Taylor grew up in the church and attended every youth group event that was offered. He attended a Christian school and spent hours after class discussing theology and ministry (and even Greek!) with a favorite Bible teacher. From the age of twelve, he knew he wanted to study and teach the Bible. Taylor traveled to youth conferences and mission trips, encouraging other students and growing closer to God with every passing year. When Taylor was in high school, his leadership gifts were evident and he was asked to plan and lead the youth worship every Sunday. Since Taylor had been at the same church since first grade, there were dozens of adults—former Sunday school teachers and youth sponsors—who encouraged him in his calling. He was well-loved, mature beyond his years, and confident in the knowledge that God had big plans for his life.

Taylor went to a Christian college where he formed deep friendships and thrived in his studies. Majoring in Bible, he took every available elective in addition to the required courses, and studied Greek for two years so that he could deepen his understanding of Scripture. He spent two summers involved in full-time youth ministry (and one summer working a landscaping job to help pay for college—developing his work ethic and humility). As the years passed, he had many opportunities to teach Bible studies, lead worship, and preach for student-sponsored events. His degree plan included a semester-long internship at a large church where he learned from some of the best ministry leaders in the country. During his senior year, he secured a residency with a church plant for which he would raise his own support, and began making plans to move after graduation. He sent a letter back to his home church, asking the leaders to ordain him to the ministry.

Taylor sounds like a textbook case for entering the ministry, doesn’t he? It’s certainly one of the best résumés I’ve ever seen. Doors of opportunity swing open before this student ever knocks. He represents the hope of the world, with enough passion and naïveté to believe he can make a difference with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We read his story and everything we...
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know—everything we believe—about ministry and calling affirms that this young man reflects the type of person we hope our churches will hire.

Except “Taylor” is actually a woman.

If your background includes stories of women being called to and affirmed for ministry, that didn’t surprise you, male pronoun notwithstanding. In fact, maybe you pictured a young woman from your own church while you read it. But if in your worldview, like mine, that script could apply only to young men, the idea that this story could be about a woman is incongruent.

Worldview is the deepest part of what you believe; these beliefs are so deep that we’re usually unaware of them and rarely question them. The word is a translation of the German word weltanschauung, which is defined as “a comprehensive conception or image of the universe and of humanity’s relation to it” (Dictionary.com). Worldview defines the fundamental assumptions that inform our thought patterns and decisions. This has advantages. For instance, decision-making is much easier when we can make assumptions about many of the details. In fact, all our decisions, including our theological ones, are framed by our worldviews. Our assumptions about women have long informed the church’s stance on women’s place in the church.

This is not a new phenomenon. When I first heard twelfth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas’s description of women as “defective and misbegotten” (Summa Theologica I q.92 a.1), I was appalled and offended. Yet the patriarchal presupposition that women were somehow less than men was common for centuries before Aquinas. Many of his views were built on those of Augustine (a fourth-century bishop) who believed that women were a secondary subset of humanity. Augustine, in his time, had adapted much of his philosophy from Aristotle (fourth century BC), a Greek philosopher who insisted that men were superior and women were subject to them. So, while I’m not happy about Aquinas’s view, I can’t fully blame him, either. He inherited much of his worldview from some of the greatest philosophers ever studied.

Unfortunately, these presuppositions have moved in a forward trajectory through subsequent centuries as well. Martin Luther (sixteenth-century German monk and reformer) describes women as dissimilar from, weaker, and dependent on men. In a more progressive move, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (eighteenth-century French philosopher) promoted political freedoms and rights for women, but still rejected equality between the sexes. And Karl Barth (twentieth-century Swiss theologian) affirmed the dignity of women, but still insisted on their subordination to men because of what he called the “definite order” (Church Dogmatics III.4).

When we consider these views of women in relation to social issues, we more easily recognize the worldviews behind them. When women suffragists picketed the White House in 1917, appealing to the president for a constitutional amendment for the right to vote, the arguments used against them followed the same line of reasoning—women were intellectually weaker and unfit to participate in the public sphere. Almost a hundred years later, few would use this line of reasoning to object to women’s suffrage, but this same worldview underlies many of the limitations women still face.

For example, even though women have found more career doors open to them in the last twenty years, they are still paid less than men and have fewer opportunities for advancement. The issues are separate (certainly many church leaders think women should be allowed to advance in careers, while limiting their roles in church) but they are still related, because they share a cause: a worldview whose underlying assumptions objectify or subordinate women.

In the twenty-first century, women are doctors, lawyers, theologians, and athletes; both experience and science disprove the idea that they are intellectually inferior or physically defective. But in many churches today, limitations on women’s calling and leadership continue. Is this really based solely on a “literal” reading of 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:33–35? Common interpretations of these passages are built on the presupposition that women are inferior in nature, and thereby unfit to lead. While scholarship abounds on the subject, some church leaders are content to allow third-century worldviews to inform today’s practice. Ultimately leaders in our generation can suffer from the same issue Thomas Aquinas did—the worldview they know and the church traditions they cherish color their current interpretation of Scripture.

So what does all this have to do with Taylor? Here’s the rest of the story: the minister at Taylor’s church was excited to hear about her desire for ordination and called a meeting of the elders and pastoral staff. They assembled an application packet and scheduled an interview for the following month. After passing the evaluation with flying colors, Taylor
was ordained by the church leaders in a celebration including family and friends before beginning her residency.

That sounds like a perfect ending, right? It would be, if it had happened. Every detail of Taylor’s story (other than the name and gender) is true, except for the perfect ending. There was no invitation to enter the ordination process because there was no consensus among the leaders about whether or not they should ordain a woman. Perhaps they spent long hours studying appropriate passages and researching to come to their conclusions. But even if they did, long-held presuppositions overshadowed the process and outweighed their desire to affirm this young woman’s call to ministry. Worldview trumped wisdom.

What happens when the wisdom of Christ trumps worldview? What if we developed a truly kingdom-centric worldview? When Jesus was on earth, his wisdom trumped the prevailing worldview in several scenarios:

- Jesus praised the faith of a Gentile woman and healed her daughter, even after admitting he was “sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15, Mark 7).
- Jesus blessed and included children in a world that did not value them; in fact, he calls his followers to be more like children (Matt. 18).
- Jesus affirmed Mary’s right to study and learn, in a world where only men studied at the feet of rabbis (Luke 10).
- Jesus engaged a Samaritan woman (whose world considered her an outcast on multiple levels) in a theological conversation. She ran back to her town to tell people about Jesus (John 4).
- Jesus appeared first to women after his resurrection, in a world that would not have considered them reliable witnesses (Matt. 28, John 20).

Jesus’ kingdom, where authority looks more like washing feet than wrangling over position, turns the prevailing worldview upside down. Each of us is called to serve and participate in the Jesus-shaped work of community building. We have the responsibility to question worldviews or motives that work in opposition to the kingdom life Jesus had in mind. When you are in situations where the worldview seems to be limiting opportunities to serve, ask why. When gender seems to be the only reason for being told “no,” ask why not. Go deeper in your own study and counsel others to do the same. Challenging a deeply held worldview is a long, slow process, like changing a ship’s course on the ocean. But a relatively small rudder does that. Be that rudder.

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