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FOREWORD BY SCOT MCKNIGHT

CONFRONTING

SEXISM

IN THE  
CHURCH

HOW WE GOT HERE AND  
WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT



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ONE

## NAMING THE PROBLEM

*We would rather believe that the expositor is mistaken, than that the very term “Gospel,”—‘Good News,’—proclaims oppression to women.*

KATHERINE BUSHNELL

*There were angry men confronting me and I caught the flashing of defiant eyes, but above me and within me, there was a spirit stronger than them all.*

ANTOINETTE BROWN BLACKWELL

The church has always been vulnerable to controversy. As the church seeks to interpret and embody Scripture in any time and culture, it is inevitable that there will be disagreement and division. There are many issues in the church today that are contentious. The list of topics has grown over the last several years because of the political and racial divides in our country. We all know these dangerous topics—topics related to politics, race, sexuality, and culture. Some churches and leaders tiptoe around these controversial and inflammatory conversations in order to keep the peace, while others proudly take sides and

expect all to agree and follow as proof of authentic and acceptable faith. Many churches and denominations have divided over these issues in recent years, and individuals choose to join or leave churches primarily based on their theological, social, and political stance.

Sexism in the church is one of these topics. Women whisper about it, while men often remain oblivious. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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.

The thread of sexism is not difficult to trace for most women, especially Christian women. Women often keep quiet about sexism or choose to overlook difficult events or patterns of sexism in order to survive. Women don't speak up because there are few ways to effect change, and speaking up can lead to negative consequences. In my own life, I recently had a colleague who was a man twenty-five years older than me. He consistently interrupted, overpowered, demeaned, manipulated, and scapegoated me both in individual meetings and with colleagues. Although I reported this behavior, and other women had complained as well, no action was taken on our behalf. Likewise, I recently met a woman who told me about how she resigned from the church where she had served in leadership for many years with proven gifts and skills after she was demoted to an administrative assistant position because of the church's view of women in leadership. She is still recovering from the pain and shame of losing her ministry and church and trying to find her confidence as a leader and a new path forward as she seeks to follow the call that God has given her. Sadly, these types of experiences are commonplace for women.

The reality of sexism is easy to uncover and expose if we are brave enough to look. I experienced sexism as a child and as an adult, in my relationships—including my marriage—in my work as a pastor, and in the church where I have spent the majority of my personal and professional life. I have sadly learned over the years that my life is not

unique. Sexism has affected every single woman who has ever lived, and the effect of sexism is often greater for women who identify as evangelical, where conservative beliefs about the role of women are still a defining issue.

My story of sexism starts out like that of many other Christian women and women in ministry leadership. I was full of hopeful optimism, energy, and idealism as I envisioned my future in ministry. As a child, I was a high achiever. I was an only child with supportive parents who believed in my abilities and invested time and energy into helping me succeed in life. I was also White and middle-class with parents who were college educated, which paved the way for much of my success in life. I graduated at the top of my high school class and went on to a top ten university. The world seemed infinitely open to me. I had never encountered barriers that I could not overcome with hard work and perseverance. In my childhood and teenage years, I reaped the benefits of the strides made for women during my mother's generation. Now as I look back, I see the fingerprints of sexism in my childhood, in my family, in my church, and in the culture; however, I was not attuned to the many forms and impact of sexism at that stage of my life. Like most forms of discrimination now, sexism is often hidden and implicit rather than overt and explicit. It's easy for men and women to overlook the effects of sexism even though they are everywhere.

I was one of those kids who was at church every time the doors were open, not because my parents forced me to attend but because I loved church. I came to faith in Jesus as a child, and when I was in high school, I sensed a call from God into ministry. I had a great experience in my church with good friends, caring adults who invested in my life, a youth group that was a blast, and a youth pastor who discipled me. I was excited to follow and serve God, but I had no vision for what this looked like as a young woman. I grew up in a Southern Baptist church where women weren't allowed to do much of anything in leadership.

As a result, I absorbed many overt and covert messages regarding women. There were no female pastors or preachers at my church or even deacons (who from my perspective as a child seemed to only take the offering on Sunday mornings). Like all Southern Baptist churches, my church held a complementarian view of men and women. I remember learning that wives should be submissive to husbands, that men are the leaders of their families, and that the highest calling for women was to fulfill their roles of wife and mother. In most churches like my SBC (Southern Baptist Convention) church, sexism seems benevolent and sounds benign. Men and women absorb schemas and mantras about gender unconsciously. Sexism in the church is couched in terms of biblical fidelity, chivalry, integrity, and love. Yet, this benevolent patriarchy still leads to unequal treatment and discrimination against women. As a result, women like me grow up not knowing their full worth and purpose.

When I told my youth pastor that I felt called into ministry, he was very supportive and encouraging, but I never had a mentor who helped me discern what this path might look like for me. I had no vision for what women in ministry leadership could do. While my church affirmed that men and women could receive a call from God, there appeared to be no opportunities for a woman to follow and develop that call. Since I had never in my life seen a female pastor, I certainly couldn't imagine myself as a pastor. In my seventeen-year-old, undeveloped brain, it seemed obvious to me that God wanted me to be a missionary. I knew women could be missionaries and felt an affinity for crosscultural work. At the time, I wanted to be a doctor, so this appeared like a perfect convergence of my gifts and abilities with God's call. I would pursue a life as a missionary doctor. In this decision and a myriad of others, sexism restrained and directed my life decisions in unrecognized ways.

Fast-forward a few years. I found myself at the end of college trying to figure out my next steps. I had also fallen in love. My fiancé and I were negotiating our future plans after graduation. I didn't realize



at the time how strong the messages and narratives were from the competing spheres of my life. As a female student at Northwestern University, I was surrounded by smart and talented women who were ready to take the world by storm. At the same time, I was part of a Christian group on campus. I loved this campus ministry, and it fostered my faith during my pivotal college years. However, I didn't recognize the cognitive dissonance that I was experiencing. Like the SBC church from my childhood, the campus group was complementarian. Leaders and students alike talked often about male headship and female submission, and strict gender roles were followed. They also taught that a woman's highest calling was to be a wife and a mother. The female staff who had children were stay-at-home-moms, and those that still served in the ministry were single without marriage and family responsibilities. Sexist beliefs about women, women's work, and marriage were modeled and taught. I was desperately trying to integrate my beliefs about my faith and my calling; yet, I had not yet seen or heard a compelling vision for women that made sense of my life and supported my flourishing as the person God made me to be with my unique gifts and calling.

As college came to a close and I approached marriage and an impending decision about my future career, I felt paralyzed. How could I follow my calling to be a missionary doctor while also supporting my husband in his career? How could I prioritize being a wife and a mother in the future with a demanding job as a doctor? If my husband's career was most important, what was I supposed to do about my dreams and career? The competing voices in my head were overwhelming. I had been groomed by the patriarchal beliefs of my faith to put the needs of men and others above my own needs and to pursue my high calling as a wife and mother. It was clear from family and friends that my fiancé's career was most important and that I needed to align my plans around his. I ended up giving up my dream of becoming a missionary doctor. I didn't give up on following God's call, but I took

the route of following my husband as a supportive wife. After college, I enrolled in seminary instead of medical school and found myself confused and lost in a universe of overt biblical patriarchy.

When I started seminary, I not only had abandoned my dreams and lost my sense of self, but I found myself at a school where others did not see my value either. This was a shocking and confusing transition after graduating from a prestigious university and experiencing much prior success and achievement. I noticed immediately that other students, mostly men, would not look at me in the eye or speak to me. I felt small and invisible. I could not be my full self, a confident and accomplished student with plans for my future in ministry. It was clear that I was expected to fit into a traditional “pastor’s wife” role. Many of the other seminary wives were stay-at-home mothers with small children or were in traditionally feminine professions such as nursing or teaching. Women like me who were training for ministry in the church were often looked at with suspicion. I only had one female friend who was pursuing an MDiv, the traditional degree for pastors, and she was not respected by her male peers, though she was intelligent and gifted.

During this season of life, I also willingly took on traditional gender roles in my Christian marriage, assuming that this was what a “good wife” should do. This played out in a multitude of ways over the years, and my naive attempt to be a good, Christian wife led to increasingly destructive effects. I assumed more and more family responsibility that should have been shared. I accepted demeaning and abusive treatment that eroded my confidence and restricted my work in ministry. I learned that my gifts and calling were secondary and that my primary responsibility was to support the gifts and calling of my husband.

After three years of seminary, I graduated summa cum laude with two master’s degrees, but I had trouble finding internships and a ministry job because many churches only hired men. Although my degree

required me to have “field education” credits for graduation, my church would not let me teach an adult Sunday school class without my husband coteaching with me. Even the job placement office at the seminary declined to assist me as I explored career options because they didn’t have any employers interested in interviewing women. Sadly, twenty years later, other women are still telling me this well-known evangelical seminary is a very difficult place for women.

At this point in my midtwenties, sexism finally stopped me in my tracks and demanded my attention. While sexism had certainly been prevalent in the 1980s and ’90s when I was growing up, I was largely unaware of sexism in the culture and especially in my faith tradition until it started causing me intense personal pain, blocked my calling, and obscured my vision for the future. I am strong and tough, but attending seminary broke me like no other experience in my life had at that point. I realized something was wrong when I found myself crying on a regular basis in my apartment on the seminary’s campus, and I am not one prone to crying. Christian institutions and Christian individuals were actively restricting the abundant life that I thought was available to me, and doing so in the name of Jesus. This is why Elaine Storkey says, “The gospel is not good news for women.”<sup>5</sup>

While I didn’t yet have language to describe my experience, I came face-to-face with the patriarchy and sexism that is ubiquitous in evangelicalism. As a friend said to me, “Sexism is baked into the cake” in evangelical churches. My experience in seminary opened my eyes to the ways that sexism in the church is widespread, alarming, and damaging. I experienced sexism on multiple levels—in the roles to which I was expected to conform, from the negative treatment that I experienced from others, and from the restriction and limitation of my gifts and work in ministry from well-meaning men and women. During those years, I wrestled with my theology in order to understand God’s value, purpose, and vision for women in the church and the world. I needed to understand my value and purpose because few people

in my proximity saw it or affirmed it in me. Although I resolved my theology during seminary, severed ties with the views of my past, and aligned myself with those who affirm biblical equality, I still struggled through the next twenty years of my life with experiences of sexism that affected every facet of my life and faith.

Those years when I was in seminary were when I began to sense that something wasn't right in the Christian world that I inhabited. Being a Christian woman shouldn't feel utterly miserable. I shouldn't lose my identity in marriage. I shouldn't feel devalued in ministry. I shouldn't be weighed down by expectations and roles. I shouldn't feel invisible, unworthy, and useless. I shouldn't experience discrimination, abuse, and inequality. This could not be the abundant life that Jesus offered. My faith should allow me to flourish, to be the full human that God made me to be, to discover and use my gifts and abilities, to fully contribute to the church and the kingdom of God, and to reach my full potential. My seminary years were not the end of my experience of sexism, but they were a turning point. My eyes were opened, and I started to see more clearly. As a result, I have spent the last twenty years learning and processing how sexism, which has been integral to our evangelical Christian faith, has affected me, other women, men, children, the church, and our culture.

I'm not the only one who is starting to draw attention to sexism in the evangelical church. People are talking and writing and leaving the church over the issue of sexism. Beth Moore finally left the SBC after what can easily be labeled as abusive treatment by denominational leaders because she dared to preach and to call out sexual abuse by powerful men. Medieval historian Beth Allison Barr wrote *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* to debunk the sexist evangelical myths about womanhood. Historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez wrote *Jesus and John Wayne* tracing the thread of sexism through the history of the American church. Organizations such as Christians for Biblical Equality are writing and teaching and advocating for the full equality

of women in the church and the world. Women are leaving the church because there is no place for them to thrive, and non-Christian women who are accustomed to equality see the church as sexist and antiquated. There are countless others who are raising their voices and saying that enough is enough.

It's time to start telling the truth about our faith. Sexism is intertwined with and pervasive in our evangelical faith. We can see the origins of sexism and patriarchy in Genesis, and this brokenness in our relationships and world has been perpetuated since then as an essential part of our faith in many evangelical churches and denominations. Sexist theology and practice do not align with God's original vision for women and the church. 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. Many gifted women, like me, who love God and want to serve him, find it impossible to actualize their callings and become the people who God created them to be in the evangelical church today. Theological and cultural constraints related to gender roles hinder the personal and professional lives of many Christian women. Sexism impacts marriages and families in innumerable ways such as in the areas of intimacy, roles, sex, work, friendship, parenting, and other aspects of family life.

In many ways our practices and beliefs in the evangelical church today have overstepped our theology. This is due to the influence of culture, politics, and the long history of the church. Many of the beliefs and practices regarding women in the church have been reactionary against cultural changes. While as evangelicals we desire to let Scripture rather than culture inform our beliefs and actions, there have been times, especially in American culture, where our interpretation of Scripture was wrong and the culture was on the right side of justice. The church in recent years has not kept pace with the cultural changes that have empowered and freed women. We must untangle our beliefs

and practices from ingrained cultural views and calcified theological beliefs and look with fresh eyes on the scourge of sexism and God's vision for women. There are many issues regarding women on which we all can agree and can work together for a better world for women.

It's time to consider how we can be part of the solution. While I do not equate sexism with racism, I have found Ibram X. Kendi's and Jemar Tisby's writing on racism helpful to consider as a model for fighting sexism in the church. Ibram X. Kendi coined the term "antiracist" in his bestselling book *How to be an Antiracist*. According to Kendi, "There is no neutrality in the racism struggle. The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not racist.' It is 'antiracist.'"<sup>6</sup>

Kendi defines an antiracist as "one who is supporting antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea."<sup>7</sup> Kendi's point is that the only way to undo racism is to actively work to dismantle it. The same is true when we consider sexism. It's not enough to not be sexist. We need antisexistists in the church who are actively working to dismantle sexism.

Lynn Schmidt defines antisexistism as "opposing sexism while managing personal sexist biases. A person who is antisexist takes action by challenging sexism and those who are sexist."<sup>8</sup> While Schmidt's book addresses sexism generally in the culture, we also need antisexistists in the church. Antisexistists in the church take action to build a faith culture where women can display their created identity and fulfill their created purpose without hindrance due to their gender. Antisexistists don't all have to start with the same theology. We each can encourage and empower women to the greatest extent possible as we continue to learn and grow in our support and advocacy for women. As Jemar Tisby says about racial justice, "not all of us have the same starting point, nor are we all moving at the same speed."<sup>9</sup>

Many will argue, "I'm not sexist." Others might say, "I hold specific theological beliefs about the role of women, but that's different from sexism." Some will say, "This is a peripheral issue in the church and

theology.” Many will feel angry about this book and the topic of sexism in the church and believe that this conversation is harmful and divisive for the church. If this describes you, I encourage you to keep reading. I know that there are many faithful followers of Jesus with different perspectives and theological viewpoints from my own. Most of us are doing our best to live faithful lives that honor the women in our lives. The church has been wrestling with the issues in Scripture and in culture for centuries, and our views on women are closely tied to our own experiences in the church and family.

Sexism is difficult to address, and we all come with our personal convictions. Women of faith who continue to endure many forms of sexism need us to courageously consider the impact of sexism in the church rather than remaining neutral, denying, or distancing ourselves from these important issues and conversations that impact a woman’s humanity and dignity. It is easy for us to stay entrenched in our current views, narratives, and ways of living. It seems like our entire culture is divided and hostile as we have taken sides on numerous political, social, and religious issues. It takes courage to examine our presuppositions and to engage in dialogue. It takes humility to open ourselves to new ideas and to legitimately consider perspectives that may contradict our current worldview. It is difficult to change. It takes empathy to truly hear the experiences of women who have been harmed by sexism in the church. My hope is that this book will not only be read by people who already agree with me but also by others who disagree but want to consider how they might engage in eradicating sexism.

This book is more important for men than it is for women. Much of the responsibility for confronting sexism in the church falls on men who have been the perpetrators of sexism and still hold the majority of power and authority in the church and in families. Women have been confronting sexism for centuries, and we will continue to do so because our very lives depend on it. However, without strong allyship with men in the church, progress will continue to be slow. Men still

hold much power and authority over women in the church and home. You don't have to be an angry feminist or be a liberal or abandon Scripture in order to be an antisexist. Men who use their voices and work as antisexist have the ability to release and empower women in new ways, and the ripple effect of such change will have a lasting impact on the kingdom of God.

I still managed to move forward in my ministry calling despite early setbacks caused by sexism. I've spent the last twenty years working in the United States and overseas, with churches, nonprofits, and now in Christian higher education. In many ways I have been blessed in my ministry and experienced success in my work, but it has not come without struggle. I have experienced sexism at every stage and location. The stories are too many to fit in the pages of this book, but this has only grown my passion to advocate for women in the church.

In this book, I will share more of my experiences of sexism as well as the stories of many other women. I will look at the historical roots of sexism in the church, our present evangelical milieu that perpetuates sexism, and the many ways that women are paying the price for sexism in the church. I will describe a theology of antisexistism and give concrete, actionable steps for how people of faith can confront sexism at multiple levels in the church and culture.

I'm not an angry feminist bent on destroying men, families, or the church. I am not a left-wing liberal bent on indoctrinating you with a myriad of other political ideologies. I am a pastor and a leader and a practitioner who loves the church and wants to see the church flourishing into the future. In this book I hope to honestly look at how our Christian beliefs and practices have contributed to sexism and how we might take practical steps to change so that women are able to fully and equally participate in life as unique human beings without barriers or restrictions.

This is a matter of great importance. It is biblical. It is a matter of justice for half the world, and it is vital for the future of the church.



Addressing sexism in the church cannot wait, because every woman continues to suffer because of sexism. It is necessary for the evangelical church's mission to draw more people into the abundant life that we have found in Christ. The church has led the way in working toward social change and for the common good throughout the centuries by promoting the protection of children, education, democracy, health care, poverty alleviation, racial equality, human rights, and yes, even women's rights and equality.

At our moment in history, I've noticed a change recently in the fight for women. We are at a tipping point. There is momentum for change. There are many more women and men in evangelicalism now who are working for the full inclusion and equality of women in the church. We have the capacity now to see substantial and lasting change that could echo for generations, empowering women and girls in the home, church, and society who will live out their faith in new and bold ways in the name of Jesus.

Yet, the church's work on behalf of women is far from finished. Imagine how different our lives, and churches, and culture would be if sexism was eradicated. Imagine that there were no more stereotypes, discrimination, inequality, or violence. Imagine if this movement was led by Christians. Imagine in the next generation of the church, women telling stories of how they were championed by the church, how men treated them as equals worthy of respect, how they participated fully and equally with men in the church and family, how new doors were opened, how harassment and abuse declined, how the church and families became healthier and stronger because women's identity and gifts were welcomed, and how the mission of the church in the world expanded. Together we can confront sexism in the church so that we may fully realize that we are neither male nor female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Let's create this new future for women.

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