

# Christianity: The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Women

*Sue Bohlin examines the facts to show us that a Christian, biblical worldview of women lifted them from a status equivalent to dogs to a position a fellow heirs of the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Christianity, accurately applied, fundamentally changed the value and status of women.*

## The Low Status of Women in Jesus' Day

Some feminists charge that Christianity, the Bible, and the Church are anti-female and horribly oppressive to women. Does God really hate women? Did the apostle Paul disrespect them in his New Testament writings? In this article we'll be looking at why Christianity is the best thing that ever happened to women, with insights from Alvin Schmidt's book *How Christianity Changed the World*.[{1}](#)

"What would be the status of women in the Western world today had Jesus Christ never entered the human arena? One way to answer this question," writes Dr. Schmidt, "is to look at the status of women in most present-day Islamic countries. Here women are still denied many rights that are available to men, and when they appear in public, they must be veiled. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women are even barred from driving an automobile. Whether in Saudi Arabia or in many other Arab countries where the Islamic religion is adhered to strongly, a man has the right to beat and sexually desert his wife, all with the full support of the Koran. . . .[{2}](#) This command is the polar opposite of what the New Testament says regarding a man's relationship with his wife. Paul told the Christians in Ephesus, 'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.' And he added, 'He who loves his wife loves himself.'" [{3}](#)



Jesus loved women and treated them with great respect and dignity. The New Testament's teaching on women developed His perspective even more. The value of women that permeates the New Testament isn't found in the Greco-Roman culture or the cultures of other societies.

In ancient Greece, a respectable woman was not allowed to leave the house unless she was accompanied by a trustworthy male escort. A wife was not permitted to eat or interact with male guests in her husband's home; she had to retire to her woman's quarters. Men kept their wives under lock and key, and women had the social status of a slave. Girls were not allowed to go to school, and when they grew up they were not allowed to speak in public. Women were considered inferior to men. The Greek poets equated women with evil. Remember Pandora and her box? Woman was responsible for unleashing evil on the world. [{4}](#)

The status of Roman women was also very low. Roman law placed a wife under the absolute control of her husband, who had ownership of her and all her possessions. He could divorce her if she went out in public without a veil. A husband had the power of life and death over his wife, just as he did his children. As with the Greeks, women were not allowed to speak in public. [{5}](#)

Jewish women, as well, were barred from public speaking. The oral law prohibited women from reading the Torah out loud. Synagogue worship was segregated, with women never allowed to be heard.

## Jesus and Women

Jesus' treatment of women was very different:

*The extremely low status that the Greek, Roman, and Jewish woman had for centuries was radically affected by the appearance of Jesus Christ. His actions and teachings raised*

*the status of women to new heights, often to the consternation and dismay of his friends and enemies. By word and deed, he went against the ancient, taken-for-granted beliefs and practices that defined woman as socially, intellectually, and spiritually inferior.*

*The humane and respectful way Jesus treated and responded to the Samaritan woman [at the well] (recorded in John 4) may not appear unusual to readers in today's Western culture. Yet what he did was extremely unusual, even radical. He ignored the Jewish anti-Samaritan prejudices along with prevailing view that saw women as inferior beings.*[{6}](#)

He started a conversation with her—a Samaritan, a woman—in public. The rabbinic oral law was quite explicit: “He who talks with a woman [in public] brings evil upon himself.” Another rabbinic teaching prominent in Jesus’ day taught, “One is not so much as to greet a woman.”[{7}](#) So we can understand why his disciples were amazed to find him talking to a woman in public. Can we even imagine how it must have stunned this woman for the Messiah to reach out to her and offer her living water for her thirsty soul?

Among Jesus’ closest friends were Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who entertained him at their home. “Martha assumed the traditional female role of preparing a meal for Jesus, her guest, while her sister Mary did what only men would do, namely, learn from Jesus’ teachings. Mary was the cultural deviant, but so was Jesus, because he violated the rabbinic law of his day [about speaking to women].”[{8}](#) By teaching Mary spiritual truths, he violated another rabbinic law, which said, “Let the words of the Law [Torah] be burned rather than taught to women. . . . If a man teaches his daughter the law, it is as though he taught her lechery.”[{9}](#)

When Lazarus died, Jesus comforted Martha with this promise containing the heart of the Christian gospel: “I am the

resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26) These remarkable words were spoken to a woman! "To teach a woman was bad enough, but Jesus did more than that. He called for a verbal response from Martha. Once more, he went against the socioreligious custom by teaching a woman and by having her publicly respond to him, a man."[\[10\]](#)

"All three of the Synoptic Gospels note that women followed Jesus, a highly unusual phenomenon in first-century Palestine. . . . This behavior may not seem unusual today, but in Jesus' day it was highly unusual. Scholars note that in the prevailing culture only prostitutes and women of very low repute would follow a man without a male escort."[\[11\]](#) These women were not groupies; some of them provided financial support for Jesus and the apostles (Luke 8:3).

The first people Jesus chose to appear to after his resurrection were women; not only that, but he instructed them to tell his disciples that he was alive (Matt. 28, John 20). In a culture where a woman's testimony was worthless because she was worthless, Jesus elevated the value of women beyond anything the world had seen.

## **Paul, Peter, and Women**

Jesus gave women status and respect equal to men. Not only did he break with the anti-female culture of his era, but he set a standard for Christ-followers. Peter and Paul both rose to the challenge in what they wrote in the New Testament.

In a culture that feared the power of a woman's external beauty and feminine influence, Peter encouraged women to see themselves as valuable because God saw them as valuable. His call to aspire to the inner beauty of a trusting and tranquil spirit is staggeringly counter-cultural. He writes, "Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided

hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful."

Equally staggering is his call to men to elevate their wives with respect and understanding: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." Consideration, respect, fellow heirs; these concepts sound good to us, but they were unheard of in the first century!

The apostle Paul is often accused of being a misogynist, one who hates and fears women. But Paul's teachings on women reflect the creation order and high value God places on women as creatures made in his image. Paul's commands for husbands and wives in Ephesians 5 provided a completely new way to look at marriage: as an earthbound illustration of the spiritual mystery of the union of Christ and His bride, the church. He calls wives to not only submit to their husbands as to the Lord, but he calls husbands to submit to Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). He calls men to love their wives in the self-sacrificing way Christ loves the church. In a culture where a wife was property, and a disrespected piece of property at that, Paul elevates women to a position of honor previously unknown in the world.

Paul also provided highly countercultural direction for the New Testament church. In the Jewish synagogue, women had no place and no voice in worship. In the pagan temples, the place of women was to serve as prostitutes. The church, on the other hand, was a place for women to pray and prophecy out loud (1 Cor. 11:5). The spiritual gifts—supernatural enablings to build God's church—are given to women as well as men. Older women are commanded to teach younger ones. The invitation to

women to participate in worship of Jesus was unthinkable—but true.

## Misogyny in the Church

Author Dorothy Sayers, a friend of C.S. Lewis, wrote:

*Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as ‘The women, God help us!’ or ‘The ladies, God bless them!’; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.*

She continues: “There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything ‘funny’ about woman’s nature.”[\[12\]](#) And this is one of the unfortunate truths about Christianity we have to acknowledge: over the centuries, many Christ-followers have fallen far short of the standard Jesus set in showing the worth and dignity of women.

In the second century Clement of Alexandria believed and taught that every woman should blush because she is a woman. Tertullian, who lived about the same time, said, “You [Eve] are the devil’s gateway. . . . You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die.” Augustine, in the fourth century, believed that a woman’s image of God was inferior to that of

the man's.{13} And unfortunately it gets even nastier than that.

Some people mistakenly believe these contemptuous beliefs of the church fathers are rooted in an anti-female Bible, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. People held these misogynistic beliefs *in spite of*, not because of, the biblical teachings. Those who dishonor God by dishonoring His good creation of woman allow themselves to be shaped by the beliefs of the surrounding pagan, anti-female culture instead of following Paul's exhortation to not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). The church in North America does the same thing today by allowing the secular culture to shape our thinking more than the Bible. Only nine percent of Americans claiming to be born-again have a biblical worldview.{14} The church in Africa and Asia does the same thing today by allowing animism, the traditional folk religion, to shape their thinking more than the Bible.

It's unfortunate that some of the church fathers did not allow the woman-honoring principles found in Scripture to change their unbiblical beliefs. But that is the failing of imperfect followers of Jesus, not a failure of God nor of His Word. Jesus loves women.

## Effects of Christianity on Culture

As Christianity spread throughout the world, its redemptive effects elevated women and set them free in many ways. The Christian ethic declared equal worth and value for both men and women. Husbands were commanded to love their wives and not exasperate their children. These principles were in direct conflict with the Roman institution of *patria potestas*, which gave absolute power of life and death over a man's family, including his wife. When *patria potestas* was finally repealed by an emperor who was moved by high biblical standards, what a tremendous effect that had on the culture! Women were also

granted basically the same control over their property as men, and, for the first time, mothers were allowed to be guardians of their children.{15}

The biblical view of husbands and wives as equal partners caused a sea change in marriage as well. Christian women started marrying later, and they married men of their own choosing. This eroded the ancient practice of men marrying child brides against their will, often as young as eleven or twelve years old. The greater marital freedom that Christianity gave women eventually gained wide appeal. Today, a Western woman is not compelled to marry someone she does not want, nor can she legally be married as a child bride. But the practice continues in parts of the world where Christianity has little or no presence.{16}

Another effect of the salt and light of Christianity was its impact on the common practice of polygamy, which demeans women. Many men, including biblical heroes, have had multiple wives, but Jesus made clear this was never God's intention. Whenever he spoke about marriage, it was always in the context of monogamy. He said, "The two [not three or four] will become one flesh." As Christianity spread, God's intention of monogamous marriages became the norm.{17}

Two more cruel practices were abolished as Christianity gained influence. In some cultures, such as India, widows were burned alive on their husbands' funeral pyres. In China, the crippling practice of foot binding was intended to make women totter on their pointed, slender feet in a seductive manner. It was finally outlawed only about a hundred years ago.{18}

As a result of Jesus Christ and His teachings, women in much of the world today, especially in the West, enjoy more privileges and rights than at any other time in history. It takes only a cursory trip to an Arab nation or to a Third World country to see how little freedom women have in countries where Christianity has had little or no



presence.<sup>{19}</sup> It's the best thing that ever happened to women.

## Notes

1. Schmidt, Alvin. *How Christianity Changed the World*. Originally published under the title *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), which is the copy I reference in these notes.
2. "Men stand superior to women.... But those whose perverseness ye fear, admonish them and remove them into bedchambers and beat them; but if they submit to you then do not seek a way against them" Sura 4:34, as quoted in Schmidt, p. 97.
3. Schmidt, p. 97-98.
4. Ibid., p. 98-99.
5. Ibid., p. 101.
6. Ibid., p. 102-03.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 103-104.
10. Ibid., p. 104.
11. Ibid., p. 104-105.
12. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 47.
13. Schmidt, p. 109.
14. "A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life," The Barna Research Group, Ltd. <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=154>.

15. Ibid., p. 111.

16. Ibid., pp. 111-112.

17. Ibid., p. 115.

18. Ibid., pp. 118-119.

19. Ibid., p. 115.

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## Tale of Two Republics

It's hard to read an historical account of the ancient Roman Republic without being tempted to compare its successes and failures with America. For some, it follows that if the mighty Roman Empire fell because of moral, economic, and military blunders, the U.S. shall relinquish its greatness by committing similar errors. The problem with this argument is that it's a form of political reductionism that leaves out the providence of God. He alone determines the destiny of nations and peoples. He alone brings revival, causing people to repent and nations to turn from sin.

Although we can find similarities between different historical settings, every historical event is unique. And even though similar patterns of behavior might be found in both eras, modern America is very different from ancient Rome. With all of that said, there are certainly trends within cultures that prove to be deleterious to the social fabric that binds together a nation.

In this article we will compare social trends and attitudes found among the ruling class of ancient Rome with those of

modern America. In one sense the empire built by the Roman Republic was itself surprisingly modern. Its success was powered by large scale business enterprises, cutting edge technology, and economic opportunity for the upper class. It also had a highly structured and disciplined army that made it the dominant military force on the planet much like America is today. Although only a small percentage of the total population was involved, the Roman Republic engaged a significant number of people in the political process which was rare for any nation until modern times.

Another similarity between the ancient Romans and modern Americans is that both tend to see themselves as the “most morally upright people in the world.” This dangerous human tendency is amplified by military success and goes hand-in-hand with the unspoken assumption of “How could an immoral people prosper as we do?”

In the recent book, *Rubicon*, by Tom Holland, the story is told of how changes in the Roman culture and leadership eventually brought an end to 460 years of the Republic, ushering in a period of absolute rule by Augustus in 27 B.C. Using material from this book, we will look at how big business and materialism corrupted politics and foreign relations, how power distorted justice and reduced individuals to a commodity, and how nationalism was twisted into a tool for building political power and personal gain. Finally, we will explore how individuals were able to overthrow the Republic and impose tyrannical rule on Rome in the name of tradition and conservative principles.

America is not ancient Rome. However, without the constraints of a biblical worldview it is not hard to see how a future leader or political movement might steal the republic from the American people all in the name of patriotism and tradition.

# Big Business, Materialism, and the Military

Back in the sixties, protestors against the war in Vietnam focused on the danger inherent in what was called the military-industrial complex, the partnership between the American companies producing weapons and military supplies, and those who used them. The charge was that America was using its military to both protect and feed America's big business concerns, and in return, big business was providing the military with what it needed to be dominant on the battlefield. In a speech in 1961, President Eisenhower warned that

*In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.*[{1}](#)

He went on to explain that

*This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government.*[{2}](#)

Rome had its own military-industrial complex. As proconsul of the East (in 64 B.C.), Pompey occupied Antioch, the capital of

Syria, and shortly afterwards Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judea. His justification was to protect Roman interests in the region which turned out to be mostly business interests. Pompey was willing to intervene in or impose direct rule on any territory in the interest of maintaining peace and a good business environment. This *Pax Romana* protected unbridled exploitation by Roman entrepreneurs.

The Roman Republic was fueled by big business and its military victories were often turned into a license to make money. Cities were ransacked for treasure, mining was conducted on a scale not to be witnessed again until the Industrial Revolution, and in one city, smelting furnaces caused pollution so bad that naked skin burned and turned white upon exposure.[\[3\]](#)

A culture that encourages limitless greed and personal glory opens itself up to unbridled corruption and bloodshed. The Romans soon found that the republic they so cherished could not survive with leadership that would go to any lengths, and tell any lie, that might keep them in power. The American republic is also fragile. When a “profit at any cost mentality” becomes too embedded, it corrupts both accounting practices and governmental policy.

God did not spare even his people when it became evident that they were corrupted by greed. The prophet Amos warned Judah that God was bringing on judgment because “They [the people of God] trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.”[\[4\]](#) God is still concerned about justice. It will always be in every nation’s interest to seek justice for all people and to act upon ethical principles beyond the profit motive or personal glory.

## **The Politics of Power**

One common trait of both the ancient Roman Republic and the

early United States is that they shared a dependence on slave labor. The Romans believed that if a man allowed himself to be enslaved, then he thoroughly deserved his fate. As they conquered much of the known world, the Romans plundered the wealth of each new territory, and human beings were a major part of this booty. The empire established a single market that moved slaves around the Mediterranean Sea in vast numbers. Millions of slaves owned by wealthy and not so wealthy Roman citizens performed most of the tasks that made Rome rich and powerful.

Even though slavery had virtually vanished in Christian Europe, it was reestablished when the Portuguese began to trade with Africa in the mid-fourteenth century. There had always been slavery in Africa, and it was further developed by Arab traders after the emergence of Islam which regulated its use. Eventually, the Portuguese took over the slave trade and made it more impersonal and horrible than ever. As the Portuguese and Spanish traveled westward, they brought slavery with them. This slave trade became an early component of life in the New World and, eventually, in America.

The result of this dependency was living in constant fear of slaves and a slave revolt. In the Roman Republic, Spartacus led a group of slaves in such a revolt in 73 B.C. that grew to be an army of over 100,000. The rebellion was eventually crushed by politically ambitious leaders Crassus and Pompey. Crassus sent a violent message against future revolts by having the defeated army of Spartacus crucified every forty yards along a one hundred mile stretch of road outside of Rome. America experienced its bloodiest conflict in the Civil War, primarily over the slavery issue. Both cultures endured a degradation of society as a result of slavery. Thomas Jefferson thought that slavery was an evil institution that corrupted the slave owner more than the slave, yet he owned and traded slaves most of his life.

The Roman Republic continued to live with the tension of slave

ownership and labor until its demise. The U. S. ended slavery, but has continued to suffer the effects of enslaving an entire people for centuries. Distrust and anger still exist between races in America, and the gospel message is often tainted because the Bible was used as a justification by some for enslaving millions.

When a society recognizes the uniqueness and significance of each citizen, it is acknowledging the biblical teaching that all individuals are made in God's image. How the current conflicts over other moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia are settled will determine whether we continue to move closer to or further from this biblical principle.

## **Conservatism Abused**

The word *conservative* can mean different things to different people. However, as the name implies, it usually points to someone who is trying to conserve or protect traditional values, values that are often seen as fundamental to both the creation of and the continuance of a nation or political entity. Conservatives argue in defense of what are often called the "permanent things" relating to spiritual, political, and familial ideals. Conservatives in the Roman Republic and the current United States have both referred often to these "permanent things." In some cases, the "permanent things" have been used as a screen to support other agendas or to simply gain power and prestige.

The "permanent things" of the Roman Republic were quite different from today's America. The myth of Romulus and Remus, whose simple childhood home was preserved on a hillside in Rome, is one example. Their legend includes a violent struggle against one another, ending in the death of Remus, which over time came to depict the enduring struggle between the aristocracy of Rome and the plebian class. Another permanent ideal was the freedom from economic or political slavery that

was felt by many Romans to be the key to the Republic's success. A corollary to this freedom was the severe meritocracy supported by the unwritten constitution that guided the nation. Each man was to seek glory and wealth in the name of Rome, and his success or failure would determine his destiny. Strong leaders such as Sulla would sometimes violate the ancient rules of Rome and its unwritten constitution in order to "save it" from perceived or real threats to the Republic. For example, in 88 B.C. Sulla led an army on Rome, violating an ancient tradition. Generals commissioned to serve Rome swore never to enter the city with their soldiers, a tradition that had existed intact for hundreds of years. Sulla claimed that he violated this tradition in order to save the Republic from his political enemy Marius, but he was acting mostly out of desire for personal power and glory.

Ancient Rome also had its traditional religious beliefs and institutions. The temple of Jupiter was at the center of the city as were temples to other Roman gods. Political careers could be ruined if one ignored the traditional role of religion in Roman culture.

America has obvious traditions regarding the role of government, family, and religion. It is unlikely that an outspoken atheist or someone who denied the authority of the U.S. Constitution could be elected president. However, the Roman Republic was lost when men, in the name of conserving the traditions of the Roman people, began to ignore the very rules established by those traditions in their pursuit of personal power and glory.

## **The Fall of the Republic**

Another group which grew increasingly more influential in the Empire and its provinces were the *publicani*. These were businessmen who ran large business cartels that benefited from



the unquestioned dominance of Rome's military power. These business ventures sold shares, had shareholder meetings, elected directors to a governing board, and were as profit motivated as any present day multinational corporation. Although they held no official government title, the *publicani* wielded considerable authority in Rome's provinces and were held in contempt for their merciless extraction of wealth by any means necessary.

This military-fiscal complex corrupted what had been a traditional policy of isolationism in Rome. One provincial administrator, Rutilius Rufus, attempted to restrain the abuse caused by the *publicani* and tax collectors but was himself brought to court, convicted, and exiled in 92 B.C.

Eventually, the provincials fought back. Finding the provinces of Asia poorly defended, Mithridates, the King of Pontus, quickly defeated the Roman forces and encouraged the locals to take their revenge. In the summer of 88 B.C. he ordered the massacre of every Roman and Italian left in Asia. Eighty thousand men, women, and children were killed during one bloody night. Mithridates was seen by the Greeks as a divine source of retribution against the hated superpower of the day. The execution of the Roman commissioner Manius Aquillius provides a vivid picture of the animosity held by many towards Rome. Mithridates order some of the gold treasure held by the Romans to be melted down. Then, Aquillius's head was held back, his mouth forced open, and the molten metal poured down his throat.

I am not equating Rome's experience with modern America. It would be too easy and false to match Osama bin Laden's motives and actions with those of Mithridates. But unfortunately, any nation that rises to the level of wealth and power that the U.S. has will attract resentment and jealous hatred. At the same time, we have to be wise stewards of all that God has blessed us with. We should be known for our justice and mercy, not just our military power.

Even if we do everything right, some will resent our actions. That is why Christians in business and government must avoid even the appearance of evil and work to make America a source of healing and freedom for oppressed people everywhere. We cannot allow those who mislabel our deeds cause us to grow weary of doing good. We should never fall victim to donor fatigue when it comes to hunger or natural disaster; God has blessed us with too much to not get involved. The difference between the Roman Empire and the U. S. is our awareness that God requires much from those who have been given much.

## Notes

1. Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960, p. 1035-1040 Found at <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html>
2. Ibid.
3. Holland, Tom, *Rubicon* (Doubleday, 2003) p. 41.
4. Amos 2:7