

So, you wouldn't be OK with her pastoring a church, but you'd read her books?

I enjoy reading Dorothy L. Sayers. If you don't know who she is, think the female version of C.S. Lewis, overlapping timeframe, more detectives but fewer wardrobes and lions. I haven't read her novels (which are detective novels, in case you didn't get the joke) but I am trying to read all of her theological works that I can get my hands on. She is bright, well read, witty, very direct and a wordsmith who doesn't try too hard. I appreciate two major things in particular about her theology: one, her use of narrative and love of stories, most of all the greatest story of Jesus Christ; two, the way she attempts to be very practical in showing what Jesus Christ means for our lives. The best example of the latter is in regards to us and our everyday work. There are slithers of Anglo-Catholic theology (among some other things) in her writings, so I don't agree with her on all things but I appreciate needing to think about why I may not fully support her line of thinking at various points. I am most times encouraged and challenged by Sayers.

I would be called conservative because of my view of women in the church (I might be called other things too, but let's keep it pleasant). There are positives to this position.¹ One, *as a conservative*, men and women are regarded as equal in creation (Gen 1:27) and salvation (Gal 3:28) – what a glorious truth! Two, *as a conservative* I think we should be particularly active and vocal in protecting the physical and emotional wellbeing of women in all matters of abuse and exploitation. We are strongly against misused male strength, positions and authority, especially within the church! Three, *as a conservative*, I want to acknowledge the importance and wonderful involvement of women in the great storyline of the bible, in particular in the New Testament. No women means so much of the great story is missing. The same holds true for our times now. Four, *as a conservative* I think that women

¹ To be clear, I hold to the subsequent list of things because I am a Christian, not because I might be called conservative by others.

should be encouraged to speak the truth in love within the church (Eph 4).

Conservatives have been guilty of letting this fall off the radar as we've relegated speaking in the church to one guy, sometimes two (service leader and preacher). So it's really a wider issue than just concerning women. But with at least two guys in up front positions, understandably men are seen as represented, even if the majority of them are also simply sitting placidly in the plastic pews. That isn't a call for our gatherings to be one big 'share fest' with a cacophony of un-weighed voices and versions of the truth. But it is a call to consider how we can implement creative ways to see as many Christians as possible (both men and women) speaking the truth to one another in love and so seeing one another built up as a result.

But then of course there is the so-called 'negative theology' of being a conservative, I'm thinking of a passage like 1 Timothy 2 where women are seen as prohibited from giving the weekly sermon or being the pastor of a church. And this is what usually causes all the fuss in response. It's worth recognising that not all men are open to doing this either, as 1 Timothy 3 lays out. The situation is not as simple as: 'you're a man, therefore you can be a leader within the church and give the weekly sermon.' No, plenty of Christian men are prohibited, but yes it is true, not on the grounds of their sex – which irks many and isn't exactly PC. So why might women be prohibited from, for instance preaching the weekly sermon on Sunday? Aren't women *able*, in terms of giftedness, to do this? Well yes I'm sure they are able. I'm sure my wife could give a better sermon than many pastors I know. But it isn't a question of sheer *giftedness* but rather of *responsibility*.² I fear that the egalitarian position can make a mistake here when it starts with the matter of giftedness and turns them into rights: 'I am gifted in this [by God], therefore who are you to keep me from using my gifts?'³ But it is not a matter of sheer giftedness, but rather one of responsibility as

² This does not at all mean that the male gets off the hook for preaching shoddy sermons and generally just being lacklustre. I take it that his responsibility would push him to grow, not only in his own personal knowledge and love of God, and godliness, but also in his skills and ability to faithfully present the Word of God. This would include, but is not limited to, his faithfulness in applying God's Word to the people he pastors.

³ It would seem to me that Scripture would encourage us to do the opposite, to think less of our own rights – that's the other-person centred way of thinking. Of course you could try for the argument: 'I have to preach because that'll be for the best of others.' But that strikes me as a dangerously proud train of thought. Only one person could be called God's gift to humanity, and we killed him.

the formal leadership of the church has been entrusted to certain men. This I believe fits into the larger scope and flow of Scripture, that men are called on to lead - to lead in love and sacrificial service (remember, we are against the many distorted versions of abusive male leadership!). But still, they are called on *to lead*, and to do this in *close partnership* with women. ***Different in responsibilities, equal in partnership we might say in regards to men and women in Christian congregations. And one of the ways that difference in responsibilities shows is in certain men pastoring churches and preaching the sermons. I believe that 1 Timothy 2 fits within this scope as these men are given charge of directing (under God) the spiritual well-being of the local gathering.***

In the arguments against 1 Timothy 2's prohibition I am yet to be convinced by:

- The cultural dismissals ('Paul only said what he said because there were particular women in *that* church who were teaching false doctrine and they needed to be silenced. It was just for them.')
- The redemptive-movement/trajectory hermeneutics ('Scripture was heading in a direction in which, like with slavery, soon something like these prohibitions against women would be seen as passé and in fact evil.')
- The intense and complex word definitions arguments ('To teach technically means...')

This isn't the place to go fully into why I remain unconvinced by these arguments. Needless to say that even a prohibition like 1 Timothy 2 is grounded: not in culture, but creation (2:13-14); not in the issues of specific local church, but in the invitation to see the church as God's household, the pillar and foundation of the truth (3:15) – surely unchanging from local church to local church? ***I am convinced that the so-called 'negative theology' of something like 1 Timothy 2 finds its rightful place in the beautiful flow of God's Scripture where it is presented as something for our good, part of the good order established***

by our good God. Certain men are given the responsibility to lead the church, they do this in deep partnership with other men AND women. This is good! And so it's not actually 'negative theology' at all, even if it involves a prohibition.

I was not always conservative in these particular views. I was... well, nothing. I did not know that there was an issue and so I had no thoughts either way. (Some pastors seem to remain in this most unfortunate position, some not so much because of ignorance but rather indecision – regrettably incorrectly labelled as ‘epistemic humility.’) I was brought up in very small village church run by two women pastors whom I remain thankful for! They taught me the gospel as a young child, they were there when I rejected God in my early teenage years, and they were there when the zeal of the Lord stirred my heart as a late teenager. And then I went to university in the city. And in my second year as I started involvement in a Christian group on campus, the first book of the bible we did in Bible Study was, you guessed it, 1 Timothy. It was a jolt to my experiences, the start of many questions, and a push to frequent and fervent studying of Scripture and books around the subject. To the dismay of those women pastors, who used a cultural argument against 1 Timothy 2, I hold the view I do today.

So you read female theologians like Sayers, but wouldn't feel comfortable with a woman pastoring a church?

Yes.

Why?

It's a question often raised by both egalitarians and by ‘soft’ complementarians. It's seen as a push back, a way to show the hypocrisy of being conservative and yet... ‘you read female theologians?’ Yes I do read female theologians and the two main reasons

are: firstly regarding teaching authority and the pastor, and secondly regarding the differences between a theological publication and a preached sermon. I consider the first as the really important point, the one most applicable to our question; the second I offer as something for further reflection.

Firstly, the theologian does not have teaching authority over us like the pastor.

I should listen to all fellow Christian brothers and sisters as they speak the truth of God to me. This is part of the positive theology mentioned above that I think needs to occur more in our churches – it needs to form part of our congregational DNA. As this speaking is happening, I am to be discerning in what I hear: is it getting me to set my eyes on Jesus according to what Scripture says? If it is biblical and godly and wise then I listen. And by listening I mean the kind where it's not just in one ear and out the other, but instead the kind that fast tracks this matter to the heart with the help of the Holy Spirit. Why do I aim to listen like that? It is because, as per a passage like Ephesians 4 and others, God is using this person for my edification as they bring His authoritative truth to bear on my life. I do this in church with people that I *listen* to, and I do this as I *read* the work of theologians who are faithfully thinking about and applying the things of God from the Word of God. ***Theologians then, when they are doing their job properly, are doing their work as a brother or sister in Christ as they encourage us to turn our hearts towards God.***

The situation with my pastor is both similar and also slightly different.

It is similar in that he is certainly *not less* than also being my brother *and* I am still to be discerning. Like the Bereans (Acts 17:11) I am to search the Scriptures – tracing all things back to the ultimate authority of God through Scripture. God is the ultimate authority, not my pastor or the preacher (I am reminded in particular of so many

African churches who need to hear this given the propensity to misuse authority. 'The Pastor said...' is often used, not as a hand towards godliness but as a weapon to bring about submission to this man instead of Christ). So the situation is similar – this man is still a brother under the authority of Christ and His Scripture.

But the situation is also slightly different. Firstly, generally speaking, we must remember that there is a *relational context* of pastor to congregation, one that is not necessarily present or needed as between the author to reader. I don't necessarily know them (or vice versa) and actually I don't need a relationship with them for reading their books. Secondly, and this is actually the point I want to focus on, an extension of the relational context, namely that there is an added level which I must be aware of as I relate to my pastor. Yes, I am ultimately under the authority of God and His Word but I am also under the authority of this man if he is my pastor. God has seen fit to place him as an under-shepherd who I am to obey for my own good (truly for my good, not as a threat 'Obey me or else'). As the Holy Spirit says in Hebrews and 1 Peter:

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. (Heb 13:7-8 NIV)

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb 13:17 NIV)

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Pet 5:2-4 NIV)

A theologian I read is not operating at the same level as my pastor. She or he may be a sister or brother in Christ, and in so far as they point me to the things of God, I am to respond to that authority linked to God and inherent in His Word and truth. But

they do not have the added level of being placed as one with teaching authority over me. So I gladly read female theologians, even expounding 1 Timothy 2 issues and give thanks for this one-sided ‘conversation’ and encouragement from a sister in Christ who I may never have even met or known.⁴

There is perhaps another angle to come at things from. If the first one is primarily about *pastors* and their authority over us, the second is about the broader and linked category of *preaching* and how that compares to a theological work. And so:

Secondly, a theological publication is different to a preached sermon.

You may grasp that instinctively (you might not) and think: ‘Of course they’re different!’ But *how* they are different is slightly more difficult to articulate, even for leading theologians:

“That I am given the opportunity to preach is a great gift. I do not take it lightly. I am sure I spend much more time writing a sermon than most of the essays or books I write. I do so because it is my conviction that *sermons are more important*, that I am *under quite a different obligation when I preach than when I write an article or book.*” (Emphasis mine)⁵

So wrote Stanley Hauerwas in the introduction to a collection of his sermons. I’d imagine that Hauerwas wouldn’t be particularly gladdened by my using his words as I will (sorry Mr. Hauerwas!). Nevertheless, his words provide us with two differences between a theological publication and a preached sermon.⁶ He explains it simply as

⁴ So this is not primarily an issue of *reading* versus *hearing*. A written work can carry teaching authority. Think here of Paul writing. Why should they/us obey as we read it? Because he writes as the apostle of Jesus Christ – his role carries teaching authority. (Often this has relational context but it is not needed all of the time, his position still carries the authority whether he knows you personally or not). Think about a watered down example involving your pastor and his authority: you could be away and your pastor sends you an email detailing a matter of concern for which he needs to rebuke or correct you. How do you respond? As he is your pastor, the fact that it was over email and not face to face should not change how you respond – his words, this time written down, still carry authority as he writes to you as your pastor. However, if your pastor publishes a book on theology, the book’s call on you is not exactly the same as if he was preaching to you. Why? I would suggest that he is not operating under his specific role as pastor to you but rather under the larger banner of general theology for Christians.

⁵ Hauerwas, S. (2009). *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (20). Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.

⁶ In pitting ‘theology’ versus ‘a sermon’ I have introduced a false description and dichotomy, for the preacher is a most certainly a theologian, and sermons are first and foremost theological works. As Hauerwas notes, “I have,

(A) a sermon being *more important* and (B) as a preacher being under a *different obligation*. It is probably best to not separate those two ideas too much, they do go hand in hand – the greater *importance* with the *different obligation*. But how might we further articulate these ideas?

John B. Webster in his own wonderfully theocentric collection of sermons, prefaces them (don't fear, I do read past the introduction/prefaces of these books!) by speaking of three elements to preaching. The first is *Holy Scripture*, a body of texts where 'God teaches us, gives us knowledge' and where preaching is part of the 'church saying something about the words of the text, on the basis of the words of this text, under this text's authority, direction and judgment.'⁷ The second is the *congregation*:

“At the Lord's summons, the people of God gather in his presence. They gather in the expectation that something from God will be said to them – that however anxious, weary or indifferent they may be, the God of the gospel will address them with the gospel, will help them to hear what he says, and will instruct them on how to live life in his company.”⁸

And the third element to preaching according to Webster is the *sermon*:

“God speaks to the congregation through the human words of one who is appointed by God to “minister” the Word, to be an auxiliary in God's own speaking. The sermon repeats the scriptural words in other human words, following the Word's movement and submitting to its rule. In this, the sermon assists in the work of the divine Word, which builds up the church, making its life deep, steady and vital.”⁹

however, increasingly come to the recognition that one of the most satisfying contexts for doing the work of theology is in sermons. That should not be surprising because throughout Christian history, at least until recently, the sermon was one of the primary places in which the work of theology was done. For the work of theology is first and foremost to exposit Scripture.” Hauerwas, S. (2009). *A Cross-Shattered Church: Reclaiming the Theological Heart of Preaching* (12). Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.) ***I would suggest that the sermon and the preacher-pastor are the examples par excellence of theology and of a theologian.***

⁷ John Bainbridge Webster, *The Grace of Truth* (ed by. Daniel Jay Bush and Brannon Eugene Ellis; Oil Lamp Books, 2011), 11-12.

⁸ Webster, *The Grace of Truth*, 12.

⁹ Webster, *The Grace of Truth*, 12.

Perhaps immediately you can glean some differences between the theological publication and the preached sermon from those words. Leaning on some of Hauerwas' distinctions (the sermon is more important, the preacher has a different obligation) and Webster's categories, we may say something like: *What the appointed preacher of God is given in his preaching is an obligation (/responsibility?) to bring the Word of God to bear on a specific gathering of God's people who have come to hear from God Himself.*¹⁰ Or more simply and starting from the other end: *God has something to say to his expectantly gathered people through a sermon preached by an appointed person.*

A theological work can do some of that, but I do not think it can do all of that, and not quite as well. If that was the case then we should be advocating people going home and individually snuggling up to Calvin's *Institutes*, or get a group of people together (with less, to no snuggling) and have them read through Bavinck's *RD*. Those are activities that God surely uses for our edification! But they do not quite hit the same mark as someone preaching to a gathering of God's people does. Obviously there is overlap between a sermon and a theological book: both are theological (see remarks in footnote 6), and more importantly they are theological because they are based on *Holy Scripture*. In other words both are (or should be!) part of the 'church saying something about the words of the text, on the basis of the words of this text, under this text's authority, direction and judgment.'

But the differences then also exist: firstly, there is an expectant *congregation*. There is a gathering of God's people, this relational context again, one which again, a theological publication may not have. But also a sense of expectation and even

¹⁰ I'm still trying to think through what is happening at a Christian Conference or convention – that strange animal of Christian gatherings. Possibly only for a small minority will the preacher be their pastor who has an existing pastoral relationship with them and also has teaching authority over them. Perhaps these conventions are better thought about in terms of our second category here, not pastors, but preaching. For most people this man invited to preach will simply be the preacher, as a take it Hauerwas or Webster often were when preaching. What then? Well this man, whoever he is, still needs to conform to Scripture: he must carry the marks of knowing Jesus (1 Tim 3); and he should recognise the tremendous opportunity and responsibility placed before him. Perhaps recognition of his calling as a preacher is needed, although I'm not entirely sure what I mean by that. However, I wonder if it as a whole simply highlights the importance of praying that the conference organisers would be wise in who they choose and that we'd be discerning in who we come to listen to at Conferences. I still need to think about this more though!

urgency to this all – they gather to hear what God has to say. Perhaps we don't always rightly feel this on a Sunday, but we should – as the Word of God is delivered, this is [more] *important!* We as the people of God have gathered expecting 'the God of the gospel' to address us! Secondly, note again the different obligation or responsibility of the preacher as he delivers the *sermon*. These are either his people (think under-shepherd language) or his moment to bring the Word of God to bear. He does this as he speaks the Word of God in other human words to these gathered people.

God uses all things: the words of a theologian as you read his or her book, and the words of the preacher on Sunday. But yes, out of those two, while they both matter and are used by God, I would say using Hauerwas' words that the sermon is more important, and the preacher is under a different obligation. How does that relate to reading female theologians but not being comfortable with women preaching at church? Well, I think while the activities are related, they are different and the latter activity has been entrusted to certain godly men within the church of God. Again, it's not about ability but rather responsibility.

So... no job offer for Dorothy Sayers to pastor your church, but you'll read her books?

This whole situation is easier in that a) Sayers is dead, b) based on some of what I have read, I don't actually think she would want to pastor a church, c) perhaps some other things besides her being female could prohibit her from being pastor of a church. But those things aside, it's still yes. I do not think that her pastoring a church would be in line with the good design of God for godly men to take responsibility to lead the congregation and to be preachers of God's Word to His gathered people. But yes, I would gladly read her books (as I already do). And if she was alive and part of the church I was in, well, I reckon she'd have an open invitation for tea any day. Plus, imagine being in a book club or bible study with that lady! Perhaps I'd even ask her

to help review and critique our sermons at church. And I'd certainly be looking for opportunities for her to be able to encourage and challenge, both men and women, in what it means to live as a follower of Jesus.

Appetite whet for a bit of DLS?

I'd recommend a copy of 'Creed or Chaos' as a good starting point. It's a collection of some of her theological essays. Nothing particularly heavy but still good!

Then i'd recommend 'The man born to be king' where Sayers draws on the gospel accounts to create one single account of Jesus' life. It was done as a series of audio plays for the BBC. It goes a bit further than i'd be happy with in some places but it is still a very refreshing read.

Then a decent summary of Sayers' theology can be found in: Creed without Chaos by Laura K. Simmons.

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