

Should Churches Exclude Women from Senior Pastor Role?

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Lifeway Research recently released the results of a survey involving 1000 Protestant pastors concerning the level of their acceptance of women in leadership. They found that most would accept women leading Bible studies, but only 44% of evangelical pastors and 14% of Baptist pastors answered in the affirmative when asked if their church permitted women to serve as “senior pastors.”

“Senior pastor” is not a Biblical term, but for many Protestant pastors, it is the highest position of authority in the local church. Since “authority” is the central issue for them, they exclude women from that position.

For other churches it may be the position of “elder” that is off limits to women, but the issue is the same—“authority.” One influential mega church, for example, allows women pastors, but only men can be elders. They explain that the governing body for their church is their board of elders, and since, in their opinion, women cannot exercise governing authority, all elders must be men.

No Biblical Evidence of Women Being Excluded from Authority

The truth is that neither Paul nor any New Testament writer ever made “authority” the issue when it comes to women serving in leadership roles in the church. The Greek word for “authority” in the New Testament is *exousia*, and it is found 102 times in the Greek New Testament, and numerous other times in its verb and other cognate forms. Not once is a woman told she cannot exercise *exousia*.

How then are we to understand 1 Timothy 2:12, where Paul

writes, *I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man?* To understand correctly what Paul meant in this passage, it is necessary to examine his word choice. It is of utmost importance to note that the Greek word translated “authority” here is not *exousia*.

Instead of *exousia*, Paul uses the word *authentein*, and this is the only place it is found in the entire New Testament. This should immediately raise a red flag for the Bible exegete, for if he were addressing the normal exercise of authority in the church we would expect him to use the normal word for authority that he and all other Biblical writers use.

That he uses a strange Greek word that neither he nor any New Testament writer ever uses, is a clear indication that he is addressing a unique situation that exists with Timothy and the church in Ephesus where Timothy is ministering. The historical context in which Paul writes this letter to Timothy must, therefore, be taken into serious consideration.

Why Paul Used *Authentein* in this Letter

We know from 1 Timothy 1:3 that Timothy is in Ephesus at Paul’s urging to confront false teaching that is affecting the Christians in Ephesus. It is also obvious from the letter that this false teaching is having a particular effect on the women. Paul’s admonition in 2:11-12 must be understood in this context. Those who read 1 Timothy as a manual for church order are completely missing Paul’s point.

Based on the use of *authentein* in the Greco-Roman world, we know that it had very negative connotations meaning “to domineer” or “to usurp authority.” In the ancient world, it was used, at least once, in reference to a murder. The murderer was said to have committed *authentein*.

The religious and cultural milieu of Ephesus, and the fact that he and Timothy are confronting false doctrine in that city, offer the key for understanding why Paul would use

authentain in this letter.

In Ephesus, where the culture was dominated by worship of the female goddess, Artemis, female primacy prevailed. Artemis was a fertility goddess, totally independent and able to reproduce offspring without the help of a male cohort. According to one ancient legend, the female warriors, known as the Amazons, came out of Ephesus and their role model was Artemis.

Modern archaeology has uncovered ancient documents that confirm the sort of heresy Paul and Timothy were probably confronting in Ephesus. In these gnostic writings it is obvious that myths of Artemis have become entangled with the Genesis account of creation. In these accounts, Eve is the dominant character and the one who gives life to Adam. One document reads:

“The spirit-filled woman came to him and spoke with him saying, ‘Arise Adam.’ And when he saw her, he said, ‘You are the one who has given me life. You will be called ‘the mother of the living,’ because she is my mother, she is the female healer, and the wife and the one who gave birth’ . . . For Eve is the first virgin, the one who had no husband and yet gave birth. She is the one who acted as a physical midwife to herself.”

Based on Paul’s admonitions throughout this epistle, it seems that this was the sort of thinking that was infiltrating the church in Ephesus and provoking domineering, inappropriate behavior that would be described as *authentain*. Dr. David Scholer, late Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, agrees and says that by the use of the word *authentain*, Paul is denouncing violent, inappropriate behavior.

He is persuaded that the text is not prescribing a universal norm of male leadership and female subservience. Rather, he concludes that the data supports the view that the passage is

opposing the negative behavior of certain women, “probably the women mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:15 who follow and represent the false teachers that 1 and 2 Timothy are dedicated to opposing” (Hyatt, *In the Spirit We’re Equal (2nd Edition)*, 418).

In Summary

In her just released 500-page treatise, *In the Spirit We’re Equal (2nd Edition)*, Dr. Sue Hyatt demonstrates that women in the early church functioned as teachers, pastors, evangelists and apostles (Hyatt, *In the Spirit We’re Equal (2nd Edition)*, 126-34). Couple that knowledge with this breakthrough understanding of 1 Timothy 2:11-12, and it is obvious that women are not excluded from any leadership role in the church, including “senior pastor.” {eoa}

Dr. Eddie Hyatt is an ordained minister and Biblical scholar. The information for this article was derived primarily from Dr. Susan Hyatt Hyatt’s latest book, *In the Spirit We’re Equal (2nd Edition)*, available from Amazon and her website at .

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