

Answering God's Call to Lead in a Church

Way back when I was young and nimble-minded, I wrote a college paper on why women should not speak, teach or preach to men in church. Doctrinally, it was a wide-load philosophy built entirely on the spindly shoulders of 1 Timothy 2:12. Emotionally, it was fueled by a determined resistance to the growing tide of feminism, which seemed to be crushing femininity as it rolled through my generation.

I'll also add that I wrote the paper during a frantic, caffeine-fueled all-nighter that probably included more accidental dozing than actual studying. My point is: I didn't do the work to prove my point, and I didn't really feel I needed to because I wanted to be a lawyer and not a pastor. I didn't need a theological construct to become an attorney, so I threw together a reactionary position paper using poorly developed hermeneutics and a fair number of impressively astute words. (Sometimes that's all you need to land a B+.)

Today I am a pastor on staff at a large, respected church. In fact, I am a teaching pastor charged with oversight of the scope and sequence of our churchwide discipleship continuum. Our lead pastor directs the planning of our corporate messages, but I am a voice at the table and from the platform, regularly teaching both the men and women during our four weekend services.

So what happened between paragraph one and paragraph two? Twenty years and so much learning happened. Some of the learning was experiential and some was intentional, but all of it has been both beautifully freeing and incredibly frustrating. (My husband, by the way, wrote his college paper on why women *should* be pastors, so he spent a lot of years waiting for me to catch up and demonstrated an annoying lack

of angst about the whole issue.)

It started innocently enough, with one little character study on Peter. I remember goose bumps popping as the deeper truths of Peter's life jumped off the page and into my heart. I also remember discovering the works of old, dead theologians and weeping in the library as the timeless truth of their devotion to the Word of God pulsed through thick sentences, condensed and compacted by a lifetime of learning. I filled notebooks with brilliant quotes and bullet-pointed application and Greek and Hebrew etymology.

Finally, on a quiet Saturday, I placed a new legal pad on the table in front of me and, without knowing why, wrote out a sermon. I gathered my learning like soft yarn, weaving and crafting it into something I hoped would be a warm blanket for somebody somewhere, someday. It was not a small or safe decision. In fact, my heart raced as I did it, almost like sneaking into the men's restroom and hoping not to get caught—and even as I write that, I know how ridiculous it probably sounds to you, dear reader.

The thing is, I knew I was opening my heart to this bold new idea that maybe—just maybe—God wanted to use my desire to argue a case somewhere other than a courtroom. This was very frightening because I still had the matter of my own theology to deal with, and also: Have you checked the want ads for female teaching positions in the church recently? Yeah. Dismal.

So, as I wrote out the points of that sermon on that brilliant Saturday, I was distinctly aware of two really big, really opposing issues brewing just beneath my legal pad: 1) Nothing in life could make me more happy or fulfilled than studying and teaching eternal truth, and 2) The chances of anyone ever letting me do this were slim to none.

In spite of the contrary nature of my calling, I pressed on. I

kept writing messages, even though I couldn't imagine ever having the chance to share them with anyone. And I dug deep into the issue of women in ministry leadership in the Bible.

I took a hard look at the prohibitions of Paul and weighed them next to the rest of his words about women, men and submission. I researched women like Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Huldah and Ruth. I even (fearfully) waded into the waters of Proverbs 31. And finally, I looked at the life of Jesus and His profound, revolutionary acceptance of women. I emerged from that study no longer wobbling, no longer wondering, but certain that women are qualified to lead, teach, preach, write, pastor, prophesy and pray out loud. Even in America.

My theology developed at the same time I did. We landed at a Foursquare church, where our lead pastor had not a single shred of hesitation about using a qualified woman in the pulpit. Some pastors talk a good game about permitting women to exercise their God-given gifts but never actually give them the chance to take a swing at the ball.

My pastor gave me the opportunity to fly, to fail and to grow as a communicator. Even though a handful of men stayed home or walked out when they found out I was speaking, he didn't budge an inch from his determination to give women a voice in our community of faith. He consistently pointed out in meetings that for every man who stayed away when I spoke, plenty others invited their friends.

After 10 years on staff, few people question it any more. When they do, our standard response is to give them the research done by our denomination on women in ministry leadership and to remind them, "If you don't agree with women teaching in church, you'll have no problem finding a church in our city where they'll never step foot on the stage." This is a subject on which smart, godly people disagree, and that's OK. There's a church for every mindset.

Because of the male leaders in my life who have encouraged, strengthened and enabled the gifts of women to grow and be exercised in our church, I see these positive developments:

Female voices are welcomed at all leadership tables in our church. Please, can we be honest and say that women and men have innately different views on many things, including money, children, sex, work and marriage, and both viewpoints are valuable for creating a strong, beautiful community?

Though I am currently the only woman on the teaching team, I know that a woman's unique take on life is represented in all the decisions our church is making. The female perspective doesn't dominate the conversation, but I don't believe anyone's opinion dominates. We live in joyful—mostly joyful—submission to one another.

Young women see and believe there is room for them and their gifts in the church. They are not just dreaming of which strong leader they can marry, they're also dreaming of what they can become and how their unique gifts might nourish the house of God.

Young men see that women are more than bodies and beauty. That awareness will serve them well when they date and choose a wife and work a job alongside women.

I've occasionally spoken at other churches where they've asked if it was OK to introduce me as something other than a pastor. I have no problem with this. Titles mean very little to me, and I don't want something so trivial to alienate a listener.

Recently, however, I wrote a book, and it was a lot of work. When my publisher asked for a bio, I wrestled with it for days. What if that one word triggered a doctrinal bias that prevented people from reading a message of hope and life when they most needed it? I thought and prayed and wished for the day when entire organizations weren't required to keep the lines so firmly drawn between men and women.

I dreamed of the glory of the garden and those days before the fall and the curse disrupted the beautiful, free flow of community and comradeship enjoyed by Adam and Eve. I prayed and wished and dreamed, and then I wrote what I know to be true: *Bo Stern is a teaching pastor at Westside Church.* And that's my journey.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly released *Beautiful Battlegrounds* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. She is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.