

Women in Ministry: Roles and Titles in Chinese Baptist Churches

By: Chinese Baptist Fellowship of USA and Canada

The discussion of women in ministry, specifically holding the title pastor, has been hotly debated recently in the Southern Baptist Convention. The Chinese Baptist Fellowship of US and Canada would like to lend its voice and address the issue from both a historical perspective and of language/translation in the Chinese church.

The Chinese Baptist Fellowship (CBF) are composed of Chinese Baptist churches and individual Baptists in the United States and Canada. The purpose is to promote fellowship and to evangelize the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our statement of faith begins with these words, “The Bible itself, as the inspired and infallible Word of God that speaks with final authority concerning truth, morality, and the proper conduct of mankind, is the sole and final source of all that we believe.” Our statement ends affirming that we are created in the image of God, only two genders exist, and that marriage is exclusively between a single man and single woman. All member churches must agree with our statement of faith.

From a historical perspective, women have held a vital role in the Chinese church. Many of the first converts in China were women who were influential in spreading the gospel and starting churches similar to Lydia in Philippi. Due to persecution and a lack of mature male leaders, women played a pivotal role in evangelism, teaching, and discipleship. This still takes place today within the Chinese church in China and among the Chinese Diaspora including North America with women having shepherding roles and caring responsibilities for women’s, children and youth, administrative, and other ministries under the male leadership of a senior pastor.

Furthermore, at least five words in Chinese are used for women in ministry. The Chinese terms and their English translation are 傳道 (minister), 姑娘 (Bible woman), 教師/先生 (teacher), and 教士 (evangelist). In addition, because of the recent adoption of the title “pastor” for non-ordained ministers, the Chinese term for minister is now translated pastor as well. Moreover, the title of “Reverend” is used in the Chinese church to delineate authority, given through ordination, and limited to men.

In summary, among Chinese Baptist churches, women hold the role as pastors, ministers, evangelists, teacher, and bible women actively serving in their churches today. The practice is not over fidelity or obedience to Scripture but rather due to history and language. In addition, the Baptist principle regarding autonomy of the local churches allows for individual churches to practice male headship/leadership in their local context based on history and language.

In conclusion, our goal is not to dictate or shape opinion but to inform the broader Baptist family to consider the issue from the lens of other cultures, in this case Chinese believers and churches that hold the same values, truths, and love for the Lord.