

Redefining the Cultural Narrative of Biblical Womanhood:

A Response to Sarah Bessey's "Jesus Feminist"

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The term *feminism* has claimed quite a controversial connotation, both in today's society at large and in today's church culture. For many, simply hearing the term causes back-of-neck hairs to bristle and forces awkward, drastic attempts at transitioning conversation away from equal pay and violence against women. These topics are messy, and it's hard for anyone discussing them to emerge unscathed – especially anyone who doesn't view feminine oppression as the most pressing issue facing all of humanity. But why do conversations about feminism need to be so fierce? More importantly, what does the term “feminism” mean in any of these contexts? The term encompasses such a wide history of thought that it's impossible to maintain a reasonable back-and-forth without first defining which feminist movement is being discussed.

On one edge of the spectrum lies liberal feminism, which has been at play since Abigail Adams started proposing equality for woman during the American Revolution. This type of feminism doesn't seek to change societal structures, but to integrate women into what already exists by granting them individual freedoms already granted to men (Baehr). On the opposite end lies radical feminism, which spurred out of other mid/late-twentieth century civil rights movements and argues that the oppression of women is a more important issue than racism, classism, etc. Radical feminism seeks to uproot the entire social system, calling for a new societal predisposition regarding woman's potential and an end to any misogyny/patriarchy that has percolated through past traditions into today's thinking (“Radical Feminism”). Marxist/socialist feminism falls close to radical feminism, declaring that women need to overthrow all male-dominated systems entirely to find their inherently deserved freedom. Cultural feminism is also a prevalent movement, focusing on creating a separate, women-focused society, as an entire upheaval of current male-focused living isn't a reasonable goal (“Kinds of Feminism”). Though each of these definitions has its nuance, at the core, these movements

embrace women as important, contributing members of the human race and consequently work towards reflecting that importance in women's political, social, and personal voices.

Similarly, in her book *Jesus Feminist*, Sarah Bessey defines feminism simply as “the radical notion that women are people, too” (13). Most people wouldn't disagree with this conclusion alone, but Bessey takes her argument a step further, making a more controversial claim: If feminism's heart is granting women their personhood, then by Bessey's string of thought, Jesus himself was undoubtedly a feminist. And if Jesus was concerned with women's personhood and consequent rights, then the modern church should follow in their Lord's footsteps, reflecting that concern in Christian culture. Personally, I find Bessey's argument entirely compelling.

Consider the first person to become a Christian missionary, for example. She – that's right, *she* – was fetching water from a well in the heat of the day, during the time she knew all the other women would be off tending to their other chores. She clearly wanted to be alone. She clearly bore some sort of shame that separated her from the rest of the Samaritan community she lived in, and she wanted to be isolated in her shame, for as Jesus was soon to reveal she had “had five husbands, and the one [she now had was] not her husband” (John 4: 17-18, *ESV*). Carrying the burden of her past left her exhausted and parched, so much so that she jumped at Jesus' offer of “living water,” of water that would quench her thirst that she would “never be thirsty again,” water that would become “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14, *ESV*). She was confused by Jesus' cryptic language, and she was confused that this Jewish man would even converse with her, since her Samaritan status should have created an unbridgeable rift between them. Despite her confusion, she knew that he was offering some sort of hope, so she tried to meet Jesus where he was that she might grasp the promise of water, that she would “not be

thirsty or have to come [to this well at this time] to draw water” ever again (John 4:15, *ESV*). She was enticed by the promise of an end to the isolated hurt, so she called Jesus a prophet, as he had seen her past and offered a hopeful future. She then spoke of the Jewish Messiah to come, making it clear that she saw Jesus as a prophet that extended promises, but the Messiah would come and fulfill those promises. Then, for the first time in his ministry, Jesus corrected someone’s understanding of his identity: “I who speak to you am he” (John 4:26, *ESV*).

The first person that Jesus revealed his true Messianic identity to wasn’t a priest, nor was this person Jewish. She was a Samaritan woman, and she responded perfectly. Rather than keeping this precious truth quietly in her heart, she went home to the community that looked down on her and courageously told them about her encounter with Jesus. Because recalling her conversation with Jesus also meant recalling her past shame, this proclamation was not to her own benefit; she did it solely out of the joy that closeness with Christ engendered. The Samaritans who heard her story were shocked both that a stranger had known this woman’s hurt so intimately and that she seemed much lighter having spoken with him. In turn, “many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39, *ESV*). Then, after going to the well to converse with Jesus firsthand, “many more believed” (John 4:41, *ESV*). This woman boldly shared what Christ had done for her, and consequently, Christ was able to do bold things for those she shared with (Atteberry). Undoubtedly, this woman’s initiative is mission work, the first instance of Christian mission.

It would be ridiculous to claim that Jesus chose this woman as the first truth-hearer only to exercise his feminist principles. The focus of the story and of Christianity as a whole is, of course, on Jesus revealing his identity, on Jesus offering hope that satisfies, and on people responding to his hope. Nonetheless, in choosing a Samaritan woman to be a part of such an

important moment in history, Jesus validated her humanity and her potential to accomplish mightily for the Kingdom, giving her a story and a voice to tell it. He validated someone that society often overlooked, just as he did over and over again throughout the Gospels by giving sight to the blind, by causing the lame to walk, by feeding the poor, by healing the bleeding woman, by befriending Zacchaeus, etc. Jesus certainly cared about these people's pasts, but only because he cared about them individually, only because he cared about the way their pasts could find futures as part of his narrative. Neither their identities nor their pasts eliminated them from Christ's use. For Jesus, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female" (Galatians 3:28, *ESV*). While on earth, Jesus saw people, and Jesus worked through people, women included.

And today, Jesus is still using all sorts of demographics to do mission work, women still included. My friend Lisa, for example, founded a sponsorship program similar to Compassion International or World Vision that's specifically tied to the school she teaches at in Ethiopia. My friend Angie went on a yearlong mission trip, hopping from country to country to see what God was up to and how she could help. My friend Natasha started a girls' home in Denver for women who were trying to get back on their feet after fleeing the prostitution industry. There are countless women whose accomplishments fall into the category of stereotypical, church-sanctioned mission work, and one cannot deny that God is blessing their efforts, their ministries, and their lives. Depending on what denomination these women are associated with, they may be permitted to have a spotlight night sometime during the week for their fellow congregation members to hear stories, see photos, and pray for this specific woman and her calling. Sometimes, this sort of spotlight may be permitted to happen within a Sunday church service.

In many churches, however, women are not allowed to speak during a service at all. The most common verse cited to support the silencing of women in the church is 1 Corinthians 14:34-35: “Women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (*ESV*). When read in isolation, as it is above, the thought seems sure and unarguable. But when read in context, the issue doesn’t seem so decisive – not only the context of 1 Corinthians, but the context of the entire Bible, of the whole narrative God has written and is writing through humanity. As Sarah Bessey articulates, “These are not right-or-wrong, black-or-white, yes-or-no sorts of issues. These questions are only answered by abiding in the Vine, searching Scripture, taking wise counsel, praying, and then a bit of holy risk taking” (181). Scripture isn’t a book full of black and white, nor is it a book full of grey. It’s a book full of color, “a grand story, mystery, invitation, truth and wisdom, and a passionate love letter” (56-57).

So when diving into the rainbow that is living into God’s promises and correlated biblical commands, we first find that this verse comes amidst a slew of other specifics for how a church service should be run. Within 1 Corinthians 14, Paul addresses using spiritual gifts, using music in worship, prayer, interpretation of prayer, growing as a congregation, how long services should be, and how women should act within a service, all of which should “be done for building up” the body of Christ (26b, *ESV*). And for every issue except those regarding women, Paul proclaims a resounding *yes*. He encourages all congregation members to orderly exercise their spiritual gifts, to speak in tongues and interpret that speech at appropriate times within the service to bless the entire congregation, to pray aloud, to teach aloud, to encourage aloud, to

prophesy aloud, etc. Then, for a few verses at the end of everything Paul permits, he requires that women keep these gifts to themselves, sitting silently within the service.

However, nowhere in the Bible are certain fruits of the spirit or spiritual gifts associated with a specific gender (Hirsch). Rather, at Pentecost as recounted in Acts, “even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:18, *ESV*). The Holy Spirit has touched every Christian – man and woman alike. Thus, all Christians are called to “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23, *ESV*). Further, because the Holy Spirit is at work in all Christians, all Christians have been dealt a unique spiritual gift for the purpose of glorifying the Spirit in His timing. In fact, Paul explained this in the same letter to the Corinthians:

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:7-11, *ESV*)

So why would Paul first encourage every Christian to lean into his or her unique probings and proddings from the Spirit, aware that the Spirit is probing and prodding both men and women, only to retract his commissioning to women? Remember the verse from Galatians cited earlier in this paper when discussing Jesus’ non-discriminatory approach to ministry, including everyone

no matter class, race, or gender? Those were also Paul's words, so why would he contradict himself?

Perhaps the retraction isn't a blanket rule, something that is to apply in all circumstances for all time. The point of 1 Corinthians 14, after all, isn't to lay out how all church services should be run always and forever, but to offer guidance and restore order to the newly developing Corinthian church, which was trying to assert itself and figure out how to working within the preconceptions its members had been marinated in, having grown up in a deeply patriarchal culture (Bessey 65-66). Consequently, all of Paul's words in this passage, especially those regarding women's silence, were indeed counter cultural and revolutionary for the time and place he spoke into.

This church sprouted during an era where women were uneducated and unvalued outside of their usefulness in the home. Therefore, the fact that women were welcome as members of a congregation, even if they needed to remain silent for the sake of establishing an initial sense of order in the church, was something outside people's notions of gender roles, something that ascribed worth to women and created a space for them exercise that newly spoken worth (Bessey 66). By not banning women from church services entirely, and by encouraging women to listen, to think for themselves, and to ask the questions that emerged from this listening and thinking, Paul was doing something unlike any other religious or cultural institution had ever done. Paul was a Jesus feminist, granting women their inherent personhood in a way that would serve as a most effective first step within the early church culture. "As a follower of Jesus, of course he did. Of course he did" (Bessey 69).

In turn, to truly follow the spirit rather than the letter of Paul's words would be to continue granting women their personhood. Since today's Church exists in a culture where

women are now valued for their minds, for their work outside the home, and for their thoughts, the next step towards granting women their full personhood as Jesus would have is granting women a voice and a validity within the congregation. That's countercultural, and that's what will cause the church to grow the most because it's the natural course of redemption, the natural course of returning the church to it's Eden-like state.

Prior to Eve and Adam's tempting and consequent mistake, women were not silenced, were not delegated to specific areas of work. Rather, Adam and Eve were partners, naming animals and cultivating plants and enjoying the creation God had created for them to enjoy. Then, sin came into play, and "the curse that was laid upon Eve – her desire would be for her husband, and her pain in childbirth would be greatly multiplied – even shows us how patriarchy, subordination, and pain are part of the Fall. They were never God's original intent; they are a consequence of sin" (Bessey 91). Thus, if to truly redeem creation is to seek God's original intent for his creation, then the church should be a place where men and women work together, equally validated in their work, to redeem creation. When women are not allowed to speak, though, the church does not exist in a redeemed state and, in turn, cannot enact redemption as fully as possible (Bessey 68).

When the modern Christian Church holds to Paul's instructions for the new Christian Church in Corinth, which were progressive when he wrote them but have become regressive as history has unfolded, by denying women their voice within the congregation, Christians are "effectively benching half the church in the midst of holy harvest season when the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few" (Bessey 58). By silencing women, the church is only hurting itself, denying itself ministry outlets, potential in redeeming the world, possible understanding of what that redemption should look like, etc.

For example, the “now, but not yet” language ascribed to the Kingdom of God has become a popular description throughout the years, though it has always been difficult for pastors to articulate perfectly. But if a woman were to describe it, she might describe it in terms of pregnancy. This earth is a giant womb, preparing to give birth to the child that is a redeemed creation. The earth, then, is pregnant with what is to come, with what is good and wholesome and God. This metaphorical child exists, and it’s within the earth at all times, with its mother at all times. But it’s not fully brought into existence while confined to the womb; it’s now and not yet. Even when it’s partially hidden, though, preparations are taking place for its full arrival. Nursery walls are being painted, a crib is being built, the mother is eating all her proper fruits and veggies in anticipation for what is to come. The baby hasn’t arrived, but having been conceived and created in the greatest act of love known to its parents, it is always on mom and dad’s hearts and minds. In other words, this child’s arrival is what Christians are constantly striving for, since it will be the manifestation of God’s love for his people. And as time moves closer and closer to the end of this pregnancy, the child continues to grow and grow. That’s where the pain that we experience on this earth comes to play. Growing pains hurt, even though they indicate a movement towards greater fullness, and that growth is always working towards the culmination. That culmination, that birth will hurt worst of all, but will be more than worth it once the birth is complete because the love will have come in full and the “not yet” will cease to be an accurate descriptor (Bessey 116). When women are silenced, the church misses out on metaphors like this one. When women are benched, the church only hurts itself by limiting its possible understanding.

In churches where this 1 Corinthians verse and others like it are held to – such as most Baptist denominations, the United Reformed Church and its offshoots, the Orthodox

Presbyterian church and its offshoots, etc. (Scott) – one could argue that women aren't "benched," so to speak, but are instead delegated to women's ministry and children's ministry events, as those are areas of ministry that women have an aptitude for. However, this thinking is flawed, as it assumes that women only have gifts for working with other women and for working with children. Some women may certainly be called to this, but because the Holy Spirit offers a wide range of gifts, many women will not be called to lead a women's bible study or lead a VBS class. Many women may not be called to be mothers, to stay at home and focus their efforts towards raising godly children and serving their husbands in humble submission. Yet this is the quintessential view of a godly woman pushed by the church, as painted by an institution that offers women's bible studies on Tuesday mornings, when workingwomen are unable to attend. This is the view pushed by a church that is filled with events for couples to attend, that makes it difficult for singles to find their place amidst the other people that all seem to live similar lives, that have play dates for their kiddos, that are constantly relating to each other by praying for and offering advice regarding parenting, maintaining a healthy marriage, making healthy meals for children, establishing Christ-centered family habits, etc. Oftentimes, it's difficult for people that aren't living into the church stereotype – single women, especially – to find a home in a church, which shouldn't be the case because the church should be validating and encouraging all walks of life – including single womanhood – so long as they're lived in pursuit of Christ.

None of this is to say that a woman who marries and becomes a stay at home mom is lesser than a single woman teaching in an orphanage in Cambodia or pastoring a congregation here in the States. That's the beauty of the Kingdom – there are various, valid jobs for everyone to partake in, and the Kingdom is not complete until all of these jobs are being served out of a great love for Jesus. In Sarah Bessey's words, "It is precisely because of our great love for God

that we pursue justice, make peace, build schools for kids halfway around the world – and then make supper every night for our own tinies” (168). Within the Kingdom, all Christ-guided ministry is valid, no matter what its nature or who its spearheaders.

Thus, if a woman is called to children or women’s ministries within her church, she should pursue them wholeheartedly, and many do. If she’s called to something else, then she should pursue that wholeheartedly as well. And as evidenced by all the women I know who have started ministries outside of church sanctioned women’s and children’s ministries, the trouble isn’t that women aren’t capable or aren’t active. They are already doing ministry. The real trouble is that their Christ-spurred work isn’t considered as valid or as important as a man’s, as it’s something that happens in its own separate sector of Christ’s body or outside of Christ’s Church body altogether.

What about Zoe, for example, the woman who leads children’s ministry within my church? What about the hundreds of women within our first-world systems of worship that disciple children, teach them weekly lessons, and interact with them on an individual level to assure that they’re understanding, internalizing, and exhibiting qualities of a genuine relationship with Christ, always modeling that relationship themselves? Are they not *pastoring* those children? But these women are not titled Children’s Pastors. The title Children’s Minister is a step in a positive direction, but the title Director of Children’s Ministry is most common, in my experience. Now, the title or the ability to be ordained isn’t the heart of the issue, but a symptom. The true issue is that women’s work isn’t worthy of ordination, it isn’t worthy of being named, it isn’t worthy of talking about openly within a church service. Yet God is at work in it, is He not? So why isn’t it encouraged? Why aren’t stories of children understanding biblical concepts told in front of the entire congregation? Women will pursue Christ, whether or not the church creates

space for it. Women will pursue ministry whether or not they have titles and permission. The next step for the church, though, is to mimic the feminism their Jesus lived by creating space, granting titles, commissioning women on mission in all walks of life, etc.

Ultimately, Jesus feminism isn't "for women's sake, but for redemption's sake. For the sake of the Gospel, women must speak – and teach and minister and prophesy, too. For the sake of the gospel, a woman must be free to walk in her God-breathed self... in whatever vocation and season and place of her life. And she does all of this alongside her brothers...to see God's Kingdom come and his expressed will done" (174). God's view for creation is so much larger than creating equality between the genders. God's view for creation is about restoring the entire cosmos to the rules of reality as created for Eden. God desires that a Christian to live into whatever calling Christ has ordained for him or her, to exercise his or her spiritual gifts whatever they may be, and to be encouraged and validated by other Christians who are striving to do the same thing. That's Jesus feminism. That was Jesus' view for the church, and the church should live into it to glorify Jesus himself.

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