



Invitation to the Table

Cindy Degrie

Desolate. Disconsolate. Adrift.

I sat on my couch just a day after the decision to separate from my husband. I had been in ministry for almost the entire thirty years of our relationship. On this fall day in 2013, I was at a loss for what to do or what was next. I opened my computer thinking that I might be able to work on a project and soothe my emotions, but the first thing that I saw as I tried to log into my website was the header: “Cindy is the wife of her very best friend, mother of Matthew and Elisabeth, Mimi,¹ and writer . . .” I burst into tears. My children were grown, and my marriage had ended. Who was I, and what could God’s purpose be for me outside of these relationships? Could I even have a ministry apart from a man now that I was getting divorced?

There it was. I was questioning my very foundation: my purpose, identity, relationships, ministry, vocation. What I didn’t realize was that this questioning did not begin the day before, but *years* before.

Back to the Beginning

I was saved at eight years old and surrendered to a call to ministry from God. That may sound strange—not only a child hearing a call into ministry, but a little *girl*. What did that mean? Fully engaged in my complementarian church, I had no idea that a woman could be a leader, much less what God could do through me.

Fast forward to 1986: Nineteen and newly married, I didn’t see how God could use me in ministry since my husband wasn’t a pastor or a missionary. That fall, I attended a local women’s retreat. It was a pivotal moment in my story—for the first time, I heard clear, practical teaching on “biblical womanhood,” something I’d never

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encountered in any teaching in my church. Though the teaching was complementarian overall, it stirred something within me. In spite of feeling the call to study Scripture more deeply and ultimately teach, I felt boxed in. I believed that without being the wife of a preacher or a missionary, teaching Sunday school or serving as a “Titus Two” mentor were my only options for serving the church.

After that weekend, I entered a long season of solitude, studying Scripture daily and serving in my church. At twenty-eight, God moved me from running a home business into full-time ministry, though I carried the same theological expectations and patriarchal rules: not on the platform at my church, only under “authority” of male leaders, teaching women or young children, and certainly not teaching doctrine. Within those confines, I published books, spoke at conferences, hosted retreats, and podcasted for Christian wives and mothers, never realizing that the theology guiding me wasn’t rooted in Scripture. Despite striving to serve God, this faulty theology would play a big role in the desolation and despair I would come to feel.

Steps Forward

Sitting on my couch in 2013, every step before me felt impossible, but each one led me back to the path I had sensed as a girl, back to God’s design all along. The most pivotal was returning to school at age forty-nine. I’d left college after one year to support my husband’s education, even turning down a full scholarship because I believed his education mattered more than mine. Losses like that revealed the lies I believed about being a woman. I had unknowingly chained myself to a theology that caused real harm—not just to me, but to my family and those I ministered to. Now at last I recognized that I deeply needed to return to my education.

Returning To God’s Design

During the first semester of my doctoral program, I asked one of my professors how I could improve my writing and research. His answer was pivotal: I needed to share *my voice*. He emphasized that people want to know what I think and know, what I believe and agree or disagree with. Tears flooded as I flashed back over my life to all the moments I was told that I “talk too much,” was criticized for having “an opinion about everything,” or was encouraged “to be quiet and listen to the men in the room.” I realized this journey was not just about academics; it was about embracing and learning to trust my voice—a voice long silenced. School wasn’t just a path to a degree; it was an invitation to step into the woman God designed me to be.

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Another foundational moment took place a year later. One of my relatives called to ask why I thought I could preach and lead at church. My answer was simple: God called me into ministry. She asked me about 1 Corinthians 14:34–35,² commonly used to keep women silent and secure within “glass walls” and under “glass ceilings.” I struggled to answer her. As we got off the phone, an interview with a church historian, Beth Allison Barr, began to play on the YouTube stream I was listening to. In it, she discussed her book, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, and whether what was commonly taught as “biblical womanhood” was truly biblical. This birthed what later became a paper in one of my courses and eventually expanded into my doctoral dissertation.

Throughout my doctoral program, the papers I wrote became much more than assignments. They took me on a journey toward God’s design for my life—my purpose, identity, relationships, mission, ministry, and vocation. Through my research, I was forced to confront the errors I had believed from my childhood. This transformed me and led me to accept the Bible’s good news for women.

Education Leads to Transformation

The connection between education and transformation is emphasized by scholar and theologian Katharine Bushnell (1855–1946). She saw up close the damaging consequences of distorted theology and misconceptions about women, linking these ideas to historical shifts and theological presuppositions perpetuating the problems of sexism, abuse, sex slavery, subjugation, gender, and oppression. She believed that these problems would continue as long as women and men believe that a gender-based caste system is “rooted and ordained in the Bible.”³ One of her solutions was to promote the biblical education of women and elevate their influence in the

discussion of God's design for women. As a result, in 1921 she published *God's Word to Women*, a compilation of one hundred masterfully researched and developed lessons, originally developed as an early twentieth-century correspondence course. This course examined fallacies regarding womanhood (and manhood), equipped women with knowledge of the Bible, and challenged them to see "their need of knowing the Bible in its original tongues."⁴ She argued that:

The world, the church, and women are suffering sadly from woman's lack of ability to read the Word of God in its original languages. There are truths therein that speak to the deepest needs of a woman's heart, and that give light upon problems that women alone are called upon to solve. Without knowledge of the original, on the part of a sufficient number of women to influence the translation of the Bible in accordance with their perception of the meaning of these truths, these needed passages will remain uninterpreted, or misinterpreted.⁵

Bushnell is not alone. In 2022, Joy Schroeder and Marion Ann Taylor published *Voices Long Silenced*, introducing readers to the women theologians and Bible interpreters spanning the past two thousand years, documenting both those who supported women's education and work, and those who actively erased or silenced their voices. Thousands of women have diligently studied and interpreted the Bible from the early church to the present but remain forgotten, often known only to a handful of specialists. Schroeder and Taylor urge more than just learning about these women; they provide tools to resist efforts to regress on women's roles, citing Nehama Leibowitz as an example of how one woman's demonstrated competence opened doors for countless others, ensuring "there was no going back."⁶ This is a call for women not only to walk through the open doors, but also to take their seat at the table sharing their voices.



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Theologian Sandra Glahn also documents this in her ground-breaking 2023 book *Nobody's Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament*. Glahn, a Dallas Theological Seminary professor with a PhD, explored her understanding of what it means to be a woman and asked, "What was I made for?" Her research, based on recent scholarly and archaeological discoveries, clarified debated New Testament passages, challenging complementarian interpretations. Glahn connects these contributions directly to women's entry into higher education, noting that an "influx of women doing academic work has *influenced the questions* and *expanded the subject matter* in areas that directly aid studies of historical backgrounds in both Testaments."⁷

It has never been more essential for women to take their seat at the table. Katia Adams goes so far as to describe the marginalization of women as a strategy of the Enemy. She writes, "The Enemy knows that undermining women is an efficient way of incapacitating the whole body of Christ. No wonder this is such a war-ridden issue."⁸ The Enemy employs the marginalization of women as a strategic assault against the kingdom of God at a time when both the church and the culture desperately need all laborers in the field (Matt. 9:37). Many gifted and called women are excluded, leaving a significant void within the Church. Susan Hyatt echoes this concern:

The church has a divine mandate, and only when believers confront the realities all around them and truly embrace the equality inherent in the Spirit-empowered mandate will it minister in the fullness of the Spirit's power and thereby be an adequate voice of Christ's redemption of both men and women, equally, to all people everywhere.⁹

Conclusion

The discussion about what it means to be a woman is far from over. It compels a revision to the theology of womanhood and every sphere of theology it impacts. Our understanding of God and the Bible will only grow as women are invited to the table to study, ponder, ask their questions, share their insights, and continue to discover the beautiful design for women. Looking back, that desolate day on the couch marked not an end, but the powerful beginning of a journey to find my seat and voice at that theological table—to ask questions, learn shoulder to shoulder with women and men, grow and transform into the fullness of God's design, and boldly contribute to the discussion. And, to every woman who has ever questioned her place or purpose: You are invited to the table as well.

Notes

1. "Mimi" is a variation of "grandmother."
2. "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church."
3. Katharine C. Bushnell and Amy Francis, *God's Word to Women: With Fresh Historical Background of the Biblical Sources by Amy Francis* (Crowning Educational, 2016), 8.
4. Bushnell and Francis, *God's Word to Women*, 29.
5. Bushnell and Francis, *God's Word to Women*, 33.
6. Schroeder and Taylor, *Voices Long Silenced*, 279.
7. Sandra Glahn, *Nobody's Mother: Artemis of the Ephesians in Antiquity and the New Testament* (IVP Academic, 2023), 29.

8. Katia Adams, *Equal: What the Bible Says about Women, Men, and Authority* (David C. Cook, 2019), 29.
9. Susan Stubbs Hyatt, *In the Spirit We're Equal: The Spirit, The Bible, and Women—A Revival Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Press, 2022), 473.



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★ Susan Harris Howell ★

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My passion is to help others recognize the impact of gendered socialization and to empower them to create more egalitarian homes and churches.

I'd love to speak at your event!

Let's have a conversation!

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