

Calling the question of gender justice "the defining issue facing the church in the 21st century," Floyd E. Rose compares the restrictions placed on women in the Churches of Christ to similar restrictions placed on African-Americans in the past. Rose, who was denied admission at Abilene Christian College in the early 1960s on the basis of his race, knows what he is talking about.

He is the minister of the Church of Christ at Pine Hill, which he calls "a church without walls--without denominational, cultural, class, race or gender walls; a congregation of Christians where women participate in all of the ministries of the church, without restrictions or reservations."

The following is excerpted from his book, An Idea Whose Time Has Come (Columbus, GA: Brentwood Christian Press, 2002). The book can be ordered (\$10.00 + 2.00 shipping & handling) from Save our Children, Inc., 4001 Foxborough Blvd., Valdosta, Georgia 31602, Phone: 229/241-0705.

Behold, I Show You a Parable

Dr. Richard Barclay, Minister of the Cashmere Gardens Church of Christ in Houston, Texas, says, "the word parable means to throw alongside." In a parable we throw that which is familiar alongside that which is unfamiliar so that the unfamiliar can become familiar. And the sense of a parable is, if you can see and understand that, you ought to be able to see and understand this.

Now the parable is this: Once upon a time there was a church whose membership was composed of whites and blacks. 80% of the members were black and 20% of them were white. All of the positions of authority were held by the whites. The minister, elders, and the deacons were all white. Those in positions of perceived power--the decision makers--were all white; the song leaders, the announcers and the ushers were white. Although blacks gave 85% of the money, they could not count it, deposit it, or account for it. They were required to put it in, but they had no input as to what happened to what they had put in. One of the black members was an accountant at the local bank, and was responsible for millions of dollars, but at the white-controlled church, he could not count the \$2,000 average offering that was raised on Sunday mornings, or the \$450 which was received at the evening worship service.

The black members could pass the collection basket and communion trays to their right and left, and when necessary, over the back of the seat, and might be permitted to pass it across the aisle, but they were not allowed to give it to the first person. The black members could receive the Lord's Supper, but could never administer it. Only whites could do that. Despite the black members being more educated and far better readers, they sat embarrassed while the white members, however illiterate they were, stumbled through the Bible to read the scriptures. For only the white members were allowed to read.

The black members would place announcements in the bulletin, and in fact, a black member laid out and printed the bulletin, but blacks could not publicly read from the bulletin they printed; only the white members could do that.

However fervently they prayed at home, the black members could not offer the public prayer unless there were no white members present. The presence of even one white member would disqualify all of the black members from praying in the public worship and in Bible study.

The black members could, and more often than the white members, did publicly confess their sins. They told of how they mistreated their families, lied or stole, cheated on their wives or husbands. They were allowed to tell about how bad they had been to God, but they could not tell how good God had been to them. Only the white members could do that. In fact, at any time they chose, the white members were free to open the Bible, read a scripture and speak about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit or simply testify about an experience they may have had the previous week with God, but none of the black members were permitted to testify in the public worship.

The black members were allowed to teach, but only teach other blacks. And if a white member entered the room, the black member had to stop teaching, surrender his right to do so to the white member; however unqualified or unprepared the white member was.

The black members could not usher, even though the job merely called for the seating of the people as they entered the sanctuary, and giving them a bulletin and an envelope. Only whites could do that--that is, unless there was a dead body in the church building. Ushering at a funeral was not considered a position of "authority", and so blacks could stand at the door, direct people to their seats, pass out programs and fans, if necessary. The black members were allowed to read the scripture, quote a poem, sing a solo and even stand in the pulpit that was usually reserved for whites only, and speak in honor of the dead body lying before them, but they were never allowed to speak in public worship in honor of the risen Christ. Only the white members could do that.

In a church where 80% of the members were black and 20% were white the black members could buy the bread and grape juice, the symbols of the Lord's broken body and shed blood. They could (before any of the white members entered the building) prepare the communion table, and might even stand silently beside it and whisper a prayer of thanksgiving, but they could not serve it to the members who would assemble later for worship--only the white members could administer the Lord's Supper. The black members could clean up the table and prepare it for the next time, of course.

The black members could work and earn money with which to buy food. They could prepare, cook and serve it in the fellowship hall of the church, and even tell the white members when it was time for them to eat it, and in most instances, tell them where to sit; but the black members could not give thanks for the food they bought, prepared, cooked and served; only the white members were allowed to offer the prayer of thanksgiving. If they gathered at a private home or at a restaurant, blacks were never asked to offer the prayer of thanksgiving--only whites were asked to pray.

The point is, if it was wrong for whites (who did not choose their color) to assign blacks (who did not choose their color) roles, separate and apart from whites based on race, it is equally wrong for men (who did not choose their gender) to assign roles to women (who did not choose their sex) based on gender. Just as whites have no right to discriminate against blacks because of something for which neither is responsible, men have no right to discriminate against women because of something for which they are not responsible.