

## Perspectives: Jesus was a feminist and so am I



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**In the first of a two-part feature on Christianity, the Church and women - theologian and broadcaster Vicky Beeching argues that the bible, and the teachings of Jesus are pro-women and pro-women's ministry.**

I find myself living in an interesting tension. My Christian friends chide me for my overtly feminist views, while the atheist-feminist circles I move in despair at my commitment to what they see as a patriarchal religion. It would be much easier to choose one or the other; Christianity or feminism, but I believe they should be - and are - utterly compatible. Empathising with my non-religious feminist community is easy. From an initial glance Christianity does seem overtly male; its language is strongly masculine, using terms like father and son rather than mother and daughter, to describe two thirds of the Trinity.

### Jesus and his men

The key players in the religion are mostly men: the patriarchs, the Jewish priesthood, Jesus, the 12 apostles and St Paul. Their stories are recorded in a sacred canon of texts, the Bible, written down by (you've guessed it) men. Add to that a few voices from Church history like St Augustine, who once said that "women should not be educated in any way; they should be segregated" and it's not exactly rocket science to grasp why many forward thinking women are initially suspicious of Christianity.

I'll be honest, I have found the dominant male imagery of the Christian story difficult to embrace at times. The Church has also directed its fair share of criticism toward me for being a woman who is passionate about teaching theology, and for campaigning on issues of gender equality. Suffice it to say, it has not been an easy journey. So, why do I stay? Because I believe those masculine impressions of Christianity are not, by any means, the full story. When you take a long hard look at the life of Christ, you see a radical revolutionary. Jesus didn't just overturn the tables in the temple, he overturned the cultural norms of his society and sent them crashing to the ground. The way he related to women was a key part of this.

### Jesus and his women

In an era when women were uneducated, not given a legally valid voice, and treated like property, Christ refused to bow to those cultural stigmas. He talked freely with women to the shock of those watching. He encouraged women to engage in theological study. He also chose to appear to Mary after he rose from the dead, making her the first official witness of the resurrection and the person who delivered the news to the male apostles. Many of Jesus's followers were female. They were not included in the 12 apostles, but the community surrounding him was far larger than that. Women were also among his key financial supporters, paying the bills for him, his team and their mission.

So, Jesus treated women with dignity, equality and respect. But how about St Paul? Initially he may seem difficult for a feminist to embrace, but a deeper look into his writings suggests this is not the case. In his letter to the Romans, Paul highly commends Junias, thought by many scholars to have been a female apostle. Paul also penned the powerful statement in Galatians 3:28 that there is "neither male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus". Many believe that these words transcend his culture-specific concerns about uneducated women teaching in Church.

### Christianity and bra-burning

Even if I can convince my feminist friends that the Christian faith embodies radical equality for women, it is still a hard sell to persuade my Christian friends to embrace the term "feminist".

They ask: "Isn't it a shrill, harsh movement of bra-burning and man hating?" Yes, feminism has been caricatured by the media of the 1960s and is sometimes presented as abrasive and anti-men.

But the real meaning of the term needs to be reclaimed: true feminism is simply a belief in the total equality, dignity and value of women. Christianity and feminism are often misunderstood by one another; each side needs a PR overhaul to slough off the old stereotypes and see with new eyes. Far from being an oxymoron, the two perspectives are deeply compatible.

I look forward to the day when eyebrows will no longer be raised at that notion, but in order to achieve this the Church must continue to move forwards in living up to the high standard set by Christ himself.

Hopefully he'll continue his work of turning over temple tables in our generation, until women have an equal voice and an equal place inside the doors of his house.