

Doctrinal Dialogue

Anderson University School of Theology

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A Response to Dr. John Stanley's

"Reclaiming the Church of God Heritage of Women in Ministry"

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I would like to thank Anderson University School of Theology for giving me the opportunity to be a respondent on this important topic. I love our seminary and I'm deeply grateful for the significant contribution my seminary colleagues and professors have made to my life and ministry.

I grew up believing that women should not be pastors or leaders in the church. My childhood experiences, church tradition and biblical understandings left me uncomfortable with female clergy. I was nurtured in the Episcopal church before it ordained women. When God called me out of the Episcopal church into the Church of God I came face to face with this disquieting subject. How could the Church of God justify ordaining women? How did they handle the relevant biblical texts? How was I to respond to the claims of the highly capable women that I met in seminary that God had called them into professional ministry? During my seminary years from 1977-1980 I came to understand that it was biblical for women to lead the church. Still, it didn't have much relevance for me. I was more concerned with learning how to pastor. I essentially ignored the subject for eight years.

During a period of pastoral transition, prior to my arriving as pastor in York Springs, Pennsylvania in 1982, the congregation changed their by-laws to prohibit women from serving as pastors or elders. In 1988, 1990 and 1995 I addressed the by-laws issue but when I sensed resistance from the leaders I backed off. I didn't want to make waves. It was not important enough to me to risk anything. In 1995 our congregation was seeking an associate pastor. I had to inform qualified women that our congregation could not call them. I was embarrassed and ashamed. Around that same time, Dr's John and Susie Stanley made an appointment with me encouraging me to

address this improper situation. I promised that I would go to the wall. I preached eleven sermons on women in ministry. Our leaders prayed and considered the texts and issues. As a result our congregation changed its attitudes and by-laws. Through the Wesleyan/Holiness Womens Clergy, Dr. Susie Stanley published a booklet “Reclaiming the Wesleyan/holiness Heritage of Women Clergy” co-authored by Dr. John Stanley and me. My eleven sermons, a case study on the transformation at Chapel Hill Church of God and Biblical and theological written by Dr. Stanley were part of that booklet.¹

With the assistance of a Teaching Faith and Life Teaching grant from Louisville Institute, John Stanley and I traveled throughout the United States speaking on women in ministry. Still, not content that we were reaching a broad enough audience, in 2003, I wrote “*Called, Equipped and No Place to Go*” published by Warner Press. In this same time period I also enjoyed the privilege of serving on the Church of God Clergy Task Force advancing the case for women in ministry. I served with many excellent leaders who possess a big heart for the church and the truth. We started several initiatives including a video, a web-page, a bibliography, and made presentations at colleges and camp meetings. Commitment and motivation remains quite high but there is still much progress to be made. I will always be grateful that John and Susie Stanley’s nudged me to do what is right. They have been my mentors and colleagues as we have sought to address this subject. Throughout their careers, they have worked tirelessly to advance the cause of women in ministry. I could not overstate their contribution. We are all in their debt.

With that context I now respond to John’s excellent paper. John has succeeded

¹ Randy Huber and John Stanley, *Reclaiming the Wesleyan/Holiness Heritage of Women Clergy: Sermons, A Case Study and Resources*, Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy c/o Messiah College, Grantham, PA

in highlighting accomplishing his five key goals.

1. As a holiness church the Church of God has a heritage of accepting women as ordained pastors and leaders.
2. Women pastors and preachers have always been intrinsic to leadership of the Church of God.
3. The Bible supports the ordination of women.
4. The cloudy texts of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 do not preclude women in ministry.
5. Obedience to scripture and continuity with our heritage stimulate the Church of God to take action in placing women pastors.

I say “Amen” and well-done to all five points. Dr. Stanley’s arguments are clear, concise, accurate, biblical, relevant and timely. Space and time limitations prevented him from exploring other issues about which he is well informed. Here are a few biblical arguments that also are worthy of consideration.

There is no male/female hierarchy in the creation narratives found in Genesis 1 and 2.

The man and woman complement and complete one another and the text indicates God gave dominion over the earth to both.²

Male patriarchy is the result of the fall, not the original intention of the creator.³

The New Testament issue of male headship does not prevent women from serving as senior pastors.⁴

17027, 1999.

² I treat this subject in *Called, Equipped and No Place to Go*. Anderson, In.: Warner Press. 2003 in pages 25-27.

³ I treat this subject in *Called, Equipped and No Place to God*. Anderson, In.: Warner Press. 2003 in pages 28-30.

⁴ I treat this subject in *Called, Equipped and No Place to God*. Anderson, In.: Warner Press. 2003 in pages

I want to focus the remainder of my remarks on Dr. Stanley's final section, "What is at stake for the Church of God?" Dr. Stanley raises vital questions. "Has the Church of God become 'more apostolic and deeply spiritual' or has the Church of God leveled off in spiritual vitality"? "Are all potential clergy aware of our heritage of women in ministry?" "Do Credential Committees and Area Administrators work hard to place women pastors? Do we educate congregations on our heritage?" "Are we aware of the heartache these women, their families, and their home congregations experience as they leave the church that nourished them but refused to place them as pastors?" "Have we as the church counted the cost of the leadership we have lost?"⁵

Let me add a few questions of my own. Why has the percentage of Church of God congregations pastored by women dropped from 32% in 1925 to 6 % in 2002? Are pastors regularly teaching their congregations what the Bible says about women in ministry? Are pastors and other leaders intentionally mentoring women and advocating for their ministerial placement? Are our leaders educating pulpit committees about the Bible and our Church of God heritage on women in ministry? How should we hold pastors, leaders, educators and pulpit committees accountable for sexism, failure to expound and practice the scriptures in a manner consistent with our heritage and ignoring the ongoing injustice against their Christian sisters? Are we inclusive in our language and illustrations being sure to describe pastors as both males and females? How many Church of God pastors and leaders know the truth of scripture and our heritage but are sitting in the gallery saying and doing little or nothing as I did for eight years?

It is one thing to say that we believe in women in ministry. It is another to

72-74.

⁵ John Stanley, "Reclaiming the Church of God Heritage of Women in Ministry," 21-22.

advance the call and placement of women in our churches and institutions. James 1:22 reminds us: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (NIV)