

DETAILS



Confronting Sexism in the Church

How We Got Here and What We Can Do About It

August 27, 2024 | \$18, 224 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0818-8

What Is Sexism?

“This book promises to be a valuable resource for evangelicals addressing gender inequality in their communities. Matthews offers a helpful synthesis of recent scholarship and events, issuing a gentle but fervent call for better theology and practice in a tradition she loves.”

-Lisa Weaver Swartz, assistant professor of sociology at Asbury University and author of *Stained Glass Ceilings: How Evangelicals Do Gender and Practice Power*

Despite the real progress that has been made in recent years, women continue to be silenced, wounded, and relegated to the sidelines in our churches. Many churches—even churches that outwardly affirm and platform women—remain unaware of the patterns and cultures at play that set up unseen barriers for women.

This is a book for Christians who want to learn how to do better. Heather Matthews has experienced sexism in the church firsthand. In *Confronting Sexism in the Church*, she explores the history and culture of sexism in our contemporary evangelical world and describes the many ways—subtle and not so subtle—that it lives on in the church today. She gives simple, practical steps for how Christians can actively fight sexism in its many forms.

The mistreatment of women has been part of the human experience from the very beginning—but in Christ, women are set free to be all they’ve been created to be. This book invites churches to live out that reality in all its fullness.

Chapters include:

1. What Is Sexism?
2. Theology of Antisexism
3. A Brief History of Sexism in the Church
4. A Brief History of Antisexism in the Church
5. The Price Women Pay
6. Politics, Power, Pornography, and the Perpetuation of Sexism
7. Confronting Sexism in Relationships
8. Confronting Sexism in Christian Leadership
9. Confronting Sexism in a Church or Organization
10. Confronting Systemic Cultural Sexism



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Heather Matthews (DMin, Fuller Seminary) is the doctor of ministry program manager at Wheaton College Graduate School. She has also worked as a pastor, church planter, nonprofit leader, and missionary.

Naming the Problem

While much progress has been made for women in our society in the last fifty years, sexism is still rampant in our culture, and some argue, even more so in our churches. Many see sexism as one of the primary challenges facing the church today (“5 Major Challenges Facing the Church Today [and How to Address Them],” *Gravity Leadership* podcast, March 14, 2023, <https://gravityleadership.com/podcast/social-challenges-facing-the-church-today/>). Most women can affirm that they have experienced many forms of sexism throughout their lives. Women still regularly encounter discrimination, abuse, harassment, violence, microaggressions, inequality, stereotypes, objectification, and various other forms of sexism both inside and outside the church. The church has not been immune nor a place of refuge for women. It’s time to label these experiences of Christian women as sexism.

It is uncomfortable and disruptive to talk about sexism in the church just like it’s uncomfortable and disruptive to talk about racism in the church. While many women throughout history and in some denominations in recent decades have been vocal about sexism, the evangelical church has largely and collectively buried its head in the sand and refused to address this taboo topic. We want to believe that we are all good people, that we would never intentionally hurt others, and that we are faithful in following Scripture and upholding orthodoxy. We hope that our Christian families and church communities exemplify a biblical ethic, uphold the value of human dignity, and create countercultural spaces of justice and equality.

Yet, sexism is a real problem in our churches. Elaine Storkey says, “The church is that institution which has in the past contributed most soundly to subduing women and has provided a divine justification for doing so” (Elaine Storkey, *What’s Right with Feminism* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986], 46). While women have experienced gains in the broader culture over the last fifty years, and most secular institutions are working toward equality for women, many churches have done little to address similar issues. Though the church can applaud many of the gains secured by the feminist movement, it has even more to offer women. Secular feminism seeks equal rights for women as individuals in the world by addressing social structures and cultural attitudes. Christian feminism grounds these beliefs in Scripture, roots feminism in a Christian ethic, expands the vision for women as God’s co-image bearers, and sees progress for women as the outworking of the gospel in the world. The church has the opportunity to free women to fully actualize their created identity for the good of women and the whole world.

Instead, many evangelical churches perpetuate a theology of leadership and marriage that silences and diminishes women and leads to a myriad of other deleterious effects. While there are historical and theological justifications for the church’s treatment of women, we must label it correctly as sexism and acknowledge that the church has been a primary contributor and perpetuator of sexism. According to Karoline Lewis, “The truth about sexism in the church is that the church is not only a place where sexism is tolerated, it is actively harbored and justified . . . on biblical and theological bases” (Karoline M. Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016], 119).

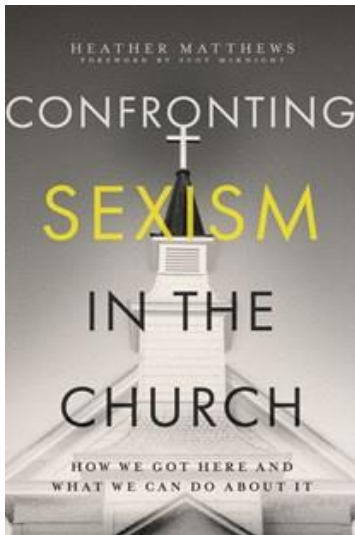


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Heather Matthews (DMin, Fuller Seminary) is the doctor of ministry program manager at Wheaton College Graduate School. She has also worked as a pastor, church planter, nonprofit leader, and missionary.

Sexism from a secular perspective is defined as an “individual’s beliefs and behaviors and organizational practices that either harm individuals based upon their gender or contribute to the maintenance of gender inequality in the society at large” (Todd D. Nelson, *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination* [New York: Psychology Press, 2009], 316). From a faith perspective, sexism is any belief or practice that diminishes women’s identity as fully and equally created in God’s image and restricts women on the basis of their sex from actualizing their full identity by using their gifts and abilities in the church, in the home, and in the world.

Sexism is alive in the church and is malignant in the body of Christ because it prevents women from flourishing. Women flourish when they can fully embody who God created them to be and do what God created them to do—in relationships and in work—using their gifts and abilities without limitation due to their gender. Sexism, however, restricts women from embodying their created identity as co-image bearers and co-rulers with men. As a result, women experience pain, repression, minimization, and inequity. Women are silenced, wounded, and relegated to lesser roles and unable to realize their full humanity and created potential. Sexism is everywhere in our churches and Christian culture in both subtle and overt ways, and it is destructive to women. But it’s not only destructive to women. It harms everyone, including the church and the church’s mission in the world.

—taken from chapter 1, “Naming the Problem”



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Q & A



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Sexism is Alive in the Church

What led you to write a book on a sensitive topic like sexism in the church?

Heather Matthews: I've been in ministry my whole adult life. While I have experienced much success, from young adulthood though now, I continued to encounter barriers to being who God made me to be and doing what God made me to do. The evangelical church has a problem with women, and I believe we are at a cultural moment where change is starting to happen. I wanted to talk about what I have learned, researched, and experienced over the years as a woman in Christian leadership in order to bring about change for more women.

Why is the time right for a book like *Confronting Sexism in the Church*?

Heather: Sexism is alive in the church and is malignant in the body of Christ because it prevents women from flourishing. Women flourish when they can fully embody who God created them to be and do what God created them to do—in relationships and in work—using their gifts and abilities without limitation due to their gender. Regardless of one's theological position, it is time to look closely at the many ways that sexism in the church has harmed women and to actively work toward freedom and flourishing for women.

What makes your book unique with regard to the topic of sexism?

Heather: My book is distinctive because I'm using the word *sexism* to label how women are often treated in the church. But I'm calling all people, men and women, regardless of their theological position, to work together to create a better world and church. I take a broad approach as I identify the problem, look at the history of the church, the current situation in the church, and offer common-sense solutions.

What are the five main things you want readers to take away from your book?

Heather:

1. Sexism is alive in the church and perpetuated by the church.
2. Sexism in the church harms women (and men, the church, and the world).
3. Confronting sexism in the church is part of our role as followers of Jesus.
4. Confronting sexism is good for women, men, the church, and the world, and there are multiple ways to do this.
5. Men must engage with this issue if we are to make progress for women.



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