

# Tertullian's Ghost: How a Canadian Baptist became an egalitarian advocate

By Hugh McNally

I grew up on a farm in Atlantic Canada. When I was thirteen, our country church called Josephine Kinley to be our pastor. She began her ministry with us in June, 1948. That October she conducted a week of evangelistic services, during which I and a number of others accepted Christ as our Savior and Lord. In November, we were baptized in the Saint John River by Rev. Dr. William Elgee (Josephine believed that she should not conduct the baptisms because she was not yet ordained). In 1949 she married and moved away from the community. Even though she was our pastor for only one year, she had a profound impact on my life. I consider her to be one of the best, if not the best, pastor I have ever known.

On June 23, 1953, her husband was killed in a tragic car accident, leaving her with two children to bring up on her own. In 1953, she accepted a call to become our pastor again. In the spring of 1954, the church asked the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches (CABC) to examine her for ordination to pastoral ministry. The CABC recommended her for ordination and she was ordained by the Prince William Baptist Church on October 28, 1954. She was the first woman to be ordained in the CABC. Since then ninety-six other women have been recommended for ordination.

While I was always grateful for the influence of Josephine on my life and always supported the ordination of women, I confess that for much of my ministry, I did not pay much attention to biblical equality issues. This changed one day, around 1980, when I picked up a magazine in a doctor's office and read an article claiming that Christianity was the main cause of the oppression of women worldwide. The author cited a number of quotations from Christian leaders down through the centuries to prove her point. One of these was by Tertullian, who wrote to women, saying,

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of that divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die. ("On the Apparel of Women," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, Eerdmans, 1956, p. 14).

Another was by the Protestant reformer, John Calvin, who wrote,

As the woman derives her origin from the man, she is therefore inferior in rank... as the woman was created for the sake of the man; she is therefore subject to him... God's eternal law... has made the female sex subject to the authority of men. On this account all women are born, that they may acknowledge themselves inferior in consequence of the superiority of the male sex.... Let the woman be satisfied with her state of subjection, and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex. (*Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Calvin Translation Society, 1848, pp. 357-358, 361).

## Why be an advocate?

Rev. Dr. McNally is often asked why he pours so much time and effort into ASBE and advocating on behalf of the biblical equality movement. Here are a few of his reasons:

1. The Bible is the written Word of God. When we misinterpret his Word, we distort God's message to the world. This is a serious matter.
2. God wants the church to set all his people, both women and men, free to use the gifts he has given them in his kingdom work.
3. The increasing gap between women's place in modern society and women's place in the church is contributing to a significant drop in the number of women who regularly attend church and become involved in its ministries.
4. The hierarchical stance of some churches on gender roles is turning many young women and men away from the gospel. For them, hindering women from fully using their God-given gifts is a justice issue.
5. Some men use hierarchical teaching about male/female roles to justify violence against their wives and children.

Want to read more from Rev. Dr. McNally? Find his articles, "Women in Ministry" and "Women Are Persons," at the ASBE website [www.biblicalequality.org](http://www.biblicalequality.org)

At first I questioned the authenticity of the quotations, but when I checked them out, I discovered that they were correct. This troubled me because what they were saying did not agree with the teachings of Jesus or what the rest of the Bible taught. This pushed me to read books on the subject and to study what the Bible actually teaches. As I studied the Bible's teachings, I became increasingly aware that the views of Tertullian and Calvin were still with us in the 20th century. For instance, in 1957 Donald Guthrie wrote, "The idea of woman's subjection is not only ingrained in the conviction of the mass of mankind . . . but also appears to be inherent in the divine constitution of the race" (*The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 76). In 1958, Leon Morris wrote, "Neither in her origin, nor in the purpose for which she was created, can the woman claim priority or even equality" (*The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 153). And today, we hear dozens of high-profile Christian leaders who say the same types of things. Even though I respect these men and have benefitted from their teachings, I believe that in this area they have been more influenced by patriarchal culture than by what the Bible teaches.

At the 1986 assembly of the CABC, notice was given that the following year delegates would be asked to vote on whether or not to stop ordaining women. In preparation for this vote, the editor of the *Atlantic Baptist* asked a number of people to write articles, both for and against the ordination of women. I wrote one on "Women in Ministry." When the church secretary finished typing it, she said to me, "Do you realize that you may never get another pastorate in our convention?" By then this possibility no longer concerned me. Fortunately, the delegates voted overwhelmingly to continue ordaining women.

The reading and thinking I did for the article had convinced me that the Bible taught the equal partnership of men and women in the church and in the home based on gifting and calling rather than gender. Soon after, I wrote another article for the *Atlantic Baptist* entitled "Women Are Persons." In it I discussed four false ideas that "keep women from enjoying the respect and dignity they deserve as persons created in the image of God." The four false ideas are:

1. Women are inferior to men.
2. Women were responsible for mankind's fall into sin and God is still punishing them for this grievous act.
3. Women are the tempters of the pure.
4. Women are somehow the possession or the property of men.

I have observed that these ideas, reflective of those held by Tertullian and Calvin, still have a hold on Christians, even in the CABC, which trains and ordains women for ministry. A few male students at the CABC seminary, Acadia Divinity College, are still harassing the female students and challenging their right to become pastors. Upon graduation, even though they have been called, gifted, and equipped for pastoral ministry, female graduates discover that many churches are still not willing to give them an opportunity to serve as pastors. To combat these and the many other problems facing Christian women, I decided to establish a CBE chapter in Atlantic Canada. Through consultation with CBE, this ultimately took the form of an independent sister organization, called the Atlantic Society of Biblical Equality (ASBE), founded in 2009.

I am convinced that biblical equality is a central issue, one which is critical to the future of the church. In Canada and the United States, Christians lament ever-shrinking participation in church by society as a whole, even as we bar those women who want to participate from doing so! Women in the Western world are some of the least oppressed in the world, but are far from achieving full equality with men, especially in the home and in the church. Discrimination in the workplace, sex trafficking, rape, domestic violence, and a culture that blames sexual abuse on the victims rather than the perpetrators, all remain deeply ingrained in our society. Too often, the church has misinterpreted the Bible in ways that justify these problems. Compounding this is a vocal group of Christians, who are actively attacking gender equality as thoroughly secular and a betrayal of biblical principles.

Biblical equality is not a secular power-grab by women trying to reinterpret the Bible for their own benefit. Biblical equality is about the freedom of the gospel, which has for too long been overshadowed by the patriarchal worldviews of great men like Tertullian and Calvin. It is the power of the Holy Spirit freeing all people to use their gifts for service in God's kingdom. If not for the ministry of a woman, I would not have surrendered my life to Christ sixty-five years ago. How many people could the church reach if it supported the full participation of women! I look forward to the day when women and men will be fully empowered to serve God together as partners in their homes, churches, and society, using the gifts God has given them.