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## Spiritual Gifts, Pastoring, and Gender: an Ongoing Dialogue

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*BOUBAKAR SANOU*  
**SPIRITUAL GIFTS, PASTORING, AND  
GENDER: AN ONGOING DIALOGUE**

**Introduction**

In Joel 2:28-29, God promises an innovation regarding how He will make His Spirit available in the last days. He promises, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” As David Baker notes, the innovation in this promise is:

. . . not in the means of revelation but in its recipients. The beneficiaries of the Spirit-gift and its accompanying revelation will not only be a special class, the prophets, or even a few folk. . . . Rather, this bestowal will be universal, blessing young and old, male and female, free or slave; it will affect all of humanity. (2006, p. 108)

In other words, God promises to give His Spirit and gifts without discrimination to both genders (“your sons and daughters,” and “both men and women”), young and old, from all walks of life, races, and social strata. In Acts 2:16-21, the apostle Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32 to assert that the equal filling of the Spirit for the 120 disciples (among whom were women, cf. Acts 1:14) was an element of the fulfillment of God’s promise through the prophet Joel. He also points out that, from then on, the pouring out of God’s Spirit on believers will be an ongoing process: “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39).

The subject of women’s ordination to pastoral ministry is a hot-button issue that has divided many Christian denominations into two sharply contrasting groups (Zikmund, 2003; Zagano, 2008; Deasy, 2009; Bauer & Sanou, 2015; Campbell, Sanou, & Williams, 2017). This article examines the role of women

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in the gospel ministry from the perspective of spiritual giftedness. The main focus will be to see if the gift of pastoring is gender-specific or not. In the following reflections there are unanswered questions for each reader to personally ponder.

## **What Are Spiritual Gifts, Their Prominence, and Purpose in the Bible?**

It has been pointed out that the number of times a Biblical principle or teaching is referred to in the Bible can often help determine its importance (Moskala, 2015, p. 7). Using this principle of Biblical hermeneutics, the subject of spiritual gifts is a vital one, since spiritual gifts are directly mentioned in four different parts of Scripture: Rom.12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:7-16; and 1 Pet. 4:10-11. In Eph. 4:12, Paul summarizes the core purpose of spiritual gifts as that of equipping God's "people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

Spiritual gifts are thus special abilities given by God to believers to fully equip them to serve Him, the church, and witness to the world (Eph. 4:12-13). The Bible is unequivocal that spiritual gifts are apportioned to every believer (1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11) only as the Holy Spirit determines (1 Cor. 12:11). The body of Christ will truly be built up as every single believer, male or female, is allowed "to use whatever gift they have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Pet. 4:10). Good stewardship of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is what is emphasized in 1 Pet. 4:10. Just as believers must give an account of the use of their time, body, and material things God has blessed them with, they will also be accountable for how they used their spiritual gifts (Eph. 5:15-17; 1 Cor. 3:17; Matt. 25:14-30).

## **Is the Spiritual Gift of Pastoring Gender-Specific?**

According to 1 Cor. 12:12, the church is a body of interdependent members upon all of whom the Spirit bestows His many and diverse gifts. Among those gifts, Eph. 4:11 states that the Holy Spirit gives some of the members of the body of Christ the grace, power, and authority to serve as pastors. As such, service as a pastor is first and foremost a spiritual gift rather than a mere profession or office. Therefore, deciding who gets what spiritual gift(s) is not the prerogative of an ecclesiastical body. Being gifted spiritually means that those extraordinary abilities have their source in the Holy Spirit, who then "dis-

tributes them to each one, just as he determines” (1 Cor. 12:11). I personally view 1 Cor. 12:11 both as a call for humility to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in matters of the distribution of spiritual gifts to believers and as a warning not to interfere with the ministry of the Holy Spirit in any person’s life.

There is no indication in the Bible that some spiritual gifts are only given to particular genders. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit and any of the gifts He dispenses can be given to any person who: (1) repents and is baptized in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38); (2) obeys God (Acts 5:32); and (3) understands and appreciates spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:13-14; Eph. 4:17-24). There is no gender-specific condition for receiving the Holy Spirit or any of His gifts. Because Paul previously included both men and women as part of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27), the action of bestowing spiritual gifts on “each one” in 1 Cor. 12:11 is necessarily gender neutral. Since it is the Holy Spirit who determines who gets what spiritual gift(s) in the body of Christ, why do some Christians still insist that women have not been called to serve as pastors? If no spiritual gift is gender-specific, should a woman, called by God and gifted by the Holy Spirit, be denied any role of ministry or leadership in the church just because she is a woman?

Convinced of her calling to the gospel ministry and that of other women, Ellen White, a female pioneer and recognized prophetess of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, strongly believed that “there are women who should labor in the gospel ministry” because “the cause [of God] would suffer great loss without this kind of labor. Again and again the Lord has shown me that women teachers are just as greatly needed to do the work to which He has appointed them as are men” (1990, p. 325). By recommending that the tithe (which was used in the Old Testament to take care of the all-male Levites and priests) be used to pay women in pastoral ministry (1990, p. 324), Ellen White evidently saw no viable distinction between men and women serving as pastors. Men, as well as women, can rightly serve as spiritual Levites and priests.<sup>1</sup>

I not only believe that Christians will give an account to God about what they did with their spiritual gifts, I also believe that any person, whatever his or her motivation, who prevents others from faithfully stewarding their spiritual gifts will be accountable to God. I think of Pharaoh Necho, who warned

<sup>1</sup>Some Seventh-day Adventists may want to argue that Ellen White was writing here about pastors’ wives as co-laborers with their husbands in pastoral ministry. My response is that Ellen White did not say “there are pastors’ wives who should labor in the gospel ministry,” but rather “there are women who should labor in the gospel ministry.” Could “women” be limited to “pastors’ wives”? Evidently not. Should a woman be married to a pastor before she is allowed to exercise her spiritual gift of pastoring? There is no such biblical condition.

King Josiah not to interfere with what God was doing through him (Necho) lest God destroy him (Josiah). Sadly, good King Josiah died because he “did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God” (2 Chron. 35:20-24). I also think of Gamaliel, who when the disciples were persecuted for preaching Jesus, warned his colleagues in the Sanhedrin to “consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. . . . For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:34-39). If the great job many women do in pastoral ministry is from God, it means that trying to restrict them from fully utilizing their gift of pastoring amounts to fighting a losing battle against God; with Him on their side, no one will be able to stop these women.

### **What Role Should Women Occupy in Pastoral Ministry?**

The answer to this question is straightforward and simple. Because the gift of pastoring is not gender-specific, women called to pastoral ministry should have the same roles and privileges as their male colleagues. Is it not unthinkable that the Holy Spirit would give the same spiritual gift to a man and a woman and expect the woman to play a lesser role in exercising that gift? If both men and women are equally qualified by the Holy Spirit to serve as pastors of God’s flock, could treating them differently solely because of their genders, over which they had no choice, be seen as a form of unfairness?

### **What Does the Church Make of the Fruit Born by Women in Pastoral Ministry?**

Jesus states in Matt. 7:15-20 that it is the fruit a person bears that determines the truthfulness or not of what that person claims to be or have. First, John 4:1 also recommends that the church test every spirit to ascertain if it is from God before believing it. How does the body of Christ evaluate the claim a person makes that they have this or that gift? We allow the person to exercise the spiritual gift they claim to have, and then affirm or not affirm them on the basis of how effective they are in exercising that gift in building up the body of Christ. This has been the case for both men and women regarding all other spiritual gifts except that of serving as a pastor. Has the church failed to see how some women are effective at building up the body of Christ in pastoral ministry? Have we failed to see the tangible evidences that the Spirit is using many women to grow their congregations spiritually, sometimes even more than their male colleagues? If their capability and effectiveness is palpable

and can in no way be denied, why are some Christians still adamant in denying their call to pastoral ministry? If their fruit and effectiveness testify to their calling, why are they denied ordination? Could it be unfair and discriminatory that a man and a woman who both feel called to pastoral ministry and who both capably serve as shepherds of their congregations not be given equal opportunity towards ordination (Johnsson, 2017, p. 15)?

## Does It Make Sense to Ordain Women as Elders but Not as Pastors?

The New Testament speaks of pastor/shepherd (*poimen*) as a divinely endowed ministry function rather than a role or office formally appointed by the church (Eph 4:7, 11; cf. 1 Pet 5:1). Even in the early church, pastoring was not a separate office of its own but a ministry carried out by elders or bishops. As far as we know, it was not until the Reformation, in correcting the abuses of doctrine and power brought in by the traditional system of bishops and priests, that the term *pastor* became the title of a role formally identified and appointed by the church (Reeve, 2015, p. 203).

Some Christian denominations have made the choice to ordain women as local church elders but not as pastors.<sup>2</sup> This choice is in stark contradiction to the New Testament precedent of pastoring as a ministry fulfilled by elders. Two questions that keep demanding Biblically-based answers are: “If women qualify to be ordained to the Biblical spiritual leadership ministry of elders, what really prevents them from also being ordained as pastors?” and, “Can women only be good as elders but not as pastors?”

## What Is Ordination Really About?

To begin with, it is noteworthy to mention that there is no Biblical command to ordain or not ordain women to the gospel ministry (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 378; Moskala, 2015, p. 1). The contemporary practice of ordination to pastoral ministry is in stark contrast with the New Testament practice of choos-

<sup>2</sup>An example of such denominations is the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA). In 1975, it officially voted that “both men and women are eligible to serve as elders and receive ordination to this position of service in the church.” That historic decision was reaffirmed in 1975 [See The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist minister’s handbook* (Silver Spring, MD: The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Ministerial Association, 2009), p. 94]. According to the SDA Church Manual, elders play an important role of spiritual leadership in the church [See The Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist church manual* (Silver Spring, MD: The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Secretariat, 2010), p. 71]. Although the SDA Church Manual says that “the authority and work of elders are confined to the church in which their election has been made” (p. 73), does that make their spiritual leadership of a lesser grade than that of local church pastors?

ing, appointing, setting apart, or commissioning believers to ministry (Johnsson, 2017, p. 13). Some have argued against women's ordination to pastoral ministry from the perspective of headship in reference to Gen. 3:16: "To the woman he [God] said, 'I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and *he will rule over you*'" (emphasis added). But as stated earlier on the basis of Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12, ordination to the gospel ministry is neither about headship nor is it about authority (see also van Bemmelen, 1998, pp. 297-311). Serving in the gospel ministry is simply about accepting one's divine call and using one's spiritual gifts to serve God and others. Ordination to pastoral ministry should then be subsequent to a public recognition of a man's or woman's divine call and enabling of the Holy Spirit to function as a pastor. That recognition should not be tied to any policy but based only on the undeniable fruit of the person's ministry (Matt. 7:20).

### **What Do We Make of John 16:12 in Relation to Women's Ordination?**

Jesus said to His disciples in John 16:12, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." Could it be that it was because of His contemporaries' cultural limitations that Jesus did not say or do many things such as recruit women among His twelve disciples? If so, is such a principle of cultural sensitivity applicable in every context today? I strongly believe that Biblical principles have a universal application. At the same time, God's recorded dealings with people in their cultural contexts also reveals that, because He works in redemptive ways within human contexts, in some cases He made room for human culture with its weaknesses (e.g., Gen 15:9-21 where God offered to go through a Near Eastern covenant ratification ceremony that Abraham could relate to as definite surety). As Bruce Bauer and I pointed out:

In many instances, knowing the effect of drastic change, God chose to patiently work to change people's practices in a culture rather than forcing things so quickly on a people that they could not handle the change. It is therefore quite appropriate to suggest that the revelation of God's principles has often been progressive rather than spelling out God's ultimate ethic or ideal. For example, he tolerated Jacob's marriage to two sisters (Gen 29:15-28), a practice that he later outlawed (Lev 18:18), and in the New Testament there is no frontal attack on slavery, yet who would argue for a Biblical basis for slavery? (Bauer & Sanou, 2015, pp. 176-177)

The good news is that every human culture is dynamic rather than static. Because cultures are always changing, there is hope that the cultures where women's ordination to the gospel ministry may be very detrimental to the mission of the church would one day be able to fully embrace the Biblical fact that the call to pastoral ministry is not gender-specific. Who could think in 1930s America that women would one day be wearing slacks, even to church? Who could imagine in Jesus' days that there would be women graduating from rabbinical schools and being ordained in orthodox and conservative Judaism (Hein, n.d.)? Where there are no reasonable cultural limitations to women being ordained to pastoral ministry, the church needs to do its very best to side with the Holy Spirit, who indiscriminately dispenses His gifts to both men and women for the building up of the body of Christ.

## Conclusion

The question of whether or not to ordain women to pastoral ministry has been an ongoing issue in several Christian denominations. My reflection on this issue from the perspective of spiritual giftedness convinces me that because there is no single gender-specific spiritual gift, the Christian church's theology of the call to pastoral ministry and ordination should be solidly "grounded in the endowment of the Spirit, the divine calling, and a life of commitment to God, to His people, and to the world" (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 379). However, because of the negative impact the ordination of women might have on the church's mission and ministry in some contexts, it is wise to also be mindful of the cultural contexts within which the church ministers (Bauer & Sanou, 2015). In applying Biblical principles, "there needs to be great sensitivity to the standpoint of the listener at a given time. Truths that may be sweet at a later time can provoke unnecessary opposition when given before the listeners are ready" (Paulien, 2011, pp. 91-92).

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