

To the Woman Longing to Push Over the Fence:

I remember my very first encounter with Paul's teaching on male eldership in 1 Timothy. I was 19 and eager to become a member of my church. I had only recently begun walking with the Lord and reading the Bible regularly. As I sat in the large sanctuary waiting for the membership class to begin, I began flipping through the packet in front of me containing church doctrine. *There it was.* "The role of elder/pastor is reserved for elder-qualified men in accordance with 1 Timothy 2:11-3:7." Completely baffled and horribly offended, I turned to my mentor at the time who had accompanied me to the class. "This church really believes women can't be pastors?" I asked her. She promised me we'd talk after the class.

We did talk. I owe a great debt for her patience and perseverance with me in that season. I was heartbroken. The text seemed so clear. Why did my heart recoil at it? "That's not fair!" This was my rallying cry. "What can women do that men can't? What special role do we have?"

"Having babies." One man replied.

Even though I am now a mother-to-be and appreciate freshly the weightiness of childbearing, that response still makes me cringe.

If the biblical picture of church government – particularly male eldership – can be thought of as a fence surrounding a beautiful field, I was the girl longing to knock the fence over. I resented the fence. Whenever someone even so much as acknowledged the fence, I felt anger. And for a while, my personal soapbox was pointing out flaws in the fence.

There are a dozen reasons why I hated the fence so much. My own story includes a plethora of broken men. For many women, our minds eye imagines the wickedest men we know in leadership. Our biases are confirmed when we see stories in the news of such men abusing their power. Unsurprisingly, we flinch at the thought of having those men be our pastors. Surely God couldn't have intended for leadership to look like *that*. Like we all do whenever we go to God's Word, I was bringing all of my hurts and past experiences with me.

Though some time has passed since that membership class, if I'm being honest, the fence still gets to me sometimes. But God's Word is a delight to His people, and God has been kind in using a number of things to allow me to find this particular passage not just bearable but beautiful.

1. The work of the Holy Spirit.

Through God's Word, God's people, and God's Spirit, I have experienced tremendous redemption in my own story, particularly in regard to men. By God's grace, I have sat under the leadership of some pretty amazing pastors. They're men who walk with integrity, handle hard situations with wisdom and maturity, and protect their congregation – especially the most vulnerable members – with steadfast love. Watching them lead in the church has been healing to my heart. In addition, God gently instilled in me a conviction about the beauty, authority, and timelessness of His Word revealed in Scripture. It wasn't God's Word that was

ultimately hurting me; it was the wickedness of the world and the wickedness of my own heart. Thanks be to God for His commitment to redeeming His people by His Spirit!

2. Patience.

If I could offer a word of wisdom to the woman worn down by the fence, it would be to be patient with other believers. Be patient with people who don't understand (and maybe even disagree with) your confusion and hurt. And while you're practicing patience, pray diligently. I once went to a friend to share my frustration in regard to a male student at our seminary who had said something unkind about women leaders in the church. I was anticipating her being equally as outraged as I was. Instead, she asked, "Brooke, aren't you glad that God is patient and gentle with you as you sort through all of the wrong things you currently believe?" I was dumbfounded. In my arrogance, I had ignored the possibility that perhaps I had beliefs of my own that were wrong and hurtful. Instead, the reformer inside of me is normally first to speak, first to offend, and quick to be outraged. I am so thankful this isn't God's posture towards me. In God's kingdom, truth and compassion are never at war with each other. Be patient with others (and yourself) and prayerful as you seek to understand tough passages of Scripture.

3. Community.

We weren't made to interpret the Bible on an island. We need community to point out our biases, assumptions, and sin patterns when necessary. We need community to remind us of the inerrancy of God's Word when we're tempted to depart from truth. I'm incredibly thankful for that mentor of mine and many others who persevered with me as God healed my heart. And frankly, if the practical application of the fence needs some work, it's going to take the whole church. You and I were not made to be solo reformers on behalf of women in the church.

On my worst days, I still want to knock the fence over. But my sinful heart will resist most of Scripture's commands on those days, too. But by the grace of God, I can honestly say that I am so glad that God made me a woman. I'm thankful to be a uniquely female member of His church. Whether you're struggling to understand and obey this particular part of Scripture or some other passage, take comfort in God's faithfulness towards you even in the midst of confusion. Ask God to reveal areas of your heart where sin might be clouding your perspective. Ask God to heal hurt that might be causing you to approach this and other passages in a particularly biased way. He can and *does* heal His people.