Religion is the most deadly tool of oppression, according to Eugene Peterson. "More people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way." What is the first line of defense to exploitation driven by religious zeal? God’s prophets! In his introduction to the book of Amos in The Message, Peterson reminds us:

More people are exploited and abused in the cause of religion than in any other way. Sex, money and power all take a back seat to religion as a source of evil. Religion is the most dangerous energy source known to humankind. The moment a person (or government or religion or organization) is convinced that God is either ordering or sanctioning a cause or project anything goes. The history, worldwide, of religion-fueled hate, killing, and oppression is staggering. The biblical prophets are in the front line of those doing something about it.

To embrace a spiritual life that makes us better rather than worse will always require a healthy dose of prophetic challenge because “none of us can be trusted” Peterson warns. We too easily listen to people who agree with us. Since the line “dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being,” as Solzhenitsyn observed in The Gulag Archipelago, the pursuit of justice is inseparable from an honest engagement with the prophets of Scripture and the prophets God sends us in every age—prophets like the founders of CBE.

CBE founders were a solitary voice supporting the equal humanity, dignity, and authority of girls and women who had been marginalized and exploited by a shallow interpretation of Scripture. Demanding that what is unclear in the Bible be understood through that which is clear, their prophetic work made the church stronger biblically and therefore socially.

For this reason, I thank God for the day I met CBE founder Cathie Kroeger while waiting for Harvard’s library to open. She invited me to share lunch with her, and from that moment onward, my life would never be the same. A member of student council at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, I was collecting resumes of eligible female professors. Who better to hire than Cathie Kroeger? Her archaeological research on women continues to enlighten the academic community to this day, and her research on the prevalence of abuse in Christian homes has built awareness, provided desperately needed resources, and forged paths of healing over the years. A prolific researcher and writer, Cathie was always searching for new ways to enlarge the church’s conversation on gender justice. She was an indomitable defender of the vulnerable, not only in the foster children she raised, but also in her biblical scholarship and activism, which advanced the agency and capacity of women beleaguered by Christian patriarchy.

Through Cathie, I met CBE founder Gretchen Gaebelain Hull, daughter of Frank Gaebelain, a prominent evangelical writer, educator, and social activist. Like her father, Gretchen was as erudite as she was lucid and she quickly assumed leadership of CBE’s publication—Priscilla Papers. Under Gretchen’s leadership as editor, Priscilla Papers grew rapidly and became the primary means of disseminating egalitarian theology to seminaries, colleges, and Christian thinkers around the globe. Gretchen’s grasp of the evangelical world proved essential to CBE’s strategic outreach. Her piercing logic and prophetic vision made her a key spokesperson, and her speaking engagements took her to distant audiences. She was CBE’s golden tongue, and her classic volume, Equal to Serve, continues to enjoy a broad reading. Her commitment to social justice was one that was shared by many CBE founders, and it was in Gretchen’s home in New York City that evangelical
leaders convened to write CBE’s “Statement on Men, Women and Biblical Equality,” now available in thirty-one languages.

Like Gretchen, CBE founder Alvera Mickelsen has long been an extraordinary leader and communicator. She and her husband Berkeley—a New Testament scholar—together advanced biblical equality as teachers and writers. Berkeley provided treasures from the New Testament, while Alvera addressed practical issues. Recognizing that not everyone reads Greek, Hebrew, or Latin, Alvera had a passion to popularize CBE’s message through more accessible resources. What is more, she made herself widely accessible to CBE’s community, particularly those suffering the consequences of patriarchy, addressing the concerns of housewives, business leaders, and PhD students alike.

To release the chains of patriarchy from the necks of girls and women, Alvera worked to create a financially stable organization. Her focus on development made it possible to grow CBE’s staff and to provide them with effective technologies. To enlarge CBE’s outreach, Alvera created CBE’s first development committee by inviting Sara Robertson, an expert in the field and the vice president of development of Pioneer Clubs, to lead this vital project. Sara not only mentored CBE staff, she also joined CBE’s board. In the years since, she has gifted the organization with her vast experience in areas such as development, editing and publishing, and best practices for nonprofits.

Robertson was joined by Virginia Patterson, who had recently retired after twenty-seven years as president of Pioneer Clubs. A strategic thinker and organizational leader par excellence, Virginia served as CBE’s board chair for more than twelve years. During this time, she transitioned CBE’s board from managing tasks to governance. Virginia established a regular process of strategic planning that developed and assessed mission, ministry goals, and an annual analysis of organizational growth and vision. As CBE’s board matured in governance, its staff received correspondingly greater support for their work in carrying out the mission on a daily basis. It was a win-win!

There is not enough space to celebrate the contributions of CBE leaders like Ruth Bolyard, who first developed and nurtured CBE’s chapter ministry, and whose legacy continues to empower grassroots egalitarian activism. Or Gilbert Bilezikian, the confidant and mentor to hundreds of students and egalitarian leaders. A great midwife, Bilezikian birthed ideas, books, and leaders, while also ensuring that leaders had the theological and spiritual nurture they needed to reach their fullest potential. Or Roger Nicole, a founder of the Evangelical Theological Society, contributor to CBE’s “Statement on Men, Women and Biblical Equality,” and champion of women’s theological voices and leadership; or Pat and Stan Gundry, Nancy Graf Peters, Faith Martin, Jo Anne Lyon, Carolyn Olson, Ron and Arbutus Sider and many others, who comprised an extraordinary community of scholars, activists, and practitioners who together declared the good news of Scripture that men and women are created in God’s image, recreated in Christ, and thus called to a shared dominion in advancing Christ’s kingdom and justice.

Their prophetic voice dealt a blow to patriarchy which had long been portrayed as a biblical ideal. Through their collective service, girls and women are recovering their identity and agency as heirs and daughters of Abraham.