

**Doctrinal Dialogue**  
**Anderson School of Theology**  
**“Reclaiming the Church of God Heritage of Women in Ministry”**  
**Response by Reverend Dr. Diana L. Swoope**

As a graduate of this marvelous school, I find great honor in being asked by Dean Sebastian to participate in this forum. As one of the most recently installed female Senior Pastors in the Church of God, this particular task is approached with great humility and immense gratitude to God for being called to the kingdom for such a time as this.

Dr. John Stanley has written an extremely thorough treatise on the subject of the Church of God heritage and women in ministry. I have turned the last sentence of his paper into a question to formulate the foundation for my response. Is “placing women as pastors a matter of justice, a matter of fidelity to our holiness heritage or a measure of the church’s willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit into growth and mission?”

I believe that this issue is a matter of justice. He rightly and relevantly makes a biblical case for the equality of men and women. Granted, societal history has not always affirmed his assertion. The prevailing attitude of ancient times was that women were not even fully human; making the question of equality fully irrelevant. Inequality was assumed. Dr. Stanley documented several revealing glimpses of female leaders in the Old Testament. Yet, the overall evidence is quite explicit; these women were definite anomalies.

Unwittingly, the source cited as the foundation for equality of men and women by Dr. Stanley, is the exact same source upon which the doctrine of inequality is formulated: Holy Scripture. “Women,” I was told by a man who was adamantly opposed to women preachers, meaning me, “are under the curse of Eve and cannot teach men. You are supposed to be silent in the church.” He had some other demeaning things to say, but this response paper is not the place for me to air my utter disgust and disappointment with that verbal assault. My critic referenced

the Genesis 3 account of Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, as well as several Pauline texts that have most often been utilized to justify and validate the objection to women pastors. Ironically, Pauline texts were quoted by slave owners to justify the appalling system that enslaved descendants of Africa for hundreds of years in this country. However, during the abolition movement, those texts, when set in full biblical context, were subsequently declared to be specific to the culture and time of Paul's day; not injunctions for all time.

This raises some pertinent questions in my view. How can it be that Paul's texts supporting slavery can be declared as specific to time and culture but not his texts used to suppress women? How can it be that one oppressed group is released from the tyranny of scriptural misinterpretation but not another? What happened to the application of the full guidance of scripture? What happened to the many other biblical texts supporting women in general and women ministers, apostles, deacons, and pastors in specific? How can we so readily accept the denouncement of one as unjust but not the other? How did we arrive at this place of theological contradiction?

More critical though is the question of how do we resolve this contradiction. Where do we search for a viable resolution? I believe that Dr. Stanley's inspection of the manner with which Jesus treated women is the absolute key. WDJJ: What Did Jesus Do? Jesus treated women as the joint kingdom heirs and dominion partners that they were created to be. Yes, as my detractor pointed out to me, sin did bring a curse upon men and women. Still, Paul declared that in Christ, the curse has been reversed (see Galatians 3:13). In Christ all are free. Justice is ultimately about liberation of the oppressed. So, Dr. Stanley is indeed correct. Failure to acknowledge and advance women in ministry is without doubt a matter of justice. And as the acclaimed minister of justice and peace, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so aptly declared: Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere!

Now, let us turn to the matter of fidelity to the holiness heritage of the Church of God. Like my sister Rev. Lori Salerno, I had no concept of this inequality of women and men as preachers and pastors until I ventured outside of the Church of God. As a young girl, women ministers frequented my church's pulpit nearly as much as men. Many of my mentors as a youth and young adult were female ministers and pastors. And frankly, my overall personal experiences have not corroborated this apparent inequity in the treatment of women in ministry.

It took a recent conversation with a leading Presbyterian pastor in my city to force me to the stark reality of how far the Church of God has veered off course from its identity. Within a span of two months, my Presbyterian friend had attended the installation services of two female Senior Pastors in the Church of God. My installation was one of them. He was intrigued by this and wanted to know if the Church of God had always supported women pastors. Reticently, I answered, "Yes and No." Dr. Stanley's paper unmistakably verified the "Yes" of our beginnings, and also validated the "No" of our subsequent movements over the last fifty to sixty years. Perhaps the most difficult part of that conversation was to hear my Presbyterian friend enthusiastically and proudly declare, "Our denomination has always strongly supported women pastors! We've been doing that since the 1950's!" I thought to myself, "Since the 1950's! The Church of God was supporting and greatly supported by women pastors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century!"

How ironic though. It was right around the 1950's that the numbers of women pastors seriously plummeted taking right along with it an integral descriptive of the Church of God's identity. The use of and support of women ministers was one distinctive that set this movement apart from other church bodies. Somewhere along the line something happened. Did we, as Dr. Stanley inferred, lose our way scripturally, turning away from something we always believed? Did we succumb to pressures to make the Church more "male friendly" by assuring male leadership? Were there not enough "worthy" female candidates for pastoral positions at that

time? The answers are not clear. But one thing is: The Church of God is now the witness of a somewhat religious awakening in other Christian circles; though this awakening may be more survivalist than scriptural. Female pastors are on the rise. Will we just keep watching what happens or will the real Church of God stand up? Will the real Church of God please stand up!

We must return to fostering a spiritual atmosphere in all of our churches that conditions the affirmative response of the “whosoever will” to the call of God. Frankly, in today’s atmosphere, the Church of God has great need for both men *and* women to answer the call to ministry. We must dismiss this circular and capricious debate about women preachers versus women pastors; about the prophetic “Gift” versus the prophetic “Office.” We must affirm that the Holy Spirit who “sets the members each in place, according to His will” not only knows the gender of the member being “set” in place but also dictates how that member will function in the body; a body where there is neither male nor female. We must go back to the blessed old bible! This is where our true heritage lies!

I submit that whenever matters of justice and truth are unmistakable, that the failure to embrace and enact the issues of justice and truth is definitely a matter of willingness (or unwillingness) to grow. God empowers where there is willingness. Jesus met an invalid who had lain by the Pool of Bethesda for thirty eight years (see John 5:1ff). When Jesus saw the man, he asked, “Do you want to get well? In this case, Jesus required willingness in order to restore the man to wellness. The Church of God may rightfully be declared an invalid as it regards women in ministry at this stage of its history. Dr. Stanley’s paper makes it clear that we have embraced an *invalid* theology and a paralyzing practice. So, I ask today the same question that Jesus asked: Church of God, do you want to get well? If so, then do justice to your heritage. “In beauty stand, Oh Church of God, with righteousness arrayed!” Put on your strength by using all of God’s gifts in all of God’s people in all of the ways that God has declared.