

The Role of Women in Healthy Church Formation

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“Does a church owe its women English lessons for their personal growth?”

I listened as this question ignited a heated discussion among the women’s ministry team from my Central Asian church, and I realized it reflects a deeper debate about the role of the church in the development of women. But perhaps the question most worthy of consideration is not about the development of women but rather, what is the role of women in the *development of the church*?

The IMB’s *Foundations* document identifies twelve characteristics of a healthy church: evangelism, discipleship, leadership, preaching & teaching, membership, ordinances, worship, fellowship, prayer, accountability & discipline, giving, and mission.¹ For over ten years, I have been a member of a local Central Asian church in a large metropolitan city. I believe the church—not just my local church but truly the church universal—would be

¹ International Mission Board, *Foundations*, v. 4 (Richmond, VA: 2022), 67-70.

transformed if its women grasped the inestimable role they play in healthy church formation.

Women Who Fulfill Their Creation Role as They Help the Church

The role of women in the church is anchored in the unique role of women as determined by God in creation. Genesis 3 says, “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper for him as his complement’” (Gen 2:18). This helper role isn’t about subservience to men or being less-than. The word for helper, *Ezer*, is used throughout the Old Testament about God himself as he helps his people;² for example, “Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their help and shield. House of Aaron, trust in the Lord! He is their help and shield. You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!” (Ps 115:9-11). Women reflect the character of God’s powerful help to his people when they support and build up the church.³

Using *Foundations* twelve characteristics as a guide, below are twelve examples of how women can help the church based on my experience in a Central Asian congregation. From a church planting perspective, my thoughts are limited. I’ve served in only one country with one language. My context has always been Muslim and is driven by honor and shame. But I hope my reflections encourage women to actively pursue the health and growth of their local church.

² Bible Study Tools Hebrew Lexicon, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/nas/ezer-2.html>, accessed March 13, 2023.

³ Theology of Work Project, “Women Workers in the Old Testament” <https://www.theologyofwork.org/key-topics/women-and-work-in-the-old-testament/#god-created-woman-as-an-ezer-kind-of-helper-genesis-218>, accessed March 13, 2023.

Women Who Articulate the Full Message (Evangelism)

Foundations states that biblical evangelism means presenting “the full message of holiness and love of God, the sinfulness of every human being, the atoning sacrifice and victorious resurrection of Jesus for our sins, and the necessity of repentance and faith.”⁴

My little church boasts some bold women. These women aren’t afraid to be known as followers of Christ, even if it means risking their relationships, careers, or reputation. Their faith encourages and challenges me. But, I have rarely heard a local woman articulate the whole gospel clearly, even when I know they understand it. They often focus on an ambiguous love they received from Jesus while leaving out less palatable truths like sin, substitutionary sacrifice, and repentance that leads to a new life.

Most of these women are the only believers in their households.⁵ They are mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters of Muslims dead in sin. The women in our churches must be able and willing to articulate the gospel clearly if their loved ones are to understand and believe.

The church is the training ground for gospel fluency. Women who disciple women should encourage, teach, and model the complete proclamation of the gospel. Women leading new believers through baptism lessons should help them learn how to weave the full gospel in their personal testimony. The church will be blessed as Spirit-filled women articulate the full gospel.

⁴ IMB, *Foundations*, 68.

⁵ Janelle P, Global Christian Relief, “10 Specific Prayers for Christians from a Muslim background,” <https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/10-specific-prayers-muslim-background-believers/> accessed March 14, 2023.

Women Who Disciple Women in Intimate Topics (Discipleship)

A Christian disciple dies to oneself and surrenders to the authority and rule of God. There is no area of a woman's life that gets a free pass on the authority of God. As we teach women to obey Christ in all areas, we must not neglect sexual ethics. Many issues fall under this topic, but I want to highlight just one here: abortion.

The organization, Passion for Life, reports that only 3 percent of abortions worldwide happen in the United States.⁶ Within the Muslim world, there is a general agreement from one Islamic passage⁷ that a fetus receives a soul at 120 days. One part of discipleship among women is to instruct women on issues of life: the value of every human, life that begins at conception, and God's purposes in marriage, sex, and children.

Central Asia women who come to Christ might not automatically hate abortion or grieve the millions of babies lost through abortion, abortifacients, and in vitro fertilization. Most of them have never thought twice about it. This is an area of Christian living often neglected in my context. Women who teach other women how to surrender to Christ in intimate matters will help the church reflect God's care for life.

Women Who Influence Elders for Good (Leadership)

Women in the church can have a powerful influence for good on pastors and elders. As they accept their God-given role as helpers, women can make pastors better pastors. Truth be told, some women know the Bible

⁶ Passion for Life, <https://www.passionlife.org/our-work/>, accessed March 13, 2023.

⁷ Sunnah, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6594>, accessed March 13, 2023.

better than their elders—they can support those elders through theological conversations and resources for further study. Some women may have a gift of encouragement—they can affirm the good in elders and speak well of them to others. Women can pray for their elders. Women can also encourage their elders by serving joyfully in the church.

Public recognition and titles are important in my cultural context. This can be ugly when people who are not recognized leaders demand a title to validate the ways they want to serve. Women who serve in the church with a joyful, quiet strength will not only qualify themselves for leadership as deacons but also influence their elders for good.

Women Who Know the Word (Preaching & Teaching)

One way women can support biblical preaching and teaching is to know the Word themselves. A friend once likened a good Sunday sermon to a banquet that someone else prepares and serves you. What a feast! But that meal won't last a whole week. Her point was that we need daily sustenance to sustain and give health.

To build on this analogy, what if we ate only junk food throughout the week? Eating addictive junk food, like a feel-good verse taken out of context, feeds a craving for the next quick high through junk. It's not actually nourishing us. In fact, it causes harm.

We need to cultivate a palate for nourishing meals—deep Scripture study—in order to appreciate the true feast of a biblical, expository sermon. In many cultures, women are less likely to pick up and study a book because of poor literacy or a cultural lack of interest in the written word. It doesn't have to be like that. One dear sister in my church learned to read so she could study the Scripture.

As women know the Word, they are also equipped to teach other women. One of the most gifted teachers in my local church is a woman. She knows the Word, teaches other women in the church, is involved in theological writing and training, and submits to the church's biblical understanding of male eldership.

When women know the Word, they have discernment in active listening to the public preaching and teaching of the church. With the help of the Spirit, the Word will fall on ready soil and bear much fruit, and this will help the church.

Women Who Love the Body (Membership)

The young woman sat across from me in a crowded cafe and smiled warmly. "I haven't abandoned God. I just felt judged at church and needed to take a break. You should be glad—I'm much happier now," she said. Unfortunately, she was not the first to stop attending church because of hurt feelings, entitlement, or worldly enticements.

Biblical membership involves men and women who are committed to assembling together and practicing the biblical "one another" commands, even when it's hard. Many former Muslims react strongly to anything hinting at rules. They appreciate Christian love and freedom in Christ, but any sense of Christian obligation reminds them of Islam's dark demands.

A culture of reactive emotionalism also contributes to many women taking a break from attendance if they feel someone has injured or offended them. A missions scholar from Union School of Theology reports:

In answering the question regarding their reasons for leaving the church all interviewees mentioned the topic of community in some way, whether as a need for belonging (L3), a desire for caring relationships (L1 and L2), a fear of losing people close to you (L4), a need for strengthening relationships (L5), a fear of

being rejected after having been away from the church for several months (L7), a struggle with over-sensitive people leading to hurt feelings (L8).⁸

Yes, we must obey the Scripture's command to gather (Heb 10:25). Women especially should understand the heart of church membership is rooted in love, not rules—loving the church as the body of Christ and committing to work through difficulties together in the pursuit of Christian unity. Women who love the body will persevere through challenges and ultimately build up the church.

Women Who Find Healing in the Cross (Ordinances)

The gospel is not *one and done* as we watch it fade into the distance of our lives. It permeates the daily moments of our Christian experience and speaks into our relationships, jobs, hopes and dreams. The cross is for those who know they are sinners in need of grace, forgiveness, and restoration.

Over the years, I've regularly noticed Central Asian believers who abstain from the Lord's Supper. Among the women, sometimes they feel *off* spiritually, so they abstain. They're angry at someone else in the church, so they abstain. They feel hurt by someone else, so they abstain. At first, it seems commendable, like they're taking sin seriously. But I fear in many cases they miss the opportunity for healing through participation in the Lord's Supper.

Bobby Jamieson, an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC, addressed his congregation about when to abstain. He urged the members in most scenarios to repent and partake. He says the Lord's Supper is

⁸ Author name withheld for security, "A STUDY OF ATTRITION IN A MUSLIM-BACKGROUND CONGREGATION OF PROTESTANT (EVANGELICAL) BELIEVERS IN [CITY NAME]." Unpublished dissertation, Submitted to Union School of Theology / Chester University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MTh Theology in Scriptural Context. November 2016, 21.

the opportunity to “receive and experience the benefits of Christ’s death.”⁹ In taking the Lord’s Supper, believers proclaim that Christ is already theirs by faith, yet they also welcome Christ, his forgiveness, and his peace all over again.

The Lord’s Supper allows the church to renew its commitment both to Christ and to each other. Jamieson says the Lord’s Supper “draws a straight line between proclaiming the Lord’s death and loving the Lord’s people.”¹⁰ Tom Ascol, in his article *Worthy Partaking: Examining the Heart*, reminds us that the biblical warning against taking the Lord’s Supper in an unrepentant manner is serious¹¹—but the impetus is toward repentance. Every Lord’s Supper is an opportunity to repent of sin, turn to the Lord, overlook sins of others, and receive healing from the cross.

We take communion weekly at my church. What an opportunity! As women run to the cross for healing, they strengthen the unity of the church.

Women Who Testify of God’s Goodness (Worship)

The *Foundations* document folds the testimonies of God’s people into the definition of biblical worship.¹² In the Bible, James didn’t tell us anything new when he said the tongue is powerful and able to bless and curse (James 3:5-12). In my cultural context, women especially are known for their gossiping tongues. They eat each other up like a banquet, not even aware that their words are “deadly poison.”

⁹ Bobby Jamieson, “When Should I Abstain from the Lord’s Supper?” Capitol Hill Baptist, October 16, 2022, <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/sermon/when-should-i-abstain-from-the-lords-supper/> accessed March 13, 2023.

¹⁰ Jamieson, “When Should I Abstain from the Lord’s Supper?”

¹¹ Tom Ascol, “Worthy Partaking: Examining the Heart,” <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/worthy-partaking-examining-heart>, accessed March 13, 2023.

¹² IMB, *Foundations*, 63.

What a powerful shift to encounter a community of women in the church who use their words for good! This indeed is a part of acceptable worship: a sacrifice of praise and lips that acknowledge his name (Heb 12:28, 13:15). I've found that just as gossip feeds more gossip, praise feeds more praise among those with changed hearts. When we hear testimonies of praise to God, our perspective shifts. Gossip becomes distasteful. We look at life with spiritual eyes and offer our own testimonies. Many of the women in my church regularly offer this acceptable worship—they spur me on to praise and bless the whole church.

Women Who Lean In (Fellowship)

One common practice in my country is a concept best described as *taking offense*. It usually involves some sort of silent treatment or withdrawal from relationship. This withdrawal can be temporary to punish and teach a lesson, or it can be a full severance of relationship. It happens among friends, in marriages, and even through social media *friending* and *unfriending*. Darby Strickland says, “People with a strong sense of entitlement are so invested in their own felt needs that the primary reason others exist is to fulfill these demands. When others fail to do so, they penalize them.”¹³ In Central Asia, this entitlement is not unique to women, but some women perfect this offense-taking almost to a profession. It can involve emotional manipulation reflecting the curse of sin on women at its purest level.

Women who lean in, however, reflect the love of Christ who bears and forebears. Women who lean into relationships—caring for one another, using Scripture to encourage and challenge, pursuing peace, and bearing each other's burdens—these women reflect the gospel itself. And when this happens across ages, social status, and ethnicities in the context of the

¹³ Darby Strickland, “Entitlement: When Expectations go Toxic,” https://www.ccef.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Entitlement-When_Expectations_Go_Toxic_Strickland-1.pdf p. 20, accessed March 14, 2023.

church, it is a powerful testimony to a watching world. Women who lean in reflect the essence of biblical fellowship.

Women Who Pray for the Church (Prayer)

One of my roles in Central Asia is that of prayer strategist. I collaborate with a team of church planters across Central Asia who have a heart for prayer. *The vast majority of these people are women.* Deduce what you may about men and prayer (Paul does, after all, tell men to pray in 1 Tim 2:8), but the reality is that women seem to be uniquely drawn to this most intimate of spiritual disciplines.

What a gift and opportunity for women to harness this strength and use it to pray for the church: its elders, deacons, growth, sermons, holiness, and unity. Many of the women in my Central Asian church love to pray. They pray desperately because they know they need help, and they believe God will hear them and do something about it. Godly women who pray specifically for the health of the church will make an impact, for we know “the urgent request of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect” (Jas 5:16).

Women Who Warn Each Other (Accountability & Discipline)

One of the most challenging temptations in my context for believing women who come to Christ relates to love and marriage. The single women especially struggle with lack of Christian marriage prospects, pressures from Muslim family to marry, and the realities of prime childbearing years slipping away. Even the most dedicated believer can fall when she meets that one who promises to love her and respect her Christian faith.

This is just one critical area of need for women as we exhort, encourage, and warn each other. When women lean into each other’s lives, they can

often spot the warning signs of temptation and weakness before they grow into sinful decisions. Accountability never goes well, however, unless the other areas of a healthy church are in place, specifically a surrender to the authority of the Word and a healthy culture of fellowship. Women who exhort and prod each other into holiness will bless the church and help avoid many instances of church discipline.

Women Who Support the Church (Giving)

While all are called to give generously to the support of the ministry, it's interesting to note the women mentioned in the New Testament as generous benefactors. Susanna and Joanna supported Jesus from their own possessions (Luke 8:1-3). Phoebe was a *patron* of many, including Paul (Rom 16:1-2). Lydia gave out of her own wealth including the use of her own home (Acts 16:14). Yet it's not just rich women who are mentioned. It's a nobody widow who Jesus commends for her sacrificial gift: "all she had to live on" (Mark 12:44).

People in my country are suffering financially. The economy is failing, and many struggle to buy food. Even so, those who give to the church reflect an understanding that their money is not their own. Everything in their lives belongs to God, and he will bless a cheerful giver (2 Cor 9:6-7). As a *rich* American, I often feel awkward interacting with women in my church about finances. But ultimately, we can and should reflect the cheerful giver whether we are a rich Susanna or a poor widow. Women who give generously will support the growth of the gospel through the ministry of the local church.

Women Who See the Vision (Mission)

Revelation gives the ultimate vision in missions: a "multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev 7:9). I've noticed it's hard for

believers in my context to get their mind outside their own people because of the spiritual needs around them. In my church, we pray regularly for the lost—for our neighborhoods, neighbors, relatives, and even for the country as a whole—but rarely talk about the nations. Among the women in my church, they are desperate for God to save their husbands, parents, and children.

The Revelation 7 vision showcases the glory of God in a way that transforms our small worlds. It lifts us out of our limited perspective and puts us on the front row of God’s purposes and plans. When women see and get this big vision, it doesn’t replace their prayers for their families. It enhances them and gives space for these little visions to grow into God’s big plan. Women who pray and watch and wait for God to accomplish his big plan among the nations will help the church stay true to God’s purposes—and, who knows, maybe even themselves one day leave home to serve among the nations.¹⁴

Women Who Persevere

I’ve got a long way to go in fulfilling my own role as helper in the church. My own ego, agenda, and laziness creep in and distract me from a God-given role. In that conversation about English lessons I noted in the introduction of this article, I expressed indignation cloaked in a devotion to the biblical understanding of church. But the reality of my self-righteous indignation had nothing to do with biblical purity—I just plain don’t like teaching English. Maybe this is a way I can lean into relationships and support the body. So, with a renewed mind, I’m coming back to the conversation and praying the Lord will show me what it truly means to help the church, for the glory of God and the good of his body. I hope you do the same.

¹⁴ Shanee S, “Coworkers: A Biblical Study on Women in Missions,” 2019, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ih-V5tQQVJ4VLoRbKHe6Y65BHG5gW2Ik/view>, accessed March 14, 2023.

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