

The Tension of Grace

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Usually I live in Mexico, but I've been back in Canada for the past year. Here, I am part of a group that sponsors a Syrian refugee family. It's difficult to communicate across the linguistic barriers, but our families' shared goal of helping integrate the Syrian family into Canadian life has created a strong bond between us, especially between the Syrian mother and me. We trust each other. So when I see my friend rush to put on a headscarf and long jacket at the sound of my husband's knock on the door, or watch from the sidelines when everyone else is enjoying a dip in the pool, I want to blurt out, "You don't have to do that! It's not necessary! There is such freedom in the world, if only you knew!" But I don't say this, because I would accomplish nothing and might jeopardize our friendship. We each have our own conscience and view on modesty. Many of us who serve cross-culturally live with this tension—the tension between wanting to share our faith and the freedom it provides, and not wanting to impose our cultural norms. This is tough. When we minister to people who are different from us, our gut reaction is often to judge them on our terms. How do we share our faith with others without expecting them to somehow become just like us? This is the tension of grace.

In the last few weeks, I have traveled in and out of an assortment of cultures, each with its own perspective on the roles of men and women, husbands and wives. I went from attending a church in Canada where women are not allowed to be elders or to preach regularly, to leading in another church in Mexico, where I, as a woman, am an elder and preach regularly. There, I counseled a newly married Hispanic woman to submit silently to her husband's preferences on how to rear the three children in their blended household, while in my own marriage I am a partner in such decisions. In Mexico, where my husband and I work as missionaries, there are village cultures that expect wives to work in the home and rarely step foot outside alone. Just down the road from these villages are other village cultures where the women are out on their own all the time, selling their wares or visiting friends in other places. We minister among churches that don't allow women to lead as well as among churches that call women as their pastors. Our own family culture rarely matches up with the diverse family cultures of the people with whom we minister, and this is true

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even among Christians. Even those within the body of Christ don't often agree on gender roles, whether in the church or in marriage, and much less often on details such as apparel. How should we minister to one another in the midst of such differences?

I know of a group of well-meaning American short-term workers who visited a Mexican indigenous village and were appalled that the women had no say in how many children they bore for their husbands. Birth control was not an option, because it was viewed as a way that a woman could defy and even cheat on her husband. This group of Americans called an impromptu gathering with the women and taught them about birth control. When the men heard about this, they were furious and accused the visitors of inciting rebellion and undermining village unity and male authority. Although the birth control talk would have been appropriate in some other place and time, this particular setting was not suitable for this particular message. It was interpreted simply as outsiders inciting anarchy. The team had targeted a village custom without first exploring the marriage relationships out of which this custom had grown.

The Bible itself contains varying views on gender roles. Abraham is torn between a jealous wife and a taunting concubine, and his grandson has four women. Paul requires Timothy to appoint elders who are “husbands of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2). His very use of this phrase presupposes male elders in those first churches, but Paul casually mentions female leaders in his lists and greetings. He insists that “in Christ there is no Jew *or* Gentile, slave *or* free, *male and female*” (to paraphrase Galatians 3:28), undermining the norms of his day without directly contravening them. This is a long way from the law that allowed a man to pay a fine for spoiling a slave girl's virginity. The Bible, over the time of its writing, shows a progression in how people have treated the most vulnerable in their societies. It concludes with Jesus's life and teaching, which places infinite worth on all. Jesus's presence in a culture plants seed for change, overturning its injustices. Early Christians were known for sheltering the helpless of their world. And when the church is most faithful, it continues to plant seeds of good news that brings about change, providing for the marginalized and bringing freedom and hope to people around the world.

I saw this power of the gospel when it was shared for the first time with a Mexican Mixtec village. Some fifty villagers came to Christ in response to the testimony of one of their own family members, a migrant worker. Without any prompting from outsiders, they as a group decided that some of their practices had to stop—drunkenness and the beating of women that often resulted, and, as they called it in their language, the “selling of their daughters,” when money was paid for arranged marriages. They came to believe this practice was de-

meaning for the girls. I saw then how the gospel carries within itself the seed for righting every injustice. The members of this Mixtec village said that the women and girls were in some ways poorly treated by their menfolk, and the new Christ-followers took the initiative to bring about change.

Of course, as an outsider, I could have called their attention to the many wrongs I believed they had missed. I might have tried to persuade them to have marriages that looked more like my own. On the other hand, I'm sure that they, if they had come from the critical, analytical, dominant race that I had, could just as easily have pointed out to me my relational flaws and perhaps the way my race treats so dismissively the young or the old and has so much trouble sheltering the homeless. The Holy Spirit pricks the conscience of different people in different ways so that they hurry to right different wrongs; as Christians, if we are not careful, we may be too quick to judge what others have (from our perspective) obviously neglected, without trusting God's Spirit or waiting to see in what direction God is already moving them.

The tension of grace is found also in my current home in Canada, where conversations about gender include concerns for transgender individuals and communities. Anabaptists, located across multiple spectrums, accuse those who oppose their convictions of betraying Christ in some fundamental way. Each side is reluctant to acknowledge that the others are trying to be faithful. Despite the evidence of irreconcilable differences, I believe the Holy Spirit can guide all sides into truth. But it would take honesty and listening from Christians, and an abundance of grace. Meanwhile we live with the tension.

It might sound as if all that Christians have to do is present the gospel, wait for the Spirit to work, and expect all will be well. But of course this isn't true. Missionaries have much to give to people of other cultures, but only once we have listened, understood our new neighbors' cries of pain, and recognized their steps of obedience toward God. Our goal should not be to pit genders against one another, demanding rights and privileges, but to facilitate reconciliation by modeling mutual respect and submission in our relationships. Christians come to bring peace, dignity, and goodness to the relationships they encounter, not to break them. People responding to Jesus should be known for loving one another more, not less.

So what do we have to offer when we see people in the cultures around us in pain because of gender roles? What if religious leaders in a culture caution men that, like Eve, women tend to lead their husbands into sin? Or what if these leaders teach women that their religious duty is to tolerate infidelity and abuse? Or that women bring such abuse on themselves so that the welts on their bodies are their own fault? I have heard these things in the places I have lived. We

are no longer talking about clothing choices but about demeaning attitudes toward people. Then what do we do beyond listening, modeling, teaching, and sharing experience?

Jesus didn't overturn the authority structures of his day, which included government, tradition, church, and family. But he did value care of others above these lesser laws. Jesus did not hesitate to contravene these lesser laws for the sake of love and compassion. So the scriptures say he sent his preachers to "men of peace" and his freshly healed leper to a temple priest for their approval. He and Paul both began their preaching under synagogue authority. From this, we learn that whenever we can obey local law, we should. Notice Peter's defense when he disobeyed the priests: "Should we listen to you, or to God?" (paraphrase of Acts 4:19). So even though the women in some cultures may have more freedoms, we should not carry these freedoms to other cultures as weapons. We should, instead, seek out the ways in which women are valued and build on that which we find.

One application of this principle is to honor the head of household when we arrive with a new gospel, not skirting around his or her back to speak to his or her family without permission. In many cultures the saying is true: "If you bring a child to Christ, you've reached a child. If you bring a father to Christ, you've reached a family." How would any of us as parents react if we found missionaries of another faith targeting our children? In many cultures, women are considered vulnerable, deserving of protection, like children. To respect family authority in the act of sharing the good news is to recognize that God deals with us not just individually but also as families and bonded groups. After all, God is a unity of persons under authority.

But power corrupts, and when power structures just won't relent and people are in pain, there are no easy answers. There are no clear rules. Responses must be provided case-by-case. Sometimes intervention is necessary; sometimes rescue. When a woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus and men raised stones to kill her, Jesus pricked the men's consciences. He made them feel the woman's guilt as their own. He set aside their law to kill, without defying it. "If any of you..." He aligned himself with the woman and traced her pain in the sand. "Neither do I condemn you. Go in peace." He changed the relationship of the steely eyed men to the woman that day, making them one with the woman, instead of leaving the woman as an "other" to be condemned (John 8:1-11). I doubt they ever forgot that change.

We need to ask ourselves what type of person might feel condemned, surrounded by attackers, in our own circles? Among Mexican Evangelicals, it might be unwed mothers. Among Canadian Anabaptists, it might be trans-

gender individuals. We need to ask God in situations such as these to prick our consciences, as he did those of the threatening crowds around that adulterous woman. Like Jesus, we need to invoke the higher law of love, which can change our relationships with those whom we have condemned and release pardoned men and women to go in peace.

We face tension whenever we engage people who are different from us. We make mistakes. We judge and are judged wrongly. But the more we engage the other—the more we learn to love them—the more God teaches us how to walk through the tension into grace. We dare not shun these relationships, because there is no other way to learn.