

Soil & Spirit

Joan Marie Hutchison

"Taped Mouths" - January 31, 2002

Recently, I received a telephone call from a friend who had earlier confided in me that she had had an inappropriate relationship with a pastor about 20 years ago. Although it was not a full fledged affair, she is still troubled by the incident, especially in the wake of a media scandal at the same church which is stirring up the pain for her. Both she and the pastor were and are married to other people and I know that my friend eventually told her husband. Still, she believes the Lord would want her to confront the pastor about taking advantage of her during a weak period in her life, when she was actually employed by the church. But she wept in confusion as she had talked with another church leader who had advised her to read a book that basically told her she should not confront a leader. My friend is swimming in pain. We prayed together.

In the late seventies, I recall that some Christians were promoting an extreme, unbalanced view of authority that has led to many incidents of control and manipulation among Christians. I have heard people teach women that if their husbands forbid them to go to church, they must not go and one book said that wives were not even to make a suggestion to their husbands. In the bizarre "shepherding" movement, church leaders told members who to marry and where to work. In one family I know, because the son chose a different hospital to take his medical residency, the church had everyone drop out of his wedding to a church - chosen bride. More recently, with the church plagued by scandal, the pastor has referred to those who left as "chaff" and "spiritually immature." He also spread lies about certain people who left to blacken their names. And now my friend must find some way to dispose of her pain.

One of the common by-products of the oppression of Afghani women, stifled in their head-to-toe garments, prevented from working, has been depression. When we are deprived of choice or totally controlled by others, depression is often the natural outcome. Depression is a hellish thing; I've been there, and I've seen its connection to control from family and church. Silencing people has been a common tool. Sometimes people are silenced with a "poisoning the well device," that passes judgment on the speaker, like the "chaff" remark. Women who spoke up on issues were and still occasionally are referred to as having a "Jezebel" spirit. Speaking - especially if someone will listen - is one of the best stress relievers and can become a tool of change. That's why censorship, even of things I hate, is dangerous. If we begin to censor the most obvious offenses, censorship will eventually encroach upon the things I want to say, the things many others need to say.

I am not sponsoring rebellion; the Bible does teach on order and authority. But the Bible also teaches, "submit yourselves, one to another." The Bible teaches that those who lead must be "servant of all," not dominators who selfishly impose their will on another. In fact, if we deny people the right to speak, tell them they must accept decisions unquestioningly, we provoke them to rebellion.

For my friend to confront her former pastor respectfully, in order to help deal with her pain, go through the process of grieving, is a sound choice to make. In the past, I confronted a pastor who appreciated my comments, even though he didn't agree with all I had to say. True leaders are not threatened by questions and respectful disagreement. True leaders listen.