Every fall, I pick apples alongside many Americans. For the last few years, I’ve been fortunate to go to the orchard with my nieces. We pick apples, drink cider, eat apple crisp, go on hayrides—and we take dozens of pictures to document the fun! On one such outing a few years ago, I had an epiphany: I pick apples to relax with my friends and family, but apple picking is the back-breaking work of many immigrant Latinxs in this country, particularly those without formal education and/or legal documentation.

I live at the crossroads of being female, Latina, and immigrant but I am also firmly entrenched in the middle class; I have a college education; and I have been a documented immigrant since I was eleven. By contrast, I have worked with Latina women who are poor, illiterate or barely literate, and undocumented. My race and gender place me at a disadvantage but some women are even more vulnerable to discrimination, abuse, and exploitation. This is why our egalitarianism must be intersectional; it must consider the overlap of women’s various social identities like race, class, and level of education.

I first learned about “intersectional feminism” from a Pinterest board. I stumbled on a quote that read “If it ain’t intersectional, it ain’t feminism.” I chuckled and quickly googled intersectional feminism to learn more. I discovered its unique emphasis on the layered systemic oppression of women who fall under multiple marginalized social identities. For example, intersectional feminism concerns itself with how women of color shoulder the dual weight of racism and sexism, or how women trapped in cyclical poverty suffer gender and class discrimination.

I studied gender inequality in the church in seminary but I never saw “intersectionality” applied to advocacy for women. That our egalitarian theology be intersectional seems so vital and intuitive and yet, it often isn’t. We “apple pick” our theology, buying into the myth that gender can be isolated and separated from race and class. However, marginalized social identities do indeed intersect and significantly impact women’s lives. Authentic egalitarian theology is not meant to only address gender inequality. If it truly intends to address the whole person, it must have something to say to women who are vulnerable beyond their gender. It must have something to say to women of color, to women living in poverty, to women in less prosperous nations, and to women whose stories deviate from more privileged narratives. Egalitarian theology’s mission is Christian unity, restoration, redemption, justice, and wholeness for all people, not just some.

When I examine Scripture, I see Jesus promoting and practicing a holistic egalitarian ethic in his interactions with women. For this reason, I owe the Samaritan woman in John 4 a long overdue apology. For many years I believed that because I am a woman, I understood her and her struggles completely. In fact, I even slandered this poor woman, calling her a promiscuous serial adulteress despite knowing very little about her life in her context.
In Jesus’ own interactions with the Samaritan woman, he considers her entire identity as a woman, a Samaritan, and someone with a complicated relationship history. In fact, the woman expects Jesus to shun her because she is a Samaritan (4:9), and his disciples are shocked to find him talking alone with a woman (4:27). In the course of their conversation, Jesus reveals that he sees her and knows her completely by referencing her history with five previous husbands.

Many people, including me, have assumed that she was an immoral woman because she had multiple husbands and was living with a man who was not her husband. However, we should consider her story in light of her ancient Near East, first century context. She might have been widowed many times; or was barren and had been divorced from several unhappy husbands; or was perhaps a concubine who was unable to get married for various reasons.

Jesus himself never calls her immoral or asks her to leave a life of sin—though he clearly knows everything about her. That is telling. It is likely that her marital history and possible widowhood or barrenness branded her as cursed, unlucky, or sinful, further marginalizing her in a society that already disadvantaged women and Samaritans.

Jesus practices a holistic relationship ethic—he sees and knows her as a woman, as a Samaritan, and as a fallen person. He sees her identity as Messiah to this unnamed woman and she is the first to spread the gospel to her own people, the Samaritans. She departs joyfully, leaving even her water container behind at the well.

Jesus transforms her life, her view of herself, and perhaps even her calling—but she remains both a Samaritan and a woman. Interestingly, the gospel writers choose to disclose both her gender and her ethnicity, providing a brief note on the ethnic rift between Jews and Samaritans. These details suggest that the Samaritan woman’s social identity is a central component of the story, not an afterthought.

The Samaritan woman is remade by the gospel but she no more ceases to be a Samaritan than she ceases to be female. Her social identity is a factor in how she receives the gospel and in how she spreads it. Jesus specifically references her identity as a Samaritan and she becomes an emissary of hope to her own people. Her social location is an essential part of the story, not an afterthought.

For years, I believed that the only identity that mattered was being a Christian. I firmly held that Jesus did not care that I was a woman, a Guatemalan, an immigrant, and a bicultural person—despite how those identities have shaped and marginalized me. I now believe that Jesus meets me at those intersections.

As an immigrant and ally of immigrants, I understand many of the challenges and struggles of my immigrant neighbors. I know Jesus calls me to advocate and care for the immigrant community.

As a Guatemalan Latina, I see Jesus using me to expose the underrepresentation of Latinxs in the media and in church leadership.

I am a Christian, but I have not ceased to be Latina, Guatemalan, an immigrant, and a woman. Because I accept those overlapping identities, I’m free to love my whole self in all its God-authored complexity.

When our egalitarian theology is intersectional, we can be confident that our whole identities matter to the God who formed and chose us. No form of oppression should escape the scrutiny of the gospel. An intersectional reading of Scripture challenges us to consider how social location and identity continue to shape us, even as we embrace a profound shared identity in Christ.

And in recognizing women’s complex, layered identities, the church’s prophetic imagination is strengthened; its witness is stronger; and its advocacy is refined.

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1. “Latinx” is a gender-neutral term commonly used in place of “Latino” to refer generically to people of Latin American origin or descent.