

Sexism and the church

The Bible reflects the social realities of Old Testament times and ancient Jewish society.

- **Genesis 1-3:** Eve is made from Adam's rib to be his helper – inferior? Eve gave into temptation first. As a punishment God says, "Your husband will rule over you."
- Bible Times - patriarchal (male-dominated). Men could divorce women, but not vice versa; rape/adultery - violation of man's ownership rights; women - "unclean" for much of adult life (menstruation); God is called "Father", "He", "Him", etc..
- Was Jesus sexist? Jesus had no prominent female disciples, although there were women as part of his group; he called God "Father".
- Was St. Paul (who wrote most of the New Testament) sexist? "Women.....be subject to your husbands." **Ephesians 5:22-23**. "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I permit no women to teach or have authority over men, she is to keep silent." **1 Timothy 2:9-12**

The Church seems to have supported discrimination:

- For 2000 years, Church has reinforced society's view that a woman's place is in the home.
- "Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house and bear children" Martin Luther (1483-1546)
- RC Church does not allow abortion or contraception; family life is the most important thing for society. Does this deny women their rights?
"The language of the church is sexist too. Why is God always Male? Surely God, the creator of everything, is both male and female." Rev Nan Peete, Canon of Washington Cathedral, USA.

There is evidence that the Church should not be discriminatory.

Jesus' treatment of women was revolutionary - he did not share the common view of women. Jesus:

- Taught in the Jerusalem Temple "Court of the Women".
- Had women followers (Martha, Mary, Mary Magdalen), and preached to women (Luke 10:38-42).
- Treated outcast women with respect (e.g. Samaritan Woman, John 4:7-30), and talked openly with "unrespectable" women such as prostitutes.
- First revealed himself as Saviour to a Samaritan woman (John 4:7-30).
- After the resurrection Jesus appeared first to women (Matthew 28:1-10).
- Jesus showed "feminine" qualities – love, tenderness, gentleness, compassion. Cried openly in public.
- Luke's Gospel says Jesus took as much notice of women as he did of men.

There are some general themes about equality in the Bible.

1. In the Bible, God frees the oppressed and helps those struggling for liberation/freedom.
2. God created all people equal. God is even referred to in female terms at least three times.
3. There are women who had important roles in encouraging people to follow God: Queen Esther saved the Jews from death; Ruth set an example of love and loyalty; Deborah was a prophet, and her wisdom was much admired.

St. Paul seems to be contradictory. Above he says that women should be silent, etc., but he also had some radical messages that were revolutionary in the first century! It must be remembered that he was living and writing in a time where society was very unequal; women had almost no rights and had the status almost of slaves. In that context, Paul was encouraging people to treat each other equally:

Husbands must love their wives like Christ loves the church and, love them as they love their own bodies:

“He who loves his wife loves himself” **Ephesians 5:28-29**

“There is neither male nor female for your one in Christ Jesus” **Galatians 3:16**

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me... Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord...Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.” **Romans 16;1ff.** These verses from Paul’s letters show that he worked with women in leadership roles and saw them as co-workers.

Within the church, there are differences between groups. Some denominations promote both men and women in positions of leadership and others don’t. For the Roman Catholic Church, only men can become ordained priests and bishops. Women can take other roles and special offices such as Nuns. In the Church of England, the first women became priests in 1994, and the first female Anglican Bishop took office in 2006. Some conservative groups argue against the ordination of women. (See the two newspaper articles, both written by women with contrasting views).