Representation Sparks Conversations

Earlier this month, I ran across a tweet from a female pastor.¹ It read:

Man noticing my collar: Are you a preacher?  
Me: Yes  
Man: I don’t believe in women preachers  
Me: I am literally standing right here so...

This exchange points to a reality that women leaders know too well: our very presence creates conversation because it challenges the single narrative that dominates many Christian circles—leadership is the domain of men. Women leaders not only spark conversation, but have the opportunity to model good leadership and civil dialogue. Ultimately, we point the church to a clearer vision of the cross and human identity.

Prophetic leadership

Sparking conversation, and sometimes controversy, is a fact of life for women leaders, and it can be exhausting. Because of this, the courage and civility women demonstrate in their prophetic leadership is all the more impressive. Refusing to apologize for our calling and identity in Christ, we resist the narrative of patriarchy persistently and charitably, even among those who disagree with us. In the process, minds are changed.

Ten years ago, I was one of several scholars working to start a study group on gender at the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). Originally, we proposed a single, egalitarian perspective. ETS leadership wisely pushed back, recommending that our committee and the papers presented represent both egalitarian and complementarian views. We agreed, resulting in rich conversations of learning and life-long friendships of deep trust. It has also strengthened us as proponents of our own view! The kindness and respect learned and earned at ETS brings to mind a wise-beyond-years complementarian I met at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (GCTS).

Newly elected as president of GCTS’s student senate, Bruce invited me to lunch as a senator representing women in ministry. Assuring me of his support despite our differing views, Bruce took time to learn my story. And, he expressed gratitude for the kindness egalitarians demonstrate in their scholarship and as colleagues. He wanted me to know that his heart was with us.

Recently, Bruce and I shared a few laughs as he described his journey to an egalitarian position! I am forever grateful for his courage of character in engaging not only the scholarship and leadership of those who differed from him, but also their stories. In the end, he was won over by their unapologetic leadership (though not everyone will be)!

Revealing Calvary’s power

Women leaders not only disrupt the single narrative of male-only leadership, they also reveal Cavalry’s power by aligning women’s identity not with Eve’s sins but with Christ’s victory over sin. Whether through their words or by their mere presence, women leaders proclaim that women and men equally bear God’s image and are equally remade in the image of Christ. Christ’s emancipation of women allows the entire human family to flourish.