

Double Jeopardy: Racism and Sexism

by Tina Saxon

The Rev. Tina T. Saxon is a D.Min. candidate at Andover Newton Theological School

The view from my window here at Andover Newton Theological School is quite picturesque. The small chapel in the background of deep green grass is surrounded by many beautiful trees, enhanced by a warm sun as we near spring's end. This is fertile soil for contemplating past events of my life while looking toward a future as warm and bright as this day.

It was four years ago this very month, May of 1985, that I received a Master of Divinity degree and also was ordained into Christian Ministry at an American Baptist church in West Newton. It also was at this time over 32 years ago, at the age of 18, that I announce my "call" to my family as we were finishing up dinner one Sunday afternoon after church. "I want to be a pastor. I want to preach about Jesus Christ and His healing power and love. That's all I want to do for the rest of my life."

My aunt and uncle were gathered along with my mother and me. My uncle, a long-time deacon in the Baptist church, yelled, "Answer me, where did you get such nonsense? Show me in the Bible where God called a woman to preach?" My mother and my aunt had always been my inspiration for the many times I had "spoken" in church services. They encouraged me to teach in Sunday School, organize Baptist Training Union at our church, begin a Gospel choir, raise money for the building fund, lead prayer and Bible groups. This and more all by the time I was 18! Yet, now they were silent as my uncle yelled. My mother quickly left the dining room, went into the kitchen, and began to wash the dishes. My aunt sat there head down, absolutely silent.

I could not "show" him where this came from. I could only "feel" this was what God wanted for me. So I ran out of the room, too. Why didn't my mother and my aunt come to my aid? They attended church quite often. Their faith was very strong, and I wanted to be like them. Now, they were denying the very thing they had taught me. I could not understand this. I read into their silence that in some way they agreed with him. I felt let down and unsupported. It took me twenty years to get over this feeling and answer my call.

All of this is past. I have been the Interim Pastor at three different churches. I have served as Associate Pastor of two churches. I am confident that what I "felt" thirty-two years ago was truly the working of the Holy Spirit in my life. My course work

for the Doctor of Ministry Degree is completed. I am planning to graduate in May of 1990. I hope that day will be as beautiful as this day.

My doctoral project proposal concerns itself with the issue of black women as Senior Pastors in the Baptist and other black Churches. This is an educational project designed to encourage black women to become more effective leaders in their churches by helping them to appreciate their gifts and talents and not have others to limit their use of them. The issue of black women's ministry limitations is discussed with a view toward change. The project is designed also to empower women to assist in the effort to overcome their limitations within their church tradition. The project is proposed to help black Christian women to understand how their heritage has both limited and created possibilities for their lives.

Women in Scripture and present day women have used their gifts and talents to go beyond their traditions for the cause of Christ. Black women, too, are involved in significant decision making, in medicine, in science, in the judicial system as lawyers and judges, in high level government positions, and in numerous other professions of the secular world. Why are they denied full equality in the pastoral ministry within the Baptist tradition? The project explores this question.

I have witnessed the incredible faith that black women have in the black male pastor. They have almost "defied" him over the teachings of Jesus Christ. Lay men have supported this view of "the pastor". Sadly, at times, I have seen ethical behavior, spirituality, and a commitment to what is "good and true", be subordinated to the wishes and desires of the pastor. Women have "served" the pastor often apart from a commitment to the Christian ministry, but seemingly only as a means of pleasing the man, who, of course, is in God's image. The woman's role appears extremely subordinate and oppressed. Males and females within these churches appear to honor this traditional relationship. I question this dynamic as I question racism. In some sense this may be even more difficult than racism because of its insidiously negative link with God. Here, the words of the prophet Hosea come to mind: "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge..." (Hosca 4:6)

I hold certain basic theological assumptions. These guide me as I continue research on my project. From "the beginning", we find in Genesis 1:26 that God created male and female to be equally responsible

for the care of the world. In the gospel accounts of Jesus Christ's ministry, we find women in leadership roles and among those who witness and are called to proclaim God's Word: the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-30); and Lydia, a business woman (Acts 16:11-15). Black women need to find encouragement from the woman in Mark 7:24-30 who boldly challenged her culture and tradition, holding to her argument with Jesus himself. She succeeds and receives Jesus' affirmation and blessing. Then, in the Gospel of Luke, we find examples of Jesus' unique relationship to women which is affirming, open, and empowering.

As a Christian I also believe the following: Through sin we are separated from God but through Christ grace is extended and we are reconciled to our Maker. Although we are created in the image of God, the reality of human finiteness serves as an ever present reminder to us that we are not God. But in covenantal relationship with each other we reveal God's presence to each other.

It is my contention that such an educational process will raise the self-esteem of Christian black women. As black women encounter each other in a dialogical peer model of mutual learning, they will serve to motivate each other. This educational process will be more effective than the traditional hierarchical input-output system of learning.

Yet most black women are repeatedly denied their place in the Senior Pastorate. This can be seen through a comparison of the number of ordained black women versus the number serving as senior pastors. Space will not allow me to set forth the entire proposal for this project which has been in process since January, 1989. However, the eight black women involved have been coming together, sharing stories, encouraging each other, and studying the works related to biblical equality in the leadership of the church. This is done through the inspiration of prayer, articulation of Scripture, affirmation of individual ministry, and research.

Due to the limited experience of black women, it is essential that we begin to form networks of support for our call to ministry. Through the common sharing of our experiences, we affirm each other in our various calls to ministry including that of senior pastor. Currently, black women primarily have been left to follow their call along isolated pathways. Thus, we must develop means of bringing black Christian women together to face the joys and heartaches of our call.

This project is designed to benefit the black Church by recognizing God's call to women as well as men. The Church must provide the model for an oppression-free society.

At the time (1982) that I left Washington, D.C. to come to seminary, there was an organization called the Council of 100 Black Ministers. One of their

agreed upon tenets was an alignment to prevent women from entering "their" pulpits. These churches are well attended, and many were literally packed to capacity on a given Sunday morning. Quite a few other churches who are not a part of this alliance give lip service to the support of women in ministry, but their support is marginal. The male bonding goes deeper than the concept of equality.

As I have struggled through 32 years of answering my uncle's questions, I can now pass on to other young women that this "nonsense for the pastorate" has come from the God who created me in God's image. Yes, throughout the Scriptures I, too, as a female am affirmed as one who can be a witness to God's love through Jesus Christ, because God's gifts in ministry are bestowed without consideration of gender. Jesus Christ demonstrated that His Father's ways were not our ways, nor our ways God's ways. Therefore, it behooves us to follow God, not man.

As I follow God, I often walk alone, separated from my black sisters and brothers because of sexism, and separated from many white sisters and brothers because of racism. How long will it take us to discover that in God's eyes we are all equal?

"Umbrella Coverage"

Our local chapters are rejoicing in the "umbrella coverage" which we have received from the Internal Revenue Service. Our 501 (c) 3 tax-exempt status extends to each local chapter provided they conform to the requirements stipulated by the IRS. There are both privileges and responsibilities. The privileges of our umbrella coverage include a lower mailing rate, exemption from sales taxes, and the right to accept income tax deductible contributions.

There are stringent regulations, and IRS demands a more rigorous accounting than was once the case, at both the national and the local level. This means funds must be spent in accordance with the stated purposes of CBE and that there must be a careful accounting. Program activities also must be related to our stated purposes and must be reported to the national office at least yearly. Since the national organization is obligated to assume the oversight and responsibility for the local chapters, we ask that each local member also be a national member. In this way, we can maintain better communication with individual members as well as with the chapter.

After the Christians for Biblical Equality conference July 20-23 at Bethel College, local chapters are asked to send one or more representatives to a special meeting at which the details of the Internal Revenue Service ruling will be explained. Our lawyer, Terry Slye, will be on hand to elucidate. See you there!