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A “Stained-Glass Ceiling?” A Clarifying Look at a Controversial Question

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As Mary Zeiss Stange sees it, women are being denied their rightful place of leadership in American religious life. Her logic is clear, and she writes with a mixture of exasperation and energy. Her op-ed column in today’s edition of *USA Today*, “[Do Women Have a Prayer?](#),” reflects the way many people naturally frame the issue of the role of women in the church.



Women report far higher rates of religious belief and participation than do men, according to studies as recent as The Pew Forum’s [2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey](#). Women are indispensable to the life of our congregations and are more likely than men to participate in church life in some congregations and denominations.

This leads Professor Stange to write:

One would think that these facts would translate into women’s rise to positions of spiritual leadership — surely the mark of genuine equality — in the various denominations. Alas, as a glance at some of the largest organized religious groups in the country shows, the picture is at best mixed when it comes to women’s ability to break that stained-glass ceiling.

Mary Zeiss Stange is Professor of Religious Studies and Religion at Skidmore College in New York. In the paragraph cited above, she refers to “that stained-glass ceiling” that, in her view, keeps women from positions of church leadership. In her understanding, full access to all positions of leadership is “the mark of genuine equality” that is missing from most American churches.

Thus, this article gets right to the heart of the issues at stake. Professor Stange writes from a recognizable point of view. She sees equal access to leadership as integral to genuine equality for women. If any office in the church is limited to men, women are treated as unequals. Following her logic, this pattern can only be explained by prejudice and intractable tradition — thus the stained-glass ceiling as a religious form of the so-called “glass ceiling” that has limited the role of women in other sectors of society.

Professor Stange points her argument toward the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention as examples of denominations that illustrate the “stained-glass ceiling.” She does recognize that both the Roman Catholics and the Southern Baptists base their understanding on theological commitments, but she sees this pattern as rooted in prejudice that should be overcome.

“The better news is that among the so-called mainline Protestant denominations, women have made considerable progress in attaining positions of religious authority,” she reports. She cites the fact that, for example, the United Methodist Church has ordained women to the ministry for decades now. Yet, as she also notes, “in a pattern familiar among churches that do ordain women — few of these women hold senior positions in large congregations.”

Accordingly, Professor Stange declares her verdict:

It is a truth so familiar as to have become cliché: Women are the driving force behind organized religion. They fill the pews, they bring their children into the fold. The Pew data help make sense of these facts. But the same data highlight the cruel irony that in far too many religious contexts in this country, women remain second-class citizens.

Like all of us, Professor Stange operates out of a set of presuppositions and intellectual commitments — a worldview. In her worldview, any limitation of leadership to men is based in prejudice that must be overcome in the name of liberating women. Churches are seen as human institutions marked by human prejudice, pure and simple.

Completely missing from her analysis is any concession that God might actually have ordered this pattern of leadership restriction for our good and His glory. Her perspective on the issue is fundamentally secular in approach. In this view, where men alone can hold positions of authority and responsibility, prejudice must be the cause and access to these positions for women must be the solution.

We live in a society that considers itself pledged to equality as a basic principle. We also live in a society that is, indeed, marked by many prejudices that are evidence of human sinfulness, pure and simple.

Nevertheless, those who believe that the church is an institution established by Jesus Christ and who believe that the Bible is our sole final authority for belief and practice must obey what the Bible teaches. This means that we must also follow the pattern set out in the Scripture as the pattern set out by God himself.

Men and women are indeed equally created in the image of God, equally in need of the Gospel, and equal in terms of salvation. Both men and women are called to lives of discipleship, service, and witness. Mary Zeiss Stange is surely right when she suggests that churches depend upon the dedicated service and faithfulness of women. But this does not mean that the pattern for the church set forth in the Bible is to be rejected in light of current conceptions of gender equality. Those who believe that the Bible is indeed the inerrant and infallible written revelation of God are obligated to perpetuate and honor the pattern of leadership ordered within the text of Scripture.

Furthermore, we must see this pattern, not as evidence of human prejudice, but as God's revelation to us — a revelation by grace that is for the good of both men and women and the pattern by which God brings glory to himself.

Two very different worldviews stand at the intersection where this issue is now debated. In her own way, Mary Zeiss Stange helps to clarify what is at stake, and to show how different worldviews lead to very different (even diametrically opposed) conclusions. Opportunities for this quality of clarity are not to be missed.

