

Clothed in Strength: Women Who Built the Church and Changed the World.

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[0 : 00] So as prayed and we've read a bit of scripture, I'm going to start by reading some from Ephesians 4 which will be a bit of a theme in our talk today.

I'm thinking about how women were used by God in the building of his church but how they were used in partnership with each other and with men as the Lord through his Holy Spirit was building the church.

So you can listen in or if you've got a Bible with you on your phone I'm going to read a few verses from Ephesians 4. 1 to 16. So Paul writes,

And as I do that I want you to give you a bit of a sense of the picture of how women were used by God in church history in different ways. And it really follows on, flows on from how the Lord himself taught and encouraged and used women when he was on earth.

The Marys, the people who, the women who followed him who were there at the cross, who went on, who spoke the news of Christ's resurrection. The women who cared for him, the women who anointed his feet.

[3 : 35] So all of that history and then is carried on into the, to the, in the, in the New Testament period we have women who are mentioned in Paul's letters, don't we? Priscilla and Nympha and Phoebe and Lydia, all these women who were serving the church.

And that trajectory carries on and we ourselves are part of that today, aren't we? The way the Lord works in our lives and uses us to build his church. And as we go through these, there's three truths that I want us to think about, about what it means to be partners in this work that the Lord's given us.

It means self-denial and it means suffering and it means partnership. So we're going to start with Macrina. So Macrina was a woman who was born in 330 AD in eastern Turkey, a place called Cappadocia.

And it was a world that was really changing for women, really, really changing. So in the Roman Empire, women were seen very much as second class citizens.

Aristotle, the philosopher, says a kind of woman is a deficient man. She's kind of like a man, but just not as good as a man. She is substandard. And that attitude was carried on.

[4 : 53] And there was a it was a really, really sexualized culture, a horrible culture. People and their archaeologists dug up Pompeii, haven't they?

The city that was was swamped by a volcano. And what they uncovered was lewd pictures and evidence of brothels everywhere of kind of art just on the streets.

That was really sexualized. And in that world, a historian, Kyle Harper writes, there were two fates for women that was fundamental, unchanging tenant of sexual ideologies.

There was promiscuity and shame personified in the prostitute or chastity and honor personified in the virgin and the matron. So you are the one or two categories. You are either promiscuous.

You're a prostitute or you are a married woman. And if you're a married woman, you were very, very much contained. And if you were a slave, as many, many women were, then you were fair game.

[5 : 53] You're a target for any man. You couldn't say no. And the law did not protect you. But as in this period in the fourth century, the emperor Constantine had become converted to Christianity.

And that's initiated a significant change in the decades and in the years to come after that, where rules changed and laws began to protect women.

Because the gospel dignifies women, doesn't it? The Christian faith dignifies women. He says that Jesus doesn't just say you're either a prostitute and you cannot be redeemed.

You're beyond the pale. Or you're a married woman and therefore you have to stay behind closed doors. And Macrina is a little example of this changing world for women.

So what do we know about Macrina? Well, she was, as I said, she was born in the fourth century. And she was born and what was going on in the church in that day was a real emphasis on self-denial, on depriving yourself of the pleasures in the world in what we call ascetism.

[7 : 04] So we're denying yourself in spending time in prayer, in Bible study, in good works. And in the third century, what's this idea that we could deny marriage, that virginity was sometimes preferable state?

Paul talks about virginity in 1 Corinthians. And in the early church, in the fourth century particularly, they started to embrace this.

Macrina has a brother, Gregory of Vanessa, and he wrote about virginity. But he says things which actually are really different from how I think today we imagine people then thought about staying single and how it came to be seen later on in the church.

Because what Gregory writes is that staying single was actually a way not of making yourself superior to other people, but actually of protecting yourself from pain and suffering.

Because in that period, childbirth was really dangerous. And infant mortality was really, really high. To get married meant that your life could be at risk of early death and you would be likely to suffer bereavement.

[8 : 19] So Gregory writes, Virginity is fortified against all these ills. It has no orphan state, no widowhood to mourn. It is always in the presence of the undying bridegroom.

He's talking about Jesus, isn't he? It has the offspring of devotion always to rejoice in. It's his continual home that is truly its own, furnished with every treasure because the master always dwells there.

In this case, death doesn't bring separation, but union with him who is longed for. For when a soul departs, then it is with Christ, as the apostle says. And so for women, this emphasis on it being okay to be single, it being a dignified state, gave really new opportunities.

Rather than getting married when you were 14 years old and immediately taken up with physical dangers of childbirth and managing a household, it meant you could have choices and live a life of devotion.

So how do we know about Requina? The brilliant thing is that her brother, Gregory, that I've just quoted from, he wrote a short biography of her. He so thought she was brilliant and that everybody should know about his sister, that he committed her life to Penn.

[9 : 31] And I think this is a sign again of how the early church was going, women aren't just to be a second class citizen, as Aristotle said, but just like following Jesus's model, they elevated women, they listened to them, and they wanted other people to respect them.

It's really remarkable that we have this biography of a woman from this period, not because she's an emperor's wife, not because she's a scandalous woman like a Cleopatra, but because of her godliness.

So this is what Gregory says about Requina. She was beautiful. She had lots of suitors who wanted to marry her. And she did have her fiancé, an arranged marriage, but then her fiancé died.

And so Requina thought, great, that means I can stay single. And she said, I'm going to use this as an opportunity to say, oh, well, that was a bit like, I'm a bit like a widow, so therefore you can't force me to get married.

That kind of betrothal was a bit like a marriage. And so she chose not to get married because she wanted to devote herself to the Lord. And she devoted herself to study.

[10 : 39] She became really, really learned, which, again, a remarkable thing for that period. One of the church fathers, Chrysostom, says she was as well-educated as Basil.

Basil was another of her brothers, and he was a major theologian. She just knew as much as him, which is really impressive. And it was through Requina that her brother Basil was converted.

It was through talking with Basil, talking theology, discussing, pointing the Lord Jesus out to him, that Basil, he was a proud man, he was a lawyer, committed his life to Christ.

He submitted to Christ. And he was used enormously by God in establishing the faithful doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the early church.

So if it hadn't been the Lord choosing to use Macrina to speak to Basil, that that doctrine of the Holy Spirit wouldn't have been solidified at that point. She also was a massive influence on her mother.

[11:38] They were quite a wealthy family. And as her mother grieved the loss of one of Macrina's siblings, she persuaded her mother to give up some of the wealth and the habits, the dress of a wealthy woman, and instead to focus her life on prayer and worship.

She said that she persuaded her mother to live on an equal footing with her maids. And that's amazing, isn't it? That the gospel and this devotion to Christ so changed the social status that actually women started to see themselves as equal.

Not, I'm the mistress and you're the maid. But actually, we are sisters together in Christ. We're equal together. Macrina also practiced an open home.

She took in the destitute. People who were really poor, people who were homeless. She cared for them. She welcomed them into the home that she was sharing with her mother. And they lived in a kind of community together, showing physical and spiritual care together.

Gregory, in fact, describes her as an athlete. I think he's picking up Paul's language in Philippians. She was an athlete. She worked hard. She trained herself in godliness.

[12:52] She had troubles and bereavements and difficulties in her life, but they didn't break her, he says. Instead, they were used as training. She embraced suffering and difficulty. So that she, the bereavements of her mother dying and then her brothers dying, and illness.

We think she probably died of breast cancer. She embraced those sufferings and they were used to refine her faith and her godliness rather than crush her. So Gregory went to visit her at the end of her life when Macrina was on her deathbed.

And that's when he wrote this biography of her. Because he sat down and he talked with her about heaven. He talked with her about the hope that was to come.

And he really, really valued her wisdom. He could talk with her as an equal. He was a great theologian, Gregory of Nyssa. He, again, like his brother Basil, was defending important doctrines. But he spent time to sit down with his sister to listen to her and to honour her. And as he writes down the conversations he had, what comes out is her confidence in the hope of heaven.

[13:58] She was full of gratitude. She gave things away. And out of that, so by making herself less, he says she was a great one. She was a noble woman in the faith.

And he wrote down the prayer that she prayed as she was dying. This is what she prayed to the Lord Jesus. Thou hast saved us from the curse and from sin, having become both for our sakes. Thou hast broken the heads of the dragon who had seized us with his jaws in the yawning gulf of disobedience. And that has shown us the way of resurrection. Just as we sang this morning, just earlier, about the resurrection.

Christ is risen. And that was Macrina's faith. And that had shaped her whole life. And when it came, she died shortly after that. It came to her funeral. They were going, oh, well, what are we going to dress her body in?

They realised she had one set of clothes. She had given everything away. She was left with one set of clothes because she knew that her wealth, her riches, was in the resurrection. She would be clothed in pure linen in eternity.

[15:03] She didn't need to hold on to those treasures. Now, that ascetism, that self-denial, might seem a bit too much for us. And we can think, oh, Gregory was just a kind of fond brother.

And there's a tendency in that time to tell stories of history by airbrushing them, brushing out the faults and the flaws, focusing on the saintly. We can call that haggriography, turning people into saints.

Sometimes that's not helpful. We need to see that people are like us. And yet, I think we can still take Macrina's story as a story which is so important, telling us that from the beginning of the church, women have been crucial in the shaping of the church.

They've not been the ones preaching, but they have been absolutely essential in the Lord's building and shaping his church, keeping it faithful to the truth of the gospel.

And maybe we ourselves feel weak in comparison to these great stories. But let's not feel condemned by them, but let's learn from them and think, well, what in my life can I change?

[16:10] So it's just a few lessons we can learn from Macrina. Macrina, what did she do? She immersed herself in God's word. She studied. I mean, imagine how hard that was then.

How few books they had, handwritten books. And we've got so many resources. Let's use her example to make ourselves women of the word, to devote ourselves to study.

And so making ourselves wise, being somebody who can contribute to discussion, who can share ideas, who can support the men who are leading our churches and teach each other.

And she cheerfully embraced self-denial. She got rid of stuff to focus on what was most important. Now, there's nothing wrong with owning things, is it? But it can sneak up and take our hearts away from the Lord.

Macrina denied herself so that she could help others, not just because denying yourself is good in itself, but because it freed her to do the Lord's work. She was laying up treasures in heaven, not trying to bury treasures on earth.

[17:16] And she worked together with other women. So in that world where women were oppressed, she lifted up with other women in this community. She was helping women to see themselves as primarily belonging to the Lord.

They weren't commodities. They weren't second-class citizens. But in working together, she helped women to see Jesus's vision for women. Feminists talk about women adjusting for men and caretaking for them and shrinking when they're in mixed company.

And sometimes we do that, don't we? Sometimes we go quiet when we could speak up when we're in mixed company. But if we're investing in time together to build each other up, we can become stronger together in our faith and we can encourage each other.

So moving on from Macrina, in the centuries that followed, this is really, really rapid. We're going 1,000 years now on from these.

There were a strange 1,000 years of the church growing across Europe. But also this idea of virginity and of singleness that we see in Macrina's life became more and more powerful such that there was then a sudden, a different second-class citizen.

[18:29] It was the married woman became the second-class citizen as monasteries and convents were established. And so we're going to jump now to the Reformation where we see a really significant shift and look at a woman called Katharina.

Katharina, well, initially Schütz. And she was living in Strasbourg on the border of what is now France and Germany. So the very end of the 15th century.

So Strasbourg was a really important city. 20,000 people living there, which might seem small now, but it was very big for then. And we're going to think about a different kind of partnership, not the partnership of women living together, but a partnership of marriage that was used by the Lord.

So I'm sure you'll have heard about how in this period Martin Luther's teacher really shook the world, kind of starting from when he nailed those 95 theses to a church door, challenging the church's teaching, which was then what we now see as the Catholic church, but then it was pretty much the universal church in the West, challenging their teaching, saying it was out of line with the gospel, out of line with what the Bible taught.

Now, Katharina was 20 when Luther nailed those theses. And though Wittenberg, where Luther was, and Strasbourg were 300 miles apart, it was about a week's journey time, the news spread really rapidly of Luther's challenges and his teaching.

[19:59] And it was only a year after that that the priest in charge of the St. Lawrence's church in Strasbourg started to change. He was listening and hearing these ideas.

He started to change the way he was leading services, stopped saying everybody had to go to confession, and began to base his preaching more and more on the Bible. And people flocked to hear him because this was radically new and exciting.

Sometimes even 3,000 people would be in his church. And one of those people was Katharina. She'd been really religious from her childhood, just like Macrina had thought the best way to express her love for Christ was to stay single.

She thought, that's the godly thing to do. And she tried really hard with good works, going to mass, caring for the poor, and also studying. But this only led to what she says was distress about the kingdom of God.

Everything she did just made her more upset and restless and anxious. She was really hungry and ready to hear the good news of free forgiveness, that you don't win yourself into heaven by good works.

[21:07] It's that the grace isn't dispensed by the church through the sacraments, but it's given freely from Christ. And she wasn't from a wealthy family. Her father was a master carpenter.

And she actually decided to train as a weaver. She wasn't going to go into a convent. She thought she could live, she could fend for herself as a weaver, live at home, not have to get married. But because her father cared about literacy, she could read. And that meant she went to hear the sermons, but she also read Luther's books for herself. And later on she wrote, God had mercy on us and many people.

He awakened and sent out by tongue and writings the dear and now blessed Dr. Martin Luther, who described the Lord Jesus Christ for me and others in such a lovely way that I thought I'd been brought out of the depths of the earth, yes, out of grim, bitter hell, into the sweet, lovely kingdom of heaven.

Isn't that a wonderful description? She's like, I heard this teaching and it felt like I was dead and now I'm alive and it's so sweet and it's so good. She's describing herself there, it's notable.

[22 : 17] She's not just striking it individually, she's us, this happened to us. There were many people and they shared this experience together. And she shared the experience that the priest had experienced himself.

And a few years later, in 1523, when Catherine was 25, she married him. She married that priest, she'd been listening to him.

That was a shocking thing because in the Catholic church, in the church then, the priest had to stay single. And he was one of the very first few that went, where's that in the Bible? And he got married. It was a significant change. Virginity wasn't superior to the marriage state. The words of Galatians 3.26, you are all children of God through faith.

You're all baptized into Christ, who've closed yourself with Christ. It was good news. It meant that actually the priest didn't have to stay single. But actually, there was this new day.

[23 : 17] And we have to be really careful, thinking, there are some Christian writers today who went, ah, pre the Reformation, women could be in convents and they could study and they could do all kinds of great things and their voices were respected like Macrina's.

But then the Reformation came, the convents were dissolved and women lost power. Well, Katerina shows us that that's not actually the case. She had her voice heard and remembered.

And one of the first ways she had to let her voice heard was actually she had to defend her marriage because there are people going around going, oh, she bewitched him. What is going on?

This shouldn't be happening. Maybe he's, oh, he's scandalous. Maybe he's got another mistress.

So she went to print and defended herself and defended the marriage to say, no, this is legit.

This is fair. It's a good thing to do. So she raised her voice and it was listened to. Her letter shows how clear her thinking was. But also how happy her husband was that he was speaking.

[24 : 19] He didn't, he could have prevented her publishing that letter, but he was going, go on, do that. After he died, she wrote, my husband didn't rule over or compel my faith.

He granted me space and will to read, hear, pray, study, and be active in all good things. Indeed, even when it meant less attention or neglect in looking after his physical needs and running his household.

That's a bit of a mission. Her husband, what a great husband. Her husband was so passionate about her developing her faith and her knowledge of the Lord Jesus that he was like, oh, you didn't wash up.

But that's okay because you were reading your Bible. She's a real Mary, isn't she? That she knew what was first, the best thing was to sit at the Lord's feet.

And it's a real picture of what Paul describes later on in Ephesians of the husband loving the wife as Christ loves the church, caring for her godliness, caring for her holiness.

[25 : 23] She was a strong woman, but she was focused, used that strength to focus on the Lord and on others. There was so many, it's such a turbulent time, there was even physical violence that broke out as the Reformation stirred up so many questions for people and there were political involvement.

And there were a lot of refugees moving around. In that time, she wrote letters, public letters, to female refugees and pastors' wives, urging them to stand firm under persecution.

These were published letters. And when 3,000 refugees flooded into Strasbourg, she was the one coordinating the poor relief, advising the town council on ways they could do this the best.

But it wasn't just practical wisdom that she shared. When those theological debate happened, Katharina was there. She was in the room when Zingley and Calvin and other performers were

around.

She does say, I was their cook and maid, but she also had her own opinions. She ended up writing to Luther because she thought he was becoming a bit too narrow on communion and how it should be practiced.

[26 : 34] It took a year to respond to her, but she did. She had theological ideas, she engaged with people, she did in a way that was submissive and gracious, but she spoke. And at the heart of her concern with that matter with communion, but with others, was that there should be unity.

There should be unity in the church. She didn't want there to be division. There's been such a massive change, the Reformation. She didn't want it to go sour or to be splintered. She wrote later that all the good teachers and preachers did not become a sacrifice on the cross for me, but Christ, the Son of God himself.

I don't want to be called after them. I don't want to be a Lutheran or a Zwinglian. I want to be called a Christian. She knew that theological debate was important, but she didn't want it to split the church.

And that was lived out practically. They practiced an open door to all who were in need. She didn't say everybody was right, but she gave hospitality nevertheless.

There was four weeks at one point when she hosted 80 men. And at another point, she looked after a nobleman who'd become a Protestant for a year, living with him and seeking to show him grace, even when he started to get some very strange theological ideas.

[27 : 54] So like we have to today, Katerina had to walk a road of showing Christian charity in practical ways, but being really clear and faithful to what the gospel taught.

She was doing this when there were wars nearby, when there were outbreaks of severe illness, of plague hitting the city, and when she was experiencing her own tragedies. And one of those tragedies was, well, probably the greatest tragedy, that she lost her own, she had two children, and both of them died in the first six years of her marriage in their infancy.

So she lived for the rest of the 19 years of her marriage until her husband died as a bereaved mother. You can imagine her pain. It's maybe tempting for us to think back of women in the past who experienced that loss and think, but it was so common.

It was so common. It would have been different for them. But how could a woman losing her child that she'd nurtured, that she'd carried in her womb for nine months, be a small thing?

She really suffered. And you just can read the letters and the poems and the prayers of written by grieving parents over the years to know that this was a great loss that found consolation in Christ, but was a burden.

[29 : 11] And what's, I think, remarkable was that grief didn't mean she retreated. She even edited a songbook for families. She put popular tunes to Bible words.

And she writes about how she imagined a mother rocking her child to sleep, using a gospel song as a lullaby. She wanted to give women the word to sing their faith and to teach their children.

It's really touching, isn't it, to imagine the childless Katerina writing those words, thinking about how she could care for other women in this way. So despite that loss that she went through, the Zales had a really happy marriage.

And when her husband died, he was 17, she was 50, Katerina was really overcome by grief, such that the other reformers were writing letters going, oh, how can we help Katerina? She's so sad. How can we support her? She wrote about her husband. He much loved me and held me in great honour because of my zeal, deeds and faith.

[30 : 13] And I was never worthy of this honour. Isn't that a beautiful picture of what was at the heart of this marriage, a partnership in the gospel, a partnership which was focused on the good deeds, on encouraging each other to serve.

So another reformer had written, the widow, a godly and satanly woman, is overcome. Her zeal is incredible for Christ's lowliest and afflicted. She knows and searches the mysteries of Christ and yet she's all too human.

The trial is from the Lord and astounding. She was really grieving, really suffering and yet her godliness had not rendered her immune from being broken hearted, from being really cast down. But the Lord comforted her. The last 14 years of her life weren't easier. She was attacked publicly and because she wouldn't distance herself from others who seemed radical or heretics, even though it was clear she didn't agree with them.

And as the church was really experiencing tension, she sought to serve. A nephew of hers had contracted syphilis, which is a horrendous disease that was very new then.

[31 : 21] It had just come from South America. And she nursed him through the years of that pain. And a little friend had leprosy. She visited and wrote to him, not fearing contagion, offering her meditations on the Psalms as a comfort.

She wrote down these meditations and shared them with him. And last of all, extraordinarily, her kind of last act was to read the funeral services of two women who were part of the heretic movement.

They'd been led astray and she knew that if they had their funerals in the church, that the preacher would use it as an opportunity to make a theological point to condemn these women's heretical beliefs.

And she thought, that's not good. That's not right. So what she did was she went, she went, they were, see, the women were buried in the gravesides. And she went there and she read the funeral service for these women.

I think that shows real courage and boldness and compassion. She was vilified for it. They thought she was an upstart. Why was she doing that?

[32 : 30] But she wanted to dignify those women. Now, today, women, right, often women who are Christians, who maybe have called themselves evangelical, argue that Paul's teaching on marriage, that Paul's teaching on order and structure in the church is patriarchal.

She, there's one of them, Beth Allison Barr, writes, the ugliness and pervades of historical patriarchy. Christians were just like everyone else in the treatment of women. They said, women's place is under men.

And we might hear that and encounter that in our workplaces or amongst other Christian friends we have. But I think if we look into church history and see these women, we see that, of course, there may be of instances and there are instances now where people misuse the Bible and twist it to oppress women, to be harsh and uncaring, to silence their voices.

But we see these men and women working in partnership together, men lifting up women, listening to their voices, whilst holding to a really clear understanding of Paul's teaching on the way the church and marriage are structured.

The evidence of the Zell's marriage and other marriages show that patriarchy is a really blunt instrument which doesn't do justice to how Christians were living and how Christians were challenging the wrong things in their cultures and bringing change.

[34 : 02] Matthias Zell was a husband who worked with Katharina in partnership following Paul's commands to love his wife. So there are just a few quick lessons from Katharina's life and Matthias' life before we move on to our final group of women.

Their hospitality is amazing. And I think this is we read about other women in the Reformation and they were doing the same thing. Today we live very privatised lives, don't we, individual lives. We close our front doors and we think we're safe and we can get on with our own thing. But that's not how Katharina and Matthias lived. And maybe we need to reassess how we use our homes and open them to other people.

But it wasn't just her home that she opened, it was her heart, I think. She opened her heart to welcoming people she disagreed with for the sake of the gospel. It might have been at times she crossed the boundary, maybe she was unwise at times, but it came from a desire to dignify others, to be compassionate, to read people in good faith in the best light and a desire to build unity, not reinforce division.

And then Katharina spoke out. She was a bold woman, but she was also a humble woman. when she argued for unity, once she described herself as Balaam's ass, she said, don't treat me like Elizabeth or Mary, those women who spoke beautifully in the Bible.

[35 : 30] I'm like the donkey. I'm like the donkey, so just tolerate me. Don't think that I'm bigger than I am. She wasn't trying to promote herself.

She was speaking humbly. She was opening herself out to have her words discussed and argued over. But we do need to do the same, to let our voices be heard, to speak humbly, to share our ideas with our church leaders, with each other, with people.

Let our voice be heard. Study and so be wise and so speak. And now we're going to jump really quickly, I'm conscious of time, running on, and look at another location.

Not a thousand years this time, we're going about 500 years, 400 years, to the early 20th century and two different continents. We're going to think about India. And this time, I'm not going to look at one woman, but I'm going to look at a group of women and actually a group of women as an example of many other groups of women.

400 years, loads of technological progress, but actually quite slow gospel progress in this time because we see the gospel in the Reformation in Germany, in Europe, in England and Scotland, and crossing the Atlantic in America.

[36 : 50] But a slowness to think about people outside there, people who've not heard the gospel. That really changes in the later 18th century as the modern missionary movement starts.

Ironically, it's Catholics who've been doing, actually going and travelling. Catholics going to China and going to Africa and going to India to go and spread news of Christ.

But Protestants, with the exciting, liberating news of free grace, have been slow to do that. It changed in the 18th century and that's what a lot of my close strength is about.

But I'm going to jump on to see later on in this process and think about the early 20th century and what was happening then.

Outside the church today, we can look and hear, and I'm an English teacher. I teach A-level English, as Ali said, and I have to teach post-colonial texts and we talk about colonisation and the real harm that colonisation had done.

[37 : 54] So today, scholars, teachers, in the classroom, it's very common to hear, mission, just part of colonisation. People going out from Western Europe, from America to other places, that's just imposing Western values.

It's part of an oppressive colonisation. It's dangerous and actually, it's rolled up together with wrong attitudes to women. Writers, the woman that I just quoted, Beth Allison Barr, associates patriarchy, the rule of women by men, with racism and colonialism, the rule of one group over another.

They're all wrong. They're all integrated and tied together. It's all about superiority and oppression.

They're a toxic mix. But if we, the women I want to look at today, now, in India, really challenge that notion, they just show that following the Lord's teaching on what it is to be a woman, following the gospel call to go out to all nations is far from oppressive and colonial and patriarchal.

Actually, it's beautiful and liberating. So, as it says, the head, Zinana women. We can read now a lot of documents, a lot of stories.

Actually, a friend of mine, Julia Jones, wrote a book. I should have brought it up. I was travelling by train. All about the stories of the Zinana women, which began in the mid-19th century and carried on.

[39 : 29] And actually, they were, the policies, the ideas that were used here actually stem from the ideas of a really pioneering woman called Ellen Ranyard, who is in my book. The ideas that she began were used then in India and other places.

So, what is the Zinana? The Zinana is quite an old-fashioned word today, but describes the female space in Muslim households. And also, it was also used to talk about Hindu households, where women were also restricted to their homes.

Women in the Zinana could only speak to men that they were related to, they couldn't often, they couldn't leave the home if they were wealthy, particularly in the Hindu religion at that point.

They've been kind of abolished now in India, but the caste system kind of still exists there. They were an idea of castes, different, more than class, but different groups. We had different ranks in society from the untouchables down below who had to do the dirtiest work to the Brahmins, the priestly caste, who were really high up and elevated.

Those in higher castes, Hindu homes, were women restricted to their homes. The same idea was operating actually in this period in the 19th and early 20th century in China, in other eastern countries.

[40 : 45] And as mission work was developed, it was realised that a male missionary could never reach those women. He could never be allowed to speak to them. Mission was ineffective unless women went out.

And this led to an active recruitment of women to go to the mission field. Not just wives, but single women as well. And by the end of the 19th century, there were more female missionaries than there were male missionaries.

More women who'd answered that call to go, to give up everything, to leave their families, to travel on a boat, maybe taking months to get to where they were going to, and possibly with the idea in the 19th century, certainly, of maybe never going back.

A huge sacrifice. And women of all classes were doing this. It was often, sometimes it was highly educated, wealthy women who left their homes. Sometimes it was maids, women in service who had been doing very menial work.

They went out to different places to serve because of what their soft hearts were moved by the stories, by the fundraising, by the call to go.

[41 : 54] And one of those women was Winifred Booth, and we're going to think about her work today. So she was actually born in India, in what's now Chennai, was then Madras, to an Anglo-English family.

That means they'd been there in India for generations. It seems that she was converted when she was about seven, and her family had been travelling and they got stuck in a monsoon storm, and they had to stay in a traveller's hut.

In that traveller's hut, which was really common, there was like a shrine, a shrine to a Hindu deity, and she was absolutely terrified, absolutely terrified of this kind of statue of this god.

But as she was lying awake, unable to sleep, scared, she heard, as if spoken out loud, the verse from Psalm 135, eyes they have, but they see not.

And she thought, that's it. I don't need to be scared of this idol, it's not real. And she put her faith in the true god, the one who has eyes and sees, the one who has not physical eyes, but who sees, that brought her comfort.

[42 : 57] And as a young woman, she met a missionary called Ernest Booth, and they got married. And her experience of Hinduism, as well as her excellence in the language, the Tamil language in South India, was perfect preparation.

She actually had much better Tamil than he had. But he was a real partner and champion of her work. He would go out and preach in the open air, and travel around to villages.

Her job was to go into the homes where men couldn't go and speak to women. They were ideally suited and their marriage, their partnership in this, was replicated in all over India and even in China as well.

He fully backed her work. In 1906, he told the missionary organisation, if the women, that is the Indian women, if the Indian women were one, they'd wield an influence that the missionary never would.

If the women were one, they would wield an influence and missionary never would. He thought his wife going to speak to the women was so important because those women who heard and believed would then go on to share with other women and they would teach their children.

[44 : 08] He was convinced that indigenous evangelism, the evangelism of the local people, was far, far more powerful than that of the incomer, that of the person who's travelled overseas.

Rather than clinging on to their own power, what these missionaries wanted to do was to give it away. That's so anti-colonial, isn't it? They wanted to give power, give the gospel, because the gospel is power, give that to the Indian people so that the gospel would grow.

They were prepared to become less so that others would become greater and greater in Christ. And so, as I mentioned, Winifred was following the model which had been begun by Ellen Ranyard in the slums of the East End of London.

And the model was called the Bible Women. What they did was to train up local women, to train up women who were often poor, to teach them, to teach them literacy, to teach them the Bible, and to give them what they needed so that those women would go out and reach other women.

And so, they would work together in partnership as groups. The white woman often training and teaching, standing back a bit, encouraging and supporting the local women to go out.

[45 : 25] One of these was called, I've got to pronounce this right, Arso Vatha, and she was the first person to be converted under Winifred's husband's mission. And she went out to those homes, teaching girls to read, visiting them regularly, taking tracts, speaking of Jesus.

They would sit down in the women's quarters and would be accepted in a way that the white women, who might be treated with honour, but might not be listened to in the same way.

And actually, what's also interesting, that quite often there were very elderly men who would be allowed to sit in the women's quarters. Other men might come and just listen through the screens.

They were speaking to the women, but other people were eavesdropping.

The women would also get onto the streets to drinking fountains and bazaars and speak to women there, taking tracts, singing songs, engaging people in conversation. And eventually, they also wanted to set up schools.

So in the village that the Booths had gone to, they set up a school for the very poor women, girls from the lower castes. The government, the governors, were supportive of these schools.

[46 : 32] And when the girls left, they would be able to, rather than just doing the really dirty work, what they could go is then go and be maids. And what they would do, again, it's this multiplying ministry. Those girls who'd been in the mission schools could go then, rather than working in the fields, go into the homes, work as maids, but take the literacy, being able to teach other people to read, and teach the Bible as they taught literacy.

So partnership existed across castes, across racial divisions, across backgrounds for the sake of the gospel. But it wasn't easy because it might be easy to think that, oh, this is a colonial period. There was very serious control by the British Empire, and the Indians were very subservient. But actually, from the late 19th century into the 20th century, the independence movement was really growing, and there was real resentment towards the British.

One man said to a missionary, the time has gone by when Hindus were willing and anxious to hear and copy Western ideas. There's no need for you to come. There was a resistance, and that would often break out into violence.

The missionaries were murdered, and often preachers would have stones or dung thrown at them as they were preaching in the open air. Mobs can be stirred up.

[47 : 54] And here again is where women were in a good position, because a white woman was treated with a bit more respect and dignity, would be less likely to be attacked and have reprisals, so that they, and also the Indian women again could move freely and talk, although they themselves were seen, ah, you're just on our oppressor's side, and they could be resisted by that way.

The missionaries were in a tricky position. They were not, they were looked down on by the colonial rulers, often. They lived in out-of-the-way places because they kept on trying to go and increase the mission, going further and further away from the big cities, into village after village, trying to make progress.

So they were excluded from the Raj, from the Indian rulers, but they also, they were white, they were different. And if you look at pictures, that picture's far too small for you to see, I think, but they were, they actually held on to some of their customs.

They wore British clothes, which I think is slightly odd, given that they were operating often in 50 degree heat. Extraordinary to think of how they coped with all those layers.

They were a bit sniffy about some of the Indian food. So they were not fully embracing a mission mentality that meant they were trying to be the same as the Indians.

[49 : 21] And life was hard with them because of that. But they were doing their best. They were seeking to work out what it meant to serve and to love and to care for the people that they had gone to.

They carried prejudices with them, just as we all do. They had blind spots, as we do. But what they did recognise was that Hinduism was bondage.

It kept people in darkness. And it particularly oppressed women, not just keeping them within the Zinana, but also forced marriage, marrying off very young girls, often selling girls, unwanted children, to be in temples, sometimes into prostitution.

For Muslim women, they were heavily veiled when they went outside. They had very little contact with the outside world. Booth, Winifred's husband, said the moral standing of any religion might be estimated by its attitude toward women.

The moral standing of any religion might be estimated towards its attitude towards women. He was saying, you can look at any religion and see how they treat the women.

[50 : 35] That's amazing. He was writing that in the early 20th century. We can say exactly the same today now. But we can say more than religion, we can look at any culture and see how they treat women.

Let's judge our cultures, judge our religions on women. The culture that we live in today says this is the best time, this is the best way to treat women, but look how they treat women today.

We know that in the church that women are elevated and encouraged or should be. In the secular world today, they are often fed lies, that they are not protected, that they are rendered vulnerable, and they struggle and they suffer because of it.

Judge society and the way they treat women. Look at Jesus and see how he treated women and we will love him all the more, won't we? So Winifred's ministry grew and grew.

She had two children, she had to leave her second child behind in England when he was just a very little boy because he was so ill they knew he wouldn't survive in the Indian climate. She struggled and suffered but she kept on going, recruiting more and more Bible women, crying out for British women to go.

[51 : 48] So there were others who joined them, women who were trained in medicine brilliantly at this period as education was expanding and expanding for women. Christian women were using that, getting trained in medicine, in languages and education so that they could go and use those gifts in the mission field.

Winifred and all the women who were with her suffered the hardship of leaving children behind, of severe illness, plague was still at large in India, there was cholera and other kinds of horrible things and the heat brought intense suffering.

Sometimes they lived in tents, sometimes they lived in just one-room houses and still wore those clothes. Which is incredible. Winifred lived and labored in India for decades.

She herself died in 1942. She was still committed at the end of her life to her lord and her people. She saw her people were the people of Tamil Nadu in the southern state of India.

So what do those women, those Zinala women, teach us? That partnership can happen in the most unlikely places if it's focused on the Lord Jesus. The partnership works best to bring strategies.

[53 : 04] When we work together we can plan, we can be strategic in reaching out with the gospel. The Zinala women, not just the British women but also the Indian women, challenge us to leave our comfort zone.

The Indian women left their religion, they often were rejected by their families. So the British women left their homes. They left their comfort zones for the sake of the gospel so they could share with Jesus.

They crossed cultural boundaries. And that's not easy is it? Forming partnerships, working with women who are so unlike us. But that's what they did for the sake of the gospel. I think if we go back and think about what we just read in Ephesians 4, Paul's picture of the church is a church of expansion, a church of growth, a number of growth and maturity, and a church which is bound to gather in Christ, he says at the end, we are to grow in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it's equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

And that's what I want to leave us with today, to this vision of a church which is growing, in which we are all part, we have a part to play, a part where we can bring change and growth, as we ourselves submit ourselves to Christ and seek to work in partnership with others.

We are part of this, as Ali read, the great cloud of witnesses, we are joined together with them, part of the universal body of Christ. And I think that's a really exciting place to be, isn't it?

[54 : 47] It's really rejuvenating to look and go, we are sisters together, we are united together, with Macrina, with Katharina Zell, with those Zunana women, women from all kinds of places and different backgrounds, but we share together with the mission that we've been given to honour Christ, to love him, to grow in him, and to be built more and more into his likeness, as a church is built more and more into his likeness.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for the privilege to be together, thank you that this is such a special thing, that we have the freedom now to meet and gather in such numbers, when sisters around across the world have to meet in twos, or in fear, or in anxiety, thank you that you've given us this freedom, Lord, we pray that you'd help us to use it, to partner together, to build each other up, to share the gospel with those who don't yet know it, to work with men and partner with them in building the church, and we pray, Lord, this for the glory of your name, and for the day when you will come in glory, in Jesus' name, Amen.