

Desperate Women in the Church

In Part 1 of this series, we explored what beyond sexual relationships is left for relationships between men and women in the church. We see there is quite a bit, though you wouldn't always know it in conservative evangelical churches. In Part 2, I talked about the need to practice the discipline of seeing past a woman's looks to the image bearer underneath. I think many leaders in the church don't understand the harm done to a woman who loves God who is regularly seen as a temptation and threat simply because she is beautiful. In this post, I want to explore a particularly ugly tendency in male/female relationships in the church: how women perceived as "desperate" are treated in the church.

I am a die-hard Clemson Tiger fan. I love our dear coach's recent response to a reporter's question about the term "clemsoning," which the press used to mean when our Tigers fall apart and self-destruct, something that had happened on a big stage in several games years before. He said something along the lines of: "I don't even know why you use that term." And he went on to put it to rest. That's not a word we use. That's not a concept we consider. Our team plays their guts out to the bitter end, and the National Championship game in which Clemson scored with 12 seconds left in the game proved that.

In similar form, the evangelical church needs to purposefully put away the concept of "desperate" women. It's not that there are never situations in which you could use the term, but the term is unhelpful in every way when it comes to discipling women in healthy identities or facilitating brotherly, *phileo* love between the genders. As much as I don't like the term and would like to simply shut down any discussion on it as Dabo did with clemsoning, I will at least give the general context in which it gets used.

In the church, a desperate woman may be widowed, but more likely she is divorced or has never been married. She is perceived as not being sufficient in herself and looking for a man, any man, who can meet her needs physically and emotionally. Men avoid her because they think she'll take any kindness from them and misconstrue it as interest in a relationship.

Are there believing women who aren't secure in their identity in Christ? No, actually, there aren't. There is *no* woman in Christ who is not secure in her identity in Christ. Now, she may not *feel* that security, but her place in Him is more secure than Fort Knox. She doesn't need a man (though it is a blessing when God gives such a relationship), and even women in our churches who don't yet understand their security in Christ still have that as their spiritual reality. If a woman doesn't live in the reality of her security in Christ, church leaders should disciple her in it, never reinforce her feelings of insecurity. When a pastor or ministry leader perceives a woman as desperate, they will treat her like she is instead of calling her to walk in confidence in Christ. They will reinforce her feelings of insecurity instead of drawing her to see all she has as a daughter of the King of kings.

Furthermore, there are a lot of mature single women in the church, particularly those getting older in their singleness, who *are* secure in their identity in Christ. But men in their churches still often perceive them as desperate and treat them in really offensive ways.

I recently had an awkward interaction with a man at the church I was attending. I turned toward him during greeting time during church service and ... well ... greeted him. With a smile. Because he was sitting right next to me, and that's what you do during greeting time. He was clearly uncomfortable greeting me, extricated himself quickly, and darted off to greet some men. Later during the service, I noted that he had moved his

chair a foot and a half away from mine (we have individual chairs, not pews). I had to laugh. That was weird and awkward, but as I said in the last post, I have worked hard through Ephesians in particular to get my identity in Christ so that moments like that don't have the power to hurt me like they once did.

When I recounted this encounter in a private Facebook group, a mature single friend for whom I have a great deal of respect said, "Welcome to my life every day in the church." Dang! I was hoping this was just one awkward example of a socially inept man not knowing how to interact with a woman. But I talked to yet another older single friend, and she told me of similar experiences at her church. She felt alone and isolated, longing to be in community with others her age, but finding that others her age, most of whom are married, seem uneasy around her. It's as if she needs to wear a sign around her neck. "You're safe. I'm really not on the prowl for a man."

Any pastors who are reading, have you ever stopped to listen, really listen, to the women in your church about how they feel they are treated or perceived? I want to emphasize that while this way of interacting between genders doesn't happen all the time everywhere, it does happen a lot of the time in a lot of different churches, enough to stop and consider what kind of environment your church is for the single women in it.

Ask them:

Do you feel free to smile and be kind to all people you come across in our church?

Have you ever felt your smile or kindness was viewed with suspicion from others in our church?

Have you ever felt that you had to curb manifestations of Christian virtues such as love, joy, peace or hope because of

concern you would be perceived as being too forward?

Do you feel free to greet your brothers in Christ in our church?

Do you feel free to approach your pastors in our church?

If you have the courage to ask these questions, kudos to you. Step 1 is actually realizing the problem. When we truly listen to women and give the freedom to speak honestly about such experiences, they are like the canary in the coal mine. Unhealthy interactions aren't limited to single women, and such discussions may help uncover deeper patterns of relating between genders in the church.

As I conclude this three part series, I am reminded again of the Cornerstone of our faith. The Good News of Jesus is the key to getting us to better ways of relating between genders in the Church, ways that will play out in eternity.

1. Male and female, we are secure in Christ Jesus. There is no condemnation in Him, and we can face dysfunction around gender head on without being undone by our role in it.

2. In Christ, we are free from the chains of sin. We are no longer sin's slave, and while we likely all know a Christian who sinned sexually, they didn't *have* to. Sin's chains are broken, and with any temptation, there is a way of escape. We don't have to sin against a sister in Christ in our attitude in order not to sin with her in adultery or sexual sin. **We have spiritual tools in Christ that make the Billy Graham rule look like a water hose in Niagara Falls.**

3. We are exhorted in the Bible to stir up brotherly, *phileo* love in our congregations, but we are also equipped by the Spirit to do so. We do not do this work alone.

John 14:26 says: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you everything

and remind you of all that I told you.”

Galatians 5:13 says: “You, brothers, have been called to liberty. Only do not use liberty to give an opportunity to the flesh, but by love serve one another.”

After a sermon the next Sunday on how the gospel equips us for brotherly love, I had a chance to talk with the man who had turned away from me at church the week before. It turns out he had been accused years before of something inappropriate, and it left him scarred in his interactions with women at church. Oh, the weights we cast on each other sometimes! The Good News of Jesus preached that Sunday to our congregation coupled with the practical exhortation to think through how the gospel equips us for healthy relationships was powerful for positive change. I am hopeful that little changes like this in the hearts of individuals in separate churches will snowball into big changes throughout the evangelical world for the purification of the church.

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books, including The Gospel-Centered Woman. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*