



A Parent's Guide to
FEMINISM

axis

“Women, they have minds, and they have souls, as well as just hearts. And they've got ambition, and they've got talent, as well as just beauty. I'm so sick of people saying that love is just all a woman is fit for.”

—Jo March, *Little Women* (2019)

A Parent's Guide to **FEMINISM**

Table of Contents

A “Herstoric” Event.....	4
How do Gen Z and Gen Alpha think about feminism?	5
What is feminism <i>supposed to be</i> ?	6
What did feminism accomplish?	8
Where does feminism diverge from Christian morality?	9
Can Christianity and feminism coexist?.....	11
Pure Religion.....	14

A “Herstoric” Event

In the summer of 2023, the world turned pink. Crowds of people—women and men, boys and girls—appeared dressed head to toe in fuschia, bubblegum, magenta, and rose. Their outfits featured glitter, feathers, and sequins on gowns, pantsuits, and cowboy hats. These crowds made pilgrimages to their local movie theaters with one singular purpose: to see “[Barbie](#).”

When trailers for [writer/director Greta Gerwig's](#) film “Barbie” started coming out, many people expressed excitement for, as one YouTube commenter put it, “a nice, happy, cute movie.” Makeup brands, social media filters, snack companies, and even Google joined in on the marketing push for a movie with such mass appeal. But as fans of Gerwig’s previous films “Little Women” and “Ladybird” suspected, “Barbie” turned out to be much deeper than a nostalgic jaunt through the world of America’s favorite doll.

The central plot, which followed a “stereotypical” Barbie’s journey to becoming human, raised questions about womanhood, patriarchy, friendship, and what it means to be female in our culture. Some viewers loved it for being funny, heartwarming, relatable, and honest. The film’s harsher critics said the message was cheesy, heavy-handed, and preachy. In nearly every discussion of the film, positive or negative, one word kept coming up: feminism.

“Barbie” might not have plainly understood what it means to be a feminist in today’s society. But in all fairness, the concept has become a singularly murky one. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), 68% of women between 18 and 29 say the word “feminist” describes them very well or somewhat well. But even as young people espouse modern feminist causes—or at least, believe that they do—the term escapes a simple definition. When a young woman tells her grandmother that she’s a proud feminist, they’re probably working from separate understandings of the term.

This parent guide aims to figure out what’s getting lost in translation. What is today’s teenage feminist? How might they be different from a feminist in 1990, or even 1970? Has the word lost its usefulness completely? And most importantly, what would the Bible have to say about feminism? We’ll take a look at the roots of the movement as well as what it looks like today to answer these questions.

How do Gen Z and Gen Alpha think about feminism?

When conversations about *any* controversial topic come up, the loudest voices tend to attract the most attention. In the realm of feminism, the first at-bats are likely to hold views that are the most extreme; those whose idea of the roles of men and women tend towards the radical in all directions. From [Andrew Tate](#) apologists who'll jump at any chance to assert their masculinity by degrading women, to #girlboss feminists who myopically champion [a very specific kind of women](#) and shame everyone else, the social media landscape skews toward the hysterical.

Because so much of popular opinion (or at least, what we tend to hear about it) is determined by what climbs to the top of social media algorithms, many very real cultural issues are muddled by high-visibility [rage-farming content](#). This is content that goes out of its way to be controversial and extreme to get attention and engagement. After all, a ten-minute video of someone calmly explaining a complicated topic simply isn't as exciting as 30 seconds of someone making a horrifying, fact-free declaration.

In reality, the majority of people don't have extreme or outrageous opinions about feminism. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), not only do 89% of self-identified feminists say it's important for women and men to have equal rights, but 69% of people who say they are *not* feminists hold the same opinion.

Reflection questions: Who do you think are the loudest voices in conversations about feminism? Do they have anything valuable to say? What are some examples you've seen of rage-farming, and how have you or others resisted it?

What is feminism *supposed to be*?

Now that we've established how slippery it is to pin down a definition of feminism, let's give it our best shot.

Perhaps a good way to do this is to ask Mary Wollstonecraft, the so-called "mother of feminism" (and the actual mother of "Frankenstein" author Mary Shelley). In Wollstonecraft's 1792 treatise "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," [she says](#): "I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves."

In this case, Wollstonecraft is specifically arguing for women's rights to be educated, represented in government, and taken seriously for their ideas and beliefs; but the sentiment provides a solid foundation for what feminism, at its root, is supposed to be.

Though many modern social movements have distanced themselves from faith communities, the truth is that "[Christian charity](#)" has been a driving factor for centuries of social reform the world over. The question of whether faith in Christ and the defense of the rights of women could work together might have actually confused the [women of the Reformation](#) and [Sojourner Truth](#).

But although "feminism" as something distinct and separate from following Christ's commandments wouldn't make sense to women of the past, it's a schism that frames the current objectives of the movement. To understand how that has happened, let's look at an overview of the development of feminism in the West.

Feminism as a philosophy is often sorted into "[waves](#)" of ideological frameworks, with each building on the wave before it. Some point to an article in The New York Times [published in 1968](#) as the moment the term "second-wave feminism" is broadly understood to have been coined. From there, feminist scholars have established loose definitions and time periods where future "waves" begin and end.

First-wave feminism occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and mainly focused on "women's suffrage"—the right to vote. Many first-wave feminists were also part of the American abolitionist movement, although, notably, when the women's right to vote was established in the 19th Amendment, it only included White women.

Second-wave feminism, which reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, sought a re-evaluation of traditional gender roles at all levels of culture. This included the Equal Pay Act and the Supreme

Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*, as well as more women in the workplace and government. The 1963 book “*The Feminine Mystique*” set the tone for the way feminism would start to look going forward.

Third-wave feminism gained momentum in the 1990s and brought more protections for women in the workplace by creating legislation about harassment. In keeping with the sensibilities of the era, the third wave was less about reforming established systems and more about rebelling against them, as was reflected by the music of all-girl punk bands like [Bikini Kill](#) and [The Runaways](#). During this third wave, feminism began to seep into the cultural consciousness as a nebulous identity marker rather than an objectives-driven movement.

Feminist scholars disagree on whether we are currently in [the fourth wave of feminism](#) or closing in on the fifth. Fourth-wave feminism has been marked by events such as the [#metoo movement](#), the election of Vice President Kamala Harris, and reactions to the end of [Roe v. Wade](#).

One newer aspect of feminism that has emerged in the last few decades, is the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community under the banner of feminism. This is a complicated issue, and you can find more information in our [Parent’s Guide to Gender Identity](#) and [Parent’s Guide to LGBTQ+ and Your Teen](#). For now, it’s important to understand why women’s rights and LGBTQ+ rights groups often see their fates as intertwined.

Unlike other minority groups, whose experiences are joined by a variety of factors, both women's and LGBTQ+ people’s movements are centered around reshaping cultural norms around sex and gender. Women and LGBTQ+ communities identify the rallying cry of feminism as a demand for equality, respect, and safety from discrimination. For women, that has looked primarily like legal reform in regard to education, occupation, and compensation. It has also included a push against historical biases that framed women as weak and less-than.

This brings us to today. Western feminism in 2024 takes a critical approach to social systems and has expanded to include a general championing of all minority groups and a general sense of resentment toward a loosely defined “patriarchy.” The message is spread through memes rather than pamphlets, and TikTok comment sections have taken the place of the parlor meetings where feminists would meet to rally to fight for their rights.

Reflection questions: What “wave” of feminism were you born during? What opinions did you have about feminism when you were growing up, and what are your opinions now? How have you seen feminism change over the years?

What did feminism accomplish?

Women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds now have the right to vote, own property, and pursue careers. Women have the opportunity not only to attend school in the first place but to receive bachelor's and master's degrees, and even PhDs if they want them, something Mary Wollstonecraft could only have dreamed of.

Legal protections for women are not the only good things to have grown out of feminism. The ongoing work of eliminating discrimination in social structures has created a better and safer world for women everywhere. Though there is still much work to do, women in the West are treated with notably more respect and dignity—and even humanity—than in previous centuries. In the mid-1800s women who read too much [were subjected to horrific torture](#) under the guise of healthcare in asylums; as of this writing, eight out of the top ten books on the [New York Times bestseller list](#) are written by women. Before the [1974 court case of Craig v. Boren](#), women were not legally referred to as “persons”; now, a woman is the Vice President of the United States.

Reflection questions: From a historical perspective, what are some positive things that have come from the feminist movement? Is there anything positive you can think of about modern culture that was made possible because of feminism?

Where does feminism diverge from Christian morality?

There is at least one “feminist” issue that Christians find incompatible with practicing their faith: the framing of abortion as women’s healthcare. Abortion is a subject complex enough for a [Parent Guide](#) of its own, but feminists see abortion as part of a much larger conversation about women’s bodily autonomy and [reproductive rights](#).

According to [Amnesty International](#), Every woman and girl has sexual and reproductive rights. This means they are entitled to equal access to health services like contraception and safe abortions, to choose if, when, and who they marry, and to decide if they want to have children and if so how many, when and with who. Women should be able to live without fear of gender-based violence, including rape and other sexual violence, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, or forced sterilization.

In the United States, sterilization and forced marriage are already socially stigmatized. It is abortion that has taken center stage in the conversation about reproductive rights. Though a significant part of reproductive rights is women’s ability to live free from the threat of sexual violence—a cause that Christians should gladly be able to champion—our culture continues to focus on legal and easy access to pregnancy termination.

Despite the continued need for a wide variety of protections for women, many “feminist” activists and advocates push for the idea of abortion on demand as an essential part of women’s liberation. To achieve this goal, the devastating [emotional impacts of abortion](#) are often ignored or purposely minimized by so-called “feminist” organizations and even many women’s healthcare providers.

As Christians, we understand that presenting abortion as a necessary part of healthcare that causes little disruption to a woman’s inner life counteracts the dignity and personhood of women. It’s a framing that encourages women to minimize any pain or regret they experience because of an abortion and often shames women who choose to sacrifice other goals to carry an unplanned or medically complicated pregnancy.

In other words, abortion as a reproductive right isn’t about ensuring women’s right to dignity, but assuring that the contemporary claim to unlimited individual freedom at all costs reaches every corner of our culture—even at the cost of the life of an unborn child and the trauma of its mother.

The good news is, there are several religious and secular pro-life leaders and organizations, such as [Leah Libresco Sargeant](#) and [Feminists for Life](#), that seek to fold feminist theory into their pursuit of protecting the unborn. And framing pro-life ideas as women's rights issues appears to be working: [a full fifth](#) of those who identify as religious "nones" say abortion is wrong.

Reflection questions: What do you think early feminists would think of contemporary feminists?
What are some positive cultural changes that have come about since first-wave feminism?
What are some problems?

Can Christianity and feminism coexist?

To answer the question of whether feminism is compatible with Christianity, we need to step back and ask another one first. What does the teaching of Scripture and the life and ministry of Jesus show us about the worth and value of a woman?

Roman-occupied Judea, where Jesus lived and ministered for most of his life, was not a place of safety, respect, or rights for women. As part of their daily prayers, Jewish men would [thank God](#) “who has created me a human and not a beast, a man and not a woman.” Women could not own any property or receive any inheritance, could not seek a divorce for any reason (although their husbands could divorce them, leaving them destitute), and were not allowed to study any religious text. A first-century rabbi [is quoted as saying](#), “Rather should the word of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman.”

Roman culture as a whole did not offer a safe or respectful structure for women, either. The women who had the most freedom to socialize with whomever they wanted, came and went as they pleased, and earned money they could keep [were often temple prostitutes](#).

It was into this world that Jesus stepped. In our current culture, where women can buy houses by themselves, turn down marriage proposals without fear of legal repercussions, and not just attend institutions of learning but become teachers and professors themselves, it can be difficult to understand just how revolutionary Jesus’ view of women was. For Him to address women directly, to make space for them to learn about theology and Scripture alongside his disciples, heal them, teach them, to treat them with dignity wasn’t just uncommon—it was radical.

Among other religious texts, the Bible is unique in its representation of women. Not only are the wives and mothers of men mentioned by name, but many of the stories of God’s faithfulness and goodness have women at the center.

More than that, these are not women that their cultural context would consider worth mentioning. [Esther](#), a poor Jewish woman forced to marry to Babylonian king, is remembered for her boldness and bravery; [Ruth](#), a widowed foreigner, became an essential member of the lineage of Jesus; [Deborah](#) was a woman who, despite being married, is identified not only as the primary leader of Israel but as a prophet. [Hagar](#), a slave who was impregnated by Abraham in an act of mistrust

by his wife Sarah and then abandoned with her son to die in the desert, was the first woman in the Bible to name God—"the One who sees me."

We've established the revolutionary, unheard-of dignity that Christianity confers to women, so what does that mean for contemporary feminism specifically? Feminism is concerned with the *rights* of women, and modern feminism is particularly concerned with the *nature* of womanhood, so we have to inquire what Scripture says about those questions.

In terms of rights, the Gospels not only affirm women's ability to perform roles as [disciples](#) and [church planters](#), but includes them by name in Jesus' genealogy—His proof of validity as a teacher, citizen, and messiah—immortalizing them as [necessary members of the family of Christ](#) in a time when their stories were dismissed and forgotten. In our contemporary culture, this tells us that God blesses women not only in the home and family but in positions of leadership. Women are equal citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Women deserve equal social rights, from income to education to representation in government; and a guarantee of safety and respect in those spheres the same as everyone else. Given that many of these social rights have already been secured or are in the process of being secured for women in our country, the key question of fourth-wave feminism is nature: what *is* a woman? This is a question [the Bible answers](#) in the first chapter of the first book in no uncertain terms:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

*So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

The sentiment is [reaffirmed by Paul](#) under the new covenant:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So according to Scripture, women are:

- Humans made in the image of God
- Full and complete in that image, equal in both spiritual and physical value to men
- With men, the crown of God's creation and the chosen recipients of His love

- Co-rulers of nature, tasked with stewardship of life and the earth
- Of no less or more value than men, on earth or in the kingdom of heaven
- As recipients of salvation, inheritors of grace, and children of God, *no different from men*.

There are real and marked differences between men and women. But those differences do not extend to the quality of their souls, their status as image bearers, or their access to grace. God created women and loves them, and Jesus sought women and saved them.

Many ideas that are integral to contemporary feminism do not align with our faith, and for any number of reasons we may want to distance ourselves from that word. But when it comes to the idea of feminism as a defense of and advocacy for the life, dignity, safety, representation, social and legal rights, and personhood of women, Christians are called to care deeply and act accordingly.

Reflection questions: How do you see women portrayed in Scripture? How do the lives of women in the Bible inform us about how women should live today? How do you see Christians treat and teach about women today? Do you think that's biblical?

Pure Religion

When it comes to feminism, conversations about fourth-wave radical inclusivity and abortion can distract us from focusing on the fact that Scripture's teaching on women is full of dignity, respect, and truth. If we don't regularly remind ourselves of the wisdom of the Bible on incendiary topics, we risk getting caught up in frustration, trying to solve culture's problems on the symptom level without appealing to the Great Physician to heal the sickness of sin at the heart of it all.

Discord in culture regarding the rights of women is reflective of the original fall, the first consequence of which was separation from God and the struggle between men and women. Jesus came to restore that first relationship—between us and God—as well as the unity and perfect joy God designed men and women to be able to participate in.

When we as Christians work for women's personhood, we're going far beyond social justice. We are laboring against the brokenness, asking the Lord to establish His kingdom on earth, and by so doing, bring all His children together as brothers and sisters of Christ. This is a deeper, truer, and more glorious aim.

Mary Wollstonecraft's desire for women to have power over themselves is a good one, but it falls just short of the real, redeemed possibilities for feminism. In light of God's love for His daughters, a better thesis might be this: we do not wish for women to have power over men, but for men and women to join in humbling themselves to the loving, righteous power of the Lord.

Reflection questions: When do you find yourself making decisions because you're reacting to culture rather than pursuing pure religion? How can you be intentional about committing your actions to the will of Christ?