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Is it Biblical to Call a Woman a “Pastor”?

I find it fascinating to track the controversies that so often divide the evangelical, Bible-believing world. When I was in theological seminary, the most volatile issue over which we debated and argued endlessly was the timing of the rapture: will it be before, during, or after the so-called Great Tribulation. Then, in the 80’s and 90’s the issue that captivated evangelical minds and voices was the charismatic movement and the question of whether or not all spiritual gifts are valid and operative today.

Well, the tide has turned. There is a new topic that may well be the most divisive and controversial of all. The reason for this is that it has its counterpart in what is happening in society as a whole. I’m talking about the question of the role of women in local church leadership. Most evangelicals remained somewhat civil in their interaction over the issues of the rapture and charismatic gifts. But the role of women in ministry has, I regret to say, brought out the worst in just about everyone.

Let me briefly lay out before you the two options that are most widely discussed and embraced. They are known by the labels, Egalitarianism and Complementarianism. Although there are significant differences in these views, they do share a lot in common.

- (1) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equally created in the image of God, and that neither is more or less the image of God than the other.
- (2) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women are equal in personal dignity, that neither is more or less worthy or of more or less value as human beings.
- (3) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians agree that men and women should treat each other with kindness and compassion and love, and that any and all forms of abuse or disrespect or dishonor must be denounced as sin and resisted.
- (4) Both Complementarians and Egalitarians believe that women should be actively involved in ministry. Complementarians agree with Egalitarians and celebrate the fact that women, for example, served as “co-workers” with Paul and held the office of deacon.
- (5) Where Complementarians and Egalitarians disagree is whether women can serve as the Senior Pastor or as a Governing Elder in the local church, what I call senior governmental authority. Egalitarians believe the Bible permits women to hold such positions of leadership, while Complementarians do not.

Here at Bridgeway, we believe in Complementarianism. This is the way it is explained in our Statement of Faith.

12. We believe that both men and women are together created in the divine image and are therefore equal before God as persons, possessing the same moral dignity and value, and have equal access to God through faith in Christ. We also believe that men and women are together the recipients of spiritual gifts designed to equip and empower them for ministry in the local church and beyond. We also believe that God has ordained the principle of male headship in both the home and in the local church and that certain governing and teaching roles are restricted to men (primarily the office of Elder) (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:18; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; 3:1-7; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

Here at Bridgeway, we are extremely reluctant to place restrictions on anyone of either gender or any age in the absence of explicit biblical instruction to that effect. In other words, if I am going to err, it is on the side of freedom. In my opinion, the only restrictions placed on women concern what I call *senior governmental authority in the local church*. I have in mind, as noted above, (1) the primary authority to expound the Scriptures and enforce their doctrinal

and ethical truths on the conscience of all God's people, and (2) the authority to exercise final governmental oversight of the body of Christ.

Therefore, unlike a number of other Complementarians, as long as the principle of male headship is honored in the above two respects, I believe women can lead worship, can co-lead small groups, can read Scripture publicly on a Sunday morning, can assist in the celebration of both baptism and the Lord's Supper, can serve as deacons (or deaconesses), can chair church committees, can lead in evangelistic and church planting outreach, can (and should) be consulted by the local church Eldership when decisions are being made, and can contribute to virtually every other capacity of local church life. Women should be encouraged to pray and prophesy in corporate church meetings (1 Cor. 11) and should be given every opportunity to develop and exercise their spiritual gifts.

All Complementarians believe that God has created both men and women (1) in his image, of equal value and dignity as human persons, but (2) with a distinction in the roles and responsibilities each is to fulfill in both church and home.

All Complementarians believe that (1) and (2) above are perfectly and practically compatible with each other. Complementarianism asserts that *functional differences* between men and women in church and home, as expressed in the biblical terms, "headship" and "submission", do not diminish or jeopardize their *ontological equality*.

Complementarianism believes that submission to rightful authority, whether wives to husbands or children to parents or Christians to elders in the church or all citizens to the state is a noble and virtuous thing, that it is a privilege, a joy, something good and desirable and consistent with true freedom, and above all honoring and glorifying to God. And the one who submits is in no way inferior to or of less value and worth than the one to whom submission is rendered.

Women Pastors?

My concern today is to address the issue of whether or not it is biblically permissible for a woman to be called a "pastor".

Most Complementarians insist that those who are "pastors" are the ones who regularly, week in and week out, preach and teach the Scriptures from the pulpit, typically on a Sunday morning at the corporate assembly of God's people. But is this what we find in the NT?

It's important that we spend some time looking at how the NT actually makes use of the noun "pastor" or "shepherd" and the verb "to pastor." You may be surprised by what you see.

The verb "to shepherd" or "to tend sheep" or "to rule" is *poimainō*. It is used 11x in the NT. It is used with reference to Jesus in Matthew 2:6; Revelation 2:27; 7:17; 12:5; and 19:15. It is found in Luke 17:7 and 1 Corinthians 9:7 in the general sense of someone who tends or shepherds sheep. Jesus exhorts Peter to "tend" or "shepherd" his sheep in John 21:16. In Jude 12 we read of false teachers who are described as "shepherds feeding themselves."

The only texts where the verb to shepherd or to pastor is used of leaders in the local church are Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2. In the former Paul is addressing the Elders at Ephesus, and in the latter Peter is likewise giving instructions to Elders.

"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [i.e., bishops or elders], *to care for* [i.e., to pastor or shepherd] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

"*shepherd* the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you" (1 Peter 5:2).

Clearly, these two texts where the verb is used indicate that an essential role or ministry of the Elders in a local church is to shepherd or to pastor the people of God. ***Thus, it stands to reason that all Elders must, in some sense, be pastors. But nothing in the way this verb is used should lead us to believe that all pastors must be Elders. No text asserts the latter.***

The noun *poimēn* (“pastor” / “shepherd”) is found 18x in the NT. Jesus saw that the people were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). The word is used in a similar way in Matthew 25:32; 26:31; Mark 6:34; 14:27; John 10:2. In Luke 2:8 we read of the “shepherds” “keeping watch over their flock by night” (likewise in Luke 2:15, 18, 20).

Jesus refers to himself as “the good shepherd” (twice in John 10:11). The word is used in similar fashion in John 10:12, 14, 16. In Hebrews 13:20, Jesus is described as “the great shepherd of the sheep” and in 1 Peter 2:25 he is called “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

There is *only one text* where the noun “shepherd” or “pastor” is used of leaders in the local church.

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the *shepherds* and teachers” (Eph. 4:11).

In this latter text, Paul is identifying several representative gifts that Christ has given to the church. We know that prophets are those with the gift of prophecy and that evangelists are those with the gift of evangelism and that teachers are those with the gift of teaching. Whether or not apostleship is a spiritual gift or office (in some sense of the term) is a debatable question. It would seem, then, that we should conclude that pastors are those with the gift of pastoring.

Contrary to what many in the charismatic world believe, there is nothing in this text that would lead us to conclude that Paul is identifying five specific offices or governmental positions. One often hears of the so-called “five-fold ministry” in Ephesians 4:11. But everywhere else where Paul lists spiritual gifts (such as prophecy, teaching, evangelism, etc.) he simply mentions certain representative gifts. He could just as easily here in Ephesians 4:11 have mentioned mercy instead of teaching, or tongues instead of prophecy, or helps instead of evangelism. These five nouns refer to people who were blessed with a particular gift, not a position of authority in the local church. Of course, apostles are of a different order and did exercise authority over churches.

Some insist that the nouns “pastor” and “teacher” are one gift, and thus translate it “pastor-teacher.” I won’t burden you with the technicalities of Greek grammar, but scholars are divided. Some say “pastor” and “teacher” are separate, individual spiritual gifts, while others say that Paul is describing one spiritual gift, that of “pastor-teacher.”

It is difficult to see how a person can pastor or spiritually shepherd people if he/she cannot teach. But a teacher need not be someone who shepherds or pastors. But perhaps we’re drawing too fine of a distinction here between the two gifts. I suppose it is possible that someone might have the gift of pastoring and not be gifted to teach. Nothing in the NT precludes this possibility.

In any case, even if we take Paul as referring to only four gifts, “pastor-teacher” would still be a spiritual gift, not an office or position of governing authority. It is certainly the case that a “pastor” or “pastor-teacher” may also be appointed to the office of Elder or Overseer, but *nothing requires us to believe that all “pastors” or all “pastor-teachers” are necessarily Elders.*

Why, then, do most evangelical churches use the word “Pastor” to refer to an authoritative office, most often equated with that of an Elder? I identify two reasons.

First, tradition! We have become accustomed to speaking of pastor and Elder in this way and it is difficult for many to break from the habit of doing so. It would call for considerable humility in acknowledging that we were wrong and that we have not accurately interpreted the NT on this point. It would also require that denominations and local churches make changes in their long-standing and cherished doctrinal statements, something they are strongly disinclined to do.

Consider, as one example, the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) that serves as the doctrinal standard for the Southern Baptist Convention. In Article VI we read this:

“While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

In point of fact, as we have seen, this statement is false. They should have said, “the office of *Elder* is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.” But many (most?) SBC churches do not have a plurality of Elders. The Senior Pastor often is recognized as “the Elder” of the local church, with Deacons serving in a slightly lower authoritative role.

The point being that most evangelicals think of “pastor” as an office that carries governing authority and the responsibility to preach and teach and apply the Word of God to the conscience of God’s people on a regular (weekly?) basis. Whereas this may often be the case, in that one man who holds the office of Elder may also be designated as the Senior or Lead Pastor, ***nothing in the NT suggests, far less requires, that anyone who has the spiritual gift of pastoring will be an Elder or will serve as the primary expositor of Scripture.***

There are several reasons why a person may well have the gift of pastoring but not serve as an Elder. It may be that the individual is too young. Although the NT nowhere gives us a specific age requirement for serving as an Elder, it may be that a person does not have sufficient experience in church leadership because of their comparatively young age. But that doesn’t mean they don’t or can’t have the spiritual gift of pastoring and be referred to as a “pastor”. There may well be other qualifications of an Elder (see 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1) that such a person does not yet possess. But this need not be a determining factor as to whether or not they should be referred to as a pastor.

Second, fear! I sense that another reason why many continue to affirm that “pastor” is an authoritative office and that all pastors are also Elders is the fear that to predicate this noun of a woman will launch us down a slippery slope into full-scale Egalitarianism. Many Complementarians are afraid of the answer to this question: “If a woman can be a pastor, why can’t she be an Elder?” The simple answer is two-fold. First, as we’ve already noted, “pastoring” is a spiritual gift that may be found in numerous individuals of both genders who do not yet (or never will), for a variety of reason, qualify as Elders. Second, I believe 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 restrict the office of Elder to qualified males.

Thus I conclude from the use of the relevant terminology in the NT that a woman may well be given the spiritual gift of pastoring and thus bear that title, just as one with the gift of teaching may be called a teacher and one with the gift of prophecy may be called a prophet or one with the gift of evangelism may be called an evangelist, etc.

In sum, there is no indication in the NT that the spiritual gift of pastoring, unlike the office of Elder, is gender specific. The Holy Spirit may well grant this gift to both men and women. Therefore, I believe that one may continue to embrace a biblically based complementarianism while speaking of certain women as “pastors” in the local church.

Summary

(1) To be a “pastor” is to possess, by the Spirit’s sovereign operation, a ***spiritual gift*** that enables one to shepherd God’s people. Contrary to most traditions, the word “pastor” in the NT and the verb “to pastor” do not describe an office, but a spiritual gift.

(2) There are only two so-called “offices” in the local church (although the word “office” itself nowhere appears in the NT): that of Elder and Deacon.

(3) Whereas all Elders must be pastors, or must be recipients from the Spirit of the spiritual gift of pastoring, not all those with the gift of pastoring will be Elders. All Elders must be men, but not all men are necessarily Elders. All Elders must be able to teach, but not all those with the gift of teaching will be Elders. Other examples could be cited.

(4) Nothing in my study has led me to conclude that we are misguided or unbiblical in our embrace of what is known as Complementarianism. According to the latter, whereas all men and women are created in the image of God, of equal moral value and deserving of equal dignity and honor, God has ordained that certain roles in the church and in the family be different. Only qualified men serve as Elders in the local church, regularly teach and apply God’s Word in the corporate gathering, and all husbands are responsible for leading their families as the head of the home.

(5) Here at Bridgeway we embrace a rather broad and flexible application of the truth of Complementarianism. Unless the Scriptures explicitly forbid a woman from some ministry or activity, we believe she should be encouraged, empowered, and released to fulfill the same sorts of things undertaken by men. That is why women at Bridgeway will often baptize others, serve the Lord’s Supper, read Scripture publicly, pray and prophesy in the corporate gathering,

lead worship, evangelize the lost, as well as facilitate other ministries such as inner healing and deliverance, healing prayer, counseling, etc.

(6) Merely possessing the spiritual gift of pastoring does not entail governmental authority. Authority to govern the local church is invested in the Elders. They can certainly delegate authority, as needed, to others. But exercising the gift of a pastor does not itself necessarily entail the sort of authority that the NT ascribes to Elders.

Therefore, referring to certain women as pastors does not entail an elevation in their status, authority, or importance. It is simply in recognition of that person's gifting.

(7) Do some pastors exercise authority over and teach the entire flock? Absolutely. Elders certainly do. But other pastors may make use of their gifting in less comprehensive ways and without the governing authority that inheres in the office of Elder. Elders shepherd (or pastor) the entire flock not because they have the gift of pastor, but because they are *Elders!*

What, then, would a “pastor” do who is not an Elder? He or she will exercise loving care for those they lead, guard them from error, warn them of danger, pray for them, encourage them, teach them, provide wise counsel, lovingly rebuke or challenge them when needed, exhort them to obey the Scriptures, help them to effectively serve in the area of ministry to which God has called them, and always faithfully guide them into deeper maturity in Christ. A female, although not an Elder, can exercise such ministries in the use of her spiritual gift in ways that do not violate the guidelines of 1 Timothy 2:12.

(8) One thing that we must prepare ourselves for in the days ahead is the pushback that will come from those who are entrenched in traditional ways of thinking. There is no escaping the fact that the word “Pastor” suggests to most Christians an office of authority in and over the local church. Many will conclude from our decision, wrongly, of course, but conclude nonetheless, that we have abandoned biblical Complementarianism. We have not. So why stir up controversy? Why rock the boat? It isn't from a desire to be different or because we are looking for a fight. It is simply and solely because that is what we believe the Bible teaches.

Therefore, we are now prepared to designate certain women on our church staff as pastors over particular areas of ministry. At present, we recognize three women as exercising the spiritual gift of pastor: Krista Meyer is Pastor of Family Ministries, Ashley Owen is Pastor of Bridgeway Kids, and Erin Goss is Assistant Pastor of Prayer. Others may be so designated in the future when we observe in them evidence of the Holy Spirit having imparted this spiritual gift.