

A Christian Response to Feminism

Galatians 3:26-28

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I. What is Feminism?

What is feminism? The online dictionary definition (Merriam-Webster) of feminism is twofold: (1) the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities; (2) organized activity in support of women's rights and interests.

This definition understands Feminism as (1) a worldview or belief system; (2) a social and political movement.

Feminism is largely a phenomenon that has arisen in the modern, post-Enlightenment Western world.

2. History of Feminism

Primary source consulted: Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Crossway, 1992): pp. 15-24.

Many trace the beginning of the "first wave" of feminism to the late 1700s and the writing of the Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1787). Her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is considered by many to be the first explicitly feminist work of philosophy.

She lived in the age of Revolution (in France and America), equality, and rights. She was a personal acquaintance of the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine, and lived for a time in revolutionary France.

Wollstonecraft's views might have been affected by the fact that she had an abusive father and the fact that she pursued a controversial and immoral lifestyle. This included a relationship with a married man (Henry Fuseli), another relationship with an American radical in France (Gilbert Imlay) that resulted in the

birth to a child out of wedlock (Fanny), two attempts at suicide when Imlay rejected her, a relationship with the anarchist philosopher William Godwin that resulted in a second out of wedlock pregnancy. She did marry Godwin but then died at age 38 when giving birth to her daughter (Mary—who would become Mary Shelly, the author of the Gothic novel *Frankenstein*).

Her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) continued to be influential long after her death.

In America, the pioneer feminist thinker is usually considered to be Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820), whose essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790) is counted as a landmark feminist work. She was born into a wealthy family in Gloucester, Massachusetts. She and her family were among the first to embrace the Universalism movement. After the death of her husband (John Stevens), she married the Universalist minister John Murray. Another of her literary works was *A Universalist Catechism* (1792).

Other powerful feminist thinkers and writers soon emerged, including: Frances [“Fanny”] Wright (1795-1852; Scottish born American feminist and abolitionist; founder of a short lived utopian community in Nashoba, TN); Sarah Grimke (1792-1873; a Southern-born convert to Quakerism and vocal abolitionist); Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902; the outspoken advocate for women’s suffrage, abolition, and the temperance movements), Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906; also a Quaker abolitionist, suffragette, and temperance advocate).

Observation: The nineteenth century was an age of incredible social change. Notice how concern for feminism rose alongside the anti-slavery and temperance movements.

In 1848 one hundred women gathered for a meeting in Seneca Falls, NY to ratify a “Declaration of Sentiments,” regarding the basic natural rights of women, a document primarily written by EC Stanton.

By the early 1900s the movement had succeeded in changing many laws that were unfavorable to women in areas such as divorce, child custody, and property rights.

Women first gained limited voting rights in the Scandinavian nations of Finland, Sweden, and Iceland in the late nineteenth century. On August 26, 1920 the Nineteenth Amendment became part of the US Constitution giving women the right to vote. Many countries adopted women's suffrage much later: France (1944), Italy (1946), Switzerland (1971), Lichtenstein (1984). Women in Saudi Arabia were given limited voting rights only in 2015.

After the breakthrough achievement of women gaining the right to vote in 1920, Kassian notes that the fervor of the "first wave" was lost "and the public cry for women's equality became dormant" (p. 16). With basic legal and voting rights gained, the majority of American women were satisfied with their roles as wives and mothers.

This was soon changed, however, by the social upheaval of the 1960s.

With regard to the rise of a more radical a philosophical version of feminism, many note the importance of French feminist Philosopher Simone deBeauvoir whose 1949 book "The Second Sex" blamed men for subjugating and enslaving women. Interestingly enough, deBouvoir was involved in an abusive long-term relationship with the Marxist French existential philosopher Jean Paul Sartre.

In 1963 feminist journalist Betty Friedan published her book *The Feminine Mystique* which argued, based on her interviews with 80 women, that women had "a problem without a name," a basic unhappiness, purposelessness, and frustration with their station in life. Her prescription for what ailed women was for them to find meaning in work outside the traditional roles in the home, to pursue outside vocations and professions, just like the men who had been content to keep them in the home.

In the late 1960s the feminist author Kate Millet first used the term "patriarchy" [literally: the rule of the father] to describe the so-called "problem without a name" in society. Kassian: "According to feminists, patriarchy was the power of men that oppressed women and was responsible for their unhappiness. Feminists reasoned that the demise of patriarchy would bring about women's fulfillment. Liberating women from patriarchy would allow women to become whole" (p. 24).

In 1966 the National Organization for Women (NOW), a feminist activist organization was formed, their statement of purpose being co-written by Friedan.

Politically, a strong move was made in the 1970s to pass the so-called Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution. It passed congress and needed to be ratified by the states to win approval, but it was strongly opposed and eventually left to languish, the opposition being led by Phyllis Schaffley, a conservative lawyer and activist who opposed argued that feminist egalitarians had gone too far. Interestingly enough, one of the reasons conservatives opposed the ERA was because they feared it would mean that women as well as men could be subject to compulsory military service.

From the 1970s to 1990s feminist views infiltrated the mainstream of American universities which began to develop special programs and departments in women's studies. The focus of many of these programs came to be not merely upon the political rights of women but the vilification of men.

From the 1990s through the early 2000s we have now seen a new phase of the sexual revolution with the legalization of homosexual behavior and same gender unions.

With the rise of post-modern philosophy many are now arguing that gender is merely a social construct. This has included not only the rejection of basic biological distinctions between men and women but a rejection of the entire basic bi-nary distinction between men and women as the two basic types of human beings. It is a rejection of Genesis chapters 1-2.

3. Where feminism is right:

Initial observation: One of the great ironies of history is that feminism the so-called "patriarchal" influences of Christianity, but it developed primarily in Western nations where Christianity had exercised the greatest influence.

Only in societies where Christianity has been influential has there been a sense that women are the spiritual and intellectual equals of men.

Feminists were right to call attention to many injustices in society, regarding equal and fair treatment of women under the law.

The Bible itself reflects similar concerns for justice. Examples:

On provision for widows: The account of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 6.

The account of Naomi and Ruth in the book of Ruth.

On inheritance: The inherited property of the daughters of Zelophehad was protected in Numbers 36.

Against adultery: The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and the account of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11--12.

Against violence and rape: The account of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel 13.

For love and respect in marriage: The household codes of Paul in Ephesians and Colossians.

4. Where feminism has been wrong:

Feminism has its roots in the humanist views of the Enlightenment.

We see in the lives of many of the earliest proponents of feminism and in the lives of its advocates down to the modern day a basic rebellion against the God of the Bible.

Feminists too often have failed to distinguish between the sinful failures and distortions in the relationships between men and women and the goodness of God's original design.

Feminism has often ignored the basic good biological and spiritual differences between men and women.

The feminist vision of equality has not, in the end, given the satisfaction to women or men that they long for. Friedan's "problem which cannot be named" is not patriarchy but alienation from God because of sin. True reconciliation can come only through faith in Christ.