

Breaking the Silence

Throughout the history of the church, women with a leadership calling have faced criticism, disrespect and a lack of affirmation of their calling. But a simple examination of Jesus in the Gospels, along with other New Testament passages, reveals that a truly biblical view recognizes women as the servant-leaders God has made them to be, bringing them new freedom to exercise their gifts in faith rather than fear.

Jesus acted with a high level of intentionality. He deliberately chose Mary as the first person to proclaim the resurrection. Earlier, Peter and John reached the tomb but then left (John 20:10). It was only when Mary Magdalene arrived that Jesus revealed Himself and told her to deliver the Good News: “‘Go ... to my brothers and tell them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’” (John 20:17b-18, NIV).

In both Jewish and Roman courts of law, the testimony of a woman was not permitted as evidence. However, Jesus launched the new resurrection era of God by commissioning a woman, overriding cultural codes and restrictions. I wonder if we fully appreciate the significance of this action. Jesus was about to establish His new community that would be radically different from a power-hungry world. Through His earthly walk, Jesus showed through teaching and example how His community was to operate in oneness through mutual respect, love and servanthood. What a light in a dark world the church is meant to be!

Without doubt, Jesus is the best friend women have ever had. Numerous passages in the Gospels document Him lifting the status of women to one of equal footing with men. His encounters with women throughout His days on earth are nothing less than astounding, considering the strong patriarchal

culture of His day. He welcomed them as His disciples (Luke 8:1-3), brought them into male-only spheres (Luke 10:41-42; 13:12-17), stood up for them (John 8:1-11), broke religious and cultural rules to restore them (Matt. 9:20-22) and saw their value beyond the cultural perception of womanhood (Luke 11:27-28).

We cannot find a single incident in the four Gospels where Jesus restricted women from learning or being His witnesses. He never patronized or acted dismissively toward them but took them seriously.

Reflecting God's Image in the Earth

God had a dream that was fulfilled through the death, burial and Resurrection of Jesus: a community of believers that would give full expression to Him in the earth. God values community supremely, because He Himself experiences the love and synergy of the three in one. However, to have true oneness, there must be complete mutuality, interdependence and equality.

Hierarchy undermines oneness and mutuality. From the beginning, God created people in the image of the Trinity—plurality in unity (Gen. 1:26). God's original intention was for humankind to beautifully reflect the Godhead through oneness, and this plan was restored in Christ. When Jesus prayed for unity among believers the night He was betrayed (John 17:20–24), He meant it. His cry expressed nothing less than the eternal yearning of the Trinity.

The apostle Paul was also a strong proponent of unity. He constantly battled pagan and legalistic elements that threatened to divide the body of Christ. For example, in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul spoke of oneness in terms of spiritual gifts. *Every* member is needed, and we must have *equal* concern for one another so that there is *no division* in the body (v. 25). In Galatians, Paul fought the attempt to bring the Gentiles back under Jewish law, something that would have

brought women back into subjugation to men and restricted their expression in the body of Christ. In Ephesians 2, Paul painted the picture of how redemption tore down every wall between people. Unity and mutuality are God's idea and the vehicles through which His Spirit flows.

Paul was clear about what it means to be a new creation in union with Jesus for *any* human being (2 Cor. 5:17) and what it means for every believer to be ingrafted into the body of Christ (Eph. 4:3–6). Christ is all and in all. Why would He be silent in a woman and yearn to speak through a man?

International evangelist T.L. Osborn used to say, "The Holy Spirit doesn't know if He is in male flesh or female flesh." Through redemption, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female were brought together as one (Gal. 3:28). Note that Paul did not make gender distinctions when he spoke of ministry gifts (Eph. 4:11-13, Rom. 12:4-8, Rom. 16). Paul repeatedly emphasized our oneness as believers, echoing Jesus' cry for unity.

Dividing the Body of Christ

When we divide the body of Christ into hierarchies based on race, gender or social status, we find ourselves working against God's purpose in the earth. Unfortunately, much of church history reveals predominantly degrading views of women as less than human and unfit for leadership. Most of our revered church fathers were highly misogynistic. For example, Tertullian called women "the devil's gateway." Chrysostom said, "Woman taught once, and ruined all."

These church fathers leaned on Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy in their interpretation of Paul's writings. Susan Hyatt holds that these pagan and sexist views became the foundation for biblical interpretation regarding women, even among today's Spirit-oriented believers. To fully understand why many women have been conditioned to stay in the shadows,

we must recognize this long tradition of disdain for women. Old patriarchal views die hard. Instead of being *different* from the world in our unity and mutual servanthood as Jesus commanded, the church often has conformed to the world by clinging to an outdated, unbiblical bias. Unfortunately, certain passages are still misused as proof texts to limit women in ministry and society, moving many women to question and even stifle their God-given callings.

Despite clear biblical, historical and contemporary evidence of women as God's spokespersons, many still see pulpit ministry and leadership as reserved for men. It is as if we have thrown a cloak of invisibility over the multitude of examples and endorsements of women's ministries in Scripture. When a brave woman comes out of invisibility, she risks being misunderstood, criticized or flat-out ignored. In my years of ministry, I have heard comments such as, "You preach like a man" (because of my fervency) and "You probably wish you were a man" (so you could be a "real" preacher). Statements like these, even when said jokingly, are examples of microaggressions against women, sending a shaming message: If you want to be acceptable (godly), stay in your "feminine" lane.

And statistics confirm this reality: While the number of female lead pastors have increased over the last 10–20 years, studies show that in the U.S., only 13% of lead pastors are female, and the majority of these are found within mainline denominations. A Barna study from 2017 found that evangelicals are the "most hesitant" group in supporting women in church leadership. We have been bombarded with a certain narrative of biblical womanhood and accepted it as the norm.

How does this affect women? In my counseling practice, I see scores of Christian women who have so neglected their own needs, values and convictions that they have lost sight of who they are. Some have grown up in church and family environments where women's inferior status was taught and modeled. When we

view ourselves as second-class citizens of God's kingdom and succumb to a persona of dependency and passivity, we begin to lose our sense of self and the ability to reason for ourselves. No wonder depression is so prevalent among women.

Countering This Tendency

There are several ways the church can stand against misogyny and its resultant negative effects.

The church needs to see women in the pulpit in main services. Gifted female ministers have a wealth of knowledge and experience that we need! Most women are apprehensive about stepping forward, and church leaders can do much to encourage and provide opportunities for their gifts.

Provide leadership training that includes women. After all, the main task of ministry leaders is to equip the body for ministry (Eph. 4:12–13), not condition them to be passive spectators. Women are often excellent mentors and overseers, and it is high time for the church to receive them as such. When asked about the phenomenal church growth in Seoul, Korea, David Yonggi Cho often exhorted male pastors to utilize women as leaders. Sadly, he was often met with disbelief.

Stop misusing Scriptures to restrict women in ministry. It is a serious thing to hold Christ back from expressing Himself through more than half of His body. If you have held on to traditional restrictive views, please have an open mind and study further.

Be inclusive in language and examples. Shine the light on positive female characters in Scripture and history. Please avoid condescending jokes about women. Male-oriented language is prevalent in many churches; keep in mind that language is a powerful conditioning tool. Avoid using words such as "he" and "mankind," for example, when the context clearly addresses all believers. This is respectful and biblical. Since male-focused language is culturally accepted, this may seem picky, but the

frequent use of male pronouns can feel like death by a thousand paper cuts. We can instead choose words like “the one,” “humankind,” “the person” and so forth. Imagine what it would be like for men if only female pronouns were used.

Laying Aside Fear and Insecurity

We all will need to face our fears and insecurities as we take steps of faith. We may wonder if we are good enough, if we will be accepted or if we will fail. Here are some important steps to help us lay old narratives aside and move forward in this journey of growth:

Become rooted and grounded in your new identity in Jesus. This starts with understanding and internalizing your righteousness in Him. Growth will be hit and miss without a deep sense of your acceptance by God. Righteousness becomes a transforming power that will set you on a path of continued revelation of your glorious inheritance in Jesus. Proverbs 4:18 says, “The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.” This is an amazing path to walk! God is *for* you, *with* you and *dedicated* to you. Continue to study and meditate on all the Scriptures that expand on this new and wonderful reality.

Study books and resources that help you understand the passages in Scripture that seem to restrict women. It is time to dig deeper. This is not the time to hide under the cloak of invisibility. This is the time to catch the heart of God and study until you begin to see the logos—the intention of God. Does an interpretation line up with the way God intended things from the beginning (Gen. 1:28)? Does it line up with our equal standing through Christ’s redemption? Paul spoke about slavery too, but today we understand that his *intention* was never to promote slavery. It is time to stop elevating unclear passages dealing with specific situations above the myriad of clear passages that encourage oneness and the full participation of every member of Christ’s body. There are

excellent books by Kevin Giles, Lee Grady, Patricia Gundry, Sue Hyatt, Catherine Kroeger, Alvera Mickelson and many others that can be a great help to bring clarity and perspective.

Be on the lookout for good mentors. When I first recognized my desire to lead, preach and teach, I cried out to God for mentors. He answered my prayer in mighty ways. Several amazing mentors have impacted my life profoundly. I have had teacher-mentors who imparted their incredible insight. Sponsor-mentors invited me into their sphere of influence and opened their platforms. Sponsor-mentors are true servants who give room for our gifts. Next, I appreciate counselor-mentors, people who walk with a person through thick and thin and help in gaining perspective. They are wise people who navigate life well. Various mentors are invaluable in catapulting our lives in the right direction. Believe God for them and keep your eyes open.

Allow God to challenge you into new endeavors. God seems to be fond of calling us into tasks beyond our natural abilities. He may call you to disciple and mentor other women. He may call you to open your home for Bible studies or prayer meetings. He may call you to mission trips and speaking engagements. He may call you to serve in various capacities in a local church, including a pastoral position. Maybe you have a desire to be trained as a lead pastor. He invites you to know Him in a deeper way and to rely on Him and the power of the Spirit. Many times, doors have opened for me that I thought were beyond my ability. These opportunities deepened my relationship with God and enlarged my faith capacity.

Connect with other likeminded women. I have noticed how the Holy Spirit loves community. It is in authentic and nurturing communities of mutual love and respect that we keep being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18–19). Many women don't recognize their own giftings and hold themselves back. Take opportunities to affirm the giftings and characteristics you see in others. Work in teams. In our ministry, Women in Community, our leadership team consists of five leaders who

work together, prefer one another and strongly encourage each other. Such transformative relationships are priceless.

Life comes from the inside. It is time to dig up the dreams, desires and talents, as Dr. Henry Cloud puts it in his book, *9 Things You Simply Must Do to Succeed in Love and Life*. We must “value these inner treasures as life itself.” Ask yourself, what am I passionate about? In what situations do I feel fully alive? How do I want to help people and bring value to their lives? It is time to pray and seek God. It is time to seek out mentors who can help you unearth the gems inside. It is time to believe in Christ in you!

Jesus is calling us down from the bleachers and into the race (Heb. 12:1–2). He is right there with us and gives us everything we need to finish strong. Once you find freedom in running, you will never want to return to the bleachers!

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