

# Voices: Women and the SBC interpreting the Bible

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Should parents turn over their rebellious sons to the elders of a city to be stoned at the city gates (Deut. 21:18-21)?

Is it sinful to wear a polycotton blend shirt (Lev. 19:19)?

Are men required to raise their hands when they pray (1 Tim. 2:8)?

Can women wear gold jewelry (1 Pet. 3:2)?

Interpretation matters.

No matter how we describe our view of the way the Bible works in our lives, it is imperative for us to realize that we must perform acts of interpretation in order to discover how the Bible speaks into the way we live out our faith.

## Defining ‘very clear’

In a recent [article](#), Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, acknowledged the wrongs that have been committed by his colleagues, and wrote, “The Southern Baptist Convention is on trial and our public credibility is at stake.”

Personally, I appreciated the contrition Mohler’s article represented and its emphasis on the need for better accountability in regard to how churches advocate for and act on behalf of abused persons.

However, the article also indicated that while some are pointing to the

SBC's views on limited leadership for women and wives' submission in the home (complementarianism) as the problem, Mohler reiterated his and the SBC's perspective that the Bible has "very clear teachings" on male authority and women's roles.

But what do we mean when we say the Bible is "very clear" about something?

## **The need for interpretation**

The Bible, at least certain passages in the Bible, seem to very clearly teach on how to deal with rebellious sons, making or wearing fabric made of two kinds of material, the placement of men's hands in prayer and what women should wear or not wear as well. Yet, we do not enforce these other very clear teachings.

So how does one decide what makes a passage very clear in the way it should be applied to living out our faith today?

Interpretation.

Through our individual and communal interpretation of Scripture, we decide how to understand the applicability of biblical passages.

When we read about mixed fabrics, we may interpret the passage to be relevant to the ancient Israelites in their quest to differentiate themselves and their practices from other cultures and so we decide it is not literally applicable for Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Or we may understand the admonition for men to raise their hands in prayer as simply an encouragement for particular men, perhaps men under Timothy's leadership in Ephesus, to publicly show their devotion to Christ, not as a universal prescription for all men in all times.

Is it possible, then, that interpretation might yield another understanding of the limitations on women's leadership in the church and their roles in the home?

## **Women in leadership**

Those of us who would answer yes to this question see the biblical passages which present equality (Gen. 1:27; Gal. 3:28), mutuality (1 Cor. 7:3-4, 11:15-16; Eph. 5:21), and women's leadership in the religious communities (Deborah—Judg. 4:4; Huldah—2 Kings 22:14; Lydia—Acts 16:14-15; Priscilla—Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; and Phillip's four prophesying daughters—Acts 21:9 among others) as equally important to the discussion as the few passages which limit women's leadership in the church (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-15).

We have come to interpret any scriptural limitations on women's leadership roles as intended for particular circumstances, churches or people, not as universal prohibitions for all women in all times.

We have come to interpret the household codes which prescribe women's submission to men (Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6) similarly, especially since the same passages often also address slaves submitting to their masters (Col. 3:22-25; Eph. 6:5-9) and seem to condone the hierarchical relationship of slavery, which we have rightfully (though too late) come to acknowledge as sinful.

## **Reexamining 'very clear' teachings**

Though the SBC was founded largely on its view of how the Bible not only condoned but justified slavery, the convention later admitted its systemic sin in this matter and continues to try to work toward racial reconciliation.

In the same way, even though a primary issue related to the SBC conservative resurgence's commitment to biblical inerrancy was women's leadership and submission, perhaps the recent revelations about abuses of power and the objectification and silencing of women can be an impetus for reexamining what some think to be a very clear teaching of the Bible.

Jason Allen, President of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has submitted a [proposed resolution](#) to the 2018 Southern Baptist Convention entitled "On Affirming the Dignity of Women and the Holiness of Ministers," which is a small step in this direction, but there is still much space for more examination and interpretation of Scripture to be done.

Bible-justified power over other human beings, including men over women, can contribute to an unconscious sense of divine entitlement that other people's experience does not matter as much as one's own—that one person is closer to and more important to God than another.

That is the slippery slope which can lead to abuse and oppression.

Whatever the outcomes of the 2018 Southern Baptist Convention, may abuse, power, oppression and their causes be exposed so that the divine kingdom might come, and the divine will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

*Meredith Stone is director of ministry guidance and instructor of Christian ministry and Scripture at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology & Seminary. She is a member of the Baptist Standard Publishing board of directors.*