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Charlotte Vaughan

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SUBMITTING TO EQUALITY: ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY

CHARLOTTE VAUGHAN
COYLE



A few weeks before my daughter left for Pepperdine University, we sprawled on my bed, giggling our way through some of my old diaries. I scarcely recognized the twelve-year-old girl who wrote those words; she now seems like a total stranger. Silly, superficial, and nauseatingly boy-crazy, this Southern-bred, naively arrogant Church of Christ preacher's daughter embarrasses me, astounds me, intrigues me. Tucked away amid the ooohs and aahs and the ups and downs of young love, I found this little aside:

October 3, 1962 Pretty late.
Just finished h.work. There's
been a lot of hubbub about
whether or not a certain Negro
would get in Ole' Miss College.
Gov. went against Federal law
twice. Negro got in. 2 people
were killed & several wounded.
Walter Shirrah went around the
earth 6 times. Wow.

How did that girl feel about the two people who were killed on a cool autumn day on a Southern college campus? What did she think about a "Negro" stepping out of his "proper place" and insisting on admission to a white bastion like Ole Miss? I don't remember. But I suspect she disapproved.

I doubt that she heard the governor's speech on television just a few weeks before her journal entry, but I know she also would have disapproved of his insistence that

There is no case in history where the Caucasian race has survived social integration. We will not drink from the cup of genocide. ... [Mississippians] will never submit to the moral degradation, to the shame, and to the ruin which have faced all others who lacked the courage to defend their beliefs. No school in Mississippi will be integrated

while I am your governor.
(Governor Ross Barnett in a
televised speech, September 13,
1962, in Jackson)

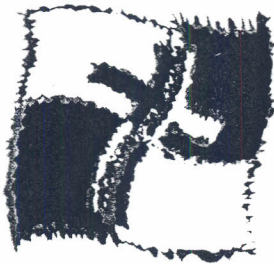
Such blatant, explicit racism shocked and disgusted that tenderhearted girl. We were Christians, after all, and Christians should be nice. My family always treated black people politely, kindly. We were never guilty of such unabashed hatred.

But what about the biblical mandate to "love your neighbor as yourself"? Looking back, I can see clearly that we loved our black neighbors as *below* ourselves, as *less than* ourselves, as worthy of our benevolence but not worthy of our friendship. Our racism was benevolent.

That is what a perspective of hierarchy can do. Hierarchy says, "There is a natural up and down order to the world." Hierarchy says, "A place for everyone and everyone

in her place.” Hierarchy can even insist that those who are lower on the hierarchical tower deserve care and kindness and an appropriate chance. But hierarchy can never say that all people are equal.

Even though it tries to.



Hierarchy can insist that those who are lower on the hierarchical tower deserve care and kindness and an appropriate chance. But hierarchy can never say that all people are equal.

“Separate but equal.” That made sense to me. I accepted the explanation that people could be separate *in function*, yet equal *in value*. I accepted the argument that God loved all people equally while assigning various people to different spheres of participation within the home and church. But—years later—when I could no longer ignore the radical call of God in my life, when I realized that the identical rationale defined what I could or could not do as a woman, who I could or could not be in God’s church, I was forced to question the conventional wisdom and go back to the Bible in order to understand God’s perfect plan for *all* human beings. So when this Church of Christ preacher’s daughter broke away from the neat cultural expectations of her world and boldly stepped out of her “proper place” and into ordained ministry, I demonstrated my growing belief that equal value *demand*s equal participation, and I

serendipitously discovered the relationship between my own God-ordained place as a woman and the equitable place God designed and desires for all human beings.

My own journey began when I confronted the conventional wisdom

of the church of my childhood and wrestled with the biblical texts myself. Beginning in the Garden, I tried to discern what the Bible says about God’s original intention for humans, what God created humans to be before the Fall. The truth I discovered—the truth that changed my life—is that God created all humans to be equal both *in value* and *in function*.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them... (Gen 1:26–28 NRSV)

The Genesis narrative describes two equal beings, fresh from the hand of the Creator, assigned to share equally in the task of caring for the earth. Even the second story, from Genesis chapter 2, relates poetically how God took the original human (not a male) and made two humans, male and female; how God “split the adam,” so to speak, so they truly were “bone of bone and flesh of flesh,” as the astonished male proclaimed when he met his new partner. The two were blessed with the gift of procreation and the gift of meaningful work.

In the beginning, in a perfect world, God assigned equal work to the humans in equal measure. The text does not support any suggestion that the male had more responsibility than the female. Whichever story one reads, the message is clear: God expected each person, male and female, to function equally as partners, to carry his and her equal share of the responsibility for the rest of God’s creation.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:6 NRSV)

The story goes on, however, and the humans sinned—sinned, most basically, against God, but they also sinned against each other. It was in that sin that God’s original design was perverted, that the humans became twisted and deceived. The woman and the man rejected equal

partnership, rejected God's design, and damaged forever the relationship with their Creator and with each other. Their sin begat natural consequences that issued like thorns from their decisions.

The curse, then, was not God's pronouncement of "plan B"; rather, the curse was God's *prophecy* of the inevitable consequences of their choices. God's intended equality was twisted into hierarchy so that the male, who was given dominion with the woman, would now take dominion over the woman. God's created equality was perverted into hierarchy so that the female, who was equally responsible for leadership within the created world, would now be "desiring" the leadership of a husband.

God did not change the original design; *we* did.

This theological perspective of the Genesis narratives changed my life. When I recognized how God had created equality in the Garden, when I realized that God re-created equality in the Cross, I had no choice but to submit myself to God's design of equality. When I realized that partnership was part of the blessing and hierarchy was part of the curse, I could do no less than reject hierarchy for what it truly is—our own cultural accommodation to our sinful humanity.

Throughout Scripture, stories of how God's people have related to each other demonstrate the challenge and the tension of living in a fallen world, seeing life through damaged lenses, and struggling to make sense of their relationships with God and with each other. Sometimes the biblical authors break free from the gravitational pull of hierarchy and

demonstrate amazing insights and radical egalitarian behaviors.

The Ephesian writer speaks specifically about the hostility between Jews and Gentiles, but his description of God's reconciliation provides brilliant support for a theology of equality that applies to men and women, to slaves and free, to "brown and yellow, black and white."

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Eph 2:13–16 NRSV)

The cross. The great equalizer. Its beam reaches to heaven, reminding us of God's amazing reconciliation that brings us back into community with God. Its cross-timber reminds us that all humanity stands equally condemned and equally redeemed. We are one in our fallenness; we are one in our salvation. In the cross, hierarchy is abolished and we are re-created into one new humanity.

For the most part, however, God's people—redeemed though we are—still struggle with twisted lenses that keep us from seeing the unity that God has created. God's people still grapple with the powerful

deceptions of culture that subtly, but consistently, re-create hostility instead of peace. As I write these words, hundreds of thousands of Promise Keepers are fresh from their emotional experiences in Washington, D.C. One of their most basic promises is to foster racial reconciliation; ironically, a movement that hopes to make peace between the races has cultivated division between the sexes. Noble efforts to call men back to responsibility within the home are, unfortunately, perpetuating our ancient cultural accommodation to hierarchy by suggesting that the man is more responsible to care for the family than the woman is. Even though Promise Keepers' theology of headship preaches a servant leadership, their good intentions continue to create discomfort and caution among many thoughtful Christians because of the historical abuse of hierarchy. As this impressive movement continues to stress the importance of keeping promises, I pray that they will continue to uncover the *functional truths* of God's promise in Jesus to "create in himself one new humanity . . . , thus making peace."

I was a middle-aged adult before I corrected my vision to see the world through the lens of equality. Hierarchy had taken such a hold on my perspective, I could not see its bankrupt deceptions. I truly believed I was an equal member of my church community, even though I could not function equally. I fully believed I was in my proper place ("separate but equal"), because God had designed it that way. Now I see how hierarchy deceived me. Hierarchy was comfortable. Hierarchy seemed normal, and the consequent sexism

within the church seemed appropriate, approved by God. The sexism I have encountered in my own personal experience has been mostly benevolent, patronizing, almost imperceptible. But benevolent sexism is still sexism. And benevolent racism is still racism.

Now that I have chosen the lens of equality, I can see the subtle ways that the world—and the church—have kept people of different genders in their separate places. Now that I wear the lenses of equality, I can begin to identify the countless ways that the world—and the church—continue to keep people of different races in their separate places. We can continue to make the tired argument that all people enjoy equal value in

God's church, but until the church allows, encourages, even *insists upon* equal participation in the functional life of the body for *everyone*, we will continue to perpetuate a cultural accommodation to hierarchy. In order to be faithful to God's original design, the church must continue to fight for racial and gender equality—an equality that is functional and practical and visible.

The challenge for God's church has always been to avoid being "conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2 NRSV). Breaking away from the conforming molds of hierarchy and

being transformed by making new our minds in order to embrace God's will for equality for all people may seem awkward at first. We are humans, after all, with a deep bias for hierarchy. But we are also "new creations," the body of Christ, so that discerning and following God's will for equality is the good and acceptable and perfect path for those of us who belong to Christ.

CHARLOTTE VAUGHAN COYLE, an ordained minister for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is Associate Minister for The First Christian Church of Garland, Texas. She lives in the Dallas area with her husband and son. Two of her children attend Pepperdine University.