

# What If God Was One of Us: A Call to Uphold the Dignity of Women

*David Hart*

When I was a kid and in elementary school, one of my very best friends in the world was called Chelsea.

I suppose Chelsea looked like most other girls in my school—tall, thin, and lanky, with sandy blond locks that extended well past her shoulders down to her back.

She almost bounced as she walked, slue-footed, through the hallways of the school. Chelsea was smart, jovial, had no enemies, and was so popular everyone knew her by first name. Like Angela, Harriet, Liza, or Cher. Or Madonna.

Chelsea was what our world called a tomboy—a girl who enjoyed loud, noisy, rough activities normally associated with boys. She could run faster, jump higher, and play harder than anybody in the school, boy or girl.

During recess, whenever our male classmates would hurl playground insults like “you throw like a girl,” or microaggressions (of course, we didn’t have the slightest idea what a microaggression was back then ) during basketball or kickball games, Chelsea would always

be there, quietly defying them with her intellectual and physical prowess.

While the kids in my school meant “throwing like a girl” as an insult, throwing like a girl in my school meant throwing like Chelsea. She was absolutely the best at everything.

There wasn’t a spelling bee, a science fair, or grammar rodeo Chelsea didn’t win or master. She had the world all figured out, the wind at her back, and every other cliché about life being a crystal stair for her.



And ours was an unlikely friendship. We were from the same working-class neighborhood, but Chelsea and I didn't share a church or any other common social threads.

I would like to be able to say that our friendship was endorsed by every student in our school, and that everyone was swell with a friendship between a black boy and a white girl, but saying that would be a lie.

Even though our friendship was completely platonic—or “not girlfriend, boyfriend”—as we called it back then, there were those who took exception to Chelsea and me hanging out.

There would be questions from some students about how Chelsea could be friends with someone “who was in the oven too long.” There would be calls for us to “stick to your own kind,” and “just stop it.”

Those comments made for some recess periods littered with pregnant silence for us, but somehow we remained friends, undeterred. Best friends. Inseparable. Nothing could tear us apart.

Except death.

One summer before school began, Chelsea was killed by a drunk driver. I had heard that Chelsea and her family were traveling on a two lane highway, and the drunk driver drifted over into Chelsea's family car's lane. I heard that the drunk driver survived.

When my father died from a heart attack five years later, it affected me, but Chelsea's death devastated me in a way that I still seek to process. I remember running far, far away and sobbing uncontrollably when I heard the news.

But, Chelsea taught me my first lesson in gender equality and feminism outside my home, my church, and my community. She also taught me the far-reaching implications of racism in our communities and interpersonal relationships.

My grade school years were full of similar lessons. I was small and black in a time when it wasn't all that advantageous to be small and black.

No. When I was in grade school, hipsters weren't ironically uttering phrases like, “dope,” “baby momma,” or “fo' shizzle.” There weren't YouTube videos of everyone from news anchors to soccer moms “hitting the dab.”

And Justin Timberlake, Taylor Swift, or Gwyneth Paltrow weren't around to buy the bar with multi-platinum, multi-millionaire hip hop artists.

My grade school days were, pardon the expression, dark times. I was one of only a few black students in my school, and as a result I was a convenient target for racial harassment.

There was a small group of white boys who would wait for me every day after school and chase me home. Most of the time, I would be able to run home fast enough before they caught me. Other times, I wasn't so lucky. On the days they caught me, they roughed me up pretty good.

Incidentally, there was also a small group of black boys who didn't care for me much at all. They would also chase me home threatening my life, screeching “Black Charcoal” and “Darkie.” And they were as dark as I was. Sometimes it is our own people with the most hang-ups about black skin.

After a few months of running home after school (This was all before helicopter parents. My mother and father demanded I fight my own battles), I got some help from an unlikely place.

My cousin Amelia was fierce and fearless. And I don't mean that the way hipsters and fashion bloggers use the terms to describe a fashion trend or an article of clothing. I mean she was brave and bold and not afraid of anything. Although she was several inches and clothing sizes smaller than me, Amelia literally fought my battles for me until I could figure out how to fight them on my own.



When Amelia would see me running from school away from trouble, she would stand toe-to-toe with my enemies, scuffling and fighting on my behalf.

On one occasion, when a group of kids had me surrounded after school, Amelia literally dove into the crowd of kids to protect me.

My favorite middle school teacher, Ms. S., taught me something about fighting as well. Ms. S. was my sixth-grade teacher, and she was the very first black teacher I ever had. She was strong and poised and intelligent. Ms. S. refused to accept mediocrity from me, and demanded that I be responsible and accountable for my actions.

My experiences with Amelia, Ms. S., and Chelsea helped to lay the foundation for how I would later see traditional gender roles as fluid, and inform my impetus to challenge patriarchal constructs in our world, especially in the church.

Fast-forward to 2008, when I was ordained. I was packed in a small ante room with about a dozen ordinands, most of them women.

A small elderly woman—a pastor—paced into the room slowly, deliberately. She was the face and body of Jesus—humble, sublime, and righteous. She was serious about God and she literally walked the walk and talked the talk.

Her church was an outgrowth of a Bible study she initiated in the early 1960s. She and her co-pastor, another anointed woman, faced considerable difficulties in planting and growing their church. The sitting bishop of their communion refused to fully ordain these women because they were “women preachers.” What’s more, there was an attempt to prevent these women from operating as a church.

However, despite all of the gender-based discrimination they faced, these women

planted and grew what is now a very healthy and robust church.

The small, elderly pastor congratulated us, offered prayer, and impressed upon us the nature of the ceremony we were about to undertake.

At the end of her carefully chosen elocution, the pastor invited the women of the group to join the women in ministry organization within the communion.

She explained that the women in ministry organization existed to encourage and support women who were clergy.

Later in the day, I was talking with another ordained man. Alarmingly, he questioned the fitness of women for the pastorate. Specifically, he questioned a woman’s ability to preach the gospel, to lead a church, or administer its business and finances properly, “like a man.”

And perhaps even more alarmingly, he questioned the need for the women in clergy organization at all when there wasn’t a similar male clergy ministry. I was so shocked, all I could say was, “You know—history.”

History indeed. The church has a lot of remedial work to do as it relates to women in the ministry. The first Christian woman was not ordained in the United States until 1853, and the first women were not ordained in my communion until the mid-twentieth century, another hundred years. This means over 200 years (and more than that for some communions) of churches in America were led solely by men.

What’s more, there has been a troubling phenomenon of church officials using erroneous readings of certain biblical passages and stories to subjugate women.

Unfortunately, because these untruths about biblical passages have been



repeated so many times without correction, I have to briefly take the space here to correct them.

We all know that if we repeat something enough, even a lie, it becomes woven into the fabric of our collective reality. Like the lie of a white Jesus. Like the lie about Mary Magdalene being a whore. Like the lie that women are not fit to lead churches.

So, it is our duty to unweave the lie from reality.

Feminism (and quite frankly women generally) has always been met with great skepticism and incredulity in the church. Since the beginning of the church, equality of women has always been seen as unchristian, worldly, and radical.

Church father Tertullian noted, in a remark that is the mother of all backhanded compliments, that, “Woman is a temple built over a sewer.”

And Clement, another church father, believed that women, by their very nature were weak, irrational, and good for nothing beyond producing children.

How can the church or its members endorse equality or see women as humans entitled to respect, dignity, and equality when its leaders have spoken against women in this manner?

What’s more, our church fathers have also told us that the Bible and God ordained for women to not lead in church. In fact, we call God a “he” when the Scriptures use male and female metaphors for a God who is spirit and transcends human categories of gender.

Specifically, they have pointed to Eve’s origin as subordinate to Adam, Deborah’s assertion that it was most shameful that she had to step up to lead the Israelites when male leaders faltered, and passages in the apostle Paul’s letters that assert that the

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husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.

For their part, church leaders have been consistent. When they see or experience cultural phenomena they don’t understand, don’t like, or perhaps fear, they proof text, or pull biblical passages out of context to support their fear and opposition.

Pulling biblical passages out of context may help construct a male-centric agenda, but it does little to discern God’s will as it relates to women in leadership in the church.

If we look at the Scriptures in their entirety, we see a Christian God who values women and their leadership.

If we look closely at the creation story (Genesis 1 and 2), we see that God created men and women at the same time, equally, and in the image of God.

We also see God calling women like Deborah to lead and save their people because of their brilliance and temperament, not simply because there wasn’t a man around to lead.

And really no biblical discussion would be complete without discussing Vashti.

Precious little is written in the Bible about Vashti, and even less is written about her in theological scholarship. However, Vashti really was the consummate biblical feminist.

What little we know about Vashti is found in the Old Testament book of Esther. In Esther, we see that Vashti was a queen to a king who ruled a territory that included modern-day East Africa to India.

For four months, Vashti’s king partied with the kingdom officials nonstop. Toward the end of the party, when the king was drunk on wine and feeling himself, he ordered Vashti to come to the party wearing nothing but her crown and show her body to the king’s guests.

Naturally, Vashti refused to do such a thing with her body for her husband’s entertainment.

The king gathered his officials and consultants to discuss Vashti’s actions. They believed that Vashti’s refusal to allow her husband to degrade her would empower other women in the kingdom.

So, Vashti’s husband banished her from the kingdom forever.

Vashti was never heard from again.

Vashti's banishment is a chilling example of how feminism, and further, women attempting to control their own bodies and destinies, was treated in the ancient world. Yet, the Scriptures lead us a different way.

While the apostle Paul made some specific statements about women designed to address specific issues in specific churches, women preached the gospel and were treated as equals in Paul's ministry.

And the only people to ever minister to Jesus were women. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and others accompanied Jesus during his ministry and supported Jesus financially and spiritually.

As Christians we believe that Jesus is God. God's decision to enter our world through a woman affirms women's sacredness in the eyes of God. But too often, women are not afforded respect in the church.

Men and women in the pew are treated differently from each other. Women who have sexual relations outside of marriage, and especially ones who are single mothers, are generally scorned and marginalized. Pastors and the leadership of churches save their most condemning sermons, admonishments, and private reprimands for them—you know, that sermon or private counseling session designed solely to make women feel guilty about every aspect of their lives, but especially their pasts. The sermon

and counseling session that calls on women to be "chaste," "modest," and "pure," because if they do all of those things just right, they will find a husband that will save them.

On the other hand, men who do the exact same thing—have sexual relations outside of marriage—are praised and groomed for leadership positions. I've seen it happen time and again in many churches. Men never hear the sermon and counseling session women receive. In fact, what men hear is radically different than the call to be pure and chaste. Men hear talks about how "boys will be boys and men will be men," and how, if we as men mess up, it is a woman's fault. In fact, I heard a woman whose male pastor was dealing with sexual issues say that the pastor would not have had these issues if the women within the church wouldn't tempt him with provocative dress and talk.

An organization for women in ministry designed to support and encourage women is necessary and should only be the beginning of how we remediate past discrimination against women in the church.

Now, I assumed that I wouldn't have to explain all this to the clergy with whom I was speaking. He was a black man. We understand what discrimination and marginalization feel like. We know what institutionalized discrimination, packaged to appear perpetuated by *us*, feels like.



For instance, I am a member of a historically black Greek-letter fraternity (In all honesty, there is only one. But, I digress). I was at an outing in which I was wearing a fraternity pin. After a woman discovered I was a member of a "black fraternity," she asked me, "why are there 'black fraternities'? Shouldn't there just be 'fraternities'? What if there were 'white' fraternities?"

Yes. That actually happened. To have to explain why there must be organizations that support women in ministry is just like explaining why there are black fraternities. If there were no discrimination and marginalization advanced by the dominant cultures in either case, there would be no need for black fraternities or women in ministry organizations. And further, to blame women for being industrious and organizing to encourage themselves in a male-dominated profession and remedy past and current discrimination is both laughable and unconscionable.

An editor of a newspaper reviewed a shorter version of this text, and told me that I needed to clarify in which churches

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women face the kind of marginalization I describe because it did not happen in her (predominantly white) church. Her comments underscore another barrier for women of color who seek to lead: other women don't seem to understand their struggle.

Black women in America have had to fight, scuffle, and scrape for their womanhood and their blackness—often alone, but many times alongside people who have sought to negate both aspects of their identity. Black women have played major roles in both the women's suffrage movement and the Civil Rights movement. However, when it came time to realize the fruits of their efforts, black women and their concerns were repudiated and laid to the side. Rosa Parks was all but muted after her famous refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus in the 1950s. And who can forget the suffragist Susan B. Anthony's declaration that she would just as soon cut off her right arm if she

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had to work for voting rights for blacks before women?

So, perhaps the marginalization of women in church doesn't happen in every church, but it does occur. In fact, several black clergywomen tell me that they still feel considerable hurt and pain from this kind of treatment.

I have been in the called ministry for almost a decade. Unfortunately, conversations and experiences like the one I had with the male clergy after my ordination are all too common.

It is curious to me that women in the pews of many of the churches I have served outnumber the men by a substantial margin. Women, from my experience, were the driving forces that made these churches function properly as well, serving in various lay leadership roles. And these haven't been just any women. They have been among the sharpest, motivated, brilliant people I have ever met. Yet, while women outnumber the men in the church both in the pew and in leadership positions, I have seen a resistance to having women in the pastorate in churches. Even from women themselves.

A close confidant who was a woman in the ministry faced a significant amount of discrimination and sexism within the church at large. She had

church members (some of whom were women) and entire congregations unwilling to follow her because she was a "woman pastor." She was passed over for promotions within the pastorate while she watched her male colleagues receive those same promotions. And my friend was repeatedly admonished and characterized as arrogant, brash, and overbearing for infractions men would have been praised for.

The notion of women not being fit to lead within the called ministry is foreign to me. I grew up in a family with three sisters, no brothers, and a mother who raised me as a single parent after my father died in my teenage years. All of my aunts are strong, intelligent women who lead schools and run their own businesses. And until recently, I never conceptualized supervisors in my professional life being anything other than women.

Yet, I am acutely aware of the privilege I have as a male. My closest friends are women and I see them struggling with body image, work-life balance, fashion issues, and sexism in the workplace—issues that I have never had to struggle with. Issues that, quite frankly, we should be alarmed to still be dealing with today.

I have male privilege.



I have never had to keep my cell phone out in case I had to dial 911 because someone was following me. I have never had to worry about who was lurking in my parking structure after work to get me. I have never feared for my safety in any dark alleyway, first date, or nightclub (although, I probably should have in retrospect).

I have never been eviscerated on social media for what I wore, what I didn't wear, or what I should have worn. My body parts have never been analyzed online, or discussed in a chatroom. I have never had to worry about being "too sexy" on my social media page.

I have never had to go to work, work hard, and get paid less than an incompetent counterpart. I have never had to worry about the right time to tell a job that I was pregnant. I have never had to determine whether I should wear an engagement ring to work for fear of appearing too "high maintenance."

I have never had to pretend that I was dumb in order to sell a product, learn a concept, or "land" a partner. I have never been urged to have children or be seen as incomplete because I do not have them.

I have never been called "whore" or "slut," "thot" or "thottie," "baby momma," or "freak" simply because I exist. I have never been accused of using my body or sex to benefit myself or career.

I can wear whatever in the world I want outside my house and not be judged for wearing it (except by my mother). I can be assertive and aggressive without being a bad person.

I can drink beer from a bottle. I have never had a car sales person ignore me because I am a man. No server has ever thanked my wife for paying for a meal that I paid for. I have never had my meal paid for on a date with the expectation that I would then "put out."

## **But, simply because men cannot fully comprehend the magnitude of the oppression women face daily does not mean we cannot be allies. Particularly in the church. In fact, it should begin with men.**

I can wear the same suit to work (Hey. Only God can judge me, right?) for an entire week, only changing my shirt and tie. Nobody has ever pressured me into wearing skinny jeans, a bra, or make up in the morning. Nobody's called me a bad mom for breastfeeding in public, for not breastfeeding in public, for not attending every single thing my kid does, or for nothing at all.

And, and, and, I don't even know what yoga pants are.

Yes, I'm privileged.

And one day several years ago, after talking with my wife and my friends about all of the privileges I enjoyed which they did not, I decided to quietly attempt to give up all of these privileges for one week. All of them. Not for a gimmick, but to attempt to understand what gender oppression feels like.

I didn't make it more than seventy-two hours. I couldn't handle needing to be aware of my surroundings or caring what I wore for that long. And, what's more, I never truly felt what it was like to be a woman, because the world at large saw my maleness during that time period and treated me the way I was always treated.

But, simply because men cannot fully comprehend the magnitude of the oppression women face daily does not mean we cannot be allies. Particularly in the church. In fact, it should begin with men. We must challenge ourselves to think differently than our fathers and this world about women and gender.

We must tell our sons early that women should be valued and equal in this world *because* of, not *in spite* of, their womanhood. We must bear witness in the presence of those who use off-color names, tell tasteless jokes, or hurl microaggressions about women that we won't stand for further oppression.

We must be ready to stand with women and assist them as they create leadership opportunities for themselves within the church, and not pout or lament "me too" when they do. Do all lives matter? Yes, of course they do. But, right now we have a need to concern ourselves with the ones attached to women who have been devalued for far too long.

Women will continue to fight for equality, humanity, and inclusion in the calculus of the business and leadership of the church. They will continue to fight for the church to see their womanhood as an asset rather than an annoyance.

**But, in the same way my young friend and cousin made my fights their fights, men must be willing to do the same for women. We must make their fight for equality our fight as well. All of us. Both men and women.**



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