

The Working Woman's Dilemma

Even today, some church leaders tell Christian women that God wants them to stay at home. But what does the Bible really say?

In the small town of Berryville, in northwest Arkansas, members of the board at First Baptist Church voted in February 1997 to close their church-run day-care center. They made the abrupt decision not because the facility was too expensive to operate or because they didn't have enough children enrolled. The official reason, as stated in a letter that was mailed to parents, was that church leaders felt their day-care center was encouraging women to work outside the home.

"God intended for the home to be the center of a mother's world," the letter from First Baptist stated, adding that working moms "neglect their children, damage their marriages and set a bad example." First Baptist's day-care center board, under the direction of the pastor, also noted in their letter that families should learn to get by on the husband's single income."

The day-care center closed one month later, and parents scrambled to find another place to leave the 27 children who attended. Arkansas state officials eventually found another church in town that was willing to organize a day-care program.

Is it any wonder that so many people—and an increasing number of women—have rejected the church?

The leaders of First Baptist of Berryville were totally out of touch with the needs of the women in their community, and thankfully they didn't trigger a trend of day-care center closings when news of their decision made national headlines. But the sad fact is that the mind-set that led the men of this church to act so irrationally is common in the evangelical

church today. We may live in the 21st century, but 18th-century ideas about women's roles are still embedded in our minds—and leaders twist and misinterpret the Bible to defend this view.

WOMEN SHOULDN'T WORK?

The “women shouldn't work” argument comes in various forms. The mildest variety—and the one that actually makes sense in some situations—states that God intends for a wife to nurture her children while they are young and that she should let her husband provide the bulk of family income during those years. This line of reasoning works for some families in wealthier Western countries, and many women in the United States enjoy playing with their toddlers at home all day while daddy is at the office.

Things get more complicated for families when they cannot survive on one income. There are millions of two-parent families who struggle to pay their bills, especially if the father works at a factory, a convenience store or a construction site. The wife is often forced to find at least a part-time job while she juggles childcare responsibilities.

And then there are many single mothers who must work even if they qualify for partial welfare benefits. Perhaps because of their own wrong choices, abandonment or social disadvantages these women struggle constantly to balance the pressures of home and work.

They should be able to turn to the church for moral support and spiritual resources. But often what we offer them is a slap in the face. We often quote to them Titus 2:4-5: “Encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home” (NASB, emphasis added).

Then we twist this verse to say that God requires all women to fit into the cookie-cutter mold of the full-time Christian

housewife. We also tell women in the church that they should model their lives after the “virtuous woman” (KJV) described in Proverbs 31—and then we misread that passage to imply that she too was a stay-at-home mother.

But that is not what the Scripture says. First of all, the Proverbs 31 woman was never meant to be considered normative for every Christian woman. The Hebrew poetry employed in this passage of Proverbs is an acrostic; each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and describes some aspect of a godly woman’s life.

The “woman” described here is actually a composite, not just one woman. Christian women who uphold the Proverbs 31 woman as a virtuous ideal must realize that God does not expect them to emulate her unrealistic schedule because she is actually several “model” women rolled into one.

But even if we view this woman as one individual, we need to recognize that her work was not limited to domestic chores. She was a shrewd businesswoman who was involved in real estate, agriculture and a textile business. She also employed other women to help her (see Prov. 31:13, 16, 19, 24).

Traditionalists who champion this verse as a picture of the happy housewife would probably not endorse the lifestyle of this woman if they met her on the street. In her ancient Middle Eastern society, she was an entrepreneur.

She stayed occupied with her home-based business day and night—and someone else probably watched her children when she was selling linen in the marketplace, dealing with merchants, buying fields or making wine with the fruit of her vineyard. She was most definitely not a stay-at-home mom in the suburban American sense of

the word! Those who use this passage to keep women locked into an exclusively domestic role are misusing Scripture to hold women in a crippling form of religious bondage.

DID PAUL TELL WOMEN TO STAY HOME?

Fundamentalist Christians in the United States have long contended that God's highest plan for women is to function as housewives—content to iron clothes, cook casseroles, diaper babies, bathe toddlers and perhaps master the fine art of sewing or embroidery while the children are napping. That's because we have viewed the Bible through a warped cultural lens and have imposed on the Scriptures our suburban American values and prejudice.

When this view is questioned, conservative Christians often cite Titus 2:4-5 as well as 1 Timothy 5:14: "Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach" (1 Tim. 5:14, NASB).

If we examine these two New Testament verses closely, it is obvious that what the apostle Paul was demanding of women was not domesticity but Christian faithfulness. He was not discouraging women from working outside the home.

How do I know this? Because the concept of going to work was not an option for women in the first century. Paul's concern had nothing to do with women leaving their homes to pursue careers because women in the agrarian society of Crete in the year A.D. 62 didn't do that!

We must be careful not to read into the Bible something that isn't there. We can't use Paul's instructions to the Christian women of Ephesus and Crete to concoct a doctrine about men's and women's roles. Paul was not talking about roles in either of these passages. He was addressing serious issues of character.

When he mentioned the issue of "keeping house" in 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul was encouraging married female converts to view with seriousness their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

In Titus 1:12, Paul mentions that the people of Crete were known for their laziness. Their pagan culture was crumbling

because men and women were enslaved to drunkenness, gluttony and debauchery.

It is possible that many of the men in Crete didn't work at all—perhaps they spent most of their lives drinking in their huts. Perhaps the women were living in this kind of stupor as well. So naturally when they embraced the message of Christ and joined the fledgling churches that Titus was overseeing, one of Paul's first priorities as an apostle was to disciple them in areas of personal conduct, family life and basic self-control.

Paul told the men of Crete to learn to be temperate (see Titus 2:2). They needed to break ties with their past and leave their alcoholism, promiscuity and slothfulness behind. Likewise, he told the women to learn to “keep house.”

Most likely the women were horrible at managing their domestic affairs—and they were neglecting their children in the process. In order to please God and be credible witnesses in their culture, these women would have to change the way they lived. They would have to discipline their unruly children. They would have to love them rather than neglect them. They would have to bring order where there had been domestic chaos.

When we examine 1 Timothy 5:14, we see that Paul expressed concerns about laziness among the women of Ephesus. He says in verse 13 that they are idle and that many of them had become “gossips and busybodies.” So naturally his remedy for their problem was to urge them to become women of virtue and integrity.

He instructed them to stay home (rather than wasting time spreading rumors and silly talk) and to maintain order in their homes. In fact, the word used in this passage for “keep house” is the same word used for a ruler or master.

Yet translators, perhaps because they were uncomfortable giving women a sense of authority, translated this phrase

“keep house” rather than “rule their homes.” The one exception is the Revised Standard Version, which translates 1 Timothy 5:14: “So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households.”

Disorder and unfaithfulness in the homes of the Ephesian converts were serious issues for Paul. When he listed the qualifications of an overseer in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, he wrote: “If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?” (v. 5).

In essence he says, “The Christian life must start at home. Get your own life in order. Get your marriage in order. Get your children in order. After you’ve done that, then you will have something of value to take to the world.”

This is a hard-core truth from the Bible that has universal application to us today. When we come to Christ, His transforming power should change our behavior at home.

It should change alcoholics into sober, hardworking individuals. It should change cavalier women-chasers into faithful husbands who treat their wives with respect. And it should change self-absorbed, undisciplined women into diligent disciples of Jesus Christ.

But we cannot use these verses to imply that Paul’s command to “keep house” or to be “workers at home” requires that all Christian women in the 21st century stay in their kitchens all day or shun their God-ordained career paths. Those who teach this view impose a cruel and legalistic burden on women that isn’t supported by Scripture. We need to stop teaching it and release Christian women to follow the Holy Spirit’s leading with regard to their callings and careers.

There is a world to win for Christ, and too often the church has told half our volunteers that they can’t enlist. Let’s break the molds and tear down the barriers. We need women on the front lines!

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