

# Doesn't Christianity Denigrate Women?

## Genesis 1:27-28

**Series:** Confronting Christianity – Summer 2021

**Preaching Date:** July 4, 2021

**Worship:** As Christ Loved the Church

**Chapter in *Confronting Christianity*:** 8

**Key Sentence:** Jesus Christ elevates women by his example and his sacrifice

**Outline:**

I. How the Bible presents the story (Genesis 1:26-29, Isaiah 54:5-8)

II. How Jesus lived the story (Luke 8:1-3, Luke 13:10-17)

III. How Jesus is the story (Ephesians 5:22-27)

**Genesis 1:26–29** Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” <sup>27</sup>So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup>And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” <sup>29</sup>And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.”

**Isaiah 54:5–8** For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. <sup>6</sup>For the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. <sup>7</sup>For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. <sup>8</sup>In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,” says the LORD, your Redeemer.

**Luke 8:1–3** Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, <sup>2</sup>and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, <sup>3</sup>and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

**Luke 13:10–17** Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

<sup>11</sup>And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. <sup>12</sup>When Jesus saw

her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.”<sup>13</sup> And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.<sup>14</sup> But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.”<sup>15</sup> Then the Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it?<sup>16</sup> And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?”<sup>17</sup> As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

**Ephesians 5:22–27** Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.<sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.<sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,<sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,<sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

## Doesn't Christianity Denigrate Women? Genesis 1:27-28

Once upon a time a man married a woman. The man had very specific ideas of what constituted an ideal marriage. Though he wouldn't have said so, he saw women as second-class citizens, condemned by Scripture and tradition to a life of near-slavery and voicelessness. His wife was to serve him only and suppress every gift, talent and idea of her own. She had no say in their sexual relationship, their economic decisions, their child-bearing or child-rearing. Simple freedoms like going to the store or deciding on a meal were forbidden and if she expressed an opinion she was called a nagging or rebellious wife. Any initiative on her part, even with other women and mothers, was regarded as suspect. The idea she might have a vocation or career was unthinkable.

But once upon a time there was another marriage. This husband too had very specific ideas of what constituted an ideal marriage. He believed that his wife was equal with him before God, and that his calling was to love his wife and care for her, even sacrificing his own plans, his own satisfactions, his own happiness, really his whole life. When one of their children was born with a genetic malady that would require months of intensive care, he did as much of the caring as his wife. When she came under criticism for her various ministries, he defended her. He was committed to helping his wife be all that God intended for her to be. When she wanted to start a business, he was all for it, and when it prospered, he quit his own job and worked with her.

Which of these portraits is true to Christianity? I'm sure you know the answer and mourn when that answer is transgressed as in the first scenario. But our culture doesn't know the answer, won't admit what true Christianity teaches. The Freedom from Religion Foundation, for example, wants us to know "Why Women Need Freedom from Religion." "Why do women remain second-class citizens? Why is there a religion-fostered war against women's rights? Because the bible is a handbook for the subjugation of women. The bible establishes woman's inferior status, her "uncleanliness," her transgressions, and God-ordained master/servant relationship to man. Biblical women are possessions: fathers own them, sell them into bondage, even sacrifice them. The bible sanctions rape. Wives are subject to male jealousy fits and no-notice divorce as wives. The most typical biblical labels of women are "harlot" and "whore." They are described as having evil, even satanic powers of allurements. Contempt for women's bodies and reproductive capacity is a bedrock of the bible. Jesus scorns his own mother, refusing to bless her, and issues dire warnings about the fate of pregnant and nursing women."

In the last fifty years our culture has become convinced that Christianity denigrates women, that patriarchy and sexism are essential components of Christianity. To denigrate, the thesaurus says is to disparage, malign, belittle, revile, vilify, slander, defame or impugn. But is this true? Does Christianity do all this to women. Rebecca McLaughlin, in chapter 8 of *Confronting Christianity* wrestles with this question on many levels, but eventually it all comes back to Jesus. I would summarize her teaching, and that of Scripture, like this: “Jesus Christ elevates women by his example and his sacrifice.”

McLaughlin also says that to understand the Bible’s teaching on sexuality and gender, on male and female, you have to look at the whole arc of the Biblical story. “If we read texts only in the light of our own presuppositions, they will make little sense. But if we dive into the panorama of salvation history, the biblical view of men and women assumes new meaning.” Let’s try to do that.

We begin in Genesis 1, the story of creation. Day by day God creates the universe and the earth on which we live, then fills the seas, the sky and the land with creatures, and finally human beings. Genesis 1:26–29 *Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”*<sup>27</sup>*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*<sup>28</sup>*And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”*<sup>29</sup>*And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.*

God says that human beings are created humanity “in his image” and “after his likeness.” This “image” language applies to male and female together. God charges his image bearers to fill the earth and to rule over it. He gives them dominion, both authority and responsibility. This requires that they be fruitful, that the sexual union they were designed to celebrate lead to offspring. Why did God design us this way, so that both male and female were needed for procreation? I believe a relational God, who eternally exists in three persons could not make us in his image if we were solitary. God’s image emerges not just from our rationality but also from our relationships, male and female.

This point is underscored in Genesis 2. God forms man out of the dust, breathes life into him, and puts him to work in a garden. But God says, Genesis 2:18 “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

God's constant refrain in Genesis 1 had been that his creation was "good." His creation of humans was "very good." But here he asserts that for Adam to be alone is "not good." The man cannot image God alone; he needs another, a helper or companion. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this word helper is overwhelmingly applied to God. Psalm 54:4 "Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life." Psalm 118:7 The LORD is on my side as my helper." Our culture views this word 'helper' in Genesis 2 as a judgment of inferiority for the woman. But if God himself is our supreme helper, this word cannot imply inferior status. There is no denigration the woman in creation.

Ah, you'll say, but what about Genesis 3? It's a disaster. Rather than pursuing God's good plan, the man and the woman break the only law God has given them. Genesis 2:16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>1</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. Only after the command has been given is Eve formed. And after that, in chapter 3 the snake approaches the woman. "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" <sup>2</sup> . . . "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, <sup>3</sup>but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" <sup>4</sup> . . . "You will not surely die. <sup>5</sup>For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." As this exchange is happening, we wonder "Where is the man?" The answer is in verse 6. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate." Rebecca McLaughlin says "Rather than countering the snake's lies, the man eats the fruit too. This disobedience breaks both humanity's relationship with God and the fellowship between humans. Innocence and intimacy are replaced by shame and blame. Life yields to death."

The man and the woman are cursed by God in response to their rebellion in ways that affect the roles they were jointly given in Genesis 1. Ruling over creation is made hard by the curse on the man. Multiplying is made hard by the curse on the woman. Genesis 3:16, God says "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you." This verse is sometimes cited by those who believe Christianity denigrates women. See, they say, the first book of the Bible institutes an abusive patriarchy. But as McLaughlin points out "The word translated 'desire' is rare in the Old Testament, but it occurs in the next chapter when God says to Adam and Eve's son, Cain: "Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is against you, but you must rule over it"

Desire, here, implies a will to possess and master. This is the desire all the daughters of Eve inherit. As a result of this desire, this curse, the unashamed united love story between men and women is gone. Now there is conflict and power struggle. This is a result of rebellion, not God's original design.

But how does this not lead to the denigration of women? In one sense, it does. All through the Old Testament, we see sin resulting in appalling treatment of women by men—and vice versa. We see murder and rape and exploitation. Many of the patriarchal abuses mentioned by those who believe Christianity denigrates women come from these Old Testament accounts, this history. But these are symptoms of an illness, not a prescription for society. The Bible does not endorse what it reports, as New Atheist mash-ups of Scripture would say. But the Bible does present a realistic picture of how human beings treat each other and, in particular, how we wield power. But if the fall led to such abuse, how does the rest of the story redeem the original image of creation?

McLaughlin points that God's covenant with his people is pictured as a marriage. **Isaiah 54:5–8** *For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. <sup>6</sup>For the LORD has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God. <sup>7</sup>For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. <sup>8</sup>In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,*” says the LORD, your Redeemer.

“Parenting metaphors,” McLaughlin says, “sometimes liken God to a father and sometimes to a mother. But this is a marriage metaphor, and in the marriage metaphor the roles are never reversed: God is always the husband and never the wife.” But as we examine Scripture we discover that this is not a happy marriage. God's people are unfaithful to him by worshiping idols. The implication is not that women are naturally less faithful than men. The Old Testament paints a brutally real picture of male unfaithfulness. But within the biblical metaphor, God is unrelentingly faithful. He desires the love and devotion of his people and hates when they give themselves to other gods. His love is jealous—the appropriate reaction of a loving husband to a cheating wife. But it is also forgiving. Though God has every right to reject his people, he wants them back, and the renewal of the covenant is pictured as a reconciling of husband and wife. Yet this marriage never really seems to work. In this respect as in many others, the Hebrew Scriptures pose a question without ever quite yielding the answer. How can the holy, faithful, love-filled God live with his loveless, faithless, sin-filled people?”

In the New Testament, fully God and fully man, Jesus comes as the bridegroom, betrothed to all of God's people, his church. Like God, Jesus the bridegroom is perfectly faithful. This one-sided faithfulness could be interpreted as a negative view of women. But it's not. It's just that this one bridegroom, in this marriage metaphor, is always faithful, and the bride in the metaphor is always unfaithful. Jesus has come to be the perfect bridegroom to a straying bride.

“But before we get to that,” McLaughlin says, “we must marvel at Jesus’s relationships with women in the Gospels. . . . The portrayal of women in the Gospels is stunningly countercultural.” The culture of that day, like many cultures through world history and many cultures now, did denigrate women. Women could not own property. Women could not testify in court. Women could not divorce their husbands even if cheated on or abused. Women could not choose the course of their lives or the people they married. It hasn’t always been this way. There have been matriarchal cultures and patriarchal cultures with more freedoms than this. But too many cultures have made women second-class citizens, and the Roman, Greek and Hebrew cultures of the day were no exception. In fact Judaism is famous for a daily prayer “Thank you, God, that I am not a Gentile, a woman, or a slave.”

It is into this culture that Jesus comes and his approach to women is revolutionary. Any criticism of Christianity’s attitude toward women has to deal with the data about Jesus. This is our key second point today, the life and example of Jesus. Women played key roles in the birth of Christ: Mary, of course, but also Elizabeth and the prophetess Anna. Women were prominent in his parables and teachings. Think of the parable of the persistent widow, or the lost coin. Women were the recipients of many of his healing miracles, from the woman with the flow of blood who touched him in the street to Mary Magdalene who had had seven demons. One of my favorites is a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years, who was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. Luke 18:12-16 *When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.”*<sup>13</sup> *And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.”* But the ruler of the synagogue object to this healing on the Sabbath. Jesus says, *“You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it?”*<sup>16</sup> *And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?* Jesus did not denigrate women, but elevated them. He set women up as moral examples. When the sinful woman came and wept on his feet and anointed him, Jesus compares her positively to the critical Pharisee. When the poor widow puts the coins in the offering, Jesus points to her as the one who truly knew generosity.

McLaughlin says “Jesus’s valuing of women might seem to be compromised by his choice of twelve male apostles. . . . But Luke emphasizes the women who followed Jesus too.” Luke 8:1–3 *Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him,<sup>2</sup> and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,<sup>3</sup> and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.* These women are at the heart of his ministry, and at the crucifixion these women were there to see it. When Jesus rose it was these women who were the first eyewitnesses, who told the amazing truth to the apostles. Luke 24:10 “Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles,<sup>11</sup> but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” McLaughlin says “Jesus’s valuing of women is unmistakable. In a culture in which women were devalued and often exploited, it underscores their equal status before God and his desire for personal relationship with them.”

But is Jesus’s life and ministry an oasis of equality in a desert of biblical misogyny? To answer that question McLaughlin turns to one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament from the point of view of valuing women. Ephesians 5:22–27 *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.<sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.<sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.<sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,<sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,<sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*

McLaughlin analyzes this from a personal point of view: “I was an undergraduate at Cambridge when I first wrestled with these words. I came from an academically driven all-female high school. I was now studying in a majority-male college. And I was repulsed. “Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord”? You have got to be kidding me. I had three problems with these verses. The first was that wives should submit. I knew women were just as competent as men. My second problem was with the idea that wives should submit to their husbands as to the Lord. It is one thing to submit to Jesus Christ, the self-sacrificing King of the universe. It is quite another to offer that kind of submission to a fallible, sinful man. My third problem was the idea that the husband was the “head” of the wife. This seemed to imply a hierarchy at odds with men and women’s equal status as image bearers of God.

“This all seemed to pull against the countercultural message of the gospel. The Bible had offered me a radical narrative of power inversion in which the Creator God laid down his life, the poor outclassed the rich, and outcasts became family. The gospel was a consuming fire of love across differences to burn up racial injustice and socioeconomic exploitation. Yet here were these horrifying verses promoting the subjugation of women. Jesus had elevated women to an equal status with men. Paul, it seemed, had pushed them down.”

This view of the New Testament’s teaching is the narrative of our culture and, the chief cause, along with the “descriptive not proscriptive” incidents in the Old Testament, for the conclusion that Christianity denigrates women. I read an article this week by a feminist author who says that few who seek true equality for women can avoid disparaging Christianity and Judaism. These want to “bury all patriarchal religions forever in the scrapheap of history as outworn and even demonic world views. No one who is truly a feminist can find any authentic meaning for herself within the context of these traditions. To do so is sheer masochism and dependency. Feminists must purge themselves of all traces of adherence to these religions and turn to alternative woman’s religions.” From this viewpoint it is Christianity, though particularly Moses and Paul, that has led to the unthinkable concept of “submission,” to slavery of women in the home, unequal pay in the workplace, to the glass ceiling that limits women’s opportunities, to sexual objectification and to abuse.

McLaughlin says “At first, I tried to explain the shock away. I tried, for instance, to argue that in the Greek, the word translated “submit” appears only in the phrase “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” so the rest of the passage must imply mutual submission. But the command for wives to submit occurs three times in the New Testament, while husbands are called four times to love and once to honor their wives.” It was only when she began to look seriously at the the command to husbands, the Ephesians passage started to come into focus. “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” How did Christ love the church? By dying; by giving himself, naked and bleeding, to suffer for the church, putting her needs above his own; sacrificing everything for her. Ephesians 5 is sometimes critiqued as permission for spousal abuse. Tragically, it has been misused that way. But the command to husbands makes that reading impossible.”

“When I realized the lens for this teaching was the lens of the gospel itself, it started to make sense. If the message of Jesus is true, no one comes to the table with rights. The only way to enter is flat on your face. Male or female, if we grasp at our right to self-determination, we must reject Jesus, because he calls us to submit to him completely.”

With this lens in place, I saw that God created sex and marriage as a telescope to give us a glimpse of his star-sized desire for intimacy with us. Our roles in this great marriage are not interchangeable: Jesus gives himself for us. Christians (male or female) follow his lead. Ultimately, my marriage is not about me and my husband any more than Romeo and Juliet is about the actors playing the title roles. Like a great play marriage points to the underlying reality, to the greater reality of the one who sacrificed himself to make us his bride. Thus our roles in marriage are not interchangeable. They are designed to point people to the greater reality. Submission is a cue in our script.

Recognizing that marriage (at its best) points to a much greater reality relieves the pressure on all concerned. First, it depressurizes single people. We live in a world where sexual and romantic fulfillment are paraded as ultimate goods. Miss out on sex, we are told, and you miss out on life. But within a Christian framework, missing marriage and gaining Christ is like missing out on playing with dolls as a child, but growing up to have a real baby. When we are fully enjoying the ultimate relationship, no one will lament for the loss of the scale model. It also takes the pressure off married people. Of course, we have the challenge of playing our roles in the drama. But we need not worry about whether we married the right person, or why our marriages are not flinging us to a constant state of Nirvana. In one sense, human marriage is designed to disappoint. It leaves us longing for more, and that longing points us to the ultimate reality of which the best marriage is a scale model. Ephesians 5 used to repulse me. Now it convicts me and calls me toward Jesus: the true husband who satisfies my needs, the one man who truly deserves my submission.

So the key phrase in Ephesians 5 is “as Christ loved the church.” Christ’s sacrificial love is the reality behind the metaphor. His love for fallen people of both sexes does not denigrate them, but elevates them, re-creates them into new life. As Paul says in the very early letter to the Galatians “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. <sup>27</sup>For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Does Christianity denigrate women? Sometimes Christians do. Men prioritize themselves and even use the Scripture as a hammer to oppress and dominate, privileging men and patronizing women. But the bad behavior of some Christians cannot change the beauty of Christ who elevated women and treated them graciously. Nothing can change the beauty of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, not to denigrate but to elevate. This Christ centered lens is the answer to the critique brought by our culture.