

WE'RE STILL WAITING

by Dr. Dan Stiver, President

The history of the subjugation and suppression of women is a long, sad, and tragic tale that carries throughout recorded history in almost all civilizations. It was not that long ago even in the United States when women could not vote, own property, borrow money, or be protected from violence against them by their own husbands. Yet now women can be presidential candidates (although the rest of the world has already elected women presidents and major leaders), and even a conservative party has placed women as vice-presidential candidates, Supreme Court justices, and members of Congress.

Women can be CEOs, managers, bankers, doctors, movers and shakers - but not, it seems, pastors for part of the church and the Southern Baptist Convention. Why is the church, or part of the church, so often so far behind, when other parts of the church can be leaders in the liberation of minorities? Baptists were initially leaders in the movement of liberty of conscience and democracy. In the church, Baptists upheld the affirmation of the priesthood of all believers, and yet some Baptists, have somehow eliminated half of the human race from such leadership.

The idea that women cannot be leaders would actually be a surprise to many in the Bible who told of Deborah, a prominent judge and Huldah, a prophetess who had to be consulted before Scripture could be affirmed. It would be a surprise to the Apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost, when women were announced to be proclaimers of the Gospel, not to mention the women who were the first to proclaim Jesus' resurrection or the Samaritan women who preached to her city of the Messiah.

The denial of leadership to women would be a surprise to the Apostle Paul, who gave the emancipatory declaration that helped end slavery and freed women, breaking the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles, in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew nor Greek: there is no longer slave nor free; there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

How might history have been different if proper translations had been given to Romans 16 when Paul called Phoebe a deacon and Junia an apostle?

Of course, there are difficult passages in the Bible on many themes, but there are also well-known interpretations that place those passages in the context of relating the freedom of the Gospel to a male-dominated world. These passages are fairly seen as contextual to the times, such as women not being allowed to wear jewelry or men not allowed to cut their hair. How many conservative Southern Baptist churches follow these admonitions? One has to look at the whole Bible and the sweep of revelation towards the movement of all people

being called to minister the Gospel, not just at one or two troubling verses on slavery or the limitation of women, which have long been seen as contextual.

Also consider the grand history of the church when even early Baptists had women preachers before men rose in cultural dominance and began to limit women. But when has culture been determinative over the Gospel? And of course, women pastored and preached on the Southern Baptist mission fields but were not allowed to do so at home. The Scripture speaks of knowing truth by its fruit, or we might say that the fruit is in the pudding, yet women have pastored and preached effectively throughout history, and we would be much the poorer if they had not.

And all of this is the more remarkable in that they did so in male-dominated societies, including such great spiritual guides such as Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich and many others. In recent decades, women have proven to be great pastors and preachers, even among Baptists. Pentecostals, who are generally conservative, have long had women pastors. There was a time when Southern Baptists were leading the way in favor of women pastors, Al Mohler being among them at one time. I was there in the eighties, being in a cohort with the first three Baptist women receiving doctorates in the School of Theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In light of Scripture, history, and actual experience, not only in the church but now in every walk of life, how can one seriously maintain that a woman cannot lead or preach the Gospel? Southern Baptists are trying, but their fruit reveals a steadily declining denomination. No wonder their churches are failing when they suppress the gifts and calling of half of their congregations. In contrast, churches where women are set free are flourishing.

Scholar Elizabeth Dreyer writes of Hildegard of Bingen: "Hildegard was the only woman of her age to be accepted as an authoritative voice on Christian doctrine; the first woman who received express permission from a pope to write theological books; the only medieval woman who preached openly, before mixed audiences of clergy and laity, with the full approval of church authorities; the author of the first known morality play and the only twelfth-century playwright who is not anonymous; the only composer of her era (not to mention the only medieval woman) known both by name and by a large corpus of surviving music."*

This woman lived in the twelfth century! One can only imagine what the church might have achieved if the gifts and energy of half their number had been unleashed at that time. And now, as for this time, we're still waiting.

*Dreyer, Elizabeth. *Accidental Theologians: Four Women Who Shaped Christianity* (p. 21). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition. Photo by Quilia on Unsplash.