

# Freedom in The Christian Liberation of women Christ

— by Peter Hammond

The advent of Christianity raised the dignity, freedom and rights of women to levels never before known in any other culture or religion. As one historian put it: “The birth of Jesus was the turning point in the history of women.”

As a result of the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, women in much of the world today, especially in the West, enjoy far more privileges and rights than any previous culture in history.

By way of contrast, one only needs look at how women are treated in those countries where Christianity has had little influence, for example in the Muslim Middle East. Christian women have been publicly stripped and flogged in Sudan for failing to wear the Islamic Abaya (a black garment that covers the head, face and the entire body). Under the Taliban in Afghanistan women were forbidden to go to school, to work outside the home, or even to walk without their whole face and head being covered under the Abaya. Women have

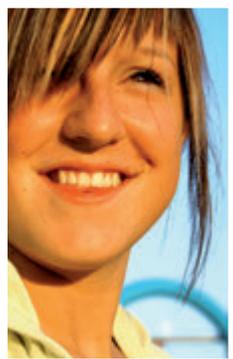
been arrested and jailed in Iran for wearing lipstick. In Saudi Arabia it is illegal for women to drive a motor vehicle.

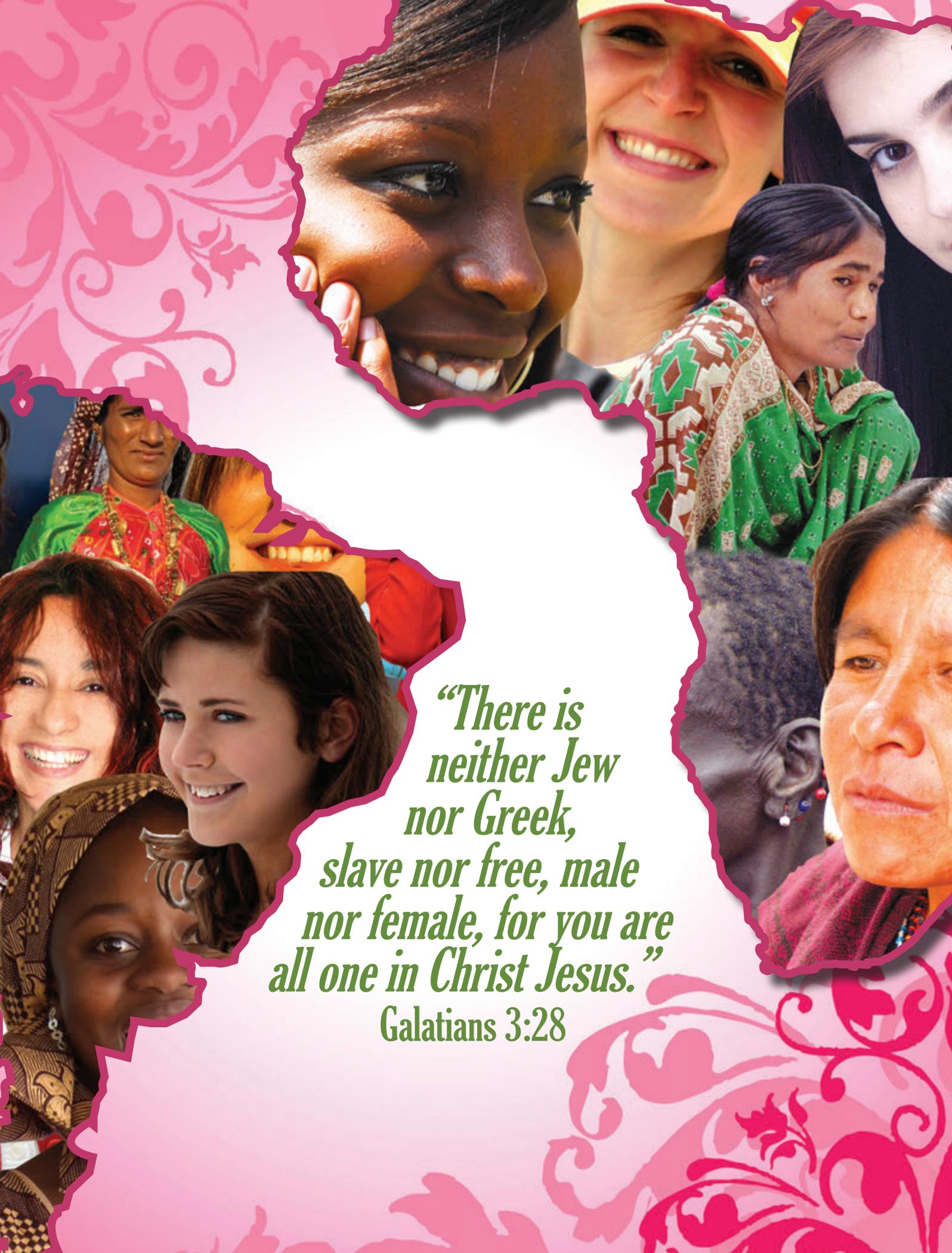
Polygamy is also widely practised in non-Christian religions. Christianity has always rejected polygamy because it inhibits exclusive, devoted love. Love between a man and a woman ought to be exclusive, otherwise marriage is degraded. Monogamy gives recognition, status and value to a woman. Yet Muhammad, for example, had at least 16 wives and 2 concubines. Muhammad’s successor, Caliph Umar, married 7 women and had 2 slave concubines. The Caliph Uthman married 8 women. The Caliph Ali (Muhammad’s son-in-law) had 11 wives and 19 slave concubines. Muhammad’s grandson, Hassan, married 70 women and had at least 31 children. Muhammad also authorised “temporary marriages” (for three nights or more). Thereafter the man could desert the “wife” leaving her without any rights or obligations – even

with regard to any offspring, who would have no claim to inheritance or support.

Those who approve of polygamy, mistresses and “temporary marriages”, deny the value of a genuine marriage based on exclusive, lifelong, devoted love. Polygamy erodes the concept of a Biblical family. Monogamy alone gives the recognition, status and value that a woman needs, and the environment for raising children in a stable and loving home.

Few people appreciate how highly promiscuous and depraved cultures were before the advent of Christianity. British historian, Edward Gibbon, stated in his “History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” that marital faithfulness in the Roman Empire was virtually unknown. Not only were adultery and fornication common, but obscene sexual practices were prevalent. Even the most depraved and obscene sexual acts were shamelessly illustrated on household items such as lamps, bowls, cups and vases. The





*“There is  
neither Jew  
nor Greek,  
slave nor free, male  
nor female, for you are  
all one in Christ Jesus.”*  
Galatians 3:28

Romans and Greeks also exercised and bathed publicly in the nude.

The Roman writer, Ovid, noted that sexual relations had become sadistic and masochistic. Catullus, a Roman writer, referred to the prevalence of Romans practising group sex. Emperor Commodus had a harem of 300 concubines and 300 young boys. Homosexuality and paedophilia was rampant in Rome and Greece. Tiberius, Nero, Galba, Hadrian, Commodus, and many other emperors engaged in widespread homosexual perversions and child molestation. Decadent plays, including live sex, mutilation and

bestiality on the stage, became common during the reigns of Nero and Trajan.

The Roman law defined adultery only on the basis of the marital status of the woman. A married man could not be guilty of adultery. Adultery was perceived as a crime that only a woman could commit against the husband. In Roman law adultery was a property crime against the husband, not an ethical issue which applied to either single or married men.

Into this decadent environment the Christian message and lifestyle came as radical, revolutionary and very offensive. *"You shall not commit adultery"* Exo 20:14; *"Marriage*

new sexual morality. As secular historian Edward Gibbon declared: "The dignity of marriage was restored by the Christians." (The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire)

It was as a result of the tireless work of Christians that by the 5<sup>th</sup> Century a wife was able to divorce an adulterous husband – something which had never before occurred in the Ancient World. Christianity equalised the crime of adultery and brought dignity and beauty to the formal wedding ceremony. Prior to Christianity marriage

## “Christianity has achieved for women greater respect, dignity, honour and protection.”

*should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral"* Heb 13:4; *"The husband should fulfil his marital duty towards his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband"* 1 Cor 7:3; *"Be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect"* 1 Pet 3:7.

Christians maintained that marriage should be between one man and one woman for life, and they insisted that sexual relations had to be confined to marriage. The sex act made the couple *"one flesh."* This required married couples to remain totally faithful to one another. Extramarital sex was unfaithfulness to one's marriage partner, and it was in violation of God's express command.

By rejecting polygamy, adultery, fornication, public nudity, and the artistic portrayal of sexual acts openly on stage and graphically, the Christians instituted an entirely

ceremonies were anything but dignified. Obscene songs, mockery and open displays of extreme decadence were part and parcel of Roman weddings. However, from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, Christianity brought about a revolution in the state's view of marriage, introducing a dignity, beauty and solemnity to weddings which had never before been seen. The belief that marriage is a Divine institution – a sacrament – stems from Christianity (The History of Marriage, by Edward Westermarck).

The abhorrence which Western society still generally holds for paedophilia (the sexual molestation of children) is a direct result of Christianity. Prior to Christianity, paedophilia and homosexuality were completely accepted by Roman and Greek society. Roman and Greek plays, novels, artwork, and philosophers, reveal an acceptance, and obsession, with pederasty. Bisexuality, perversion and sexual deviance was widespread throughout the pagan culture of the Greeks and Romans. It was the clear Biblical teaching against such immorality that revolutionised Western civilisation:



*“Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable.” Lev 18:22; “If a man lies with a male as he lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination” Lev 20:13; “Do not be deceived; neither the sexual immoral nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offender...will inherit the Kingdom of God.” 1 Cor 6:9-10; “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness...shameful lusts...and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion...” Rom 1:18-28*

The Biblical doctrine that sexual intimacy was a holy gift of God – only to be enjoyed between a husband and wife within the context of marital privacy – was a revolutionary Christian concept. The Christian teaching that *“the body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body”* 1 Cor 6:13, and that the body is *“a temple of the Holy Spirit”* 1 Cor 6:19 led Christians to condemn, and in time to outlaw, adultery, paedophilia, homosexuality, bestiality, pornography and other decadence which had once been prevalent and accepted in pre-Christian cultures.

St. Augustine in “The City of God” observed that the Romans despised the Christians because of Christian opposition to their unrestrained sexual depravities. Tertullian noted the Romans were so incensed by Christian opposition to their immoralities that they hated the very name “Christian.”

Professor Alvin Schmidt in his “How Christianity Changed the World” observes: “The hateful attitudes that were once directed against the early Christians seem to be returning, and for similar reasons, despite the current attention given to toleration. Increasingly, Christians are hated by many who advocate ‘hate crime’ laws. In large measure, they are hated

because they seek to honour God and His Laws rather than ‘re-define god as our future selves’... as feverish efforts are underway to bring back the sexual debauchery of ancient paganism.”

To appreciate the revolutionary impact of Jesus Christ in the history of women, and to understand how radical His teaching and conduct towards women was to the ancient world, we need to understand the historically low status of women before the time of Christ.

### The social status of a slave

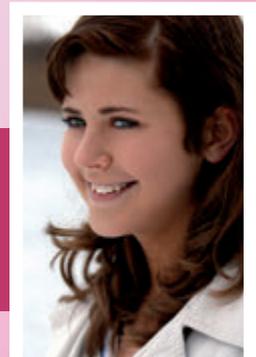
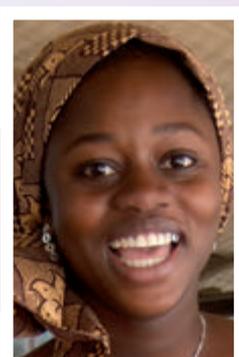
Respectable Greek women were not permitted to leave their house unless accompanied by a male escort. When guests were present in the home, the wife was not permitted to eat at the same table or interact with the guests. The wife had to be unseen and confined to her quarters. The average Athenian woman had the social status of a slave. Whereas the husband could divorce the wife at any time, the wife could not divorce her husband. Girls did not go to school at all. Throughout a woman’s entire life she was not permitted to speak in public.

As Sophocles wrote: *“Silence is an adornment to women”*; Aristotle declared: *“Silence gives grace to women”*. Euripides

wrote: *“Women, specious curse to man”*. Aeschylus wrote: *“Evil of mind are they, and guileful of purpose, with impure hearts”*. Aristophanes wrote: *“For women are a shameless set, the vilest of creatures going”*. Homer wrote: *“One cannot trust women!”*

Greek civilisation accorded an extremely low status to women, not allowing them to have any meaningful social life in public, or in the presence of men, even in private. Women had little social value. Female infanticide was commonplace. Baby girls were expendable. Female babies were seen as *“an economic liability, a social burden.”*

Similarly, in Roman society wives were not allowed to be present with a





into slavery, or kill her at will. Women were prohibited from speaking in public. Women were not allowed to speak in court. A man could even execute his married daughter. He had full authority to beat to death his wife, even his grown children, or grand-children.

These laws were strongly criticised by the early church fathers, such as St. Augustine.

From the very beginning, Christians opposed infanticide and rescued and adopted many of the abandoned babies. ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*** Gal 3:28

The way in which the Lord Jesus interacted with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) may not appear so unusual to Westerners today. Yet, to the prevailing Greek, Roman and Hebrew cultures of that time, our Lord’s actions must have been quite shocking. Jesus not only ignored the Jewish anti-Samaritan prejudices, but He violated the customs that prohibited a man from speaking to a woman that was not a relative. The Samaritan woman herself was shocked: ***“You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? (for Jews do not associate with Samaritans)”*** John 4:9.

husband’s guest at a meal. A married woman under Roman law was placed under the absolute control of her husband who could divorce her, sell her

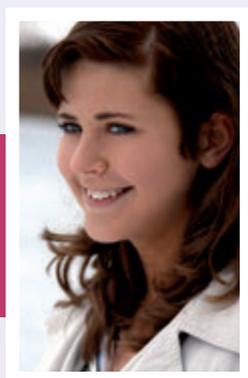
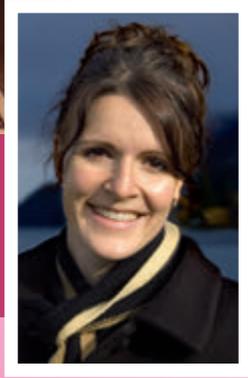
The Rabbinic law of the time was quite explicit: *“He who talks with a woman in public brings evil upon himself”* (Aboth 1.5). And *“One is not so much as to greet a woman”* (Berakhoth 43b). One can imagine then why the Lord’s *“disciples were surprised to find Him talking with a woman”* John 4:27. By the Lord Jesus granting women a previously unknown respect and status, He not only broke with the anti-female culture of His era, but He set a high standard for His followers to emulate.

## Honoured Bible women

The actions and teachings of Jesus raised the status of women to new heights, to the consternation and dismay of both His friends and enemies. By word and deed Christ went against the ancient accepted practices that stereotyped women as socially, intellectually and spiritually inferior. Truly our Lord came ***“that you may have life, and have it in abundance”*** John 10:10.

The Gospels record that many women followed Jesus. Women were the last at the cross (Mark 15:47); the first at the tomb (John 20:1); the first to proclaim the Resurrection (Matt 28:8), and the first to witness to the Jews (Luke 2:37-38). Women attended the very first prayer meeting (Acts 1:14); women were the first to welcome Christian missionaries to Europe (Acts 16:13) and the first European convert was a woman (Acts 16:14).

In the early Church women were not only very prominent, but were frequently honoured: Elizabeth (Luke 1:43); Mary (Luke 1:30-38); Mary of Bethany (Matt



26:13; Luke 10:42); the Samaritan evangelist (John 4:29); Dorcas (Acts 9:36); Lydia, the business woman and the first European convert (Acts 16:14-15); *“Apphia our sister”* (Phil 2); *“Nympha and the church in her house”* (Col 4:15); Phoebe *“a servant of the Church in Cenchrea...she has been a great help to many people including me.”* (Rom 16:1-2).

In His epistles, the apostle Paul mentions numerous female co-workers including *“Priscilla...and her fellow workers in Christ Jesus”* Rom 16:3; *“...Mary, who worked very hard for you.”* Rom 16:6; *“Tryphema and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord...Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.”* Rom 16:12; *“...Euodia and...Syntyche...women who have contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel...”* Phil 4:2-3

## A revolution of love

As Dr. Schmidt observes: “Jesus, Paul and the early Church broke the ancient bonds that kept women secluded and silent (as in Athenian society), subservient (as under the Roman law), and silent and segregated in public worship (as in the Jewish culture). The freedom and dignity that the early Christians gave to women is also evident by their having access equal with men to baptism and the Lord’s Supper...Christ’s message of repentance and salvation proclaimed by the Apostles had revolutionary effects on the lives of women. The early Christians included women in the life of the Church, and gave them a freedom and dignity unknown in

the Greco-Roman and Judaic cultures.”

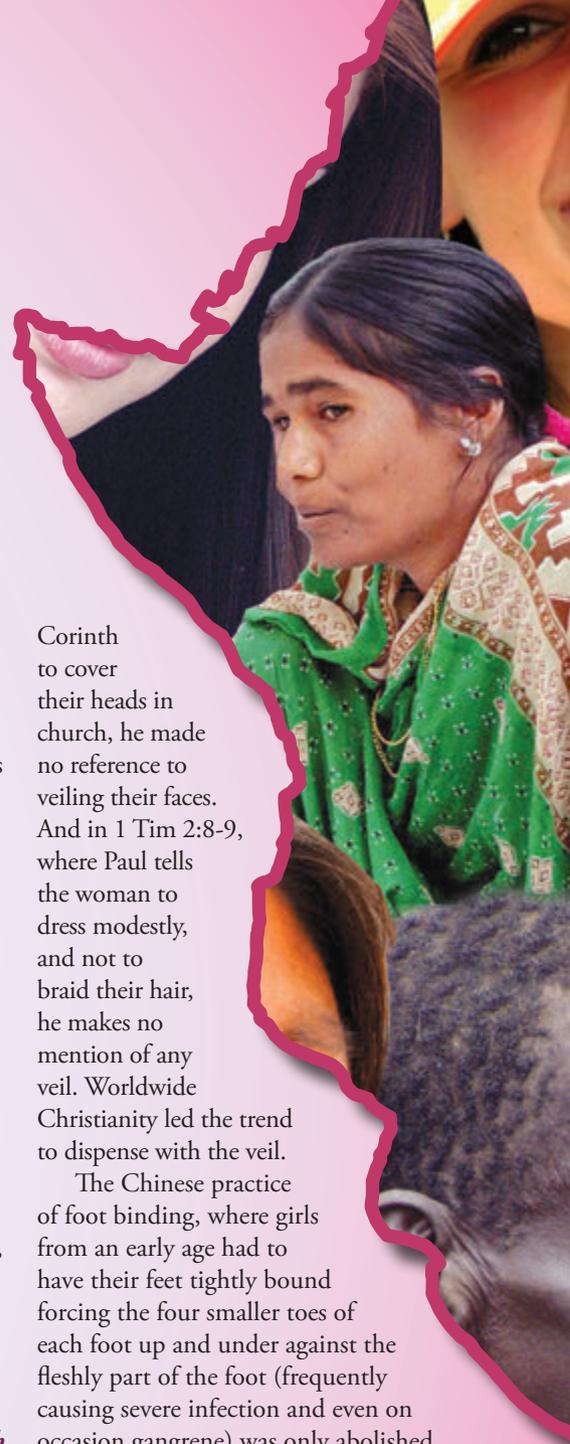
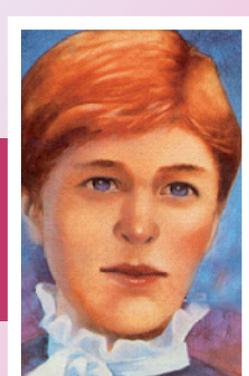
Far from Christianity being “anti-women” as many critics allege, women in the early Church soon outnumbered men to such a degree that there were simply not enough Christian men available for marriage. Celsus, a 2nd Century critic of Christianity ridiculed the believers by saying that Christianity was a religion that attracted women. To him this was a sign of weakness. Numerous Roman authors saw Christianity’s providing dignity and freedom to women as a threat to the entire social order.

Christianity revolutionised marriage by seeing the wife as a partner, commanding husbands to love their wife as Christ loved the Church (Eph 5:25), and allowing Christian women the choice as to whom they married. Christianity granted women the right to divorce unfaithful or abusive husbands. Women also received, for the first time, guardianship over their children who previously were the sole possession of the man.

Christianity pioneered the removal of the veil. Women were veiled by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Chinese, Egyptians, Greeks, Hebrews, Romans and Samaritans. There were cases of Romans divorcing their wives for leaving the house unveiled. Greek women were required to wear a veil after marriage. The rabbis taught that it is a *“godless man who sees his wife go out with her head uncovered. He is duty bound to divorce her”* (Kethuboth 2). The lack of any specific reference in the New Testament to women having to veil their face led the Church to discontinue the practice. While Paul in 1 Cor 11 urged the women in

Corinth to cover their heads in church, he made no reference to veiling their faces. And in 1 Tim 2:8-9, where Paul tells the woman to dress modestly, and not to braid their hair, he makes no mention of any veil. Worldwide Christianity led the trend to dispense with the veil.

The Chinese practice of foot binding, where girls from an early age had to have their feet tightly bound forcing the four smaller toes of each foot up and under against the fleshy part of the foot (frequently causing severe infection and even on occasion gangrene) was only abolished under the influence of Christianity. This cruel custom, which crippled many Chinese women, was outlawed by the Chinese government in 1912 after Christian missionaries led the crusade to abolish foot binding.



The widespread practice of female circumcision is another cruel age old cultural practice which has been outlawed in all countries where Christianity has become the majority religion. The only countries in the world where this barbaric ritual is still practised are countries where Christianity has little or no influence.

## Saving lives

Before the coming of Christ, widows were ostracised, despised and frequently buried or burned alive at their husband's death. For centuries India's cultural custom of suttee, the burning alive of widows, was an integral part of Hindu culture. By God's grace, as a result of the tireless efforts of Christian missionary William Carey, the British authorities in 1829 outlawed the practice of suttee.

This legal ban on suttee (known as Carey's Edict) is still in effect today, although since the 1990's there have been numerous attempts to revive the custom with glorification of *suttee* widow burning and instances of teenage widows being cremated on their husband's funeral pyres. Dr. Schmidt notes: *"In light of the current, almost worldwide promotion of multi-culturalism, which argues that all cultures and religions are essentially equal, the desire and efforts to bring back India's pagan custom of suttee may gain momentum in the future."*

Widows were burned by American Indian tribes, by the Maori in New Zealand, and by the Chinese - before the coming of Christianity. However, Jesus had particular compassion on the widows. Christ rebuked the Pharisees for taking financial advantage of widows (Mark 12:40). Christ praised the widow who, although poor, gave two coins in her offering: ***"I tell you the truth, He said, this poor widow has put in more than all the others."*** Luke 21:3. Christ had compassion on the widow of Nain

(Luke 7:11-15). In 1 Tim 5:3-4, Paul urges Christians to honour and care for the widows.

***"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after... widows in their distress."*** James 1:27

***"Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."*** Prov 31:30

Because of the teachings and actions of our Lord Jesus Christ, Christianity has progressively achieved for women greater respect, dignity, honour and protection. It is to Christianity that we owe marriage as a mutual partnership, the rejection of polygamy, and the promotion of monogamy and marital faithfulness. In granting women respect, dignity and protection, Christianity broke with the prevalent anti-female prejudices of the Ancient world, of pagan cultures and Eastern religions. All the freedoms and advantages which women enjoy today are as a result of the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and the progressive work through the centuries of the Church.

## A new threat

However, if present anti-Christian trends continue one could see a return to the previous pagan abuses of women. Those advocating pornography, sexual permissiveness, homosexual "marriages", legalised prostitution, lowered age of consent and the decriminalisation of adultery are not offering us progress - but only a return to pre-Christian paganism.

***"...remember the Lord who is great and awesome and fight for...your daughters, your wives and your homes..."*** Neh 4:14

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DR. PETER HAMMOND is the author of *The Greatest Century of Reformation*. [www.frontline.org.za](http://www.frontline.org.za)  
Sources: *How Christians Changed the World* - Dr. Alvin Schmidt, *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born* - Dr. James Kennedy

