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# *Expect* Women Who Wound



## Chapter 1

My brothers and sisters, consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything.

—James 1:2–5

“I just want to know what the Bible says,” demanded Gail, a student in my women’s weekly Bible class. As I (Sue) descended from the platform, she was on me, nose to nose. My back pressed to the wall, I felt silly in my costume, sprayed-on grey hair, and granny makeup. For seven weeks I lectured, pulling my main points straight from the text. But for the finale, I dressed the part of a character from a story and illustrated the message with a dramatic presentation. The women seemed to love the unique lesson, all except Gail.

Her tirade lasted several minutes but I don’t remember specifics—just a tightness all over my body, a warmth that began small and then engulfed me in a wave of adrenaline and emotion. The room faded and I was left feeling alone and exposed. I wanted to slip away and hide, but a luscious lunch with small group leaders waited, a time to celebrate God’s work over the semester. I let Gail ruin the celebration for me.

Crazy thoughts overwhelmed my thinking, even as I made polite conversation over lunch. *I am a Bible teacher. Can’t I try something creative and fun occasionally? I bet I spent twenty hours working*

*on that lesson and a lot more if you consider I had to learn how to apply stage makeup and look all over town for grey hair spray. She has no idea. And hey, I'm not paid a penny and I took more time away from David and the kids this week than usual. Does she appreciate the sacrifice? Noooo . . . I bet she has never taught anything. What does she know? I'm glad the semester is over and I hope she never comes back. I don't want to see her in the audience again—or anywhere else.*

A rather extreme reaction, don't you think, but honest. Gail was my first critic. Now thirty years later, as I reflect back, I'm embarrassed by my intense and immature reaction. In the next chapter, we will explore a variety of reasons *why* I and many women fail to react biblically and wisely when personally attacked or involved in a conflict. But first things first.

### SURPRISE, SURPRISE

My mentors prepared me for my spiritual journey and ministry. They taught me to pray, study, and apply my Bible. They equipped me with a plethora of ministry skills—but *not one* ever mentioned to expect conflict. No one told me that *every* ministry leader, lay or paid, experiences criticism, personal attacks, and church politics. Don't believe me? Who would qualify as one of the most honest, amiable, godly Christian leaders alive today? I'm nominating the pastor of Stonebriar Community Church and Bible teacher on *Insight for Living*, Chuck Swindoll, who is also chancellor of the seminary where I teach. Now here is a man that no one would dare attempt to discredit, right? Surely he ministers so effectively that no one could find fault with his life and teaching. I thought so too until he stood at our chapel podium announcing, "There is not a week of my life that I don't receive hate mail. Not a week goes by that someone does not deliberately and personally criticize me inappropriately."<sup>1</sup>

Even Chuck Swindoll has critics like Gail. I just wish someone had told me about her. If I had only known to expect her, I would have prepared myself. I would not have been so vulnerable, so shocked, so wounded by her constructive criticism. And, by the way, it was constructive. She could have benefited from a shot of

lovingkindness. She needed to learn healthy confrontational skills, but her point was valid. Now that I teach a seminary course *Women Teaching Women*, I hammer my students, nicely of course, with my conviction that even our dramatic presentations should be drawn from the text, without exception. Not that we deep-six creativity, but we must not substitute entertaining stories for God's truth. If I had been forewarned, I might have taken Gail's criticism to heart sooner and enjoyed my lunch. But like most unseasoned women, I was ignorant and ill-equipped to deal biblically and wisely with women who wound.

#### EVEN JESUS WAS NOT EXEMPT!

We learn from Jesus' earthly ministry, but here is one lesson often overlooked. Jesus lived with the Twelve for three years and among them was one who would betray Him. The Bible reveals that Jesus knew his heart.<sup>2</sup> Judas Iscariot had a secret agenda and Jesus was aware that Judas would sell Him out. Jesus felt the sting of conflict just like we do.

However Judas was not the only disciple to betray Jesus. Peter and the others scattered, scared to be associated with Jesus the day He was crucified. But Peter and the others returned to ask for forgiveness. Jesus was delighted to grant it and Jesus would have forgiven Judas too. But Judas would not return. He was his own worst enemy, choosing not to repent but to commit suicide instead. Judas is an example of a person who will not admit his fault and make peace. In the early stages of conflict, we don't know whether we are dealing with a Judas or a Peter. But we do know that if Jesus had His Judas, we can expect ours. But, take heart! In our experience, you will encounter many more women like Peter than like Judas.

#### PAUL WAS NOT EXEMPT EITHER

Paul endured a barrage of personal attacks and difficult people. After Jesus knocked him off his high horse on the Damascus Road, God put him through a preparation process that lasted fourteen years. During this time, the Jews put out a contract on him

and the Christians did not believe his conversion was real. He was shuffled from Damascus to Jerusalem to Tarsus for protection from assassins. Imagine the stinging verbal attacks and nasty behavior he encountered. It took Barnabas, a man the Christians trusted, to convince believers that Paul was genuine.<sup>3</sup>

Even after his ministry was in high gear, he had run-ins with Peter, the Judaizers,<sup>4</sup> and “some who preach Christ out of envy and rivalry.”<sup>5</sup> Paul writes that these charlatans “preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains . . .”<sup>6</sup> Paul, like Jesus, occasionally faced harsh words, false accusations, and rude behavior. Why are we so surprised when we find ourselves facing them too?

#### WOMEN’S LEADERS IN THE BIBLE WERE NOT EXEMPT

Paul and the male leadership at Philippi mediated a “catfight” between squabbling women. In his letter to the Philippian church he writes, “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel . . .”<sup>7</sup> Yes, women with great passion to serve Christ clash. In a strange irony, the three women who have wounded me most through my thirty-year ministry stint have been women deeply committed to serving God. Later we will explore why.

#### GREAT WOMEN IN HISTORY WERE NOT EXEMPT

Even our larger-than-life heroines experienced conflict with other women. For example, Abigail Adams, the wife of our second president and mother of the sixth, stands as a tower of intellect, faith, and fortitude,<sup>8</sup> a model to those who read her biographies drawn from volumes of her letters preserved by historians. Yet her letters reveal a heart-wrenching conflict she carried to her grave. With husband John gone much of their married life, Abigail spent evenings corresponding with friends. One of the dearest was Mercy Warren, a woman of admirable intellect with whom she interacted on questions regarding the revolution and the birth

of their beloved nation. For more than thirty years, these two astute women encouraged and inspired each other.

As their friendship blossomed, Abigail wrote to Mercy, “Let your letters be of the journal kind. I could participate in your amusements, in your pleasures, and in your sentiments which would greatly gratify me, and I should collect the best of intelligence.”<sup>9</sup>

But in 1805, Mercy’s three volumes on the American Revolution were published. Her work, according to both Abigail and John, contained numerous unflattering reports and “falsehoods” about John. “John, cut to the quick, took issue with Mercy passage by passage, all three volumes worth, initiating an exchange of ten long, involved letters of accusation and reproach that mounted to screaming pitch before they were done.”<sup>10</sup>

Alas, Abigail and Mercy parted bitterly. When Mercy’s husband died, Abigail wrestled with whether or not to at least send a note of sympathy:

However, she recognized Mercy and John’s fundamentally opposing political beliefs, and was sadly resigned to the fact that the bitterness of party spirit had severed them. After the injustice to John’s character and the chance given Mercy to acknowledge her errors, which she wholly omitted to do, Abigail felt she had no alternative. “I thought a letter of the kind would appear insincere, and although I feel for her bereavement and know how heavily she must feel it, I have declined writing to her.”<sup>11</sup>

Shortly before their deaths, tokens of forgiveness were offered and timidly accepted, but the fire of their friendship never rekindled.<sup>12</sup> How sad that these two women did not learn how to breach their differences, forgive one another, and restore their relationship—all possible through biblical peacemaking strategies.

#### WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE ARE NOT EXEMPT

The American Management Association interviewed one thousand women in the marketplace to learn that 95 percent felt

other women had undermined them some time during their careers.<sup>13</sup> Additional research revealed that woman-to-woman sabotage has increased by 50 percent in the last ten years.<sup>14</sup> Pat Heim and Susan Murphy, authors of *In the Company of Women*, conduct workshops all over the country on women's conflict in the workplace. When they ask the group, "When a woman gets promoted, who is the first to attack her?" the answer is always the same. "Women."<sup>15</sup>

#### EVEN HOLLYWOOD IS NOT EXEMPT

Superstar vocalist Barbra Streisand has sold eighty million records and earned millions of dollars from her recordings. She was honored with the Golden Globe's Cecil B. DeMille Award for her contribution to the entertainment industry. In a related article she said: "What I've done, going into a man's world was tough. You get attacked, but mostly by women. That's the irony. I've found that women are the most competitive and vitriolic. The worst reviews I've gotten were from women . . . When they're out to get you, they're out to get you."<sup>16</sup>

#### AND IT'S GETTING WORSE . . .

The ethos of ministry is affected by the culture, a surprise to some Christians. They expect that redeemed people will act like redeemed people. And many do, but some don't. The church attracts hurting people out of the culture who bring their woundedness, idiosyncrasies, and even their pathologies with them. Jesus heals them over time as they submit to Him. But in the meantime, some retain their meanness.

#### AS LONG AS THE FLESH IS WITH US . . .

Our flesh is that part of us that doesn't want to listen to God but instead wants to do its own thing. No matter how spiritually mature we become, we still battle our flesh. The flesh is with us until we die or Jesus comes back. Paul reveals the nature of our flesh in Galatians 5:17–21:

For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit . . . these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want . . . now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity, idolatry, sorcery, *hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissentions, factions, envying*, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things . . . (emphasis ours)

The bold italicized words describe emotions, attitudes, and actions that create conflict. For example, our flesh is jealous when others succeed. When a friend receives an honor we want, instead of celebrating, our flesh says, “Why wasn’t I chosen?” Pastor and author John Maxwell followed in his preacher father’s footsteps, benefiting from his mentoring and leadership. As a result, Maxwell experienced early success as the first in his denomination to average more than a thousand in attendance every Sunday, the youngest to write his first book, and the youngest to be elected to a national office.

But a surprise accompanied his successes: “Unfortunately during those early years, I might have also been the loneliest pastor in my denomination. The good news was that when I failed, plenty of people were glad to commiserate with me. But when I succeeded, few celebrated. I thought my colleagues and I were on the same team, but evidently they didn’t see it that way. Many times Margaret and I celebrated alone.”<sup>17</sup>

Why didn’t his colleagues celebrate with him? Probably because they struggled with jealousy, selfish rivalries, and envy that can lead to dissentions and factions—straight out of Galatians 5:20.

The authors of the secular book *In the Company of Women* discuss this phenomenon. Of course, they don’t call this phenomenon “the flesh,” a spiritual term. Instead they call it “The Power Dead-Even Rule.” They insist that when women in the workplace perceive themselves as dead even in their successes, all is well. But when one of them is promoted and suddenly has more power or prestige, the stage is set for a catfight: “In those situations in which

a woman's power is diminished (she loses her job, doesn't receive an expected promotion, or fails publicly), she finds her female co-workers to be extremely supportive. By contrast, when a woman has more power than another woman, behaves as if she has more power, or is perceived as trying to obtain more power, the environment is ripe for conflict."<sup>18</sup>

MIT graduate Dr. Leonard Sax agrees. In his book *Why Gender Matters*, he writes, "Girls' friendships work best when the friendship is between equals. If you're a girl or a woman and you think your friend believes herself to be 'better' than you, then your friendship with her is not likely to last. Boys on the other hand are comfortable in an unequal relationship, even if they are the lesser party."<sup>19</sup>

Maxwell, Heim, and Murphy suggest ways to overcome the Dead-Even Rule, and we will consider helpful methods and strategies throughout this book, but the point to remember now is that the flesh breeds conflict.

The flesh is real—even in Christians. We don't talk about these inner tensions because Christian women are supposed to be nice. Many of us deny we are ever jealous. When was the last time you heard anyone admit they struggle with this sin? But for so many women, at the moment our friend shines, our flesh winces. As we mature spiritually, we learn to overcome, to celebrate with others, and to shackle our dark side. But everyone is at a different place in the process—and emotionally immature and diseased women act out of their flesh. Expect it. To think otherwise is naïve. When you work with people in ministry, you have not entered the "no conflict zone."

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*Men kill their weak and women kill their strong.*<sup>20</sup>

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#### WHEN TODAY'S GIRLS BECOME WOMEN . . .

Conflict between females is different from conflict between males, as we will see in Chapter Two. Males generally display a

more direct and sometimes more physical response to disputes. Most evenings, our local television news anchor paints the gory results of youth violence, and we expect the perpetrators to be boys. Usually they are. But according to the U.S. Department of Justice, “while criminal violence among teenage boys still far exceeds criminal violence among teenage girls, the gap is narrowing.”<sup>21</sup> For every *ten* boys arrested for assault ten years ago, there was only one girl. Today there are only *four* boys arrested for every girl.<sup>22</sup>

James Garbarino says to expect a *new* American Girl:

Girls in general are evidencing a new assertiveness and physicality that go far beyond criminal assault. They are apparent in the girls’ participation in sports, their open sensuality, in their enjoyment of “normal” aggression that boys have long enjoyed in rough-and-tumble play, and in the feeling of confidence that comes with physical prowess and power. We should welcome the New American Girl’s unfettered assertiveness and physicality. We should appreciate her athletic accomplishments, like the way she stands up for herself, and applaud her straightforward appreciation of herself as physical being. But I believe that the increasing violence among troubled girls are unintended consequences of the general increase in normal girls’ getting physical and becoming more assertive.

All this, the good news of liberation and the bad news of increased aggression, is the New American Girl.<sup>23</sup>

We predict that when the New American Girl grows up and joins the female ranks of the church, we can expect even more conflict, a good reason to arm ourselves now with biblical tools for the future.

#### WHY WE DON’T TALK ABOUT OUR CONFLICTS

We have seen that conflict is part of the human experience—no one is exempt, not Jesus, Paul, not people in the Bible or

history. We can expect conflict and it's probably going to get worse. Then why don't we talk about it? Why do we fail to prepare for the inevitable? We believe one reason is because down deep we women feel that conflict is our own fault.

When it comes to evaluating success and failure, men and women tend to think differently.

Girls on the average outperform boys in school (as measured by report card grades), in most subjects and in all age groups.<sup>24</sup> Because girls do better in school, one might imagine that girls would be more self-confident about their academic self-esteem. But that's not the case. Paradoxically, girls are more likely to be excessively critical in evaluating their own academic performance. Conversely, boys tend to have unrealistically high estimates of their own academic abilities and accomplishments.<sup>25</sup>

Women's beliefs about academic achievement spill over into other perceptions. For example, women tend to be harder on themselves, engage in negative self-talk, and advertise their flaws more than men. When females succeed, they tend to attribute their accomplishments to factors outside themselves—it was easy, I was lucky, I just worked hard. They seldom attribute their successes to their own abilities. But when females fail, they are quick to blame themselves. Interestingly, males have the opposite tendency. He is likely to attribute successes to his own abilities and failures to factors outside himself.<sup>26</sup>

This tendency to self-deprecation means that many women blame themselves for conflict. We are not saying women don't see their adversary as responsible too. But in the midst of the conflict, many women hear a condemning voice in their heads whispering, "I must be hard to get along with. I'm high maintenance, difficult, problematic. If I were just nicer, a better Christian, if I were more loving, if I worked harder, if . . . if . . . if . . ." an endless list of reasons why conflict points to personal failure. And so when conflict raises its ugly head, we are embarrassed and don't want anyone to know.

We especially don't want men to know. Talk about conflict, personal attacks, and church politics in a room full of women and you'll see nods of agreement and an eager desire to discuss the issue. But bring up the topic in mixed company and many women sit like stone. Why? Because "catfights" make women look bad. We don't want men to know women sometimes treat each other this way. We don't want to play into men's stereotypical thinking about women already. We experienced such thinking recently: when Kelley mentioned to her Sunday School class that she was beginning to work on a new book, this one about women in conflict, one of the men in her class deadpanned, "How many volumes?"

So, like ostriches, many of us suffer alone and in the dark, blaming ourselves and refusing to address the issue head-on or prepare for the next round. It's time to stop blaming ourselves. Yes, we may be part of the problem, but we are simply playing into Satan's traps when we refuse to acknowledge our shortcomings and work to acquire skills we will need later. Too many women jump ship, abandoning their callings when waters rise. Jesus needs you to take courage and learn to fight well.

Phyllis Chesler, author of *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*, captures our intent in writing this book: "It is irresponsible to tell women that the world is safe when it is not. One must tell women to expect enemy fire down the road and deserters and collaborators within their own ranks. Such information will give women the option of adopting measures of self-defense."<sup>27</sup>

We want to give you the option of adopting measures that will enable you to stand tall in the midst of criticism, personal attacks, and church politics. But first, you must face facts. You won't be the exception and you are not odd, difficult, or bad when caught in conflict.

### READY TO QUIT?

As you ponder these sobering stories, statistics, and research findings, do you wonder if serving Jesus is worth the hassle? To that question, we proclaim a resounding *yes!* Remember that only

a small fraction of people you work with will be difficult. Most will support, appreciate, and encourage you. Unfortunately, we observe women allowing the 1 percent to overshadow the ninety-nine. The goal of this book is to equip you to deal positively with the one so you will not be sidelined from serving the ninety-nine. So keep on reading—solutions and strategies are ahead.

*It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.*

—Psalm 119:71 NASB

## Discussion Questions

1. Has anyone ever warned you to expect conflict and personal attacks in ministry? If so, specifically what did they say? If not, why do you think this is often a taboo topic?
2. In this chapter, we observed multiple biblical and historical examples of people enmeshed in disputes. Can you think of others?
3. Do you believe ministry conflicts and personal attacks are increasing? If so, why?
4. Have you observed more violence among girls and young women? Give examples.
5. What is the role of the “flesh” in conflict?
6. Have you personally experienced ministry conflict or personal attacks? How did you feel? (No names, please.)
7. Regardless of conflict in ministry, why is it rewarding to serve the Lord? How can you overcome the tendency to be discouraged by the few who are difficult?