

P O P E S  
AND  
F E M I N I S T S

*How the Reformation  
Frees Women from Feminism*



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P R E F A C E

M Y S T O R Y



**S**ince long before I knew the word, vocation has been an important issue for me, as it probably has been for most Christians. It has been a particularly confusing issue for Christian women, myself included, because of the shifts in our culture over the last hundred years. How should a woman use her gifts and skills to honor God in the work she does? How should she accomplish faithful work, pleasing to God?

I grew up down South in a Southern Baptist pastor's family. We were at church every time the doors were open and sometimes when they weren't. I always loved reading and learning, and people often asked me

throughout my childhood and then in my high school and college years what I wanted to be. I regularly read Christian biographies, and that, combined with the missionaries who came to speak at our church, convinced me that all the best Christians were missionaries. So I wanted to be a missionary, and I also wanted to be a mom. Most of the women in the books from the church library had careers, either secular (Susan B. Anthony) or religious (Lottie Moon). As far as I remember, there were few books about the lives of faithful wives and mothers. Still, I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, most likely because I myself had a wonderful stay-at-home mom.

By the time I'd reached high school, and even more so in college, my professors and advisors and the rest of the world had convinced me that being just a mom would be a waste, and that only reinforced what I'd learned from those books in my childhood—the people who change the world do it through their careers. I always got the impression that with so many opportunities available and with such a love of learning, I should do something more to serve God and others than stay home with children. However, this placed a huge burden on me: there did not seem to be a faithful option that was interesting or exciting to me. All these desires to learn but also to have children could not be combined into obedience, and if I pursued them both, I would live in a perpetual state of guilt.

So I ended up with a college major that was just a precursor to graduate school (called the University Scholars Program, in which I took whatever classes I wanted, from



Greek to organic chemistry). I loved learning, and the longer I stayed in school, the more I could delay jumping into a career I didn't want. I started pre-med but realized I did not want to spend ten years in school and residency before being able to start a family. Since I loved standardized tests so much, I went ahead and took the LSAT and then ended up in a joint law degree and master's of theological studies program at Duke University. The problem was I hated law school from the first day. Turns out I still didn't want a career; I wanted to learn, and one of the only subjects I never found interesting was the law (the fun I had taking the LSAT was no preparation for law school itself). The master's of theological studies was interesting, but not enough to make the subject into a career. I still wanted to get married and have children. I still wanted to do what my professors would have disdained—throw away all my potential in order to stay home and feed and diaper kids. Intelligent and industrious women were supposed to have careers, and the impression I had was that simple and lazy women stayed home, women who would be intellectually challenged by changing a diaper.

Through a whole shakeup of my faith, I joined a Reformed church, and one of the important things I learned was that there is a greater reason for having children than personal happiness—children are a blessing God gives and one of the means He uses to bring the world under Christ's dominion. Raising faithful children is a fundamental means of ministry and missions. Still,

I thought the best Christians were in professional ministry, so since I wasn't inclined to do that, my plan was to marry a pastor or an academic (professors can fill a sort of pastoral role, I reasoned). Instead, God sent me a remarkably brilliant businessman who'd never graduated from high school, let alone college. Three weeks after I turned in my final paper for law school, we got married. And then nine months and one week later, our first of five children was born. For a time, babies and toddlers were my world. After I awoke from ten years of having babies and nursing, I started wondering what I was supposed to do next. Now that I could complete sentences again, I questioned again what the point of my life was after my children no longer need the same amount of attention all day. The women who stayed in their jobs had long since passed by a stay-at-home mom like myself. Taking ten years out of the workplace ensured that much.

Along came Nancy Pearcey. Several years ago, I picked up her book *Total Truth*, in which she presented the cultural mandate, which either I had never heard of or never fully absorbed. Whatever the case, she pointed out that in Genesis 1, God gave His people a mandate to fill the earth and subdue it, and that building cultures—through all sorts of vocations—is one of the means of fulfilling that mandate. She also rejected the evangelical Christian perception that real Christians become missionaries and do kingdom work, and everyone else is subpar. Although I knew the Reformers had fought battles over vocation, Pearcey's modern application of their

teachings was fascinating and helpful. Thus, when I was asked to give a talk for wives at a ladies' event for church, I wanted to flesh out what a wife's vocation should be.

Having loved history, I knew that women hundreds of years ago would have had a different perspective on the American debate about whether women should go to work or stay at home. I figured they would have been fighting different battles, and so they were. I had read a quote about Katie Luther once, so I started with her and then moved on to what her husband Martin said about vocations and how greatly his perspective differed from the Catholic Church of his day. And it struck me that the Catholic Church of the sixteenth century was arguing something similar to what my professors and the biographies in our church library argued, namely, that women have to leave the home to make a difference in the world. Although they never said it outright, I realized these professors and authors and seemingly everyone else had been advancing a feminist cause—that women need careers to matter. Even the conservative Christians I'd known throughout my life had an undercurrent of feminism in their assumptions because they too believed that for a woman to make a real difference, she had to be in a career ministry. They were (inadvertently, I believe) pushing the feminist agenda—more softly and gently than the secular world, but creating the same kind of guilt nonetheless.

As I studied further, the connections between the Catholics of old and modern feminists became obvious.

INTRODUCTION

THEIR STORY  
(AND YOURS)



“**T**he people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone” (Isa. 9:2). What is history if not a retelling of this same great story? The prophecy fulfilled on a dark night in Bethlehem has been fulfilled again in all the darkest ages of our race, and we have forgotten it. However, one of our central missions is to remember—Remember the Lord your God, Remember what the Lord your God did, Remember how the Lord your God led you (Deut. 8:18; 7:18; 8:2). This book hopefully will serve as a reminder of how God

faithfully shone the light of His gospel on an undeserving people and how this is His favorite storyline, one He will retell until our world ends. When the culture around us is crumbling, we need to be reminded of His great goodness in the past. “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles. 1:9). The same sins of pride, selfishness, and greed permeated other cultures, perhaps with different manifestations, but all sharing the same root. And God was faithful. God raised up His servants to fight the darkness. And in His unsearchable wisdom, one of the central means He used was the lowly family. This book is a study of a crooked culture, in some ways similar to our own, and a generation of men—and particularly women—who stood firm against it and in so doing changed the course of Western history.

Early modern Europe\* was a society rife with corruption at every level. The Church was a dominant political force and the only religious force, and she had lost her

\* I am using the term *early modern Europe* to distinguish the society influenced in large part by Catholic teaching and practice (out of which the Reformation sprang) from the society influenced by Reformation teaching and practice. Chronologically, early modern Europe covers the period from the end of the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution (late 1400s to the late 1700s). Of course, society did not change automatically at the start of the Reformation when Martin Luther nailed up his Theses in 1517. The effects of the Reformation on society were not all immediately obvious, so I will focus on the Reformers’ teachings, evidence we have of societal changes effected by the Reformation, and the lives of those involved in the Reformation. This is as close as we can probably get to an understanding of how the Reformers influenced the culture all around them. Encyclopaedia Britannica, “History of Europe,” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Europe/The-emergence-of-modern-Europe-1500-1648>.

way. Her princes were like wolves tearing their prey, destroying lives for their own profit. There was a famine of the Word of God, and the inconvenient doctrine of grace had been tucked away out of sight while the works of men were celebrated. According to the Catholic Church, the only truly “holy” members of society were celibate, drawn away from the world into the cloister or presiding over the laypeople<sup>†</sup> as clergy. In reality, they lived like prodigal sons. If an ordinary, sinful man wanted to please an angry God, he could pray to the saints, hoping they would intervene with Christ, the implacable judge, on his behalf. He could do some form of penance to try to reconcile himself to God, or he could buy relief from punishment in the form of indulgences. He could go to Mass or pay for Masses to be said for him and prayers to be offered. In short, he had at his disposal all sorts of works of men and no sort of grace.

And then God intervened in the person of Martin Luther and then through John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and other Reformers. The Reformation separating Protestants from Catholics was not a concerted movement; it was a series of pots boiling over simultaneously. These men were not organized, but they preached truth, and that truth was attractive because grace is potently attractive to people who are sunk deep in sin. They brought the Bible back to the people, translating it and preaching it. They turned a sin-weary people to the sweetness of forgiveness and surprised them all with the news that it

† I.e., a member of the church but not a member of the clergy.

was free. As the Reformers taught the people how to love God and their neighbors, they explained that all lawful vocations were equally holy and that God used the diligent industry of His people to accomplish His purposes in the world. Even more surprising, the Reformers taught that being a wife and mother is a noble and holy calling through which God blesses His children and raises up a new generation of faithful believers. They believed the family was the foundation of society, and that without a change in the family, their society would not see reformation. God used the men and women who embraced these doctrines to turn European society on its head. This book will highlight the contributions Reformers' wives and other women made during the Reformation. These women were soldiers on the front line of the cultural and religious battles even in their homes. Given the cultural assumptions about feminine capacities at the time, wives and mothers were the Trojan horse of the Reformers' cause. Women of the Reformation embodied the new theology. Without their service, there would not have been a Reformation.

It is important to examine the history of feminism and its trajectory in order to identify the ways we are all shaped by it, so we'll start there. After a brief study of feminism, we'll move on to a short cultural history of sixteenth century Europe. Along the way, we'll see some parallels between the sixteenth-century Catholics and modern feminists and between the societies they've influenced. That will prepare us to read the good news of

the gospel as the Reformers preached it in their pulpits and lives. We will learn about a number of women who participated in the Reformation and were an integral part of its radical cultural change. Their lives provide an encouraging and convicting glimpse into the power of feminine faithfulness in the home. The final chapters will apply some of the lessons learned from the women's lives in this book and answer the questions about vocation that were introduced in the preface. My hope is that looking at these women and comparing their culture with modern American culture will inspire Christian women to lay their lives down for their families and the church, anticipating God's faithfulness to bring modern culture to Him through the sacrifices of His people.





CHAPTER 1

F E M I N I S M :

*A Little Background*



**W**hy bother studying feminism? Many of us do not identify with the feminist movement. It seems more like a piece of American history with some strident advocates nowadays who are mostly focused on political ends. Others of us find feminism attractive. We might not embrace the more militant expressions of it, but we don't get why there could be any objection to talk of equality and respect for women. Surely that's not contrary to the Bible, is it?

Whether you are a Christian who is decidedly against feminism or one who is friendlier toward it, it is worth

taking the time to think through exactly what feminism is and how it impacts all of us, whether or not we're aware of it. Those of us who trust Christ and desire to order our lives according to God's Word, particularly as we try to discern what a godly and productive vocation should look like for a woman, would do well to carefully consider how feminism compares to the teaching of Scripture. In future chapters, we will also explore how feminist principles line up with the teaching and practices of the Christian Church both before and during the Reformation, but for now let's look at where we are in twenty-first century America.

American culture today is a hot mess. And by hot mess, I am referring to the state of cultural confusion regarding the roles, responsibilities, and purpose of women in our society. A lot of Christian women are wondering what to do about it, as I was, while living in a state of guilt in their personal lives. On the one hand, they love their families and find great joy in serving them in the home. On the other, they have been taught that their most valuable contributions to society are through the workplace, and they desire the challenges and accomplishments they find there. They feel guilty if they work outside the home and guilty if they stay home and seemingly bury their talents. This confusion is due in part to the effects of feminism on American culture. Feminism has permeated modern society and drives much modern thought both inside and outside the church. It is not possible to understand our culture without understanding a little of its roots.

Feminism is a political and social movement that aims to establish equal rights for women. “Feminism has three components. It is a *movement*, meaning a group working to accomplish specific goals. Those goals are *social and political change*—implying that one must be engaged with the government and law, as well as social practices and beliefs.”<sup>1</sup> So feminism is a movement that aims to conform the entire culture—from beliefs to laws—to its standards.

Feminism has penetrated our culture in three waves, each successive wave building upon the ones before it. The first wave in the nineteenth century issued the Declaration of Sentiments at Seneca, New York, proclaiming the great abuses of mankind against woman-kind. First-wave feminism fought for women’s right to vote. Second-wave feminism in the mid-twentieth century fought for women’s legal equality and for the entrance of women to the workplace. Modern feminism is sometimes called third-wave feminism and is focused on rights for any victimized segment of society. It intends to dismantle any perceived power structure that might be guilty of oppressing these victims. Today’s feminism has embraced and advocated for gay rights and racial and economic equality and has promoted self-determination and human rights.

Christians have created their own feminist movement, and as with all movements, there are many different varieties of Christian feminism. Christian feminists range from women arguing for equality in the workplace

to feminist theologians claiming they are post-Christian. The most basic definition of Christian feminism is feminism as a social justice movement and a means of accepting and affirming women as much as men in social, political, and religious spheres. Unlike secular feminists and other progressives, the Christian feminists base their arguments on their interpretations of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

Feminism claims to have made important gains for women, and in some ways, that is correct. For instance, today women can legally extricate themselves from abusive relationships, get loans without a male cosigner, and vote, which are all good things. However, because of the underlying beliefs about women's purpose and ultimately about God's authority, there is a flip side to these advances. Women have been encouraged to cease being feminine and to pursue careers like men. Many feminists deride those women who have maintained femininity, even when femininity has been defined biblically, so that the woman is perceived as the glory of the man, and that she comes alongside to help him as he fills the earth and subdues it. Furthermore, modern society's rejection of God's creation of masculine and feminine and devaluation of the feminine roles of wife and mother has led to a push for unrestricted reproductive control. And the success on that front has resulted in the deaths of approximately twenty-eight million baby girls in the past forty-four years in the United States. That's a steep price for equal-opportunity loans.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROMAN  
CATHOLIC  
CHURCH IN THE  
SIXTEENTH  
CENTURY



**A**s we prepare to study the Reformers and the women of the Reformation and how they answered these same questions modern American women have about vocation, marriage, and motherhood, we need to gain some context for their culture. Along the way, we'll see parallels between the sixteenth-century Catholic Church and

modern feminism. We can understand the parallels more completely if we have a brief overview of the Church and its teachings. We will see that the Catholic Church connected salvation and vocation, creating a heavy burden.

Five hundred years ago, the corrupted Catholic Church held sway over all of European society in much the same way that secular culture now dominates American society. And just as the modern world looks down on marriage and motherhood, so the Church's view of wives and mothers in the sixteenth century was less than complimentary. The last section of this book tells the stories of women who rejected these views and left the powerful Catholic Church. All the women we'll study were born into the Catholic Church, and some of them were nuns who had devoted their lives to the Church. To better understand their world, it is important to look at some of their contemporaries and at the nature of the Catholic Church and society at the time. We'll also examine key Church teachings that Protestant women abandoned.

What was the state of the Catholic Church in sixteenth-century Europe? In a word, corrupt. In another word, powerful. "The Roman Catholic Church was the center of communal life. It impacted everyday lives of men, women, and children across every social stratum.... The Church was everything: law, order, morality, and eternity, all wrapped into a single powerful entity."<sup>1</sup> A church dominated every small town square; the priest baptized new babies, approved marriages, and buried the

dead, all for a fee.<sup>2</sup> After a death, family members often paid local monasteries or convents to pray for their departed loved ones. Most importantly, the Church told people where they stood with God. Most people lived in fear of the afterlife, and the Church told them that the only way to avoid the agonies of Hell, spend less time suffering in purgatory, and get to the glories of Heaven was by following her rules.<sup>3</sup>

### **POPES: THEIR POWER AND INFLUENCE**

Then as now, the pope was the head of the Catholic Church. However, in sixteenth-century Europe the pope exercised far more power than he does now because of the Church's all-encompassing influence. In Catholic theology (historically and presently), the authority of the pope supersedes the authority of the Word of God. In fact, the Church teaches that the authority of the Word of God derives from the pope, who is the voice of God to the people. Only the pope and the Church are authorized to interpret the Bible, and at the time of the Reformation, any translation of the Bible from Latin into the vernacular was illegal and punishable by execution.<sup>4</sup> In light of this teaching, the corruptions in the Church impacted believers in a more significant and far-reaching way, because they were told the pope was infallible, and his people really had no other alternatives for spiritual leadership. Studying a few of the popes who were contemporaries of the Reformers will help illustrate the problems Reformers denounced within the Church. It



is important to note that other scholars and churchmen spoke out against the excesses of the Catholic Church at the time, but not all of these critics left the Church as the Reformers did. Some stayed inside, continuing to push for reform, and their efforts eventually brought about the Council of Trent (1545–63), which sought to curb abuses and corruption.

### *ALEXANDER VI*

The pertinent popes for this study are Alexander VI (1492–1503), Julius II (1503–13), and Leo X (1513–21). Alexander VI was a man singly devoted to his own exaltation. He has a reputation as the worst pope in history. Historian Philip Schaff notes, “the pre-eminent features of [his] career, as the supreme pontiff of Christendom, were his dissolute habits and his extravagant passion to exalt the worldly fortunes of his children.”<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Church officially held that priests and clergy were to remain celibate. Many did not, including Alexander. He had children by numerous mistresses. Before he allegedly bought his way to the papacy, he had fornicated with a Roman lady and then her daughter, with whom he had four children.<sup>6</sup> When he tired of one particular mistress, he married her off to three successive husbands. Another was married at the time of his relationship with her, so “her legal husband was appeased by the gift of castles.”<sup>7</sup> A Roman Catholic historian remarked that during Alexander’s day, “every priest had his mistress and almost all the Roman monasteries had been turned into

brothels.”<sup>8</sup> There were orgies and bawdy entertainments at the Vatican, but if anyone dared to criticize them, he was in danger of excommunication.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the influential Florentine friar Savonarola condemned Alexander’s excesses and called for his removal.

Alexander, like other popes, cooperated with the rulers of the day. Upon the death of France’s King, Charles VIII, Alexander looked to ally himself with the new king, Louis XII. Louis had a problem—his wife was deformed and barren, and it would be expedient for him to be married to Charles VIII’s widow, whose dowry included Brittany. Alexander had a problem—his son didn’t want to be a bishop and cardinal deacon any more (in fact, he told his fellow cardinals that “from the first he had been averse to orders and received them in obedience to his father’s wish” which one historian “pronounced to be perhaps the only true words the prince ever spoke”<sup>10</sup>). Alexander and Louis found a solution. Alexander gave Louis official permission to divorce his wife, and Louis gave Alexander’s son a dukedom and a royal wife.<sup>11</sup>

Alexander appointed his children (many of whom had been legitimized by the Church) and other relatives, including his mistresses’ relatives, to Church offices. He gave aristocratic positions to his children, as well. Alexander was criticized for his devotion to the advancement of his children, who were not upstanding individuals. At one point, Alexander’s oldest son, Caesar, was imprisoned in Spain. He asked for a confessor and was sent a monk. He killed the monk, donned his hood, and

fled.<sup>12</sup> Caesar was accused of murdering his brother-in-law some years later.<sup>13</sup> Machiavelli was inspired to write *The Prince* using Caesar's political and military tactics as his model.

Later, upon the celebration of the Jubilee in Rome in 1500, Alexander issued a papal bull\* offering free indulgences (Church-authenticated remission) for grievous sins to those who attended.<sup>14</sup> He created offices in the Church—more Cardinals—all bringing in more money for the pontificate because Church offices were often sold.<sup>15</sup> Upon his death in 1503, Caesar threatened to murder the Cardinal with the keys to the papal treasury, thereby procured the keys, and then stole two chests full of gold and silver.

### *JULIUS II*

Julius II succeeded Alexander in 1503, and he began planning to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica almost immediately. During his tenure, he commissioned Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and Raphael to decorate several rooms at the Vatican. Julius was a warrior, and his position as pope did not diminish his ferocity. He aimed to be a prince as well as a pope, to aggrandize the papacy's political power. And so he did.<sup>16</sup> As a sixty-seven-year-old man, he led an army of mercenaries to conquer cities and territories for the Church. He fought Venice, then the French, then Florence. Despite his purportedly holy papal office, he led the

\* A decree issued by the pope.

army to battle on Easter Day.<sup>17</sup> His goal was a unified Italy, which he intended to accomplish by ridding Italy of foreign princes.<sup>18</sup> Erasmus, a Catholic humanist scholar of the day, was so shocked by Julius's military pursuits that he wrote a play satirizing him. As one of Julius's contemporaries noted, "It is assuredly very difficult to be at the same time a secular prince and a priest, for these two are things that have nothing in common. Whoever looks closely into the evangelical law will see that the popes, although calling themselves Vicars of Christ, have introduced a new religion which has nothing of Christ in it but the name. Christ commanded poverty, and they seek for wealth; He commanded humility and they desire to rule the world."<sup>19</sup> Despite all the wars, Julius II left behind a well-financed Church, in part due to the selling of indulgences, which we will discuss later.<sup>20</sup> Julius was a successful warrior, and thus it would be difficult to overstate the political power of the papacy after his reign. The Church and state were wed, and thus the Church was a secular power.<sup>21</sup> And it was the major landowner in Europe, a landowner which paid no taxes.<sup>22</sup>

### *LEO X*

The reigning pope when the Reformation officially began was Pope Leo X, who succeeded Julius II. Under

† Technically, indulgences purchased a reduction of time spent in purgatory, but in popular thought, they purchased permission to sin, and sellers of indulgences were not quick to correct the error (D'Aubigne, *History of the Great Reformation 1*, 45).

Leo's reign, Rome enjoyed luxury, literature, theater, art, wealth, and a building boom.<sup>23</sup> He was devoted to entertaining, and spent mountains of money giving gifts, receiving visitors, and making merry in myriad ways. He played chess and cards and kept a monk who could swallow a whole pigeon in one mouthful and eat forty eggs at a sitting.<sup>24</sup> Leo almost achieved bankruptcy, borrowing money at forty percent interest,<sup>25</sup> so he took to selling church offices. In 1517, he created thirty-one new cardinals, and then he sold the appointments for three hundred thousand ducats (\$50 million today). Upon receiving the money he remarked, "How well we know what a profitable superstition this fable of Jesus Christ has been for us."<sup>26</sup> Although he brought in an astounding amount of money per year, one of his contemporaries said of him, "It was no more possible for his Holiness to keep 1,000 ducats than it is for a stone to fly upwards of itself."<sup>27</sup> Upon Leo's death, a number of cardinals who had lent him money went into bankruptcy.<sup>28</sup> A contemporary Catholic historian said, "His manners were so charming, that he would have been a perfect man, if he had had some knowledge in religious matters, and a little more inclination for piety, concerning which he never troubled himself."<sup>29</sup>

In a papal bull in 1516, Leo reaffirmed his authority over all Church councils. He reaffirmed a previous pope's position that subjection to the pope is necessary

\* Sometimes others contributed to the revelry. The Portuguese king gave him a panther, two leopards, and an elephant.

CHAPTER 5

THE CATHOLIC  
CHURCH AND  
WOMEN



**T**he Church's teaching on grace had a significant impact on early modern society, but so did their teachings on women, vocation, and marriage. Since this book is about the impact of the Reformation on women then and now, we need to know what the Catholics were saying about women and the issues important to them. Because of the Church's extensive control, what the Church taught about women, vocation, and marriage dictated what the people thought about them. In many ways

the Church was influenced by the ancient Greeks. Church fathers combined Greek philosophy with Scripture to formulate doctrine. That doctrine influenced their culture and their everyday life. Notably, some Catholic clergy disagreed with the following characterizations about women and called for reform, but they were not successful in changing the Church's teaching.<sup>1</sup>

The early modern concept of women derived originally from the Greeks, who had been rediscovered as humanism took hold on Europe. Although in *The Republic* Plato argues that men and women should both be guardians of his ideal republic, that was his only work where he championed equality between men and women. He made disparaging remarks about women in his other works. For instance, he believed immoral men would be reincarnated as women,<sup>2</sup> and he believed men were superior in just about every realm.<sup>3</sup> His pupil Aristotle thought women were inferior by nature. Aristotle believed society needs both men and women, but the men were by nature more fit to rule and the women by nature more fit to serve. During the Renaissance, Aristotle's ideas "entered with renewed strength in the academic fields of philosophy, medicine, and theology."<sup>4</sup>

Generally speaking, the Catholic Church accepted these ideas about women. The influential church doctor Thomas Aquinas believed women were, as a whole, intellectually inferior to men, although some women might be intellectually superior to some men. He believed that is why Paul instructed wives to submit to their