

# The importance of women within christianity



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The role of women in Church has forever been scrutinized and misunderstood; although many churches continue to refuse women certain rights, it cannot be overseen the vast contributions women have given to Christianity and vice versa.

All forms of Christianity use scriptures to guide their beliefs, theories and practices. For centuries it has been disputed and argued as to how scriptures should mold religious practices with changing times; with this several branches of Christianity have been formed and each branch views women differently according to their scripture translations, guidance, and beliefs. From Early Christian times people have followed and believed many religious theologians, which has led to a negative, insignificant, interpretation of women's roles, rights and status, within the Christian community.

All of these negative connotations towards women have led to a sexist view on the Christian church and religion. If one looks beyond the rights of women within the church, and sees the vast opportunities that have evolved for women from the religious community and their contributions to the Christian community, it is obvious that Christianity has actually given women a name and place in society, and without the women, the Christian community would be at a completely different place.

Throughout the international growth of Christianity women have been the majority of followers and participants, in many countries. It is women that keep the religious communities strong. The rights of women in Christianity may not have been, nor may not ever, be equivalent to man; however, despite these inequalities between sexes, Christianity actually helped give

women a place in society and contributed greatly to the success of women's rights.

Through the growth and development of Christianity, women were devalued and disrespected: seen as a property of men. This has created a stigma against women in religious communities and has influenced various beliefs regarding women and their role within Christianity. Women have slowly gained rights and respect, not only in the church, but also in society overall. In the first century women in the church were extremely active and were viewed as equal to men. They were respected and acknowledged within the religious community; to some it was even an advantage for women to be Christian.

This did not last long, " after that, as Christianity became the dominant faith of the empire and as sex ratios responded to the decline in the differential conversion of women, the roles open to women became far more limited" (Stark 238). Women lost much of the respect and rights, this was due to various scriptures, translations and theories that influenced the Christian religion. Christianity has forever used scripture as a basis for the hierarchal roles within the church, and to sculpt and build the beliefs that hold the community together. Within this dependence and fidelity of scriptures, women's roles were sacrificed. This was mainly due to the translation and implication of the scriptures.

One of the first, and the most influential, Christian writings are the testaments.

These represent the foundation of defining gender differences and roles. The Old Testament was translated into the belief that God chose men to speak to and to perform various significant events. This was and, to many still is, interpreted as all leadership roles in the church can only be done by men and that they are capable of 'speaking', preaching, and acting through the voice of God. This was one of the first influences on the separation of men and women in the church. In the New Testament women are not acknowledged as unimportant, but it emphasized that all of Jesus' twelve disciples and his apostles were men only.

With these early translations of scriptures that illustrate men as higher and more powerful, the perception of women has been undervalued. However, if one looks beyond the obvious portrayal of Jesus' 'chosen' it can be seen that both of the testaments do not exemplify God or Jesus disrespecting or ignoring women. Still, it is apparent that women do not have a leadership role; but within the Testaments, God and Jesus actually praise and support women in spreading the word of the Gospel. Beyond the Testaments and scriptures there are other arguments that were made to define the gender roles within the Christian religion.

Many Christian followers and churches use other arguments to support their view on the role of women. The first argument is the Icon Argument, that is the most physical inequality between genders. It is argued that priests are symbolizing Jesus, or are an "icon" of Jesus, and for that reason men are the only ones that can represent him.

This was one of the early debates regarding how Jesus should be portrayed, and was widely accepted throughout the development of Christianity. There is also the Sovereign will of Christ argument, that reflects much of the New Testament's portrayal of women. This belief does not deny that Jesus chose men as his disciples and apostles, but it states that he did this out of his own free will and it was not necessarily a representation of Jesus' views towards women.

This philosophy is supported by the assumption that Jesus was not culturally criticized and was not scrutinized for being politically incorrect with his male dominant disciples and 'chosen ones'. Although this conjecture does not devalue women, it still supports the idea that men were/are the chosen ones, whether Jesus intended it or not.

In 1983 the New Code Canon Law was created that gave women the opportunity to be participants within the church, but still not ordained. Women were given a few roles within the church including, members of diocesan synod, auditors, and defenders of marriage bond. This attempt at creating a 'place' or status for women was argued and criticized from both spectrums.

These are not large roles and still put men at a higher position than women, but they acknowledge that women deserve to participate in religious leadership positions. The philosophy of these arguments and translation has influenced, and been influenced by, various different theologians throughout the development of Christianity. Christianity has been influenced by many different philosophers and theologians that have shaped and defined the

beliefs and faith of Christian followers. However, their individual opinions and theories, based on women's roles and status, were not necessarily intended for a contemporary society.

Their concepts and convictions about women are supported, yet they have become obsolete with the changes that have occurred politically and religiously throughout the growth of Christianity. Many of the early Christian theories were hypocritical and condescending towards women and their capability within the church. Perhaps one of the most superseded theologians, regarding his views towards women, was Paul. In many of his theories he referred to women as merely a 'reflection of man' and not sufficiently expert. Despite the praise of a few known Christian females, such as Mary and Miriam, Paul preached that women are to remain 'silent' in church.

Because he was one of the earliest Christian philosophers and preachers his theories set this standard or definition for Christian women (Kung 34).

Augustine, an influential Christian thinker, in Western Latin theology, "stressed the equality of man and woman at least on a spiritual level" (Kung 89). He did not deny Paul's statements that woman is made from and/or for man; but he understood and preached that both genders are "in the image of God" and therefore are equally spiritual (Kung 89).

This was widely acknowledged and recognized by the Christian community; it also contributed to the gender segregation of the roles within the church.

Not only did people attempt at explaining the gender differences spiritually but many moved to the scientific aspects of Christianity to help support their

theories. Thomas Aquinas is one of the most known Christian theologians for taking Aristotle's scientific theories and intertwining them with religion and Christianity. Albeit, he guided and contributed a lot to the Christian religion, its theories and explanations; but his beliefs on women were extremely hypocritical and controversial. He acknowledged Aristotle's scientific theories and refined Augustine's remarks towards women.

He began with statements regarding Augustine's gender equality in the spiritual sense stating, that men and women have " the same dignity and the same eternal destiny" (Kung 118). Yet he in no way gave women priority or equality with as physical individuals. In an scientifically based and influenced conjecture, he explains that " individually woman is ' something deficient and unsuccessful' compared with the man" (Kung 118-119). It is after Aquinas and other theologians that Christian followers and critics started suggesting beliefs that were more or less traditional than those prior.

During the reformation, around the 1500's-1600's, various branches of Christianity were created due to the change in beliefs, translations, and traditions of groups of Christians.

Within this change and growth of Christian groups came various definitions and beliefs on the role and importance of women. Some continued to follow the traditional scripture and others interpreted womens roles in scripture and church in a more contemporaneous way. Roman Catholicism continues to believe in the traditional scripture and is against women being accepted into any of theclergy. Catholics, another branch of Christianity, follow by example from traditional scripture and never ordain women.

The Catholic church regards the Bible and Jesus as excluding women from Priesthood and therefore, continues to follow the same guidelines. These are all very prominent religions around the world, regardless of the gender bias. On the other hand, Presbyterians view women as equal to men, they believe that in denying women prominent roles in the church, it is wasting their gifts.

In spite of the varying rights towards women, within the branches of Christianity, there is a preconceived idea that women are in some way lesser than men. Christianity forever has held on to many of the traditional beliefs, some remaining unchanged from early Christianity and some be shaped to fit a more contemporary society; however, society has also had a misconception of women in the Christian community. The assumption that Christian women are uneducated and culturally unaware came from the early scriptures and theories that are the backbone of Christianity.

However, according to Lynn Cohick, that is not the case. She argues that, during early Christianity women were wealthy patrons “ doling out gifts and influencing senators” (Bailey). She continues to explain that women were “ making their own decisions [and those that] studied biblical texts understood fairly sophisticated ideas” (Bailey). This has been overlooked and ignored when it comes to the influence of gender roles in early and modern Christianity. Not to say that women have not struggled and fought to be heard and seen within the church; but, regardless of their ability to participate in leadership roles, they are educated and have played a significant role in the growth of Christianity.



One would think that all of the scrutiny and assumptions that the Christian religion has put on women would have slowly driven them away from the religion and its community. However, women represent the majority of Christian practitioners across the entire world and should be recognized for their contribution to the growth of Christianity (Robert 180). There are many reasons and/or theories as to why women continue to represent the majority of Christian followers, despite the past and present discrimination.

In the article “ World Christianity as a Women’s Movement” a few of these reasons are distinguished, and are extremely significant in the explanation of the importance of women within the Christian communities. Perhaps the most compelling reason is the identity of the church-based community, which intrigues and supports women. As author Dana L. Robert states, “[a] church-based community [provides] support for women, and for healing and wholeness, [it] can create new avenues for women’s leadership in patriarchal societies, as well as provide a context in which female education is valued,” (Robert 185).

This basically explains the main reason as to why women’s voices, roles and participation are crucial for the international growth of Christianity. This also helps understand how Christianity has actually helped women find a place in society. Churches help females find “ solidarity and support for their roles in family and community life, often in connection with mitigating the pressures of patriarchal societies,” (Robert 185). That is, despite the inequality of gender roles within the church; women still have and value, their contributions and acceptance within their religious communities.