



“It’s too bad you’re a woman.”

I grew up in a missionary family. This meant that every few years we would return to the United States to give a report to supporting churches. My parents would describe their work in the mission field, their successes, challenges, and prayer requests. One Sunday after the church service, my mother, having given a rousing presentation on our missionary work, was approached by an older gentleman. He vigorously shook her hand, thanking her for her talk. “You’re an excellent speaker—too bad you’re a woman, you’d make a fine preacher.” He nodded and walked away, leaving her in stunned silence.

The missionary field has historically been an area strongly led by women like Lottie Moon and Amy Carmichael who would ironically be prohibited from serving in that same capacity in their home churches and countries. Lines are drawn and distinctions made to separate preaching to a church congregation on a Sunday morning from evangelism done on the mission field. Should a woman be invited to speak on a Sunday morning, the language around her changes; she’s not preaching a sermon, she’s giving a “talk” or “leading a presentation,” regardless of how sermon-like it is. This may seem insignificant, but it is part of a larger culture that deemphasizes women and their gifts because of their gender. By treating women and their contributions as less authoritative, churches stifle gifted Christians and misrepresent Scripture. What harm are they causing to these women by not providing a place for them to flourish in the full extent of their calling? What harm are they causing to the congregation by not allowing them to learn from women in a meaningful way?

Churches who bar women from serving in their leadership face another difficulty: without female representation, women’s issues and needs often fall to the wayside. Unique opportunities to serve the women of the congregation or local community are easily missed because they are not on men’s radars. Worse still are situations in which women who are victims of abuse find themselves unable to seek help from among the leadership because there are no women there to hear them. In environments where women feel unsafe, particularly unsafe with men, how can they seek help from entirely male church leadership? While there are godly men in leadership positions who would readily help, many women who have experienced abuse fear they would not be believed. Indeed, we have seen many cases in which men in leadership deny support to those who seek it. What problems are created when there is not diversity among the leadership to keep things in check?

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12,

“We were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we

were all given the one spirit to drink.¹³ Even so the body is not made up of one part, but of many.¹⁴ [...] If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?¹⁷ [...] The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”²¹ [...] Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it.” (1 Cor. 12:13 – 14, 17a, 21, 27)

There is no hierarchy among the spiritual gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit to women and men alike, just as there can be no gender-based hierarchy between the women and men in the church who receive them. A healthy church needs all of its parts working together. When people are prevented from serving according to their gifts and calling, the whole church suffers.

In our last issue, we examined questions related to women in the home: who makes decisions, the division of household labor, and what Paul intended in his writings on marriage. Now we turn to the church.

We start with Neil Rees and his call for churches to more fully support the women in their congregations, providing a safe place for them to learn and grow.

Not everyone is able or even called to leave their complementarian church, and egalitarian churches often do not spring up from nothing but are the result of a long process of growth and study. In her article, Ariel Stephens shares ways that we can begin to effect change where we are.

Then we turn to Gertrude Osei Tutu who powerfully answers the question, “What is the big deal, anyway?” demonstrating that a church’s position on women is not neutral and has important implications for both the church and the local community.

As numerous investigations make clear, it is not a given that the church is a safe place for women. Claire Roster walks us through her personal story of abuse and recognizing the truths which came to shape her into a strong advocate for women despite obstacles from church leadership.

Next, Ruth Martin provides a helpful and insightful guide on how to identify churches that value women and empower them to the full extent of their callings. Finally, Mimi Haddad shows how women were created to be genuine partners with men, both in church and beyond.

I hope this issue helps you to reflect on your relationship to the church and the ways in which we can support all members of the body. With that, I hope you feel encouraged to grow in your gifts and follow your calling—even (and especially) if you’re a woman.