

**WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP:**

**A NEW ERA**

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By

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The early 1970's saw an astonishing influx of women entering graduate theological studies. By 1983, 25% of the total enrolment in theological schools and seminaries were women and a 400% increase in the number of women in doctoral theological studies was realized (Johnson & Kalven, 1988). All of this has paved a way for women to hold influential roles in our churches today. Concurrently, more and more, women are being invited to the leadership table in denominations across North America. This is all exciting indeed, but remains a relatively new phenomenon and brings to light some new challenges.

Standards and rules of leadership that have been made thus far in society have been written by men and for men in leadership. Women then, in stepping into leadership roles previously held by men must adopt the male norms and attempt to fashion their leadership roles and style by their male forerunners, or begin to formulate their own unique roles and style. Standards and disciplines already established and necessary for leadership, are completely relevant and provide women as well as men with much needed insight. However, there are differences that exist that are as God has ordained it.

Women are neither altogether different from males, nor are they altogether the same (Hubbard, 1992). If women are only taught to lead through textbooks and mentored by men, how will they learn to respond as God created them to be, preserving their unique feminine perspective? All this brings us to the question, what are the unique qualities God has given them that will bring strength and blessing to congregations in their role as leader? How will women uniquely respond when confronted with challenges and what challenges will they face as different from men? Every woman is completely unique and cannot be categorized in any way, but there are some similarities outside of unique gifting and physique that remain unalterable and are well worth examining.

God has uniquely assigned and equipped women to carry and bring children into the world, whether they actually bear children or not relevant to this discussion. He has therefore given to women to know intimate matters that relate to the goings on in the womb. They have been given the unique sensitivities and equipment to notice subtleties of the wellbeing of the infant and more obvious ones like when their womb is starting to run out of room! Women carry a unique sensitivity to the individuality of the one they are carrying. In being assigned to be the one to bear the children, women have necessarily been given the responsibility of being the baby barometers, reporting all the progress to doctors and expectant fathers. She has been outfitted with unique sensitivities, strength and endurance to fulfill the function. Beyond these child bearing and caring functions, research identifies many other uniquely different feminine characteristics.

Marguerite Kraft in her volume *'Frontline Women'* presents research findings that begin to define factual differences between men and women. Women's brains for example, draw information equally from both hemispheres, mixing artistic and spatial abilities with a specialization for language, analysis and math. It is thought this may be what allows for their unique intuition and gives her an advantage in remembering and organizing. This also may explain why women can become overwhelmed more easily. Women use talk to build relationships and to develop intimacy with one another. They also use communication to show their understanding and express empathy which serves to strengthen relationships. Women excel at decoding non-verbal messages. They readily recognize and admit their weaknesses and go directly to God for help. Other unique characteristics include the fact that women have a peculiar sensitivity to note when people are feeling up and when they seem down; they seem to notice people's body language and the tone of their voice (Kraft 2003). All this is natural equipping

that God has given women. Women are often considered the relational barometers in their families. They will feel it first when something is not right between man and wife and they generally feel the separation more acutely than men do when the children leave home. This is only a sampling of the differences discovered by researchers, but suffice it to say that many of these qualities are highly valuable gifts for deposit within our churches.

God's word also bears witness to some of the uniqueness's of women as highlighted by the roles given them by God. Jesus Himself encouraged women to be discipled by Him. He invited them to accompany Him in much of His earthly sojourn and sit at His feet to absorb all they could in the time they had with the Master. Ann Ulanov in her volume *'Receiving Woman'* helps us understand more deeply. Women in Jesus' day revealed deep reservoirs of faith and strength when they allowed Holy Spirit to use them to initiate heavenly purposes. Though she could have been stoned to death, Mary's acceptance of her God-given role to bear the Messiah, ultimately brought redemption and reconciliation to the world. In this we also see how a woman was given intimate insight into God's yet unrevealed revelation. Women's innate refusal to see anyone reduced to anything less than who they are, afforded them the courage to attend and be witness to the event of Jesus as He hung on the cross. Their fierce loyalty is seen expressed in their attendance at Jesus' tomb, where they were also afforded a stunning revelation of His resurrection. Women displayed prophetic insights, independent assertion and lavish love when they wept over Jesus' feet, dried His feet with their hair and poured costly perfume over Him in the presence of critical onlookers. Women expressed lovely interest in Jesus' person when they took Him into their homes to provide care for His needs. In addition to their softness and interiority, compassion and nurture – women are power, intellect and aggression (Ulanov, 1981).

Women bring an astonishing array of perception and response to faith (Ulanov, 1981). When women step into leadership in the church setting, they will bring all these qualities to their role. Based on these attributes, it is likely we will see them naturally move to celebrate and protect the small beginnings of the Spirit within people. They will likely show keen interest in laying the groundwork for believers to discover their own unique spiritual identity. Women very likely will register spiritual growth (or lack of) in the people and will be likely to notice when people are experiencing turbulence. They will bring their strong ability to develop bonds of relationship with the people and nurture bonds among them through her unique sensitivities and her robust ability to communicate and relate. Not the least of these relationships will be the one they will have with our Heavenly Father! Women will likely take to their leadership role a lovely interest in the person of each individual. When released to lead, they will be able to mentor women to walk like women in their faith, like iron sharpening iron bringing out the best in them. Women's natural connectivity will likely help her harmonize disparate elements that will arise within the church like different personalities or polarities. All of these innate characteristics paint a spectacular picture of the many values women will offer to strength to our churches and bring glory to God. All this being said concerning women, it is also true that no one outside of Jesus Christ is or ever will be perfect. How will all these blessings and benefits fair when they come up against the realities of church life?

When C. S. Lewis was asked what (if anything) was unique about Christianity, his answer was grace!(Keyes,2006) The sin nature of people, church people included naturally challenge all areas of leadership, but in particular these challenges will highlight inherent weaknesses in them. Dick Keyes in his volume '*Seeing Through Cynicism*', tells us that the bible does not lie to those who are called to lead by leading them to believe the people they serve

are saved, therefore are going to give them no grief or difficulty as leaders. Inasmuch as the bible is a spectacular portrayal of champions of the faith with supernatural demonstrations of the power and Spirit, so is it a depiction of the fall of man and the resultant devastation that has been passed down from generation to generation. It is an essay on the opposites of tragedy and victory, strength and weakness, poor in spirit and power in the Holy Spirit. Keyes describes human beings as glorious ruins. Churches are full of people who fail, even those who fail while leading the church, but they are also people who know their need for hope and grace in their lives. They rightly find this hope and grace within the church, as God has indeed furnished it with that and much more through His word and the Holy Spirit, but in coming to the church, they necessarily come complete with all that brought them there. The word of God warns leaders to expect difficulties along with stunning victories in Matt. 10:16 where He counsels us to "Be as wise as serpents and harmless as doves." He requires us to carry necessary suspicion and hope (Keyes,2006).

Paul plants healthy suspicion in our hearts when he writes in 1Cor.13:13 about real love. You will know real love because it believes all things and hopes all things, but real love is also not naïve (Keyes,2006). Women in leadership are not to think naively about things they encounter within the setting of the church, nor are they to turn a blind eye. Women leaders should not throw out healthy suspicion or healthy hope. Hope is our only connection with the future and therefore must be preserved. It holds space for improvement (Keyes). Since we all live in that place between glory and ruin, leaders must be willing to risk by learning to love anyways – to take up one's cross and follow Jesus who experienced everything the sinful heart could throw His way, even to death on the cross, and yet miraculously, supernaturally, loved us

in it and through it and into eternity. Steven Garber asked the question, “Can one really know what the world is like and still choose to responsibly love it?” (Keyes).

Keyes goes on to tell us that if we have been disappointed, betrayed or disillusioned enough times or even once in a big way, cynicism may come naturally to us. Some of our most hurtful experiences will come through those individuals whom we have loved and cared for the most. No public leader is spared from being a target of cynical criticism, but cynicism can also be contagious and over time and leaders can begin to adopt a predisposition to seeing people and things in a negative light as well. How then might we as leaders view and respond in such a way as to remain cynicism free and preserve a pure heart in our leadership? Many champions of faith before us, though imperfect in their walk, modeled a faith that never questioned God nor entertained the deceit of the enemy that tells us to look behind positive appearances to discover a negative motivation. In encouraging us to do this, the enemy promises to protect us from disappointment, to provide us with a perception of enlightenment and power. Cynicism’s pride does not avail itself for viewing or questioning. It shifts healthy suspicion to a suspicion that holds no hope. Three heart checking strategies indicated in Keyes’ volume for self-examination help detect signs of cynicism in leaders. They are humility, individuality and charity.

Holding space open in one’s heart for healthy humility is one way leaders can stay in the game and remain healthy. Humility counters overconfident suspicion in a leader by first applying suspicion to us. What we see in others is often in ourselves as well. After all, we do not just sin, we are sinners. In humility, remembering God’s grace in our own lives would go a long way to realizing the grace that exists for others. The humility we need to remain healthy has eyes to see clearly the realities around us, but also the reality of our own sin nature. A poem whose author is unknown (some attribute it to Mother Theresa), adds to our understanding.

“People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered:  
 Forgive them anyway.  
 If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;  
 Be kind anyway.  
 If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;  
 Succeed anyway.  
 If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;  
 Be honest and frank anyway.  
 What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;  
 Build anyway.  
 If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;  
 Be happy anyway.  
 The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;  
 Do good anyway.  
 Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;  
 Give the world the best you’ve got anyway.  
 You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God’  
 It was never between you and them anyway.” (Keyes)

The second heart check strategy is to realize the tendency of cynicism to generalize about age, race, and gender. Generalizing simplifies and removes some of the tremendous complexities of life and ministry. In that way it can be a very attractive alternative to the leader, but generalizations can be hiding places for self-serving motives that oppose true faith. True faith is not self-serving and cannot be easily deconstructed. Self-serving generalizations can and should be deconstructed. Jesus said, “Beware of your piety ....”

Charity believes all things and hopes all things but is not naïve. Catching others in an act of hypocrisy should not make our day. Man looks at the outer appearance, when God looks at our hearts. Charity allows God to be God and do as He will without requiring Him to account to us for what He is doing in a person’s life (Keyes,2006).

Mother Theresa is a significant study and example of a woman who took the lead and did so with grace and strength. When asked the question do you feel loved by the people, her response indicated that she does not look to those she serves for the love needs of her own heart as very often their own challenges stand in the way. Mother Theresa looks to her Heavenly

Father to sustain her and then receives what love she can from those she serves. Her response does not come from a neglected spiritual walk with the Lord, but by maintaining a constant prayer vigil and a spirit of sacrifice (Benenate & Durepos). At the end of the day our Heavenly Father will not ask us “How did My people do in loving you?”, rather He will ask, “How did you do in loving My people?” Mother Theresa also looks for a glimpse of Christ in every person she meets whether they are dying, an invalid or an orphan, as she knows we were all made in His image (Benenate & Durepos). These views have served to sustain her and keep her vision from becoming impaired from the ongoing barrage of challenges and sin she saw on a daily basis. What is also evident from the life and ministry of Mother Theresa is that God did not give her an assignment He didn't intend to equip her for completely. He tells us in His word that His grace is sufficient. Mother Theresa is a great model and mentor for women in leadership today.

One of the greatest movements in our day is that of women being trained up and released to serve as leaders in our churches. The church shall indeed be triumphant as their gifts are realized and assimilated there. Gifts, sensibilities and strengths that women bring will be instrumental in ushering the church into a whole new era of ministry. It remains to be seen the effect in time on our churches, but God will indeed be glorified and churches undoubtedly will blossom. Women will be able to draw on their unique God-given instincts to receive strength from Him, to call on their intimate spirituality and utilize their intuitive prowess to process through challenges. By keeping close tabs on their humility, individuality and charity and by God's grace they will stand the test of time in ministry. They will run the race with endurance and finish well. There is much to look forward to in the shape of ministry to come, when women sharpen the iron in other women and the whole church of God stands up and takes its

place in society today and works collectively to respond to the great commission and proclaim the good news to all nations.

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