

The Dangers of Unity | BY MEGEN MOLÉ

Just a few weeks ago, US president Barack Obama published an article on feminism in the fashion magazine Glamour. Identifying himself as a feminist, he wrote that twenty-first-century feminism is about “the idea that when everybody is equal, we are all more free.” This applies not just to basic human rights, but to gender stereotypes as well. We’ve come a long way, he wrote, but there are still many things we need to work on:



and ambitious in the workplace—unless you’re a woman. Then you’re being too bossy, and suddenly the very qualities you thought were necessary for success end up holding you back.

For Obama, the feminist movement is far from finished. We need to keep working on feminism to liberate everyone, male and female.

Other people are less certain about the benefits of feminism. In a 2014 social media trend called “Why I Don’t Need Feminism,” women were invited to take a picture of themselves with a caption that described why they don’t identify as feminists—and many did. Last year at the General Conference Session in Texas, I listened to Natasha Nebblett explain to the delegates why she didn’t want the GC to allow women’s ordination.

She argued that while people often recognize her work as president of Generation of Youth for Christ, “they should give more recognition when I become a wife next February and a mother after that, since the Spirit



of Prophecy says that that position is higher than the ministry and the desk and the king on his throne.” I’ve also heard a lot about independent evangelist Doug Batchelor, who argues that feminism is “becoming” more about angry women who wanted to be like

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We need to keep changing the attitude that raises our girls to be demure and our boys to be assertive, that criticizes our daughters for speaking out and our sons for shedding a tear. We need to keep changing the attitude that punishes women for their sexuality and rewards men for theirs.

We need to keep changing the attitude that permits the routine harassment of women, whether they’re walking down the street or daring to go online. We need to keep changing the attitude that teaches men to feel threatened by the presence and success of women.

We need to keep changing the attitude that congratulates men for changing a diaper, stigmatizes full-time dads, and penalizes working mothers. We need to keep changing the attitude that values being confident, competitive,

HTTP://WWW.MLIVE.COM/NEWS/FLINT/INDEX.SSFZ201601/PRESIDENT_OBAMA_SIGNS_EMERGENC

WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?v=BO_X3PLWQ_EA&KEYNOTE_ADDRESS//NATASHA_NEBBLETT_GYC_2015

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men rather than attaining the rightful respect for being a “woman.” He feels that feminism is pushing the church “beyond” voting rights and equal pay into the arena of unisex “thinking.” Now that women have equal pay and are allowed to vote, what is feminism doing? For Batchelor, it’s turning all of us into some form of male-female hybrid. It’s limiting us, both male and female.

Who is right? Is feminism a liberating movement or a limiting one? The answer is too complex to be summed up in a few words. But let’s see what we can do.

Feminism existed before the women’s liberation movement in 1960s America, and it’s likely to be around for a good while. It has been many different things at different times, to different people. It’s only natural that things get a little complicated as a movement gains size and momentum. Like Christianity (or even Adventism) feminism is not a static entity, composed of people who think exactly alike and who all move in the same direction. Nor should it be—if it was, it wouldn’t be able to do the thing it aims to do: work towards equal rights for all people, regardless of their sex.

In fact, the illusion of unity—unity of one group, or even of the whole human race—was one of the problems feminism had to overcome along the way. Let me explain what I mean with a short history lesson.

Hillary Rodham Clinton may be the first woman nominated to a major political party in the US, but she’s certainly not the first woman to run for the office of president. In 1872, almost fifty years before any woman would be able to legally vote for her, Victoria Woodhull became America’s first female presidential can-



Doug Batchelor

didate. A campaigner for women’s suffrage, she reasoned: “If Congress refuse to listen and to grant what women ask, there is but one course left to pursue. What is there left for women to do but to become the mothers of the future government?” If the government was not going to listen to women, women would just have to join the government. She lost spectacularly to Ulysses S. Grant, but her campaign drew a great deal of media attention, and she continued to campaign for women’s rights until she died at the ripe old age of eighty-eight—seven years after women were finally granted the right to vote.

Woodhull, and other women like her, formed what we call the “first wave” of modern feminism. The height of first-wave feminism was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the suffragettes and the women’s rights movement. These feminists were largely focused on the legal aspects of equal rights: the vote, the right to be educated, the right to own property, etc.

The “second wave,” generally marked as taking place from the 1960s through the 1990s, came up against a different set of chal-



Hillary Rodham Clinton

lenges. Equipped with the legal rights won by first-wave feminists, the second wave set out to negotiate questions of identity and social justice. Women were now legally “equal,” but deep-seated cultural biases still kept them from true equality on most fronts. They had to fight for the right to be women in the workplace, and in this new environment they were forced to reconsider what it actually meant to be a woman, and what it meant for a woman to be equal to a man. Undaunted by these challenges, second-wave feminists succeeded in

reforming higher education, business and politics, and reproductive rights; set up organizations and legislation for the protection of battered women; and raised awareness about the movement at a popular level. Second-wave feminism was loud and proud, and this is the wave we are still most likely to associate with the term “feminism.”

They also changed history in a deeper way. I work at a university, teaching, and research-

from a very specific point of view. Most of the art was made by men: specifically, well-off white men from the West.

We discovered that “we” were not as united as we had thought, and that our unity had only been possible because we were excluding everyone with a different perspective than ours—people who were women, who were black, who were poor or uneducated. These people didn’t matter in our society, and so



“Second wave” feminists, led by Betty Friedan, in a 1971 march for constitutional equality.

ing literary and cultural criticism. Basically, I study how art and literature shape identity. In my field feminism is hugely important—and not just because the feminist movement ensured my right to work in the first place. For hundreds of years we assumed that great art was universal. We believed that it held up a mirror to the world—that it showed us who we were as people. Then, in the middle of the twentieth century, we suddenly and shockingly realized that most of the art we had previously considered “great” was actually only reflecting a very small portion of the world,

their art couldn’t possibly matter either.

Until a group of feminist critics came along—at this point still mostly women—who, thanks to their nineteenth-century feminist forerunners, were finally allowed to participate in scientific discourse. They pointed out, in a language other scholars could understand, that actually these other perspectives were everywhere, and could be very valuable indeed.

The impact this realization had on the arts (and later on the sciences as well) cannot be overstated. There were endless, conflicting worlds and perspectives out there, just waiting

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to be recognized. The effect was revolutionary. Batchelor argues: “All of history has been altered in the last fifty to sixty years. Up until the feminist movement, the church understood for 1,900 years that the final authority was to rest solely with husbands

and men pastors.” He’s absolutely right. Feminism is responsible for teaching us to read differently, from multiple perspectives. It opened our eyes. It showed us that our society wasn’t as fair as we thought it was, but that we could make it better. We just needed to open the floor to other voices.

Soon the feminist scholars were followed by postcolonial scholars and class scholars. They didn’t focus on women, but on non-Western peoples and on the poor. They were followed by disability studies and by queer theory. Some feminist critics (male and female) even turned their focus back to the old perspective, to learn how these new perspectives could help us re-evaluate thousands of years of rich, white masculine—and all the men left out by that category. The floodgates were opened and the knowledge poured in. Some people took this knowledge to strange extremes, as people always do. This was OK. Feminism taught us that difference wasn’t the end of the world, it was the beginning. Some feminists hate men, and some feminists are men.

A thousand varieties of third-wave feminism were born. They responded to second-wave feminism’s attempts to avoid the mistakes of the past 2,000 years by teaching us that there is more than one way to be a woman (or a man). Where the second wave was mostly composed of highly educated white women, third-wave feminisms work to improve conditions for all people, each according to their

needs. Some of these feminisms are contradictory, and that’s OK. People are contradictory as well. But it’s important to recognize that feminism made their contradiction possible in the first place. Feminism isn’t obsolete. It’s still doing exactly what it was meant to—building the opportunity for real democracy and equality, for everyone.

The Adventist church still needs feminism too. The world church is arguing for unity, but feminism has taught us the dangers of that type of unity. Can the church be truly unified? Or are we enforcing unity at the cost of people? Are we only united at the cost of excluding everyone with a different perspective? Could that be why the church needs feminism? Not, as Batchelor fears, to push the church into “unisex” thinking, but to allow everyone in the church a voice? To make our church better and more fair? To let all of us be equal and more free?

Feminism isn’t about ordaining female pastors and it’s not about recognizing the position of wife and mother above that of president or king. Feminism is about recognizing that you should have the right to prefer being a mother or father over being president, and vice versa. Feminism is about recognizing that your way of looking at things is not the only way of looking at them.

Of course, that’s just my perspective. The beauty of feminism is that you are free to offer your own perspective on equal footing, regardless of your sex, race, class, or gender. No matter how radical. ■

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