

Resist and Persist

Faith and the Fight for Equality

ERIN WATHEN

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Introduction

Whenever I sit in my favorite coffee place, writing and people watching, I am constantly struck by people's shoes. Not in a philosophical, "where they've been" or "the things they've seen" kind of way, but by the fact that the men walking to work at the courthouse are wearing sensible, presumably comfortable loafers. Shoes that don't wreck your knees and ankles, distort your posture, and generally make you daydream all day about being barefoot.

On the other hand, the women walking to work at the courthouse are mostly wearing stylish instruments of torture. Because this is what we're told strikes the right balance of sex appeal and professionalism to earn us a seat at the table. Sure, fifty years ago we didn't get to come to the table at all—unless we were pouring the coffee. Nowadays, women make up nearly half of the U.S. workforce, but equal pay—not to mention representation in higher executive positions—is still far off. According to the letter of the law, we have every right to be there. But the subtext of our highly gendered culture says we can achieve that equal status only by adhering to the laws of the boys' club—and, of course, its highwire act of a dress code for women.

We need a new language for feminism, because misogyny looks a lot different than it did a few decades ago. In some ways, we've moved beyond the days of overt ass-grabbing, telling the "little woman" she doesn't belong in the workplace, and having no representation in government and other places of power.

And yet . . . in many ways it's the same story for a different day. The ass-grabbing is much more subtle and indirect. It's

in rape culture and microaggressions. It's in the shoes we are expected to wear, the dress codes that don't apply to our male colleagues, and the unspoken pressures of juggling motherhood with professional life. Or the pressure to be a mother at all, when perhaps that is not our calling. In many ways, sexism has only gotten more brash and repulsive as women have gained power and voice in the mainstream culture. The patriarchy dies hard; it has to find new and artful ways to function in the civilized world, and those new ways are often even uglier than the old ones.

Misogyny for the modern age is in watching the first major-party female presidential candidate get heckled off the political stage. After a lifetime of public service, she was ultimately painted as shrill, unlikable, and "crooked," criticized and vilified for doing what men in her position have done, and still do, forever and ever, amen.

We are in the age of double standards and impossible expectations; a never-die patriarchy that is sanctioned by every institution: capitalism, government, and even—maybe especially—the church itself.

But for all this, many women still don't recognize the real impact this system has on their lives. They do not identify as feminists, they feel this is "not their fight," and in many ways they even perpetuate the systems that continue to harm women. Meanwhile, many men who care about, affirm, and empower women do not call themselves feminists—because they cannot see or acknowledge the privilege granted to them by nature and anatomy.

Maybe, for the new expressions of misogyny present in our time and place, the language of traditional feminism fails us. It is time for a new lexicon of female empowerment; a more compassionate and nuanced conversation; a movement that can be inclusive of all women, regardless of age, race, religion, or economic status.

We need to change the conversation. For a new generation of feminists who have more opportunity than our mothers and grandmothers ever dreamed of—and for all the women who

have never felt they had a place in this fight. For women of color who have been marginalized even in the fight for equality. For Millennial women who find the language of feminism off-putting and archaic. For conservative women who shut down any further discussion the minute the word “abortion” comes up. We need a much bigger table to host all of these voices, to hear all of these stories. Because we all still live in the same world, which is, in so many ways, a man’s world. We still find ourselves glancing over our shoulders at night, rolling our eyes in board meetings, and wondering if we will ever be “enough” for our families, for our employers, for the world.

This cannot be the plight of just the middle-aged white woman. The work of equality must include women of every age and ethnicity, as well as men who will be allies, advocates, and partners for the journey. But even more than that, if women are ever going to be fully free and equal in modern culture, it is going to take the voice of the church calling loudly for that equality. As one of the primary guardians—we might even say architects—of the patriarchy, the church must play a critical role in dismantling the language, the worldview, and the systems that tilt the tables in favor of men.

We have all been deeply conditioned to uphold “man’s place” at the head of the table—whether that is the kitchen table, the boardroom table, or the communion table. These notions of male entitlement to leadership and power run deep, and they touch every institution that shapes our collective lives. This means the way forward is complicated. It bears implications for our family systems, our leadership structures, even our government life. In many cases, even women are reluctant to engage in the kind of paradigm shifts that it would take to bring about full equality for women. That means it will not be easy to draw the community of faith into the work of equality. But for this moment in our history, it is imperative that we do. The language and stories of our faith point to an ethic of justice, inclusion, and empowerment. Without women’s voices fully heard, we cannot be faithful to that gospel calling. What follows is a conversation in the direction of change—by no

means exhaustive, but by all means necessary. My hope is that communities of faith will find new ways to engage topics like rape culture, the wage gap, and yes, even reproductive health, in just and compassionate new ways, while creating a space for more voices in our midst, and at all of our many tables.

1

The Patriarchy Dies Hard

First, an airing of the grievances: I am a feminist because of the church. Because of one church in particular, actually.

That might sound strange enough, in and of itself. Adding some context will make it sound even stranger still; the church that raised me to be a feminist is located in a rural part of southeastern Kentucky.

Granted, it was a midsize, mainline church on Main Street, and not a one-room country meetinghouse. And my denomination, the Disciples of Christ, has been ordaining women since 1853, so I grew up never once hearing a Scripture referencing how women should be silent in churches. I saw women serving communion and praying at the table from the moment I was born. I occasionally heard a woman preach. I saw women teaching all levels of Sunday school, including adult classes that included (gasp!) grown-up men. I never once heard the word “feminist” uttered in that place, but every part of church life modeled to me that women had a place in leadership. It was never even a question.

When I was in high school and occasionally started bringing friends to worship or youth group activities with me, they

thought it was so cool that there were women leading worship. “What do you mean?” I asked them with a completely straight sixteen-year-old face.

“Well, in my church, women can’t stand up front,” they’d tell me. “Women can’t speak in worship, or pray aloud, or teach the men in Sunday school.”

What? This was the first time such a stark reality of my own community was made known to me. But it was certainly not the last.

As the truth of Christian (and cultural) patriarchy began unfolding for me, I was outraged. Even before I knew the depths of how the church’s ingrained misogyny touched every other part of public life, I was horrified that places existed where women’s voices didn’t matter. Where women were taught that their silence—and their never-cut hair—was their glory, their greatest asset. At the same time, I was filled with pride and gratitude that my own family of faith had somehow managed to raise me—and all the girls of our church—apart from those limitations, even within our own community and culture. For all of my young life, I was oblivious to the fact that women did not have equal voice and value in all worshiping communities. It is an extraordinary thing to grow up as a woman in that part of the world and never once question your voice, your place, your ability to lead and be a part of things.

To this day, I align that mixture of outrage and gratitude with the early stirrings of a call to ministry. My incredulous “What do you mean, women can’t be ministers?” echoed with an unspoken but audible echo of “The hell I can’t,” and “You just watch me.” That tension between thanksgiving and anger has served me well in this vocational life, and life in general. I am always mindful of the privilege of having been given voice at a young age, while also recognizing that not all girls have been afforded that same model. Heck, most girls in my own hometown were raised a world away, figuratively speaking.

But here’s the sad part of the story, the grievance. In the end, it wasn’t enough. The church that raised me, empowered me, and ordained me still failed the ultimate test of equality;

when it came right down to it, they would not call a woman to be their senior pastor.

She was the candidate chosen by the search committee, the leader who was clearly most qualified, who had a calling for the work—and even the community—and was willing to move to this small Kentucky town because she saw the Spirit at work in this particular congregation. She was The One.

I probably don't have to spell out the rest for you. There followed a textbook church conflict. Longtime inactive members and extended family members were called home for the vote—and ultimately, a margin of affirmation that was far too thin to secure the call.

A few years later, that beloved community left the denomination. Because like most mainline bodies, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was becoming “too liberal” in regards to LGBT inclusion. But there was much more at work there than just a single hot-button issue. Having moved to a fearful place, an anxious place, that church I loved so well made a cliché of itself. Having caved to the cultural norms of the surrounding community—including the all-too-normal norm of patriarchy—they are no different now from every other church in that part of the world.

Rejecting a female leader was the first nod to its power; the rise of homophobia was the next natural unfolding. In these, and in so many other ways, the church—as we know it in the Western world—has been so powerfully shaped by the cultural norms of patriarchy that we don't always even know when we are in its grip.

CHURCH OF THE EMPIRE

Patriarchy in the church is nothing new. In fact, it is so deeply entrenched in the Christian narrative that it is difficult to parse out all the factors that led us to this place of systemic inequality. Some of our assumptions about power, gender, and worth are deeply rooted in our reading (and misreading) of Scripture.

But others have more to do with cultural, historical, and political influence along the way.

In the earliest days of the church, Christian communities were circles of peace and, often, resistance to the empire. As such, they were frequently persecuted, viewed as outliers and a threat to “law and order.” During the early fourth century, though, Constantine saw an opportunity to harness the power of the church—which had continued to grow in spite of attempts to stifle it—to stabilize the crumbling Roman Empire. Over time, the relationship between church and empire made for some convoluted messaging. Under the influence of Constantine and his successors, that theology of peace and resistance evolved into a theology of dominance and control, intertwined with the power of the state.¹ Next thing you know, crosses—the symbol of torture, control, and the power of empire—began to appear as symbols of Christianity (supplanting the *ichthus* and *chi rho* as primary emblems of Jesus Christ), and the focus of faith turned from a resurrection theology of hope to a cross theology of fear, guilt, and control. Fast forward to the early days of America—God’s “new Israel” some called it—where Christian domination of the continent was a widely accepted value, perhaps even a divine calling. It’s no wonder that the young new nation came to worship, not the God of Israel, but the god of capitalism—which is itself the very idol of modern patriarchy.

It goes on like this, so that what we have now is a secular movement full of crosses, money, and masculinity. This modern movement worships power and follows material success, far more than it follows an itinerant peace-loving Jewish teacher. And so it happens that our contemporary expressions of church preserve the patriarchy. Both the American dream and the Western Christian narrative are powerfully entrenched in a worldview that holds a man’s voice, role, and person as authoritative and values a woman primarily in terms of her connection with (and usefulness to) the men around her. Each of those institutions—the American capitalist

dream and Western Christianity—work to uphold the inherent sexism of the other. For all the progress women have made in regards to rights by the letter of the law, living into an egalitarian ideal is slow going. Women have earned the right to vote and own property, to serve in the military, to pursue an education or any vocation of their choosing; and women are more financially independent than ever before. Yet, despite all these legal advances, we still live within systems that make it hard to realize full equality. Having rights is one thing. Seeing those rights put into practice across the board is another matter entirely.

It's an especially maddening time to be a woman, because we've come so far. Yet, in painful ways both large and small, we are still far from being fully equal members of society.

The 2016 election cycle brought this truth to light in some heartbreaking ways—and some maddening, outrageous ways. Politics aside, this goes way past party, or even candidate loyalty. The race for president was an ugly display of misogyny from the beginning. As it progressed, the leading candidate seemed to never suffer in the polls for his demeaning, degrading, and disregarding women. The barrage of overt sexism throughout the campaign seemed never-ending. Hillary Clinton, the first woman to ever get so close to the presidency, may not have been the perfect candidate. But rather than just *not voting for her*, much of America trolled her, hard, in a way that male candidates have never had to endure. She was criticized, loudly and crassly, for her looks; she was blamed for the sins of her husband; and she was vilified for political tactics that men in similar roles have used for centuries. Ultimately, the campaign of misogyny and fake news was enough to keep her out of power.

To many American women, that felt both global and personal.

At that point, it was not so much about who didn't win as it was about the sense that all women, everywhere, lost. We lost all the progress of the past few decades, and we lost the hope that we were going to be the generation to see full equality and representation in our lifetime.

For many of us, the disappointment was a rallying call to a new kind of activism. This isn't over. But clearly the traditional forms of feminism aren't working. So it's time for some changes in the dialogue among women and for changes in our institutional rhetoric as well.

For me, the election was an echo of my own story with my home church: moving along for years thinking you are in a place that is enlightened and inclusive—only to find, No! Wait! On second thought, women *are* better in the kitchen and behind the secretary's desk, and we're going to just keep right on letting these guys run things, because hey, neckties just make us feel more comfortable in some vague and indescribable way . . .

Yes, it's maddening. But it's becoming clear, now more than ever, that if we want to see real progress for women, the faith community is going to have to be a much bigger part of the conversation. We're going to have to find ways to actively engage the people in our circles—men and women alike, as well as our wider communities—in real solutions that make life better and more fair for women. While many of these issues may be loaded with political baggage, there are plenty of places to connect and work for change that should be not only bipartisan but also rooted in the gospel.

In spite of everything, 53 percent of white women voted for Trump, which shows how deeply we hold a shared acceptance of his misogynistic worldview. If we are passive in accepting this message, then we are complicit in upholding it for our daughters. Meanwhile, a gut-wrenching 81 percent of white evangelical Christians voted for him. To be clear, these votes were about more than the man himself, more than the "brand" he cultivated to reach the top of the ticket. This was a vote for a platform that promised to subvert the rights of women and minorities in the interest of preserving the patriarchy—not just the set of behaviors that implies but the status quo of an entire system that is geared toward preserving male power and diminishing that of women. While the margin of victory was narrow, it's clear that many who claim to follow Christ hold

the values of that patriarchal world as a higher priority than those of the kingdom.

THIS IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Nowadays, when someone tells me they aren't a feminist, I tilt my head and I raise an eyebrow. Everything else I know about this person tells me that they believe in equal pay; that they believe women to be capable of advancement in any field; and that they are against any expression of sexual aggression. How can anyone who believes in these basic truths *not* be a feminist? It's a matter of humanitarian necessity that women be recognized as full and equal partners with men in every context—from home and family to business and government. It is of great global and historical importance that we keep expanding this conversation and its partners to address all the new and evolving—not to mention ancient, preexisting—expressions of sexism. Yet too often, as much as it seems like a no-brainer to some of us, it appears that even those who recognize the need for equality do not see themselves as being connected to the work. If language is our only problem, then we should change the language. But my sense is that language is only part of the disconnect.

When someone says, "I'm not a feminist," one of a few things is usually true. Either (a) they do not believe that sexism still exists, and therefore feel there is no need for feminism; (b) they have a certain stereotype in mind about what it means to be a feminist, and they cannot make the stretch to write themselves into that narrative; or (c) they have so internalized the values of a patriarchal society, and those prescribed gender roles are so comfortable in their own lives, that they see no disconnect between the way things are and the way they could—or should—be. (We will further discuss this concept of "internalized misogyny" in chapter 2.) Therefore, they can't recognize the widespread and systemic injustices resulting for women worldwide, from abuse and objectification to poverty

and human trafficking. Patriarchy remains hard at work to preserve itself, in all of these scenarios.

Many folks have the *Mad Men* kind of misogyny burned into their imaginations. When you mention sexism, they picture ass-grabbing, cigar-smoking, “Go get us some coffee, honey” kinds of normalized behavior. Admittedly, part of the charm of the acclaimed AMC drama is the retro vibe, a “remember those days” kind of sentimentality or even a self-congratulatory “look how far we’ve come” response. The danger there is that in our collective imagination we begin to see that world itself as retro—bygone days when women were treated with overt disregard by men who didn’t know any better. Logging that part of our history into a category of bygones, however, allows us to think that we have evolved, that we are past the days of preferential treatment for men, and that other kinds of sexism haven’t evolved to fill the void.

This is patently false.

In 2012 author Laura Bates took to Twitter with the #YesAllWomen hashtag to prove this very point. A spokeswoman for what many are calling Fourth Wave Feminism, Bates wanted to demonstrate the reality of pervasive sexist thinking and the kinds of abuse and harassment that thinking perpetuates. She asked women to tweet their experiences of being harassed or verbally abused, of being passed over for opportunities, or of having their voices diminished. The responses were overwhelming. The stories of women’s personal experiences of harassment, discrimination, and assault confirm what statistics reveal about the frequency with which women meet male aggression: 87 percent of American women age eighteen to sixty-four have been harassed by a male stranger; and 41 percent of American women have experienced “physically aggressive” forms of harassment or assault in public spaces, including sexual touching, being followed, or being flashed.²

In her book *Everyday Sexism*, Bates shares many of these tweets, stitching together a visible mosaic of the ongoing aggressions to which women are subjected in the course of their

day-to-day lives. Alongside those stories, she shares hard statistics about women's underrepresentation in nearly every part of public life. The connections between these sexist worldviews and opportunities for women are undeniable. Bates writes:

Women [in the United States] hold one-fifth or less of seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Only 35 women in history have ever served as governor, compared to more than 2300 men. Just four of the 112 justices ever to serve on the Supreme Court have been women. The *New York Times* reported in 2014 that women run a quarter of the biggest art museums in the United States, and earn about a third less than their male counterparts for doing so. Eighty percent of the reviewers and authors of reviewed books in the *New York Review of Books* in 2013 were men, as were almost 80 percent of the “notable deaths” reported in the *New York Times* in 2012. Data from the U.S. National Science Foundation reveals that women make up just 20 percent of architects, 17 percent of economists, and 11 percent of engineers. Only 5 percent of CEO's at Fortune 500 companies are women. The full-time pay gap is around 20 percent overall. Around one in five women in the United States has experienced rape or attempted rape at some time in her life, and more than one in three have experienced intimate partner violence. On average, more than three women every day are killed by a current or former partner.³

The statistics above apply *just* to women in the United States; they scarcely touch on the global plight of women. But as Bates also says, “Disbelief is the great silencer.”⁴ A commitment to ignorance, whether willful or otherwise, is the primary source of denial when it comes to people removing themselves from the conversation about gender and equality.

These statistics are several years old. The House of Representatives is now 19.3 percent female, while twenty-one of the 100 U.S. Senate seats are held by women.⁵ That's not much improvement over the past few decades. And the whole women CEO thing *just* crept up from 5 to 6 percent in 2017. If we inch

up by 1 percent every five years, then women will hold equal corporate power with men by roughly the year . . . well, never. At least, not in my lifetime. Probably not in your lifetime. Or our kids' lifetimes, for that matter. (Something like 200 years. Pardon me if I'm not jumping up and down about that.)

Do all women *want* to be CEOs or senators? Of course not. But that isn't the point. The point is that women who want to should be able to get there. As long as they don't have women role models, women's voices in the room, and women to be mentors and friends on the way up, it is a tedious uphill climb. Furthermore, as long as women have a minimal presence in rooms where decisions get made—whether it's the board room, the House of Representatives, or the Vatican—then the systems around which we order our lives are always going to be tilted in favor of men and men's interests.

The litany of abuse and underrepresentation demonstrated in the #YesAllWomen thread and in the everyday stories of every woman you know is just a surface argument for the ongoing work of equality—both why it is needed and why people of faith everywhere need to be involved in the conversation. This is not a job for only a secular, leftist, radical fringe of women. To fully realize the vision of a world that is fair and just for all, we need men at the table as well, and women of every generation and political persuasion, especially women of color, whose voices have been subverted for generations. The stories of women who have gone before us remind us how far we've come—but also how far there is yet to go.

It cannot be denied that the word “feminism” carries a lot of cultural baggage. Bra-burning, podium-thumping, man-hating, mascara-rejecting . . . am I getting close? There's a certain image that the F-word conjures up in the collective imaginations of many. While a certain brand of feminist may fit this prototype, it's unfortunate that the word has come to be so limiting for so many. Don't get me wrong; women who fit this angry and vocal model of feminism were (and are) more than entitled to their anger. But we should not assume that

adopting this language, tone, and even wardrobe is a prerequisite for the work of equality.

We also can't overlook the fact that, for a great number of people living in our current context, the word "feminism" is synonymous with "abortion." While reproductive rights are a critical part of the discourse surrounding equality, one's views on that one matter should not preclude you from the conversation. Later in this book, in chapter 10, we'll explore what I hope is a more compassionate and nuanced approach to the issue, one that will bring more women (and men) to the table, regardless of their current stance or political persuasion.

Men and women alike have been deeply conditioned to accept a certain amount of male privilege as just the way things are. The same is true of deeply normalized gender roles. We just get used to the fact that most high-level executives are men, and that most commercials for cleaning products and minivans will feature women and women's lives. These are not isolated realities. They are profoundly connected. That women are the choosers of the toilet cleaner and that men are presiding over board meetings are two profoundly entwined cultural expectations, each relying on the other.

These deeply entrenched cultural norms are nearly impossible to overcome without intentional resistance and the cultivating of a counternarrative. Many view the crafting of that counternarrative as a divisive ideological issue—partly because of the inherent assumption that "feminist" is synonymous with "baby killer." But also because all of our societal systems work hard to uphold that measure of male superiority: academia, government, the sciences, Wall Street, Hollywood, and of course the church. Each of these institutions has been shaped by generations of male-dominated culture, and therefore established and upheld by men's voices, values, and vision. So, despite all the inroads women have made in each field, women are still functioning within the context of a cultural narrative created by and for men. The saying "It's a man's world" is cliché for a reason.

PART OF THE PROBLEM, PART OF THE SOLUTION

We cannot go back in time and unwind all the ways that the male perspective has shaped and formed the world we're living in now. What we can do is reject the notion that the institutions responsible for the long-standing tradition of patriarchy can't have a role in changing that tradition. We can also counter the assumption that the work of equality must, by definition, take place in an entirely secular frame. Just as those in the boardroom can change the assumptions about who is buying toilet cleaner, the church—the body of Christ, the global family of faith—can and must play a role in ending the daily atrocities enacted upon women worldwide. While most folks who participate in the life of an American Christian congregation will insist that they are not sexist—that women's voices are valued, and equal, even if sometimes found in different expressions of church life—the math speaks for itself.

Over the past decade, the number of female clergy in Protestant America has doubled, and roughly 10 percent of congregations have a woman in a primary leadership role. But when you start looking at churches of a certain *size*, the numbers have changed very little. While nearly half of all newly ordained clergy leaving seminary are women, there are still very few holding senior-pastor roles in larger congregations. And there remains a pay gap, to the tune of 27 percent, between female clergy and their male counterparts.⁶

Hard statistics aside, I can attest to this reality in purely anecdotal fashion. Many of my clergy sisters know for a fact that they are making less than their male predecessor at the same congregation. The sad truth is that as churches decrease in size and struggle to resource their ministry, they often call a female pastor because they think they can get away with paying her less. I know many women who have even had search committees say to them, outright, "Well, won't your husband be working too?" As though the existence of a husband and his inherent earning potential effectively diminish the value of her seminary degree and the skills she will bring to the position.

Don't do that, church. Just . . . don't. Not only is it completely asinine; it is against the dang law. I love congregations; I'd hate to see one of y'all get sued.

The happy news is this: sometimes when a church hires a female pastor—seemingly on the cheap—they get more than they bargained for. They find that her particular set of gifts and skills is uniquely suited for their congregation, in their particular time and place. They find there is untold growth potential in many parts of her being, her way of preaching and accompanying, her way of engaging leaders and challenging the status quo. They find that the brave spirit it often takes to call a woman in the first place leads the congregation itself to be transformed in exciting ways.

As a pastor myself, I spend a lot of time trolling other church's websites. While, yes, there are still traditions and parts of the country where a woman preacher is tantamount to a unicorn—as in, it doesn't exist/can't exist/would be a crime against nature if it did exist—I have a growing sense that, in most large churches and nearly all mainline churches, women as pastors are not strictly forbidden. They just aren't exactly celebrated or empowered.

Try this little experiment: Find a few midsize to large congregations in your community. Then go to the staff page of their website. You may find a few women there—likely as administrators and music leaders, at first! But you may also see some who are leading things called “community life” or “mission and outreach.” You will certainly find them in children and youth ministry—possibly even with the job title of “children's pastor.” You may even find clergy couples who are honored as the “pastors” of a church.

But dig a little deeper, and the line in the sand is around preaching. Women can be called, ordained, even employed, in many churches where they will never stand behind the microphone. Unless they are addressing a roomful of ladies (because I guess you have to have lady parts to be able to talk to an all-women gathering?). Where did the church get this idea that men can teach and lead both men and women, but women

can speak only the language of women? Do we not see what an absurd disconnect that is? In fact, there are plenty of instances in Scripture where women are teaching and leading in many ways—from Mary and Martha to Lydia and Dorcas.

But, as Rachel Held Evans notes, “Unfortunately, when it comes to womanhood, many Christians tend to read the rest of Scripture through the lens of 1 Timothy 2:11–15 rather than the other way around.”⁷ Yes, there are a few texts in Scripture that indicate women should keep silent. But rather than viewing those through the wider lens of the biblical narrative as a whole, we’ve let those verses speak larger and louder than the rest of Scripture combined. As a result, women’s voices have been limited, if not omitted altogether, throughout Christian history. But this was not always the case. One simple way that churches can engage the work of equality is to reject such a limited reading of Scripture. If teachers and preachers could approach those selective verses with a view of their place in the whole of the biblical narrative, we’d find that they were never intended to speak for all women across all time.

In the earliest days of the Christian church, women started out on equal footing with men. There was a time when the sentiment “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, . . . slave or free, . . . male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”⁸ was the rule of the day. It was commonly accepted that once a believer entered into baptism, all boundaries of national identity, faith history, economic status, and even gender just fell away. All that mattered was identity in Christ and faithfulness to the mission and life in community.

Mary Magdalene, one of the few women mentioned by name multiple times in the Gospels, is one of the first to witness the resurrection and, as such, is the first preacher of the gospel and the first evangelist. Though not named as one of the twelve, she is clearly a “disciple,” in the purest sense of the world: following, learning from, and serving alongside Jesus through thick and thin. Women held many positions of leadership in the early church. Many women were leaders of house churches, the first congregations; they served as deacons,

evangelists, and servants of the gospel. Though we don't hear much of their story, we know some of their names: Appia, Nympha, Lydia, Chloe, Phoebe.

How did we get from there to banning women from the pulpit? It's the same thing experienced by many women throughout history in general and Scripture in particular. Their names get dropped from the credits. Their legacy was not enough to keep women empowered over the centuries. Over time, the church's radical and countercultural move toward egalitarianism was overridden by the wider male-dominated culture. The pressures and influences of his surroundings and his own history and experience colored Paul's reading of ancient texts.

Sexist as Paul may have been (simply by virtue of his culture, if nothing else), many scholars say that the verses specifically silencing women were likely penned not by Paul himself but by a later scribe writing commentary on that era. It bears resemblance to the second-century apostolic church—the days of the letters of Timothy and Titus, an era in which women's roles became severely diminished. Over time, and under the influence of the Constantine administration (as we mentioned before), translators like Jerome and those working for King James didn't have to work very hard to skew the Bible toward a total canon of masculine leadership. The male hierarchy was literally sanctified by the empire, making it nearly impossible to extract the original spirit of the Christian movement from the culture of which it was a product.

But the Scriptures most often used to silence/limit women have been dramatically “proof-texted,” that is, lifted intentionally out of their entirety and context for the purpose of supporting a particular worldview. While these carefully selected texts might uphold, in some simplistic readings, a diminished voice for women, a more nuanced reading of Scripture shows that progressive, even radical-for-the-time views of women breathe throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels, and the stories of the early church.

Jesus was a feminist.

The Jerry Falwell set are clutching their pearls right about now. But it's true.

Though perhaps not in the framework and expressions we would associate with women's rights in our own time, Jesus in many ways is an advocate for women's rights and fuller inclusion of women's voices in the spread of the gospel. For the time and place of his life and ministry, Jesus' voice is one of equality and inclusion. He frequently brings women into circles where others think they do not belong; includes them in the life of discipleship; heals and acknowledges and converses with them (to the horror, sometimes, of the other disciples); and ultimately recognizes the full humanity of women in a way that seems a bit radical in light of other cultural considerations of the time.

LOSING SIGHT OF THE GOSPEL'S FOCUS ON INCLUSION

I'll tell you what I see in my own little corner of the world: nice suburban folks who prefer not to ask hard questions, who fully believe that women are equal to men in every way, but have no problem at all going to a church where women can do anything but preach. They just really never let that part of their lives intersect with everything else they believe and value.

If we believe in equality in the boardroom and the halls of Congress, we can't let the church off the hook. Despite our following an inclusive, feminist Messiah, the greater representation some churches are giving women in leadership is more a sign of secular and cultural progress than any real theological awakening across Westernized religion. That demonstrates the power, however imperfect, of the secular women's rights movement. Given our cultural, political, and biblical history, that we even got this far is a miracle. At the same time, just imagine what would happen if a faith-based women's movement took root within our tradition and joined forces with the secular

work of equality. The transformation of the whole church, the community, even the world, would be astounding.

If its millennia-long complicity in a patriarchal, misogynistic system is not enough to call the modern church to action, then maybe its stake in the future will be. There are many reasons for people of faith to step into the fight for equality as never before, reasons that have nothing to do with ideology and everything to do with the values we claim to embody as followers of Christ and the biblical narrative that shapes the identity of believers.

Many of the most pressing justice issues of our time relate directly to the lack of women's voices in our shared power structures—from church to government to corporate America. These are matters the church is called to address directly:

- poverty
- racism
- access to health care
- family leave and healthy family life
- human trafficking
- sexual assault and domestic violence

Just to name a few. In the coming chapters we will explore how each of these social crises is rooted in the gender imbalance that shapes our global culture—particularly our American culture. In some cases, the connections to sexism are obvious; in others, the roots are more complex. But all of these issues have one thing in common: none of them should be partisan or controversial. They are not women's issues; they are humanitarian issues. They are systemic and societal issues that affect all of us—men and women alike. They all speak to conditions that directly counter God's creative vision for the world.

While approaching these issues from a uniquely womanist perspective may seem edgy at first in some settings, the church is in fact uniquely situated to address all of these complex conversations, bringing as many diverse voices as possible to the table and working deeply within communities to uproot our

broken systems. While there's no way we're going to burn down this system, mine all of its history, and fix all the things in a day (or even in a single book), we can begin to unwind the ways in which our faith and culture are entwined with destructive ideas about women—and then begin to transform that unfortunate dynamic into something new, shifting the perception that feminism is some radical leftist agenda, understanding it instead as something hopeful and life-giving for all.

Far too many people still view the work of equality as elevating women at the expense of men, or insisting on a certain kind of vocational identity for all women, regardless of our individual gifts, callings, and worldviews. The emergence of absurd “men’s rights groups” bears witness to this misconception, as does the cadre of antifeminist books and blogs *written by women*. It is far past time to shift this narrative, expressing a broader understanding of feminism as a worldview that elevates humanity as a whole.

It’s time to gather up, lean in, and move forward. Maybe that means changing the language. Maybe that means changing the conversation. One thing is for sure: we are going to need everyone at the table.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What messages did you receive in your upbringing about what women’s roles should be in the life of the faith community? For women: has that teaching affected how you approach other aspects of your life? For men: has that message affected how you engage with women in other aspects of your life?
2. Think of some strong women who were influential in your upbringing. Name what gifts they shared with you, and how they shaped your faith.
3. What images or words do you associate with the word “feminism”? If you have negative connotations, where do you think you learned those associations?

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