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THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

There is none who is righteous, not even one.

ROMANS 3:10

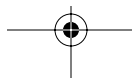


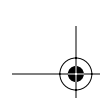
Many Christian women see themselves caught between two undesirable choices: either to flee or to fight. In other words, they can choose to back away from their ministry calling, bow their heads and flee to the refuge of conventional femininity. Or they can march forthrightly into their calling, shake their fists and fight for women's right to be ordained. Most Christian women truly don't want to do either. But what else can they do?

I believe there is an alternative: to go forward. Queen Esther went forward without fighting for her rights or fleeing from her dire situation. Esther went forward by violating the norms of her culture. She had the courage to enter the court of the king in spite of the fact that her presence before him was unsolicited and unlawful.¹ Esther went forward because God called her to go forward. So heartfelt were her convictions that she resolved to risk her very life. "If I perish, I perish," she said (Esther 4:16). The story of Esther fore-



¹See Esther 4:11, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days."





shadows the story of Christ, who walked forward in obedience, even to the point of death (Phil 2:8). Jesus healed on the sabbath, ate with sinners and did many other things that violated cultural protocol. Jesus had the courage to follow his calling and disregard the voices of dissent.

As a Christian woman leader, I have to ask myself, “Do I have the courage to violate cultural protocol? Do I have the will to disregard the voices of dissent? How am *I* to walk forward in obedience to Christ?”

WHAT CHRISTIAN WOMEN HEAR

It’s confusing to know what going forward means, especially with regard to what Christian women leaders commonly hear. On the one hand, they are told they can do all things through Christ (Phil 4:13). A woman can step out into a foreign mission field and evangelize an unreached people. She can disciple a king, rebuke a false teacher, correct a wayward brother and change the course of history by her prayers. She can lead or preach to thousands as long as the appropriate men invite her to. If her leadership is more suited for work outside the church, then she can become a senator, CEO or even president. There’s really nothing she can’t do.

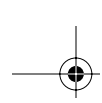
On the other hand, every Christian woman is told not to lead too much. She can lead women, but she isn’t to be called the women’s pastor. She can preach to men in someone’s home or in a conference setting but not in a local sanctuary. She can oversee a big budget in a big government or nonprofit, but she can’t have an official say over the small budget of a small church. Are women supposed to believe that these vast and pervasive inconsistencies are justified by orthodox Christian theology? Surely not, for in the words of Mortimer Adler, “We know that if we contradict ourselves or if we think contradictory things, we are missing the truth somewhere.”² It is logically inconsistent to think that women are designed to be subordinate to men in the home and church but not necessarily in society. Yet that is what Christian women hear.

When I was a student at Trinity, one of my professors called me into his



²Mortimer J. Adler, *The Great Ideas* (Peru, Ill.: Open Court, 2000), p. 8.





office and said to me in a warm, fatherly tone, “Sarah, do not show the full color of your plume; it will intimidate the men.” My professor sincerely believed he was doing me a favor by telling me not to express myself without also holding back. He liked me, and he didn’t want me to become controversial or lose the good favor of the men. I left his office confronted once again by the same recurring question: *Do I have the courage to exercise integrity and be who I am in Christ?*

To be honest, I am the audience this book is targeted for. I am the one who needs to read it. Writing this book has helped me to see that I unknowingly have followed the proverbial advice to be a good woman and hold back. There’s a reason why my writing was so bad for many years. The reason was that I held back.

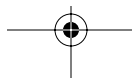
It also took me several years to begin to overcome my longstanding reluctance to write from my whole self. I was slow to realize that I have felt self-conscious about being a woman in ministry. I *have* felt self-conscious because women ministers are controversial. But at this point in my journey, I am repenting from my subconscious fear of being left out because I, as a woman, do not measure up as a man.

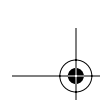
I didn’t ask God to grant me the grace to enter seminary and complete my doctoral work. That was his idea. He designed the plan; he’s the one who saw me through. I did not anticipate becoming the woman I am. Nor would I have guessed that my struggle to be a writer somehow was connected to my ministry. In all those years of pre-authorship, I never once dreamed of writing about my story as a woman theologian. I didn’t even know I had a story.

CHRISTIANITY VERSUS FEMINISM

People who know me understand that I am a Christian, not a feminist.³ Here’s what I mean by that. I am a follower of Christ (Mt 16:24). I confess with my mouth that “Jesus [is] Lord” and believe in my heart “that God

³According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, the word *feminist* literally means “one who believes in the principle that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men.”





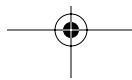
raised Him from the dead” (Rom 10:9). My vocation is to become like Christ (Rom 8:29). With that, my number one goal is to love God foremost (Mt 22:37). If I were a feminist, my focus would be on women and equality and power.⁴ But since I am a Christian, my focus is on Christ and truth and grace (Jn 1:17). As a Christian, I don’t function in a feminist paradigm.

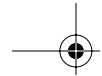
Christians don’t have to be feminists in order to believe in social justice. Feminism is not something that must be added to Christianity in order for the church to honor women. The gospel itself is pro-women. It is quintessentially Christian to be pro-people. Hence it is just as unnecessary for a Christian to be a feminist as it is for a Christian to be a humanist. There’s no need to blend a humanist worldview into a Christian worldview, because Christians already have the highest view of humanity in the world. Our Lord Jesus is himself the all-time greatest Advocate for men and women and children. Anyone who thinks that treating women fairly is a feminist thing to do, not a Christian thing to do, doesn’t understand Christianity.

The point of Christianity is to unite the people of God as one in Christ. When any of us squabble about power and personal status, we display a lack of faith in God’s plan. God has arranged for each member of the body to make a contribution—though not as the head of the church. Christ is the head of the church (Col 1:18). None of us are the head. The pope is not the head. Billy Graham is not the head. No woman is the head because no man is the head. Christ alone is the head.

And yet, here we are, as members of Christ’s body, debating over who can be the head. We’re clamoring for power because we keep overlooking God’s plan. God’s plan is for us to be united to the Head. That’s what church is all

⁴Writer Anne Atkins expresses a similar perspective: “Christians and feminists are agreed in wanting the job market to be fair, but we are not agreed on the purpose of life itself. . . . There is indeed an essential difference between Christianity and feminism, but it is a difference we have not just with the women’s movement but with almost any philosophy in our society. We do not live for the here and now: we believe in a hereafter. We cannot live to please ourselves. . . . We may not simply work for a just society: we have a gospel to proclaim which is even more urgent.” See Anne Atkins, *Split Image* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), p. 253.





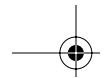
about. It's about us being one with Christ. About us growing up "in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ" (Eph 4:15). God also has arranged for us to reign (Rev 22:5; 2 Tim 2:12). Someday each of us will reign, but none of will reign as the head.

Until we learn this, until we have it settled in our minds that Christ—and no one else—is the church's head, I don't think we're ready to talk about other matters of church order. For whenever we attempt to inaugurate someone other than Christ to be the head, inadvertently we forfeit an aspect of our freedom. Unwittingly we end up subjecting ourselves to the very yoke of slavery (that is, slavery to sin) from which Christ has effectively released us. Galatians 5:1 says, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free." He did not set us free so that we could attempt to displace him. Christ set us free so that we would be free. Free from death. Free from sin. Free from selfish ambition. Free from deception. Free from dishonesty. Free from religious hypocrisy. God wants us to be free so that we can show the world what it means to be reconciled to God through Christ (2 Cor 5:18).

God also intends for Christian men and women to be fully reconciled to one another. In Christ, we have been made one (Gal 3:28). While to some it may appear that Christian men and women are already fully unified, the indicators say that we are not. If we were unified, we would not be embroiled in such a heated debate about the parameters for women in the church. Instead, we might be focused on mobilizing laborers for the gospel.

This is where repentance comes in. Some of us need to repent from feeling threatened by the giftedness of others. The Bible says, "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and lie against the truth. This wisdom is . . . demonic" (Jas 3:14-15). Selfish ambition is of the devil. It is not from God above. I know firsthand how destructive my own selfish ambition can be. As James puts it, where selfish ambition exists, there is "disorder" and "every evil thing" (Jas 3:16). This verse couldn't be more relevant to the subject of women in the church. For if we want to establish church order, then we have to put away the disorder that arises from our selfish ambition. In other words, we have to repent.





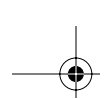
To be clear, I am not saying that people must repent from their doctrinal differences. Nor am I saying that diversity of conviction isn't good. Instead, I am saying the mere topic of women in ministry is uncomfortable. Many of us dread it because we know it's complicated; thus we'd just as soon not try to sort it out. I understand. Just as I didn't want to write this book, others may not want to read it. It's painful for the church to consider our sins against women. It's hard to come to terms with what we've done and what we're doing. It is humbling to realize that we have failed to treat men and women lovingly without partiality. I have failed in this. Who hasn't?

Overall, I believe that the debate on women in ministry has been improperly reduced to a debate about roles. The church is prone to say that women should do this and not do that when her activity is not the issue. As I see it, the confusion in the church ultimately stems from a more fundamental question of relationships. The church has not yet learned how to relate to Christian women who, in light of their ministry calling, have chosen to walk an unconventional path. Though I'm getting ahead of myself, let me try to illustrate what I mean.

I have been told that Christian women in Korea feel devastated socially if they turn thirty before marriage. Evidently they feel challenged, even in the church, to find their role. As I see it, the issue of their role is not the problem. The problem, rather, lies in everyone around them who feels at a loss to know how to relate to them as single Christian women. My single female friends in the United States, especially those over the age of forty who have never been married, constantly describe the same ordeal. They feel that many Christians do not know how to relate to them comfortably. Instead, people want to know "how they're coping" with their singleness and lack of motherhood. In other words, they want to know how they're coping with their conventional rolelessness.

Conversely, it seems that Christians also feel uncomfortable when a woman in the church begins to attain an excessive rolefulness, if you will. In other words, we begin to squirm when a woman accepts a visible position of public leadership. Thus we start to wonder about Anne Graham Lotz, a





daughter of Billy Graham, because she is a she, and she is a preacher in our midst.

Granted, on the surface the debate about women has to do with proper roles. But underneath, it has to do with the more complex question of the God-given nature of women. Followers of Christ are struggling to figure out how it is that female human beings can be made in the image of God who reveals himself as “he.” On top of that, we’re arguing about culture and perspectives and the authority of the Bible. In truth, we are arguing about a multitude of things because the question of women’s identity inevitably is connected to a multitude of other related factors. So many questions come to mind. For instance, what does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a man? Why do an inordinate number of men avoid the church? Would even fewer men attend if women served as pastors and preachers? What are we going to do about the divorce rate? What about women who feel convicted to stay at home and rear their kids? What about the Bible? What about the church being true to obey God’s Word?

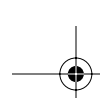
In light of this, our foremost concern, at least in conversation, is to raise the red flag of I Timothy 2:12-14, which is usually translated, “But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.”

No doubt this passage is prominent in the debate. In fact, it is mentioned so often throughout the rest of the book that I refer to it and the verses that surround it as I Timothy 2. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the “problem” of women in ministry boils down to a collision between feminist theology and the timeless teaching of Paul. In my view, the problem is more basic than that.

TACKLING A TOUGH PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH

Most of us are aware of the global trends of feminism spreading throughout the world and seeping sometimes into the church. At the extreme end of the movement, women are claiming the right to be sexually promiscuous, to live





as lesbians and to abort their unborn children. I agree that it is not God's way for women to come barreling in making personal demands for themselves. But I would like to add that it's not God's way for men either. It's not God's way for women to interact as mutual lovers, but it's not God's way for men either. It is not God's way for mothers to abandon their children either born or unborn. And yet, it's not God's way for fathers either. In the kingdom of God, there is no double standard. All of us are responsible to live for God, and yet all of us are guilty of living primarily for ourselves.

The apostle Paul put it plainly: "There is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become useless. There is none who does good. There is not even one" (Rom 3:10-12).

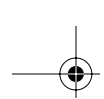
Christians know that God's way is offensive to the world. But sometimes we forget that God's way can also be offensive to us Christians. None of us is naturally inclined toward God. All of us stand in constant need of correction. For obvious reasons, I cannot say with integrity, "Get it right as I have it right," but I can say, "Repent as I repent." All of us are contributors to the problems between men and women; thus all of us are part of the solution.

I am writing this book because I have hope that men and women in the church can build new bridges of trust (I Cor 13:8). I think it's realistic to believe that we can change. We *can* repent and build more integrity within ourselves as well as in our local church communities. We can also seek to heal our relationships. But in order to do this, we have to come to grips with our current condition and engage in some unsettling conversations. We also have to lean on God in prayer.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book introduces a theology of women woven into the narrative of my story. It expresses my rendition of a complex issue that is weighing down heavily upon the church. Notice I didn't say it's an issue that is weighing down heavily upon women. No, this issue is everybody's issue, because it has to do with women and men. It is true that motherhood is strictly a women's





issue. But it's not true that parenthood is. Nor is it true that women in church leadership pertains only to women. Church leadership is a general subject; hence it involves the whole church.

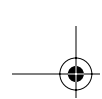
Unlike some reference books that are written on this topic, my book is not meant for pick-up-and-put-down use. Instead, it represents one author's attempt to challenge believers along with myself to examine our assumptions about women and men and see if they're biblical or not. It is also meant to interpret the debate in evangelicalism and explain why the two sides collide.

For the record, it is not my goal to mirror everybody who reads this. Instead, my aim is to communicate true stories that typify men and women in the church. If you find yourself thinking, *This doesn't describe me*, then consider that it probably describes someone else. If you find yourself feeling convicted, then you are similar to me. I am not an innocent party when it comes to this debate. Perhaps that is why my overall conviction is to stimulate Christians to face the truth, even if the truth indicts us.

To offer a sneak preview, I can tell you twelve assertions in this book:

1. Both sides of the debate are radically revising church tradition. The notion of women being equal in personhood to men is a relatively novel idea, or rather, a biblical one that only recently has been renewed.
2. Both sides of the debate are trying to be biblical.
3. Both sides are also mixed. Complementarian thought is usually a mix of Bible and traditionalism. Egalitarian thought is usually a mix of Bible and feminism.
4. It is possible to affirm women leaders in the church without becoming a feminist. Feminism is about women's power. Christianity is about Christ's power.
5. It is possible to believe in complementarity of the sexes without reaffirming church tradition. Church tradition says that women are inferior; Christianity does not.

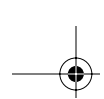




6. The Scriptures nowhere say to pursue “biblical manhood” or “biblical womanhood.” The Bible commands us rather to become like Christ (Phil 2:5-11; I Pet 2:21-23).
7. There are no problem verses in the Bible. First Timothy 2 is inspired by God and therefore not a problem per se.
8. Neither side of the debate promotes a straightforward reading of I Timothy 2:12-15. Instead, both nuance their interpretations of the passage.
9. The word *head* in Ephesians 5 (“the husband is the head of the wife”) does not mean “authority” or “source” or “covering.”
10. Many Christians, such as myself, have sinned by being prejudiced against women and partial to men. This kind of behavior is contrary to the teachings of Scripture (Mk 12:14; I Tim 5:21; Rom 2:11).
11. The only way that Christians can resolve this debate is for each one of us to repent from our own sins.
12. Men and women in the church can begin to build consensus, but only through relationships of trust (I Cor 13:8).

There are questions at the end of each remaining chapter. I wrote them for the purpose of facilitating discussion among my readers. There are also many footnotes included. If you're the type of reader who would rather move past them, then do so. Footnotes aren't for everyone. My philosophy is that even if you feel burdened by footnotes, there's a benefit to having them—because when you *ignore* them, you get to turn the page a little sooner. (Psychologically it's sort of like swimming with flippers. You get the feeling with flippers that you can swim faster. Likewise, skipping footnotes makes you feel like you can read faster.) If, by contrast, you're the type of reader who savors footnotes, then perhaps you will be happy that they are nicely set before you rather than packaged less accessibly as endnotes.





THE CHALLENGE OF THIS BOOK

From the start of my research, I have felt convicted by a well-known passage in I Peter:

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering he uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously. (1 Pet 2:21-23)

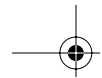
Every time I read this, I see the word *you*. God has called “you,” meaning me, for this purpose, since Christ suffered for “you,” meaning me, and left me an example for me to follow in his steps.

Though many people might still argue that women are entitled to the political right to lead in the realm of church government, I do not concur. Within the kingdom of God, people have only one right. The Bible says that all who receive Christ as Savior and Lord, to them God gives “the right” to become children of God (Jn 1:12). That one right is sufficient. As long as I have the right to be a child of God, then my identity on earth cannot be threatened. I am God’s child, an heir of the kingdom, empowered by the Spirit of the Lord.

Indeed, all Christians easily can afford to confess that we don’t have rights in the democratic sense of the word. For instance, it is not my right to be loved by other people. It is the duty of all others to love me, because God commands other individuals to love me as they love themselves (Mt 22:39). But duties are distinguished from rights.⁵ Thus Christian feminists who insistently proclaim that women have the right to be ordained or the right to be treated fairly have no biblical basis on which to stand. No Christian has the right to lead. No Christian is entitled to demand such a right for our-

⁵The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant is the one who persuaded Western culture to believe that rights are defined by others’ duties. To learn the difference between Kantian ethics and Christian ethics, see Steve Wilkens, *Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 99-115.





selves. The Bible does not say to lead one another. It says to “love one another.” Once we do that, we won’t have a thought about clamoring for our positions anymore. Instead, we’ll be like him who came to serve (Mk 9:34; 10:35-45).

In closing, I acknowledge that God has not commissioned me to enter this debate and settle the matter conclusively. He has called me to something higher and more painful. He has called me to repent from my sins, speak the truth, suffer for his sake, love other people and entrust myself to him who judges righteously. This is his call to all believers. In the past we have failed to follow in his steps. But that is no excuse. It’s not too late to make a better decision.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which chapter in this book are you most excited to read? What interests you about it?
2. Why are you reading this book? What are some of your most pressing questions regarding men and women in the church? What are you hoping to learn?
3. What do women in your local church hear? What are they told about their participation in the church?
4. What does it mean to “show the full color of your plume”? Do you think it’s wise to advise Christian women not show the full color of their plumes? Why or why not?

