

8 Reasons Why the Bible Is the First Feminist Manifesto

The other day I realized that the Jewish collection of sacred writ we call the Scriptures was the first feminist manifesto! When I refer to feminist in the context of this article, I am describing the celebration, honor, equality and liberty afforded the feminine aspect of humanity called *women*. (I am not referring to the radical feminist, men-hating agenda prevalent in many circles today.)

It is not a coincidence that when we compare women's rights in nations historically influenced culturally by Christianity (especially the Protestant Reformation nations) to nations affected primarily by other religions (such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism), there is no comparison! Christian-influenced nations by far have a higher ceiling for women and enable them to serve as leaders in every realm of society.

Furthermore, the teachings of Scripture have also paved the way for women in the modern era. History teaches that the 19th century Christian awakenings resulted in an egalitarian movement that motivated women to pursue societal leadership. Powerful ladies such as Phoebe Palmer, Harriet Tubman, Catherine Booth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth and beyond were "movers and shakers," motivated by the liberation message of the gospel that permeated American culture during the protracted effects of the Second Great Awakening. This also eventuated in the women's suffrage movement that finally enfranchised women in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th amendment. Also, a profound, salient moment that illustrates the power of the gospel to liberate women is how the contemporary Iranian house church movement has more female than male leaders in a male-dominated (Islamic) society. Wow!

The following are eight key biblical passages that make the Bible the first feminist manifesto:

1. **Genesis 1:27:** This passage serves as the foundation for the biblical worldview related to human dignity and the sanctity of all (human) life. This scripture makes it clear that both male and female equally represent God as His image-bearers. Being an image-bearer is connected to verse 1:28, which is a command to both genders to serve as God's stewards to manage planet Earth. Hence, we need both a man and a woman's perspective and function if we are going to express God's character and will on the Earth.
2. **Numbers 27:1-11, regarding the daughters of Zelophehad:** Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah and Tirzah were the five daughters of a man called Zelophehad, who had no sons. Some Rabinnic writings identify him as the man stoned to death for violating the Sabbath (see Num. 15:32-36). Their laws stipulated that if a man did not have sons, his land would go to the nearest male relative even if he had daughters. The girls reasoned, "Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son?" Hence, they recognized that their personal situation was discriminatory. Consequently, they took up their case with Moses and the other civic leaders of Israel. In spite of the fact that the world of that day was overwhelmingly a male-dominated patriarchy, the Lord told Moses that the daughters were correct and they were granted their father's inheritance.

This is another poignant example of the Hebrew Scriptures being the first feminist manifesto that empowers women!

3. **Proverbs 31:10-31:** This is a groundbreaking part of Scripture that unpacks the implications related to women serving as co-stewards of creation with men (Gen. 1:27-28).

The “excellent” woman prototype illustrated here is not a stay-at-home mom who is always “barefoot and pregnant”! No! This is a woman who—in addition to taking care of her family—buys and sells real estate (Prov. 31:16); manages her own vineyard; sells her own merchandise (v. 18, 24); is a benefactor to the less fortunate (v. 20); creates and designs her own clothes (v. 21, 22, 24); teaches others out of the wealth of her wisdom and has cultural influence in the gates of her city (v. 31).

4. **Romans 16:7:** In this amazing passage, Paul’s greeting to Andronicus and Junia states that both are of note (or have a great reputation) among the apostles. Hence, we know that at least one female was put in the apostolic category! Of course, this has huge implications for church and culture. Related to the church, women can serve in every ministry function described in Ephesians 4:11.
5. **John 20:18:** Mary Magdalene was the first person Jesus appeared to after His resurrection. This has resulted in many Christian expressions referring to her as “the apostle to the apostles.” Furthermore, we see that when Jesus revealed Himself to “the woman at the well” (John 4) God used her to be the first person to proclaim faith in Messiah to the whole city of Samaria! Thus, this illustrates how Jesus chose two women to be the “sent ones” (some would argue as missional apostles) who broke new ground for the gospel.
6. **Galatians 3:28:** In Paul’s letter to the Galatians he made this astonishing counter-cultural statement: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, and there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In essence, Paul proclaimed total equality between male and female in the context of the highly patriarchal Roman/hellenistic society. The ensuing effect was that nations most influenced by Christianity elevated women and bestowed upon them the

right to be educated, work and even lead!

7. **1 Corinthians 11:5:** In the context of a church gathering, Paul allowed women to prophesy. This challenges the paradigm for those who distort Scripture to inhibit women from speaking or teaching in church (prophecy is also considered by many to be a form of preaching!). Also, a passage further on in the letter used to silence women (1 Cor. 14:34-40) has to be read in the context of chapter 10. Since Paul would never contradict himself—by saying in one verse a woman can prophesy and in another verse she must be silent—it must mean something else. A deeper contextual reading of 1 Corinthians 14 shows that the instruction had to do with a wife (who likely sat separately from her husband in church meetings) who interrupted the services by asking her husband questions. It was not referring to women in general being silent. This is why Paul admonished them to ask their husband questions at home if they wanted to learn something (v. 35).

Another passage (1 Tim. 2:12-15) used to silence women in general also had to do with a husband/wife dynamic. This section of 1 Timothy is not generically referring to women (there is only one Greek word for woman and wife) since the example used is Adam and Eve—a married couple. Here Paul is saying that he does not allow a wife to exert revelatory (biblical) authority over her husband. Furthermore, the great New Testament scholar NT Wright says the accurate reading of this passage is “I’m not saying that women should teach men, or try to dictate to them—but that they should be left undisturbed” (2:12 in the “Kingdom New Testament” translation).

8. **Ephesians 5:21-25, 33:** During the writing of this passage, in the Roman/Greco culture, men often viewed marriage to women merely as a means for procreation. Love and romance were not usually involved. A husband

sacrificing himself and loving his wife as much as themselves (v. 33) was unheard of! Erotic love and romance were often between older and younger men (read Plato's Republic as an example of how normal this was) and infrequently between husband and wife. Christianity changed all that (most specifically this section in Ephesians)!

When gentile men got converted, they attempted to treat their wife the same way Jesus loved His bride—the church! Furthermore, 5:21 admonished both husband and wife to submit to one another, which framed the discussion that ensued, related to husband/wife relations regarding submission and respect. Hence, women were elevated in marriage to a place of prominence, which eventually elevated all women in society!

In closing, much more can be written about this subject. The above should be enough to demonstrate that the Bible is truly the first feminist manifesto!