

The Church and the World — A Raging Debate at “On Faith”

Friday, September 5, 2008

Over at “[On Faith](#),” the project of *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* magazine, a debate is raging over this question:

Women are not allowed to become clergy in many conservative religious groups. Is it hypocritical to think that a woman can lead a nation and not a congregation?

As you might expect, that question has unleashed a torrent of response. The essays range across the spectrum.

From retired Episcopal Bishop [John Shelby Spong](#):

It is not a hypocritical sign so much as it is a uninformed sexism in the Christian Church as well as a sign of how irrelevant many parts of Christianity are in the world of today. Great Britain had a woman prime minister before the Church of England had a woman priest. How absurd can a people be?



and

It is time for the dated prejudices of human beings based primarily on the fear of being different, to cease receiving the dignity of a cover from either the Church or the Bible. We need to call those prejudices what they are - evil!

Spong is one of the most outspoken characters on the religious left of our day. He has embraced every heresy imaginable and rejects the deity of Christ and the inspiration of Scripture. Thus, he can only be repulsed by people who hold the Bible to be a binding authority. It is “evil” to restrict modern humanity by means of biblical authority.

From [Brian McLaren](#), author and leading figure in the “emerging church.”

I just talked to a leading conservative religious leader about this the other day. He believes that the New Testament texts regarding women only apply to the church and not the secular world. I find that line of interpretation very convenient for conservative churches, and impossible to justify theologically. My guess is that more and more of the daughters of today's religious conservatives will decide to a) abandon their parent's approach to interpreting the Bible, b) decide the “secular” world is a more hospitable place and spend more time there and less in the church, or c) change churches.

This short post is interesting for what is absent as much as what is present. McLaren suggests that he finds the distinction between the church and the secular world “impossible to justify” in terms of the New Testament texts, but he offers no explanation as to why. Does McLaren think that the Apostle Paul’s list of qualifications for pastors found in 1 Timothy 3 is to be applied equally to positions of secular political office? This would be a fascinating argument to see him make. Given the tone of this argument and his other writings, it would seem that he would see these texts as basically *inapplicable* to both contexts.

[N. T. Wright](#), Anglican Bishop of Durham, offers this:

No, it isn't hypocritical. There might well be perfectly coherent guidelines as to why a woman might lead in one area and not in another. It isn't hypocritical, after all, to think that the church is not just 'another human organization' or a society like any other; it's Christian common sense.

Bishop Wright is a supporter of woman as priests, but he recognizes the distinction between the church and the world.

The entire question was framed against the backdrop of the nomination of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as the Republican nominee for Vice President. In opening salvos, Sally Quinn of *The Washington Post* directed her guns at the Southern Baptist Convention and to me by name. Her articles, "[Palin's Pregnancy Problem](#)" and "[Sarah's Palin's Priorities](#)," set the stage.

In reality, Sally Quinn's articles and the question posed to "On Faith" illuminate an important aspect of our current cultural situation — and serve as a warning to the church. The clear and unavoidable implication of this question is that there must be no distinction between the church and the world. If equal employment opportunity is the rule in the secular world, must not the church follow the same rules?

This reasoning is perfectly understandable coming from the secular world. How else would we expect the secular mind to think? But coming from *inside* the church this logic is both fatal and unfaithful.

Sally Quinn's articles were also fascinating for the logic she employs against Sarah Palin. I can understand this logic coming from a conservative Christian who is committed to biblical gender distinctions. I'm having a very hard time understanding how a feminist can ask these questions.

My article at "[On Faith](#)" is found [here](#).

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