

Some conservatives say: “A woman VP? Sure. A woman pastor? No way”

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—There may never be a female pastor leading Tony Perkins’ Southern Baptist congregation in Louisiana, but there could be a woman taking over the vice president’s mansion in Washington. And as Perkins sees it, there’s no contradiction there whatsoever.

“It’s not a spiritual role,” said Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, who calls Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin a “brilliant pick” for the Republican ticket. “An elected official is not a spiritual leader—and that’s what the Scripture speaks to.”

That view—that female politicians are fine, but female pastors are not—has sparked debate about the role of women inside and outside of the home and the church.

Republican vice presidential nominee Gov. Sarah Palin, seen here in Virginia with running mate Sen. John McCain, has been embraced by many religious conservatives who have no problem with a woman as vice president of the United States but who object to women in pastoral roles in their churches. (RNS photo/Lee Love)

“Even though the Bible reserves final authority in the church for men, this does not apply in the kingdom of this world,” said David Kotter, executive director of the Louisville, Ky.-based Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which believes men and women have separate and distinct roles in the home and the church, in a column on his organization’s “Gender Blog.”

But some evangelical leaders, including women at the helm of prominent conservative Christian organizations, chafe at such viewpoints, arguing women should be considered for leadership both in and out of the pulpit.

Jane Hansen Hoyt leads Aglow International. Hoyt, an ordained minister in a Pentecostal denomination, is “disappointed” by fellow religious conservatives who affirm women in politics but not in the pulpit.

“I personally believe that from the beginning—and I’m going back to the third chapter of Genesis ... the role of the woman was very strong because that’s when God said he would send a help to the man,” Hoyt said. “Well, it wasn’t just a help to cook his meals. It was a help to walk alongside him, even as we see John McCain and Sarah Palin walking side by side.”

These views appear to be a change for some evangelicals. As recently as March 2007, the Pew Research Center found 56 percent of white evangelicals viewed the idea of mothers with young children working outside the home as a “bad thing” rather than a good one.

But Wendy Wright, president of Concerned Women for America, said such polling numbers may be a “rather stark” look at situations that vary from family to family, including Palin’s.

“What people have seen as they’ve watched Gov. Palin is that she has integrated her family and her work,” she said. “There are situations where people are able to bring their children to work.”

Palin—who now attends a nondenominational Bible church—has religious roots in the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination that ordains women but where female clergy still have difficulty getting prominent pastoral roles, said Margaret Poloma, research professor at the University of Akron.

She calls the views of evangelicals who support women politicians but not women pastors a matter of “selective interpretation” of the Bible.

“The whole thing is contorted, but they really believe that,” she said. “That’s their interpretation.”

The Southern Baptist Convention declares in the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message statement that “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” and a wife should “submit herself graciously” to her husband’s leadership.

But those beliefs, based on New Testament teachings, do not apply to women in secular leadership, said Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

“Where the New Testament is silent, we’re silent,” he said. “Where the New Testament speaks, we’re under its authority. ...

“The only thing that would disqualify Gov. Palin from being governor or vice president, in my opinion, would be if her husband didn’t want her to do it.”

Janice Shaw Crouse, senior fellow at Concerned Women of America’s Beverly LaHaye Institute, said she’s appeared on Christian radio talk shows since Palin’s nomination, and is shocked by callers who complain that the Alaska governor “has no business being in politics.”

Crouse, whose mother is an 85-year-old United Methodist minister, thinks

those comments reflect a fear of women not only having a greater role in politics but a greater place in the nation's pulpits.

"Quite frankly, it is threatening because the more you see Christian women out in the professions and doing things publicly, the more people get adjusted to that idea and the more acceptable it is," she said.