

Commentary: What about Phoebe? When Scripture “contradicts” Scripture, Part 1

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When Saddleback Church recently ordained three women as pastors, some Baptist leaders quickly spoke out in protest.

[J.D. Greear](#) called it “disappointing,” as Scripture “clearly reserves the office of pastor ... for qualified men.”

[Al Mohler](#) argued Saddleback was going against the “codified ... convictional issues” of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000.

[Mike Stone](#)—a 2021 nominee for president of the SBC—while noting SBC churches do not have to adhere to every point of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, supported expulsion of the SBC’s second largest congregation because it had ordained women. Apparently, Stone views the ordination of women as a doctrine of the first order on par with denial of the triunity of God or the deity of Jesus.

Defining “pastor”

The primary biblical verses cited by Greear and Mohler in support of men alone holding the title of pastor are 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

Mohler connects female ordination to: (1) liberal theology, (2) liberation theology, (3) “second wave” feminism and (4) LGBTQ issues, assuming one or more of these is the motivation for any Baptist who reads the Bible differently on the issue.

While Mohler clearly is driven by a “culture war” mentality prevalent in some sectors of American evangelical Christianity, Greear seems more open to engaging contemporary culture as he studies Scripture. Yet, Mohler and Greear come to the same position, distinguishing between “minister”—a title both men and women may hold—and “pastor”—which may apply only to men.

By “pastor,” they do not mean “senior pastor.” In fact, Mohler calls this term unbiblical. Instead, they create an artificial distinction between the title “youth minister,” which a woman may hold, and “youth pastor,” which she may not. The latter title implies “authority,” while the former indicates one’s actions are “under” some elder’s or pastor’s direction.

To defend these mental gymnastics, Greear creates non-biblical categories of “general teaching” and “special teaching,” which he also calls “elder teaching.” Women can do the first in the presence of both men and women, but they cannot do the second.

For instance, Greear will not allow women to preach the “weekend sermon,” because that implies the woman’s speech “functionally acts with the authority of an elder.”

Differing positions on women’s leadership

Differences of opinion exist on this side of the argument. Greear speaks positively of Lottie Moon’s teaching ministry to men and women in China, but says it was not “elder teaching.” Meanwhile, [Kevin Howard](#) condemns Moon’s teaching men as improperly exercising authority over them.

[Mohler](#) dismisses any Christian who wrestles with the whole of Scripture with a proclamation his selected proof-texts settle the issue. “Simply put,

the only way to affirm women serving in the pastoral role is to reject the authority and sufficiency of biblical texts such as 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2," Mohler states.

Yet this black and white pronouncement ignores the multicolored world of Baptist life. Not only do Greear and Howard differ on Moon, but a [Baptist Standard article](#) noted Southern Baptist churches that differ with Greear on women preaching from the pulpit.

On Mother's Day, Anne Graham Lotz preached at Second Baptist Church in Houston, the SBC's largest congregation. (Billy Graham once called his daughter "the best preacher I've ever heard." What of his son, Franklin?) Beth Moore and Kay Warren preached at other SBC churches.

One complementarian position

Baptist scholar E. Earle Ellis, deceased professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and renowned in his day as a premier New Testament scholar, argued in *The Making of the New Testament Documents* that 1 Corinthians 14 was not a general statement about *all* women, but rather was narrowly focused on the wife of a husband when both were prophets within the congregation.

Ellis, a complementarian like Mohler and Greear, noted the injunction for women to be silent appears in a chapter on the proper use of gifts in orderly worship. It immediately follows instructions for prophets to speak one at a time, while the other prophets evaluate the uttered prophecy.

Ellis said Paul's emphasis was that the spirits giving rise to prophecy were "under the control" of the prophets, so they could speak or not speak as appropriate to the situation. This control applied especially to a wife's prophetic evaluation of her husband's prophetic speech.

That is, if the husband stood to prophesy, the wife should not speak publicly concerning her husband's prophecy—whether for or against its authenticity—in her official role to test the spirits.

If Ellis is correct, this prophetic role the woman was expected to play with other prophets in the community—both verbal and evaluative—sounds surprisingly like the “elder teaching” Greear says women should not do.

In his classes, Ellis often explained how the wife could disrupt worship. Her public rebuke against her husband might be from some pre-service family disagreement rather than from the Spirit. Her public attestation to the truth of his prophecy might arise from preplanned collusion to influence the church, akin to the Ananias and Sapphira's collusion in Acts 5.

Ellis viewed 1 Timothy 2 as a preformed tradition based on 1 Corinthians 14, and so applying within the same limited scope. To understand what Ellis meant, Timothy was Paul's letter carrier for 1 Corinthians (see 16:10-11), so he already was familiar with Paul's rationale for the injunction against a wife's speech.

Ellis's reading is but one of several ways to understand the context of 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 as a temporal prohibition on women's speech, rather than an eternal mandate or prohibition from the office of pastor.

Others see Paul's prohibition as referencing the general lack of educational opportunity for women in the first century. For orderly worship, women should ask questions at home rather than during the service. If correct, then universal education in 21st century America should not create the same barrier for pastoral leadership.

In part 2, I will discuss Phoebe's role in the letter to the Romans.

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