

How the Enemy Divides Women in the Church

A doctor, a drug abuser, a plumber and a pastor's wife walk into a church. Sounds like the beginning of a really bad joke, right? Yes, either that or the gathering of a local church body on a given Sunday in Anytown, USA.

Just take a look around your church. If it's anything like mine, you have it all—the wealthy, the not-so-wealthy, the toddler crowd, the gray-haired crowd. Even if your church is relatively homogenous in terms of age, you may have racial diversity, cultural diversity, or diversity in terms of lifestyle or spiritual maturity.

How amazing that God has put together such a strange little flock to fulfill His purposes in our tiny corner of the kingdom! How amazing, and, frankly, how awkward. How uncomfortable. For though it is en vogue in 2016 to embrace diversity, the truth we sometimes whisper to ourselves is, *What's up with this, Lord? How can I minister to—and alongside—women who are so different from me? Is this some kind of a joke?*

With our lips we say we embrace everyone. We chant that “the ground is level at the foot of the cross.” But our tightly bound circles in the church foyer tell another story. It's easier to love those with whom we have a lot in common. It just is. But what about that equal footing, that level ground? It's a hallmark of the Christian faith, is it not?

The Castes We Create

Perhaps you remember learning about India's ancient caste system, where Hindus are confined to a social hierarchy which—based on a person's social status by birth—determines his or her intrinsic value and code of conduct. Those at the

very bottom, *Dalits*, are banned from even touching members of castes above them, which is why they became known as “the untouchables.”

According to an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, “The Indian Constitution aimed to eliminate the caste system decades ago, starting out by banning the lowest rung of the system. However, particularly in villages, caste hierarchy continues to pervade daily life.”

So what’s the parallel between an ancient Hindu social structure and women in the local church? Hopefully we do not have a formal or even conscious hierarchy that divides us. And to be clear, I’m not insinuating that any “suffering” created by social boundaries in the church compares to an entire class of people relegated to a lifetime of human waste collection. But as I examine my own heart and look around the Christian community, I’m compelled to wonder, *To what extent have we created a class system of our own?* And so I ask: **Who are the untouchables in your church?**

Differences That Divide

It sounds crazy, right? But hang in there with me. Take a moment to consider the agents of division among the women in your church. Remember those little circles in the church foyer? What makes them tick? Here are a few possibilities I’ve come up with:

- **Age/Marital Status**

This one is pretty obvious. In many churches, we find our congregations, our women’s ministries, and our friendships segregated according to age or marital status. We naturally flock to those of similar age groups as our own. The Bible study groups we create fall into neat categories and clichés. We have “Senior Saints,” “Young Marrieds,” “College and Career” and so forth. The moms at church are naturally whom I gravitate

toward, because, well, that's where I am right now! And that's not bad, but who am I missing if the extent of my church fellowship happens at the door of the nursery?

What about the older folks in your church? I sat next to a lady at our spring tea who was in her upper 70s. She commented with great sadness that she didn't know which children from our congregation belonged to whom because of a lack of interaction with the young families. Are the elderly the marginalized in your church, relegated to pew-filling and offering-giving? **Each woman in our churches, from the high schooler to the senior saint, needs other women to come alongside her as we walk this road together.**

▪ **Occupation/Economic Status**

The church where I grew up had largely a working-class, blue-collar constituency. My dad is a family physician, and he expressed at times how he felt that his "status" as a doctor was a barrier to fellowship and accountability in our local church.

This could look different depending on the makeup of your church and where you sit on the spectrum, but it's probably present in every local body. Perhaps your church is largely affluent, white-collar jobs, two-income families. Do we let our economics divide us? Should we? In your church, is the woman who is an attorney being ministered to in the same way as the stay-at-home mom? **We all need mentoring; we all need accountability.**

▪ **Lifestyle Choices**

Let's step gingerly into this territory. Look around that church foyer again. Where are those circles defined by lifestyle choices? These areas can be especially divisive among women. We tend to line up according to breast vs. bottle, anti-vax vs. pro-vax, working mom vs. stay-at-home mom, Granola Gertrude vs. Drive-Thru Daisy.

Our church happens to have a church-run Christian school, which has historically caused some division between Christian school/public school/homeschool families in the body. Are these issues important? Of course! Should we have opinions on them? Sure. **But they are largely Christian liberty issues and should be met with grace among sisters in Christ.**

Each One Needs Some

Here's the bottom line: Every woman in your church, every woman in my church, needs one of two things:

1. To be met with the gospel.

Ladies, there are women sitting in our pews who do not know the Savior. They think they know Him because they've seen Him from afar. They know Him in the same way that I think I know Candace Cameron Bure because I follow her on Twitter. But if I show up on her doorstep and invite myself in, she will pretty quickly call the police and have me hauled away. I know about her, but I do not know her.

2. To be encouraged, loved and held accountable.

From the mom who looks like she has it all together to the gray-haired lady at the organ to the hot mess teenager, ***we all need the same thing***. We need our sisters to come alongside us, ever pointing us to Christ, while teaching, admonishing, and loving us. There is no "opt out" in the body of Christ.

If we attempt to "opt out" or to let our divisions hinder our kinship, we do so in the flesh, as the apostle Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 3:3: "Since there is envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not worldly and behaving as mere men?"

Instead, he asserts, we are to acknowledge our differences and use them to work in unity as unto the Lord, "so neither he who

plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one. . . . For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor. 3:7-9).

Opt In

And so we must "opt in." Not every woman in your church is going to be your best friend. I get that. We'll be closer to some members of the body than others in the same way that my hands, mouth, eyes and nose really appreciate each other because we all really like to eat together.

But we must opt in to loving every member (John 13:34).

We must opt in to serving every member (Gal. 5:13).

We must opt in to suffering with every member (1 Cor. 12:25-26).

We must opt in to being "one another" to every "one another."

Oh, How Good It Is

Dear sister, God did not place you into His building, your local body, by mistake. It is not the job of our churches or our pastor to initiate a program to bring every woman in our church into the fold. It is upon us, individually, to reach out ... to build a bridge ... to build a relationship.

Whether a woman needs to understand the gospel for the first time, to grow in her fledgling faith or to be confronted with a sin issue, none of these things will happen without relationship.

And, oh, what a sweet-smelling aroma it is to our Lord and to the world when our churches live life together well. Hymnwriters Keith and Kristyn Getty, Ross Holmes and Stuart Townend have written a hymn based on the premise of Psalm 133:1. We would do well to make its words our mission and our prayer as we consider each and every woman who walks through our doors:

*Oh how good it is when the family of God
Dwells together in spirit in faith and unity.
Where the bonds of peace, of acceptance and love
Are the fruit of His presence here among us.*

*Oh how good it is on this journey we share
To rejoice with the happy and weep with those who mourn.
For the weak find strength the afflicted find grace
When we offer the blessing of belonging.*

*So with one voice we'll sing to the Lord
And with one heart we'll live out His word
Till the whole Earth sees the Redeemer has come
For He dwells in the presence of His people.*

*Who are the "untouchables" in your life and in your church?
Who needs your friendship and encouragement today? How will
you take steps to move beyond the differences and dwell
together well?*

*Reprinted from Revive Our Hearts. Natives of Michigan's
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