

Equality of men and women in the family

What are Christian teachings about the equality of men and women?

Most Christians believe that men and women are equal, which is based on the biblical teaching that both men and women were created in the image of God. In the creation account of *Genesis 1*, men and women are created at the same time, and both are given authority to rule over the rest of creation:

‘Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ **So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.**’
(*Genesis 1: 26–27*)

In the *Genesis 2* account, men and women are created separately, and some Christians therefore infer that the man is superior, as he was created first and the woman is created as a companion for him.

‘The Lord God said, ‘**It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him**’ [...] So [...] he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.’ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.’
(*Genesis 2: 18, 21–23*)

A Stained glass window showing Adam, Eve, and the serpent



SPECIFICATION FOCUS

Christian teaching about the equality of men and women in the family: Christian teachings and attitudes about the role of men and women in the family, including reference to *Genesis 1–3* and *Ephesians 5: 21–30*; divergent Christian attitudes about the equality and role of men and women in the family and Christian responses to them.



USEFUL TERM

Equality: treating people in the same way irrespective of differences such as sex, race, education, disability or sexuality

In *Genesis 3* the woman appears to encourage the man to disobey God’s instruction not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Historically, some Christians have viewed women as being inferior to men on the grounds that all women share the blame for tempting the man.

In *Genesis 3: 16* the woman is punished for her role in tempting the man to disobey God, leading some Christians to suggest that pain in childbirth and male domination within marriage would not otherwise have happened.

‘I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labour you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.’
(*Genesis 3: 16*)

In the Old Testament, however, women seem to have leading roles in society and the Ten Commandments require respect for both parents equally: ‘Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you’ (*Exodus 20: 12*). Similarly, Paul writes that Jesus teaches: ‘There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (*Galatians 3: 28*). Most Christians therefore believe that men and women have equal worth in God’s eyes.

Another Christian teaching is that men and women are equal but different. Many Christians believe that men and women are equally valuable in the eyes of God, but that they have been given different roles by him. For example, the following teaching suggests that husbands and wives have different roles within a marriage:

‘**Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.** [...] Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church [...] In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – for we are members of his body [...] each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.’
(*Ephesians 5: 22–33*)

Christians who adopt this teaching in their marriages highlight the comparison to Jesus and the Church – Jesus laid down his life for the Church, and therefore the husband has the responsibility to love and protect the family. Women in turn have a responsibility to love, submit to, and respect their husbands. Some more liberal Christians do not agree that the husband is the head of the wife, and believe that both partners should submit to each other.



B Christian husbands are commanded to love their wives as much as themselves

Submitting to someone else means accepting their authority or leadership. This quotation says that wives should submit to their husbands, and husbands should love their wives.

SUPPORT

How do Christians view gender equality?

Christian denominations and Christian organisations around them have expressed a range of views on gender **equality**.

The Catholic Church

‘The Church has the duty to contribute to the recognition and liberation of women, following the example of Christ’s own esteem for them [...] Giving women opportunities [...] would enable them to occupy a place in society equal to that of men – without confusing or conflating the specific character of each – since both men and women are the ‘image’ of the Creator.’
(Pope Benedict XVI, *Africae Munis* 57, 2011)

Church of England – principles

- Belief in God as love expressed in relationships.
- Understanding of humanity (female and male) as made in God’s image, and possessing equal worth.
- Equality amongst people and within relationships.

Gender equality

Methodist Church

‘... the model of relationship between husband and wife which gives ‘headship’ as the responsibility of the husband and submission as the wife’s part has led in many circumstances to unequal and inappropriate relationships of domination and subordination [...] being encouraged to be themselves rather than sticking to gendered roles offers a better interpretation of love and a better opportunity for both partners to grow and flourish in the relationship ...’

Mothers’ Union

‘Mothers’ Union has gender equality as a core focus of its work. As Christians we believe that women and men are equal in the eyes of God. But [...] we see women and girls treated unequally. Too often women’s contributions to family life, the workplace, the church and political life are either ignored or dismissed.’



BUILD YOUR SKILLS

- 1 Make a list of the different Christian views on equality of men and women.
- 2 Which of the following statements, if any, do you agree with? Explain why.
 - ‘Women should not be given different family roles from men.’
 - ‘Men and women are different. That’s why they have different roles.’
 - ‘In today’s society we do not need to turn to ancient texts to understand gender roles in the family.’
- 3 Do you think men and women have equality in family life today? Explain your reasons.

STRETCH



SUMMARY

- Christian views on the equality of men and women are based on teachings in Genesis and in the New Testament.
- Paul teaches that the husband is the head of the wife, that wives should submit to their husbands and that husbands should love their wives.
- Many Christians interpret this to mean men and women are equal but with different roles to play. Other Christians disagree.

Gender prejudice and discrimination



SPECIFICATION FOCUS

Christian teachings about gender prejudice and discrimination: Christian opposition to gender prejudice and discrimination including Galatians 3: 23–29; examples of Christian opposition to gender prejudice and discrimination; divergent Christian attitudes to gender differences, including the role of women in the Church, prejudice and discrimination and Christian responses to them.

What is gender prejudice and discrimination?

Prejudice means having an opinion that is based on a preconceived idea, rather than actual experience. Discrimination means acting unfairly towards a person, on the basis of a prejudiced opinion.

There are many examples of **gender prejudice** and **gender discrimination** throughout history. For example, in the UK, women have not always had the same opportunities as men to own money and property. Until the Married Women’s Property Act was passed in 1882, married women had no legal identity, and their money and possessions automatically passed to her husband when they married. Women were not able to inherit in their own right until 1922.

In more recent times, legislation such as the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equality Act have tried to prevent discrimination from occurring, but many people feel that gender prejudice and discrimination are still common in society today.

When women and men are treated differently, it is often on the basis of a gender stereotype. A stereotype is a generalised idea of supposedly typical features that something or someone may have. Generalisations can sometimes be useful, but they can also be misleading, and may not relate to the actual individual characteristics of a person at all. When people make stereotyped assumptions about others, this can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

What does Christianity teach about opposing gender prejudice and discrimination?

In *Galatians*, Paul teaches Christians to regard each other as equal, in a text that is often used to encourage Christians to challenge inequality, prejudice, and discrimination of different kinds:

‘... in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. **There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.’
(*Galatians* 3: 26–29)

Read this list of **gender stereotypes**. Are there any others you could add?

SUPPORT

Gender stereotypes

Women	Men
gentle	tough
emotional	rational
compassionate	assertive
weak	strong



A How does this graffiti image challenge gender stereotyping?

According to the Bible, Jesus treated men and women with equal respect. He had devoted female followers who stayed throughout his ministry, received serious teaching from him, and were there at his death and resurrection. Female followers are presented by the gospel writers in a positive light.

- Jesus healed a sick woman who was outcast from her community (*Mark 5: 24–34*).
- He spoke to a Samaritan woman who was despised by others (*John 4: 7–27*).
- He defended the woman who had used expensive perfume to anoint him (*Mark 14: 1–9*).

How have Christians opposed gender prejudice and discrimination?

Most denominations in the modern Christian Church have tried to reflect Jesus' attitude towards women in different areas of life.

Wedding vows

For many years, in the Anglican wedding ceremony men vowed to 'love and cherish' their wife, while women vowed to 'love, cherish and obey' their husband. In 2006, the Church issued a report on how it could help to tackle issues of domestic violence, in which it recognised that the traditional vow of obedience could appear to condone abusive relationships. It went on to launch guidelines on acceptable alternative vows that left out the word 'obey'.

In the Methodist marriage ceremony, the word 'obey' had been dropped in the 1930s, and the practice of 'giving away' the bride was optional. The Catholic wedding service has identical forms of wording for the vows made by women and men.

The role of women in the Church

One of the recent acts of opposition to gender discrimination in the Church of England has been the **ordination** of women into the priesthood. Some denominations have been ordaining women into the ministry for many years, but women were not permitted to become priests in the Anglican Church until 1994. The Catholic Church does not ordain women.

Those who object to the ordination of women often refer to the teaching of Paul: 'I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man' (*1 Timothy 2: 12*). Other arguments against women's ordination include the fact that Jesus chose only men to be the twelve disciples, and women are not given authority by God to be leaders in the Church.

Christians who are in favour of having women as ordained ministers often argue that it is not just an issue of equality and that it is good to have men and women in the priesthood because:

- women have different skills to offer their congregations
- many women are able to deal sensitively with pastoral issues
- women priests can relate better to women in the Church.

USEFUL TERMS

Gender discrimination: acting upon prejudice about someone's gender; for example, not appointing a woman to a high-pressure job on the assumption that she must be too fragile for the role; or expecting a man to do a heavy physical task on the assumption that he must be strong

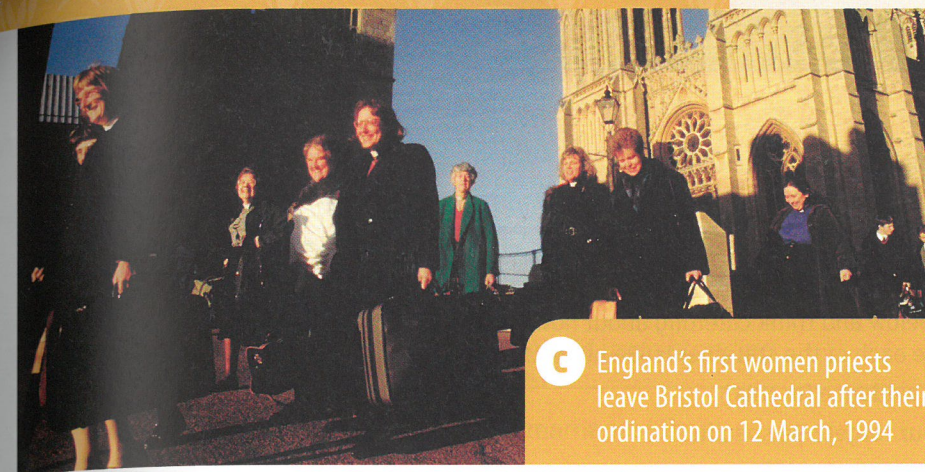
Gender prejudice: making judgements about men or women on the basis of their gender; for example, judging all women to be emotionally fragile or all men to be emotionally strong

Ordination: the appointment of men and women to professional ministry in the Church



B How might gender equality issues apply to other traditional Christian wedding customs, such as being given away?

‘The Lord Jesus chose men to form the twelve apostles and the apostles did the same when they chose their successors [...] For this reason the ordination of women is not possible.’
(*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1577*)



C England's first women priests leave Bristol Cathedral after their ordination on 12 March, 1994

After much debate, the Church of England approved the ordination of women as bishops in November 2014 and the Right Reverend Libby Lane (see image **E**) was appointed Bishop of Stockport soon after. Not all members of the Church of England agreed with this appointment, however.

BUILD YOUR SKILLS

- 1 Explain the following three terms: gender prejudice, gender discrimination, gender stereotype.
- 2 Make a bullet-pointed list which summarises the Christian teachings on gender prejudice and discrimination.
- 3 How do Christians oppose gender prejudice and discrimination? Describe one example.
- 4 Why do you think Christians disagree over the role of women in the Church? Explain your views, referring to Christian teachings.

SUMMARY

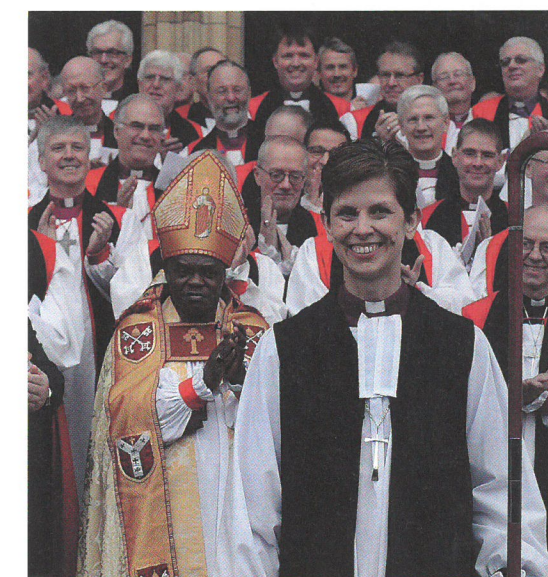
- Gender prejudice and discrimination is illegal in the UK, but is still experienced by many.
- Jesus treated men and women with equal respect and included women in his ministry.
- Women were first ordained in the Church of England in 1994 and the first female bishop was ordained in 2014. The Catholic Church does not ordain women.

EXAM-STYLE QUESTIONS

- b** Explain **two** reasons why some Christians oppose the ordination of women. (4)
- d** 'Women should have the same leadership roles as men within the Church.' Evaluate this statement considering arguments for and against. In your response you should:
- refer to Christian teachings
 - refer to different Christian points of view
 - reach a justified conclusion. (12)



D Catholic campaigns calling for the ordination of women



E Libby Lane, the first female Church of England bishop

Revision



BUILD YOUR SKILLS

Look at the list of 'I can' statements below and think carefully about how confident you are. Use the following code to rate each of the statements. Be honest!

Green – very confident. What is your evidence for this?

Orange – quite confident. What is your target? Be specific.

Red – not confident. What is your target? Be specific.



A self-assessment revision checklist is available on Kerboodle

I can...

- Give Christian teachings about marriage
- Explain the purpose and importance of marriage for Christians
- Explain different views about the importance of marriage in society, including non-religious views, and Christian responses to them
- Give Christian teachings about sexual relationships
- Explain different Christian attitudes towards relationships outside of marriage
- Explain different Christian attitudes towards homosexuality
- Explain non-religious views about sexual relationships and Christian responses to them
- Give Christian teachings about the purpose and importance of family
- Describe the five different types of family within twenty-first-century society
- Explain different Christian responses to different types of family
- Explain how and why the local church community tries to support families, with reference to a source of wisdom and authority
- Describe the various activities organised by churches today for families
- Give Christian teachings about family planning and regulation of births
- Explain different Christian attitudes about contraception and family planning, including Protestant and Catholic attitudes, with reference to *Humanae Vitae*
- Explain different non-religious attitudes about contraception and family planning and Christian responses to them
- Apply situation ethics to issues surrounding contraception and explain how Christians would respond
- Give Christian teachings about divorce and remarriage
- Explain different Christian attitudes about divorce and remarriage
- Explain different non-religious attitudes about divorce and remarriage and Christian responses to them
- Apply situation ethics to issues surrounding divorce and remarriage and explain how Christians would respond
- Give Christian teachings about the equality of men and women in the family
- Explain different Christian views about the roles of men and women in the family
- Give Christian teachings about gender prejudice and discrimination
- Give examples of how Christians have opposed gender prejudice and discrimination
- Explain different Christian attitudes to gender differences, including the role of women in the Church.

Exam practice

On these exam practice pages you will see example answers for each of the exam question types: **a**, **b**, **c**, and **d**. You can find out more about these on pages 6–11.

• Question 'a'

Question **a** is A01 – this tests your knowledge and understanding.

(a) Outline **three** Christian beliefs about marriage. (3)

Student response

Marriage is one flesh, married people can't get divorced, married people should be faithful to each other.

Improved student response

Christians believe that when they get married they become 'one flesh'. Some Christians, for example Catholics, believe that you can't get divorced once you are married in the eyes of God. Christians believe married people should be faithful to each other.

Over to you! Give yourself three minutes on the clock and have a go at answering this question. Remember, this question type requires you to provide three facts or short ideas: you don't need to explain them.

• Question 'b'

Question **b** is A01 – this tests your knowledge and understanding.

(b) Explain **two** different Christian beliefs about contraception. (4)

Student response

Many Christians believe that you shouldn't use contraception because God told Adam and Eve to fill the earth. These Christians think that only God can create life and decide who should and should not get pregnant.

Improved student response

Many Christians, for example Catholics, believe that you shouldn't use artificial contraception because God told Adam and Eve to fill the earth. These Christians think that only God can decide who should and should not get pregnant.

However, many Protestant Christians adopt a more flexible approach and will permit the use of artificial contraception – though they still may not use certain types like the morning after pill because fertilisation has already taken place.

Over to you! Give yourself four minutes on the clock and have a go at answering this question. Remember, in order to 'explain' something, you need to **develop** your points. See page 9 for a reminder of how to do this.



WHAT WENT WELL

The student has touched on some key Christian ideas – for example the importance of faithfulness. The student has attempted to give three different Christian beliefs.



HOW TO IMPROVE

A little more detail is required to ensure that the points reflect Christian beliefs more fully, and to allow for the diverse views within Christianity. See the 'improved student response' opposite for suggested corrections.



WHAT WENT WELL

This student has correctly identified a key Christian belief about contraception, and provided an explanation.



HOW TO IMPROVE

The question asks for two different Christian beliefs, and the beliefs described here reflect one Christian perspective. The student should try to make it as easy as possible for the examiner to award them marks, by giving two different beliefs, both of which are explained. Also, be careful to distinguish between 'natural' and 'artificial' contraception. See the 'improved student response' opposite for suggested corrections.

• Question 'c'

Question **c** is AO1 – this tests your knowledge and understanding.

- (c) Explain **two** different Christian beliefs about homosexuality. In your answer you must refer to a source of wisdom and authority. (5)

Student response

Many Christians believe that homosexual relationships are wrong: 'Do not have sexual relationships with a man as one does with a woman' (Leviticus 18: 22).

Some more liberal Christians are happy to accept committed homosexual relationships, because they believe that the interpretation of the Bible passages are not clear-cut.

Improved student response

Many Christians believe that homosexual relationships are wrong, *because the Bible contains several passages which forbid it*: 'Do not have sexual relationships with a man as one does with a woman' (Leviticus 18: 22). *They believe it isn't part of God's original plan for creation.*

Some more liberal Christians are happy to accept committed homosexual relationships, because they believe that the interpretation of the Bible passages are not clear-cut.

L Over to you! Give yourself five minutes on the clock and have a go at answering this question. You need to write two developed points, one of which needs to be supported by a source of wisdom and authority.

• Question 'd'

Question **d** is AO2 – this tests your ability to evaluate.

- (d) 'Christianity should be more understanding when marriages break down.' Evaluate this statement considering arguments for and against. In your response you should:
- refer to Christian teachings
 - refer to different Christian points of view
 - refer to non-religious points of view
 - reach a justified conclusion. (12)

Student response

Divorce is the legal termination of a marriage, and at certain times in history it has been controversial in society. Within Christianity today, there are different views about divorce.

It could be argued that the Catholic Church would disagree with the claim that Christianity should be more understanding when marriages break down. This is because they don't believe divorce is possible. They believe that marriage is a covenant between both partners and God which cannot be broken. Whilst Catholic Christians would show compassion to those in difficulty, they would nevertheless say

✓ WHAT WENT WELL

This student has correctly identified two Christian beliefs about contraception, and has provided a relevant source of wisdom and authority.

! HOW TO IMPROVE

The student should be careful to remember to explain each belief, even when they have included a source of wisdom and authority. The first belief is not explained and needs to be developed. See the 'improved student response' opposite for suggested corrections.

that marriage is for life. The Catholic Church does declare a marriage to be null under very specific circumstances, for example if the couple are forced to marry.

Other Christians, for example Anglicans, would say that they do show understanding when marriages break down. They would argue that God forgives mistakes and understands relationship breakdown. Many churches – in all denominations – offer marriage counselling and support to help prevent divorce.

In conclusion, I think that Christianity is, in part, understanding when marriages break down – all Christians would argue that they should show compassion to people in difficulty. However, I think it is better for a marriage to be happy and that they should be allowed to divorce and have the chance at a future with a different partner – and some Christians should be more understanding about that.

Improved student response

Divorce is the legal termination of a marriage, and at certain times in history it has been controversial in society. Within Christianity today, there are different views about divorce.

It could be argued that the Catholic Church would disagree with the claim that Christianity should be more understanding when marriages break down. This is because they don't believe divorce is possible. They believe that marriage is a covenant between both partners and God which cannot be broken: *'what God has joined together, let no one separate'*. Whilst Catholic Christians would show compassion to those in difficulty, they would nevertheless say that marriage is for life. The Catholic Church does declare a marriage to be null under very specific circumstances, for example if the couple are forced to marry.

Other Christians, for example Anglicans, would say that they do show understanding when marriages break down. *These Christians might argue that Jesus himself mentioned circumstances where divorce is permitted (Matthew 19: 9).* They would argue that God forgives mistakes and understands relationship breakdown. Many churches – in all denominations – offer marriage counselling and support to help prevent divorce.

Non-religious people would be more likely to agree that Christians should show more understanding. For example, Humanists do not believe that marriage was established by God. Humanists make decisions based on what would make people happy – and if a marriage is unhappy for those involved, they would support the couple's decision to divorce and remarry someone they are happier with.

In conclusion, I think that Christianity is, in part, understanding when marriages break down – all Christians would argue that they should show compassion to people in difficulty. However, I agree *with the non-religious view* that it is better for a marriage to be happy and that they should be allowed to divorce and have the chance at a future with a different partner – and some Christians should be more understanding about that.

L Over to you! Give yourself 12 minutes on the clock and have a go at answering this question. Remember to refer back to the original statement in your writing when you give different points of view, and make sure you cover each of the bullet points given in the question.

✓ WHAT WENT WELL

The student refers to the statement in the question, describes two different Christian points of view, and reaches a justified conclusion.

! HOW TO IMPROVE

The student has not referred to non-religious points of view – a requirement of the question. A better answer would also need to include sources of wisdom and authority. Have a look at this improved version of the student response.

✎ BUILD YOUR SKILLS

In your exams, you'll need to make sure you use religious terminology correctly. Do you know the meaning of the following important terms for this topic?

sanctity of marriage	cohabitation
homosexuality	nuclear families
blended families	rites of passage
local parish	family planning
situation ethics	prejudice
discrimination	