

Women still face huge barriers in the American church today. Here are seven biblical reasons we must empower female leaders.

My Southern Baptist parents taught me to open doors for women. But in the polite culture in which I grew up, I didn't see too many pastors practicing that habit. Sure, they allowed women to teach children's classes, take care of babies, have prayer meetings and cook fellowship meals. But women weren't allowed near a pulpit unless they were singing a solo.

I never heard a woman preacher until I joined the charismatic movement in the 1970s. It took a while for me to get used to the idea, since the church I grew up in taught that women were most spiritual when they were silent. It wasn't long, however, before I realized that most women in charismatic and Pentecostal circles struggle to fulfill their ministries. I began to see evidence of discrimination—and even abuse—everywhere:

- One woman started a drug-rehab ministry and led more than 80 people to the Lord. She met with them twice a week doing discipleship and teaching as well as hours of personal counseling. When she asked the senior pastor if he would designate her as a staff pastor, he met with his elders and then announced that she would be called “half-pastor”—simply because she was female.
- In many churches the wives of pastors are expected to work long hours alongside their husbands doing ministry work, yet they are not paid. They are viewed as lesser-important appendages.
- I have talked to countless women who were labeled “Jezebels” because they simply asked their pastors if they could teach a class or have a ministry opportunity.
- I have stacks of letters from women who suffered in abusive marriages. When they went to their pastors to get help, they were told the abuse would stop if they would become more submissive.

Breaking Up the Good Old Boys' Club

Written by Lee Grady

- A pastor reprimanded one woman who was leading a women's retreat because she served communion to the ladies without a man present.
- Another woman was told that the ladies in her Bible study would be deceived if a man did not sit in the back of the room to "cover" the meeting.

All these examples point to a "good old boy" culture that still permeates our churches. Much of it is simply rooted in a false understanding of New Testament passages about women. In some cases, male leaders are uncomfortable around women, either because of insecurity or a misogynous spirit.

It's way past time for Christian leaders to move from male dominance to gender partnership. Here are seven truths we must ponder as we make this shift:

1. God has always empowered His daughters. During Israel's wilderness journey the five daughters of Zelophehad asked Moses if they could have an inheritance in the Promised Land. They made this bold request at a time when women had no civil rights and no hope for equality. Under the rules of the day, their family was denied land rights because all of Zelophehad's children were female.

When Moses prayed about this dilemma, the Lord contradicted the male-dominant culture of the day. He said: "The daughters of Zelophehad speak what is right; you shall surely give them a possession of inheritance among their father's brothers, and cause the inheritance of their father to pass to them" (Num. 27:7).

We rarely hear sermons about these daughters today, even though their names are listed in the Bible in five different places. Even in the old covenant period, God made it clear that His daughters were not to be relegated to second-class status. How much more are they to be considered "fellow heirs" (1 Pet. 3:7, NASB) under the new covenant!

Pastors today must learn the same lesson God taught Moses. In some churches women are offered nothing but limitations, discrimination and neglect. Yet God has placed in them a desire to possess spiritual territory. They want to partner with us in battle and share our victories. Will we open the door for them—or slam it in their faces?

2. Jesus included women on His team. Traditionally minded Christians believe Jesus recruited only men to be His disciples. I want to shake these folks and ask, “Do you actually read the Bible?” It’s true that all other rabbis in Israel in the first century ignored women and viewed them as the source of all the evil in the world. But Jesus was a very different rabbi!

Jewish leaders believed it was wrong to teach a woman from the Torah, but Jesus allowed Mary of Bethany to sit at His feet and learn from Him. Other rabbis would not stoop to associate with women in public, but Jesus allowed a sinful woman to anoint His head with her perfume. Rabbis would not get near bleeding women because they were ceremonially unclean, yet Jesus healed a woman who had bled for 12 years.

And in the time of Jesus, women were not allowed to testify in a court of law because they were considered ignorant and untrustworthy. Yet Jesus’ women followers were the first to testify of His resurrection on Easter morning. Jesus broke every religious rule in the book when He allowed Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and His other women followers to be a part of His entourage (see Luke 8:1-3).

It is true that only men were among the 12 disciples. Those original apostles were also exclusively Jewish, yet we have never suggested that only Jews could be church leaders today. Why then do we point to the gender of those 12 disciples and insist that women should be excluded from leadership positions?

3. Pentecost broke the gender barrier. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the inauguration of a completely new season in church history. God did a new and marvelous thing. He took the anointing oil that had been reserved only for Jewish priests of the tribe of Levi and poured it out on both men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and Jew and gentile.

When the Spirit was poured out on the men and women gathered in the upper room, each of them received a holy flame. The Bible does not say the men had blue flames while the women had pink flames. The anointing has nothing to do with gender and everything to do with Jesus Christ, the one who baptizes us with His Spirit.

This is why the apostle Peter quoted the prophet Joel in his Pentecost sermon, declaring, “Your sons *and your daughters* shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17, emphasis added). And this is why Paul later told the Galatians that in Christ “there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). Theologians have long referred to that passage from Galatians as the Bible’s great emancipation proclamation. Those who would deny a woman the anointing to preach might as well go back and live under the old covenant.

Equality in Christ does not mean that men and women should be androgynous. Empowering women is not about denying sex roles—nor is it about women overthrowing men. But if we want to be a truly Pentecostal people we must release women to take their place in this newly anointed priesthood.

4. The apostle Paul trained and released women leaders. For centuries traditionalists have misread and twisted Paul’s words about women. Citing two difficult passages (1 Cor. 14:34-35 and 1 Tim. 2:12) they have forged a doctrine of female silence and subjugation that runs contrary to the rest of Scripture.

We don’t have room here to dissect these passages, but it should be noted that Paul was dealing with specific crises in Ephesus and Corinth when he made these statements. If we are to honor God in our Bible interpretation we must look at all Paul said about women, as well as how he worked alongside women.

When closing his letter to the Romans, Paul mentions several women leaders who served on his apostolic team—including Phoebe, a deacon; Priscilla, a skilled Bible teacher; Tryphena and Tryphosa, whom he described as “workers”; Persis, a Persian woman he labeled “hardworking”; and Junia, who obviously served in apostolic ministry (see Rom. 16:1-4, 7, 12). In other epistles he mentions women who led churches, such as Chloe (see 1 Cor. 1:11). He also tried to reconcile Euodia and Syntyche (see Phil. 4:1-3), female ministers who had some kind of ministry dispute.

Paul obviously saw women as a strategic part of God's plan. When he ventured into Europe he went to the place where women prayed—and Lydia, a businesswoman, was his first convert (see Acts 16:13-14). The Paul who clamped down on female false teachers in Ephesus is the same Paul who supported his female ministry comrades. We need to stop making him out to be a chauvinist when he was the best model of a male leader who empowered women.

5. God's family is made of both fathers and mothers. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we see a constant theme of male/female partnership: Abraham and Sarah inherited their promise together; Deborah and Barak won a great military victory; Mordecai and Esther overthrew a genocide plot; Priscilla and Aquilla laid apostolic foundations in the early church.

Solomon wrote: "Hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother" (Prov. 1:8). From the beginning God called male and female to reflect His image—and the biblical family was formed with one father and one mother. God needed both genders to accomplish His purpose.

Yet in many churches today a woman's spiritual influence is minimized. We've either muzzled our women or simply displayed them like decorations on a shelf. When godly women are silenced the whole church suffers.

Many Christians are rightly concerned about the advancement of the homosexual agenda in our culture. We oppose the acceptance of same-sex marriage—as we should. But many of the same churches that argue for traditional marriage have adopted a policy of "same-sex ministry." They only allow men to preach, teach, disciple believers and pastor the flock.

God is calling brave, passionate women of integrity today to step into the role of being a spiritual mother. Will we make fun of them like Eli did when Hannah groaned in prayer at Shiloh? Or will we bless them and make room for their spiritual gifts?

6. The church cannot address social injustice against women without their involvement.

There was a time in our nation's history when women were not allowed to attend medical schools. In the late 1800s doctors perpetrated the idea that women didn't have the intellectual capabilities needed to perform surgery or treat disease.

When women finally entered the medical field, women's health immediately began to improve in the nation: the child mortality rate declined, advances were made in gynecology and obstetrics, and a host of other problems were addressed—all because women who understood their own bodies could now contribute to medical progress.

The same holds true in the spiritual realm. Certain things won't change until women get involved. As long as women are denied opportunities in pastoring, evangelism, missions and theology, we cannot move forward. When women are included, the church can authoritatively address important issues including sexual abuse, abortion, single-parent poverty, child slavery, gender discrimination and domestic violence.

7. We will reach more territory for Christ when both men and women are engaged in ministry. Even before women won the right to vote in the United States, an army of women missionaries was sent from this country to China, India and Africa. Many of these women were single and weren't allowed to pastor churches while they were on hallowed American soil. But when they got to the jungles and remote villages of the developing world they were transformed into apostolic ambassadors.

One Scottish woman missionary, Mary Slessor, single-handedly pioneered eastern Nigeria for Christ in the late 1800s and laid the foundations of the revival that still burns there today. Yet today, there are still churches in our country that would have told Slessor that she was only qualified to teach children in Sunday school or lead the women's prayer group.

This is the primary reason I have dedicated my life to raising up women leaders. I know that right now a large segment of the church has their hands tied behind their backs. Women have been bound, squelched, limited, devalued and denied—yet they represent a huge untapped potential. We need them on the mission field, just as we need them starting Christian businesses, defending the family, pastoring churches, evangelizing our cities, running for political office and pioneering social reformation.

It's time for us guys to drop our fears and our macho attitudes—and anything else we've used to stop our mothers, sisters and wives from claiming their spiritual inheritance. I challenge you to open as many doors for them as possible.

No More Macho

Here are eight practical ways you can address gender discrimination in your church:

1. Evaluate your own marriage. How do you treat your wife publicly? Does she feel the freedom to use her spiritual gifts, or is she just a decoration? If you have abuse issues in your own life, be willing to seek counseling.

2. Change your lingo. Many pastors refer to leaders as “my men” or “my guys.” Stop using exclusively male terms when referring to your staff. And when you talk about the need for “fathering,” remember that God’s people need mothers as well.

3. Retool your women’s ministry. Many women’s groups are spiritually shallow and focus only on domesticity. Christian women today don’t want to focus on recipes, fashion shows or bake sales. Offer a diverse range of opportunities for professional women, divorced women and widows as well as stay-at-home moms.

4. Stop ignoring single women. Some of the most effective missionaries in the 1800s were single females. But today the church tells these women they are “ladies in waiting,” as if their only ministry possibilities lie in marriage and family. Help them discover their gifts and give them opportunities to serve in leadership positions.

5. Check your salary policies. Are you paying men and women equal pay for equal work? Also, make sure you aren’t financially exploiting a staff member’s wife by expecting her to lead or serve in ministry even though she’s not on your payroll.

6. Revamp your training programs. Who is being trained for ministry in your congregation? Jesus trained both men and women. Make sure you have skilled female mentors who can raise up women leaders.

7. Open your pulpit to women. Invite anointed women to teach and minister in your church regularly. This will not only inspire your women but also help your entire congregation know that the Holy Spirit's anointing is not about gender.

8. Confront abuse. Domestic violence is happening more than you realize, and it is rampant in churches. Offer regular teaching on marriage, and don't avoid the abuse issue when ministering to men. We cannot keep sweeping this issue under the rug.

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