



TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK?

By Liz Sykes

*Editor's note: This article was
originally published in the Summer
2007 issue of Mutuality.*

Maybe you can
relate to some of
these experiences:

Friends are telling us about
a prisoner they have been
visiting who has recently
become a Christian. The latest
news is that his wife has also
accepted Christ and is just
beginning her walk with God.
Our friends tell us how they
have already encouraged
this woman to submit to her
husband now as “head of the
house.” Should we speak up
about this hierarchical view of
marriage or just let it pass?

We have just discovered that our new neighbors go to the local church. The men from this church are beginning a study of *Wild at Heart* that will meet in our neighbors' house. This study is a sticky situation, because it's a great opportunity to get to know our neighbors, but we do not support the claims about gender roles in this particular book.

When is the right time to speak out on issues of biblical equality and justice? The Bible instructs us to be careful with our words, saying less rather than more. It may seem that it would be more honoring to God if we hold our tongues—particularly when our words might hurt others or cause division.

But then again, the Bible also instructs us to stand up for the poor and oppressed and this cannot be done in silence. There must be a time and place for speaking the truth where God's desire for people is neglected or misconstrued. Sometimes our silence communicates endorsement of attitudes and actions with which we strongly disagree, and we become guilty by association.

Proponents of gender-based hierarchy claim that their beliefs are truly biblical, which suggests that Christians who have other views are mistaken or even heretical. Maybe fear of being labeled “liberal” in our theology or “worldly” in our practices keeps some of us from speaking out about equality.

On the other hand, if we are also committed to biblical accuracy and to communicating God's great plan of salvation for all people, then we should speak out boldly on issues that reflect the character and will of God. Rather than responding to negative comments about equality, we should take the initiative in conversations and positively state the full redemption available to all people through Christ's sacrifice.

When women speak out about equality, they have to deal with the implied contradiction of defending themselves rather than obeying the biblical injunction to suffer quietly when mistreated. It is so much easier to speak in defense of someone else, which is why it's crucial for men to speak up for equality. As men who support true equality begin to face criticisms for the stand they take, they enter into solidarity with women who have suffered these indignities for centuries.

A man at church neglects to hang up the welcome signs at the high school where the church meets. After a woman politely asks him to post the signs, he responds, “I won't be told to do anything by a woman.” Is this just a petty response that is best ignored, or should the man be challenged about his view of women?

Another way to encourage ourselves to speak up is to consider those who are watching and following our examples. Young people in particular will benefit from the stand we take for justice, which may come at a high price for us just now. If we can make things easier and smoother for others, we will have a sense of accomplishment even if we do not benefit directly. When we see women being belittled or mistreated we can choose to speak up about a better way for women and men to behave with each other.

We should speak out boldly on issues that reflect the character and will of God.

If we do become more outspoken on issues of women's leadership, then we need to do so in a tone free of bitterness. When we have allowed God to heal our own experiences of injustice and learned to forgive, our words will be upbuilding and full of hope for a better way of treating others. Finding other Christians who believe and practice biblical equality in all areas of life will help us to grow in our understanding of biblical truths as well as give new hope for our own relationships.

Yes, we must speak and constantly be in touch with God to know how, where, when, and most importantly—why.



Liz Sykes and her husband Trevor have been involved in Christian ministry in Perth, Western Australia, for 35 years. Liz sees biblical equality as vital to an understanding of full redemption through Christ and with her husband would love more opportunities for dialogue with confused or enquiring Christians—on a personal level or addressing congregations.