

Seven Steps

for Bringing Biblical Equality to Your Church

By Karl Vaters

Have you had a hard time bringing the principles of egalitarianism into your church? If so, you're not alone. Getting biblical egalitarian principles accepted in a local congregation can be a daunting task, but there are a few things anyone can do to help this vision become a reality.

In some ways, I may seem extremely unqualified to write about inequality in the church. I am white. I am male. I am able-bodied. My native tongue is English. I am between 35 and 50. I am married. I am tall. And I'm even right-handed. In short, the culture in which I live has been designed specifically for me and for people like me. As a result, I have never personally been the victim of prejudice.

On the other hand, as the "poster boy" for the stereotypically "empowered" people of our society, I have a unique perspective to offer, especially as this subject relates to the local church. I know how pastors think because I am one. Over 90 percent of pastors are male — so the majority of people have someone like me as their pastor.

Maybe your pastor appears to be the main obstacle preventing biblical equality from becoming a reality in your church. If so, allow me to offer seven suggestions for influencing the typical American church toward seeing the value of biblical equality, specifically as it applies to men and women in leadership in the church.



1. Stand up for the rights of others first.

Are you a man? Stand up for the rights of women. Are you a woman? Stand up for the rights of racial minorities. A minority? Stand up for kids. Young? Stand up for the elderly. Elderly? Stand up for the disabled.

Phillipians 2:3 states: "In humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

So don't we stand up for our own rights? Yes! But only after we've stood up for others. That way we have more sway with those we are trying to influence. If it appears the only time we stand up for someone's rights is when we stand up for our own rights — or for the rights of those who are like us — we are at risk of being perceived as greedy or self-centered.

If we are trying to defeat those who disagree with us, their perceptions are irrelevant. But if we are truly trying to influence them, we must realize that their perceptions are their realities and act accordingly.

Standing up for the rights of others first is not only biblical, it works!

2. Recognize and praise positive steps in others — even if the steps are small.

Pastors deal with a lot of criticism in an average week — from the style of music used in worship services to the Bible version they use. Since much of it is trivial, most pastors have learned to filter most of it out, especially from "chronic complainers." So when someone criticizes a pastor for using the word "men" when he should have said "people," that criticism gets trapped in the pastor's "trivial filter." It can be difficult to get valid points, such as the importance of gender-neutral language, past the filter without appearing to be a chronic complainer. The best way I know how to do that is to start by praising the

positive steps.

Listen for the times your pastor attempts to use egalitarian language and then offer your thanks. Praise decisions that bring women into any leadership roles, no matter how small the steps may be. Then point out the ways having a woman's influence or perspective was of benefit in those roles.

Most "enemies" of biblical equality are people who, through their upbringing or theological training, simply have sincere theological difference as it relates to the equality of men and women. With few exceptions, they are not anti-woman; they are simply living according to the patterns they have already seen.

All of life is a Bell Curve. The extremes on either end are small. Those on the extreme end against biblical equality are not the ones I'm interested in influencing. It's the vast majority in the "sincere middle" who need to hear the message of biblical equality from someone who is living life through a biblical worldview.

I believe it is these people the apostle Paul was referring to when he instructed us in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 to "... warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone."

3. Be gracious in defeat.

Defeat can never be accepted and it must never deter us from doing and teaching what we know is right. But we must realize we are in a marathon, not a sprint.

I have been the pastor at three different churches. Each one had never had a woman on the deacon board until I arrived. In two of those churches, the change was easy. I suggested women ought to be considered for nomination to the deacon board along with men. After some question and answer sessions in which the tough Pauline passages were brought up and properly exegeted, they agreed it was not only appropriate to let women be nominated, but the majority recognized that they had been wrong for excluding women for so many years. Qualified women were nominated alongside qualified men. When the votes were taken, these churches had female members on their deacon boards for the first time in their histories.

But in one church, nearly everyone was shocked and some were outraged when I suggested we ought to allow women on the deacon board. No amount of teaching or question and answer sessions could sway certain vocal church members from their opinions. But because there was no outright prohibition in their Constitution and Bylaws against women, they had to allow women to be nominated.

The first election failed to get a highly-qualified woman elected rather than the less-qualified man running opposite her. Those on the losing side of the election did not argue or get visibly angry, although we believed the decision was wrong. Arguing would have felt good, but it would have been counterproductive. Instead, we chose to follow the lead of Colossians 3:13, which told us to "bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Women continued to be nominated for the deacon board year after year. After a few tries, when the newness of seeing a woman's name on the ballot wore off, a woman was finally elected. There were a handful of church members on the extreme end of things who didn't vote for her and never will. But the "sincere middle" was all that was needed. A patient approach worked best.

I remember hearing about a time the alternate approach was attempted. A woman had been nominated, and when she wasn't elected her vocal supporters began a huge argument. The "sincere middle" responded by saying they didn't elect her because her overly vocal supporters "seemed like they just wanted a woman on the deacon board whether she was qualified or not." Whether or not that was true, the appearance of it was deadly.

4. Be more gracious in victory.

There are those in any congregation who will see any victory for biblical equality not as everyone's victory (which it is), but as their loss. They need to see that it is a victory for the entire Body of Christ! It is here that Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 12:26 come into play. "If one part suffers,

every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

Those who have a misperception of biblical equality will be in a place of emotional suffering when certain steps are made that they perceive as theologically wrong. The long-time elder who complains that a theological “standard” has been “lowered” when a woman is chosen to serve in a position formerly reserved for men is hurting. While it may be easy to dismiss him as a bigot, that is neither biblical nor beneficial.

No matter how much we like to think otherwise, our experience colors our theology. The anti-egalitarian in your congregation has probably never had the experience of seeing women in positions of ecclesiastical authority. Or, worse, has had a negative experience.

Either way, I have seldom seen people like this brought into a place of agreement with biblical equality using theological arguments; and I have never seen them brought to it by having their feelings dismissed.

Most pastors are not much different from their congregations in this respect. They have also had experiences that color their theology, and most of them are also in the “sincere middle.” They need to have some positive experiences with women in leadership before they can open their hearts to accept a biblical theology of women in leadership. Being a gracious winner can be a big part of that.

5. Operate under biblical authority.

The best leaders are good followers first, and the best teachers begin as good learners. We all need to find a place where we are under godly, biblical authority. Those who bounce from congregation to congregation looking for the “perfect” church will never find it. They will never develop any position of influence in any church because they will be perceived as “unteachable” and, therefore, not to be desired as teachers or leaders.

I am sometimes asked, “But what if the authority I am under is on the extreme end of the Bell Curve?” My answer: Find a place of biblical authority. While no earthly authority is perfect, those in the “sincere

middle” — including pastors — are at least open to be influenced. The dangerous extremes are not teachable, and that is not biblical authority.

6. Teach the young.

Recently I sat in a college class in a fairly progressive evangelical college. The subject of a minister’s marital infidelity came up. Several students instantly blamed the wife for the infidelity, saying, “He wouldn’t have looked elsewhere if everything had been fine at home.”

On the other hand, I have seen grandparents who are thrilled that they have “lived to see the day” when women are serving communion and are being elected to deacon boards. We cannot assume the next generation will be more open to biblical equality than past generations have been. It is not a matter of age, but of teaching.

But the next generation is where our best hope lies. Deuteronomy 6:6,7 tells us: “These commandments that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children.”

The young are impressionable. Just as those who are in positions of authority were impressed to be anti-egalitarian by their experiences, so must we work to impress the next generation toward biblical equality.

7. See biblical equality as a means, not an end.

When we get to heaven, there will be no inequality. But equality is not the goal of our work here on earth. It is a necessary means to another end.

To discover what that “end” is we turn to Paul, who was a champion of biblical equality. Paul said in Ephesians 4:12-13 that the work of the church is “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

God’s desire is that we work together in

unity, doing works of service, so that we all become more like Jesus. Equality is not the focus of that, Christ is. Equality is a necessary tool in bringing this about. After all, the requisite unity cannot take place without everyone working to his or her full potential.

A church full of equals that does not have its focus on worshipping Jesus is dead. Christ is the goal. Anything, even good things that divert our attention from him are to be avoided.

But in a church where Christ is truly the focus of our attention, mutual submission and mutual opportunity for mutual service would be the norm — and the results of that would be extraordinary!

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