Biblical Feminism

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO SEXISM

by Gretchen Gaebelein Hull

Gretchen Gaebelein Hull is a member of the CBE Board, and is author of Equal to Serve (available from the CBE Book Service). This article first appeared in the ESA Advocate, October 1990.

Actor Alan Alda once described a feminist as someone who likes women. Even such a simple description implies the basic aim of the women’s movement: that women be accepted as full and equal human beings.

A more precise definition terms feminism “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes,” with the secondary meaning being “organized activity on behalf of women’s rights and interests” (Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, 1974).

The feminist movement is not new—nor is its connection with biblical principles. The first U.S. women’s rights convention, held in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, was an outgrowth of both the religious revivalist and abolitionist movements. Many of these women had a renewed desire to study Scripture and were quick to see the parallels between slavery and female subordination.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist movements also proliferated abroad, most notably in England, and there has been an International Women’s Day every March since 1910.

Feminism has secured important benefits in the Western world, such as equal educational opportunities for women, better health care (including prenatal and maternal care), women’s suffrage, more equitable job opportunities, and many other gains U.S. women often take for granted. Yet the social, medical, and educational needs of poverty-level women still come last on society’s agenda. Too often women are reduced to objects by the burgeoning pornography industry and escalating media violence against women. Many Christians remain sadly ignorant of the appalling statistics on wife abuse, incest, and rape and are unaware of the feminization of poverty right here in the United States of America.

Globally, conditions for women remain bleak. Consider this brief sampling of misogynist practices: In some Asian countries, women are bought and sold, and can be treated as domestic animals. In India, brides with insufficient dowries can be burned to death to free the husband to marry a more affluent wife. In many African countries, women suffer painful ritual genital mutilation. In various Muslim countries, women are denied education in order that they may be more easily exploited economically. Worldwide, women grow most of the food supply but have little say in how the food is distributed—and are themselves the last to be fed.

This discrimination against women is an unconscious product of cultural conditioning and is often perpetrated by persons unaware of the nature of their sexist acts. But it is too simple to say that misogyny (or anti-feminism or sexism) is dislike or hatred of women. Rather, anti-feminism is any teaching or practice that denies political, economic, and social equality to women. In the spiritual realm, anti-feminism is any teaching or practice that diminishes women’s standing as full children of God and limits their opportunities to use their God-given gifts to serve their Savior.
Feminism's legitimate battle to achieve fair treatment for women is far from won. Sexism, which is discrimination against women solely on account of their gender, is an evil God's people can no longer ignore.

A Human-Rights Concern

God's Word grants us rights on both physical and spiritual levels. All human beings of whatever race, class, age, or gender have a God-given right to life and thus to the basic necessities that preserve and enhance life. Discrimination against women can never be justified.

The Bible also teaches that we have spiritual rights. The self-revelation of God in both the written Word and the incarnate Word gives us the right to know God, the right to respond to God's redemptive plan, and—once born again—the right to follow as God calls. Any limitation of women's spiritual rights cannot be justified.

Although many Christians prefer to ignore or avoid this global problem, sexism is a human-rights issue in both the earthly and spiritual realms. People of good will can no longer sweep this (or any form of discrimination) under the rug of cultural mores or legalistic traditions. As long as sexism remains, feminism must continue to fight misogynist acts. Thus, for the person seeking to promote justice for all human beings, the question is not whether to support feminism but rather what kind of feminism to support.

What is Biblical Feminism?

Secular feminism can take many different forms and be guided by many different philosophies as its supporters seek to develop a society in which women are free to achieve their full potential. But persons who term themselves biblical feminists make a significant break with the secularists' approach. Secular feminism centers around competing for equal rights; biblical feminism centers around creating equal opportunities to serve. The secular feminist says, "I am entitled to compete on an equal basis with men." The biblical feminist says, "I seek the freedom to follow Christ as he calls me to use my gifts in God's service."

Sadly, feminism (or any "ism") without Christ can end up as just another power struggle. Biblical feminists, however, want to explore their convictions about equality of women based on biblical teachings, to implement their findings according to biblical guidelines, and to use biblical methods of conflict resolution. Therefore it will be within scriptural parameters that biblical feminists promote a climate in which women are free to act as equal human beings—and where Christian women can enter into their full inheritance as equal children of God.

Biblical feminists see feminism not only as a social-justice issue but also as an issue of religious freedom. To the goals of political, economic, and societal equality of the sexes, biblical feminists add religious equality. Thus biblical feminists bring the whole scope of Scripture to bear upon discrimination against women; they submit sexist problems in society, church, and family (which we will examine in subsequent articles) first of all to the light of God's Word.

The Goal of Biblical Feminism

Biblical feminists believe that Scripture affirms the worth and value of men and women equally—and that all who have accepted Christ's offer of new life should have equal opportunity to serve God. They take seriously Paul's statement that "there is neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Biblical feminists advocate partnership, not competition; mutual submission, not dominion by one sex over the other; the priesthood of all believers, not a male hierarchy.

However, in rejecting the traditionalists' patriarchal teaching that male is norm, biblical feminists also reject any reactionary matriarchal notion that female is norm. For biblical feminists, only Christ is norm.

We believe that being rooted and grounded in Christ (Col. 2:7), aiming to grow up into the fullness and stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13), and seeking to serve as Christ commands us to serve (John 13:13-17, 13:34-35) must mean following Christ's example of giving up one's rights for others (Phil. 2:3-8, Mark 10:42-45). Any limitation or denial of the human rights of women cannot be reconciled with Christ's clear call to take up our cross and follow him.

For biblical feminists, Calvary is both the leveling agent and the great unifying agent. We are all the same at the foot of the cross, all equally needy of the same gift of salvation equally offered to all who believe (John 1:12, I Cor. 5:17). In this larger perspective of our spiritual equality, we who would be Christ's disciples dare not discriminate against our fellow human beings for whom Christ died. When we seek to obey Christ's new command to love as he loved, we find that to Christianize sexism is to end it.