Feminism and Christianity: Concord or Conflict?

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Rebecca A. Cain

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Kerry T. Burch

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Abstract:

This thesis explores possible routes toward reconciliation between feminists and Christians in our society. The strategies of evangelical feminists are examined and utilized to make seemingly sexist Biblical passages more understandable and less derogatory toward women, approaching the issues of male authority and the acceptable role of women in the early church through contextual and linguistic analysis. The view of traditionalist Christians is further explained and compared to that of evangelical feminists with the ultimate goal of reconfiguring the arguments between these two ideologies and creating a mutual understanding that has the potential to benefit women both socially and spiritually.

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Introduction

As a Christian and a feminist, a unique struggle exists between two of my most predominant and defining characteristics. For the last four years, I have seen eyebrows raise in conservative Christian circles whenever I utter the word “feminism,” and I have noticed that even when talking to close non-Christian feminist friends that my mentioning of religion is an instant cue for them to change the topic, often due to their disregard for my “patriarchal” religious beliefs. The stereotypical perceptions often found within these two social groups have instigated a mutual and irrational mistrust between feminists and Christians. The objective of this paper is to explore the tensions between these two perspectives and to illuminate some of the common misconceptions of both feminists and Christians by focusing on their common values and goals.

Since there are many different definitions of both Christianity and feminism, I feel it is important to offer the definitions under which I will be operating. A Christian is one who bases his or her belief system on the Bible and professes a faith in Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death, burial and resurrection. Any references made to Christian beliefs will be grounded in scripture, but may not be completely representative of the beliefs of all Christian denominations, since approaches to interpreting certain Biblical passages range from the extremely conservative to the fairly liberal. I will be using the term “feminist” to denote anyone who works for the abolition of woman’s oppression. Again, a broad definition is necessary due to the fact that there are so many different interpretations of feminism, especially among feminists. I believe both of these loosely-constructed definitions emphasize the integrity of individual beliefs and limit the tendency to depersonalize these belief systems.
Both Christianity and feminism require a component of activism. Feminists and Christians, in general, are emotionally charged when it comes to their beliefs, making the issues they confront both controversial and delicate. I feel feminists need to be heard in our society, and I feel Christian voices are equally important. Increasingly, however, a shouting match is the only thing audible in our society, one that is occurring between extremists on both sides who have given their causes supremacy over the very people they have the potential to benefit. This stridency is drowning out the original intents of both of these movements, distracting us from the general love of humanity which is sacred to both of these perspectives, and causing a clamor that soon will defeat itself by deafening the individuals who might have once heard and understood the animating purposes behind these perspectives.
I. Gender and Biblical Interpretation

Many feminists argue that Christianity is a "man's religion." They contend that the Bible has been written and interpreted by men and for men. Not only do women often feel disregarded by the dominant strands of Christianity, but they also find that Christianity is disempowering them. Disempowerment and forced subordination are charges that in today's society demand serious attention, especially when they are brought up against a religion that places all of its value in a loving an infinitely wise God. "The feminist challenge goes beyond mere demands for the equal participation of women and the toning down of sexist language and imagery. It is nothing less than a matter of life or death for the Christian faith. It challenges the raison d'être as the religion of a redeemed humanity" (Avis 2).

The Bible and its interpretation usually serve as grounds for feminist disregard of Christianity. Many argue that the Bible is sexist. One response to this accusation occasionally stated by Christian feminists is that "the books of the Bible, while inspired by God, were written in a linguistic style consistent with the cultural mores and the author's personal idiosyncrasies" (Tucker 183). Due to the changes that take place in language "we cannot expect what was written hundreds or thousands of years ago to sound good to our ears today" (184). Literary scholars would scoff at anyone daring to discount Shakespeare on account of the fact that he uses a different style of language that for some people is difficult to understand. A Shakespeare professor would require contextualization and in-depth analysis of the vocabulary being used. This same type of linguistic approach can and should be taken when dealing with passages in the Bible.
Analysis of language can completely transform the meaning of a passage of scripture. For example, in Genesis 2 it is said that God created woman as a "helper" for man. The term "helper" is often interpreted in a modern way, giving it connotations of weakness and subordination. Generally people understand this to mean that Adam was "in charge" and Eve was merely there to play the part of his side-kick; however, the term rendered helper in Genesis 2:18 is the Hebrew word 'ezer. Elsewhere in scripture this term is used in reference to God helping his people. "A parent is a helper when a toddler is learning to walk. A doctor is a helper to a patient.... Indeed, it seems more consistent to suggest that "helper" connotes strength than that it connotes weakness." Eve was help that Adam needed. He needed a partner. The term does not suggest superiority or subordination (Tucker 38).

The curse placed upon Adam and Eve after the fall is a situation in which the literary context must be examined. Genesis 3:16 says that man "shall rule over" his wife. The statement can really only be taken one way. However, when the wife's submission is looked at as a sinful result of the Fall instead of as the way things were originally intended to be, it seems that this description is something to be challenged as the other effects of the curse have been challenged in today's society. For example, this curse also says to Adam, or man, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (Genesis 3:19), but when men try to overcome this curse, they are not seen as defiant or sinful. Likewise, women are not seen as sinful in trying to overcome pain in childbirth, another effect of the curse. Therefore, it makes no sense for the element of male headship to be the only prescriptive part of the curse. No logical reason exists for taking this aspect of the curse any differently than the aspects of childbearing or the painful toil of getting
food to eat. It seems that as a society we have made efforts to fight all aspects of this curse, and there is no reason not to try to overcome the description of the husband's rule over his wife (Tucker 51).

Another example in which contextual clues in a passage make a large difference in interpretation is the admonition given in Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, submit to your husbands..." Many feminists are familiar with this verse, but are unaware of the fact that this passage calls for mutual submission. The preceding verse states quite plainly, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." The submission is mutual. In other words, this passage is merely trying to curb either marriage partner's desire to domineer over the other. The men are also given an admonition equivalent of that given to the women. Verse 25 says "Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The comparison of a husband's sacrifice to the sacrifice of Christ is an obvious call for submission. This standard is much higher than that which most husbands in the first-century church had been meeting. "...The husband's love is to be comparable to the utterly incomparable love of Christ for the church, as it is described in Philippians 2:8: 'He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on the cross'" (Tucker 133). This additional context reshapes the perspective most people take on this passage. The passage is trying to foster compromise and humility between both marriage partners.

Paul, the author of the previous passage and most of the New Testament, is often accused of authoring the scriptures that diminish the role of women in the family. In actuality, I Timothy 5:14, also written by Paul, directs young widows to "marry, bear children and manage their households." It seems evident in this passage that Paul, in
saying that these young widows should manage their households, does not believe that a wife should embrace a role of submission in the family.

Another subject that is often a cause for controversy is that of the woman's role in the church. Christian women are often discouraged by the fact that many denominations disapprove of women taking leadership roles or sometimes merely speaking up within the church. I Corinthians 14:34-35 causes a lot of women to become uncomfortable with the terms of their religion. It says

Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

These words are enough to make any intelligent woman cringe, whether she considers herself a feminist or not. It seems as though Paul is saying a woman cannot have the gift of teaching, prophesying, praying aloud or evangelizing.

However, again when the reader takes into consideration the larger implications of the text there seems to be more behind this passage than can be understood at first glance. For instance, only three chapters earlier (I Cor. 11:5) in a list of instructions for public worship, Paul writes some guidelines by which women were to pray and use the gift of prophesy. Therefore, the idea that a woman speaking in church was or is to be prohibited seems contradictory (Tucker 122). One way to interpret this is to just focus on the text itself. "There is no clear evidence that the women were preaching or teaching or even judging prophets. It seems rather that they were simply asking questions." Since the men of this time period had more access to knowledge it seems quite likely that the
women were interrupting church proceedings with questions that could have been answered by their spouse later (123). Since Corinthians is a letter to a young church written about 55 A.D., it seems only natural that the men in this society would be the first ones to receive teaching about Christ and the beliefs of Christianity.

This same passage makes the statement that “the head of every woman is man” (I Cor.11:3). This passage is difficult for feminist Christians to come to terms with. Some support the argument that “the head” actually means “the source.” Just as man came from God, woman came from man. This still creates a conflict as to whether or not authority is being given to the man in respect to creation order. Most traditionalists would say it most certainly is while others believe that this passage is strictly calling for submission to God (Rhodes 12). The difficulty with examining texts from this approach is that everything is debatable. This is why it is important for both parties in this debate to be humble and careful about how they approach their arguments and try to facilitate true understanding instead of mere conjecture.

Finally, Christian feminists argue that as well as looking at language and passage context, one must also be aware of cultural context. Before a class studies Thoreau, the students generally get a brief overview of transcendentalism. For the modern reader, knowledge of the context in which Thoreau was writing and of the audience for which he was writing is vital to our interpretation of his works. The same aspects must be observed when analyzing and reacting to Biblical writing. A few words arbitrarily lifted from a text do not always carry the same meaning when taken out of context. In addition, the language of the Biblical authors is naturally going to reflect the deeply patriarchal societies in which they lived. First century Jewish Rabbis were encouraged not to teach
or even speak with women. The status of women was so low that it was legal for a man to divorce his wife if she burned his dinner (Rhodes 1). This is the context in which Christianity originated.

II. Perceptions of the Trinity

The fact that Christianity is not a so-called “man’s religion” is also supported when examining the character of the Christ. Jesus can be seen building relationships among both men and women in the Bible. His actions were in no way exclusive in terms of gender. In his article "Jesus Was a Feminist," Joseph Swidler states that Jesus neither said nor did anything which would indicate that he advocated treating women as intrinsically inferior to men, but that on the contrary he said and did things which indicated that he thought of women as equals of men, and that in the process he willingly violated pertinent social mores. (177)

Jesus was interested in teaching women. Luke chapter 10:38-42 tells the story of Mary and Martha, sisters with whom Christ was visiting. A contrast is drawn between the sisters’ actions. Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made and protested that she had to do all of the work. Jesus said to her "Martha, Martha, you are upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better." His statement shows that he wanted Mary to learn. He was frustrated that Martha felt like her preparations were more important than listening to what he had to say. This is not the attitude of a man who thinks women are inferior or meant for the service of man.
Jesus' attitudes toward women are in direct violation of cultural patterns and conditioning (Perkins 43). The first person to which he reveals his identity as the Son of God is a Samaritan woman. This woman was the last person with whom a Jewish man should have been associating, yet he did not worry about her ethnicity or her gender. Christ also commissioned women to be the first witnesses of his resurrection, sending them to tell his male disciples that he was risen (Rhodes 5).

When considering the role of Christ on earth, the stereotypically "feminine" aspects of his personality are undeniable. Women throughout history have been seen as the nurturing and sensitive gender. Men are generally stereotyped as being dominant and controlling with little concern for traits such as mercy or compassion. Christ set the perfect example of mercy. He was a gentle healer. He did not belittle the intelligence of woman or the role of women.

His gender identity played no role in his theological significance. It seems illogical for some females to state that they are discouraged by the idea of worshipping a male savior because although Christ was most definitely male, he is part of a divine trinity that is too infinite and incomprehensible to humankind to be placed into the finite category of gender. "Since the trinitarian fellowship of the Godhead knows no distinction of male or female and since the human fellowship of male and female knows no discrimination against the female as less in the divine image than the male, therefore the Incarnation in the form of male humanity, though historically and culturally necessary, was not *theologically* necessary" (Jewett 168).

God has been metaphorically seen as a mother figure and a father figure. Although, addressing God as mother in the eyes of some Christians borders on
blasphemy, the Bible "never strictly limits our terminology for God, and to say that it
would be wrong or sinful to refer to God as mother may be going beyond biblical
standards" (Tucker 20). However, throughout scripture Christ sets the example of
referring to God as our father. Throughout the Bible and in churches today many
metaphors are used to express the fullness of God. The Bible itself uses the metaphor of
mother for God. Isaiah 66:13 says, "As a mother comforts her child so will I comfort
you;" So in regards to this, it does not seem blasphemous to address God as mother. The
Lord is also portrayed as a midwife (Ps.22: 9-10) and a female homemaker (Ps. 123:2).
In addition, the attributes of motherhood and nurturing compassion add a more complete
picture of God's infinite presence. However, the reverse of this also seems to be true.
When a Christian does not acknowledge God as a father figure, he or she is also
attempting to place a limit on God. Therefore, feminists must be alert that taking a
female supremacist attitude is as dangerous a taking a chauvinistic attitude. Going so far
as to call God "Goddess" is not supported by scripture and really does not seem
necessary when one realizes that the entity of the Christian God encompasses all of the
goodness that is generally attributed to both genders.

In addition to Christ being attributed with "feminine" personality attributes, the
Holy Spirit, the Comforter, has sometimes also been deemed a representation of the
feminine side of God. The meaning of Christianity does not lie in the gender of God,
Christ, or the Holy Spirit. The importance lies in that fact that the Godhead is able to
satisfy all of the needs of humanity, whether the need be guidance, comfort, love,
forgiveness, or justice. Trying to put this in the category of sex is pointless. God tells
Moses that his name is "I AM." He transcends any other name that he is given.
III. Corrupted Ideals of Christianity

It is important to take these various points and reflect on them. It is important to see that Christianity is not an oppressive religion. The difficulty comes in that with reinterpretation one begins to fear an implied invalidation of the Bible as it is written. Some extreme conservatives find such reinterpretation heretical because in their opinion it changes the meaning of the text. Who is to say whether a feminist interpretation is any less accurate than the traditional patriarchal interpretation that has isolated many women from the message of love existing within the Bible? It seems more likely, considering the themes of love and grace that run through the Bible, especially the New Testament, that the feminist understanding is more concordant with the mission of Christ and the role that Christianity was intended to play in our society according to the Bible.

Theologian Paul Avis and feminist Daphne Hampson both insist that "feminism represents a revolution in our moral awareness' and that when moral consciousness and religious beliefs come into conflict it is the moral conscience that ultimately emerges victorious" (Avis 3). This may sound plausible, but what is unfortunate is that religious beliefs cannot be questioned without seeming heretical. What becomes apparent through the reinterpretation and contextualization of Scripture is that unfortunately the religion of Christianity does not always reflect an uncorrupted and honest look at the Bible. Since humans are fallible and sinful, church history is plagued with poor guidance, political selfishness and greed. These actions of the church no more represent the religious ideals of Christianity than the actions that have oppressed and belittled the role of women. Society instigated these actions. Moral awareness has the ability to illuminate corruption in Christianity, but this corruption does not make the ideals of Christianity corrupt. It
does, in some cases, show that those claiming to practice Christianity are corrupt. The frustration of a liberating society toward Christianity is easily understood. Unfortunately, the ultimate ideals of the religion have faded and been all too often unfulfilled throughout history.

Contrary to much of this society's existing attitude, Christianity actually has the potential to be a liberating belief system.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ (Gal. 3:27-28). This passage reveals a call for unity in Christ. Feminists hunger for this type of unity but are often not willing to put Christ into the equation.

If it is taken at face value, the whole question is settled as to the dignity, worth, freedom, and responsibility of women. This text does not deny the reality of sexual difference anymore than it denies the reality of distinctions that are ethnic (Jew and Greek) or legal (slaves and free persons). There are such distinctions, but "in Christ" these are transcended. Sexual difference is a fact and an important one, with relevance in human existence; but so far as our being "in Christ" is concerned, being male or female is not the proper agenda item. The phrase "in Christ" implies one's personal relationship with Jesus Christ; but it also implies one's being in the family of Christ. To be in Christ is to be in the church, the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12f; Rom. 12:5). For those "in Christ" or in the church, the body of Christ, it is irrelevant to ask if one is Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. (Stagg & Stagg 139)
This quote introduces in two important issues. First of all it makes the point that gender is not important to the agenda of Christianity, and secondly, it explains that everyone can be "in Christ" and that a personal relationship is involved.

The realization of the necessity of a personal relationship with Christ in order to fully understand and benefit from the equality and unity available through Christ is vital. I made the point earlier that there is a difference between those who seem to be religious and those who truly practice Christianity and oneness in the body of Christ. The key to comprehending this is understanding that a surface knowledge of the Bible or of God’s existence does not make one a Christian. Ephesians 4:22-23 says that Christians are to "be made new in the attitudes of [their] minds." This requires a change of heart and a love for humanity. In some professing Christians such a quality is not always apparent.

IV. Traditionalist Reactions to the Feminist Movement

Not only do feminists find fault in Christianity, but likewise do Christians find fault in feminism, often not realizing that there are many different feminist perspectives. In regard to religion, feminists fall onto a continuum consisting of four general subgroups: secular feminists, New Age feminists, liberal Christian feminists, and evangelical feminists. Secular feminists completely reject God and religion in the discussion of feminism. New Age feminists typically involve themselves in goddess worship (further explaining the danger in addressing God as “mother” or “goddess”). Liberal Christian feminists generally operate within a Christian framework; however, these feminists often take more liberty in interpreting scripture and even go so far as to suspect that Biblical authors and interpreters have minimized the role of women in the
Bible. An extremely liberal Christian feminist runs the risk of trying to make the Bible say what he or she wishes it to say by sifting and sorting out what they believe authentic revelation. The fourth subgroup is the evangelical feminists. "Evangelical feminists are those who generally (not always) hold to the conservative views on the Bible and theology, but nevertheless embrace the feminist ideal of abolishing gender-based roles in society, church, and home. They believe the Bible is authoritative and, rightly understood, supports their feminist views" (Rhodes 3). The strategies I have incorporated thus far in discussing various Biblical passages, such as the analysis of language, passage context, and trinitarian character, have been the strategies of an evangelical feminist.

Traditionalists often reject the theology if evangelical feminists (2). Traditionalists view this movement as divisive and as "the negative influence of trends in the wider culture on contemporary Christianity" (3). Most traditionalists strongly disagree with the premise that the subordination of women was a result of the Fall. They appeal to creation order as the primary factor in establishing of male headship. They find significance in Adam's naming of Eve, saying that it is also an implication of male authority (9). They view God's description of husband ruling over wife (Genesis 3:16) as a "divine description of what would occur (male domination and oppression as opposed to loving headship), not a mandate which obedient servants of God should attempt to carry out" (10). This perspective is like that of the evangelical feminists in believing that this statement is descriptive rather than prescriptive, but it discounts the idea that this is any change in the already laid out hierarchical order.
Traditionalists also strongly believe that in concordance with Paul's writing, women are "forbidden to be in a functional position of ecclesiastical authority over men, teaching them in a congregational setting" (12). This doctrine is not to be perceived as a statement of male superiority, but as a reflection again of the creation order in which man was appointed to function as spiritual head. This is logical when considering the Old Testament practice of traditionally naming the eldest son as the spiritual head or priest of the next generation. He was not given this honor because he was spiritually superior. He was simply born first.

Rhodes states that:

Women are not prohibited, however, from teaching men on an individual basis- as apparently Priscilla, with her husband Aquilla taught Apollos (Acts 18:26).... Nor are women forbidden to prophesy in a respectful and submissive manner (1Cor. 11:5-6). Nor are women forbidden to personally address fellow believers, male or female, to their "edification, exhortation, and comfort" (1 Cor. 14: 3). Nor are women forbidden to teach women (Titus 2:3-4) or children (2 Tim1:2, 3:14) or take part in other fruitful ministries (e.g. Rom. 16:3, 6, 12). In short, women are privileged to serve God in many different ways within the authority structure He designed. (13)

Many Christian women are satisfied building their ministry within these guidelines. However, problems still exist for women who feel gifted in the area of a preaching or teaching ministry. Their solutions would probably exist in finding acceptance in a non-traditionalist denomination of Christianity or seeking out a ministry scenario in which
they are focusing on the needs of other women or children. Some women still might be asking the question, “Is this enough?”

Finally, it must be said that the traditionalist idea of male headship is not always the oppressive supremacist entity that society believes it to be. The idea that the male is the authority over women has been abused and used to justify many atrocities in the past as well as the present. Men have abused their wives as their God-given right to discipline a subordinate. Chauvinistic attitudes have polluted family relationships and church interactions, and in doing so, stunted the spiritual growth of all involved. This is not God’s design. We see through the life of Christ that God’s design of headship is a benevolent design. If man is indeed entitled to headship, it is his obligation to correct and teach through love and offer protection and provisions for his wife, just as Christ showed merciful and compassionate leadership to his followers. One of Jesus Christ’s most important characteristics as a leader was his ability to sacrifice his needs for the sake of his followers. Despite his phenomenal power, he did not control his followers with fear or threats, the means by which many men have tried to control women throughout history. He inspired them by living a life of unconditional love. This is the Biblical example of headship, which is nothing to be feared or rejected. However, in today’s society such leadership is so rare that most of us cannot comprehend any human having loving authority over another one. Therefore, to avoid being victimized, women have done what they have had to do in forming the movement that many traditionalists view as rebellion.
V. Reconciliation

It remains to be seen as to whether or not any reconciliation is possible between the paradigms of Christianity and feminism. Are evangelical feminists correctly interpreting scripture or are they going too far in their interpretation and contextualization of scripture and in doing so contradicting God’s intended design? Have Christian males so abused the idea of male authority that they have lost any chance at regaining the trust of Christian women? Is there any solution that is satisfactory to our moral conscience that appeases both sides of this theological debate?

First of all, it seems necessary for the Christian community to make some changes. Evangelical feminists and denominations that are more accepting of women need to continue in their efforts to understand scripture being careful not to go so far as to cause division in the church. The focus of Christianity is not gender, and when this becomes the focus of Christian debate, it becomes easy to begin haggling and forget that the most important thing about Christianity is forgiveness of sins, and that one of God’s greatest commandments is that we love each other. Traditionalists who speak out for male headship need to reshape their beliefs about authority and headship, and create a model of male leadership that is Christ-like and humble, instead of controlling and hurtful to Christian women. Neither side of the debate between traditionalists and evangelical feminists has to change stances. The character of the debate changes when the two parties add God into their equations. It comes down to people seeking to understand God’s revelation instead of two parties trying to undermine each other for believing as they do.
Non-Christian feminists have a more difficult task when it comes to reconciling with the beliefs of Christianity, especially since the traditionalist beliefs are the most well known. The traditions of the church have not always been favorable to women, and in fact at many times have been quite derogatory toward women, and the dissatisfaction some feminists have with the actions of the church is justifiable, even deserved. However, hopefully, the promise of a restoration of unity in Christ (Gal. 3:27-28) and a more accurate understanding of the attributes of God and the ideals of the religion have the capability to in some ways inspire non-Christian feminist to reconnect with Christianity.

Reconciliation does not require complete agreement on every single issue. It would be idealistic to expect a complete absence of tension between such complicated and sophisticated belief systems. Even though it is difficult to see after analyzing all the points of conflict between these two ideologies, a great similarity in values exists between Christians and feminists. Paul Avis discusses the “powerful ethical momentum” behind the feminist movement. The ideals of feminists and of Christians are basically the same: “liberation, redemption, justice, compassion, and solidarity” (3). These are people who care about other people being their strongest, in a spiritual and social context. Two groups with such concerns working peaceably together could transform a society, but due to the discord and a mutual lack of understanding that is shown in the relationship between Christians and feminists, this is a union that will never occur in the minds of most individuals.

Personally, even after examining the beliefs of the evangelical feminists and the traditionalists, I am still unsure of God’s intentions when it comes to the role of each sex.
I do not feel as though any part of scripture calls for women to be hurt or belittled just because they are women. However, the idea of submission, when it is mutual, does not repel me. I do strongly believe that we are all to submit to one another when it is glorifying to Christ as a part of loving each other. I have also never been asked within a Christian community to leave things up to a man instead of handling them myself, although I am sure this happens in many traditionalist settings, and I can see this potentially happening to me someday. In such a case, I will avoid letting my reaction cause discord in the church, even though I will definitely have a lot of questions for a pastor or elder, and I will probably voice many of these questions from the perspective of feminist theology. I feel that many of the evangelical feminist arguments are valuable and deserve further investigation, although I am not sure if there will ever be conclusive evidence as to who is right and who is wrong in the Christian/feminist debate, which is why I sought to reframe the terms of the debate in order to negotiate these tensions within myself.
Works Cited


