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Biblical Pattern of Male Leadership Limits Pastorate to Men

Thursday, July 16, 2009

The Christian church has experienced a massive wave of change over the last thirty years, and the emergence of women in some pulpits is perhaps the most visible sign of that change. Why would Southern Baptists resist this trend?

The easiest course would be capitulation to the spirit of the age. No screaming headlines would be written if the Southern Baptist Convention simply followed the path of least resistance. After all, shouldn't God be an equal-opportunity employer?

The real issue in this debate—and the only issue worth debating—is the authority and interpretation of the Bible. Given the revelation of God in Holy Scripture, Southern Baptists cannot follow the road toward a feminized pulpit. The price would be the rejection of clear biblical teaching.

The case against women pastors does not rest on a few isolated proof texts, and this issue cannot be separated from the larger question of gender roles within God's creative intention. The first questions are these: Are men and women equal before God? Does equality imply no distinction of roles and responsibilities?

The Bible clearly reveals that both men and women are created in the image of God, stand equal in terms of human dignity, equal in sinfulness, and are equally in need of a Savior. Men and women alike can find redemption through the same gospel—the gospel of salvation through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins. This is the real meaning of Galatians 3:28, where the context is the common ground of our salvation.

Furthermore, we believe that, as Christians, both men and women are gifted for service in the church. Indeed, congregations would find themselves in deep trouble if women no longer served as vital members of the Body of Christ.

Nevertheless, the Bible also reveals a pattern of distinction between the roles of men and women. This pattern begins in the story of the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 2, and continues throughout both testaments of the Bible. All honest interpreters of Scripture, liberals and conservatives, admit the presence of this pattern. The key issue is the meaning and continuing authority of this revealed pattern in today's church.

This marks the dividing line between Christians in the current debate. The liberal Protestant denominations have decided that the pattern of complementary roles with male leadership in the church is to be discarded as a relic of the ancient past; the legacy of patriarchy and the oppression of women. Siding with modern egalitarian feminism, liberal Protestants and some leftist evangelicals have embraced the presence of women in the pulpit. The result is what veteran *Newsweek* reporter Kenneth L. Woodward calls the “rapid feminization of the clergy.”

Conservative evangelicals are unwilling to follow this course. The Bible reveals this pattern of male leadership in the church and in the home as enduring and authoritative. We have no right to reject or to compromise clear teachings of the Bible in order to meet the demands of today's political correctness. The Word of God is eternal and totally true. Without a firm biblical foundation, the church ceases to be a church in anything but name. It has become nothing more than a voluntary association with a liturgy.

For nearly 2,000 years, the Christian church has limited the office of pastor to men. Among the 41,000 Southern Baptist churches, far less than one percent have ever called a women to pulpit ministry. This is not an issue of serious debate within the SBC. It is, however, a matter of serious accountability.

As a seminary student, I followed the only arguments I was given, and supported the idea of women in the pastorate. Challenged by friendly critics to defend my position, I was driven to Scripture—and I was forced to reverse my understanding. The Word of God is the ultimate authority. If this conviction is the cause of some controversy, at least it is over something that matters.

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