

Why the Non-Acceptance of Female Clergy Is a Violent Act by the Church

by Tasha Vinson-Brown

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It is this author's contention that the Black Baptist Church, the Church of God in Christ, and all black denominations (some more and some less) have historically and tragically abused women clergy by silencing their voices and discrediting their gifts for ministry.

Many women in the Black Baptist Church—the denomination I know best and about which I will therefore speak most—experience this type of violence and abuse when they are told that God did not call them to preach or pastor. It happens when they are asked not to sit in the pulpit with their male counterparts, when they are instructed to give their “speeches or exhortations” from the floor and not the pulpit, or simply when they are referred to as “Evangelist,” “Sister,” or “Missionary” instead of pastor or preacher. It also happens when women are relegated to preaching only on Women's Day, Mother's Day, or Women's Mission Sunday. All these acts are acts of violence and abuse.

Unfortunately, they are seldom recognized as such (except by the women who endure these abuses), and are seldom addressed by the black church. This shameful form of violence is akin to and has some of the same markers of domestic violence against women generally.

The United States Department of Justice provides the following definition of violence against women on its website:

We define domestic violence as a pattern of abusive behavior **in any relationship** (boldface mine) that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone.

Emotional Abuse: Undermining an individual's sense of self-worth and/or self-esteem is abusive. This may include, but is not limited to constant criticism, diminishing one's abilities, name-calling...

Psychological Abuse: Elements of psychological abuse include—but are not limited to—causing fear by intimidation...¹

Domestic violence includes emotional and psychological abuse, a type of abuse experienced by many women in ministry. Indicators of emotional abuse include having a partner who continually criticizes you, humiliates you in any way, or insults you.² Women in ministry experience humiliation when they present themselves for service in God's kingdom and are not ordained or even acknowledged as being created in the *Imago Dei* (the image of God). The oppression is abusive and must stop!

One reason this type of abuse is manifested in the Black Church is the familial system established within it. The Church is a surrogate family for some who have absentee fathers and/or husbands. The pastor is the father for the fatherless or husband for the single, widowed, and/or divorced. The Black Church tends to reserve power and authority for the father figure. We are accustomed to having a man as the head of the house of God. We tend to forget that God's kingdom operates differently; "... *for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:26-28, NRSV). Members of the church are "brothers or sisters." We honor our aging women by bestowing upon them the title of "mothers of the church." The body of Christ has now become the house/home of Christ and the pastor is its head. This paradigm allows for a level of intimacy that exposes vulnerabilities and can foster abuse.

The women or "daughters" of the church who profess a call to ministry are used for their gifting but are rejected from leadership roles. "Women have consistently struggled with issues of oppression, rejection, isolation, and loneliness and although their contributions to the move of the church have been great they have often been omitted from official records."³ It is time to wake up and recognize that the Church has become a source of pain instead of healing and that the subjugation of women in ministry is not what God intended. The fact is that domestic violence has become a constant reality in the life of the Church. In order to be a part of God's affirming and transforming community, we must change this paradigm and follow the mandate to treat all members of the Body of Christ as we want to be treated.

One of the first steps to ending the abuse of clergywomen, especially those with a calling to pastoral ministry, is for each opposer to examine the reasons he or she does not want women to serve in ministry, especially as pastors. Is the root of the opposition training received from a pastor, especially in childhood? Is it due to a belief in defined roles for men and women? Is it due to faulty biblical training or no training at all? Is it due to a lack of exposure to competent women clergy? This self-examination opens the door to change.

Additionally, it is important to note that the Black Church has been heavily influenced in its resistance to women in leadership by Euro-American culture:

The move away from the plantation and the development of denominational theologies brought an orthodoxy—borrowed from Euro-American theologies—that opposed Black women’s spiritual leadership. Early-nineteenth-century Black women preachers resisted this trend. Most Black (male) church administrations responded to their resistance by adopting a policy that allowed a semantic and symbolic difference between men’s preaching and women’s preaching. In deciding that women could give exhortations—but not preach—Black churches effectively barred women from the symbolic sphere of spiritual authority: the pulpit.⁴

It is time to rid the Black Church of these vestiges of Euro-American prejudices.

Some will argue that their opposition is based upon the dictates of the Bible. The words of the late Peter J. Gomes are helpful on this point:

. . . What is remarkable is that the text itself remains fixed and unchanged. No new translations have emerged to clarify textual issues. No hidden or lost manuscripts have been unearthed that would unfix long-settled opinion. No startling revelations external to the biblical text have been discovered with radical new information. What has changed, however, is the climate of interpretation, indeed, the lenses with which we read the texts and the tales. The texts have not changed but we have, and the world with us. Scripture, like Jesus Christ himself, may be the same yesterday, today, and forever, but our capacity to read scripture and to appropriate Jesus Christ and his teachings is not. No one in contemporary America, except perhaps the most hard-bitten white supremacist, would read scripture with regard to race in the same way as Southern Baptists read it a century ago, or even thirty years ago; and no one feels that some travesty of scriptural integrity has happened because of that fact. . . .

It is not scripture that has changed, but rather the moral imagination by which we see ourselves, and see and read scripture. It is that moral imagination that tells us what we see and hear in scripture, and it is that same imagination that allows us to translate those transforming images into the world in which we find ourselves. The moral imagination, liberated from slavery to the literal text, also liberates from the cultural captivity of context both ancient and contemporary, and is informed by nothing less than what Christians call the Holy Spirit. That is why the book of Hebrews describes scripture as “sharper than a two-edged sword.” This is why scripture is described as “the lively oracles of God.”⁵

A change in the Black Church’s moral imagination by which it sees, treats, and uses women clergy is long overdue.

The next step in ending the violence against women in ministry is to break the silence. One of the greatest weapons an abuser uses against a victim is silence and the ability to

silence. When women are not able to share their stories or have their voices heard, the violence is perpetuated, and then sealed by silence. Women in ministry must speak out and find venues where their voices are heard. Male pastors and denominational leaders must speak out against the violence and injustices promulgated against women in ministry. Silencing one's voice and other indicators of violence are not tenets of our faith. Male pastors, male lay leaders, female pastors, and female lay leaders have to speak up, as some women have:

Women have continued in every available forum to raise their voices for legitimate roles in the church. The pressure of their claim has been articulated, impassioned, and insistent. But their leadership roles are still limited in many African American congregations. The lack of access to the pulpit is only one manifestation of the problem. Women are grudgingly placed on deacon and trustee boards as members. Their presence is carefully limited and managed so that election to leadership as chairperson is rare. An even greater and more pressing concern is the affirmation and acceptance of women in pastoral leadership. Yet it is only as churches, and more particularly African American denominations, permit honest and open discussion at every level that their potential for growth will be realized.⁶

While some progress has been made in other traditionally black denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, black Baptist denominations have made very little progress. The issue of black women as preachers and pastors is still considered controversial.⁷ Let us no longer remain silent; we must stand up and speak out.

Another key to transforming the landscape of the Church's position on women in pastoral leadership is by supporting clergywomen's groups. Women need supportive communities for their healing, growth, and development. Community is desired for most Americans in our society. Research shows that three out of every ten Americans are experiencing loneliness, and I would venture to say that those numbers are higher for women in ministry.⁸ Although women in ministry are part of a Christian community, when they serve in ministry, more times than not, they are not able to enjoy the benefits of being in community. Many women feel the need to divide their roles and shun establishing personal relationships with those whom they serve. They establish boundaries with parishioners, and if they have not cultivated any relationships outside the church, they are left void of affirming, nurturing, life-giving, inspiring, and loving relationships.

Support is vital to the growth and development of female pastors. With widespread affirmation and support, women can gain a sense of acceptance and pride. Author and social activist bell hooks states: "There are oppressed women in the United States, and it is both appropriate and necessary that we speak against such oppression."⁹ And while she may not agree that all women are oppressed, she does introduce exploitation and discrimination into the conversation as they, in her opinion, "more accurately describe the lot of women collectively in the United States."¹⁰

Even beyond the national perspective as posited by bell hooks, there is the realization that women in ministry are being oppressed within the Church and outside the Church. These women often are not able to receive the care they need from within their faith community. And, with the absence of support groups for them, they are left alone. It is important that male pastors and denominational leaders become partners of groups designed to help women excel in leadership. It is also important for church members to encourage their pastors to partner with these support groups in an effort to express support for their colleagues in ministry.

The additional step one can take to support the movement of women in pastoral and all ministry positions is for churches, pastors, and denominational leaders to support the training and development of women in ministry and to provide equitable pay for women hired in ministry positions. Bishop Vashti McKenzie recognizes the surge of women entering seminary and ministry and therefore suggests that the Black Church begin to recognize sexism as a social concern:

The African American church is just beginning to challenge sexism as a serious social concern. African American women are no longer being treated as a momentary “fad” or “movement”; these women are pioneering equal access to ordained ministry and leadership positions traditionally held by male clergy. Because the pool of available clergywomen is growing steadily, there is a need to give attention to their training and development.¹¹

Some women have identified alternative ways of exercising their gifts,¹² including leaving their traditional Baptist roots and joining white denominations or other religious groups.¹³ In order to keep these gifted women in our communities as part of our rich heritage called the Black Church, it is important that we support training and development and justice for them. Scholarships need to be offered to seminarians, churches need to be available for ministry meetings, and opportunities for women to exercise their gifts (with pay) should be provided.

If we are going to live as God intended, it is important that we denounce cultural influences that cause harm and that we reclaim the transforming community God established for us. If God were to write a letter to the Black Church, what would God say? Would God reward us for the work we have done in healing the sick, saving souls, and preaching about hope, but chastise us because we were neither hot nor cold on the issue of abuse of women clergy? I have no biblical references that evidence that God will send out letters regarding our treatment of others. However, I do know that the Bible says, “Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!” (Psalm 105:15, ESV) and, “If it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God” (Acts 5:39, ESV).

Notes

1. "What Is Domestic Violence?" Online location: www.ovw.usdoj.gov/domviolence.htm (accessed 19 December 2012). Sources indicated: National Domestic Violence Hotline, National Center for Victims of Crime, and WomensLaw.org.
2. Online location: www.thehotline.org/get-educated/what-is-domestic-violence (accessed 19 December 2012).
3. Blevins, Carolyn D. "Baptist Women," in Encyclopedia of Women in Religion in North America, ed. Rosemary Kinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 294.
4. Kienzle, Beverly and Pamela J. Walker. Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 276.
5. Gomes, Peter J. The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), 99–100.
6. Dash, Michael I.N. and Christine D. Chapman. The Shape of Zion: Leadership and Life in Black Churches (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 102.
7. Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. The Black Church in the African American Experience (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), 275.
8. Sofield, Loughlan, Rosine Hammett, and Carroll Juliano. Building Community: Christian, Caring, Vital (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1998), 14.
9. hooks, bell. Feminist Theory from Margin to Center (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 5.
10. Ibid., 5.
11. McKenzie, Vashti. Not Without a Struggle (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1996), 116.
12. Pinn, Anne H. and Anthony B. Pinn. Fortress Introduction to Black Church History (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 129.
13. The Black Church in the African American Experience, 280.