

**WHEN A WOMAN
SHOULD BE A MAN**

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When a Woman Should Be a Man

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Karen White stared out the window of the bedroom-cum-office in her home. Snow had fallen softly during the night and settled on the pine branches that framed the window. Now the sun was shining brightly, and the day glistened with all the promise of a winter reprieve. But Karen was only half aware of the winter wonderland outside. She was, in fact, quite deeply troubled about the future of her mission organization.

It was *her* organization. She had begun it and for several years had been its director. The purpose of the organization was to provide interim medical personnel for mission hospitals and clinics. Doctors and nurses from the United States took their vacation time, sometimes extended, to serve in place of missionaries who had gone on furlough. Karen's organization recruited the temporary workers and put them in touch with missions that needed them.

Karen worked with a volunteer committee of Christian doctors in the Boston area. At their last meeting, one of them, Dr. Brown, threw a bombshell into the discussion—at least from Karen's perspective. He raised the issue of having men under the authority of women, citing a radio preacher he had heard that day. He asked whether, now that the mission was well established, they should not consider recruiting a man to be in charge. Karen, he said, could certainly remain as assistant director and would be invaluable in training the new male director. But, with a man in charge, the mission would be in line with their evangelical constituency and with Scripture.

The rationale given for this proposed change of administration had caused turmoil in Karen's mind all week. Her background, training, and present commitment were to the full authority of the Bible. It had never occurred to her that she was doing anything "wrong" when she answered God's call to missions and administered the agency that she was sure God had called into being. The discussion in the meeting had left her thoroughly confused. She was a single woman. Did the instructions to wives in the New Testament mean that all women were subject to all men? Were they universal, for all time and every place? Or were the injunctions about women addressed to a particular situation for a particular reason?

Dr. Fleming, another member of the committee, at the same meeting had voiced concern about changing to a male administrator. With things going so well, he asked, why should they risk the slippage that is an inevitable part of change? He admitted that he didn't know quite what to think about the biblical issues and the church interpretations, but he did know about a real situation that was very much like this one.

A number of years ago, Dr. Fleming told the committee, a young woman named Julie Smith, who had been his wife's close friend while he was in medical school in Canada, had worked on various university campuses for a well-known campus-ministry organization. She was also very interested in foreign missions and did her best to interest the students with whom she worked. She participated with great enthusiasm in the Urbana Missions Conferences.

During the time she worked for the campus ministry, the Lord gave Julie a vision for a need that she felt was not being met. Many young people committed themselves to missions but had little guidance as to how they should go about getting involved. Julie felt called to set up an organization that would help match the gifts and abilities of young people with mission organizations and agencies overseas that could use them.

Then one of the board members whose opinions she respected told Julie that it was time to turn leadership of the organization over to a man. He recommended a certain man for the job. Julie was reluctant about choosing that particular man only because he had no overseas experience. She was no "feminist." If a man would be more acceptable to the evangelical public, she was ready to go along with the change. Besides, it would free her to concentrate on improving the service.

It was not long after this man took charge, however, before the organization was in deep trouble. Julie had built up a large file of well-prepared applicants, and many others had already been placed in ministry positions overseas. But, soon after she turned over the leadership, the placement counseling was eliminated and the service

dwindled to almost nothing. Financially, the organization was now always broke, although Julie was still out doing the fund raising.

Friction arose because Julie was still the *de facto* head as far as the evangelical community that supported them was concerned. Because of her long overseas experience, invitations to speak in churches about their mission came to her rather than to the man in charge. He had no missions expertise.

The small board was too far away and too busy to know what was really going on. Tired of the financial problems, the board finally decided to dissolve the organization.

Julie—on the recommendation of local mission leaders and her pastor and feeling a strong sense of call from the Lord—in the same week that the old organization was dissolved, incorporated a new one with the same goals. This time the board was composed of local people with whom she could stay in close contact. They rejoiced with her over how promptly God provided all their needs and how quickly the new organization became even more fruitful than the earlier one.

“This difficult experience has made Julie more sympathetic to women in leadership,” said Dr. Fleming to Karen and the other committee members. “And I think there are some valuable lessons for us in her story. We should be careful not to repeat past mistakes.”

The mention of women in leadership had made Dr. Brown bristle, and Karen herself flinched, because she always tried to avoid that discussion. She wanted to get on with the work of evangelism and avoid being embroiled in hassles over who should be in charge.

“And yet,” Karen thought, as she reached for her coat and scarf, “I am in the middle of it just because I am a woman—whether I like it or not.” When she opened the door, a fluff of snow landed on her head. She thought of 1 Corinthians 11:10 and smiled in spite of herself. Was the snow a sign that her authority was on her own head? No, she would need more concrete guidance than that.

Her heart lifted as she took in the grandeur of the day. But the weight of the decision she must make was still on her. Should she resign and be submissive in the way that she, like many other evangelical women, had been conditioned? Or should she follow the new urging that she had been convinced was a call from God, and continue the work that God had begun in her?

As she walked away from the house, leaving a trail of footsteps in the soft snow, Karen realized that her decision, like Julie’s in the story told by Dr. Fleming, would be a precedent for many other women who were struggling to live out their calls to mission and ministry, in spite of

misunderstandings and traditions in some sectors of the contemporary evangelical church. As she looked at the brilliant sky and the snow-crowned earth around her, Karen suddenly remembered the words of the psalmist: “I will trust and not be afraid.”