

# Women in ministry are neither divine nor demonic, pastor says

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As women enter the ministry, they will find that "there will be voices inside and outside telling you, 'You're divine' or 'You're demonic.' But both are telling you a lie," Julie Pennington-Russell, lead pastor of the [First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga.](#), told an audience primarily of women at a Waco conference.

She spoke to nearly 200 people at [Sacred Voices](#), the 2012 Women in Ministry Conference, sponsored by George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University and Texas Baptist churches through the Cooperative Program of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.



Julie Pennington-Russell speaks to nearly 200 at Sacred Voices conference.

(Photo/Baylor)

Pennington-Russell recalled the note she got at one point early in her ministry: "Everything God is doing right now is because of you. ... You're the best pastor this church has ever had," the writer said.

But on the same day, she received an anonymous letter informing her,

"You're the worst pastor this church has ever had. ... I pray every day for your hasty departure."

"One of those is harsh; the other leads to pride, which in my mind is the worse of the two," Pennington-Russell said. "God is the only one who tells you the whole truth about yourself."

One New Testament account is a marvelous example of how to handle conflicting messages—in that case given to men, the apostles Paul and Barnabas, as they healed a lame man, she said.

"The people who saw it started hollering, 'The gods are here!'" she said. Paul and Barnabas, horrified, protested they were merely humans.

The mood shifted when the apostles' enemies showed up to incite the crowd. People stoned Paul until they thought he was dead, then hauled him out of town.

"In one moment they're worshipped; in the next, they're walloped," Pennington-Russell said. "But when they get beat up, they shake it off. Why? Because they're secure in their identity as God's children and their commitment to their mission. They know who they are, and they know whose they are.

"There's always going to be someone who wants to put you out of town. Then there are our own up-and-down opinions of ourselves. But when you let Jesus show you who you are, no one's flattery will puff you up—and no one's criticism will throw you down."

During panel discussions, topics ranged from discerning a call to the ministry, to pastoral time management, to ways lay leaders can encourage women pastors.

Some Baptist churches grapple with whether women should be pastors,

seeking to reconcile biblical texts about women's significant roles in the ministries of Jesus and Paul with Scriptures about how women are to participate in worship, said Todd Still, professor of Christian Scriptures at Truett.

Van Christian, chair of the Executive Board of Texas Baptists, said churches "don't know what they're supposed to believe about women in ministry. They want to do what's right, what's godly. ... It's going to be a matter of education."

The BGCT hired Meredith Stone as women in ministry specialist a year ago to be a resource for churches and is exploring other ways to aid, said Bill Tillman, director of theological education for Texas Baptists.

In many small rural churches, "we're running out of men (pastors)," Christian said. "If the churches are going to survive, they're going to have to turn to women as leaders."