

YOUTH AND WOMEN'S MINISTRIES: THE DOCTRINE OF GOD OR THE PRECEPTS OF MAN?

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When Martin Luther noticed discrepancies between the practice and teaching of Roman Catholicism and Scripture he nailed his 95 Theses to the chapel door in Wittenberg, sparking the Protestant Reformation. Jonathan Edwards was the greatest theological mind America has ever known. After 20 years of ministry he began to express publically what he had been thinking privately for years, and that was the belief that a practice which his grandfather Solomon Stoddard had begun decades earlier, and which had become entrenched in the church, known as The Halfway Covenant, which allowed a person to become a communicant member of the church without a credible profession of faith, was in fact unbiblical and should be stopped. He wrote the following statement in his journal which he kept during this controversy:

“A minister by his office is to be the guide and instructor of his people. To that end he is to study and search the Scriptures and to teach the people, not the opinions of men – of other divines or of their ancestors – but the mind of Christ. As he is set to enlighten them, so a part of his duty is to rectify their mistakes, and, if he sees them out of the way of truth or duty, to be a voice behind them, saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it.’ Hence, if what he offers to exhibit to them as the mind of Christ be different from their previous apprehensions, unless it be on some point which is established in the church of God as fundamental, surely they are obliged to hear him. If not, there is an end at once to all the use and benefit of teachers in the church in these respects – as the means of increasing its light and knowledge, and reclaiming it from mistakes and errors. This would be in effect to establish, not the word of Christ, but the opinion of the last generation in each town and church, as an immutable rule to all future generations to the end of the world.”

As a result of his stance on this unbiblical practice, after 20 years of faithful ministry Edwards' church voted that he should be removed from his pulpit. Sadly, the same reaction is met when anyone questions the scriptural basis for ministries that have only appeared in the last fifty years, but are now entrenched practices within the church. The *opinion of the last generation*, not the word of God has become the rule. Two of these practices in particular stand out, and they are youth and women's ministries.

Are youth and women's ministries biblical? Are they unbiblical? By asking if they are unbiblical we are not asking if they directly violate any Scriptural command or prohibition against them, but are they a product of the mind of Christ or the mind of man. First we need to understand what is meant by the term *biblical*. Does something, whether a teaching or a practice, have any basis in Scripture? Is it something God has commanded or mandated? Is there any Scriptural precedent either by way of example or pattern? Is it a divine *ought* or *must*, such as *those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth* (Jn 4:24)? If there is no mandate, pattern, or precedent in Scripture then it is safe to say that it is a product of the mind of man, not the mind of Christ. However well meaning, or however sincere a practice or teaching may be, if it has no basis in Scripture it is not from the mind of Christ, making it incapable of effecting its desired ends. So, is there any Scriptural warrant for these ministries? The answer of course is no, therefore it must be concluded that they are not biblical.

Not only do they have no basis in Scripture, but the absolute lack of any precedent of them in church history also demonstrates they have no foundation in Scripture. Is it not odd that ministries which claim to be so fundamental and necessary have no precedent in church history? Certainly this fact alone should cause us to question their alleged indispensableness. In reality both are relatively recent introductions into the church based largely on an attempt to accommodate shifts in the culture, and that have now become entrenched as a sacrosanct part of the church. In fact, they have become so entrenched that each has become its own cottage industry, generating millions of dollars and represented by their own high-profile leaders, specifically dedicated Bible curriculum, their own music and conferences, unique principles and guidelines of operation, and distinctive methods of training, even to the point of creating specialized college degrees for each. This trend toward such specialization betrays the fact that these ministries are based on an unbiblical foundation and model of ministry. So, the fact that the Bible does not specifically forbid these types of specialized ministries does not automatically make them biblical, nor does it make the way they function biblical. Neither are any apparent benefits or success of such ministries an argument in their favor. Jonathan Edwards addressed this line of reasoning in a letter to a young friend concerning the placement of untrained people in positions of teaching:

There is no argument that such things are right, that they do a great deal of good for the present, and within a narrow sphere; when, at the same time, if we look at them in the utmost extent of their consequences, and in the long run of events, they do ten times as much hurt as good. Appearing events are not our rule, but the law and the testimony.+

The same principle applies to youth and women's ministries. It is not the opinion of the last generation+or the apparent pragmatic and short-term success of something that is to be our rule, but the inerrant and all sufficient word of God. The Apostle Paul wrote that anything not built on the foundation of Christ . His teachings, commands, examples, promises, warnings . is wood, hay, and stubble with no eternal value (1 Cor 3:10-15). This describes so much of what passes for ministry today . it has no basis in Scripture. So much time and energy is spent on doing what is not biblical that little time and effort is spent on what God has mandated, *Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men*+(Mk 7:8). Like Martha we are so busy with what is not necessary that we neglect what is necessary (Lk 10:41, 42).

A great deal of the methods and ministries carried out by the church today were never appointed by God to achieve their desired ends. Nothing the church does can have any efficacy in producing a desired end except what God has appointed to produce that end. Concerning all this, will God not say, *Who requires of you this trampling of my courts?*+(Is 1:12), and, *How vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men*+(Mt 15:9). The premises upon which so many ministries are built are nothing more than the precepts of man. They are not from the mind of Christ.

We need to ask another question, and that is, are these ministries based on biblical or unbiblical premises? Typically the rationalization for such ministries is usually expressed in terms of the unique needs of these groups, and the increased ability to

reach people within these groups by catering to their alleged distinctive needs. There are at least two fallacies in this assumption.

First, while the Bible does teach us that men and women were created different, this does not mean they have different *needs*. God created men and women different to fulfill different *roles*. The man was given the role of leadership . of providing both spiritually and physically for the woman . and the woman was created to be a helpmate or *“suitable helper”* (Gn 2:20) for the man, and to be subject to him (Eph 5:24; 1 Tm 2:11; Tit 2:5). Neither was meant to be independent, autonomous creatures, but to live in a dependent relationship with God, each fulfilling their divinely ordained role. The only unique need which the Bible attributes to women is their need to be treated as the weaker vessel (1 Pt 3:7), and to be guarded and preserved from the seduction of Satan to which she is prone. Satan plied his temptations upon Eve for a reason, because she was the most susceptible to being deceived, a deception she freely admitted, *“the serpent deceived me”* (Gn 3:13).

Adam’s sin was a willful rebellion, whereas Eve’s was the result of being deceived. She was deceived into usurping Adam’s role by taking it upon herself to autonomously decide who was right, Satan or God. She acted not only independent of God, but independent of Adam. The notion that women have unique needs that can only be met by other women is not to be found in Scripture, but is a product of modern secular psychology largely influenced by the feminist movement. In other words, it is a deception, a doctrine of demons (1 Tm 4:1). Oddly enough this assertion that women have different needs is often made by people who also adhere to egalitarianism, thereby contradicting themselves. According to egalitarianism there is no difference between men and women. If one truly believes in egalitarianism then why the need for women’s ministries? When the prophets preached they preached to both men and women because the need of both was the same; repentance and faith.

There is nothing wrong with women getting together to encourage one another, to exhort one another to fulfill their God given role as women (Titus 2:3-5), to study the Bible together, or just enjoy fellowshiping with one another, but this is far different than a specialized ministry dedicated solely to women with specialized teaching led and taught by women pseudo-pastors, all based on a faulty premise. The greatest women’s ministry a church can have is to equip the men to be the spiritual leaders in their homes, to shepherd their wives, and to love them as Christ loved the church. This is the pattern established by God in Scripture, not the specialized women’s ministry of today with its own self-appointed celebrity teachers who more often than not fall into the same sin as Eve.

So thoroughly have God’s ordained roles for men and women been rejected, and so ingrained has this practice of women’s ministries become, that most people even within the church recoil with horror, anger, and indignation should anyone dare to commit the social taboo of teaching the mind of Christ concerning the role of men and women and questioning the scriptural basis for such ministries. So twisted has the thinking become on this subject that one web site claims the biblical teaching of male headship is directly responsible for the abuse of women by their husbands. Sadly, the vast majority of the church has been taken *“captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ”* (Col 2:8).

This alleged need for women's ministries is a direct result of men failing to be the spiritual leaders in their homes. Biblical male headship is servant leadership, not authoritarianism, and anyone who attempts to slander and deny this doctrine by twisting it into something it is not, not only slanders the nature of God, but exposes themselves as a propagator of deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons (1 Tm 4:1, 2). Male headship is modeled after the example of Christ as Ephesians 5:25-29 makes abundantly clear. If women feel the need for their own ministry it is because the men have failed to fulfill their ministry to their families by meeting their wife's need. What a tragic commentary on the life of the church today that a woman would think she can get from other women, or turn to other women to get what she cannot get from her own husband.

The same can be said for youth ministries. Nowhere does the Bible attribute distinctive needs to someone based on their demographic, especially not needs that can only be met by someone of their own demographic. To the contrary, the Bible specifically places the responsibility for bringing children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord squarely on the shoulders of the father (Dt 6:4-9; Eph 6:4), not a twenty-something year old youth leader with little or no practical wisdom or life experience. Who has more credibility and authority with your children, you or a youth leader? Who knows your child's heart better, you or a youth leader? Whose example do you think your child is more prone to follow, yours or a youth leader? A seminary or Bible college degree does not qualify a person who is barely older than the youth to be the spiritual leader of your children. A degree is neither a ticket to ministry nor a pathway to wisdom. In addressing the responsibility of parents to their children Jonathan Edwards wrote,

"Particularly inquire whether you do not live in sin, by living in the neglect of instructing them. Do you not wholly neglect the duty of instructing your children, or if you do not wholly neglect it, yet do you not afford them so little instruction, and are you not so unsteady, and do you not take so little pains in it, that you live in sinful neglect? Do you take pains in any measure proportionate to the importance of the matter? Are you as careful about the welfare of their souls as you are their bodies? Do you labor as much that they may have eternal life, as you do to provide estates for them to live on in this world?...Do you not live in sinful neglect of the government of your families? Do you not live in the sin of Eli, who indeed counseled and reprov'd his children, but did not exercise government over them?....If you say you cannot restrain your children, this is no excuse; for it is a sign that you have brought up your children without government, that your children regard not your authority. When parents lose their government over their children, their reproofs and counsel signify but little....By neglect in this particular, parents bring the guilt of their children's sins upon their own souls, and the blood of their children will be required at their hands."

It should be obvious there is something fundamentally wrong with a philosophy which asserts that the church can do a better job of discipling young men and women than their own parents. Such an assertion is a rejection and usurpation of God's ordained authority structure. The only pattern we find in Scripture is the entire church coming together for worship and teaching. You never see Jesus, Paul, Peter, or any other apostle segregating the church by age, gender, or life stage. When the church divides the family, when it places itself between a husband and his wife or between children and their parents, it is doing something that is foreign to Scripture. It actually

weakens and undermines, not strengthens and supports the family structure, something in which Satan surely delights. Many former youth pastors have come to realize they have done more harm to families than they could have ever imagined by usurping the authority of parents, especially fathers, thereby having the children's hearts turn toward them and not their parents. Many have called youth ministry a 50 year failed experiment which the church needs to abandon. The Bible is very clear about the discipleship of children within the church, *And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord* (Eph 6:4). It is the family unit, not the church, which God has ordained as the means by which children are to be disciplined, and only God's means will produce the desired ends.

There is nothing wrong with youth getting together under responsible supervision for a time of fun, fellowship, and games, but this is far different than turning youth into a specialized area of ministry with its own specialized form of ministry with its own dedicated leaders. It is true that sin has resulted in the disintegration of the family resulting in homes with no engaged father, which is why it is imperative for the mature Christian men and women in the church to form mentoring relationships with these younger men and women, thereby fulfilling the mandate of Scripture (2 Tim 3:2; Tit 2:3; Jm 1:27). Farming out this responsibility to someone who has not even demonstrated they meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:1-13 does not satisfy God's biblical mandates. The greatest youth ministry a church can have is to equip the parents to be the spiritual leaders that God requires them to be, not to usurp the parent's authority or provide a venue for parents to abdicate their responsibility to the church. The argument that women and youth have unique needs that can only be met, or best met, by someone of their same demographic will not stand up to biblical scrutiny.

Secondly, not only is there is no biblical foundation for such a claim, but the premise itself denies the sufficiency of Scripture. According to this view Scripture's impact on someone's life is dependent on the demographic of the person teaching it, or whether or not the teacher can relate to those being taught. Did Jonah relate to the Ninevites? Was Paul not able to teach Priscilla as well as Aquila? Can only those who have had the same experience as others minister to those people? Is it necessary for someone to have been abused before they can minister to someone who has been the victim of abuse? Must a person be a member of a minority before they can minister to people of the same minority? Is someone who dresses, acts, and talks like a teenager really more apt to reach a teenager? Such thinking is completely unbiblical as it makes the efficacy of God's word dependent on some superficial attribute of the person teaching it. The power resides in the Word, not the teacher. Has God in His word not supplied us with everything pertaining to life and godliness (2 Pt 1:3)? Is Scripture only profitable, or made more profitable, by the age or gender of the one teaching (2 Tm 3:16, 17)? Is God's word sufficient or is it not? Is it God who meets all our needs or is it not?

It is painfully obvious that when it comes to youth and women's ministries, most of the church now treats these recent precepts of man as doctrines of God. The idolatrous and unbiblical nature of these ministries can be seen in that each has its own specialized priesthood, a priesthood that exempts itself from God's requirements for spiritual leaders. Like Jeroboam the church has *made priests from among the people who were not of the sons of Levi* (1 Kg 12:31), and, *he made priests of the high places*

from among the people; any who would, he ordained, to be priests of the high places+(1 Kg 13:33). They ignore, blur, and confuse the distinctions and requirements for spiritual leadership defined in God's word. Who is and is not acting as a spiritual leader is often differentiated by hair-splitting distinctions in contrast to God's clear and unambiguous requirements.

The greatest opposition to Jesus and His teaching did not come from the tax-gatherers and harlots, but from organized and established religion. The greatest opposition to Paul did not come from the pagan world, but from entrenched Judaism. The greatest opposition to Martin Luther did not come from the bars and brothels, but from monasteries, convents, priests, and Pope. The greatest opposition to the Puritans came from the corrupt official state church of England. When Jonathan Edwards questioned the scriptural nature of an entrenched practice his greatest opposition came from his own congregation. The greatest hostility to the preachers and preaching of the Great Awakening came from other ministers who viewed such preaching as a challenge to their own ministries. The greatest opposition to Charles Spurgeon came from his own denomination when he criticized its capitulation to liberal theology and the rejection of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. In all these instances the opposition had one thing in common; they all had a vested interest in the established system. They were fiercely loyal to the system in which they had a vested interest and on which their own interest depended, irrespective of any biblical foundation for that system.

So many churches depend on vibrant youth and women's ministries to attract and retain people. Entire cottage industries representing millions of dollars in revenue have a vested interest in the perpetuation of youth and women's ministries, so it is unlikely we will see their demise anytime soon. The church will continue to treat these precepts of man as doctrines of God. They will continue to weaken, not strengthen families, and cause immeasurable harm to families and to the body of Christ.

Thankfully more and more churches are recognizing the unbiblical and harmful nature of these ministries. Instead of following the opinions of the last generation, they are taking the Bible as their rule, and as such they are choosing to disband or never implement these ministries. Finding no basis for them in Scripture or church history, they are instead adopting a biblical model of discipleship in which the pastor fulfills his God-given responsibility to equip the saints for the work of service through the faithful teaching and preaching of God's word (Eph 4:11-13), and by equipping men to fulfill their God-given mandate to be the self-sacrificial spiritual leaders of their wives and children. Such a ministry comes into direct collision with the forms and principles most have come to embrace, expect, and demand in a church, and as such can expect to receive much opposition from those whose interests are tied to maintaining the status quo. Such has always been the history of the church.