

What About Women & Ministry?

Pastor's Perspective Column

Stevens County Times - April 2024

By Pastor Tim White

“Go home” was one of several derogatory statements directed to a leading evangelical (Southern Baptist) woman minister and respected Bible teacher, Beth Moore, from a leading male evangelical pastor at his 2019 conference about “Truth” in southern California. (I do not believe she was in attendance). Both of these ministers have demonstrated effective ministries that have benefited Jesus' Church.

So, who is right? Do women have a role in pulpit ministry, or must they work solely with women and children (and on the mission field)?

While I am ordained by the Assemblies of God, who have recognized the call of God upon women since our inception in 1914, I do not base my belief on this issue simply on my denomination. As a follower of Christ for over fifty years, my lifelong pursuit has been to discover what the Bible teaches over and above what any denomination believes. I am still learning.

Five years ago, while working through a Master's Degree program, I had a class called “Bible Exegesis.” For explanation, “Exegesis” is diving deep into the meaning of words in the original language and the culture in which they were written. Our professor (female) instructed us to pick a short but difficult passage of Scripture for our final paper – any passage.

I cautiously chose 1 Tim. 2:11-15, one of the most debated passages regarding women preachers and teachers. I was unsure where I would end up, but I am confident about where I did. My final paper is over 25 pages, so I will only address two key points here – one from a practical point and one from the Greek language and culture.

Before I go any further, I am keenly aware that there are Biblical scholars (of which I am not) on both sides of this issue, and both deserve respect and grace in expressing differing views.

The first-time reader of my chosen passage could easily conclude that the Apostle Paul had a condescending opinion of women. Was Paul boorishly misogynous? Did he have an aversion to strong women? How offensive his words seem to be! However, reading the vast record of his ministry, we see a man who worked alongside women throughout his missionary travels. So, what was Paul saying to Timothy, the Pastor/Elder of the Church in Ephesus?

Point number one – A Practical Point: In verse 12, Paul said, “...I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet” (NASB). It sounds pretty cut and dry, but is it? Is Paul saying that if a woman teaches/preaches with men in the congregation, she is “exercising authority” over them? According to Webster, one standard definition for “authority” is “Legal power, or a right to command or to act; as the authority of a prince over subjects, and of parents over children.”

I struggled with this concept because I have taught the Word of God through hundreds of sermons and have never been able to “exercise authority” over anyone. The proof of my powerlessness over my congregation was seen by how easily people hopped from church to church whenever they chose. Therefore, if I, as a man, could not gain authority over others by simply preaching and teaching them, then how could a woman do so? So, what was Paul saying?

First, notice what the relationship between pastors and congregation should be in 1 Tim. 5:17, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (NIV84). There is a dramatic difference between believers “honoring” a pastor versus the pastor “exercising authority” over the congregation. If you are in a church/religion where the one in a pastor-like role desires authority over you, I recommend you get out quickly.

Additionally, as I studied this passage, I took note of the little word “or” between “not teach” and “exercise authority.” It appears that Paul separates “teaching” and “exercising authority” into two separate issues. I only have space to deal with the latter here.

Point number two – Greek word & culture: Things began to make sense when I “exegeted” the Greek word for “authority.” Typically, the Greek word translated “authority” is “*exousia*,” and it appears 103 times, including Matt. 28:18, where the resurrected Jesus states, “All authority (*exousia*) has been given to me in Heaven and on earth.” (NASB). This Greek word points to one with the *legal* “authority” to whom the people must rightfully submit.

However, only here did the Apostle Paul (who wrote many letters) choose a unique Greek word for “authority” - “*authentēo*.” Thayer defines this word quite differently: “one who with his own hands kills another or himself; one who acts on his own authority, autocratic; an absolute master; to govern, exercise dominion over one.” Contrary to the legal authority expressed by “*exousia*,” Paul speaks about illegitimate authority here. The King James Version (KJV) and NIV bring out this distinction well as: “...to *usurp authority* over a man” and “...to *assume authority* over a man,” respectively. In other words, to illegitimately take the role of men in society.

At the end of Paul’s letter, he expresses his overriding concern to Timothy in chapter 6 and verse 1, “...so that God’s name and our teaching may not be slandered.” As in modern-day missions, Paul did not want the Ephesian believers to unnecessarily violate what was called the “household codes” within that Greco-Roman culture. These “codes” placed the responsibility for public representation of a household on the older male. The wife in that culture was not less in any way, but when it came time to speak up, she was “silent” because it was the older male’s duty to speak on behalf of the whole family.

Therefore, Paul’s intentional use of *authentēo* agrees with his concern that the actions of the Christian women do not appear as usurping the roles of men in their culture. Since these cultural roles were not unbiblical, the Apostle wanted to encourage them to avoid the appearance of violating them because the unbelievers of Ephesus would view the Gospel as a religion that causes dishonorable behavior in their culture and, therefore, should be opposed.

There is much more to say on this matter, and if you are interested, email me, and I will send you my expanded paper on this subject once I finish my revisions. Acts 2:17-18 is for the young and old, male and female, and may God pour His Spirit upon His Church in this crucial time.