

## An Open Letter to My Sisters in Christ

Dear Sisters,

There has been a recent conversation in Christian circles regarding whether or not it's scripturally appropriate for women to teach men, to preach to men, or to hold leadership positions in the church. Some would consider this to be a fairly peripheral matter, whereas others see it as central. While these are definitely real-life decisions that need to be carefully weighed, I personally believe we're wading into a pond that actually contains some larger issues.

One contributor to this conversation is J.D. Greear, a wise and respected Southern Baptist leader, who expressed his thoughts in an article called "[Can Women Teach in the Church?](#)" As with most people who write on this topic, Greear focuses on the various ways the Bible can be interpreted. He looks at the meaning of certain words and verses, he refers to the roles (presumed or explicit) of various women, and he calls attention to distinctions in specific ministry contexts—all of which are valid and important considerations.

But he then concludes with this comment:

As a dad of three very capable daughters, and as a pastor of a church where the majority are women (and the single largest demographic breakdown is single women), I long to see women raised up to serve in the body of Christ and unleashed in the mission of God to their full potential. We believe God gives to women every spiritual gift, endows them with their own spiritual authority, and makes them equal partners in the progress of the mission of God into the world.

For all their focus on biblical exegesis, I believe people often land where they do, consciously or unconsciously, because they personally know gifted women who have ministered well. What they are essentially assuming is that qualification somehow implies authorization. It's undeniable that many spiritually mature women are very capable teachers, and it can seem wise and good to allow them to minister with as few restrictions as possible. From another view, there is obviously a growing need for strong ministers in our rapidly deteriorating culture, and therefore it makes sense that the church should enlist every possible participant in what Greear calls the mission of God.

The technical term for this kind of reasoning is pragmatism: the emphasis on what is useful and effective. It's actually so ingrained in Western thought that we are rarely aware of its existence. It's not that the Bible doesn't care about what is useful and effective. But when God seeks to accomplish his end goal, which is his own glory, his means can often seem quite unpragmatic. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

With that said, I'm nevertheless going to apply the tool of pragmatism here with the hope that it might begin to reveal a deception that our culture—and even the church—is buying into. Specifically, I want to try to explain that what we're seeking is actually being dismantled by the very means we're choosing to embrace.

I believe most Christian leaders today would agree that the church's true goal is the glory of God and the expansion of his kingdom. While God's glory contains infinite aspects, in this discussion we will look specifically at the way his glory is designed to be revealed in men and in women. But before I address that, let me look pragmatically at something else, which is the question of how we can best attain our own joy and peace and fulfillment. We need to realize that these are *not* intended by God to be diminished when his glory is gained. On the contrary, it is only as God is most glorified that we are most satisfied.

My first purpose in writing you this letter, therefore, is to ask you to examine what is satisfying to you, because this is where I believe one of our enemy's schemes can be unmasked. For starters, how satisfied are you with the way men are today? There are definite exceptions, especially in the church, but would you not agree that far too many men are becoming lazy or harsh or lustful or arrogant—or all of the above? Especially in the case of young men, they also seem to be simply dropping out of life, occupied more with sports or movies or video gaming or pornography than with real-life responsibilities. While sin has always been around, have you wondered why it's getting so much worse? To be sure, you might blame technology—but technology just gives us what we want to see. It can speed things up, but in itself it's not really the problem.

Second, how satisfied are you with your life as a woman? How satisfied are the women around you? Some of you are married, and yet how many of you have the marriages you dreamed of? You hoped to find a strong man who would protect you, cherish you as a woman, and lead you spiritually. If you found him, let me tell you—you're in the minority. Most women have settled for far less—or have gotten out of their disappointing marriages altogether.

It's actually not surprising that the "largest demographic breakdown" in Greear's church is single women, since roughly half the adult women in our country are single. That's why he and most church leaders are trying hard to encourage these women to see themselves as valuable and to support them in their desire to serve God.

While I'm not at all opposed to these efforts, I do believe they often overlook an important truth. If you think about it, singleness was not part of God's original design. Men and women today are single for lots of reasons, but nearly all of these reasons can be traced to some aspect of our fallenness. Yes, there are those who, like Paul, choose the single life so they can be free to serve God without hindrance (although this is actually a very small percentage of singles). But even these people realize they are giving up something valuable that in a perfect world they would not have to sacrifice.

This brings us back to that part of the glory of God that is intended to be revealed through our human masculinity and femininity. We have an important clue in Ephesians 5:31-32. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." I believe the essence of this profound mystery is that masculinity finds its supreme expression in Christ, and femininity can discover its essential definition in the life of the redeemed church.

There's a lot contained in this mystery, but I want to note two specific things. First, we can see that masculinity and femininity do not stand alone, but are expressed primarily in relationship with each other. Among other things, Christ models his masculinity in relationship to the church by being her leader. The church expresses her femininity by willingly following his leadership. While our human interactions only partially reflect this divine dynamic, nevertheless we lose access to (and the benefits of) God's design to the extent that we replace them with our own alternate forms of relationship.

But there is also another component here that I want to draw your attention to, and that is that Christ and his church are not interchangeable. Said another way, the glory of both is found to a large degree in the distinct separation of their natures and roles. If you think about our world today, it's not difficult to see how our enemy has very deliberately blurred the lines between men and women. Men are often becoming effeminate not only in their actions, but also in their attitudes. Women, on the other hand, are becoming masculine in their personalities, their mindsets, and their position in society.

Let me pause here. If you are a single woman who has had to make her own way in the world, I realize you quite possibly had no choice. If you are a woman who doesn't trust men because all the men in your life have been irresponsible or abusive, then for me to ask you view men differently is asking something you can't do. I understand that.

But you need to consider the reality that few men today are given any guidance on how to become real men or what real manhood actually is. Instead of being around confident masculine role models, men today are routinely disparaged and ridiculed. No wonder they are escaping into the multitude of distractions that are so readily available to them. On every front, our enemy has systematically sought to demolish God's plan for both men and women.

I realize this is a very brief glance at a very complex and interwoven situation, and there is much more I could elaborate on. But because the topic I'm addressing is women's roles in the church, let me focus now on that. As I see it, people are trying to determine if there is a line between what a woman can and can't do in church—and if a line does exist, where to draw it. Can she teach in a classroom but not in the sanctuary? Can she teach 10-year-old boys but not 13-year-olds? Anyone familiar with this conversation knows the gray regions are legion. It's easy to see why people find relief when they can dismiss the line altogether.

But while the question of role lines is valid, I would encourage us to look at this issue from another angle. Specifically, we need to ask two questions: what is the motivation for assuming women to be eligible for most if not all forms of church leadership, and where will embracing that position take us as a church?

I've already suggested some of the motivations involved, including the desire to fully avail ourselves of women's giftings, the desire to encourage and "unleash" single women, and the desire to maximize the number of workers for the cause of Christ. There are, however, other motivations which I believe also deserve our attention.

One of these is our innate inclination to accommodate our culture. Men are becoming more and more comfortable with women in all contexts of leadership, and women are gladly taking that leadership. For the church to offer resistance to this is to become less attractive to nonbelievers, or worse, to incite social (if not legal) repercussions.

But often the tug to join the social momentum is more subtle. You come across a woman who is obviously deep in God's Word, with a winsome spirit and strong communication skills. Even more, she believes God has appointed her to minister. Surely it's his will that the church give her as much room as possible to bless people and advance the kingdom. So what are we to think about this?

We might see her as a Deborah (Judges 4). She may have been gifted and appointed by God for a special purpose in his plan. These were his people, and he had the right to choose who led them. But

note carefully that Deborah was quite possibly raised up to make a point to the men about their lack of courage and leadership. There is no hint in Scripture that God was now opening the door to women leaders as a norm. When God does something out of the ordinary, we need to be very careful not to conclude that he is changing his order of things—especially when that change so clearly mirrors a world that has no regard for his authority.

Also, our tendency to pragmatically evaluate a woman teacher or leader based on her personal qualifications brings to mind the story of Korah in Numbers 16. He and his group of well-known and respected men could probably have led God's people with competence and wisdom. But when they decided to challenge the leadership God had established in Moses and Aaron, God's response was frighteningly clear.

Other stories in Scripture are also instructive. Anna (Luke 2) was granted the privilege of spreading the word about the baby Jesus after decades of humble prayer. The woman at the well (John 4) was granted the privilege of spreading the word about the Messiah after being broken by a very hard life. But neither of these women were thinking about themselves—they were simply overflowing with the amazement of what they had witnessed.

This to me is a key consideration when a woman is given the opportunity to speak publicly. Is she awed and humbled by the privilege of testifying about the goodness of God, or does she see herself as “breaking ground” for women to advance to greater status in the church? If I can put this bluntly, is she drawn to the mystery of God's order in Scripture, or is she being pulled into the strong currents of today's cultural tide?

Let me remind you that there are other ways our wisdom can benefit the body of Christ. For example, while God does not give women authority over men, he clearly has equipped us to be their counselors and advisors. I have found that men, including church leaders, often welcome my insights, as long as I offer them respectfully and without strings attached. By that I mean I do not become upset when they disregard my input, because I realize God holds them and not me responsible for their leadership decisions.

You see, if we're honest with ourselves, there is a tangible difference between an inner posture that takes authority and a heart attitude of true submission and humble service. Unlike the outward line that might be drawn between ministry roles, this is a line drawn in our spirits—and it must be drawn every time we approach a ministry situation. I would add that men only properly exercise their authority in the church and the home when they too have a heart attitude of true submission to their leader, Christ.

Moving beyond the matter of motivations, the other important question we need to ask is, “Where are our choices taking us?” Remember when I spoke earlier of what we as women really desire? If we truly want to see authentic manhood restored, we need to be a little wiser about what men need. By God's design, men seek to find a place of significance, a context in which they can feel competent and successful. Women today are being told that these are the things that will also fulfill us. But if you peel back the heavy layers of cultural conditioning, what women actually desire more is a safe place where they can build a nest, raise their children and then do what they can to make this world more beautiful and healthy.

The reason everything is so broken now is because men have lost their place of honor and women have lost their sense of security. As a direct result, men migrate to fantasy worlds to compete for fantasy prizes, and women press into the vacuum men have left to do what they can to hold society together.

Sadly, these two processes end up reinforcing each other. After almost half a century of watching and analyzing the world around me, this is the conclusion I've come to. You may not agree with me. I only ask you to think about it.

But if you count yourself among those who desire men to again become men, then may I ask you to consider what the church can do to help this along. All too often men are scolded for being irresponsible, or else they're pressured into thinking their highest calling is "servant leadership" in their family. I believe both of these tactics have proven to be ineffectual.

What God intends for manhood is a place of great nobility and respect, not only in his family, but also as God's picture of masculinity in the church and in this world. A man who discovers and is allowed to develop his capacity to be strong and wise and courageous and even heroic will not be as tempted to dull his pain through lustful addictions or wasteful entertainments. Nor will he need to treat women with contempt, because he will recognize that a woman's honest admiration and appreciation go a lot farther in nourishing his spirit than her cowering, her manipulations or her mothering.

While this may seem like fairy tale talk—and in the secular world it's exactly that—it should not seem so in the church. You see, God's Spirit in us gives us the capacity to head back toward his original plan for us as men and women. We certainly can't reverse everything overnight—and realistically, we never will completely on this side of eternity.

But my challenge to you, dear sister, is to pragmatically examine the trajectory of where our decisions lead. When we promote women essentially taking men's places in the church, what are we doing? Yes, we might gain some good teaching or even good leadership. But when we step back and consider the long term effects, what is this actually costing us?

We're watching many professions in our society which used to be places of male achievement and significance become increasingly occupied by women. We're told this is exciting progress, not realizing that a society really doesn't work as well when only half the population is engaged in running it. After all, when men step out of the roles God gave them, they certainly aren't picking up the roles given to women. Why would they?

Thus it's very possible that to the extent competent women assume roles of church leadership, the men will gradually back away—not only from leadership, but sometimes from attending church altogether. Of course we aren't there yet, at least not in most Bible-centered denominations. But why then are we stepping into the river that is so evidently damaging to our society and our families, just because it's easier than fighting the cultural currents?

I realize you may not see things quite like I'm seeing them. Nevertheless, I pray you'll begin to ask these questions as you think through what's going on both in our world and in the church. There are a lot of arguments being made that seem in the moment to be powerful and true. But when you look more deeply at the underlying motivations and the end results, you need to ask if they will actually bring about the glory of God in our world—especially as it is revealed in truly masculine men and truly feminine women.

Sincerely,

Diane Woerner

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