



Faith AND Feminism

Before You Begin

We enter this topic with the assumption that readers will come from a wide variety of perspectives on issues of faith, feminism, and the intersection of the two. Some readers will claim Christian faith but not feminism. Others may claim feminism but not Christian faith. Others may claim both. Others may claim neither. The information presented on this topic aims to serve as a discussion starter for any of these situations.

We use the term “feminism” broadly to discuss the empowerment of women, but many women see this term as applying exclusively to Caucasian women. Some women of color, however, wish to claim a feminism that is not the exclusive domain of Caucasian women. Discuss in your group the advantages and disadvantages of using feminism as a broad term.

This topic focuses primarily on personal exploration of faith and feminism/women’s concerns, rather than in-depth information about women’s theologies. You may use this section in conjunction with *Women’s Theologies*, which focuses more on an analysis of the various contributions women have made to the development and articulation of theology.

This topic is geared toward young women, but most young men wrestle with the same issues. You may discuss these issues in a mixed-gender group, but it is vital to have “safe space” for women to discuss the issues. The presence of men may inhibit women’s ability to discuss without fear of “hurting men’s feelings.”

Our approach to the topic weaves the stories of two women of different ethnic backgrounds into the discussion of faith and feminism. Morgan is a European American junior from Kentucky studying in Ohio. Melva is an African American sophomore from Georgia studying in Georgia. Readers are invited to use these stories as an impetus for considering their own response. How have your experiences shaped your approach to faith and feminism?

Background Information

Many young women today wrestle with claiming an identity as a Christian, as a feminist, or both.

Christianity—some young women grow up in a supportive church environment and find Christian faith to be an integral part of their identity. Others feel that the church is not a spiritual home for them; they question Christian doctrine, experience “biblically sanctioned” sexism, or struggle to intellectually understand the existence of God.

Feminism—while most young women benefit from movements growing out of a feminist perspective (If you are in college now, thank a feminist!), many feel uncomfortable with the “f” word, especially since women who call themselves feminists are often labeled as militant



or man-hating “feminazis.” Many women see feminism as speaking for white, middle-class women only. The articulation of “womanism,” for example, speaks to the experiences of African American women, and the term “mujerista” (moo-hair-ee-sta) has been claimed by Latin American women. Others find value in feminism as a broad umbrella for understanding and working for equality, not just between men and women, but for all people.

Faith and feminism—some young women claim Christian faith but not feminism. Others claim feminism but not Christian faith. For those who claim both, the need to reconcile faith and feminism leads to an exploration of the ways in which Christian faith does or does not support feminism, and the ways in which feminism does or does not inform Christian faith.

Claiming Faith

MORGAN: “Neither of my parents went to church regularly, so where I went was at my discretion, if I chose to go at all. After years of going to different churches, I found myself at a church where I felt at home. I became involved in different activities—youth group trips, service projects, etc. Soon I was asked to be a deacon and to serve as an usher. I read from the lectionary and prayed many prayers during service. I fell in love with ‘serving’ in the church—to give, sometimes unnoticed, often praised. To me, serving in the church was more like serving Christ. Part of me grew tremendously with affirmation and praise, but another part of me did not want that recognition. I wanted to feel like I was doing good works because I was called by Christ and that what I did, I did in the name of Christ for all of Christ’s community—for the world.”

MELVA: “I have had a strong faith and a religious background. My dad was always one of the ministers, or the pastor, of the churches I have gone to. I was often asked to do numerous things such as helping with the children’s church, or having a speaking part during youth day and in regular worship. It is hard for youth to be involved because in some black churches, members look at it as showing off, and trying to be something you are not. Members have dissuaded their own children from being active in regional and national church gatherings because they will be in the minority as African Americans. My parents pushed me to be the minority, to be involved.”

MORGAN: “One of the things that I struggle to hear is the validation of my voice, my presence, my worship, my work, and praise in the church. Through the years, I learned the distinct lesson that in some places—in some churches, homes, countries, regions—my personhood was viewed as ‘lesser’ because of my gender. I was respected in a different light, or sometimes not respected at all. There were few people close to me who voiced this belief, but as I heard throughout the years the criticism of and the debates about a woman’s worth, I began to doubt the self-assurance that my family had nurtured in me. That the presence and actions of my personhood were ever in question in the church created an environment for me of doubt and insecurity. I felt insecure in my faith. Was I more sinful because I was a woman? Was I as equally saved?”

MELVA: “My experience as a woman in the church is not as painful as Morgan’s. I was never silenced—and more often I had people ‘pleading’ with me to speak up or to have a voice. I think what probably shaped me more was not my gender, but my race.”



For Journaling or Conversation

What are some of your experiences of claiming the Christian faith?

Describe your experiences with the church community. How did you arrive in the community, or what has kept you from the community?

When you were a child, how did—or didn't—the church support you and influence you? What is your relationship to a faith community now?

How has claiming Christian faith been a lifelong process for you? Or what specific experiences led you to this identity? Or what keeps you from claiming this identity?

One of the commitments of the National Network of Presbyterian College Women is evangelism—encouraging young women to claim a Christian faith that empowers them.

What are some issues you wrestle with in claiming Christian faith?

What faith stories and biblical perspectives are important to you?

What experiences would you like to share?

What has it been like for you to be a woman in your church?

Claiming Feminism

Many young women are unfamiliar with the breadth and depth of feminist thought until they are introduced to it in college. For some, this is an eye-opening experience. For others, it raises more questions than it answers. Some feel that women already have achieved equality and no longer need feminism. Others realize that by learning how to “make it” in traditional male spheres, they internalized sexism and even projected this sexism onto other women.

MORGAN: “I feel that feminism has taught me to ‘own’ my actions and to recognize that they are feminine and feminist. This made me feel that I could no longer claim any notion of selflessness because to do so would discourage other women from claiming their own personhood and respect as a part of humanity. Yet from my position as a mostly average white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant female, opportunity and privilege were at my doorstep. Feeling so privileged and fortunate, I feel a strong call to selflessness, in order to help balance the scale of privilege given to me in this unequal society. On the other hand, as women are an intricate part of this community, I feel the feminist call of claiming actions and promoting my works as a woman/feminist give light—a light of justice and affirmation. Women must not be sidelined.

And yet, we are. For example, today a woman earns something like 74 cents to a man's dollar. For example, women continue to hear that they must stay in abusive relationships—an understanding of the commitment to God and another human—regardless of the abuse that has already broken whatever promise was made. Women do not claim God's own righteousness or justice in the name of their created and good selves, as both men and women need to do. I want to see feminism as it truly is: the equality of women with men in this society, and I want to be treated with such regard.”



MELVA: “I do not claim to be a feminist or womanist and really have not been introduced to the meaning except with friends during my first year in college. My understanding of what it meant to be feminist was to burn your bra and be hard to get along with. I never really understood the importance of claiming to be feminist, and I never really thought as a black woman that it applied to me. I knew there were black feminists, but I never took the time to look into their stories or to see how, as African American women, they defined feminism and womanism. I understood the struggle for equal opportunity between men and women, but I never understood this need to change the spelling of words—like changing ‘women’ to ‘wymyn.’ That seemed pointless. I never felt that because my sex included ‘men’ or ‘man’ in the spelling that I had to feel threatened. The only thing I focused on was how I was treated because of my race first and then my sex. I knew that if I could do a job, the only thing to hinder my rise to a high claim of success would be my race. I worked hard to not make it an issue whenever I was asked to do something in an all-white setting.”

Some of the commitments of the National Network of Presbyterian College Women are informed by theology from women’s perspectives, feminism, and women’s issues (locally, nationally, and globally). NNPCW chooses to define feminism in this manner: *Our understanding of feminism grows out of our Christian belief that all people are “fearfully and wonderfully made” in the image of God and thus should be respected and heard equally. Because women in church and society historically have been marginalized and silenced, we choose to focus on women’s lives. We affirm women’s abilities to think theologically, and we value the diversity of women’s experiences in pursuing empowerment, building a nurturing community, and working for equality for all of God’s creation. We recognize the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression, acknowledge our participation in such systems, and accept our responsibility as Christian women to work for God’s fuller justice. This understanding of feminism informs our vision and action as well as our structure and process.*

Womanists generally speak from an African American perspective. “Contemporary womanists challenge interlocking systems of oppression: racism, classism, homophobia, and ecological abuse.”

“Latina women living in the United States, keenly aware of how sexism, ethnic prejudice, and economic oppression subjugate them and willing to struggle against such oppression, call themselves *mujeristas*.”

(Russell and Clarkson, *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, p. 316.)

For Journaling or Conversation

How has your consciousness been shaped and changed?

What are the roles for women in your church experience?

How do you respond when others say that women should not be leaders in the church?

Where have you heard or seen the affirmation of women in your faith experience?

How do the stories of Melva and Morgan influence your understanding of feminism?



Reconciling Faith and Feminism

Throughout much of Christian history, women's roles were limited and Christian theology reflected a male-dominated society. Some of the "giants" of our theological history promoted the idea that women were not quite as human as men, since they did not directly reflect the male image of God (or Jesus), and that "woman" was the source of sin in human life. Martin Luther concluded that women were made for childbearing, and John Calvin "insisted that her purpose was to help man live more comfortably" (Isabel Rogers, *Toward a Liberating Faith*, p. 3). As a result of this tradition, many feminists regard Christianity as a source of oppression for women.

The spiritual journey, on the other hand, is a fundamental need for many women and one that they choose willingly, with a sense of empowerment. Yet a focus on spiritual discipline seemingly challenges core feminist ideals. The spiritual path emphasizes the negation of the self, whereas feminists argue that society teaches women to be selfless at the expense of their own development. The spiritual path encourages the suppression of desire, whereas feminists argue that women need to learn how to express their desires. Christian faith demands forgiveness, whereas some feminists argue that women should not be too quick to forgive and should claim their righteous anger when they are violated.

MORGAN: "A conflict surfaced with the development of my feminism and faith in college. They became more intertwined and interconnected, yet also contradictory and in conflict. In some ways feminism called me to recognize in myself the ways in which some of my 'self-less' behavior became harmful to me and to others. I could see it in other women too. But I had a hard time discerning the selflessness that could be—that is—beneficial and that

For Journaling or Conversation

What are the images that come to mind when you hear the word "mujeristaism?" Womanism? Feminism?

How have you perceived the response to feminism/womanism/mujeristaism in your life? Your home? Your faith community? Your hometown?

What does "women's empowerment" mean to you?

What does "equality" mean to you?

In what ways do you see faith and feminism in conflict with one another? In what ways do you see faith and feminism complementing one another?

Read Mark 7:24–30, the story of the Canaanite woman. She is persistent and unrelenting in her interaction with Jesus, and she convinces him to change his mind.

How does the story relate to the intersection of faith and feminism/womanism/mujeristaism?

Read Judges 4–5, the story of the prophet and warrior Deborah.

How does the story relate to the intersection of faith and mujeristaism/feminism/womanism?



which causes pain, suffering, and worthlessness (especially in communities of women). It is a struggle to know the balance. How do I understand praise and affirmation when I am living and working and seeking to be a servant of Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit? It is a cycle of growth and conflict. How can I be self-affirmed when I seek the selflessness of Christ?

“Feminism and faith become conflicted for me as I work on justice issues, particularly where race and gender are involved. If I seek and claim the equality of women, then there comes the accountability of women to their role and their power as people of faith as well. Where I see equality, accountability, and faith coming together is in the call to be responsible for one another—especially woman to woman. We must hold one another accountable for our actions, how they are perceived, and how they impact the community. We—men, women, and children—must listen to each other, must learn from each other, as well as share and teach what we know. We must learn ‘healthy humility’—a humbleness that seeks to truly hear the voice of God in ourselves and in one another. Even when I seek to better discern God within the midst of struggles, pain, and histories of harm, discernment and understanding are not easy. Through the rhythm of prayer and interaction, I can begin to hear the truth, the life-giving hope, of God in the midst of her people.”

“How do I care for myself and not be selfish? How can I be honest and still be loved? How can I achieve and not threaten others? How can I be sexual and not a sex object? How can I be responsive but not responsible for everyone?”

(Mary Pipher, Ph.D., *Reviving Ophelia*, p. 25)

The presence of all women in the church and in society needs to be validated—and not only once, but again and again. The church must contradict the inequalities and notions of “lesser,” through the teachings of Christ. Women and men must hear again and again that we are equals, co-created by the same God and saved equally in Jesus Christ. The feminist stance is a Christian stance—of balance, respect, and affirmation of our essential equal-ness. We are equal before God, through Christ; we are called to work for that same equality in light of one another.

For Journaling or Conversation

Read Luke 24:1–10, the story of the women at the resurrection. They are called by an angel of God to tell the good news.

How does the story bear witness to women’s roles?

Contemporary women theologians interpret Scripture from the perspective of questions such as these. Many of them find that the Christian faith actually encourages self-assurance for those whom society casts in the role of “servant.”

How do you see Christian faith encouraging feminist values?

What is your response to Morgan’s expression of her wrestling with the intersection of faith and feminism?

How do you wrestle with these issues?



How Faith Speaks

The Book of Confessions, which is part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), contains various statements and creeds that spell out the Church's understanding of the meaning and implications of its Christian belief. A Brief Statement of Faith (adopted in 1991) "uses feminine as well as masculine imagery of God, and affirms ordination of both women and men" (from the introduction to A Brief Statement of Faith). This statement marks a ground-breaking shift in thinking from the 16th-century Second Helvetic Confession, which teaches that "baptism should not be administered in the Church by women or midwives. For Paul deprived women of ecclesiastical duties . . ." (Second Helvetic Confession, 5.191).

"When God is understood to be the center of one's identity, the courage to assert oneself on behalf of justice is inspired."

(Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House*, Abingdon Press, 1997, p. 44. Used by permission.)

Since the 1960s there has been an increased awareness of the role language plays in determining the way people think about God and about women. In 1985 the General Assembly adopted "Definitions and Guidelines on Inclusive Language," encouraging churches to use "language which intentionally seeks to express the diverse ways the Bible and our theological tradition speak about God: e.g., one who delivers, champions, and befriends as well as 'Savior' and 'Lord'; one who acts as guardian, parent, begetter and bearer of children as well as 'Creator' and 'Heavenly Father' . . ." (*Minutes*, 1985, pp. 419–420). It also encouraged the use of "language that intentionally seeks to acknowledge the diversity of the membership of the church in such a way that each person may feel included, addressed, and equally valued before God (e.g., 'brothers and sisters,' rather than 'brethren'; 'God's children' rather than 'sons of God'; 'our ancestors' or 'our mothers and fathers,' rather than simply 'our fathers')" (*ibid.*, p. 419).

The 1994 General Assembly of the PC(USA) affirmed "in the strongest possible terms that the body of Christ is made up of women and men. God calls both women and men to ministries in the life of the church. Any attempt to silence or marginalize any voices is not worthy of Christ's body. We reaffirm our church's commitment to solidarity with women, especially in the important task of thinking theologically. . . . We affirm the importance of women's voices and work in the church and the important task of developing and articulating our theology" (*Minutes*, 1994, pp. 86–90).

"What girls say about gender and power issues depends on how they are asked. When I ask adolescent girls if they are feminists, most say no. To them, feminism is a dirty word, like communism or fascism. But if I ask if they believe men and women should have equal rights, they say yes. When I ask if their schools are sexist, they are likely to say no. But if I ask if they are ever harassed sexually at their school, they say yes and tell me more stories. If I ask who writes most of the material they study at school, they know it's men. If I ask who is more likely to be a principal, they say a man. If I ask who has more power, they say men."

(Mary Pipher, Ph.D., *Reviving Ophelia*, p. 41.)

In response to concerns about the stances other Christian denominations were taking with regard to the role of women in the leadership of the church, the 1999 General Assembly ratified a statement that "proclaim[s] that, while the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) respects the fact that different Christians will faithfully interpret the Scripture and divine guidance in



different ways and in diverse settings, a distinguishing characteristic of the faith practice of ministry within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today is the ordination of women to all offices of the church, thereby affirming our belief that God works through all persons in a variety of ways without regard for a hierarchy based upon gender” (*Minutes*, 1999, p. 591).

Faith in Action

Choose among these suggested activities.

1. Discuss in small groups what it means to be a woman of faith and to have feminist ideals.

2. Read Esther 1:9–19; 2:8–17.

Thinking in terms of the feminist ideas of “challenging the patriarchal systems,” what role does Vashti play? What role does Esther play? What does this passage say about women’s obedience to men in those days? How do the actions of these women serve as “feminist” role models? How do their actions depart from what we understand as “feminist”? How do you see the story speaking to you today?

3. Read one of the following stories about a woman or women interacting with Jesus:

- » Mary and Martha: Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–45; John 12:1–8
- » Mary Magdalene: Luke 8:1–3; John 19:25; 20:1–8; Mark 15:40–41, 47; 16:1–11; Matthew 27:57–61; 28:1–10; Luke 24:1–11
- » Woman with the flow of blood: Matthew 9:20–22; Mark 5:25–34; Luke 8:43–48
- » Canaanite woman: Mark 7:24–30; Matthew 15:21–28

How do or don’t the women display “feminist” behavior?

How does Jesus respond to them?

4. Read Romans 16:1–16 and 2 Timothy 1:5–6.

What is the view of women in leadership in these two readings?

What roles do you see women playing in these passages?

How do these passages inform your understanding of faith and feminism?

5. Write and perform one or more skits or plays about the intersection of faith and feminism.

6. Develop a group poetry book in which women express their faith and their faith struggles.

7. Have a Faith and Feminism Forum. Invite speakers, have a panel, or host a “coffee shop” format dialogue. If you are involved in a church, encourage the congregation to hold a dialogue discussing faith and feminism.



For Further Study

Celebrate the Gifts of Women (planning resource). Published yearly, this resource celebrates the contributions of women in church and community and lifts up issues that concern women worldwide. Designed to provide congregations with ideas for celebrating International Women's Day, which is observed on the Sunday closest to March 8, it features worship ideas, themes, program suggestions, and liturgy, and provides historical background on International Women's Day. Free. Order from PDS (800.524.2612). Item numbers will be different each year.

Toward a Liberating Faith: A Primer on Feminist Theology, Isabel Rogers, Woman's Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1999. A resource you can suggest the next time someone asks, "What is feminist theology, anyway?" This primer is the first in a series of introductions to women's theological perspectives. Free. Order from PDS. Item #72-700-00-002.

We Belong Together: Churches in Solidarity with Women, Friendship Press, 1992. This book offers essays by women theologians, Christian educators, and others in three areas: Rethinking Tradition, The Church in Transition, and A Matter of Justice.

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