

BY AND ABOUT YOUNG ADULTS

# Addressing claims of ‘reverse oppression’

*People pray to each other. The way I say “you” to someone else, / respectfully, intimately, desperately. The way someone says / “you” to me, hopefully, expectantly, intensely.*

—Huub Oosterhuis

**ZACH (NOT HIS REAL NAME)** and I are still friends. When I was working as a teacher in Philly, Zach remembered the challenges he had experienced during his year of teaching.

Without my asking, he cooked delicious dinners and invited me to a break from my usual peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and instant ramen. In retrospect, his were among the only nutritionally sound meals I ate during my first year of teaching. He also made a point to ask me how I was doing and how my students were doing, and he prayed for us.

In many specific ways, I have experienced Zach as a kind and gentle person. And still, a few years ago, I asked for some space in our friendship.

An increasing number of our conversations were about mine or others’ belonging—how we ought to be, what role we ought to take in church, in marriage, in society.

This was one of several interactions that led to my request:

I said: “I have a hard time attending City Church services. Biblically and empirically, I believe women are equal in their ability to serve, pastor and lead. What is a church saying about women when they do not allow women in leadership? I no longer want to be part of churches that debar women from full participation in church life.”

He replied: “But if women are included, it would hurt me and

cause me to sin. The Bible is clear about men and women’s different roles in marriage and in church life. And it is important for there to be unity in the church. If women were included in leadership, I would need to leave. It would cause disunity.”

I and many others have experienced countless iterations of this exchange. At its core, Zach was making claims of “reverse oppression.” The logic goes: Naming or resisting oppression is

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the real oppression, or at least just as bad as the initial wrongdoing.

Words like “unity” are defined such that the people who have traditionally been excluded will continue to be excluded. Effectively, “unity” is invoked to reinforce that those who currently belong ought to belong, and those who do not belong ought not to belong.

It is frustrating to repeatedly run up against a definition of unity predicated on my exclusion.

Claims of reverse oppression are not limited to gender. I have been in many conversations in which congregants threaten to leave if X marginalized people group is included in the church. The logic is familiar: Somehow, if LGBTQ people are allowed to become church members, it will hurt a subgroup of straight people and their children, thereby forcing out these members.

If we even need to discuss making changes to include those who have historically been excluded, it indicates there was never unity to begin with. Those in the excluded group calling for recognition of their personhood and belonging do not thereby deny the personhood and belonging of those who have always been included.

Claims of reverse oppression are not limited to church contexts. Claims of reverse racism are made in explicitly religious and secular spaces. Comedian Aamer Rahman deconstructs reverse racism in one of his sketches. In short, while any individual can be biased, we all live in a social reality that includes, historically and currently, colonization, imperialism, war, segregation and new Jim Crow laws. Racism and oppression are about social structure and power.

In my early 20s, I began studying biblical feminism, in part to address the passages being lobbed at women in the church. I was more willing then than now to use the Bible to debate my place in the church body and society at large.

I love feminism (biblical and otherwise) and critical readings of texts, but I have lost interest in needing to justify that across race, gender, nationality, sexuality and religion, I am no more and no less than my neighbors.

People were never meant to be fought on like this.



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