

THE POWER OF ACCURATE TEACHING

LEARNING THE TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN CHANGED MY LIFE

Lynne M. Baab

Dr. Catherine Clark Kroeger stands at the front of the room, putting transparencies on an overhead projector. She's showing us pictures of pottery from the second and third centuries AD. On the pottery are images of women standing over men: The men are lying down, and the women hold knives pointed down at them. Kroeger explains that the Greek word *authentain* was used to describe this kind of ritual murder that occurred in temples. She has already said that the word *authentain* was very rare in the first century and is used only once in the Bible. That one usage, in 1 Timothy 2:12, is often translated as "have authority" and has been interpreted as prohibiting women from being in leadership or teaching roles.

Kroeger also says that in 1 Timothy 2, *authentain* may refer to some kind of authority women were unethically exercising over men, perhaps related to ritual murder or usurping authority. The lack of clear meaning of that word in the first century, she concludes, indicates that modern audiences cannot base Christian practices regarding women's roles solely on that one verse.

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BUSINESS OWNER.

It is 1982. I am thirty years old, sitting at the back of the room because I have my four-month-old baby with me. He's a placid little guy, always happy if I'm holding him, so I figure I can learn something from this conference on the equality of women and men in the Bible. My son nurses happily in some sessions; in others, he plays with my left hand while I'm writing furiously with my right. I also have a two-year-old. A friend and I hired a babysitter to stay with our preschoolers so we can attend the Friday sessions of the conference; our husbands have agreed to care for the two boys on Saturday.

At thirty, I have never seen a woman minister, attorney, doctor, dentist, or business owner. I had a handful of women teachers in high school and two in college, and I've seen a few women in Christian ministry positions working with children, youth, or college students. Most of my other female role models are homemakers. I am a part-time student at Fuller Seminary's extension in Seattle, working toward a master's degree in theology. I'm motivated to study mainly to keep my brain active while I'm a stay-at-home mom. I figure the master's degree won't hurt if I want to return to some kind of Christian ministry when my kids are older.

I was raised Episcopalian and didn't have any exposure to conservative interpretations of the Bible until I became

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a committed Christian at nineteen and got involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF). At that time, my inability to picture myself as a church minister—or in any other major leadership role—came from a lack of models, not the Bible. During my twenties, as I studied the Bible in the company of evangelicals, I learned about the variety of opinions on women in church leadership, ranging from “no leadership over men” to John Stott’s position, which I adopted in my mid-twenties.

John Stott, whom I admired in multiple ways, believed women could do any kind of ministry, including preaching and teaching, as long as a man oversaw them. I took comfort in his position because my spiritual gifts clearly lay in teaching and leadership. I enjoyed using those gifts when I served as a campus staff member with IVCF for four years after college. I spoke at numerous conferences and led Bible studies for both female and male students. In my third and fourth years with IVCF, I mentored staff interns. My supervisor, a wonderful man who noticed and appreciated my gifts, encouraged or assigned me to perform each of those roles. I felt “safe” as a woman Christian teacher and leader because a man was overseeing me as I used my teaching and leadership gifts.

THAT 1982 CONFERENCE CHANGED MY LIFE. I GAINED CONFIDENCE AND SERENITY IN SERVING THROUGH TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP.

But at this 1982 conference, sponsored by many who would later found CBE, I learned from Catherine Kroeger and other speakers that passages like 1 Timothy 2:12 are challenging to interpret, not only because of a rare Greek verb but also because of their juxtaposition with other passages, like Romans 16. I had never before noticed the astonishing number of women in leadership listed in Romans 16. Various conference speakers discussed the difference between passages that address specific, local situations and those that present timeless theological truths, like that of Galatians 3:28.¹ This led me to a powerful realization that echoes to this day: If indeed in Christ there is no male and female, then I am an equal person in ministry and in every area of life with all other Christians, including men. My call from God will involve using my gifts in teaching and leadership wherever the Holy Spirit takes me and whenever communities of Christians commission me. I don’t have to look to men for validation or oversight!

That 1982 conference changed my life. I gained confidence and serenity in serving through teaching and leadership.



Three years later, I changed from the Master of Arts program at Fuller to the Master of Divinity (MDiv), which opened the possibility for ordination. Four years after that, at thirty-seven, I started the candidacy process for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Two years later, I had completed my MDiv, my ordination exams, and all the required interviews. I was “certified ready to receive a call,” but I knew I wasn’t ready to work as a pastor. My boys were nine and eleven, and they took up all the finite amount of extroverted energy that I—an introvert—had. So, I got two part-time jobs writing and editing publications for the presbytery and synod.²

I was ready for ordination in 1997 at age forty-five. I received a call to an associate pastor position in my Presbyterian congregation. Early in the morning of the congregational vote, I got a phone call from a person I knew pretty well. They said, “I want you to know I have to vote ‘no’ to your call today. I appreciate you and all the ways you serve our congregation, but I don’t believe women can be ministers, so I have to vote ‘no.’” I thanked them for honoring our relationship by phoning me, but inside I felt sad, demoralized, and a bit numb. Their vote was one of eight “no” votes. More than ninety congregants voted “yes”.

A few months later, our church called another woman associate pastor and she, too, received eight “no” votes. Those “no” votes weren’t about her or me. They were a sign of the slow pattern of change in my congregation and, perhaps, the wider church as well.

I served as an associate pastor for seven years in that lively church. In my last year, I felt a clear call to pursue teaching at a seminary. I left that church, earned a PhD in communication at the University of Washington, and, from ages 55 to 65, taught pastoral theology at a university overseas. I also filled an adjunct tutor role at a Presbyterian seminary there.



Now, at seventy-three, eight years after moving back home to Seattle, I teach one class a year as an adjunct professor, and I guest-preach several times a year. I speak at church seminars and retreats. I write devotionals for Westminster John Knox Press, weekly blog posts about prayer, and occasional books. I got such a late start as a minister, professor, and author that I have no desire to retire. My energy has reduced as I have gotten older, so I work about half-time.

I remember the handful of spiritual gifts inventories I took in my twenties. Service, the spiritual gift many people expect from women, was always last on my list of gifts. Teaching, administration/leadership, and encouragement were always at the top of the lists. That pattern has played out throughout my life. I will always be grateful to the numerous wise teachers who embraced women in ministry and gave me the information and perspective to confidently use those gifts as a full equal in community with others who are also serving and using their own unique gifts.

In our faith communities, I'm sure other women hold back like I did, afraid that they might initiate leadership inappropriately or overstep the limits supposedly mandated by the Bible. Because of this tendency to hold back, women often don't contribute what they could. In the church, then, we are missing out on the gifts, vision, and energy of many individuals who might make a significant difference in an area of ministry they are

passionate about. Our faith communities are poorer, and our congregational ministries to the wider community lack resources that could make them more effective. Nonprofit ministries also suffer when women feel they can't use their leadership and teaching gifts fully.

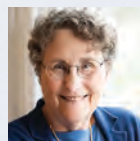
Women are freed to step out in faith when they hear and assimilate accurate teaching about women in the Bible and the gifts of the Holy Spirit poured out on all Christians. Women can then bring our joyful energy and vision to serve our Christian communities and the wider world. For me, that empowering teaching happened at a conference. Later, I offered that same teaching in sermons, retreats, seminars at churches, and in academic settings. I hope and pray others—both women and men—will do the same.

In addition to giving full access to the gifts women have to offer to churches and the wider community, accurate teaching can also gift individuals with the delight that comes from serving with joyful abandon and full energy. My writing, teaching, speaking, and preaching illuminate my life, center me in Christ, and compel me to rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance, wisdom, and words. I am filled with gratitude to God who calls us into service alongside others and gives us spiritual gifts to fulfill our calling.

Notes

1. "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28, NIV.
2. *Presbytery* and *synod* refer to regional and larger governing bodies (respectively) in the Presbyterian church that oversee and support local congregations.

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