

**ALLIES
IN
MINISTRY**

*How Men Can Support
Women in God's Mission*

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STARTING POSITION

THE IDIOM GOES LIKE THIS: “It’s not how you start; it’s how you finish.”¹ Often, people use this statement to laud those who escape humble beginnings and manage to do something extraordinary with their life. It’s an idea that is meant to give comfort, in the sense that anyone can overcome their past and author a brighter future.

Certainly, how or where a person finishes matters a great deal. For instance, in the context of the allyship pathway, the finished product is a man who has made a habit of thoughtfully expressing allyship in his ministry context. This man is an asset in the church’s quest to become what it has always been meant to become: namely, a community in which women and men flourish together in equal and mutual partnership in ministry. As I assert in this entire book, men’s developing into more effective allies to women is a crucial pursuit for today’s church. The finished product is certainly important.²

And yet it’s also true that where you start matters. Understanding a person’s circumstances and context can provide guidance for

¹Sometimes this maxim is phrased slightly differently: “It’s not where you start; it’s where you finish.” Either way, the core message is the same. Determining the origin of this idiom has proved elusive, but it certainly makes appearances in a range of contexts. For instance, it is widely attributed to business guru Zig Ziglar, and the phrase features in a song from the 1973 musical *Seesaw*.

²Using the term “finished product” in the context of the allyship pathway is in some ways problematic for me, in the sense that male allies will forever be works in progress to some extent. Still, as step seven will attest, there is a threshold where a man comes to more fully identify as an ally to the women in his ministry context. In this way, these men do become finished allyship products.

effectively helping them change and develop. Though writing from the perspective of organizational change instead of individual change, in his seminal book *Good to Great* Jim Collins notes that organizations that become great pay careful attention to their present reality, understanding their starting position. He writes, “When . . . you start with an honest and diligent effort to determine the truth of the situation, the right decisions often become self-evident. Not always, of course, but often. And even if all decisions do not become self-evident, one thing is certain: You absolutely cannot make a series of good decisions without first confronting the brutal facts.”³ In other words, it’s reckless to skip a thorough and unflinching assessment as you’re getting started with something.

When it comes to the allyship pathway, knowing where a would-be male ally is starting from is crucial to helping them launch well. Indeed, how a potential male ally starts might dictate how well, or even whether, they finish.

STARTING POSITION CONTINUUM

The first step in the male allyship pathway focuses on a man’s starting position relative to both an acknowledgment of male privilege and the idea of identifying as a male ally to women in ministry. My research has demonstrated that, as would-be male allies embark on their allyship journey, they are on a continuum that lays out a range of starting positions (fig. 1.1).

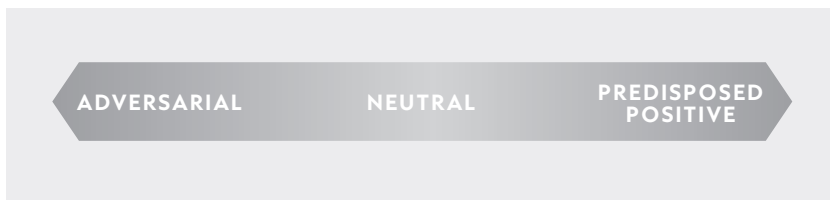


Figure 1.1. Male allyship starting position continuum

³Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don't* (HarperCollins, 2001), 70.

On one end of the continuum, men are adversarial toward the notions of male privilege and male allyship. For men in this starting position, there may well be an initial hostility that will need to be engaged and eventually overcome if they are going to progress along the allyship pathway.

In the middle of the continuum, men are neutral to the possibility of becoming an ally to women in ministry and to the idea of male privilege. While the neutral position was the least frequent starting position in my research on male allyship, there certainly are men who are unaware of any sort of gendered disparities in the culture and in the church, or they are intentionally neutral, not wanting to take a position for a variety of reasons.

On the other end of the continuum, men are predisposed positive to the idea of male allyship. Men on this end of the spectrum have been formed in such a way that they are open to the reality of male privilege and sensitive to the struggles that women in their networks can face in the ministry context. Generally speaking, for men in this category, the invitation to walk the allyship pathway will be an easy sell. My hunch is that many (but not all!) of the men who have picked up this book would place themselves toward the predisposed positive end of the starting-position continuum.

These are the three general starting positions, but the beauty of a continuum is that it allows for individualized nuance. For instance, men may be on the adversarial side of the continuum but not all the way out at the far edge, making them more suspicious than anything else. Similarly, men on the other side of the continuum but short of the far edge may be cautiously open instead of predisposed positive.

In this chapter I will zoom in on each of the three basic starting positions, creating a generic profile of what men in each category might have experienced and discussing why knowing a man's starting position matters as he embarks on the male allyship pathway.

One of the reflection questions at the end of this chapter will invite readers to place themselves and/or the men in their lives on the starting-position continuum, but it might also be worth doing so now as a way to enter more fully into the content of the chapter.

ADVERSARIAL STARTING POSITION

Keith is very much an ally to women in his ministry context today. As a marriage and family therapist, Keith regularly has opportunities to express allyship for women, and he is diligent and intentional about taking advantage of those opportunities. In thinking about the allyship pathway, Keith is solidly at step six and is starting to dip his toes into step seven.

That reality is a marvel considering where Keith was when he started his allyship journey. Keith grew up in an environment in which women were manifestly subservient to men, both in the home and at church. Keith's home life was marked by a strict hierarchy, with his father at the very top. When I interviewed him, Keith said, "Our lives were pretty much fully about what my father wanted to happen in any given moment." Indeed, Keith's father ruled the family home, making each of the significant (and most of the less significant) decisions. As far as Keith knew growing up, this was how it was supposed to be.

Not coincidentally, Keith's family went to a church that also embraced a hierarchical reading of the male-female relationship in the Scriptures. Reflecting on his experience growing up in that church, Keith can't remember ever seeing a woman in the pulpit, as the thought that women could be pastors was anathema in his church. Because of his experience at home and in his church, Keith's first steps on the allyship pathway began from an adversarial posture. When I think about where Keith has ended up, it really does feel like a miracle.

Keith's story illustrates a few markers of a man who might enter the allyship pathway from an adversarial position, and he wasn't alone. Drawing from my research study, there are three common experiences that men on the adversarial side of the starting position continuum might have had, including a complementarian theological background, a belief in a rigid system of gender roles, and suspicion about the idea of male privilege.

Complementarian theological conviction. First, men on this side of the continuum have often been raised in a complementarian theological milieu. That is, like Keith, their default theological setting is that the Bible's message is male leadership or headship, both in the church and in the home.

In general, there are two primary ways of thinking about the Bible's message regarding women in ministry leadership, the egalitarian and complementarian positions.⁴ The egalitarian theological position argues for equality between women and men both in the home and in the church, noting,

The sexual differences that exist between men and women do not justify granting men unique and perpetual prerogatives of leadership and authority that are not shared by women. Biblical equality, therefore, denies that there is any created or otherwise God-ordained hierarchy *based solely on* sexual difference. Egalitarianism recognizes patterns of authority in the family, church, and society—it is not anarchistic—but rejects the notion that any office, ministry, or

⁴These labels define the two primary interpretative camps, but there is room for nuance as well. As with allyship-pathway starting positions, perhaps the best way to think about a theological position on women in leadership is using a continuum. In addition, theological labels such as these often need a freshening up, as the old label accrues baggage or becomes in some way insufficient. For instance, in her book *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women*, Lucy Peppiatt prefers the terms *hierarchicalist* and *mutualist* instead of *complementarian* and *egalitarian*. For now, I am using the two most commonly used terms in an effort to connect to the larger theological conversation about gender partnership in the Bible. See Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (InterVarsity Press, 2019).

opportunity should be denied anyone on the grounds of being male or female.⁵

In support of this nonhierarchical vision for leadership, egalitarians claim,

Women and men are made equally in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27), equally fallen (Rom 3:23), equally redeemable through Christ's life, death, and resurrection (Jn 3:16), equally participants in the new-covenant community (Gal 3:28), equally heirs of God in Christ (1 Pet 3:7), and equally able to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit for life and ministry (Acts 2:17).⁶

Egalitarians see mutuality and equality as God's design for women and men, both at home and in the church.

In contrast, the complementarian theological position argues for God-given, benevolent hierarchy.

In the home when a husband leads like Christ and a wife responds like the bride of Christ, there is a harmony and mutuality that is more beautiful and more satisfying than any pattern of marriage created by man. Biblical headship for the husband is the divine calling to take primary responsibility for Christlike, servant-leadership, protection and provision in the home. Biblical submission for the wife is the divine calling to honor and affirm her husband's leadership and help carry it through according to her gifts. This is the way of joy.⁷

The complementarian vision for a hierarchical pattern in the marriage context extends into the church as well.

⁵Ronald W. Pierce and Cynthia Long Westfall, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural and Practical Perspectives*, 3rd ed. (IVP Academic, 2021), 2.

⁶Pierce and Westfall, *Discovering Biblical Equality*, 2. For more information on egalitarianism, see the Christians for Biblical Equality website at cbeinternational.org.

⁷John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, 2nd ed. (Crossway Books, 2006), 52-53.

Paul speaks of authority and submission in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. . . . “Authority” refers to the divine calling of spiritual, gifted men to take primary responsibility as elders for Christlike, servant-leadership and teaching in the church. And “submission” refers to the divine calling of the rest of the church, both men and women, to honor and affirm the leadership and teaching of the elders and to be equipped by them for the hundreds and hundreds of various ministries available to men and women in the service of Christ.⁸

To be sure, churches and other faith communities tend to hold their theological positions on this topic differently. Some choose a less overt approach, and new attenders may go for a long time before they understand where the church is at theologically on this topic. But other churches see this as a front-burner discipleship issue and tend to be more proactive about articulating their position and its practical ramifications. Men who have been formed in a complementarian environment in which the issue is top of mind will likely start out further to the adversarial edge of the continuum, and often these men will initially find the allyship pathway to be irrelevant or even heretical.

One challenge for the project of developing more men into more effective allies to women in ministry is that the majority of Christian denominations and churches would be considered complementarian to at least some degree. Recent data from the National Congregations Study suggest that just 35.4 percent of evangelicals and 7.9 percent of Catholics believe that a woman can be a religious leader. These numbers stand in contrast to other faith traditions, including Black Protestants, 57.8 percent of whom believe women can be religious leaders, and white liberals or moderates, of whom

⁸Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 52-53. For more information on complementarianism, see the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood website at cbmw.org.

93.1 percent endorse the leadership of women.⁹ These egalitarian traditions are largely outliers. Too often, the prevailing theological wind continues to blow from the complementarian direction.

With all of this in mind, it is clear that as faith communities go about inviting men to consider embarking on a journey of becoming allies to women in ministry, they will need to discern ways to engage theologically with men like Keith, who have been steeped in complementarian ways of thinking and acting.¹⁰

Belief in a rigid system of gender roles. In alignment with a complementarian theological understanding, men on the adversarial edge of the starting position continuum often tend to have in mind a definitive picture of gender roles. As demonstrated in Keith's story above, for many complementarian men, male leadership is considered God's design for humanity and is thus the preferred option in any setting, at home and in the church.

For example, one complementarian scholar writes, "Alongside our insistence on women's legitimate participation in the life of the church, we need to remind ourselves again that the apostolic teaching insists on men being the primary leaders in the church (just as in marriage) and therefore excludes women from that role."¹¹ Practically speaking, this way of thinking tends to preclude

⁹"Can Women be Religious Leaders?—Belief Statistics Topic," Association of Religion Data Archives, www.thearda.com/us-religion/statistics/beliefs?qsid=4. For context, according to a 2023 Gallup survey, "About three in four Americans said they identify with a specific religious faith. By far the largest proportion, 68%, identify with a Christian religion, including 33% who are Protestant, 22% Catholic and 13% who identify with another Christian religion or simply as a 'Christian.'" "How Religious Are Americans?," Gallup, March 29, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/358364/religious-americans.aspx>.

¹⁰In my view, egalitarianism presents the best possible launching pad for effective male allyship, but it is worth considering the possibility of allyship within the complementarian construct. I do think it is possible for complementarian men to function as allies to women, but the scope will be dramatically different. Because complementarianism proposes a hierarchical system with a rigid set of gender roles, complementarian allies will be able to support women only in ministry roles that adhere to their system.

¹¹George W. Knight III, "The Family and the Church: How Should Biblical Manhood and Womanhood Work Out in Practice?," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, 2nd ed. (Crossway Books, 2006), 352.

women from such church roles as preaching, teaching, pastoring, church planting, and providing executive leadership.

Obviously, a man who is convinced that male leadership should be normative in all situations is going to have a difficult time venturing onto an allyship pathway that has the ultimate goal of gender equality in the church. Looking ahead to step two on the allyship pathway, careful thought will need to be given regarding the potential disruptive encounters that will challenge men who hold this belief.

Suspicion regarding the reality of male privilege. Men on the adversarial side of the starting position continuum can also tend to be hesitant or even hostile to the idea that men are privileged in the culture and in the church. The idea of some sort of systematized advantage in favor of men does not compute for men in this position. More to the point, to the extent that they see privilege, they see it as God-ordained.

Because of this posture, men on the adversarial side of the starting position continuum can really struggle to be open to the idea that systemic advantage based on gender is a reality. I recall a meeting with a complementarian friend once in which he strongly disputed the concept of privilege in general, stating, “Some people just work harder and maximize their potential.”¹²

Privilege, and male privilege in particular, is a real thing. The stats quoted above about the lower number of churches that affirm the full ministry of women demonstrate that for most churchgoing women, the playing field does not tilt in their favor. And while there are significant conversations worth having about just how privilege

¹²As I write, there is a national debate on the topic of privilege. Many on the political left argue that marginalized people face systemic injustices that must be overcome if everyone is going to be afforded equal opportunities to advance in society. By contrast, like my complementarian friend, many on the political right argue against systemic realities, instead advocating for a pure meritocracy. Men who are suspicious about the notion of privilege, then, can point to both theological and sociocultural influences.

is at work in a given situation, the fact remains that it is. For men who are unable or unwilling to engage that reality, getting started on the allyship pathway will certainly be more challenging.

Taken together, a complementarian theological position, a rigid view of gender roles with a default male leadership setting, and a built-in suspicion of the concept of male privilege present a significant adversarial trifecta. Faith communities will need to carefully and courageously engage these impediments to men entering onto the male-allyship pathway.

NEUTRAL STARTING POSITION

As I conducted my research interviews for this study, it became evident that some men are fundamentally neutral toward the idea of male privilege as well as to the possibility of embracing the identity of an ally to women in ministry. Men who are positioned toward the middle of the starting position continuum might come from a non-Christian background, might be intentionally ambivalent, and/or might be immature or unformed in their faith.

Non-Christian background. In one case, I interviewed a male ally who became a Jesus-follower later in his life. When I asked him about his starting position, he said, “Growing up an atheist, I always thought women were just as gifted as men, but it wasn’t until I became Christian that I realized the great chasm between male and female leadership opportunities.”¹³ This surprising revelation meant this man had to play catch up to understand the different ways of interpreting the Bible on this topic.

Particularly if they have not grown up in proximity to a Christian setting, men may be legitimately unaware that this is even a

¹³This man’s experience demonstrates the reality that too often secular America is ahead of the church when it comes to empowering women into service. As the Genesis 1 text so clearly articulates, women exercising leadership in full and equal partnership alongside men was God’s idea in the first place. One day, I hope the church will become a leader in this area.

conversation in the church. Therefore, men in this position will require some sort of introduction to this theological debate. While the good news is that a man in this starting position is functionally a blank slate, the hard news is that it's unclear where neutral men will land once they wade into the theological waters of the conversation. Some neutral men will find themselves able and willing to venture onto the allyship pathway, but others will opt to skip the pathway altogether.

Intentionally ambivalent. Other men at this neutral starting position are there on purpose. There can be several reasons for this. First, men in this starting position may be committed to principled neutrality when it comes to theological debates. Perhaps they have had negative experiences with past theological debates that cause them to choose not to engage in subsequent conversations, or maybe they are committed to peacemaking and harmony. In either case, men in this category choose neutrality on principle.

Second, they may see the issue of women in leadership as a secondary or tertiary issue and therefore unworthy of focused reflection leading to a defined theological position. To be sure, salvation comes through Christ alone (1 Timothy 2:5), and so a person's theological position on women in leadership won't dictate whether they go to heaven. And yet labeling the topic of women in leadership a "secondary issue" can have the impact of dismissing it as an important conversation for the church to be having when the conversation is in fact crucial because it determines whether women are going to be able to use their gifts in pursuit of God's mission. Because of this, I've started referring to this topic as a 1.5 issue.¹⁴

¹⁴While a person's theology of women in ministry leadership is not a salvation-determining issue, it's important in a way that other theological conversations are not. For instance, a person's convictions about whether God created the world in seven days or in seven longer time periods has little impact on their day-in, day-out experience. In contrast, the issue of women in leadership has a significant impact on a person's lived experience, and that is of course especially true for women. For more on this dynamic, see chapter six.

Third, men may purposefully choose a neutral starting position because they are conflict avoidant. This choice is understandable; after all, as I've noted, the theological debate about the role of women in leadership can indeed become contentious. When conflict is a part of the experience, some men simply choose to withdraw from the conversation, embracing a neutral starting position.

Immature/unformed in faith. The goal of Christian discipleship is maturity, but sometimes men in the neutral starting position are simply not in a place where they are able to engage in a robust theological conversation that results in taking a position on the topic of women in leadership. That is, their maturity level is insufficient to permit them to have an articulated position, and they remain unformed.

I have spent my career in the college ministry context, and I can testify that many students fit in this category. It is not uncommon to have a new student say something along the lines of, "I know people and churches have different opinions on what the Bible says about women in leadership, but I'm more focused on my personal relationship with Jesus and sharing my faith with those around me." To be sure, focusing on these things is important, but at some point, people will need to wade into deeper faith discussions, including this one.

Again, my research suggests that a genuinely neutral starting position is the rarest of the three general positions, but some men certainly start their allyship journey from this position. As such, it is worth consideration as faith communities, including churches, faith-based nonprofits, and other institutions such as Christian colleges, discern ways to invite men onto the allyship pathway.

PREDISPOSED POSITIVE STARTING POSITION

I could tell from the first moment he opened his mouth that Jae was ready to set foot on the allyship pipeline. Though he had grown

up in a more muted complementarian church setting, Jae quickly exhibited an openness to an egalitarian reading of the Scriptures. It was almost as if he were craving a different way of understanding the texts on this topic.

Beyond that, Jae demonstrated a deep well of empathy when confronted with the difficulties women can face in ministry. At one point, a woman on Jae's leadership team was struggling with a man in her Bible study who did not respond well to her leadership. Jae came alongside this woman, listening to her pain and gently offering guidance and advice. Around that time, I had the opportunity to talk with this woman about Jae's leadership, and she expressed profound gratitude for his pastoral care. He wasn't yet on the allyship pathway, but Jae was already beginning to use some allyship skills.¹⁵

Like Jae, some men are predisposed positive to becoming an ally to women in their ministry contexts. My research suggests that men in this position tend to have the following four experiences or attributes.

Egalitarian theological conviction. In the same way that a complementarian theological background can dictate the experience of men on the adversarial side of the continuum, an egalitarian theological background often marks the experience of men on the predisposed positive side of the continuum. Men with this experience have a theology that supports the full leadership of women both in the church and at home. For these men, leadership assignments are allocated by gifting and calling, not moderated by a person's gender.

In one interview, I sat with a man who had been raised in an egalitarian environment. His home church had women and men serving as copastors, and his parents sought to embody equal partnership in how they structured their marriage and family life. His

¹⁵Chapter four will lay out seven different allyship behaviors. In this vignette, Jae is using both the scholar and confidant allyship roles.

posture in approaching the allyship pathway was definitively predisposed positive, so much so that he wasn't even aware there was an alternative way of reading the Bible with regard to gender and leadership. As such, he was a good candidate for an invitation onto the allyship pathway.

Normalized experience with the leadership of women. The next chapter will explore experiences serving under the leadership of women in the context of a disruptive encounter with the notion of male privilege, but for many men on the predisposed positive side of the starting position continuum, there is a preexisting familiarity with the leadership of women in their context. Simply put, for these men, women in leadership has been a normal part of their life experience, and this makes them predisposed positive to the ideas of male privilege and male allyship. One man captured this idea perfectly in his interview, saying, “At one point, my church had three pastors, and two of them were women. And my youth director during my middle school years was also a woman. So, I was open to allyship because I was comfortable with women influencing and leading alongside men.”

This experience of having seen women exercise leadership is a key part of my own allyship journey. Growing up, women carried a significant leadership role in my family's spirituality. For example, I have a clear memory of trying and largely failing to share my faith with my college roommates, only to find out my grandmother had recently led her pool cleaner to faith! Further, in the church setting, I saw models of women in leadership throughout my formational years. One of my earliest mentors was a woman named Suzy, and my church had women serving on the pastoral staff. The net result of experiencing women in leadership both at home and at church was to normalize it in my young heart and mind—of course women could serve where they were gifted and called! Because of this, the invitation to pursue male allyship was easy for me to receive.

Allyship in other contexts. A man who is predisposed positive toward becoming an ally to women in ministry might have already exhibited his allyship credentials in other contexts. In fact, these men might be familiar with the various allyship roles outlined in chapter four; they just haven't used them yet in the context of gender.

I have an online friend who serves as a pastor in another part of the country. He is a white male pastor, and I know him to be a staunch ally for our sisters and brothers of color. He does an excellent job of exposing racial injustice, often posting articles along with an exhortation for his followers to act in order to end racial oppression.¹⁶ Not long ago, after watching him continue to express his allyship around issues of race and ethnicity, I mentioned that he might also extend his locus of concern to gender dynamics as well. Since our brief interaction, he has done so, often combining the issues of race and gender in his allyship posts.

This friend is going to always view race and ethnicity as his primary area of concern. His background makes him a motivated ally in this domain, and he feels called by God to express his allyship in this arena. But his willingness and ability to include gender in his advocacy makes the point that an ally in one context can become an able ally in another context. So, men who consistently and effectively function as allies in other contexts might well be predisposed positive to the notion of male allyship on behalf of women.

Notably high concern for the marginalization of women. Our working definition for male allyship in this book includes a word about empathy, and one marker of men on the predisposed-positive side of the starting-position continuum might well be an abnormally high amount of empathy for women being

¹⁶This would be a good example of the amplifier allyship role. For more on this and other allyship roles, see chapter four.

marginalized in their contexts. Looking back at Jae's story, it is clear his heart was full of concern for the struggles of the female leaders in his context. And that empathetic posture caused him to be open to the notion of functioning as an ally.

I have met other men who likewise exhibit a relatively high degree of awareness about the problems women can face in their leadership contexts. In his interview, one man cited statistics about the lack of women in upper management in his firm. In another, a man told me about how the experience of watching his sisters face gendered challenges in the educational workplace had been difficult for him. When men demonstrate, either in word or action, a notably high concern for the marginalization of women, it may well be an indicator they are predisposed positive to the notion of male allyship.

These four markers—an egalitarian theological background, familiarity with the leadership of women, allyship in other contexts, and an especially high degree of concern for the marginalization of women—may serve as indicators that a man is predisposed positive to both the notion of male privilege and the possibility of entering onto the allyship pathway. Notice the word *may* in the prior sentence. Not all men who start on the predisposed positive side of the starting position will end up becoming effective allies to women. Instead, it will take purposeful and developmental work over the remaining six steps. That said, these are important metrics faith communities can look for to identify men who may be ready to start their allyship journey.

WHY THE STARTING POSITION MATTERS

Ascertaining a would-be ally's starting position is important, primarily because it can help calibrate the type or magnitude of disruptive encounter needed in step two. Chapter two will explore the concept of disruptive encounters with the notion of male privilege in detail; for now, I will establish the link between a man's starting

position and what manner of disruptive encounter might be useful. Consider three different scenarios.

First, for men who are in the adversarial position specifically because of a developed complementarian theological conviction, perhaps a theologically oriented disruptive encounter would be useful. For instance, a confrontation with an egalitarian reading of the Scriptures could be wise. Alternatively, sometimes theologically minded men might actually need a disruptive encounter that is more experiential in nature, such as personally experiencing the effective leadership of a woman in some capacity.

Second, for men who are near the center of the continuum, it is possible that a less confrontational disruptive encounter might be beneficial. Perhaps someone in the neutral starting position would be helped by easing into the conversation. That could particularly be true if they are new to this topic, either because they are immature and unformed in their faith, or they have come to faith more recently.

Finally, having clarity that a man is starting from the predisposed positive side of the starting-position continuum could mean that even a simple meeting with a mentor could function as a disruptive encounter. Perhaps a man in this position won't need much at all in order to progress to the next step in the pathway. A simple word of encouragement or invitation might prove to be sufficient.

CAN MEN CHANGE?

Whatever a man's starting position, entering onto the allyship pathway will require some sort of transformation. In the case of men who are predisposed positive to becoming an ally to women in ministry, it should be easier to embrace the allyship road, but for men in the other two categories, it could be more challenging.

After all, change is hard. Plenty of writers have attested to this reality, including James Bryan Smith in his book *The Good and Beautiful God*. Smith begins the book by describing how hard it is

to effect inner change, writing, “A lot of people want to change . . . but many of them do not believe it is possible. After years of trying and failing, they lead a Christian life of quiet desperation, longing for change and yet certain it will never happen. So, they sit in their pews each week, sighing silently, resigned to their fate.”¹⁷ This morose assessment speaks to the incumbent challenge as the church considers the task of developing men from adversarial or even neutral starting positions into male allies. Change often comes slowly and sometimes not at all.

On the other hand, change is certainly possible. Smith himself came to realize he could change for the better, ultimately concluding, “The problem is not that we do not want to change, nor is the problem that we are not trying to change. The problem is that we are not training. We have never been taught a reliable pattern of transformation.”¹⁸ For Smith, such a pattern includes adopting the narratives of Jesus, participating in community, and engaging in soul-training exercises, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Change can happen. Keith’s story from earlier in the chapter reminds us of this. Men from adversarial starting positions can indeed become male allies. It just takes careful, intentional, and sustained work.

Perhaps the most compelling example of a man becoming an ally from an adversarial starting position comes from the pages of our New Testament. As noted in the introduction, a careful look at the life and leadership of the apostle Paul portrays a man who was an ally to women. Again, Romans 16 provides a list of women Paul considered to be full partners in gospel work as well as women who were worthy of his allyship.

¹⁷James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 19.

¹⁸Smith, *Good and Beautiful God*, 19.

¹⁹Each of these components from Smith’s rubric makes an appearance in the book, most prominently in the form of the male-allyship cohort discussed in chapter seven.

In the same way that Paul was an ally to women in practice, he was likewise an ally to women in his writing. Despite texts that temporarily restrict the ministry of women for specific reasons, Paul consistently trumpets the equal partnership of women and men in his letters. This is perhaps no greater example of this than Paul's grand egalitarian statement in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." As one commentator notes, "The new vertical relationship with God results in a new horizontal relationship with one another. All racial, economic and gender barriers and all other inequalities are removed in Christ. The equality and unity of all in Christ are not an addition, a tangent or an optional application of the gospel. They are part of the essence of the gospel."²⁰

So, in word and in deed, Paul is one of the most prominent male allies in the New Testament. But he didn't start out that way. In fact, Paul started his ministry life as the opposite of a male ally; indeed, Paul began from an adversarial starting position.

We know from several places in the New Testament that Paul was part of the ruling religious establishment. In fact, in Acts 23:6 he identifies himself as "a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees." In Paul's day, antipathy toward women was baked into the experience of being a religious leader. As Kenneth Bailey notes, "With the passage of time and the rise of the rabbinic movement, the position of women by New Testament times was, on all levels, inferior to men."²¹

²⁰G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 112.

²¹Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008), 190. Bailey describes some of the writings of a Jewish aristocratic scholar named Ben Sirach. Included in Ben Sirach's writings are prohibitions against trusting women, deeding property to women, and letting women support men. To top it off, Ben Sirach writes, "Women are responsible for sin coming into the world and their spite is unbearable." This is the misogynistic milieu that Paul would have been developed in.

Sadly, we don't have a clear picture of what exactly happened to change Paul's view of women. To use the language of step two of the allyship pathway, we are in the dark about Paul's disruptive encounter. But we can surmise a couple of things, given what we know about Paul's larger conversion to faith.

First, Paul became earnest about following Jesus. Perhaps this is because of the miraculous nature of Paul's conversion story from Acts 9, in which Jesus features prominently. In fact, it is Jesus' voice that calls Paul into a process that will radically reorient his life and leadership. In the introduction to this book I have already offered a brief overview of Jesus' allyship credentials, and a deeper dive on Jesus as an ally awaits in chapter four. Because he was an ardent follower of Jesus, we can presume that Paul would become intentional about following Jesus' allyship example.

Second, Paul joined and eventually helped to shape a faith community marked by the leadership of women. While Paul was a significant force in advocating for women in the first church, he wasn't the only one. For example, when Peter stands up to deliver his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, he is careful to cite Joel 2:28-39, where the prophet Joel quotes God, saying, "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days I will pour out my spirit." Peter's public affirmation of the prophetic ministry of women reminds us that Paul wasn't the only budding male ally in the first church; instead, Paul was a part of a company of male allies. For more reflection on Peter's journey as a male ally, see chapter two.

Though we are sadly short on details, the apostle Paul's transformation should give us hope. People can change. People do change. More to the point, men starting from an adversarial side of the

starting position continuum can indeed progress and one day become habitual allies to women in ministry.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Over the years around the holidays, I've become intrigued by the story of Joseph. Mary rightly deserves the lion's share of the Christmas spotlight, but Joseph's story merits our reflection as well, particularly viewed through the lens of male allyship and the starting-position continuum.

To be sure, Joseph, as a good Jewish male, would have been initially hostile to the notion of male privilege. His first-century world clearly tilted in his favor, and he would have seen that reality as God-ordained. But then his fiancée gets pregnant, claiming her pregnancy is the result of a miracle foretold by an angel.

At this point in the narrative, it would have been altogether appropriate for Joseph to call time out on the whole relationship. The Old Testament law contains a clear prohibition on adultery. That is made plain in the seventh commandment, and then Leviticus 20 clarifies that the punishment for adultery is death. Viewed from a cultural perspective, Joseph would be expected to haul Mary before the elders in order to press charges.

But he opts not to do that. Perhaps Joseph's starting position would actually have been somewhere between neutral and the adversarial edge. At first, Joseph decides to quietly divorce Mary; Matthew 1:19 notes that he does not want to "expose her to public disgrace." Then the miraculous happens, and Joseph comes face-to-face with an angel. The theophany constitutes his disruptive encounter, and Joseph clearly receives the intended message. His resolve is cemented, his posture is changed, and from then on Joseph becomes Mary's biggest ally.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- For men reading this, where would you place yourself on the starting-position continuum as you think about your journey on the allyship pathway? For women, how would you describe the starting position of the men around you in your life and ministry?
- Wherever your starting position, what are some of the key influences that have formed you?
- What might be needed for you to move forward from whatever starting position you are at?

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