How growing up as a Southern Baptist made me egalitarian

Julia Butcher

If denomination could be passed down genetically, you could say that I’m a Southern Baptist all the way down to my DNA. My family tree grows in Southern Baptist soil, my earliest memories take place in Southern Baptist churches, and even though I have learned from and spiritually matured in a wide variety of other denominations, my heart pumps Southern Baptist blood.

I am also an egalitarian because I grew up Southern Baptist.

In Christian egalitarian literature and testimonies, Southern Baptist congregations, pastors, and church leaders are often shown in a less than positive light, and there are sometimes legitimate reasons for this. Many individuals, families, and communities have been hurt, ostracized, and spiritually abused by the attitudes and actions of Southern Baptist churches and their leaders. However, there are many unsung heroes in the Southern Baptist world who, whether they are aware of it or not, promote equality, justice, and the full use of the spiritual gifts given to men and women alike. I was fortunate to be surrounded by some of those heroes.

Both my family and the churches my father, an ordained minister, worked for while I was growing up would have defined themselves as complementarians. They earnestly sought to follow the Bible and the Holy Spirit, and their interpretations led them to believe that 1) husbands should be the “head” of their households and 2) men should be in the “head” leadership positions in their churches. However, my family and church were also healthy, and their theology and interpretation of Scripture did not match up with what I observed them practice on a daily basis.

My first example of a strong, independent, God-gifted woman was my mother. She has always been a force in our family that has been able to get us through multiple moves and financially tight times. She also doesn’t put up with oppressive theology. Once, as a teenager, I asked her why the Bible told women to be submissive to men. “There is no such verse in the Bible,” she responded. “Any man who tells you that you need to submit because you’re a woman is probably looking for you to just hand him something he knows he doesn’t deserve.”
My mother and father have a marriage that is built on mutual sacrifice, friendship, service, and respect. Their kind, Christ-like treatment of one another is an inspiration to me and many others. Although my father was technically the “head” of the household, neither of my parents would ever make a major decision without coming to a mutual agreement. Pulling rank on anyone in our family could not be farther from their natures. My parents are genuinely good to one another, and although complementarian in name, I have no better example of how well egalitarian marriages work.

My parents have always encouraged me to pursue my gifts, talents, dreams, and crazy ideas. When I first informed them at the age of fourteen that I wanted to go into the ministry, they were thrilled. I was entirely supported in my plans to pursue a degree in church music ministry, and when I looked into a seminary degree that encompassed both a Masters of Sacred Music and Masters of Divinity degree, I was met with both encouragement and pride from my family. When I began better defining my beliefs on biblical equality and working at Christians for Biblical Equality after college, my family, especially my pastor father—happily engaged me in conversation about egalitarianism. My emerging views on some biblical texts were in no way divisive. The dialogues that emerged strengthened our friendships, and we have increased respect for one another because of them.

Besides the influences and examples of my immediate family, I had plenty of opportunities to watch leadership in action within the church where my father served as an associate minister in my childhood and adolescent years. On the surface, this church would have seemed complementarian. I remember complementarian theology being taught by the head pastor and my Sunday school teachers. However, there were many strong, independent women working in leadership positions in many areas. Some of the wiser, older women in the congregation were the first to be called upon when the church staff was in need of advice. These same women also held the staff accountable for their actions. They were advocates for the integrity of the congregation. The chapter of the Women’s Missionary Union that met in our church was comprised of strong women leaders, as well. They not only regularly contributed to mission work through their fundraising, prayers, and projects, but also wrote letters and made phone calls to prominent leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention addressing matters of injustice and inequality.

The women of my church were not only role models from afar. There were several women who actively mentored both me and the other young women of the church. Some of the gifts and talents that I have to offer in my ministry today were first recognized and nurtured by these women. I was provided with wise advice from one of them which has stuck with me for years. She told me, “If you’re going to go into the ministry or mission work, do whatever you can to get ordained. You should be fully acknowledged and respected for the work you do.”

One of the most important activities for me as a young woman was my involvement in Girls in Action, a missions education program for grade-school girls created by the Women’s Missionary Union. At Girls in Action (or GAs), we were taught how God has called all Christians to share the gospel wherever
the Spirit led us. They taught us that the Great Commission has no addendum addressing gender, or who does or does not need to be spiritually “covered,” or what roles disciples may or may not have. GAs learned about both male and female missionaries from the past and the present. Many of the female missionaries we learned about were single. We were not taught that they were in leadership because there were no men who were willing to get the job done, but instead that they were in leadership because they had been obedient to God’s calling. Growing up in this program taught me to be proud of the courageous women throughout church history. Because of that foundation, the women in my life who have chosen a life of ministry, as ambassadors for God, are still people I uphold as role models and respected friends.

Hypocrisy is often defined as “not practicing what you preach.” This definition, although catchy, is not accurate. A dictionary definition of hypocrisy is “a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess.” The actions of the people who surrounded me during the forming years of my life in no way fit this definition of hypocrisy. They could not have been more sincere. There may have been actions inconsistent with what was preached from the pulpit and in Sunday school classrooms, but those actions were healthy, loving, sincere, and Christ-like. They honestly applied themselves to living by the Spirit of God, and they produced “good fruit” in their relationships and ministries.

I believe that the egalitarian actions and examples that I observed in my family and church were due to the fact that healthy relationships cannot help but be rooted in equality. Mutual, service-oriented love and respect in the church and home are evidence of the Holy Spirit working within and among the community. I feel that it is the grace of God that I was introduced to biblical equality despite the oppressive and inaccurate interpretations of some Scripture passages I heard growing up. I also feel that it is the grace of God that though there are inconsistencies in action and theology in many churches and homes, yet there is the clear practice of equality of men and women serving the kingdom of God, though not yet fully acknowledged. It is my continued prayer that these churches will one day preach what they practice.

JULIA BUTCHER is currently studying to become an herbal medicine practitioner and works as the database application administrator at Christians for Biblical Equality. She also enjoys spending time outdoors, sitting on her back porch, playing the pipe organ, and working with the northeast Minneapolis mission church, Mercy Seat.