



Phoebe arrived as a stranger in Rome, carrying a letter which included Paul's instruction on her behalf: "Welcome her in the Lord" (Rom. 16:2).¹ While the women's rights movement since the 19th century has increased equality between women and men, a truly Christian vision of gender goes well beyond mere fairness. A Christian vision of gender seeks healing and wholeness through radical mutuality as presented in Scripture: women and men welcoming one another and belonging to each other within the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12–31). If that's the case, our treatment of women in the church and in the home is a matter of Christian hospitality. When Phoebe knocks on our doors, sits in our pews, or stands in our pulpits, are we able to "welcome her *in the Lord*"?

While the word "hospitality" may conjure up images of entertaining guests and serving coffee and donuts on Sunday mornings, Christian hospitality is far more robust. It is the Spirit's power to create communities of radical, mutual belonging in Christ, until all people flourish in mutual wholeness. This hospitality has three defining features.

God Is Host

First, when Paul instructs the Romans to welcome Phoebe "in the Lord," he makes an important theological point: They are not to receive Phoebe to their own table, but to God's. The God who prepares a table before us (Ps. 23:6) seats us with Christ (Eph. 2:6), welcoming us and bringing us near when we were far off (Eph. 2:13). Male and female meet Christ together in the Eucharist now as we await our invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). Because we are guests at God's table, we don't choose the place of honor and look down on others (cf. Luke 14:7–8). Men and women welcome one another because we have been welcomed first by God. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7).

If the table belongs to God, we must not restrict it to men alone. God's daughters are invited to God's table, where we all find hospitality, healing, and wholeness together. Phoebe isn't truly received at a complementarian table where she must submit to her male hosts. "In the church, especially, it is not our table to which we welcome people; it is God's table to which we come as equals."² In the

**CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY IS THE SPIRIT'S
POWER TO CREATE COMMUNITIES OF
RADICAL, MUTUAL BELONGING IN CHRIST.**

**WHEN PAUL INSTRUCTS THE
ROMANS TO WELCOME PHOEBE
"IN THE LORD," HE MAKES AN
IMPORTANT THEOLOGICAL POINT:
THEY ARE NOT TO RECEIVE
PHOEBE TO THEIR OWN TABLE,
BUT TO GOD'S.**

church, Phoebe sits down beside men, made whole as an equal at God's table. To women told to serve and submit on the sidelines, Christian hospitality offers Christ's healing welcome.

Authority and Vulnerability

Second, Phoebe demonstrates Andy Crouch's helpful framework for human wholeness: the tension and intersection between authority as "capacity for meaningful action,"³ and vulnerability as "exposure to meaningful risk."⁴ A full human life consists of authority and vulnerability. Paul shares that Phoebe "has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well" (Rom. 16:2). Paul knew Phoebe in her *authority* as a benefactor, empowered with capacity for meaningful action to benefit the vulnerable, including Paul himself. But now, entering Rome as a stranger, Phoebe has become the vulnerable one, exposed to the meaningful risk of dependence upon strangers far from home. Paul instructs the Romans: "Help her in whatever she may require from you" (Rom. 16:2). The helper needed help, the healer needed healing, and the host needed hospitality.

When Phoebe arrives at God's table in Rome, Paul expected the Romans to welcome her wholeness—her authority *and* her vulnerability. Anything less falls short of true Christian hospitality, where every person is free to reveal their weakness without fear, and embody their strength without domination.

Seeing Jesus and Being Jesus

Finally, Christian individuals and communities are responsible for seeing Jesus in everyone we encounter, and for being Jesus toward everyone we encounter. After Phoebe's arrival in Rome, it would be fitting for them to self-assess using Esther de Waal's question: "Did we see Christ in [her]? Did [she] see Christ in us?"⁵

Christian hospitality rests upon a simple phrase from the lips of Jesus: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35). When Paul instructs the Romans to welcome Phoebe as a stranger, he instructs them to welcome her as they would welcome Christ. They are to honor the fullness of her God-given dignity. Further, the Roman Christians were called to receive Phoebe as Jesus received those who were far off, to nurture her vulnerability as Christ had compassion on the weak, and to empower her agency and authority as Jesus did. They were to *see* Jesus in her *and* to *be* Jesus toward her.

Paul instructed the Roman church to welcome Phoebe to God’s table, to value her authority and her vulnerability, and to see Jesus in her while being Jesus toward her. Christian community that offers this radical dignity provides the healing and wholeness consistent with Christlike hospitality.

Does complementarianism empower Christians today to welcome women with this Christian hospitality?

Leaving God’s Table

Complementarianism affirms male and female equality before God. Insofar as men and women are both guests at God’s table, they are equals. However, in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (RBMW), Raymond Ortlund writes: “The man was not created to help the woman, but the reverse . . . So, was Eve Adam’s equal? Yes and no. She was his spiritual equal and, unlike the animals, ‘suitable for him.’ But she was not his equal in that she was his ‘helper.’”⁶ While men and women are equal at God’s table, complementarians appear to have built a segregated table, where men sit to be served by female “helpers.” To sustain this theology, complementarian men must leave God’s table to sit at their own.

Ortlund sees all women as “helpers,” but as we have seen, Phoebe scrambles these categories. While she may

appear to follow in Eve’s footsteps as a “helper of many” (Rom. 16:2, NASB), Paul flips the script by instructing the Romans to “*help her* in whatever she may require from you” (Rom. 16:2). Phoebe proves that “helper” is not a permanent gender role for all time. It is a temporary responsibility, belonging to those who are in a place of strength. As Paul says, “we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength” (Rom. 15:1, NASB). The strong provide healing hospitality to the weak until everyone is made whole in Christ.

Male Authority and Female Vulnerability

This brings us to our second consideration: does complementarianism accept men *and* women in their strength *and* their weakness? Does complementarianism value women in their wholeness at the intersection of authority and vulnerability? In *RBMW*, John Piper defines both masculinity and femininity:

At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man’s differing relationships.

At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships.⁷

In this framework, men and women each lack the wholeness at the intersection of authority and vulnerability. Masculinity is construed as strength: responsibility, leadership, provision, and protection. Femininity is presented as vulnerability: affirmation, reception, and nurture for male strength. A man that shows weakness has stepped below “mature masculinity” toward femininity, and a woman that shows strength tries to usurp “mature masculinity.”

**CHRISTIAN INDIVIDUALS
AND COMMUNITIES ARE
RESPONSIBLE FOR SEEING
JESUS IN EVERYONE WE
ENCOUNTER, AND FOR BEING
JESUS TOWARD EVERYONE
WE ENCOUNTER.**

**WHEN WOMEN SIT
DOWN WITH MEN
AT GOD'S TABLE IN
BOTH AUTHORITY AND
VULNERABILITY, THE
SPIRIT IS AT WORK.**

This is remarkably problematic for men *and* women, as neither can flourish without both authority and vulnerability. Piper's narrow definitions constrain each of us to half of a human life—either authority *or* vulnerability. Women suffer as their authority is restricted, and men suffer as their vulnerability is restricted. Martha Nussbaum says, “The peculiar beauty of *human* excellence just is its vulnerability.”⁸ When men fear the appearance of femininity and restrict female authority, nobody finds the wholeness available to all at God's table.

Christ in Women

This brings us to our final consideration: does complementarianism enable Christians to *see* Jesus in women and to *be* Jesus toward women? When complementarian men are blind to female authority, they fail to see Jesus in women. When they refuse to give women a seat at the table, they fail to sit with Jesus in women. When they fail to perceive Christ's “human excellence” in the uniquely female vulnerability of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, they fail to perceive Jesus in women. When they do not listen to women's voices, they fail to hear Jesus in women. When they don't embrace women's gifts, given by the Spirit of God, they fail to recognize Jesus in women. When they refuse to care for women who have been wounded by abusive church leaders, they fail to love Jesus in women. When they fail to “welcome her in the Lord,” they fail to welcome Jesus in women.

Furthermore, when men are intent on being served by women, rather than serving women, they fail to embody Jesus who “came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). When they don't give women a voice, they fail to have the mind of Christ who empowered the Samaritan woman to preach the Messiah to her village (cf. John 4:28–29) and sent Mary Magdalene back to the disciples with the good news of the resurrection (cf. John 20:17–18). When they restrict female agency, they fail to be conformed to the Image of the Son who celebrated Mary's choice to learn at His feet (cf. Luke 10:38–42). When

they quench female authority, they fail to embody Christ who went to the Gentiles because of the Syrophenician woman's faith (cf. Mark 7:24–31).

Hierarchy creates an ideological wall that stands between Christian men and God's desire that they would see Jesus in women and be Jesus toward women. Because Christ is in women, the church will be an incomplete picture of Jesus as long as we fail to receive women in the Lord.

Conclusion

What does it mean to “welcome her in the Lord?” Rather than separating women into separate spheres with separate roles, the church is called to be Jesus toward women by welcoming Christ in women. When women sit down with men at God's table in both authority and vulnerability, the Spirit is at work, healing God's children and creating a community of wholeness and mutuality in Christ. This is God's hospitality at work, bringing women and men together as many parts to form one body.

Notes

1. All Scripture quotations are NRSVue unless otherwise noted.
2. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, p. 158.
3. Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk, and True Flourishing*, p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
5. Quoted in Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 173.
6. Ortlund, Male-Female Equality and Male Headship: Genesis 1-3. In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, p. 135.
7. Piper, A Vision of Biblical Complementarity: Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible. In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, p. 40–41.
8. Quoted in Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 149.



Nick O'Brien is a graduate student in Trevecca Nazarene University's Theology and Biblical Studies Master's program. He has served in worship ministry for the past fifteen years, and lives in Virginia with his wife and two sons. Nick writes on theology, spiritual

formation, and social transformation at renewedmind.substack.com.