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# What Does It Mean To Be a Christian Woman? Sustaining and Empowering the Female Christian Faith in Light of Sexism in Christian Communities

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN WOMAN? :  
SUSTAINING AND EMPOWERING THE FEMALE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN LIGHT OF SEXISM  
IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

“What Does it Mean to Be a Christian Woman?”

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN WOMAN? : SUSTAINING AND  
EMPOWERING THE FEMALE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN LIGHT OF SEXISM IN CHRISTIAN  
COMMUNITIES

ERIN PAULINE ROONEY

A PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE REQUIREMENTS  
OF MASTERS OF ARTS (RECONCILIATION AND INTERCULTURAL STUDIES) AT  
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Date: 5/25/2018

This paper is dedicated to  
Celeste Cranston & Shannon Nicole Smythe  
*You are two women who show me  
what sustaining faith looks like.*

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**Introduction: Where are We as Christian Women?**

“Being a Christian woman means constantly having to argue to be as heard and as valued as the other voices in the room - and that’s really difficult, I think.”

Sam sits across from me, stating what it means for her to be a Christian woman, with a sense of ease – as if the statement has been something she has always known, without needing to say it out loud. She does not seem visibly upset, but she also is not without emotion. There is an undercurrent to the words that she speaks to me, in this little room where I conduct my interviews, and I believe it is one of tiredness. If one had to argue to be heard and valued, this would surely prove tiring. Sam’s experience does not exist in a vacuum. It is not an outlier among that of Christian women one might encounter in daily life. No, it represents a long line of women who have gone before her and will go after her. Living into what it means to be a Christian woman is not without struggle, and so many of us resonate with the tiredness that comes from this. I resonate with Sam’s statement so deeply that I find my body responds; I do not need to ask any clarifying question. Her tiredness is my tiredness. How can this be?

As women, our individual experiences echo in a chasm of revelations made by so many others. These revelations take hold in a “communal consciousness,” transmitted and integrated into what is then identified, by scholars and researchers, as a collective experience.<sup>1</sup> Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether proposes that faith communities will use human experience to create tradition, and also to renew or discard traditions if they no longer fit said experience. Women’s experiences, which have been shut out or minimized in theological reflection in the past, are communally experienced, making such experiences revelatory and

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 13.

giving rise to the urgency of new traditions – especially when existing traditions are corrupted by the powers that be (namely, a white capitalist male patriarchy)<sup>2</sup>. Practicing faith within a male-dominated system can stifle a woman’s experience and isolate her relation to God, self, and others. However, in the right settings, if it is revealed to the woman that her experience is shared, she can learn how to challenge the dominant tradition and change the practice of her faith.

This is why I find myself here, in this small room, with Sam and many other women to follow, relating wholeheartedly to the fight that she feels is needed to have her voice heard in Christian spaces. This is why her tiredness is my tiredness. No researcher is ever neutral. In fact, researchers often pursue a deeper understanding of a topic because they bear some personal connection to it. To say it more simply, if a researcher has skin in the game, they stay in the game. My journey of self-discovery as a Christian woman began before I even knew it was happening. My body knew the stories of other Christian women before I ever had a chance to read their words, because our bodies lived the same experiences. This journey of understanding my femaleness, my Christian femaleness, began right around the same time we find Sam – as a college student, in a university, struggling to name this struggle that we as women live through.

### *The Author’s Context*

For a period of ten weeks, eight years back from this paper’s existence, a course titled “Women’s Lives in Context” spurred the revelation that my experiences as a woman were not only shared but could be explained. As a young woman in her undergraduate studies, enrolling in the psychology course was like being handed a tall drink of water and realizing I had been parched for twenty-two years. As we navigated psychological and social factors from a woman-

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<sup>2</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 12

centered approach, I began to assign terms to the experiences that had made up my life up to that time. While this did not solve the more troubling realities of being a woman, the course certainly helped me make more sense of what I had experienced. During this time, I was involved at a local church, working both as a volunteer and in paid positions. I still remember my first visit to this church. They were doing a series on sex and sexuality. There was a woman preaching at the dimly lit evening service. The experience of seeing a woman speaking to a congregation of believers, on a subject that had been a church-taboo topic for me, is still, to this day, one of the few sermons that had me transfixed the entire service. My eyes took in the representation of the female preacher, and it was as if I could, just maybe, see myself there one day doing the same thing. This glimmer of possibility stayed with me as I became more involved. Each female church leader was my personal ‘shero’.<sup>3</sup> Over time, I was mentored by many of them. A male pastor, who saw his own minister-daughter in me, took me under his wing. These relationships spurred my desire to attend seminary.

I entered my seminary studies unsure of where exactly they would lead, but sure enough, my identity as a woman became an integral piece to the duration and completion of the degree. If I was to envision my faith as a long hike, then womanhood was the creased and worn map I constantly was pulling from my pack; womanhood was the flashlight I pulled out to navigate a dark street. I felt deep in my bones that I needed to seek an understanding of what it meant to be a woman and a Christian. However, there were also deeper confrontations in light of sexism within the Christian community, which were not expected. I navigated a host of delayed epiphanies of sexism. I noticed, in retrospect, how my male colleagues would complain to me that they felt ‘outnumbered’ by all the women on staff. I recalled parishioners asking to speak

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<sup>3</sup> “Shero”: A woman regarded as a hero.



with the male pastor even though I was fully equipped to address their question. I experienced a steady stream of interruptions and power plays from my male colleagues, and sometimes superiors. While there were so many positive experiences, sexism hovered, using doubt and shame to make me feel like I was taking two steps back for every step forward in my faith. These delayed experiences caused me to question my own call, and I struggled to defend my voice. I began to ask myself, “What happened to the college version of me? She was so confident in her faith, and hopeful in her role in church.” Now that the curtain had been lifted, what remained was only pain and cynicism. These experiences are not to give a final word on those who have hurt me – rather, I believe that they show the complexity of the Christian female experience, a journey so many trod.

Sarah Bessey, author of *Jesus Feminist*, took to Twitter, starting the hashtag #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear to try and start a conversation with her social media followers. Bessey started with a few of her own experiences of sexism to kick off the conversation online – “Women should be silent in the church!” and “You are an amazing leader! You’d make an excellent pastor’s wife someday!” are two to note.<sup>4</sup> The topic hit home for many, and soon the hashtag was trending, meaning that this hashtag was shared by a large number of people in a short amount of time. In Bessey’s case, she posted the hashtag and her stories on the evening of April 18, 2017 and woke up the next morning to hundreds of replies. Anyone can look up the hashtag, see the contributors, and read disturbing responses. Women from all over the world revealed the sexist things that they heard in their Christian communities, whether they were from well-meaning but unknowing community members, or commands of submission and

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<sup>4</sup> Bessey, Sarah, “#thingsonlychristianwomenhear Hashtag on Twitter.” Twitter. April 18, 2017. <https://twitter.com/hashtag/thingsonlychristianwomenhear?lang=en>

silence.<sup>5</sup> I do not share this in an effort to prove that sexism exists, but rather to illustrate the prominence and variegated forms of sexism facing women in Christian communities. Many of these experiences mirror my own, and ultimately, they reinforce the fact that sexism is indeed a topic that bears relevance and needs attention.

In order to move forward, I had to first look back. Ruether tells us that new traditions spring forth when the existing traditions can no longer relate to the current human experience.<sup>6</sup> Throughout world history, new traditions have regularly come into existence. The fields of politics, literature, and theology are a few cases in point. Critiquing the United States Congress for being run by only men, Shirley Chisholm became the first African-American woman elected in 1968 and was the first black candidate for a major party's nomination for President in 1972. Harper Lee used her life experience growing up in the South to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*, highlighting her witness to racial inequality. Julian of Norwich reconceptualized her experiences of God in ways that stressed feminine attributes of Christianity and elements of motherhood played by Christ. These are only three women out of countless who strove for new traditions that better reflected their experiences and offered new perspectives. Looking back on my college experience helped reveal pivotal moments when my experience as a woman needed naming, and where I needed a new tradition. Self-exploration could only get me so far, however. There were plenty of moments that left me feeling empowered and disempowered as a Christian woman. Yet, I realized that I needed other voices to draw a fuller map of traditions and practices that could help young Christian women, like myself, sustain faith for the long haul.

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<sup>6</sup> Ruether, *Sexism & God-Talk*, 12

*Overview of the Project*

With this in mind, I began to seek out the voices of Christian college women. I was struggling to make sense of my experiences, and I presumed that other women might be having the same problem. Through my work at the university, I had the privilege of hearing from female students about their experiences of faith, sexism, and what it meant to them to be a Christian woman. These women were also enrolled in an undergraduate course titled “Women in Christianity,” which aims to “...give students an introductory breadth of exposure to the topic of women in Christianity from the perspectives of Scripture, theology, philosophy, church history, church leadership and ministry, and current issues facing women in the world today.”<sup>7</sup> The course methodology holds that women and men are equally called and gifted by God for ministry. The course challenges students not just to navigate biblical, theological, and historic narratives by women in Christianity, but also to explore their own sense of identity and vocation in Christ. The stories of these students intrigued me – what would their experience be, women learning from women? Would they have similar revelations about their faith and womanhood as I did in my college years? If so, would they be positive, negative, or both? Was it possible that this course would shift their understanding of what it meant to be a Christian woman? Would they finish this course wanting new traditions? I believed hearing from these students would give me insight into what helps young women feel empowered in faith (given the realities of sexism). While it would be presumptuous to suggest that there is a formulaic answer for the complexities that come with being a Christian woman, I entered this project with the firm belief that we could learn how to start supporting young Christian women if we asked them directly what they needed.

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Seattle Pacific University’s THEO 3331 Syllabus, Dr. Shannon Smythe, Winter 2018

My faith and education have always been fueled by relationships. Narrative and story are more intriguing to me than facts and numbers. For this reason, I found that qualitative research propelled my curiosity about the questions I was asking. John Swinton's definition of qualitative research has been a helpful framework for my own understanding. "Qualitative research assumes that the world is not simply 'out there' waiting to be discovered. Rather, it recognizes 'the world' as the locus of complex interpretive processes within which human beings struggle to make sense of their experiences including their experiences of God. Identifying and developing understandings of these meanings is the primary task of qualitative research."<sup>8</sup> Such a task is executed in many forms, but I designed my research based off of grounded theory. Narrative research focuses on individual stories. Phenomenological research emphasizes a common experience of individuals. Grounded theory seemed like a happy medium between the two.<sup>9</sup> Grounded theory research seeks to follow the 'movement' of a process and develop a theory of its progress. The course these women were enrolled in provided a window into a history of women who were navigating patriarchal, sexist Christian cultures. When I say this, I am referencing a long lineage of Christian women who not only named their mistreatment within Christian communities, but also found ways to disrupt the male dominant culture. This disruption of patriarchal, sexist Christian culture takes on many forms. Women writing, women pastoring, women witnessing, and women publishing their own theology are broad strokes of this denial. My research participants were asked to share with me their own process of taking in this information, and how this affected (or did not affect) their own understandings of womanhood

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<sup>8</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. (London: SCM, 2006), 30

<sup>9</sup> John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013), 82

and sexism within Christian communities. I sought to develop a model for sustaining the female Christian faith in light of the reality of sexism and patriarchy within Christianity.

### *Focus and Framing Questions*

What helps young Christian women sustain their faith in the face of sexism within Christian communities? Are there practices or traditions that leaders of these Christian communities need to consider to better support young Christian women? Do young Christian women find value in studying theology, history, and hermeneutics from female perspectives, and if so, why? These are the guiding questions this project seeks to answer.

### *Hopes for the Reader*

My hope for the reader would be for them to meet the stories of these young women with openness, curiosity, and respect. This work has in mind women going into various types of ministry settings and Christian spaces, not just women who are seeking typical parish work, but women in lay ministry as well. This is not to ignore the reality that there are unique challenges that ordained women face, but rather to express that all women in Christian communities, by virtue of gender, will face some of the same recurring issues. This work also has in mind the pastors, professors, mentors, and leaders that will have the responsibility to guide, teach, and oversee these Christian women. Karoline M. Lewis reminds us that such leaders, no matter their gender identity, have just as much of an active role in empowering Christian women as the women themselves do. “We need to unlock [the] power [of Christian men] for dialogue around theology, ministry, and how God works in the world [...] They cannot simply be our defenders. Nor should they be in a position where all they can do is remain silent because they do not have the language to talk about leadership in God’s church. We are responsible for giving our

community members the tools to articulate their own understandings of women in ministry and leadership.”<sup>10</sup> Men and women who may not see the realities of sexism in Christian communities, or know how to possibly combat it, need to hear the truth in order to empower the young women that are under their leadership and care. My hope is that in reading this work, they will see that they are not only wanted by these Christian women, but they are needed.

There are a few pieces that were beyond the scope of this research. It is important to note that when I speak of women in Christianity, I believe being a woman should be allowed to take its fullest expression, regardless of the sex assigned at birth. I only interviewed female participants, and all identified as female but did not disclose to me if they were transgender. Gender is one of many parts that make a person’s identity. There are differences in experience that come from identifying in the LGBTQIA+ community, and this was not explored nor disclosed by my participants. I also could not address intersectionality in regard to the gender binary, given that I did not ask for the experiences of those in the class identifying as male. Racism is also a reality that impacts the Christian faith, and the majority of my participants did not speak in depth about their racial identities. Racism, homophobia, and transphobia are alive and well today, and this research cannot adequately address what it is like to be a woman experiencing such marginalization in the wake of her intersectionality. The perspective of my writing is admittedly heterosexual, and also informed by my white, cisgender, able-bodied, middle-class position. There is also the possibility that not every woman will say they share the same experience of the women in this research, and this is understandable. At the same time, many of the views and experiences expressed in this study are shared, at some level, by many

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<sup>10</sup> Karoline M. Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), xx

women in Christianity – my hope is that there can still be something to glean in seeing how women of the faith can find some common ground.

### **Chapter One: The First Interviews**

So, just who are these Christian women that I interviewed? I recruited them from a specific course offered at Seattle Pacific University called “Women in Christianity,” but there were other factors that helped give me a sense of who I was meeting. Of these seven women, five identify themselves as white, one as Hispanic, and one as African-American. All come from either an urban or suburban context, with church and ministry experience within the past three to five years. Six are between the ages of twenty and twenty-two years old, and one student is thirty years old. In preparation for these interviews, I was curious if there was anything about their life stage that could help me add framework to their responses. This was how I entered into the plethora of research around an age group now commonly referred to as ‘emerging adults’.

Emerging adulthood is a recently developed stage of life within psychological and sociological research on persons between 18 and 29 years of age. This newer phase exists for four major reasons: 1) the dramatic growth in U.S. higher education, 2) the delay of marriage of American youth, 3) an economic decrease in lifelong careers and increase in more frequent job changes, and 4) extended financial support from parents to their children as late as their early thirties.<sup>11</sup> These macro social changes have occurred in America just over the past few decades, contributing to the rise of people between 18 and 29 whose lives have morphed into a very different experience than those of previous generations. Many studies agree that the transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood today is significantly more complex and disjointed, which indicates that there is significant identity development occurring during this time. I found this to be true in my project, which was only a glimpse into the complex lives of seven different women, all in the same course.

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5



In my first round of interviews, I was able to get an introduction to each woman and what she was processing about her gender and faith. I wanted to know if they fit the norms established by existing emerging adulthood research. At first, I asked them somewhat simple questions - where they were from, why they enrolled in the course, and any positive experiences from their Christian communities. They were also asked to define terms like “feminism” and “sexism,” with no pressure on giving a “correct” answer. Soon, with their permission and boldness, we delved into more complex topics. What *does* it mean to be a Christian woman? Did they remember or recall any experiences of sexism they had in these Christian communities? Did anything feel helpful to them as they navigated the intersection of faith and gender in their lives?

This chapter seeks to summarize the common (and less common) viewpoints and experiences of my research subjects from the first interview. It is impossible to convey the full richness and complexities that each of these women shared about their take on gender and faith. It is also impossible to generalize an entire age group based on seven women. There are roughly 46 million emerging adults within the United States alone and there will always be diverse outlooks and experiences.<sup>12</sup> Still, within my research, I found a lot of commonalities in their journeys of being Christian women. The following are prominent themes that occurred.

*Yes, the Course is Required - but that's Not Why We're Here*

Five of the seven women were theology majors at Seattle Pacific University. For these women, the course fulfills an academic requirement. However, none of my participants gave me the impression that they were burdened with such a requirement. Instead they all expressed an interest in the subject. “It’s a requirement for graduation, yeah, but there was an option out of four classes and this was the one I picked,” Mary (22) explains as she settles into our interview.

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<sup>12</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 33

“I wanted to know more about how our mothers and sisters who came before us shaped what we think, what we learn, and how we are going through our lives.” Each woman I sit with has her own unique backstory and vocational dream. Some are set on becoming pastors or involved in some form of ministry. One wants to be a nurse. Another seems set for changing national policies. Yet they all chose this course for the exact same reason: they believed, on some level, that they were missing some information from their Christian upbringing.

All seven women noted that they were missing information on the topic of women in Christianity. Sam (21), notes, “I have grown up as a woman in a Christian home and community for all of my life, and I really think that my understanding of women, the ways women function theologically in Christianity and in the Bible, and the ways that women are important to the faith isn’t something that has been super ingrained in me.” Even with all seven women growing up attending a Christian church or being raised in a Christian family, they still felt like there was a lot to learn. Allison (22) lamented that churches preach on Moses, but not so much Ruth or Zipporah, while Esther (21) and Hannah (20) remark that they never once saw a female pastor at their churches back home. Each participant expressed that they were hoping to learn more about women in the Bible, women in church history, and how female scholars interpreted Scripture and theology. For most, this course was not a review - it was going to provide their building blocks to further understanding.

*You know you’re a Christian woman when you’re excluded for being one*

Identification with being a Christian woman is learned through exclusion. Each participant comes from a different city and church, but they all named moments of exclusion that served as “ah-ha” moments telling them that they were different and perceived as less than.

Allison named that while she never really thought much about being a woman and Christian at

the same time, she started realizing in high school that women in her church were serving all the time, but not leading in pastoral roles. It was not until her college theology classes that she was able to name that she was taught women were not equal to men within the Christian community. Similarly, Mary noted that exploring the classic 1 Timothy 2 text in a class made her realize that things were not equal in her home church. “I think it just hit me that in my church, we don’t have women in leadership or women preaching,” Mary explains. “It was disheartening. I think it made me challenge what I grew up believing. I did go back [to my home church] and asked them, ‘Why aren’t there women in leadership?’ and a lot of their answers felt like they were redirecting me.” Leah (20) and Sam told me stories of their own realizations that if they became pastors, their churches would not hire them. While each woman gives an expression of a personal relationship with God, and that their faith is important to them, their descriptions of how to implement this make Christian womanhood sound a lot like a balancing act. “You’re getting to know God through your own personal relationship, but then you have the expectations of church leaders, who are mostly men. Then, when you try to fulfill those expectations, they go, ‘No, you can’t do that.’ People in your community put limitations on you because of your gender. How do I become who God calls me to be, but still be embraced by my community?” Rachel (30) expressed her struggle to me, ending with that excellent but very hard question that I myself struggle to answer on a daily basis. How *do* we as women live into our faith in a fulfilling way, when our faith community attempts to limit us?

These “ah-ha” moments seem to be determinants for what it means to be a Christian woman. Hannah tells me that being a Christian woman means standing up for other women and doing Jesus’ work on earth, even though sects of Christianity would say women should not be doing so. Sam says that being a Christian woman means constantly having to fight to be included

in Christian spaces. Allison says it is about being able to do whatever Christian men do, and doing it well, while Mary says that it is about following the Bible, but also challenging the parts that silence or exclude women. These are all descriptions of a fight, and I believe this is because these women know that they have already been pushed out of the ring.

*Sexism is Real, but the Experiences are Split*

Participants all had a general description of what sexism was. Sexism was defined, in one way or another, as women (or other non-male genders) being treated unfairly, oppressed, or marginalized based on their sex. However, when asked if participants had experienced sexism within their Christian communities, the responses were split. Allison, Mary, and Esther all said that they could not recall personal experiences of sexism, though they believed that they observed it being played out in their Christian communities. Esther even thought out loud, “Maybe years down the road I’ll realize something said to me was because someone was sexist.” Even though they did not claim their own experiences of sexism, no one claimed it did not exist or that it was somehow not a real problem for women. Examples like church youth groups being separated into male and female groups, all male pastoral leadership, and strangers asking, “*You* want to be a pastor?” held the possibilities of sexism to these women.

As for Sam, Leah, Hannah, and Rachel, the strangest thing happened with each of them when I asked, “Have you experienced sexism in Christian communities?” They all said yes, and then laughed. It broke up the formality of the interview for sure. Eventually, I had to admit, it was a funny situation, asking a woman such a yes-or-no question which they believed had an obvious answer. From these four women, I was given more detailed stories. Sam told me about her experience interning at a church, feeling unheard in meetings. “I just remember sitting in staff meetings trying to bring things up about race and power dynamics and feeling so ignored

and dismissed,” Sam narrated. “When the men in the room would bring things up, their ideas were at least acknowledged by the pastor. Then the pastor would preach sermons about women being the helpmate. Fundamentally, the person who was supposed to be leading my church didn’t understand anything about me, or any woman at our church.” Leah began dreaming in high school of becoming a pastor, but her home church blatantly discouraged her, saying, “Oh, you aren’t going to have a congregation because it’s unbiblical for you to be a pastor.” Hannah was told countless times growing up that her role in life was to be a wife and a mother, which did not sit well with her, causing a lot of deeper reflection later in college. “I kept questioning my identity. Am I really a woman if I don’t want these things in the future? I just feel like sexism is so institutionalized at this point, we’re raised to see and believe these things without realizing it, and when we butt up against it we say, ‘Oh that’s just the way things are, men and women are different’ and it’s like, ‘But are we really different, or is that just how we’ve been treated for so long that we automatically assume that we are different?’” Then, finally, Rachel, the last of my first round of interviews, proceeded to tell a story of preaching at her youth camp. Rachel comes from a vocal congregation where you talk back to the preacher, throwing out “Amen” and “That’s right” when you hear something you like and believe. When Rachel got up to preach, she was surrounded by the six male speakers that were also on stage. During her sermon, she described feeling an icy silence behind her the entire time. “Then the main speaker goes up after me, and he says basically word for word what I had just preached on - and the other male speakers start talking back to him. I knew that it had a lot to do with me being a woman. You’re not supposed to be that good, saying things that are profound. You’re supposed to get up there, with your cute little sermon, and then you sit down while people say ‘Aw, that’s nice.’ It was pretty discouraging.”

*Thank God for the Female (and Male!) Mentors*

Another strong trend from the first round of interviews was naming mentorship as an encouraging resource for navigating being a Christian woman. Emerging adults are in an age of instability. With this sense of impermanence comes freedom to explore ones' own identity.<sup>13</sup> In college, emerging adults are trying to figure out who they really are within the social influences of their families of origin and the current context of their college peer community. This is a chaotic time, which means that older people can serve as anchors of stability while emerging adults figure themselves out. Remember how I mentioned the she-roses of my own undergraduate time? These women all have them too. Every participant named older women as a source of support, much like Rachel's experience at her current church. "To see that there were women who were holding it down, on their own, in ministry, very elegantly against a lot of opposition, defying the odds of the standard of women in church - their strength encourages me." Esther names her current female pastor, her female mentor, and female professors as the ones she goes to when she wants advice on navigating her own faith, experiences of sexism, or shared experiences. She is not the only one turning to female professors during this time in college. "It's simultaneously encouraging and discouraging to see this is a shared experience among a lot of women, because you feel like you're not alone, but at the same time the problem just got a million times bigger," Sam remarks. "But I think it's been encouraging to see women wrestle with these issues, to see my mom wrestle with these issues." Finding seasoned narratives of the communal consciousness of womanhood is a grounding experience for my younger participants. They begin to realize that they are not alone. Allison began volunteering in her home church's kitchen ministry, which she still returns to every time she visits home. "It's such a cool

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15

experience to pick the brains of older women. I think just to have that group of women I can talk to and go to and say ‘Life is crazy, and I don’t know what to make of this!’ and they can go, ‘It’s okay’ has been encouraging and supportive at the same time.” Older female relationships, whether pastors, professors, or fellow parishioners, were the pinnacle of faith and female encouragement to my participants.

While older female mentoring relationships were key, the commentary on older male mentoring relationships should not go unsaid. While older women were named for understanding the experiences my participants were going through, some of them experienced healthy encouragement from men as well. Mary’s father was her biggest cheerleader in her choosing a theology degree, and Esther noted that her father was always encouraging to her as a woman in the faith. Leah likes to take things one step further, finding value in seeking wisdom and support from both genders. “I feel like when I go to my female professor, she tells me her own story of how she faced sexism. With my male professor they would say ‘I can see how that would upset you, and it’s not my experience, but I support you’. If both are really willing to seek out what is true and biblical, and not just their opinion, I think they’re both helpful.” Conversely, Sam expresses more mutuality with female mentors, describing a difference in what they offer next to male mentors. “With men it’s more of an academic experience, like, ‘Here’s my advice for you, here’s what you should do’, versus a woman’s ‘Here’s how I experienced this, here’s how I process through it, here’s what I see in you.’” Sam has a male mentor that she deeply respects, but to her, it is about knowing what you are going in for. Esther and Mary both love their dads, but they each express that they do not think they would share experiences of sexism with them, for fear that the fatherly support would vanish. Allison expresses that listening to an older man’s experiences may not feel as similar when she hears her older female mentors’ experiences. Older

male mentoring relationships are definitely mixed in receptivity among the group, but even the questioning reveals that these women are seeking understanding in this chaotic time of life. If men provide this, that is great. If they do not, it does not seem like they were fully expected to based on different life experiences.

*What 2-3 words would you use to describe how you feel as a Christian woman?*

This was my final question for my participants during their first interview. I wanted them to give me a small window into their current sense of self before and after they finished the “Women in Christianity” course. Below is a table of their word choices.

<b>Allison</b>	Frustrated, Uplifted, and Contemplative
<b>Mary</b>	Challenged, Empowered, and Graceful
<b>Sam</b>	Wrestling, but Hopeful
<b>Esther</b>	Empowered and Discouraged
<b>Leah</b>	Strong, Teachable, and Faithful
<b>Hannah</b>	Powerful, Intelligent, and Faithful
<b>Rachel</b>	Hopeful, Strong, and Rebellious

The women entered this course excited to learn more about their own lived experience, and the history of women who have gone before them in the faith. They were fuzzy on concepts of sexism and feminism, but not entirely confused or in disbelief. They had found encouragement in church and college as well as discouragement from older authority figures. The biggest takeaway



for me, when I wrapped up this first round, was that these women knew that Christianity, on some level, had told them that they were less than, but their response was to fight against it rather than comply. I left the first interviews intensely curious as to what the course experience would be like for them. Luckily, I only had a short wait until we met again.

## Chapter Two: The Second Interviews

After the first round of interviews, the weeks flew by. Soon, my participants were in their final class sessions. I was itching to speak with them, wondering what their overall class experience had been. Did anything change for them regarding what it means to be a Christian woman? Was there a shift in their understanding of sexism and feminism? What did “going forward” from the course look like for them? Then, the question I was most concerned about: Did they even *like* the course, or would they all sit down and tell me it was not worth their time? This chapter seeks to summarize the viewpoints and experiences of my research subjects from the second interview. With any group, there are commonalities and areas of divergence, and the prominent themes are what I will name here. Because I was asking these women to reflect back on their course, they named many of the readings that they did, which I will include and elaborate on as needed to give context.

### *“This Was Worth My Time,” and Other Honorary Mentions*

I was pleased to hear that every participant was glad to have taken the class and enjoyed it too! “This has been one of the most meaningful courses I have taken in my four years here.” Sam tells me during our second meeting. “I really think that this course has saved what little hope I had left in Christianity. I now see room for myself, space for myself that is meaningful, and a community of people that see me as meaningful.” Hannah, Leah, and Mary all note that they “loved” the course, Mary emphasizing that it has been one of her favorite courses taken at Seattle Pacific University. I said in the previous chapter that the participants all named feeling very new to the topic of the course. Both Esther and Allison found the course to be a positive experience, and definitely emphasized that there had been a lot of new information to take in. “It’s been kind of like a roller coaster.” Allison says. “Lots of ups and downs. There are some

weeks where I'm like, 'Yeah, I totally agree with this' and others where I'm like, 'I don't know, I have to go back and figure things out because I don't know where I stand on this.' But I've learned a lot about women in Christianity and myself as a whole, so it's been a positive experience overall." Esther explains that the new information felt like important conversations to have, and that she could continue to have them further down the road.

What was the most helpful, or impactful, though? It is one thing to *enjoy* a course, but I wanted to know if anything was impactful to my participants. What changed their way of thinking? What stood out to them? Across the board, the things deemed the most impactful were their studies in scripture and inclusive language. I wanted to highlight these two topics because they were mentioned by all seven of my participants. While each participant had their own particular things that they liked, I was interested in the unanimous vote on these themes.

Participants in the course had an entire unit on women, scripture, and hermeneutics. They read through scriptural interpretations through a variety of social lenses, by feminist and womanist authors. These readings challenged participants, like Esther, to ask how they approached scripture. "It's been good to see how a person's social identity influences how they read scripture. This class has brought up a lot of questions, like 'Do I understand how *I* approach scripture? It's easy to think of myself as neutral, like a lot of other people probably do, but that's the issue.'" Esther also noted that reading interpretations of scripture from authors other than heterosexual, cisgender men impacted her thinking more than she realized. "When the gospel is in the hands of men, you're going to fill in the gaps of scripture with a patriarchal lens. Feminist hermeneutics plays with scripture in a different way, and I am going to continue to need that as a woman. That's important for a fuller revelation of God and how we experience the stories in the Bible." Through reading *Encountering God in Tyrannical Texts* by Francis Taylor Gench,

Hannah now describes feeling “armed with knowledge” when she hears the bible being used as a means to limit women to what they can do. Rachel had a similar experience through the course readings and came out with a new method of understanding the complexities behind biblical texts. “Prior to this class, I really thought Paul and all his letters were misogynistic...so I assumed Paul was anti-woman, pro-male. But then we read Romans 16, and Paul spends most of the chapter talking about all these different women in ministry, how they were apostles, how he respected them and sat under their leadership. I was like ‘Is this the same Paul?’ It challenged me to go back to other texts and read them differently.” Sam was not used to hearing the perspectives of women being valued in the Bible and appreciated the authors they read from in the course. Varying perspectives on biblical texts helped show my participants new ways to interpret stories they grew up reading only one way. Not only was this encouraging, but many participants felt that reading different hermeneutical perspectives gave them permission to wrestle with the Bible as well.

### *I Talked to God, and She Says Hello*

Inclusive language for God was a brand-new concept to all of my participants, and for the most part, they really loved it. All of my participants grew up in Christian communities that used he/him pronouns for God, so using inclusive language was sometimes a challenge. As Allison explains, “As I’m writing my reading responses, I want to put ‘she’ instead of ‘he’, but I can’t. I’ve gotten mad at how gender specific we are, when really God is male and female, and also neither of those things, because God is so much more than we can ever know. I think for me the language shift is hard; growing up, it was always ‘God is He’ and that’s what I’ve been rooted in. I hope that one day I can refer to God as a woman, and that I can incorporate the feminine metaphors more.” Rachel, similarly, was not always comfortable with the pronoun change, more

comfortable with the masculine titles she grew up hearing, like ‘King’ or ‘Father’, for God. Mary, on the other hand, found that God became more relatable when the pronouns changed. “I think metaphors like giving birth or femininity were never things I learned [to describe God]. I think having my perspective of God change was life giving, especially being able to relate to God in feminine characteristics.” Esther and Sam both had powerful experiences when considering how language shaped their understanding of God, and Sam narrated some especially emotional moments she had in the course. “I was brought to tears a few times in class thinking about the implications of language and how that has shaped my experience with God. Even at age six or seven, I was asking ‘Why is the bible only talking about men, or mankind?’ and not getting answers. One of the quotes in our readings one week was, ‘I found God in myself, and I loved her, I loved her fiercely,’<sup>14</sup> and realizing I couldn’t relate to that, because of the way I’ve been socialized, was hard. Language, male-language, has shaped my understanding in the way that I’m able to interact with God, especially in the concept of being made in God’s image - if you can’t see yourself in God, what are the implications of that?” Inclusive language for God, language that goes beyond a male pronoun, proved to be a noteworthy experience my participants had of the course. It simply was something they had never considered or tried before.

#### *Views on Sexism Didn’t Change - But We Did Grow in our Awareness*

Participants were asked if the class changed their understandings of sexism at all. None of the participants had fresh insights on their own personal experiences with sexism (or new ah-ha moments where they realized something was sexist in hindsight), but the majority said that

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<sup>14</sup> Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 63.

their awareness of sexism from a systemic standpoint had grown, especially within Christian history.

Some participants, like Leah, noted the “little things” that they could perceive as being sexist. “I think [the class] has uncovered more subtle things that we don’t realize are being said - microaggressions. Sexism for sure can be very obvious and over-pronounced, but there are also accidental and unconscious ways.” Mary explains that by learning about women in Christian history, she can see the different ways that sexism works out. Sam also was able to name that what she understood as a societal issue has been impacting her faith more than she realized. “[Sexism] affects not only our culture, but our theology. And that theology shapes ministry, and that shapes the experiences of Christian women. I’m seeing more of the systemic results of how the implications of sexism are ingrained.” For some, this deepened awareness has a price. “Even though we’re studying all these great women throughout history and in the Bible, not much has changed in the existence of the Church.” Rachel laments, “There are more women than ever in ministry, but in my personal experience, I just don’t see the equality there. You just see that there’s still a lot of sexism, and I just want it to be all better, right now. I’ve been having to face the fact that it’s been a slow journey, since the time Christianity was established. That’s the challenging thing: we’ve still got a long way to go.” Allison also describes the same long journey. “This class has shown me how much deeper sexism goes than I thought, how much work has already been done, and how much work there still is to do. I don’t think we’ll ever get rid of [sexism]. At this point, I feel like it’s a part of what it means to live in America, which sucks, and I wish that weren’t the case, but it is.”

*What Happens in the Classroom Won't Stay in the Classroom*

I asked each woman if they thought the course would impact their faith going forward. The answer across the board was yes. “Oh, for sure,” Rachel says with a laugh, “It has challenged my own perspective of being a woman in Christianity. I definitely feel more confident in who I am as a woman, and I now feel like I have permission to challenge certain doctrines in the Church that don’t sit right with me.” Rachel is not the only one who laughs knowingly when I ask this question. Leah, after a chuckle, tells me that the course will absolutely, 100 percent influence her faith moving forward, especially since she plans to be a pastor. Part of moving forward for her involves going back: back to her home church, which does not allow women to be pastors. “I think this class has taught me how to be in a conversation with those who have a different opinion than me. Yesterday, I emailed my church back home to meet with the leadership. They’re all male, two pastors and two elders. I’m slightly intimidated, but I know I have a good education in theology. I feel nervous, but also at peace that I’m doing what’s right.” The knowledge gained from the course, for Leah, is one she believes needs to be brought back to her roots. Mary is in a similar mindset, planning to incorporate the concepts she has learned during a summer internship at her church back home. Hannah expresses that she has never felt more confident in her knowledge of how to challenge biblical arguments made against women leading within the church. Sam notes that the class has been a healing experience, prompting her to return to church after some time away. “I was in a pretty long stretch of not going to church and not wanting to engage my faith, because I think it was just painful. I’ve started to go to church more consistently as a result of this class. Seeing arguments for the inclusion of women [from the class] has really influenced my faith and encouraged me to keep going, to keep looking for liberative interpretations and things that are life giving. It’s shaped what I’m looking for in a church, and what kind of Christians I want surrounding me.” Both Sam

and Esther name a new interest for theology and ministry as a vocation. “I get excited thinking about how liturgy is framed and what that means for a congregation,” Esther explains, “Youth and children’s pastors seem like accessible roles for women in the church, but I’ve been toying with the idea of being a lead pastor, asking ‘Is this something I’m being called to step into?’”

*More Female Representation, Please (But Don’t Worry Men - You have a Job too!)*

I asked my participants to elaborate more on what they thought they would need to really “move forward” from the course. Sure, they believed that the course would continue to influence them, but what was going to fuel that fire now that the readings and assignments were coming to an end? The answer was clear to all my participants: they want to see more women who were doing this work of being an empowered, Christian woman.

Esther found a practical, every day way to incorporate more female theologians in her life, without the homework. “The female voice and perspective is what I need more of in my life, in all areas. I finally got on Twitter and followed a bunch of female theologians: Sarah Bessey, Rachel Held Evans, Kaitlin Curtis, Nyasha Junior...Just having those voices in my life who are advocating for something they’re passionate about is broadening my view of what it means to be a Christian woman and how we understand God.” Community is also a big need going forward. Hannah, Sam, and Mary believe having a community with a similar mindset or set of beliefs is super helpful in feeling empowered. Speaking with other Christian women and continuing to read female theological perspectives was also something they hoped to continue doing. Leah says a similar thing, but also advises that dialogue with those who disagree with you can sharpen your knowledge and perhaps change the perspective of others. Church has to change too, according to a majority of my participants. Mary has started going to a church that is led by both a man and a woman. Sam and Hannah have adamantly stated that they will refuse to attend any



church that does not allow women to be pastors. Allison not only wants to find a church with a female pastor but would like to find an older woman to mentor her. “That would be helpful for my faith because I would have someone who has gone to school studying theology, like me, and I could pick their brain and look up to them. I think for me that would be the most empowering.”

This does not cut the Christian male population out of what is needed to be “helpful”. Rachel finds a lot of solidarity with other Christian women, but she does not want men to be out of the dialogue entirely. “I think it would be helpful if we could start having conversations, not just in a group of women saying, ‘Oh I think this is unfair,’ but include men in them. Men see themselves as above women, and we need to pull them in and say, ‘Hey, this is the truth, here are these examples, here’s what the bible has to say about it, and here’s how you’ve been using the bible to support your superiority.’” Leah believes that being able to have messages of support from her male professors and pastors proves that “it’s not just a female thing, but it’s a Christian thing.” Mary believes that having perspectives from different genders and races from her own helps her grow in her faith and perspective. Sam believes that navigating the pain and vulnerability that sexism in Christian community brings is best done amongst women only. However, she says that there should be spaces where men are affirming a woman’s place in ministry and church, and that she has appreciated the conversations with male students in the course who are asking how they can encourage and empower women.

### *Being A Christian Woman means “I am not Alone”*

In the first round of interviews, I observed that participant’s identification of being a Christian woman was learned by exclusion: things said or done to them that were sexist, and the lack of female leadership representation in their Christian community, to name a few examples. What was the most exciting for me were the answers I got when I asked, “In light of the class,

has anything changed for you about what it means to be a Christian woman?" I was pleased to find that the course added a positive element to their understanding of their identity. Hannah is naming that her identity does (and should) matter in Christian communities echoed many of my other participants. "The sense that I have a place in the church, a place that is biblically grounded, that my voice and other women's voices matter in church...in that sense, my understanding has changed." Mary also names a sense of empowerment and is encouraged that the course has shown her that her role in the church should not be limited. Allison now believes that being a Christian woman means coming alongside women currently paving the way for more inclusion in Christian communities.

Remember how I said earlier that no researcher is ever neutral? That remains true, because I found by the second round of interviews that I had a favorite response from one of my participants. I quoted the opening of this project with a quote from Sam, which came from the first round of interviews. Sam was answering what it meant for her to be a Christian woman, and she said, in sum, that it meant fighting to be heard. While that has not completely gone away, I was moved by how much of a healing experience this course was for Sam, and how it shifted her answer. "What's challenging is that it's always going to be a fight; it's never going to be an easy thing where my identity and existence are affirmed. Being a Christian woman means not letting the weariness of your voice not being heard, your perspective being underrepresented, get to you. It means you're always rewriting traditional narratives and trying to figure out how you fit in, and how to flip the narratives so they're liberative. Being a Christian woman also means that I can see myself in Christianity more, and I can see how other people are struggling with these things too, and that's been really meaningful." Sam's identity was more affirmed as a result of this course, and it has given her a new passion not to give up on her faith. Instead of seeing her

identity as a never ending battle to be seen and heard, I believe Sam has gained something in this course: hope. Hope that she can be Christian and a woman, and that there will be space for her.

Being a Christian woman is still defined by my participants with words that remind me of a fight, or a battle. However, they are also noting ways of self-affirmation that were not there before. The course has given them more footing for a positive self-identification as Christian women, and I would say that they now have more of a sense of skin in the game. I also think that many of my participants found a sense of support in the class, which helped them see that they were not alone in figuring out what it meant to be a Christian woman. Hannah, Leah, Mary, and Sam all named the course participants and instructor as a “support” to them as they navigated what it meant to be a Christian woman and the topics they studied. Being a Christian woman means that not only do my participants believe they deserve to be fully included in Christian spaces, but they understand that they are not alone in believing this.

*What 2-3 words would you pick to describe how this course made you feel as a Christian woman?*

In repeating this question, I wanted to see if my participants would pick any new words in the second round of interviews. The first round, overall, felt quite hopeful. My participants were excited to learn new things about women in Christianity. How would it hold up after they had been through all the readings, assignments, and processing? How did they hold up? Below is a table that includes both their new words, and the words they used from the first round.

Name	Round One Interview	Round Two Interview
Allison	Frustrated, Uplifted, Contemplative	Hopeful, Frustrated
Mary	Challenged, Empowered,	Empowered, Equal, Important

	Graceful	
Sam	Wrestling, but Hopeful	Hopeful, Confused, Challenged
Esther	Empowered, Discouraged	Confused, Destabilized, Empowered
Leah	Strong, Teachable, Faithful	Empowered, Challenged, More Faithful
Hannah	Powerful, Intelligent, Faithful	Knowledgeable, Curious, Skeptical
Rachel	Hopeful, Strong, Rebellious	Conflicted, Confident, Strong

Now, for some elaboration on these words. At first glance, they are quite a mix. We have some positive words, like “Hopeful”, “Empowered”, or “Faithful”. We also see some more perplexing words. “Confused”, “Challenged”, “Destabilized”, “Skeptical”, and “Conflicted” give room for pause. Are these negative experiences that the women are referring to?

An interesting process for me was how much more the participants elaborated with their words the second time around, without any prompting from me. In this way, these perplexing words should be seen with more nuance. Esther picked “Confused and Destabilized” as two of her words, but then explained, “Not in an inherently negative or bad way, but in an, ‘Oh these aren’t things I ever thought about’ kind of way.” Hannah chose “Skeptical”, but “...not in the sense of myself, but more like, nothing is ever black and white. If something from the Bible doesn’t sit well with me, I shouldn’t ignore it or throw it out, but instead be skeptical and ask, ‘What does it say? Who is it written to? What’s being written about?’” Leah said that “Challenged” did not feel like a bad thing to her. Sam meant “Challenged” as a reasoning to seek out what it means to be a Christian woman, and seeking out what God has for women. Sam also

noted that “Confused” was actually in relation to her calling: “I’m confused as far as my call...I’ve been in a phase of discerning where I’m going after graduation and I’m confused now as to why I haven’t considered ministry or theology in academics. It’s not a bad thing, it’s just opened up a lot for me.” It seemed that when my participants used words that seemed inherently negative, they wanted me to know that they actually meant it to be a good thing.

What my participants are naming through these specific words are a disruption in their previous ways of thinking. To put it another way, they are learning! Jack Mezirow explains the process by which adults learn best when their habits and norms are challenged by new material: “Reflective learning involves assessment or reassessment of assumptions. Reflective learning becomes transformative whenever assumptions or premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid. Transformative learning results in new or transformed meaning schemes or, when reflection focuses on premises, transformed meaning perspectives.”<sup>15</sup> As we move into adulthood, we face moments in which we are brought up short, or are trying to understand something that disrupts our prior understanding. I believe that my participants were experiencing this same method of learning: by going through a course that had new concepts regarding their identity, a lot of their assumptions got disrupted (or confused, or destabilized, or challenged, to note some of my participants word choices). This disruption is very normal to their learning development, and they also saw it as positive. What leads us to the next chapter are some considerations on what comes after these disruptions, and how this learning does not have to stay in the classroom.

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 6

**Chapter Three: Postures and Practices for Christian Communities & Women**

The course ended, as did my time with these college age women. I was left to write about what I had found. Since this was a qualitative grounded theory study, I had set out to follow a movement of a process and develop a theory of that progress. I felt like this was the hardest part for me. Something about coming up with a theory made me nervous, and I struggled for a few weeks to figure out why (especially because I was putting off the writing). Every proposition to my writer's anxiety did not seem to fit. Did I think that I hadn't discovered anything of substance? No, I definitely felt like I did, especially given the stories and experiences these women were able to share with me. Did I think that I had no answers? While it would be foolish to say that my research was the key to solving all women's experiences of sexism in Christian communities, I did believe that I had some well-educated correlations that were worth considering.

As I sat with many people who were my steadfast sounding boards throughout this process, I realized that much of my struggle was how I was feeling at the end of the second round of interviews. While all of my subjects loved the course they took, and all said that it would influence their faith going forward, I finished each interview with a kind of melancholic undertone to my reflections. I was so glad that these women experienced the course. I was even more glad that *they* found value in it, from being introduced to new perspectives, to vocational discernment, to feelings of empowerment. However, I think I was sad because, as corny as this sounds, I was a little older than them, and that meant I was carrying some of my own emotional baggage into the interview. Even with my own college courses that enlightened my awareness of my female experience, I still experienced sexism in Christian communities. I knew that these women, however inspired and armed the course made them feel, were likely to face sexism in

Christian communities again. So, I felt sad and unsure what was to become of them and their faith experience.

There are a multitude of women in Christian communities who tell their stories of sexism. While there are denominations that do ordain women, there are still experiences of various forms of discrimination. *The Stained Glass Ceiling* is a short film from the New York Times where female ministers spoke on their experiences of being treated as inferior to men, inequity in pay, and limited opportunities for promotions in their ministries.<sup>16</sup> Dr. Debora Hooper of Greater Works Worship Center stated, “Because men have dominated ministry from the beginning, and women are really just beginning to bust through and come to the forefront, most people who come to the church are not really expecting a woman, they’re expecting a man.”<sup>17</sup> This was reflected in my research, as the majority of the subjects I interviewed came from or grew up in churches that had mostly (or only) male pastors. What’s important to note is that in addition to sexism, there are other elements that will intersect and deepen the levels of oppression that women in Christian communities face. Racism fuels discrimination against anyone who is not privileged by the social construction of whiteness. Ageism will also harm young Christian women in Christian communities, as youth can often be seen to be deficient in leadership and lack the necessary experience for their vocation. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community still face exclusion by a large number of churches throughout the world. (Dis)ability continues to be underrepresented in theology and ministry, and there is continual danger in valorizing or pitying women with disabilities and not seeing them as whole people. There will

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<sup>16</sup> *The Stained Glass Ceiling*, (The New York Times, August 19, 2006). Accessed May 20, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/1194817096137/the-stained-glass-ceiling>.

<sup>17</sup> *The Stained Glass Ceiling*, 2006.

always be negotiations of the identities of Christian women, both within themselves and how they are treated within Christian communities. These inevitable negotiations will impact their faith going forward, just as much, if not more, than the course they took did.

My fear, I realized, was that everything within the course would be blown away, once my participants completed their studies and set off to churches, ministries, nonprofits, and the like. My struggle was realizing these churches, ministries, and nonprofits are part of the key to helping these women navigate sexism. These participants could not, and should not, go through their faith alone. They also should not have to go through sexism alone. Christian communities, which had so often hurt me as a woman, could also hold people and practices that could empower women. This research is all about approaching the data in order to find the theory, rather than approaching the data with a theory already established. I realized once again why a researcher cannot be neutral; in my own experiences of sexism in Christian communities, I was theorizing that maybe there were alternative methods to sustaining one's faith without ever stepping foot into a church. However, this was unrealistic, and not at all what my participants expressed by the end of the course. My participants want to keep their faith alive, but they want to do so in Christian community. There was, like my participant Rachel had said, so much work to do.

### *The Researcher's Theory*

My theory is that there is deep value for young Christian women in studying theology, history, and hermeneutics from female perspectives. The knowledge gained helps young Christian women feel empowered, supported, and encouraged in their faith. This knowledge also performs a disruptive role, helping these women question the patriarchal culture they have previously experienced as "normal." However, in order for any practices, traditions, or strategies



to be effective in helping young Christian women sustain their faith and navigate sexism, Christian communities must become an active participant in working through methods of reconciliation to and for these women. Christian leaders would benefit from representing, including, and following the methods laid out by women and for women, some of which will be elaborated on.

### *Christian Communities, Reconciliation, and Young Women*

I recognize that “reconciliation” can be a loaded term, and this is because there can be a wide variety of ways it is understood in Christian circles. Reconciliation is a much sought after and elusive goal, yet here I am realizing that it is a great need between young Christian women and Christian communities. I will offer a brief overview of what I mean when I speak of “reconciliation,” and I will start by explaining what I do *not* mean when I use the term. Robert J. Schreiter explains that reconciliation is not merely a matter of asking for forgiveness and unity, but also changing the structures in society that caused the disunity in the first place.<sup>18</sup> Because these are both complex, sometimes lifelong tasks, it is easy for Christian communities to define and use the term in ways that are more easily expressed, but ineffective and often harmful. Schreiter summarizes what reconciliation is not in the following ways: it is not a hasty peace, it is not in replacement of liberation, and it is not a managed process.<sup>19</sup> The task of reconciliation cannot be reduced to a quick, technical rationality. Rather, reconciliation is a lifelong process in which we recognize a multidimensional reality. This reality bears our own responsibility to repent and repair broken systems and an awareness that God is already active in this process.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry in Changing Social Order*, 1

<sup>19</sup> Schreiter, *Reconciliation*, 18-26

Christian communities can begin the process of reconciling between them and young Christian women, but it will take time and intentionality. Lisa Sharon Harper has named a few practices that aim to restore interpersonal, systemic, and structural harm done to Christian women. These are listening to the stories of women, lamenting, confessing, and repenting.<sup>20</sup> In listening to the stories of women, especially stories of sexism and subjugation, Christian leaders can become more aware of the areas in which they have missed moments of sexism, or participated structurally in those moments. Christian communities must go beyond offering Christian women a seat at the table; they must also hand them a microphone. Reconciliation cannot happen if there is not equity across all parties,<sup>21</sup> and asking to hear these stories and experiences is a way to give Christian women their voice. Lamenting, Harper instructs, “allows us to grasp the impact that male domination has had on the witness of the church in the world. We must face it, own it, and grieve it.”<sup>22</sup> Confessing is the next step, of not just seeing the problem of sexism, but owning the parts we play in it. Harper’s confession process is where the self-interrogation of the community comes into play:

“We must examine and interrogate our theological beliefs about gender roles. We must also examine and interrogate our language and the systems and structures we build and maintain. Does our language reflect the male and female nature of the image of God? Does it cultivate, protect, and serve the co-dominion of males and females? Are the systems and structures we build and maintain actively and consciously cultivating, protecting, and serving the image of God in women?”<sup>23</sup>

Through this practice, Christian communities will have to confess where they are falling short for young Christian women in their theology, language, systems, and structures. My hope is that

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<sup>20</sup> Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can be Made Right* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2016), 99-100

<sup>21</sup> Adapted from conversations with Dr. Shannon Smythe about the 2018 Equity Summit, May 11 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, 100

<sup>23</sup> Harper, *The Very Good Gospel*, 100

in the repenting stage, Christian communities can begin the reparative work of integrating new traditions and theologies that come from the female perspective.

### *New Traditions Worth Following*

Christian communities could implement a multitude of practices within their organizations that would support and empower young Christian women in their faith. I have named a few here that I believe serve a few different purposes. Some are about *posture*: the ways in which Christian leaders can be mindful and self-aware of how they may be impacting young Christian women for better or for worse. Some are *practices*: things that Christian leaders can try out in a way that can be seen, heard, and experienced by young Christian women. Ideally, these two will go hand in hand. You can try out a new activity or idea within your community or congregation, but if you have not thought through why you are doing it, the meaning can be misinterpreted. This would be an example of how a practice is ruined when we do not consider our posture. You also could have completely good intentions within your community and go about communicating them in the wrong way. This would mean your practices are not reflecting your posture. Postures and practices can also be thought of as “intent versus impact.” If both are not working together, the whole process may go haywire. The following postures and practices are not, by any means, a complete model for sustaining the faith of young Christian women. Not every element is “one size fits all,” especially given the wide range of diversity in experiences of both women and Christian communities. Still, the following are considerations that were highlighted by my participants as what they believe will be truly helpful going forward. If we are to believe that narrative and experience is essential for how we develop traditions, then they stand to be reviewed and implemented. Included within these postures and practices are ideas from existing “sheroes” of feminist theology, womanist theology, and other Christian female

perspectives that my participants studied in their course. Through their contributions, and practitioners of reconciliation, my hope is that we can begin to see the ways in which this knowledge does not stay within books and the classroom, but also moves out into our churches and day-to-day faith experiences.

*Postures and Practices for Christian Communities*

Schools have a start date and an end date. Similarly, this “Women in Christianity” course has, by now, come and gone for these women I interviewed. While they spoke of its impact and value, they also wanted to see it integrated into their day to day practices. They wanted it integrated into their church life, their mentorship experience and who they listened to. The course has value, but if Christian communities do not pick up and implement the same knowledge, the course will only be a moment in time, and not sustaining for the long-term faith of these young women. In addition, Christian leaders both male and female can greatly benefit from implementing more female perspectives in their doctrine, theology, and faith practices. The course is not forever, but what is learned can be.

*Female Representation - but also, Practice what You Preach*

“When we started reading about the women in the early church, women who were bishops, and apostles, and teachers, it was really shocking to me. Why don’t we know about these women, who did these really big things, in the history of the Christian church? No one is preaching about them, no one is talking about them. We take up the majority of the church, our bodies fill up a congregation, and yet, we’re so underrepresented in scripture and church history.” I raise Rachel’s response here because I think she highlights the greater need expressed by my participants, which is wanting more female representation in Christian communities. While there is good work in hiring female pastors, ministers, and leaders, the problem is not

simply solved by putting a woman in the pulpit. Young Christian women need to see the lifelong dedication to uplifting the stories of women across all fronts of Christian communities: in their staffing, yes, but also their interpretations of Scripture, their sermons, and the stories they bring into focus. Christian communities can do themselves a great service by reading theology and hermeneutics from a diverse group of female perspectives, just as they would to name women in Christian history that do not often get highlighted. In the Bible, we have women who were prophets, disciples, and bringers of the good news. There are also women who are victimized and caught up in oppressive systems. Christian communities would do well to acknowledge and learn from these stories of women in the Bible. These women should be lifted up and celebrated and also examples of how the Church can stand against the cycles of violence women still face today. In order for young Christian women to sustain their faith, and stay connected to Christian community, they need to see themselves reflected in the greater story of God. Christian leaders bear a responsibility to practice regularly including and championing women and their stories within their communities.

### *Change How We Talk*

Words matter. This seems like a simple concept until we really begin to consider the ways our language can perpetuate how we engage and see the world. Christie Cozad Neuger points out how using male pronouns as “generic”, actually communicates that women are less than. “When we use ‘generic’ male language for humanity, women and women’s lives, accomplishments, experiences, values, perspectives, and power are made invisible, and, to a large degree, lost.”<sup>24</sup> This gendered language has personal and cultural consequences, fueling a

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<sup>24</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger, “Rupturing God-language: the metaphor of God as midwife in Psalm 22” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of*

patriarchal hierarchy that exists within our world. My participants have been impacted by the constant use of male language within their faith: this is why they all named their readings on inclusive language for God and Christianity as so new and groundbreaking. Many of them had never considered feminine characteristics for God, much less pronouns. Elizabeth Johnson notes, “Language about the father in heaven who rules over the world justifies and even necessitates an order where men rule, thanks to their greater similarity to the Source of all being and power.”<sup>25</sup> Without anything else to offset this limited language, the male domination gets taken literally. Christian communities who use inclusive language and female pronouns for God can lift up new understandings of God as well as the dignity of women. Young Christian women can begin to see themselves reflected in God’s image, especially when God’s feminine characteristics are incorporated into their community’s language, prayers, worship, and descriptions. It is likely that when Christian communities use she/her pronouns for God, they will receive pushback from community members who believe it is not correct: to this, I say all the more opportunity to affirm and uphold the dignity of women by challenging our biases that God as male is normative.

### **Postures and Practices for Young Christian Women**

There were many ideas named by the Christian women I interviewed in how to sustain their faith for the long run. I had mentioned earlier feeling a little old when I interviewed my participants. By interviewing mostly 20-22 year olds, I felt like they had so many more life experiences to come. Emerging adulthood is an incredibly chaotic, transient, and difficult time. It is also the prime time that persons in this age are exploring their identity and what it means for

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*Katharine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Linda Day, and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 156

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Abounding in Kindness: Writings for the People of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 128

them. While there are many things that Christian communities need to provide and repair for young Christian women, there are also postures and practices that these women may find value in doing themselves. It can actually be a good thing when you take ownership of where your story is going. Reconciliation takes the oppressed to a new place just as much as the oppressors. Similarly, these young women are in a new place at the end of the course than they were at the start. My participants have named the struggle they see themselves and other Christian women facing in light of sexism. Holding the realities of sexism and affirming their value as Christian women will be difficult: this is why it is important to consider postures and practices that help young Christian women see themselves in a new way.

*Tell the Truth, and Understand the Tension*

Whatever manner of involvement young Christian women find themselves in, there will always be sexism. Yes, there are resources and churches that affirm equal calling for women in ministry, but we are also in a society where the majority of our churches root themselves in traditional, patriarchal stances. Karoline M. Lewis writes that part of the necessity for preparing women in ministry is to tell the truth that sexism is alive and well: “The truth is that you will experience sexism, overtly and covertly; it is just a matter of time [...] It should be devastating to you that you will still experience sexism when it comes to your call in ministry.”<sup>26</sup> We cannot hope for any sort of reconciliation between women and the Church if women do not continue to tell the truth about their experiences, however uncomfortable, discouraging, or devastating they may be to hear. Part of our posture in sustaining our faith as women in Christianity is to tell the whole of our story, much like the participants I interviewed did. Within these interviews, there was a multitude of good and bad experiences with the Christian faith, and a lot of ways in which

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<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *She*, 117

these women felt tension in how to hold all of it together. Lewis highlights this tension by asking her female readers, “Why enter into ministry if you know that this is what you will face?”<sup>27</sup> Mihee Kim-Kort writes about how she chose to enter into ministry, while still facing ageism, racism, and sexism from other Christians. According to Kim-Kort, these tensions never fully disappear, but this does not mean Christian women should stay on the sidelines: “It means [choosing] a dynamic engagement of the tensions experienced within our call, in our communities, in our particular seasons and being open to the possibility of rejection, refutation, and even modification.”<sup>28</sup> Kort believes that choosing to engage in Christian communities will not be easy, but that the act can be a growing experience of power and agency, and even an expression of hope in God’s faithfulness.<sup>29</sup> In understanding the realities and tensions of sexism and faith, young Christian women can go into their Christian communities both realistically and honestly. While she acknowledges that sexism will always find ways to catch us off guard, Lewis says that these experiences give women a right to justified anger: “Your anger will be justified and not only on the grounds of one specific incident alone. It will be justified because the church should be so much better about dealing with sexism. The church, of all places, should not explain sexism away, sweep it under the rug, or insist it is really ‘not that bad.’”<sup>30</sup> This is healthy anger, Lewis explains, because while there are those who are sexist without intending to be, there will be those who use sexism to intentionally disempower women. This anger can help women understand that what is happening to them is in fact, not okay, and that they deserve to be treated better and more equitably. Christian women have the burdensome task of navigating the

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<sup>27</sup> Lewis, *She*, 117

<sup>28</sup> Mihee Kim-Kort, *Streams Run Uphill: Conversations with Young Clergywomen of Color* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press), 121

<sup>29</sup> Kim-Kort, *Streams Run Uphill*, 121

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *She*, 117



complicated landscape of sexism but being able to affirm that it is not the right landscape to be in is an important part of the journey. Nicole Massie Martin makes a similar charge to Christian women: “In order to overcome the challenges of leadership, you must never forget who you are. There will be systems that try to break you. There will be people who try to tear you down. You may even have friends who abandon you on your way to becoming who God calls you to be. No matter what happens around you, never ever forget who God calls you to be.”<sup>31</sup> This posture of understanding the tension of sexism and faith is not meant to sound easy: it is not fair to ask young women to be aware of sexism, their own reactions to it, and how to be proactive. Yet, as women, knowing how to express one’s authenticity and identity is linked to monitoring our experiences and responses to sexism.<sup>32</sup> This is how we find ourselves considering community.

### *Don’t Go it Alone*

All of my participants named community as a way in which they could feel empowered in their faith going forward. Community takes on a lot of different forms, especially given the digital age we live in. My participants also named who they would find most helpful, and those answers vary. The following are possible areas of community practices to have in the life of a young Christian woman. This will take on different forms depending on personal preference and levels of comfort, and by no means is this a model in which I am suggesting you need all three to thrive. Rather, I hope that Christian women can pick and choose what community practices will be of most value to them.

*Women:* Having other Christian female peers has been named as a vital resource for many of my participants and female Christian leaders. Lewis believes that women are actually the

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<sup>31</sup> Nicole Massie Martin, *Made to Lead: Empowering Women for Ministry* (Ashland, OR: Christian Board of Pub. TCP, 2016), 40

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, *She*, 121

critical community to have when dealing with sexism, as they know your experience and can remind you who you are: “You will need to know that you are not alone. You will need to be affirmed in the fact that you are not making this stuff up. You will need spaces to cry, be angry, scream, and swear [...] You need girlfriends, real girlfriends. These times that you spend with them are spaces of escape, safety, and sanity.”<sup>33</sup> In hearing and sharing stories amongst women, this creates a “solidarity of sisters”<sup>34</sup> that can help bring each other to an awareness that they are validated, equally called, and understood. Consider too, other ways in which female voices can be integrated into your daily life. My participant Esther began following a number of Christian women on twitter, which means she has the opportunity to glean from quips and quotes from these women whenever she picks up her phone.

*Mentorship:* Mentors can serve with guidance, counseling, and discipleship to help mold young Christian women as they navigate sexism and their faith. Leaders within Christian communities who are seen calling out sexism, instead of meeting it with passivity or dismissal, are especially important to look for. Martin would say that while female-to-female mentorship carries value in its ability to relate to each other’s lived experience, we should not always discredit others who are already impacting our lives in a meaningful way: “I wanted a woman pastor with a large network and time to teach me how to get where she was. Yet, while I was looking for something I did not have at the time, God was trying to show me what was already in my hand: My dad was a pastor and had already begun to recommend me for preaching engagements. My local pastor allowed me to tag along with him and even became my sponsor into international circles. My life coach was a minister and although she was not in my

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *She*, 141

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 63

traditional network, she took me in and showed me all there was to know about coaching others.”<sup>35</sup> There will be times in which a perspective from an older Christian woman to a younger one will provide guidance and insight that is sorely needed. However, a few of my participants named that they do not want men to be removed from the dialogue entirely, and even named some Christian men as their biggest advocates. Perhaps for mentorship, it is about considering what voices you already have in your life, and where you need to look for the ones you are missing. Finding a mentor who is both a good fit and available is not easy, but the wisdom gained can be life changing. Whether your mentor is exactly like you or not may be a point for consideration for young Christian women.

*Churches and Ministries:* Many of my participants expressed wanting to find a church where women were pastors. Currently, six of my seven participants attend churches that employ women in ministry (the one who does not referenced the church plant she attends during college, but says her church back home does). I would encourage young Christian women to ask themselves what they envision when they think of a church or ministry community. Is there a woman on staff? Is she a pastor? Are there women working in the church on every level? Are they single, or do they have to be married to lead a bible study? These are just a few of the questions I ask myself when I am considering a church community to join. I also recognize that many young Christian women come from churches and families that do not support women in ministry, and this can be a very painful process. To leave or to stay in these communities, to debate or to distance, is a very normative part of emerging adulthood development. While the life stage can be characterized by opportunities, identity exploration, and hope, there can be transient, confusion, and conflict when emerging adults begin to disassociate with the

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<sup>35</sup> Martin, *Made to Lead*, 73

communities they come from.<sup>36</sup> There can be value in Christian women confronting the Christian communities where they experienced sexism. There is also be value in creating distance and boundaries. No church will ever be perfect, but it is fair to ask oneself what you would hope for when going through its doors, and if you would like to go back in again.

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<sup>36</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 6

### **Conclusion: Going Forward**

I began this project to investigate what helps young Christian women sustain their faith in the face of sexism within Christian communities. My hope was to find practices or traditions that leaders of these Christian communities need to consider to better support young Christian women. In interviewing these amazing women, I heard their deep value for studying theology, history, and hermeneutics from female perspectives. My participants ended the course feeling empowered and encouraged in their faith. The disruption of their previous assumptions and understandings were seen as a positive experience. All my participants said the course would influence their faith going forward, and they all gave ideas as to what would be helpful. In sharing this, I realized that a lot of what they needed had the potential to be found in Christian communities.

The process of research is a lot like an emotional rollercoaster for the researcher. I went in trying my best to come up with an idea, ask some good questions, and develop a theory that could help young Christian women feel like they could sustain their faith, no matter what sexism they had or would face. What I did not realize is that through my interviews with these young women, I was also seeking the answers to the questions for myself. I had experienced sexism in the church, and I was hurt by it. While I was studying theology and interviewing these women, I thought those emotional hurdles were behind me. By the end of the second round of interviews, however, I was tumbling over my doubts and questions about Christian communities, and my place within them, once again. I realized that my project could not be about how young Christian women could survive without Christian communities; I realized this because these young women still want these communities in their lives. What they have, because of this course, is hope, passion, and empowerment that can get them to the places they need to be to keep thriving; and that is why I realized how incredibly important it is that Christian communities do their part to

meet these women at the door. I realized that I could have hope that I would find my own way back into Christian community. Romans 5:5 tells us that hope does not put us to shame, and I am beginning to believe in that, because of the hope of these women, and women, such as Mihee Kim-Kort: “The very essence of hope might even be described as embracing the tension between living in a broken world and believing in God’s redemptions, the tension between seeing the terrible inequities of the world and calling out for God’s healing transformation, the tension between being questioned as a legitimate clergyperson and being an answer of God’s light and love. What we do in the midst of those tensions is an expression of God’s faithfulness and very presence in the world.”<sup>37</sup>

There is still so much work to be done to help young Christian women navigate sexism in Christian communities. However, there is also so much good work that has been done to name it, combat it, and call it for what it is: a horrible lie that attempts to keep Christian women from living into their full potential. From courses like “Women in Christianity,” to Christian communities beginning to partake in reconciliatory efforts, I believe that young Christian women can sustain their faith for the long ride.

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<sup>37</sup> Kim-Kort, *Streams Run Uphill*, 121

## **Appendix A: Methods Section**

### **Participants**

#### *Who Qualified to Participate?*

The participants of this study were comprised of female college students from Seattle Pacific University, a private Christian college in the Pacific Northwest, who were also enrolled in the course THEO 3331, “Women in Christianity”, which explores the biblical, historical, and theological implications of women in the Christian tradition. This course took place during the winter quarter of 2018 at Seattle Pacific University. The restrictions on my pool of participants were presented in person and in writing as follows:

- Participants had to identify as female and as Christian,
- Participants had to be enrolled in the Women in Christianity course at Seattle Pacific University,
- Participants had to have been involved, through volunteer or paid work, within a Christian community (church, nonprofit, ministry, mission, school, etc.) within the past three to four years.

#### *Description of Participants*

Seven participants in a class of fifteen participated in this research project. While all names and other identifying factors have been changed to protect confidentiality, the basic factors of these participants are as follows: of these seven women, five are white, two are persons of color. All are between the age of 20 and 22, with the exception of one student who is 30. Six of the participants have some major or minor in theological studies, which vary in topics from general theology, educational ministry, or reconciliation studies. One student does not have a theology-related degree but chose to take the course based on scheduling and personal interest.

All participants currently identify with the Christian faith and tradition and were or are involved in some form of Christian community.

### *Recruitment & Confidentiality*

I, the principal investigator, presented students the research opportunity during the first and second week of the THEO 3331 Course. Students were handed informed consent documents that they were able to consider and review over the weekend, and sign upon my second visitation to the course. The professor of THEO 3331 offered extra credit towards any research participants' final grade in the course and offered alternative comparable methods of earning extra credit for those who did not or could not participate in the study.

I did not communicate any direct benefits; however, I noted that their participation in the research may assist Christian women in the future as they navigate their Christian communities. There may also be indirect benefits to participants, such as an opportunity for self-reflection and self-awareness of their experiences that they would choose to share.

Participants were also told that while there would probably be publications as a result of this study, their name would not be used nor would they be identified in any way. The information in the study records was kept confidential and was only accessible by me. No reference was made in oral or written reports that could link participants to the study. The professor for the course was given the names, and only the names, of the participants at the end of the course, to ensure that they were compensated with their extra credit.

### **Materials & Design**

The only materials that were used in this study were basic recording devices for the interviews of participants. Journals were submitted to me through email on typed word documents.



## **Procedure**

If participants wished to participate in this research, they were asked to meet with me twice during the Winter quarter for an individual, one-hour interview, and they were also asked to allow me to assess some of their written work for the course. The design for the research was as follows:

### *Interviews*

The interviews were scheduled between each participants' and my availability and was scheduled for one hour – participants were not obligated to fill the hour if we finished our questions earlier. The first interview was scheduled within the first three weeks of the ten-week quarter, and the second interview was scheduled within the last three weeks of the quarter. The first interview consisted of many initial assessment questions, whereas the second interview was more reflective of the participants experience in the course. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participant, so the data could later be transcribed and coded. Participants were given opportunities during and outside of interviews to ask any questions about the research they might have had. Participants were not asked to share anything they were not comfortable with, and they were told they could opt out of a question in the interview if they choose.

### *Journals*

For the course, participants were asked to write weekly journaling reflections – with their permission, I also used this journaling content to learn more about what participants were processing and reflecting on in light of being Christian women. My assessment of participant's' journal entries was for research purposes only and did not influence any aspect of their grade in the course.

I asked participants to submit three journal entries to me. Two were their journal entries were collected from the unit of the course on Women in Ministry, and their readings were centered on the topics of women's experiences in ministry, calling, and ordination. I then asked participants to submit a third journal entry, from any point in the course, that they felt they had expressed a lot of content or processing through – I believe that this helped participants have some ownership in what they chose to share, as well as give me more variety in what aspect of women and Christianity they were reflecting on.

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