

Responding to the Patriarchal Spirit

IT IS GOD'S HOUR FOR THE RELEASE OF WOMEN IN EVERY ASPECT OF MINISTRY. BUT HOW DO WE PREVENT AGE-OLD GENDER BIASES FROM HOLDING US BACK?

Several years ago I sat in a meeting of pastors and leaders, waiting for my turn to speak. During the introductory message, one of the most influential pastors of the city shared on the topic of unity as a foundation for change in the city. What he had to say was very good, except for one thing—all his comments referred to men.

“We men need to love our city,” he said. Another time he made the statement that “‘the guys’ need to step up to the plate and start reaching out to the lost.”

I agreed with every word he said. However, I knew he had left out an important component. The faces of the women in the audience confirmed that they felt the same way I did. Some were sad about the omission. Others simply looked resigned to being excluded.

Before you judge me, let me assure you that I am not a feminist. I teach that women leaders need to be feminine, not feminists. But I am also radically opposed to the patriarchal spirit that permeates certain churches and apostolic movements. This spirit hinders many women from reaching their God-given destinies.

Perhaps you have come up against this spirit in your own life and wondered: What is the nature of it? Is it merely an influence or an actual demonic power?

The patriarchal “spirit” is a negative attitude toward women in leadership that frequently originates from a religious belief system, traditional way of thinking or cultural bias. However, there are times when the attitude is so strong and so ingrained that it can be categorized as demonic.

The patriarchal spirit finds reasons to prohibit women from being in ministry rather than ways to see them released. In the foreword to my book, *Women of Destiny*, John Dawson writes about this phenomenon:

“I am part of a patriarchal religious culture in which women who serve ministries are usually treated with great kindness but seldom taken seriously as leaders. This is less so in missions but very evident in evangelical institutional life on the home front. We are snared by the sheer momentum of religious tradition.”

John continues, “Are women to be involved in Christian leadership? I have begun to suspect that that question is a trick query from hell. The question should be, given the difference between males and females, in what aspects of leadership do we desperately need females to serve?”

THE PATRIARCHAL SPIRIT IN OPERATION The patriarchal spirit was deeply entrenched in the discipleship or shepherding movement. Women still tell stories that depict the level of oppression they experienced in this movement. The understanding of submission was so skewed that some of them could not even buy a dress without their husband’s approval. Others were told that they were out of the will of God when they married if the prophets of the church did not have a word from God that they were to do so.

This spirit has tainted other movements as well. Women have been told that they cannot hear God for themselves; their husbands must hear for them. One Bible teacher told a large assembly of people that a wife should stay with her husband

even if he is beating her. I personally knew a woman who died because she believed this teaching.

I've observed that even church leaders who claim they believe in women in ministry are not fully releasing women to minister. The women may be licensed, but they are acting only as secretaries or administrators, not ministers. In some cases this is an oversight; in others it is intentional.

How can you know whether you are under the influence of a patriarchal spirit or patriarchal belief system? There are numerous manifestations to look for:

****Women have no leadership roles in the church at all.**

****Women are appointed only to stereotypical leadership positions such as Sunday school teacher, missions coordinator or girls' ministry leader.**

****Women are asked to preach on Sunday or Wednesday night but never on Sunday morning.**

****Women are allowed to share from the floor but never from behind the pulpit.**

****Women are given the freedom to become missionaries and preach in foreign countries, but when they come back home the "women must be silent in the church" rule comes into effect.**

****Men in ministry are treated with greater deference than women in similar positions.**

One woman who used to be a professional and is now working in the church said to me with tears in her eyes, "I am treated like dirt in the church. The business world never treated me with such a lack of respect." She was a brilliant, submissive woman whose only desire was to give her gift to the church.

The patriarchal spirit blinds leaders' eyes to the fact that women are not being released into ministry.

I have had scores of foreign men tell me that they—and their nation—have no problem releasing women into ministry. Often this astounds me because women from the same country have just unburdened their hearts to me about the restrictions they face as ministers. The men don't know there is a problem because, not being women themselves, they don't have to deal with it.

CURRENT TRENDS More and more women are being called into ministry today. And those who are already leaders are hungry to be used of God. Consider these statistics from David Barrett, a church growth expert based in Richmond, Virginia:

****Of the 1 million pastors in the world, 80,000 are women.**

****Of 5.5 million full-time Christian workers, 3.3 million (60 percent) are women.**

****Five percent (50,000) of the 950,000 ordained clergy in the world are women. This figure would be much higher if it were based on the number of women who are actually preaching. Many of them are unable to find a group that will ordain them.**

In 1997 the Denver Post reported that in the previous year more than 27,000 students were preparing for ordination at 230 seminaries accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Nearly 8,000, or 28 percent, were women, a significant jump from less than 5 percent in 1972.

In spite of the trend toward women in ministry, there is ample evidence for the continuing gender bias in the church:

****According to EP News Service, May 2, 1997, a study of 15 Protestant denominations showed that women in leadership roles are paid less than their male counterparts—\$5,000 per year less on the average.**

****George Barna reports in Today's Pastors that men represent 97 percent of all senior pastors. Relatively few women reach that status, even though more than one-quarter of the students**

enrolled in Protestant seminaries are women, and increasing numbers are seeking to become senior pastors.

****Barna** says most of the women who reach senior pastor level do so in mainline churches—the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Pentecostal Church, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. For theological reasons, many of the Baptist and evangelical denominations prohibit women from becoming senior pastors.

****Barna** also says women who do make it to the top in a local church generally are older than their male counterparts, serve in older churches and are more likely to lead congregations that have fewer than 100 people.

Statistically, it seems certain regions of the United States are more affected by the patriarchal spirit than others. California is probably the most open to women in ministry, while some areas of the South are still closed to a large extent. There is a stronghold in Southern culture that influences the thinking of both men and women with regard to the role of women in the church.

The good news is that some apostolic leaders who used to vocally oppose women in church government have had a dramatic change of heart. Dr. Gary Greig, one of the theologians who worked with me on Women of Destiny, found that he was so entrenched in the teaching he received in seminary that he had to fast for two weeks before God could open his eyes to revelation from Scripture that shows women can hold any position in the church.

WHAT CAN WE DO? How do we as leaders help eradicate the patriarchal spirit? We must ask ourselves some serious questions:

1. Am I influenced by this spirit?

2. Do I have any bitterness toward those of a different gender?

3. Have I ever seriously studied a position other than one prohibiting women to minister?

4. Have I as a leader (pastor or otherwise) ever asked an objective party whether or not I have a problem with releasing women into ministry?

We must deal with the spirit in ourselves before we can work to change the attitudes of those around us. We must also guard against bitterness or negative attitudes toward those who disagree with us when we are ushering women into ministry. And of course, we must pray.

I believe it is God's hour for the release of women into the fullness of their callings. But we must tread lightly in order to keep from interfering with the Holy Spirit's plan to bring about the release.

As a woman with a call on your life, you can do several things to ease your situation when you sense that a patriarchal spirit is trying to hold you back. First, trust God to make a way where there seems to be no way. I know from experience that He will do this.

Second, keep your heart right. Bless those who despitefully use you.

Third, make sure you aren't doing any strange things that will draw attention to yourself or bring unnecessary fire. Fourth, ask the Lord if the hindrance is a demonic spirit or simply religious tradition.

Then pray the Word for your church and ask God to bring revelation. Search the Scriptures for prayers you can pray without getting into charismatic witchcraft.

Finally, seek the Lord for revelation on how to break down the

powers of darkness that are preventing women from being received into ministry.

One of the saddest results of the patriarchal spirit is that it prohibits men and women from working together in team ministry. I believe God desires to heal the gender gap so we can come together to minister, reach the lost and bring forth fruitfulness in the generations.

It is my dream that the patriarchal spirit will be defeated in the next few years. For those of you who have daughters or know a young woman who longs to preach the gospel, I have a dream: that there will come a day when the question “Should women be silent in the church?” is never asked as they serve in the kingdom of God.

Read a companion devotional.

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