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## God's Feminist Ideals

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Gloria Steinem famously said a feminist is “anyone who recognizes the equality and full humanity of women and men.” Is God then a feminist by her definition? If feminism in its purest sense is the quest for justice and equal rights for women, then, yes, God was the first feminist. God created woman in his image and bestowed on her equal dignity with man. By a woman’s mere existence, God has bestowed on her dignity and privileges that transcend race, economic status, and physical ability.

But sin entered the world, and the inherent dignity of men and women has often gotten lost as corrupt people with power oppress others without it. In Christ, whether we hold power in our culture or not, God equips us once again to live as image bearers, living in light of our inherent dignity in him while treating others in the hope of their own.

God’s feminist ideals don’t correlate one to one with the world’s secular ones; in fact, it is nearly impossible to value women and put forth their needs and rights correctly without first valuing the God in whose image they were made. But understand that any rights we should demand for women worldwide arise from the fact that God created them with those rights and that only he can rightly limit them.

### **Where feminism goes one way, the church the other**

During the 20th century, the first wave of feminism gave voice to women whom society had long marginalized. In 1920, women finally won the right to vote in the United States, due in large part to the efforts of Christians. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union led this movement, seeking to apply biblical principles of social justice to larger society. Based in part on their understanding of Jesus and the Bible, men and women of faith fought together for women to have the right to vote. This first wave of feminism resulted in women’s right to vote and inherit land, along with subsequent benefits as women gained a voice in legislation. But as the century wore on, there came a fork in the road in which orthodox Christianity seemed to go in one direction, and second-wave feminism (which focused on birth control, abortion rights, and equal pay) in another.

Where are the forks in the road between God’s feminist ideals and those of fallen man? Why have Christians rightly fought for a woman’s right to vote but continue to protest abortion

vehemently? Of course, Christians see commands against murder as critical to the abortion debate. But there is another issue as well.



We must note the differences in a secular, modern Western view of feminism and the justice for women that Scripture models. The fork in the road seems to center on the concept of independence. Western women's rights discussions often focus on the fact that woman is an autonomous self and no one can tell her what to do. In the case of abortion, the Supreme Court gave the woman absolute rights over her body. The desires of the father and the welfare of the baby must take a lesser place than her desires for herself. Her autonomy from others is the highest ideal, and woe to those who attempt to influence society against such a choice.

The Bible never supports such independence. Scripture first presents a story of humankind utterly dependent on God. Then it lays a foundation of male and female interdependence. From the first moment man and woman entered the scene, they were interdependent. "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," Adam marveled at the woman (Gen. 2:23). Their stories continued to be entwined through God's description of the consequences of the Fall. For good and for bad, men's and women's lives have been joined in the body of Christ ever since.

Instead of a social justice that gives woman complete independence from man, God wrote a story that advocates social justice in interdependent relationships between men and women. God lifts up women but not in a way that frees woman from dependence on man or man from dependence on woman. The Bible's instructions to men and women work in covenants of mutual responsibility—be it the covenant relationship of Christian marriage, the covenant relationship of the church, or both—not in barriers between them.

### **A better feminism**

God's feminist ideals of justice and the full humanity of women tweak our weaker Western ones. If we value the God in whose image woman was made, we will value the woman herself.

Though God doesn't write a story that supports woman's complete independence from man, he does write one with a much stronger sense of justice for the weak than the traditional American view of justice offers. In America, we refer to blind justice, and we often see outside courthouses a statue of a woman blindfolded holding a set of scales. The blindfold represents objectivity. But a blind statue weighing pros and cons is not the best illustration of God's justice.

Instead, God sees. And he calls us to a justice that takes the blindfold off and judges in favor of those without resources—those who cannot advocate for themselves. Look at Isaiah 1:17: “Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause” (ESV). God's justice is revealed in those with resources and power actively seeking those without to plead their case and bring them the justice they deserve as image bearers of God.



God disproportionately favors those who cannot earn for themselves. Consider Jesus's words in Luke 6:35–36 on reflecting God to those who can't or won't repay us: “Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (ESV).

We often note this passage for its command to love our enemies. But this passage also teaches us to do good to those who cannot return it and to lend to those who cannot pay us back. Such bestowing of favor and dignity on someone who cannot return it is the essence of God's character. This remains God's call to his image bearers. To the poor, to orphans, to widows—to any who cannot provide or advocate for themselves—God's image bearers aim their resources and seek their benefit as God seeks ours.

God's people should create level playing fields for women in our world. We should affirm the full image-bearing humanity of all women. But, in the image of God, his daughters in this

paradigm sometimes lay down their rights for the good of another in God's interdependent family.

The bottom line of image bearing for believers in Christ on this side of the Cross is found in 1 Peter 2:23. Jesus entrusted himself to the One who judges justly, and we are called to do the same. As we conform to Jesus's example, we see that faith and trust are the foundation of it. We cannot endure like Christ in community, male or female, without trusting our Father in heaven.

Wendy Alsup is the author of several books. Her newest, [Is the Bible Good for Women?](#), examines challenging biblical passages through a Jesus-centered lens. She writes at [theologyforwomen.org](#). Adapted from *Is the Bible Good for Women?* by Wendy Alsup. Copyright © 2016 by Wendy Alsup. Used by permission of Multnomah, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.