case of our first candidate you were quite insistent that he believe that virgin bore the word. How is it that you are now so adamant that a virgin should not preach the word?’” Everyone laughed, and the committee voted, and Addie passed unanimously. And so she became the first woman in history to be ordained by a Southern Baptist Church.¹

Stories like Addie’s often get talked about in one way. We’re told that what we have here is two very different groups of people: One of them believes that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. The other group just doesn’t care. Instead, they just go around following every whim of the surrounding culture. In other words, they do whatever they want. But that doesn’t seem to be the case with Addie Davis’ ordination council.

Everybody on the committee seemed to take the Bible very seriously. They all saw it as true and authoritative. This was the Word of God, after all.

So, what happened? How did they go from on the verge of voting her down to unanimously passing her? What changed if it wasn’t some decision to stop taking the Bible seriously?

This is where our story from Luke’s Book of Acts comes in. Let me read it again. It’s long, so hand on:

As for Philip, *an angel of the Lord* commanded him, “Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So

Philip started out, and he met the treasurer of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under the Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and he was now going home. So he was sitting in his carriage and reading aloud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

The Holy Spirit then said to Philip, “Go over and walk along beside the carriage.” So Philip ran over and heard the man reading from Isaiah, and he asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The man replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” And then he asked Philip to come up into the carriage and sit with him.

The passage of Scripture that the eunuch had been reading was this:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter.

And as a lamb is silent before the shearers,
he did not open his mouth.

He was humiliated and received no justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

So the eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, was the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” And beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus.

As they continued to ride along, they happened to come to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look! There’s some water! Why can’t I be baptized?” And he ordered the carriage to stop,

and they went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

When they came up out of the water, *the Spirit of the Lord* snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the town of Azotus. He preached the Good News there and in every town along the way until he came to Caesarea.

So, here's my question: Who's the main mover in this story? Who's the one in control? Who's doing all the action? There's really only one answer, right? It's got to be the Spirit.

“An angel of the Lord commanded...”

“The Holy Spirit said...”

“The Spirit of the Lord snatched...”

Think about it. Everything that Philip does, he does it because God either tells him to do it or God just makes him do it. Just look at the story again: Luke (the author of Acts, remember) tells us that Philip just so happens to “find himself” in Azotus. The Spirit tells him to go down the desert road at the beginning of the story, but at the end of the story even this little bit of Philip's agency is now whisked away. So, the real agent in the story is God. And, I think that's one of the biggest things Luke is trying to tell us all throughout the book. *God* is the one acting. *God* is the agent of salvation. *God* is the one behind the gospel going out into the whole world. Remember what Jesus tells us in Acts chapter 1? “Don't leave Jerusalem until God sends you what he promised to send you...and *then* you will receive power when *the Holy Spirit* comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and

Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth.” If the story of Acts is the story of salvation going out into the whole world, then the one who’s really directing and organizing and making everything work is God.

And guess what? The place we see him most is in the interpretation of scripture itself. Here the Ethiopian eunuch is riding along in his chariot and reading the Book of Isaiah, and he can’t make two cents of it. But, for Luke, that’s par for the course, and not only in Acts but also in his Gospel. Nobody understands what’s going on unless God helps them understand – unless God interprets the story for them. Remember when Luke tells us about the two disciples walking down the road to Emmaus and how Jesus all incognito and what not has to spell it out for them? “‘Didn’t the Messiah have to suffer and die if he was going to rise again and bring salvation?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” Luke tells us, “Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.”

And then again, not two paragraphs later, Jesus shows up right in the middle of the disciples and says, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” And he goes on to open their minds so that they can finally understand the scriptures.

Over and over again, this is how it goes. If we’re going to understand the Bible, then God is going to have to show us how to interpret it. If we’re going to make sense of what God is really doing in the world, then we’re going to have to *actually look* for where and how he is moving and acting. It’s not the case that the Bible’s wrong; it’s just that *we interpret* it wrongly. Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, actually, you’re just going to have to ignore that

verse.” Instead, he says, “You just haven’t put things together right. You’ve been looking at this all the wrong way. You’ve missed a crucial part of the story – the fact that it’s *God’s story*, and sometimes there’s no telling what he’s going to do.” And then Jesus opens up our eyes and the scriptures for us by showing us what God’s *really* been doing, by telling us where this gospel thing has *really* been going all along.

And you know what? It’s the same thing throughout the entire Book of Acts, and it’s the question right at the heart of the single biggest controversy that rocked the early church. In Acts 15, the Apostle Paul walks into Jerusalem and asks for a meeting with the other apostles and leaders of the Church. He had just come from a big debate with some other Christians about what it took to be saved, and some of them had been arguing that if people who weren’t Jews wanted to be saved, they first needed to be circumcised. That’s how these folk understood their scriptures, at least. If non-Jews wanted to become Christians, well, the Bible said they needed to become Jews first.

But Paul understood things differently. When he read the scriptures, he didn’t interpret them as saying that salvation required circumcision. In fact, everything he’d seen God do among his non-Jewish friends went directly against the notion that they needed to become Jews first. In fact, as Peter would put it, “If God, the guy who knows everybody’s thoughts, gave these so-called outsiders the Holy Spirit just as he gave the Spirit to us, then why are we trying to out-god God? Why are we forcing them to be circumcised when *God* has clearly shown that they don’t?”

Like it was in the story of Addie Davis, the problem here was not that one group believed the Bible to be the authoritative while the other group didn't. Both groups were trying to figure out what the Bible had to say about the salvation of these Gentile outsiders. They both believed they needed to go to the same scriptures for the truth. The problem, however, was that they simply understood those same scriptures differently. The problem, in other words, was interpretation.

Peter and Paul realized something – just like Addie Davis' ordination committee did. They realized that when we talk about the authority of the scripture, what we're really talking about is the authority of *God* exercised *through* scripture. It's *God's* word, after all, and it's his to interpret. And, if he's going to save Gentile outsiders without making them become Jews first then that says something about how we should understand the scriptures. If God is going to act in a way that goes against our interpretation of scripture, then we had better rethink our interpretation of scripture. Let's not try to out-god God by thinking that we've got everything wrapped up nice and neat when, in reality, God's doing something different. If we really want to interpret scripture rightly, if we really want to know the will of God, then we're going to have to actually pay attention to where he is moving and acting in the world. We're going to have to leave room for God's Spirit to work in our lives and in our thoughts and in our neighbors and in our world – even when that work happens to run counter to beliefs we've had for a really long time. We've got to remember that it's *God's* word we're reading and it's *God's* path we're following and it's *God's* salvation we're offering, not ours. And we've got to let that mean something.

But this means that reading scripture and figuring out what is right and what is wrong isn't as easy as we think. It means we're going to have to be open and willing to say that we've got it wrong, that we haven't interpreted things rightly. It means we're going to have to go in without prejudice because we know that God works in mysterious ways. It means that we're going to have to realize and remember that sometimes God moves and acts in ways we simply don't – and maybe even *can't* – expect.

That's what Addie Davis' ordination committee finally realized. They finally realized what Warren Carr had already seen and what Addie had already felt so strongly about – that God had *really and truly* called her to preach. And they decided they weren't going to get in God's way. "If the God who knows everybody's thoughts has called Addie to preach just as we know he's called all these men to preach, then why are we trying to out-god God?" That's what they said. "Why are we arguing that God can't call a woman to preach when what we have standing right here before us is evidence that he has?"

But, like our discipleship in general, this openness to the Spirit is risky. It's complex. It's even muddy. It means really listening to what other people have to say, and it means giving due weight to our experiences of God in the here and now. It means being willing to give up tightly held beliefs because we're more concerned and interested in following Jesus and figuring out where his Spirit is moving and active. It means acting differently when we come across something or someone who disagrees with us. It *doesn't* mean tossing out our convictions altogether, but it does mean

being willing to think through them and revise them and even change them if that's where we see God's Spirit moving.

There's no certainty here, and there's not always that much clarity. In fact, we might even sometimes get things wrong. But I think that's a small price to pay if we don't want to miss what God is saying and where God is going. Do you?

ⁱ Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 303. For the story of Addie Davis, see 300-305.