

Why We Need to Restore the Diverse New Testament Church

“You’re not giving me any softballs,” Pastor Sharon Hodde Miller laughs, after I ask another interview question about a loaded sociopolitical subject. (In fairness, she brought up the topic in question that time.) But she doesn’t run away from the subject, instead clearly articulating the importance of racial diversity in today’s church.

Perhaps it’s only fitting. Our new *Charisma News* podcast mini-series, “New Year, New Voices,” profiles rising leaders in the charismatic movement. Miller—an author and speaker who recently founded Bright City Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina—concludes the interview by noting that being a leader in today’s world means tackling the hard questions with grace and love. And in this episode of the podcast, she tackles plenty of complicated questions, from navigating her own call to ministry as a woman to promoting racial diversity within the church.

Read it here.

This interview—originally recorded for our “New Year, New Voices” podcast series—has been edited for length and clarity. Listen to the full interview here.

Berglund: Can you start by telling me your testimony?

Miller: I grew up in the church. I grew up in a really wonderful Christian home. I have a great relationship with my parents, who are wonderful, wonderful people. But I would say that while I grasped it as a kid, the gospel really came alive for me in this new way when I was in college. Up until then, I was very preoccupied with being just this good Christian kid. But I don’t think I totally grasped just the radical nature of the gospel until college. And then it was right around that

time that I discerned a call to ministry.

So right after college, I actually worked for Proverbs 31 Ministries. I don't know if you're familiar with them at all; Lysa TerKeurst is the president, and now the ministry is huge. But back then it was just a tiny little ministry. I think there were maybe five of us. I worked as Lysa's intern and assistant, and I just traveled with her and learned the ropes of women's ministry. During that time, I was also discerning my own path. I realized that I wanted to learn more and get better equipped for ministry. So after I worked for Proverbs 31, I went back to school, and I got my Master of Divinity, and then I actually also got my Ph.D. Also during that time, I got married and started having kids. Then fast forward to a year ago, when my husband and I—we met in seminary, and he also got his Ph.D.—started a church together. So we have been busy.

Berglund: Tell me about Bright City Church. How have the early stages been going so far?

Miller: It has been a wild, wild ride. We never wanted to plant and hunt. Let me just say that. We never wanted to plant a church. People would always say, "Have you ever thought about starting a church?" We would say no. You know, we know people that planted churches and it was really hard. But also, we felt personality-wise that we just weren't the people for starting a church. We envisioned church planters as being these entrepreneurial, sales-type people, and that is not really our style. So we thought, *That's just not something God would call us to.*

Then a couple years ago, in the middle of the night, my husband was awake, tossing and turning. He couldn't go to sleep. He finally said, "God is this You? Do You have something to say?" In that moment, he felt God say, "I want you to start a church."

The funny thing is, he did not tell me that happened. He went to sleep.

Then the next morning, he woke up and thought, *I'm not telling anybody about that*, because he didn't want to do it. Finally, he did tell me. We're not people who get visions very often. That was just not something he'd ever said to me before. So when he said that, I said, "You know, we've got to take this seriously. We need to start asking God for confirmation." And that is exactly what happened.

Over the next several months, God sent these clear-as-a-bell signs that we were supposed to be planting. So eventually, we reached a point where we said, "God has been patient with us. He's been gracious to us. He has sent us so many confirmations, but at some point, if we keep asking for confirmation, we're just being disobedient." So we said yes.

I guess that was around November or December, and then that following September is when we launched Bright City Church. [My husband] is the lead pastor, and I have a teaching pastor role. It's been the adventure of a lifetime.

Berglund: You mentioned you're a teaching pastor. The idea of women as pastors is still controversial for many churches and denominations. You talked about how you felt that call to ministry as part of your testimony. Did you receive any pushback when you tried to then follow that calling out?

Miller: First of all, thank you for asking me that question. When I first discerned the call to ministry, I was actually at a Southern Baptist Church, where—you know, women were not leading in my church. So that was one of the reasons why I went to Proverbs 31 and for a long time just really focused on women's ministry. I never felt compelled to become a pastor, to get ordained, any of that. I loved doing women's ministry, and I still do. So that was the path for a really long time.

But throughout the last number of years, my husband has been

my biggest cheerleader and my biggest advocate. God bless him; he really believes in my gifts. And he takes seriously that as my husband, part of his call is to steward my gifts—like with me being his wife, he feels like he's going to answer to God one day for how he stewarded my gifts. That's been a conversation we've had a lot, where I think it weighs really heavily on him that he sees the speaking gifts in me.

I was going on my merry way, writing books and speaking. Occasionally, I was speaking at larger conferences where I was speaking to men, but most of the time, I was speaking to women. But when we discerned this call to plant this church, it was actually really important to my husband that I would have a pastor title.

I was still very open-handed about it, because our kids are also really young. My oldest is 7, and then we have a 4-year-old and a 1-year-old. So my need to be home is pretty high right now. Just to be with them. I'm already traveling some, and so I knew if I was going to have a pastor title, I wanted to do it justice. I knew there were expectations attached to that. That was kind of how the teaching pastor title came about; we felt like that communicated to the church kind of a narrow understanding of just what my role is in the church right now.

But in addition to just him believing in my gifts and feeling like I needed to exercise my gifts in the church, another reason why he really wanted me to have that title is we're in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. We're in one of the most highly educated areas in the country. There are three major universities. There is Research Triangle Park here that draws a lot of really brilliant people. Women here are leading in the workplace. They are CEOs. They are VPs. They are doctors. They are lawyers. They are professors. So women are leading outside of the church, but when they walk in the doors of the church, women are not always being given a lot of guidance on how to exercise their leadership gifts in a way that invests

in the kingdom of God. My husband said, "We need to be teaching women that. We need to be teaching women how to steward their leadership gifts in the world, and they need to see you doing that."

So, for those many reasons, it was really important to him that I would take that position as teaching pastor. But at the end of the day, we are not doing this simply for pragmatic reasons, but because we also believe that this is biblical. Throughout the Bible, we see Deborah the judge. We see Huldah the prophet. We see Lydia, who was this influential woman who helped start the church in Philippi. We see Phoebe and other really influential women who helped launch the early church. We see Junia, who's counted as one of the apostles.

We see all these women in the Bible, especially in the early church, whose priority was not, "I am a woman. Give me my rights." Their priority was, "Hey, a whole lot of people don't know about Jesus. How can we leverage our gifts and our influence so people meet him?" So we see that precedent in Scripture, and we really want our church to be a New Testament church that way.

You mentioned this is a really controversial topic. I also want to say that we personally don't believe this is an issue worth dividing over. We believe this is an issue that Christians of good conscience who uphold the full witness of Scripture just come to different conclusions on and that we do not have to be divided over it. We can still be in unity and in fellowship with folks who do come to different conclusions than we do. So we hold all of those things together. Really and truly, this is just about proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to as many people as possible.

Berglund: You mentioned that where you minister, there's a lot of women who are getting higher education and going into the workforce. Do you think that those leadership trends will also continue in the church? That increasingly, in the next

generation, you'll see more women in pastoral and ministering capacities?

Miller: That is hard to say. And I don't want to speak into, you know, cultural trends that I personally have not researched. But I think I will just speak from our particular context and say one thing that has really surprised me in taking this position.

I was really nervous. Because we're in the South, and women—especially evangelical women—are not usually in the role I'm occupying right now. So when we first launched the church, and we're telling people about what my role would be, I was really nervous about it. You know, we would call people about Bright City and our vision for the church and for the area. Then I'd get to the point and say, "And also I'm going to be preaching. How do you feel about that?" I would kind of hold my breath, and I wouldn't know how they were going to respond. And I was shocked by how many people's eyes just lit up. They would say, "Finally. Finally! We have needed this." We have sat across from men who have openly wept and said, "It is time. It is time."

It feels like the Spirit has been going before us in a lot of ways and just readying hearts for this. As I said earlier, I don't think that what we're doing something new. Ultimately, we want to be a New Testament church. I think we're trying to restore the radical place that women actually occupied. I mean, so much of what Paul says in the New Testament is radical—even him saying, "Men, honor your wives" was radical at that time. That was so much better and more loving than the cultural standard of the time. We just want to return to that. But it does feel like the Holy Spirit is moving in that direction right now.

Berglund: What are some other ways that you're seeing the Holy Spirit move in the next generation?

Miller: Hmm. That's a big question. Another area that we as a church are working towards is racial diversity. This is something that my eyes are newly being opened to, that—speaking of the New Testament church—in the New Testament, we see this incredible, radical diversity.

We just preached on Romans 16. It's at the very end of Romans, after Paul has gone through all this beautiful, complicated, complex theology. And he ends on Romans 16. We kind of brush over it, because it's just this list of salutations, where he's saying, "Say hello to this person and this person and this person." But if you go through that list, which is kind of a snapshot of the church in Rome at the time, there is so much diversity. You actually have racial diversity. You have Jews; you have Gentiles; you have people from all over Asia and Europe. But you also have single people, and you have married people, and you have slaves, and you have incredibly wealthy people. You have politically influential people. And they are all in this Roman church, and they all consider one another brothers and sisters in Christ. The gospel has erased the differences. It has erased class distinctions and those hierarchies.

I really have just glossed over that in the past, and I think God is waking me up to the miracle of unity that you see in the early church. As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, I think we are beginning to understand that we need to take that seriously. If we, again, want to reflect the miracle of unity that we see in the New Testament, then we have to get really intentional about diversity.

For my husband and I, it wasn't the founding vision of our church or anything like that, but we do want to be faithful to what we see in Scripture, and that is undeniably there. And I think that is becoming more and more important to young people as well, because a lot of young people are growing up with friends who have all sorts of different backgrounds.

Berglund: Obviously, you and your husband leading Bright City are both white. I think many of our readers will be wondering, “OK, if I’m a white person, how do I go about trying to encourage racial diversity at my own church?”

Miller: Taylor, you’re not giving me like any softballs, man (*laughs*). “Let’s talk about gender. Let’s talk about race.”

Berglund: In fairness, you brought up this one.

Miller: Yeah. We have sought the guidance of people who know a lot more than we do on this topic. Actually, just this past week, we were in Charlotte, North Carolina, attending training with Pastor Derwin Gray. He’s a longtime friend of ours. We knew him, I think, before we were even married. He’s got this amazing church just outside of Charlotte called Transformation Church, and it’s incredibly diverse. Derwin has this vision, and a lot of what I just said to you about the diversity of the early church came from what we have learned from him.

But we went to this training for multiethnic churches and just sat under his leadership and learned about how to move forward and develop cultural competency. Because one of the things that is a huge obstacle is not just simply getting diverse spaces, but doing it in a way that is honoring to everyone.

Sometimes what happens is a church will say, “We need to be more diverse. Let’s hire a person of color.” It’s almost kind of a tokenism where they’re hired and put on stage, but they aren’t given any real influence in the church. And if they have a different perspective, it’s chalked up to just a cultural difference, where, “You just think that because of your background, but that’s not necessarily biblical.” It’s not taking seriously the interdependence of the body of Christ, which Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 12.

So, we need to develop cultural competency about people of different backgrounds, so that you are dignifying and honoring people whose experiences are different from yours, and

dignifying and honoring the image of God in every person. So that piece is really, really important.

It can be difficult for people of color if they're the only person of color on a church staff. That actually can be really lonely and really isolating, so we wanted to just learn how to honor. Right now our worship leader is an African American woman, and she is phenomenal. We really want to care for her well, and we knew we would have to learn from people who know better than we [are] to do that.

So, I would say, listen. Read from folks who are talking about this. Listen to your brothers and sisters of color what they're saying, and then really take it seriously. That's super important. And then, honestly, hire people of color. That really practical step of hiring people of color and having them onstage leading is important.

Berglund: In your own personal quiet time, what has God been putting on your heart right now?

Miller: Oh, so many things. But I'll share this. I wouldn't necessarily say this is something I've been passionate about, but it's just ministering to me a lot in this season of our lives: Jesus talking about all who are weary and heavy laden coming to him because His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Because we just started a church, and our church is a year old, we are in a season of picking up very, very heavy things. Starting a church is extremely difficult. So there are days when we just feel really weighed down. And I've been leaning into that language a lot and remembering that, whenever God calls us to pick up something really heavy to carry, He is going to carry the lion's share of it. He is bearing up the majority of the weight.

So, whenever I am feeling weighed down by the responsibility ahead of us, when I feel overburdened, that is a moment for me to stop and ask, "Am I carrying something that actually God

should be carrying? Have I taken on something onto myself, onto my shoulders, that I was never meant to bear?" To make sure I'm handing over things like the success of our church. That's a huge weight. And when I take that onto myself, I do feel almost suffocated by it. But I remember that God didn't call us to succeed; He called us to obey. So by handing the weight of the success of our church back over to God, there's so much lightness in that—whenever I give back to Him what is only His to bear.

Berglund: You've also got a new book out: *Nice*. Can you tell people a little bit about that and where they can pick it up if they want to keep hearing more from you?

Miller: It's called *Nice: Why We Love to Be Liked and How God Calls Us to More*. This book was birthed out of my own grappling with this kind of false faith that I realized I was practicing at times, where I was putting on this mask of "nice Christianity" that was only really skin-deep. It was also able to hide a lot of what was going on underneath me—like what was really going on inside of me.

I think that especially for those of us raised in the church, it is very easy to pull this off. We know how to look like a nice Christian. We know how to give all the right answers and to do all the right activities, whether or not we are actually flourishing in Christ.

I saw this tendency in me, and I noticed that it was actually bearing a lot of really bad fruit. Jesus says that you can know a tree by its fruit, and nice Christianity looks just like what we're called to in so many ways that you can only know it by its fruit. I started to notice that I was being nice instead of truthful. I was being nice instead of honest. I was being nice instead of courageous. This was coming out in relationships, but also coming out in ministry, where I knew God was prompting me to say something that was biblical and true, but I didn't want people to reject me. I didn't want

people to stop reading me. And so I would hesitate. I would flounder a little bit. I wanted to be nice.

That worked so well for me. It got me so many things. But when I saw that, I realized, "You know what? This is an issue in my heart." I think that it's really an issue in the church as well.

So, I decided to look at what the bad fruits of niceness are: fruits like cowardice, inauthenticity, self-righteousness or even corruption—where we settle for someone who's nice to us, regardless of what's going on behind the scenes. Seeing all these bad fruits, I turned my attention to the question of "OK then, do we simply say, 'Don't do that. Do this'? Or should I help people to cultivate something better?" Because fruit of the Spirit is fruit that grows out of us. It's not simply a different mask we put on.

So that was the vision for the book. It's still honestly really convicting to me on a daily basis. ... The ironic thing is, I think writing that book on *Nice* sort of has prepared me to just lean into hard conversations, because we are in this really polarized time where people don't always receive it well. But it's really important.

I think that part of being a leader right now actually means modeling, "How do we talk about these really hard things, but in a way that is gentle and kind and unifying instead of just shying away from that?" Because otherwise, we have this fragile appearance of unity. I think having those conversations is actually really important right now.

Find Sharon Hodde Miller on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.