

COUNT THE COST

Gretchen Gaebelein Hull

In the summer of 1998, when the Reverend Kay Ward was elected as the first female bishop in the very conservative Northern Province of the Moravian Church in America, she stated:

We never know what will happen when men, clearly led by God's inclusive Spirit, choose to break open tightly bound fists of power and authority. And so I understand that [my election to bishop] takes place in a much wider context, a much longer journey.¹

Her words are an important reminder that working to implement reconciliation through Christ is an ongoing process, and represents the cooperation and hard work of many participants.

We can rejoice that increasingly women are freed from unbiblical restraints, at last able to use their gifts as God calls. But we also recognize that this movement of the Spirit has not "just happened." The same is true of efforts to end racial discrimination and economic injustice. All these ongoing movements of the Spirit take place in the context of sacrifice on the part of persons who believe the cost of standing up for biblical justice is worth paying.

In my immediate family, I was privileged to have as role models persons who understood the importance of paying that price. My grandmother, widowed in 1912 and with two teenage daughters to support, found herself with no vote and therefore no voice in helping determine political and social decisions directly affecting her family's welfare. She, and my mother also, joined with other suffragists and worked to achieve women's right to vote, a right finally granted by Constitutional Amendment in 1920.

Although this battle for women's suffrage was won before I was born, I heard and read enough to know that the suffragists had been targets of anger and name-calling; some had even been arrested and jailed. Later, I observed first-hand my mother's ongoing work for the League of Women Voters. Voting was precious to the women in my family, because they had personally known the pain of being voiceless in society's adult decision-making process.

My father was also an important role model in showing me what counting the cost involves. His was one of the first voices calling twentieth-century American evangelicals to account over the matter of racial discrimination. Tragically, in the 1950s and 1960s, evangelicals courageous enough to speak out against the evils of segregation and racial oppression were very few and far between. In 1965, as Associate Editor of *Christianity Today* magazine, my father traveled to Alabama to cover the pivotal civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. After witnessing the ghastly violence and police brutality against the predominantly African-American marchers, he wired back to *Christianity Today* an editorial in which he declared that such actions "cannot but sicken every American who cherishes freedom... The concept of first-class citizenship for just one race has to go."²

Most important, however, was that these family role models were convinced Christians who grounded their social activism in the biblical teaching that all human beings have equal worth and value to God, and that God hates discrimination and injustice of any sort. For example, when my father was asked how he, a highly respected evangelical educator and theologian, became involved with the civil rights movement, his simple answer was: "Through studying Scripture."

CONTEMPORARY ROLE MODELS

Someone my age recalls that twenty-five years ago, there were just a mere handful of books and articles not only written on the subject of biblical equality, but written from a high view of Scripture. Today there are hundreds! Again, this impressive list did not "just happen." The tremendous wealth of solid scripturally-based information available through the CBE Resource Ministry represents untold hours of dedicated research, rigorous exegesis, and careful theological reflection. The result of such sacrificial gifts of time and energy is that CBE authors are published by well-known evangelical publishers, and these authors' books are highly respected in the academic world. Similarly with those who write for *Priscilla Papers*: The fact that this CBE journal is subscribed to by dozens of libraries attests to its reliability and usefulness in the wider Christian community.

In addition, all of our authors write under their own names: no anonymous articles, no pseudonyms. These writers recognize the importance of standing up and being counted as they bear witness to truth. In being a voice for the voiceless, CBE writers are an encouragement to the entire CBE membership.

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However, many CBE members are themselves role models as they pay the costs involved in working through the Scriptures personally, laying the necessary foundation for being a faithful witness to the truth of biblical equality. Those who are Chapter members and attend CBE conferences and utilize the Resource Ministry, have taken the time to educate themselves so that they will be able to give answers to any who inquire into (or even challenge) the egalitarian position.

FURTHER COSTS TO PAY

Someone has made the observation that there is no such thing as “secret” discipleship: Either secrecy destroys the discipleship, or open discipleship destroys the secrecy. The same is true of those of us committed to proclaiming and living out the scriptural teaching that races, classes and genders are made one in Christ Jesus. It is impossible to be a secret egalitarian!

But this means that when we do stand up to be counted, there may be further costs to pay. Once you and I give public witness to biblical equality, we may face the misunderstanding of relatives and friends, possible financial hardship in certain job situations, hostility within our particular church setting, or even ostracism. We may experience intense loneliness, with no opportunity for fellowship with like-minded believers.

Again referring to my own family, possibly the deepest hurts my father experienced in his work for racial reconciliation were from fellow-evangelicals, hurts we describe with the oxymoron “friendly fire.” That term refers to attacks from people with whom we identify theologically and who share our concern “rightly to divide the word of truth,” and yet who not only have no interest in matters of biblical justice but criticize us for ours.

Sadly, “friendly fire” wounds us just as surely as does enemy fire, and is possibly more difficult to endure. We *expect* attacks from the secular world. We do not expect that world to care about gender or racial reconciliation, or to be concerned about the ever-widening gap between rich and poor. But when fellow believers criticize our efforts to practice Galatians 3:26-28 in the “here and now,” this criticism does indeed hurt. Therefore it is important to investigate the source of their “friendly fire” and also decide how best to deal with it.

Out of my father’s experience in the civil rights movement came these insightful words:

Sometimes evangelicals tend to be afraid of newly discovered truth. If so, they may have been equating some cherished doctrinal formulation or historical position with final truth. So when some hitherto unrecognized truth, some breakthrough into wider knowledge, faces them, it may seem a threat and they may react in fear or anger.³

Frank Gaebelein’s insight does indeed describe the ecclesiastical climate many of us face as we continue to work on justice issues such as racism and sexism. When people comfortable with the status quo are confronted with the message that our oneness in Christ is for *now*, not just in heaven, they may be so threatened that they react with fear and anger. We must be realistic: Persons uneasy with the implementation of the truth of biblical equality may direct that fear and anger at the members and friends of CBE.

To me, therefore, the important question is not “Will we have to pay a price for standing up for biblical equality?” because some sort of cost simply “goes with the territory.” Rather, the crucial question is “How will we best handle paying those costs?”

UNDERSTANDING FEAR AND ANGER

When I was a child I was told “Sticks and stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you.” Wrong: Words can be deeply wounding. Like many women, I found it very difficult to accept my physical appearance because of some exceedingly nasty gibes about my looks that I endured in my early teens. I was afraid of the people who made fun of me, and I was resentful of them for how badly they made me feel. However, as I grew older, I began to see that only insecure people use inappropriate name-calling, and that these people are to be pitied, not feared.

Similarly with persons today who try to discredit or suppress the truth of biblical equality by means of scurrilous attacks on individuals or churches, or who use excessive sarcasm in their attacks. Their actions say far more about themselves than their targets, because their tactics are evidence of insecurity and desperation. As Oswald Chambers observes: “Sarcasm is the weapon of the weak man. If a weak man is presented with facts he cannot understand, he invariably turns to sarcasm.”⁴

In contrast, the person with the strong case does not need to stoop to *ad hominem* and *ad feminam* attacks, low tactics that bear no relation to fair academic comment. The person with the solid argument does not need to impugn someone else’s personal integrity, or manipulate facts, or deliberately misrepresent the opponent’s case. The person with the strong argument has nothing to fear from engaging in fair, open, honest dialogue. And in the long run it is the courteous voice that can best be heard, and the careful scholar who is taken seriously.

Some years ago I heard this profound observation: “If you do what the enemy does, then you too are the enemy.” Although contemporary society seems to encourage and even reward people who employ cheap shots and underhanded methods to win their points, if we as Christ’s disciples ever stoop to that level then we will have become tools of the Enemy. We will be walking in darkness, not light.

So no matter how convinced we are of the rightness of our cause, we can never become so caught up in that cause that we fail to act in a Christlike manner. If someone lashes out at us, and we respond in kind, then we will have disobeyed Jesus' command to love our enemies and do good to them who use us spitefully. Therefore, just as we members and friends of CBE are committed to treating Scripture with care and integrity, so we must also be committed to treating all members of the faith community with care and respect, including those with whom we differ.

But what about the matter of righteous anger? Certainly the Gospels record the intensity of feeling that Jesus directed against the harm done by evil and injustice, and against those who deliberately hurt others or led them astray. Here it is important to note that in Jesus' usage, righteous anger was controlled anger; Jesus never lashed out with uncontrolled emotion. In the Gospel accounts Jesus used righteous anger sparingly, and always in a manner that insured his message could be heard.

As we frail human beings seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to discern the difference between sinful personal anger and godly righteous anger, we must always bear in mind Jesus' stern condemnation of personal anger which, in Matthew 5:21-22, he equates with murder. Furthermore, if we feel called to exert righteous anger against evil—such as against child or spousal abuse, or pornography, police brutality, or racial violence—we must be very careful to follow Jesus' example of self-control, so that for us what began as controlled righteous anger does not end up controlling us. For if we are dominated by an angry spirit, we are no longer acting under the Lordship of Christ. These are very serious matters indeed, and part of the cost of standing up for God's truth will be doing the hard work of discernment in order to determine when it is appropriate to show righteous anger, and when we should turn the other cheek.

In addition, we must remember that while Jesus did direct righteous anger against institutionalized discrimination and injustice, and against those who practiced these evils, he always left the door open for reconciliation with individuals. For example, Jesus' stern indictment of the legalists in Matthew 23 is followed by his tender words of yearning over those who rejected him.

DEVELOPING PATIENT FAITHFULNESS

As we pray for wisdom and guidance in the matter of understanding the uses (and abuses) of righteous anger, we will do well to heed the admonition found in Ecclesiastes 7:8-9: "Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; the patient in spirit are better than the proud in spirit. Do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools." In the biblical usage, of course, the fool is the person who leaves God out of the picture, whereas the wise person factors God in. So those who want God to be in charge of their

lives, and who want God to be the ultimate Director of their organization, will always want God to have the last word about any difficult question. These wise people will therefore cultivate patience.

Oswald Chambers points out: "Our Lord was never impatient... We get impatient and take men by the scruff of the neck and say: 'You must believe this and that.' You cannot make a man see moral truth by persuading his intellect."⁵ So just as with each person's initial conversion experience of being born anew into God's family, accepting moral truth must also be a matter of a complete heart change. This must be the work of the Holy Spirit, not our work. Thus counting the cost of emotional restraint will mean cultivating the patient spirit cited in Ecclesiastes. The patient person will be content to let God take care of the final outcome of any human attempts to interpret and apply his holy Word. As the Psalmist says, "From You let my vindication come" (Ps 17:2).

Therefore, when we have done our best to be true to Scripture, and when we have prayed earnestly for wisdom and guidance in dealing with those with whom we differ, then we can take heart from Gamaliel's words in Acts 5:38b-39: "If this plan or this understanding is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it." The key to the ultimate success of any venture, and therefore of CBE, is faithfulness to upholding God's Word of truth. God will always bless that.

Paul wrote Timothy, "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well" (2 Tim 2:1-2). What we have heard from Paul's inspired words in Galatians 3:26-28 and Ephesians 2:13-16 are indeed a sacred trust to teach others. Regardless of the cost, we are called to witness faithfully to our oneness in Christ, who by his own sacrifice has broken down hostile barriers between people groups. His new community is composed of the priesthood of all believers, with no racial, class or gender restrictions on the call to serve as our Savior leads. When we not only witness to these scriptural truths but also, in *our* flesh, commit to breaking down those barriers, then we join the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and who themselves counted the cost of standing up for biblical equality worth paying.

All Scripture references cited in the body of this article are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

1 The New York Times, August 15, 1998, A10.

2 Christianity Today, March 26, 1965 p 27-28.

3 Christianity Today, February 6, 1981.

4 Oswald Chambers: The Best from All His Books (Oliver Nelson:1987), 1:310.

5 *Ibid.*, 1:235.