You Asked: Should Women Be Military Chaplains?

JANUARY 16, 2014 | Mark Coppenger

Editors' note: Send your theological, biblical, and practical ministry questions to ask@thegospelcoalition.org along with your full name, city, and state. We'll pass them along to The Gospel Coalition’s Council members and other friends for an answer we can share.

Jon S. from St. Louis writes,

I have a female complementarian friend who believes that it is not biblical for women to be pastors, but is considering becoming a military chaplain. Why would or why wouldn't it be biblical for a women to become a military chaplain? What are the differences or similarities to the pastoral office?

We asked Mark Coppenger to answer the question. Coppenger is a professor of Christian apologetics and vice president for extension education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A retired infantry officer, Coppenger is the son of a naval chaplain and son-in-law of an army chaplain.
To this question, my own Southern Baptist denomination says no, though, for a season, it took the other tack. The change came after the 2000 update of our doctrinal statement, the *Baptist Faith and Message*, which now reads, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

Similar circumstances and convictions led earlier to the formation of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, whose *Danvers Statement* declares, “In the church, redemption in Christ gives men and women an equal share in the blessings of salvation; nevertheless, some governing and teaching roles within the church are restricted to men.”

The SBC’s sticking point was ordination to the gospel ministry, required by the military, but denied for women by the vast majority of SBC churches, who expressed their convictions on the subject as early as 1984. A resolution urged that churches not be swayed “by modern cultural, sociological, and ecclesiastical trends or by emotional factors,” and, encouraged, in light of biblical authority, “the service of women in all aspects of church life and work other than pastoral functions and leadership roles entailing ordination.”

### Women in the Ranks

Be that as it may, don’t we need women chaplains to minister to the influx of women in the ranks? This might be more compelling if these women chaplains were assigned to women only—sister to sister. But that would be an unacceptable to the military and non-military politicians in charge. They insist that “a chaplain is a chaplain is a chaplain.”

Of course, base chapels aren’t real churches with member rolls and discipline. As one chaplain put it, they serve more as missionaries than pastors, “performing or providing” religious counsel as needed to the various groups in their zone of ministry—more like drinking fountains to which thirsty personnel may come to drink at their leisure than parents who say, “Drink your milk.”

But I believe this description understates reality. According to Army Regulation 165-1 (Army Chaplain Corps Activities), chaplains’ job description includes the “conduct of worship,” performance of “rites, sacraments, and ordinances,” and the “conduct of marriages, burials, baptisms, confirmations, blessings, daily prayers, and other required religious ministrations.” And while they are often called upon to do more generic duty pertaining to troop and family welfare (e.g., next-of-kin notification; substance abuse counseling), they are unmistakably charged to act as *de facto* pastors for many of the faithful. And for this work, the Army insists on pastor-level ordination. This arrangement has been in place for 40 years, with the appearance of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist women chaplains, some rising to the rank of admiral and general.

Some Christian groups are more sanguine than others over endorsement. Army Chaplain Arlene Williams found her way ([http://www.army.mil/article/18828/](http://www.army.mil/article/18828/)) from the Baptist fellowship of her youth to the Church of God, more open to women preachers. She had some early disappointments: “I would hear, I’ll send
my females over to you, but they didn’t understand that I was there to provide guidance for males and females.” But things got better at a new post, where she was looking forward to her first preaching stint to the troops. She enthused, “We need more women chaplains. . . Women are nurturers by nature, and we can nurture women and men in faith. I encourage all females who are interested in being a female chaplain to just do it. It’s a very fulfilling ministry.”

**Band of Sisters**

Yet nurturing doesn’t tell the whole story, as Chaplain Delana Small well knows. A graduate of Evangel College, she’s endorsed by the Assemblies of God. At present, she serves with an all-male battalion of the 101st in Afghanistan. She joins many other military women who have served with distinction in Iraq and Afghanistan, some of whose stories are told in Kirsten Holmstedt’s book *Band of Sisters* ([https://www.amazon.com/Band-Sisters-American-Women-Iraq/dp/0811735664/?tag=thegospelcoal-20](https://www.amazon.com/Band-Sisters-American-Women-Iraq/dp/0811735664/?tag=thegospelcoal-20)). She offers inspiring accounts of women in harm’s way, often at loss of limb and life. But the question lingers, “Why are they there in the first place?”

In some instances, their presence is arguably essential, as with nurses, who’ve served in the wartime tradition of Florence Nightingale, “The Lady with the Lamp” in the Crimean War. Even then, we need to recognize the cost. Navy Lieutenant Estrella Salinas left two children behind, “well aware she could be killed and her children could be left motherless.”

Whatever case one might make for the need for women nurses in war, there is no corresponding military case for women chaplains. There are plenty of evangelical male ministers to go around, and since “a chaplain is a chaplain is a chaplain,” the men are capable of pastoral care and leadership for both genders, just as they are in the churches. To the social engineers, it doesn’t matter. To Christian men and women, it certainly should.

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Finding Sexual Freedom in Augustine’s Confessions

JANUARY 15, 2014 | Chuck Colson

No stranger to sexual dysfunction, Augustine is a faithful guide for those seeking to escape the mire of sexual sin. In his autobiographical masterpiece *Confessions* (http://www.amazon.com/Confessions-Penguin-Classics-Saint-Augustine/dp/014044114X/?tag=thegospelcoal-20), Augustine chronicles the intensity of his struggles, providing us with a probing analysis of the human heart, the nature of sin, and the grace of the gospel.

In his early 30s, Augustine was attracted to the truth of the Christian faith but struggled to give up his sexual pursuits. He feared what he would become if he discontinued his carefree relationships. He writes: “I loved the happy life, but I feared to find it in your abode, and fled from it, even as I sought it. I thought that I would be too wretched, if I were kept from a woman’s arms.”

But God’s grace found Augustine and liberated him from his deadly disease. And reading through Augustine’s struggles, we see three important principles that help us in dealing with sex and sexual sin.

**Sex is a gift from God, but sex is not our ultimate good.**

For Augustine, sex is not evil—it is the gift of a good God. Like all creaturely gifts, sex is intended by God to lead us to him, resulting in the love and praise of his name. However, as Adam’s children, our loves are profoundly disordered. Pleased with God’s gifts, we displease God by loving the gifts over him, the Giver. Augustine captures this dynamic beautifully, saying:
All these things are the gift of my God: I did not give them to myself. These things are good, and they all made up my being. Therefore, he who made me is good, and he is my good. . . . But in this was my sin, that not in him but in his creatures, in myself and others, did I seek pleasure, honors, and truths.

However, in seeking to find our good in the creation, we discover a profound restlessness, not peace. Augustine confesses that his soul sought something better than God, but “turned and turned again upon its back and sides and belly, but all places were hard to it, for you [God] alone are rest.” In other words, if sex becomes our ultimate good, rest will elude us—no matter how many beds we visit.

Augustine explains the reason for sex’s inability to fulfill us:

The good you love is from him, but only in so far as it is used for him is it good and sweet. But with justice will it become bitter, if you, as a deserer from him, unjustly love what comes from him. Whither do you walk, farther and farther along these hard and toilsome roads? There is no rest to be found where you seek it: seek what you seek, but it lies not where you seek it. You seek a happy life in the land of death, but it is not there. How can you find a happy life where there is no life?

Augustine sees that sex, like all created things, has limitations. If we ignore those limits, we die a thousand deaths seeking a “happy life where there is no life.” To experience the “goodness and sweetness” of sex we must forsake the quest of finding our good in it and accept the boundaries God prescribes around it.

No matter the variety, intensity, or orientation, sex will fail us if our meaning and identity are tied up in it. We may enjoy pleasures and climaxes but will continue to live in a world of want because we seek something from sex that it doesn’t possess. It’s like trying to find a nutritious meal on the candy aisle—it simply isn’t there.

**Sexual sin, like other disordered loves, enslaves us.**

Through his sexual habits, Augustine trained himself to answer his physical lusts. Repetitive bodily actions, freely chosen by him, made Augustine a slave. He preferred to satisfy his lusts rather than have them extinguished by God’s mercy. He writes, “There remained only speechless dread and my soul was fearful, as if of death itself, of being kept back from that flow of habit by which it was wasting away unto death.”

Augustine feared what his life would become without his sexual liaisons. So he limped between opinions, believing there was something better in life, yet terrified by what that could mean.

Echoing Paul from [Romans 7:24](https://www.esv.org/Romans%207.24), Augustine poignantly captures his struggle in this prayer: “Who will give me help, so that I may rest in you? Who will help me, so that you will come into my
heart and inebriate it, to the end that I may forget my evils and embrace you, my one good?"

Augustine helps us appreciate that God’s good gift of sex, when misused, creates its own hellish prison. Sex is a wonderful servant but a horrific master.

**God’s grace forgives and heals, turning us from the many to the One.**

In his grace, God rescued Augustine from his sinful squalor. In Christ, Augustine found grace that not only liberated him from the guilt of his sin but also transformed his affections and actions.

Reflecting on the number of men and women of every age who managed to live in sexual fidelity to God, Augustine records a fictional conversation with “Continence” (read: “self-restraint in sexual matters”), guiding us to the source of sexual faithfulness. He writes:

> She smiled upon me with an enheartening mockery, as if to say, “Cannot you do what these youths and these maidens do? Or can these youths and these maidens do this of themselves, and not rather in the Lord their God? The Lord their God gave me to them. Why do you stand on yourself, and thus stand not at all? Cast yourself on him. Have no fear. He will not draw back and let you fall.”

Augustine knew that he did not possess the resources within himself to overcome his sexual sins. However, in casting himself upon Christ, he found grace that enabled him to obey God’s commands. From his weakness and frailty, Augustine cries out to God, saying, “All my hope is found in your exceeding great mercy. Give what you command, and command what you will!”

Unless God set him aflame through his grace, Augustine knew he would not break his old habits. But in humility and dependence, he looked to God to provide what he needed, in the power of the Spirit, to follow Jesus faithfully. Grace heals by giving us all the resources we require to follow God in obedience.

God’s grace was sufficient for Augustine, forgiving his sins and healing his wounds. In humility, we can come to the same God, confessing our penchant to find our good in God’s gifts rather than in him, the Giver. This God forgives, frees, and restores us in Christ Jesus, no matter our sexual sin and shame. Come to him, allow him to inebriate your heart and collect your affections, drawing them from the many to the One. And, in weakness and dependence, may you find life in the living God.

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