

A Letter to My Brothers

By Beth More (May 3rd, 2018)

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Dear Brothers in Christ,

A few years ago I told my friend, Ed Stetzer, that, whenever he hears the news that I'm on my deathbed, he's to elbow his way through my family members to interview me about what it's been like to be a female leader in the conservative Evangelical world. He responded, "Why can't we do it before then?"

"Because you know good and well what will happen," I answered. "I'll get fried like a chicken." After recent events following on the heels of a harrowing eighteen months, I've decided fried chicken doesn't sound so bad.

I have been a professing Evangelical for decades and, at least in my sliver of that world, a conservative one. I was a cradle role Southern Baptist by denomination with an interdenominational ministry. I walked the aisle to receive Christ as my Savior at 9 years old in an SBC church and exactly nine years later walked the aisle in another SBC church to surrender to a vocational calling. Being a woman called to leadership within and simultaneously beyond those walls was complicated to say the least but I worked within the system. After all, I had no personal aspirations to preach nor was it my aim to teach men. If men showed up in my class, I did not throw them out. I taught. But my unwavering passion was to teach and to serve women.

I lack adequate words for my gratitude to God for the pastors and male staff members in my local churches for six decades who have shown me such love, support, grace, respect, opportunity and often out right favor. They alongside key leaders at LifeWay and numerous brothers elsewhere have no place in a larger picture I'm about to paint for you. They have brought me joy and kept me from derailing into cynicism and chronic discouragement amid the more challenging dynamics.

As a woman leader in the conservative Evangelical world, I learned early to show constant pronounced deference – not just proper respect which I was glad to show – to male leaders and, when placed in situations to serve alongside them, to do so apologetically. I issued disclaimers ad nauseam. I wore flats instead of heels when I knew I'd be serving alongside a man of shorter stature so I wouldn't be taller than he. I've ridden elevators in hotels packed with fellow leaders who were serving at the same event and not been spoken to and, even more awkwardly, in the same vehicles where I was never acknowledged. I've been in team meetings where I was either ignored or made fun of, the latter of which I was expected to understand was all in good fun. I am a laugher. I can take jokes and make jokes. I know good fun when I'm having it and I also know when I'm being dismissed and ridiculed. I was the elephant in the room with a skirt on. I've been talked down to by male seminary students and held my tongue when I wanted to say, "Brother, I was getting up before dawn to pray and to pore over the Scriptures when you were still in your pull ups."

Some will inevitably argue that the disrespect was not over gender but over my lack of formal education but that, too, largely goes back to issues of gender. Where was a woman in my generation and denomination to get seminary training to actually teach the Scriptures? I hoped it would be an avenue for me and applied and was accepted to Southwestern Seminary in 1988. After a short time of making the trek across Houston while my kids were in school, of reading the environment and coming to the realization of what my opportunities would and would not be, I took a different route. I turned to doctrine classes and tutors, read stacks of books and did my best to learn how to use commentaries and other Bible research tools. My road was messy but it was the only reasonable avenue open to me.

Anyone out in the public eye gets pelted with criticism. It's to be expected, especially in our social media culture, and those who can't stand the heat need to get out of the kitchen. What is relevant to this discussion is that, several years ago when I got publically maligned for being a false teacher by a segment of hyper-fundamentalists based on snippets taken out of context and tied together, I inquired whether or not they'd researched any of my Bible studies to reach those conclusions over my doctrine, especially the studies in recent years. The answer was no. Why? They refused to study what a woman had taught. Meanwhile no few emails circulated calling pastors to disallow their women to do my "heretical" studies. Exhausting. God was and is and will always be faithful. He is

sovereign and all is grace. He can put us out there and pull us back as He pleases. Ours is to keep our heads down and seek Him earnestly and serve Him humbly

I have accepted these kinds of challenges for all of these years because they were simply part of it and because opposition and difficulties are norms for servants of Christ. I've accepted them because I love Jesus with my whole heart and will serve Him to the death. God has worked all the challenges for good as He promises us He will and, even amid the frustrations and turmoil, I would not trade lives with a soul on earth. Even criticism, as much as we all hate it, is used by God to bring correction, endurance and humility and to curb our deadly addictions to the approval of man.

I accepted the peculiarities accompanying female leadership in a conservative Christian world because I chose to believe that, whether or not some of the actions and attitudes seemed godly to me, they were rooted in deep convictions based on passages from 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14.

Then early October 2016 surfaced attitudes among some key Christian leaders that smacked of misogyny, objectification and astonishing disesteem of women and it spread like wildfire. It was just the beginning. I came face to face with one of the most demoralizing realizations of my adult life: Scripture was not the reason for the colossal disregard and disrespect of women among many of these men. It was only the excuse. Sin was the reason. Ungodliness.

This is where I cry foul and not for my own sake. Most of my life is behind me. I do so for sake of my gender, for the sake of our sisters in Christ and for the sake of other female leaders who will be faced with similar challenges. I do so for the sake of my brothers because Christlikeness is at stake and many of you are in positions to foster Christlikeness in your sons and in the men under your influence. The dignity with which Christ treated women in the Gospels is fiercely beautiful and it was not conditional upon their understanding their place.

About a year ago I had an opportunity to meet a theologian I'd long respected. I'd read virtually every book he'd written. I'd looked so forward to getting to share a meal with him and talk theology. The instant I met him, he looked me up and down, smiled approvingly and said, "You are better looking than _____." He didn't leave it blank. He filled it in with the name of another woman Bible teacher.

These examples may seem fairly benign in light of recent scandals of sexual abuse and assault coming to light but the attitudes are growing from the same dangerously malignant root. Many women have experienced horrific abuses within the power structures of our Christian world. Being any part of shaping misogynistic attitudes, whether or not they result in criminal behaviors, is sinful and harmful and produces terrible fruit. It also paints us continually as weak-willed women and seductresses. I think I can speak for many of us when I say we are neither interested in reducing or seducing our brothers.

The irony is that many of the men who will give consideration to my concerns do not possess a whit of the misogyny coming under the spotlight. For all the times you've spoken up on our behalf and for the compassion you've shown in response to "Me too," please know you have won our love and gratitude and respect.

John Bisagno, my pastor for almost thirty years, regularly said these words: "I have most often seen that, when the people of God are presented with the facts, they do the right thing." I was raised in ministry under his optimism and, despite many challenges, have not yet recovered from it. For this reason I write this letter with hope.

I'm asking for your increased awareness of some of the skewed attitudes many of your sisters encounter. Many churches quick to teach submission are often slow to point out that women were also among the followers of Christ (Luke 8), that the first recorded word out of His resurrected mouth was "woman" (John 20:15) and that same woman was the first evangelist. Many churches wholly devoted to teaching the household codes are slow to also point out the numerous women with whom the Apostle Paul served and for whom he possessed obvious esteem. We are fully capable of grappling with the tension the two spectrums create and we must if we're truly devoted to the whole counsel of God's Word.

Finally, I'm asking that you would simply have no tolerance for misogyny and dismissiveness toward women in your spheres of influence. I'm asking for your deliberate and clearly conveyed influence toward the imitation of

Christ in His attitude and actions toward women. I'm also asking for forgiveness both from my sisters and my brothers. My acquiescence and silence made me complicit in perpetuating an atmosphere in which a damaging relational dynamic has flourished. I want to be a good sister to both genders. Every paragraph in this letter is toward that goal.

I am grateful for the privilege to be heard. I long for the day – have asked for the day – when we can sit in roundtable discussions to consider ways we might best serve and glorify Christ as the family of God, deeply committed to the authority of the Word of God and to the imitation of Christ. I am honored to call many of you friends and deeply thankful to you for your devotion to Christ. I see Him so often in many of you.

In His great name,
Beth