



Making Room at the Table: Encouragement for the Winding Road to Equality

Description

“You’re not honoring the Word of God if you really believe that,” the elderly man across the table said to me.

I sat in stunned silence.

I was teaching a Bible study on Galatians at a congregation with strong egalitarian roots. But the man “my student” was openly insulting me in front of everyone because I dared to tell him that God made every human being equal in his sight.

At the time, I was a seminarian who had spent years studying the Bible professionally and had ministered to others diligently inside and outside of the local church. Though my accuser did not know me well, he certainly knew that I was competent in my field. Surely, he knew?

Sadly, every woman in ministry can tell some version of this story.

Though we are serving and leading with all of our soul, mind, and strength, there are those who still try to deny us a seat at the table. We spend year after year earning the trust and respect of our communities only to see an ill-experienced, less educated man get preferential treatment. It’s painful to watch it happen time and time again.

For me, the irony is that just a few years ago, I was a staunch complementarian.

I grew up in a conservative community and a conservative family. I was a part of a Christian youth group during the height of the purity culture movement. Christian leaders told that my body was a danger to others. They taught me to interpret Scripture with a literal hermeneutic which I believed instructed me that my function in life was to be quiet, submissive, and of service to the men around me. The equality of women simply wasn’t part of my lived experience.

I thought that complementarianism was a crucial piece of my personal holiness. I didn’t date, nor did I seek out friendships with men. There was even a three-year period during my late teens when I only wore skirts because I thought that wearing pants may cause the men around me to be sexually tempted. I tried to police my friends in the same ways that I policed myself. I was harming myself and

the people around me because I was desperately overburdened with the weight of being a “good Christian woman.”

But all my work was never enough. There was always a higher standard to reach for, and I was drowning in the depths of a patriarchy-centered version of Christianity.

At twenty-years-old, when I finally began to understand the egalitarian truths of Scripture and express what I was learning, I was bullied and harassed online by a male pastor who wanted to “put me in my place.” That man later apologized for the grossly inappropriate way he treated me, by confessing to my father and asking *him* for forgiveness.

Sometimes I’m asked why I don’t quit ministry, as if I could simply remove myself from the Church and be free of sexism. But the problems are everywhere “inside and outside of the Christian community. That’s part of what makes the fight for equality so important.

When God called me to seminary, I was afraid, but I wanted to prepare for the life I knew I was meant to lead. No human being has the power to retract the calling that the Holy Spirit has placed on my life. This is true for every follower of Jesus. Whatever God has called and equipped you to do or be or say, walk through the door with confidence. It is only when the people of God are living according the Spirit’s direction that we can create meaningful change in the world. No matter what powers try to silence the marginalized, we must still rise up.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to affirm the image of God in everyone. We believe that each of us are children of the Divine, longing for a whole, just, and compassionate world. If there are imbalances in our community, it is our responsibility to correct them, and the patriarchization of Christianity is certainly one such inequality.

Complementarianism and sexism harms everyone. Not only are women marginalized, but men are deified, thus creating a dangerous power imbalance and a disturbing culture of suppression and abuse. Complementarianism tries to force women to stifle the Holy Spirit’s empowerment and limit their callings to roles deemed “appropriate for their gender.” Meanwhile, men are entrusted with power by virtue of their maleness. This is not a model for responsible, competent leadership.

Equality is a community ethic of Christian faith. The Apostle Paul tells Christians plainly that God does not play favorites based on gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status (Gal 3:27-29). When the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples gathered together on Pentecost, were women left out or given a lesser portion (Acts 2:1-4)? No! If we are all equals in the eyes of God, how can it possibly be right to operate in a hierarchical system?

I remain committed to Jesus and the ministry of the Church because the Gospel is inherently inclusive and oriented towards equality. Jesus did not die and rise for only some of his children to inherit his kingdom. Rather, in his glorious grace, Jesus has made us all co-heirs with himself and no one has a greater claim than another.

No matter how uphill the battle may seem, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor3:17). The work of the Holy Spirit is never finished, so we can cling to the hope of a brighter tomorrow. Though we struggle against those who prefer to hoard power and silence the voices of women, that will not be the end of the story. Just as I told the sexist in my Bible study years ago, no one can stop the goodness and glory that God is creating in the world.

As women in ministry, it is easy to feel isolated which makes barriers to progress seem that much bigger. In those defeating moments, we must remember the women who have made a path for us to be where we are today, and we must have faith that the work we are doing now will make a way for others to experience the goodness of God for ages to come.



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