I remember the conversation like it was yesterday. I was two weeks into my new job working at an evangelical organization. Up to this point, my background lay in the secular marketplace—I was a journalist working at a newspaper and holding a number of additional retail jobs. I had come to faith only three years earlier and was thrilled about the new opportunity.

The conversation began like this: “Laurie, you are a very smart person and we are very excited you are here as we believe you have much to contribute.” *Great!* I thought.

“But I have to warn you that you have four things working against you—you’re young, you’re blond, you’re short, and your female.”

*What kind of pep talk was this*? I remember thinking.

“These are things that won’t necessarily play in your favor,” he continued.

Being new at the job and relatively new to the evangelical world, I didn’t know how to respond. His comments, which at the time made me writhe with anger, were, in hindsight, his way of preparing me for some realities which lay ahead.

By the end of that first year, I had indeed experienced what I can only call a “secondary” status in my new world. I quickly learned that if I was to excel in my position, I would need to take on a humble and quiet leadership that always elevated others and minimized my own successes and skills. Subtly, I began to believe that the way God had made me—young, blond (well, that might have been slightly manufactured), short, and female—was a flaw I had to endure.

As I finished up graduate school, I was struck with this reality as well when a question by a male student stopped me in my tracks: “Where I come from, women don’t take graduate Bible courses. Why would you want to do that if you know you won’t be a pastor?”

His offhand comment had projected me into one of the three categories that some believe women are best suited for—women’s ministries, children’s ministries, or prayer ministries. Each of these are excellent and necessary, but by no means the heartbeat of every evangelical female!

**Out of the World**

During these first years I felt like a fish out of water. I had grown up with a father who always told me I could do anything. From an early age I had my sights set on being a neurosurgeon. It was only when I became sick that I was forced to redirect my path. There was no “can’t” in my vocabulary except for the little voice of self-doubt that I later came to understand to be the voice of the enemy.

As a journalist, being a female was a non-issue. It was simply part of the 50/50 ratio (rather 60/40 ratio) of females to males in this world.

*What was it about this evangelical bubble I entered?* I thought on a number of occasions in those early years. And blunt honesty here: Rarely does a week go by when I don’t still entertain that question, especially as I’ve gotten more heavily involved in the problem of sexual violence in our churches and the all-too-common poor leadership in churches which sometimes seems unwilling or unable to respond to these systemic problems.

Sure, none of us should ever believe that the world has it all together when it comes to the treatment of women, but there is something deeply distressing and deeply wounding when women are given an (often unspoken) level of secondary status in our churches and Christian institutions. This, I have discovered, is most common in that parenthetical point above—often unspoken.

**Most Men Aren’t Bad**

When I became a Christian, I remember both my local church pastor and another area pastor discipling me one on one. I remember having long discussions about the Book of Ruth, the Book of Revelation, and the Book of Job about theological truths beyond our understanding. These conversations are ones I treasure.

There was no sense (at least from what I picked up on) that they shouldn’t be pastoring me one on one. I was a new Christian and full of questions.

As I look back, I realize that what both men possessed was a guttural integrity (I’ll define that *guttural* part later) that was unwavering. Their mission was focused on the Kingdom of God and being shepherds of the sheepfold. They had no time for segregation or mischief or Tom foolery. They kept their eyes on Christ and the mission he had given them—to guide his sheep.

All too frequently there can be a sense when things are going poorly (and very few in the evangelical church can say they haven’t been lately) that all is lost. We develop a black and white thinking that clouds our vision of reality.

When I first experienced the secondary status of being a short, young, blond female in my evangelical bubble, I was in denial. Then anger….on went various stages of the grief process. I could have easily thrown my hands in the air and abandoned ship, heading back for the previous life outside of this odd world I had entered.

But again God placed a few men of leadership in my life who continued to remind me that I was smart and capable and appreciated. Not once did I tell any of them about what I was experiencing as a female leader. Looking back, I didn’t need to, for God had given each of them that very same *guttural integrity* I had found in my first pastors—a leadership that bypassed any notion that being a female was in any way a concern or a distraction. They all—in different ways—poured into me the affirmations of God in a picture that reflected the True Shepherd’s care of his sheepfold.

**Living Out of the World**

When I was growing up, my father would remind me of a simple truth over and over. “Laurie,” he would say, “Laurie, there is one thing in this world that all people want. And that is to be noticed. Everyone wants to be noticed.” He’d then let a few seconds pass before saying something profound which forced me to consider how I “notice” people.

Over the years, I have seen this to be gospel truth. We all want to be seen and noticed for who we are. None of us wants to be discredited or sidelined before we are even given a chance.

This is perhaps why I have come to love 2 Corinthians 3:18 so much so that I did my major paper on it in graduate school: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplatethe Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” Or 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

It’s this idea we must hold dear: Rather than seeing what is on the outside, we are to, like God, look at the heart—what’s inside.

This is what is unique and continues to compel me towards Christ—that he has made every single person different and unique. No two are the same. Seven billion people on the earth today—and he loves and knows each; indeed, he has given each a unique set of skills and gifts, hopes and dreams. A Christian faith that doesn’t compel us to go deeper like Christ does—male or female—is no faith at all. It is a pseudo faith whitewashed to appear godly but lacking the one thing mandate God has given to all of us—love.

**What does this have to do with being a female in the church today?**

Everything.

As long as women are exposed to a secondary status in our evangelical subcultures, it is impossible for all to experience the sense of true love we are all meant to have towards another. The prejudice I experienced in those early days in the evangelical world were disheartening. They impacted my leadership and my faith in real ways.

This may sound negative.

But it’s not.

In fact, that secondary status that I have felt in countless ways over the years has made the face of Christ clearer to me. It’s made his mission in my life more focused and his leadership style more attainable. Because as I’ve drawn near to him with the hard questions like *What is it about this evangelical bubble I entered?* I’ve heard his answers—some of which have shocked me; others which have inspired me.

Let me share just a few key observations gleaned over the past 14 years.

**First, a true leader in Christ’s church is marked by servanthood.** All four Gospels scream of the servant heart of Jesus. As cornerstone and head, his model and his alone is the only one to look towards. Any leadership style built on a foundation of ego and self-promotion and grandeur is antithetical to the call of the shepherds of the church.

Only a long and thoughtful assessment of the difficult questions such as “What do I get up for in the morning?” “What is my ultimate goal?” and “What do I want my legacy to be?” can get us to the realization if we have missed the mark of true Christian leadership. Any air of ego and self-aggrandizement will lead Christian leaders to distort and reject a true understanding of what is means to be a true shepherd of Christ’s church.

The discussion on complementarianism vs. egalitarianism and any other guise of conversation meant to answer the questions to the bigger problem of the secondary status of women in many evangelical circles will go nowhere. The answer begins with the hearts and priorities of our leaders—not in a theological molding on one side or the other that continues to be built on the broken and distorted hearts of too many in leadership today.

**Second, Christ is in all.** “God is cleansing his church.” This is a statement I have heard countless times over the past few years since allegations and truth about sexual impropriety have emerged among top evangelical leaders. Yes, he is. But this is not new. God has always been in the business of cleansing his church—whether on a public or a private scale.

This statement has led many to despair; they focus on the cleansing part. Instead, we must focus on the “God” part. God hasn’t thrown his proverbial hands up in despair; rather, he is on his mission that we see in Hebrews 12:

…but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (vv. 10b-11)

Our hearts ache for the sin we see exposed in our churches today. And yet our hearts ought to rejoice that God loves us so that he sees fit to do a good Spring cleaning. His eye is on the sparrow…those who are hurt, vulnerable, victimized, and silenced in the church. And he wants them to be cared for properly. He deeply desires that the shepherds in his church lead as Christ calls them to lead.

**Third, *guttural integrity* is a really, really important characteristic for all those who follow Christ, especially those in leadership positions.** This may seem like an odd phrase. Why not, after all, just say “integrity.” The simplest reason is because guttural integrity—the kind that is marked by not just actions—but also voiced *aloud*—is the kind that closely follows the heart of God. It’s a life summed up this way: *I have committed to lead like Jesus in such a way that every part of my life reflects that.*

Although Scripture speaks profoundly to the power of words, too often our lives don’t. Women in the church today need and ought to be validated for their unique set of gifts and talents. Many women make better leaders than men. Many women make better counselors than men. Many women make better confidants than men.

Yet too many women aren’t validated for their gifts and talents. True integrity in church leadership is validation and honor spoken aloud in the presence of others. Perhaps this looks like acknowledgement of a strong endurance during a time of trial or an efficient work style during a time when everything seems urgent.

Perhaps this is an identification of a latent gift that is going unused or a word of apology when the leader overlooked a women’s leadership abilities. Guttural integrity is finally seeing each person in the church as worthy of equal admiration and praise.

**Finally, women, don’t despair, for your work in the gospel in not overlooked.** The remarkable thing about God (among other things) is that even when it seems no one else notices you and the work you are doing, God’s eye is on you. Hebrews 6:10 reads, “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.” Even when we perceive ourselves to be in a secondary status here on earth, we can be certain that is never the case from God’s perspective.

Although I may no longer be “young” anymore, I still carry with me my three other “flaws.” I’ll never be male, or tall, and likely will stay blond for a while. But what I’ve discovered is that humble service and leadership isn’t necessarily bad. It’s a leadership style that models our Savior, who sacrificially gave everything for us.

As we work heartily as unto the Lord, regardless of if others acknowledge it or not, God will never forget the love we show to others. He knows that he made each and every one of us perfectly unique, with gifts and talents that are matchless in this world. We need never rely on the praise of others to continue faithfully to minister on his behalf to a world in need.

But indeed, we are past time when a renewed theology of servant leadership, integrity, and the equality of all is a bedrock of our faith. We are past time when we are to recapture a belief that in the dark moments of the church, as leader after leader falls, God is still cleansing and renewing in order to restore.

As a woman who has felt disappointment more than once in the church, my hope nevertheless remains strong. God is in our midst and working to mold his church into one that indeed serves as a light into the world. That’s a place worth staying.