

WIVES, DAUGHTERS, HUMANS: THE MISTREATMENT OF WOMEN  
IN THE MODERN EVANGELICAL CHURCH

by

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## Introduction

A sticker on my large, rolling toolbox reads: “A well-read woman is a dangerous creature.”<sup>1</sup> This piece of printed vinyl represents my appreciation for strong, intelligent women who persevered through centuries of oppression and unjust sexism, where the term *educated woman* was an oxymoron. In order to receive the rights they should have had by birth, women who were discouraged from seeking an education pioneered feminism and the women’s rights movements. Today, we live in a nation where women outnumber men in post-secondary education<sup>2</sup> and where most people consider men and women equal—most people.

The Christian church has historically been on the conservative side of feminist history. When the New Testament is read from a Christian Fundamentalist<sup>3</sup> perspective, passages such as 1 Cor 14:34 and 1 Tim 2:11-12 are considered biblical direction for how women are required to behave in church, and 1 Peter 3:1-6 is understood as God’s intention for how a woman is required to behave and appear when in the presence of her husband (or men in general). In light of this fundamentalist faith, author and professor Alice Matthews reminds us that we need to be careful not to read what was written in the Bible as *descriptive* (in a specific situation) as *prescriptive* (for all times, places, and people).<sup>4</sup>

So, it is in the discomfort between a feminist culture and a historical patriarchal theology that the Christian church presently sits. Many denominations now understand scripture in a more gender-affirming way and have welcomed women as equals with men; however, misogyny and

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<sup>1</sup> Kleypas, *A Wallflower Christmas*, 91.

<sup>2</sup> As of 2016, U.S. women represented those receiving 64 percent of associate degrees, 60 percent of bachelor’s, 63 percent of master’s and 56 percent of doctorate degrees—Journal, Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, National. “Race? No, Millennials Care Most About Gender Equality.” *The Atlantic*, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/10/race-no-millennials-care-most-about-gender-equality/430305/>.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Fundamentalism is a movement from the twentieth-century protestant church, which teaches a literal reading of scripture as fundamental to their life and faith.

<sup>4</sup> Matthews, *Gender Roles and the People of God*, 139.

patriarchy are still loudly preached by fundamentalists online, in church and in print. This, book-ended by years of churches covering up and defending abuse and centuries of patriarchy telling women they are less-than, has caused women to no longer feel safe within Christian sanctuaries and to leave and seek God elsewhere. In our feminist culture, can those in the Christian church practice their faith Biblically *and* find, in the church, a place where women and girls are accepted, loved, and valued for who God created them to be?

Feminism and patriarchy are enormous topics which cover a wide breadth of secular and religious history and of which libraries of books and articles have been written. Although I come to this research with an egalitarian bias, this research paper is not to argue for or against specific perspectives on how women are called to live their life in the Christian church.<sup>5</sup> Its purpose is to explore how the diverse feminist and patriarchal Christian perspectives have affected women inside and outside the church, what has been done right and wrong regarding how the Church has treated women, and how the Church can work toward mending broken trust and creating new relationships with women from here on in.

### **Half the Church, Half the Body of Christ**

In 1913, Millicent Fawcett, a women's suffrage movement leader, claimed: "Other movements towards freedom have aimed at raising the status of a comparatively small group or class. But the

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<sup>5</sup> I do not believe women's behaviour is to be viewed as an issue resulting in salvation or damnation. Egalitarianism and Complementarianism are the two main perspectives regarding how women are viewed in the Protestant church. I believe that women were created as individuals with as many unique qualities and abilities as men socially, privately, and religiously. I believe that any action that forces women to behave in a way that goes against who God created them to be is non-biblical in nature. This means that if a woman believes in a life lived in submission to a loving and generous husband, that should be supported, as should the lifestyles of women who believe God created men and women equal and in full submission to each other. This, however, should never be a lifestyle which is religiously or privately forced on an individual, and no lifestyle should ever lead to an abusive marriage or hide abuses occurring within a family. The topic of submission versus subjugation, discussed later in this paper, will explore this topic more.

women’s movement aims at nothing less than raising the status of an entire sex—half the human race—to lift it up to the freedom and value of womanhood.”<sup>6</sup> As Christians, we need to remember that half of the human race is also half the church and in 1 Cor 12:12-26, Paul teaches us that the church is the body of Christ. As a part of the body, each person is suited to a unique job for which God created them. Only through men and women working together, uplifting one another and encouraging each other in our unique gifts from God can the body of Christ thrive.

Human beings were created in the *imago dei*, the “image of God,” and so as image bearers of our creator, Paul’s imagery of the body of Christ is stunning. However, a division has caused half the body to feel unwanted and useless. This division is rooted in patriarchy. Feminist theology states that as the *imago dei*, women are not subordinate to men but equivalent to them, and so sexism and patriarchy are not only sinful and oppressive but blasphemous.<sup>7</sup>

Fundamentalists, however, view God as the “great patriarch” and believe men, as representations of God, are the “head” of women.<sup>8</sup> The question is, even if men are to be considered the head of God’s church and the head of Christ’s body, does that give them the right to demand what part women play in the body? And does God place a higher value on the “head” as opposed to the other parts of the body of Christ?

First Corinthians 12:24b-25 (NIV, emphasis added) reads, “But *God* has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it,<sup>25</sup> so that there should be *no division* in the body, but that its parts should have *equal concern for each other*.” Not only has God placed each part where it ought to be, but he has also given honour to avoid divisions and promote equality within all parts. Paul is saying that God chooses what each person will do within the

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<sup>6</sup> Hannam, *Feminism*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Weidman, ed., *Christian Feminism*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Weidman, ed., *Christian Feminism*, 9.

church, not man. As image bearers and equals, both men and women are called to be who God created them to be, whether that is a parent, in a career, in ministry, or something else. For the health of the church, the entire body needs to be thriving and valued, but in fundamentalist congregations, women are struggling to understand how to thrive.

### **Patriarchy and the Church**

So, did patriarchy start in culture or the church? Although historically the church has clung to the household codes of the first century CE, documents written by the (non-Christian) philosopher Xenophon (431-354 BCE) in the fourth century BCE outline the duties his wife was expected to perform.<sup>9</sup> These included managing the household budget and enslaved people, laying out his clothing and controlling herself publicly so as not to bring shame upon him. Other requirements of women were silence, modesty, self-control, obedience to husbands, and faithfulness as a mother.

Although many biblical texts also relay and uphold these same messages, it should be considered that the New Testament writers were speaking descriptively and not prescriptively, acknowledging the culture they were writing to but not teaching that culture as the ideal for all time to come. However, despite the Roman expectations of women at this time, New Testament women in the church were rarely adherent to these codes. They were often in positions of authority and leadership. Women like Nympha (Col 4:15), Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Priscilla and Aquilla (1 Cor 16:19), Junia (Rom 16:7), Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom 16:6-12), and Julia (Rom 16:15).<sup>10</sup> These women were going against everything the household codes laid out

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<sup>9</sup> Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 150–51.

<sup>10</sup> Maier, *New Testament Christianity*, 152–53.

for women, and still, Paul encouraged and spoke highly of them. This is an example of how women should be celebrated in the church today using their gifts to spread the Gospel.

### **Feminism and the Church**

There have been many misconceptions regarding Christianity's relationship with feminism from both sides of the argument. Some secular feminists believe that Christians are "brainwashed apologists" for the patriarchy, incapable of fighting for women's rights, and some fundamentalist Christian denominations believe that because feminists aim to enhance women's status in society and the home, they are incapable of having an authentic, Bible-believing faith.<sup>11</sup> Each of these arguments is based on assumptions and misconceptions and ignores the reality of those who would identify themselves as Christian Feminists.

Thanks to first-wave feminist movements in the mid-nineteenth century, women began to be seen behind pulpits in North American churches. More specifically, however, *Christian feminism* has its roots in second-wave feminism. During the mid-1960s increasing numbers of feminist articles speaking out against gender inequality in the church and home were printed in popular Christian magazines, leading conservative church leaders to speak out against what they saw as an attack on "timeless Biblical principles," rejecting the God-given authority of men.<sup>12</sup> By the 1970s, Christian feminists realized that to be taken seriously in the church, they needed to move away from simply applying secular feminism to Christianity, so they began to organize and apply biblical knowledge to their teaching of gender equality.<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Ruether (1936-

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<sup>11</sup> Braude, "A Religious Feminist—Who Can Find Her?," 559.

<sup>12</sup> Gallagher, "The Marginalization of Evangelical Feminism," 222.

<sup>13</sup> Hassey, "A Brief History of Christian Feminism," 4.

2022) was a Roman Catholic theologian and feminist scholar who beautifully explained the importance of Christian feminism (feminist theology<sup>14</sup>) as follows:

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women . . . Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption.<sup>15</sup>

Ruether's quote should be the guiding light by which we view women in the Christian church. She speaks of the "full humanity of women" as a right which should be lived out, reminding me of Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus does not admonish Mary for choosing to be educated at the feet of Jesus, nor does he scold Martha for choosing to be the host, fulfilling the culturally feminine expectation of the time. However, Jesus refuses to remove the choice from Mary when Martha complains, stating, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:42). The ability of a woman to choose how she lives her life then, is not only upheld biblically but from the mouth of Jesus himself.

### **Subjugation Versus Submission**

Submission and subjugation are terms which, although seemingly similar, are vastly different. According to the Oxford Dictionary online, *subjugation* is the action of bringing someone or something under domination or control—to conquer—and *submission* is the action of accepting or yielding to a superior force or the will of another person. Although both words place someone

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<sup>14</sup> The term *feminist theology* is sometimes used interchangeably with the term *Christian Feminism*. Although the term *feminist theology* is primarily used in Christianity, it is an umbrella term, used by many religions to understand their historically patriarchal faith from a feminist perspective, whereas *Christian feminism* is a specifically Christian term, and represents the Christian feminist movement that began alongside first and second-wave feminism. Rosemary Ruether uses the term *feminist theology*, hence its use in this context.

<sup>15</sup> Slee, "An Introduction to Feminist Theology | Student Christian Movement."

in a subordinate position, submission is an act one chooses for themselves, and subjugation is enacted upon someone against their will. Although the word submission is used in the Bible when speaking of women's actions, the word subjugation is not.

Biblically, subjugation is used to speak of the overtaking of land or peoples through war or other means of force.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, submission is always spoken of in mutual relationship: all must submit to God (Jas 4:7) and to one another (Eph 5:21) and the government (Rom 13:1), wives to husbands (Col 3:18), young men to elders (1 Pet 5:5) and servants to masters (1 Pet 2:18). Of these listed passages, only slaves are told to remain submissive to those who treat them harshly. However, in other passages, such as Col 4:1, clear direction is given for masters to treat enslaved people justly and fairly, "realizing that you too have a Master in heaven." Because of the harsh nature of the master spoken of in 1 Pet 2:18 it is assumed that the enslaved person is a Christian serving within a non-Christian household and is therefore called to be submissive in love, even in harsh conditions, and to be an example of the love of Christ to his master.<sup>17</sup> Submission, divorced from love, is not Godly submission.<sup>18</sup>

Specifically speaking of submission within a marriage, it must be understood as part of our submission to the Lord, exemplified by Christ and his relationship with the church.<sup>19</sup> Authority within a marriage is not given to the husband to lord over his wife, nor a wife over her husband. Authority, as seen in 1 Cor 7:4, is assigned to each and is only ever reciprocal, practiced in love and loyalty with one another.<sup>20</sup> Submission itself should not be understood as a negative concept, and every human, male and female, is called to be submissive to others and

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<sup>16</sup> Num 32:22, 32:29, Judges 8:28, Isa 10:13, 11:14, Jer 34:16

<sup>17</sup> Barton, ed., *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1266–67.

<sup>18</sup> Baloyi, "Biblical Exegesis of Headship," 9.

<sup>19</sup> Baloyi, "Biblical Exegesis of Headship," 9.

<sup>20</sup> Baloyi, "Biblical Exegesis of Headship," 7.



God in love. However, when forcefully implemented as subjugation to make others inferior to oneself, submission becomes abusive and is not a Christian practice.

### **Women's Issues with the Twenty-First Century Church**

Feminism has brought many changes to our twenty-first-century culture over the past one hundred years. From voting and education rights to bodily autonomy and standing up to abuse, women are finally seeing the results from the hard-won battles of our female forebears. We will now look at how these changes have affected women's lives in the twenty-first century and whether the Christian church has grown alongside women through these changes.

Women, although half of the biological makeup of the world, have long since been the majority attendees in the Christian church. However, this is changing. According to Pew Research, in the mid-1980s, 38 percent of women and 25 percent of men attended church at least once a week. But by 2012, while men did experience a 3-point drop to 22 percent, women's regular attendance dropped by 10 points to 28 percent.<sup>21</sup> Let's look at some of the most common reasons for this occurrence in recent years.

First, let's consider that single women are the most likely group to leave Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Much of this is because many churches promote and exhort marriage as God's ideal design for humankind. Women who do not find themselves within this category (by choice or circumstance) feel discarded, isolated and without support. Single women in the church are often viewed as "intimidating" as many focus their lives on their careers instead of a family.<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>21</sup> Earls, "Church Attendance."

<sup>22</sup> Gaddini, "Large Number of Single Women."

<sup>23</sup> Gaddini, "Large Number of Single Women."

leads to further isolation and rejection from those in the church, leading single adult women to leave the church and find a support community elsewhere.

Regarding denominations within the Christian faith, Protestant Evangelicals are the least supportive of women working outside the home. Considering that women are now more likely to graduate with post-secondary degrees than men and marry at an average age of almost 32 years old (an 8.5-year increase since 1971), it is evident that women are choosing to establish their careers before settling down in a marriage.<sup>24</sup>

According to Pew Research, millennials have seen the highest drop in religious association with the Christian church. From 2009 to 2019, millennials saw a 16-point drop from 65 percent to 49 percent. The idea of being a stay-at-home wife and mother after marriage is becoming less and less appealing to women of younger generations, such as millennials. Their generation experienced being raised in families where parents sharing the household duties equally.<sup>25</sup> Millennials demand a balance between work and life and an equal division of responsibilities for both sexes. Gender equality is paramount to millennials,<sup>26</sup> and churches that cannot find a way to support and uplift young, educated couples due to patriarchal belief structures will see the younger generations in their congregations continue to dwindle.

One of the strangest statistics is that even though women are leaving the church at high rates, they are still considering themselves as Christians.<sup>27</sup> According to Pew Research, in 2019, 69 percent of religious women identified as Christian, but only 50 percent<sup>28</sup> attended service at least once a month.<sup>29</sup> Despite evidence showing that those who attend church regularly have

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<sup>24</sup> Canadian Press, "Census Data."

<sup>25</sup> Winograd and Hais, "Race?"

<sup>26</sup> Winograd and Hais, "Race?"

<sup>27</sup> Andersen, *Reason to Return*, part 1, chapter 1, location 1:35.

<sup>28</sup> Religious affiliations were not specified, and therefore the number of Christians who attend services would, in reality, be lower than 50 percent.

<sup>29</sup> Pew Research, *Trends in Religious Composition*, 4, 31.

lower rates of depression and higher rates of happiness, women continue to abandon the church but not their faith.<sup>30</sup> Could it be that women recognize that patriarchy, misogyny and abuse are not of God, but at the same time, do not feel safe or valued within the Christian church?

Sexual abuse cases within the evangelical church have made headlines across the globe. Not only are male leaders sexually victimizing women under their pastoral care, but church leaders are covering it up when it does. “Damage control” is more important than those in the wrong being held accountable. Is this the message the church wants to be sending to women? Any quick Google search will bring up story after story of high-profile preachers and churches marred by indiscretions, abuse, and misogyny that has come to light and spread like wildfire on social media and the news. Stories like that of John MacArthur, who defended an abuser while excommunicating the abused because she refused to stay in a violent and dangerous marriage.<sup>31</sup> There are “top ten” lists of the “Worst Evangelical Sex Scandals,” listed like top 40 songs,<sup>32</sup> and denominations are kicking out some of the largest churches in the country over nothing more than the hiring of female pastors.<sup>33</sup> Sexual abuse by clergy has become such an issue that women in the church have appropriated the #metoo slogan into #churchtoo, calling out sexual predators and bringing the problem to the forefront of not only the church but culture in general.

### **The World is Watching**

I believe the late Rachel Held Evans said it best when she wrote, “. . . patriarchy isn’t about protecting women; it’s about protecting men. It’s about preserving male rule over the home,

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<sup>30</sup> Andersen, *Reason to Return*, loc. 3:30.

<sup>31</sup> Roys, “MacArthur Shamed.”

<sup>32</sup> Poletti, “Top 10 Evangelical Sex Scandals of 2022.”

<sup>33</sup> Marcotte, “Saga at Saddleback.”

church, and society, often at the expense of women.”<sup>34</sup> Patriarchy places women in subjugation to their husbands with no recourse when they become the next victim. We live in a nation that has seen women fight for a century, so they no longer need to live in fear, yet under the guise of “religion,” abuse is passed off as Biblical.

The Jesus we worship never lifted a finger to harm or accuse a woman, never told her to “Go home,” and never used his position and power to demand that she serve him, or degrade her so he was uplifted. Instead, he protected the one others found guilty, healed the one others deemed unclean and defended the one who chose to sit at his feet and learn while the housekeeping was laid aside. If we acknowledge that Jesus is God and that he was incarnated and lived as a perfect example of how *we* should live, why are more men not willing to look to Jesus as an example? Why are the culturally contextual words of Paul and Timothy more valuable than the living example of our Lord and Savior?

Not all women will want to live feminist lives, receive their doctoral degrees or become church pastors, and that is okay—homemakers and stay-at-home moms are just as important to our societies and churches. But that choice should not lie with one's husband or the church. I believe those who understand the scriptures that way are taking verses out of context and piecing together their own convenient version of the theology that works for them. This reflects poorly on those within the church and incorrectly represents the church to those outside it. Instead of forcing women into unnecessary submission, men in the church should mimic the loving submission of Jesus, protecting and advocating for women as he did. If men in the church are able to do this for long enough, perhaps women may eventually feel safe returning to the church.

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<sup>34</sup> Held Evans, “Patriarchy Doesn’t ‘Protect’ Women.”

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