



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:  
The 23rd Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers**  
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

## **A GIRL DEFINED BY GOD: BIBLICAL WOMANHOOD, ANTI-FEMINISM, AND WHITE EVANGELICAL MICROCELEBRITIES**

Caitlin Lawson  
Emmanuel College

### **Introduction**

Girl Defined is a cross-platform fundamentalist Evangelical Christian ministry started in 2014 by Kristen Clark and Bethany Beal (both née Baird), who describe themselves as “two sisters from Texas who are fighting feminism, embracing gender differences and empowering girls to live out their God defined purpose.” The goal of their ministry is to encourage women to deny their desires and live out God’s design for their lives: Biblical womanhood. Biblical womanhood centers on a complementarian mandate in which the husband is the head of household and his wife is his helpmate. In addition to strictly defined gender roles, they promote cisheteronormativity and purity culture and largely ignore issues of race and socioeconomic privilege.

Through an analysis of Girl Defined’s blog posts and accompanying YouTube videos tagged “feminism,” this project seeks to understand the ways that white fundamentalist Christian women make sense of and mobilize against the feminist movement. As made abundantly clear by the 2016 and 2020 US Presidential elections, white Evangelical women are a powerful voting bloc that skews heavily conservative. Moreover, scholars have tended to focus on male anti-feminist online communities in their explorations of digital far right phenomena. Through their expansive construction of feminism as ideologically dominant, Girl Defined simplifies and individualizes women’s experiences to frame Biblical womanhood as a “radical” alternative to feminism. These findings add to our understanding of anti-feminist backlash and white Evangelical women’s place in the culture wars.

### **Relevant Literature**

This project extends existing scholarship in three subject areas: women’s agency in gender-traditional religions, questions of authority among Evangelical white women in the United States, and tensions around Evangelical microcelebrities. Research on

Suggested Citation (APA): Lawson, C.E. (2022, November). *A girl defined by God: Biblical womanhood, anti-feminism, and white Evangelical microcelebrities*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Evangelical white women in the US has explored their reactionary relationship to two secular forces: anti-racism and feminism. Many scholars have focused on the ways that Evangelical women mobilize their whiteness to bolster their authority (Mikkelsen and Kornfield 2021, Burke and McDowell 2021) and express conflicted responses to feminism, which often functions as an ideological stand-in for a range of progressive movements (Diefendorf 2019). Further, given the constraints of women's authority within gender-traditional religions like Evangelicalism (Burke 2012), women's use of social media to engage in ministry can deepen existing crises of Biblical authority (Gaddini 2021, Laughlin 2021). Through an in-depth analysis of Girl Defined's discursive construction of feminism on the one hand and Biblical womanhood on the other, this study explores how Clark and Beal deploy microcelebrity practices to spread their anti-feminist messaging.

## **Research Design**

The analyses presented here are part of a larger examination of Girl Defined and its cross-platform constructions of Biblical womanhood. The findings presented here stem from a critical discourse analysis of 67 blog posts (2012-2021) and 14 YouTube videos (2016-2021) tagged "feminism" on the Girl Defined blog. The topics of these posts range widely from discussions of relationships and sexuality to beauty standards; thus a central goal is to use Clark and Beal's organization of these posts under the umbrella of "feminism" to better understand their conceptualization of feminism and its relationship to Biblical womanhood. Using the grounded theory method of open coding, my analysis of these posts centered on 1) descriptions of feminism, 2) the relationship between feminism and mainstream culture, 3) descriptions of Biblical womanhood, and 4) the relationship between Biblical womanhood and feminism.

## **Findings**

First, Girl Defined portrays feminism as ideologically dominant and synonymous with mainstream secular culture. Their construction of feminism can be summed up neatly with this quote from Beal (2015): "We have a massive Goliath mocking our God. Her name is Feminism." To Girl Defined, feminism is a secular giant that Godly women must battle.

Further, Girl Defined's descriptions of feminism reflect an amalgamation of postfeminist logics, anti-feminist stereotypes, and sexism that is divorced from any substantive acknowledgment of the material, emotional, or psychological impacts of misogyny on women's lives. They describe feminism as: 1) selfish striving for personal fulfillment (Girl Defined 2019); 2) man-hating and hostile toward children and family; and 3) responsible for men's objectification of women due to the sexual revolution. Rarely do they discuss any actual efforts of the feminist movement to improve women's lives; when they do, it is to critique the pro-choice movement.

Finally, Clark and Beal appeal to their audiences by incorporating neoliberal logics of self-improvement consistent with postfeminism while appropriating the language of progressive movements to modernize their presentation of traditional gender norms. Such "self-help" discourses, provided by two conventionally attractive and charismatic

white women, are consistent not only with Evangelical Christianity (see Mikkelsen and Kornfield 2021) but also social media influencer content. Moreover, their rhetorical appeals reflect the growing mainstream popularity of progressive movements, including feminism, as they coopt terms like “countercultural” and “radical” to describe Biblical womanhood.

## Conclusions

Girl Defined employs often-contradictory rhetorical and aesthetic appeals to present Biblical womanhood as an empowering, radical alternative to feminism. The Evangelical emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ allows Clark and Beal to act as religious influencers, providing guidance to their followers about how to improve their individual holiness using many of the same strategies of intimacy, relatability, and authenticity that other influencers deploy to share beauty tips. This individual focus on living out God’s supposed design for women enables them to sidestep issues of systemic sexism and misogyny, not to mention racism and poverty. By reframing feminism as postfeminism – an individually-focused belief system that gives women a sense of self – they offer Biblical womanhood as an alternative pathway to understanding women’s purpose and value. Further, their construction of feminism as ideologically dominant makes it easier to incorporate feminism into a simple binary of secular/bad and Biblical/good. Acknowledging that feminism is an alternative “radical” movement could complicate thus weaken their defensive posturing and sense of persecution; it is easier to dismiss feminism if it becomes a more expansive explanation for problems with secular culture. Overall, these findings provide insight into the paradoxical flexibility of hyper-conservative ideologies that center on a rigidly defined “us” (fundamentalist Christian women) vs. an ever-flexible “them” (secular culture) while expanding our understanding of the way conservative thought leaders modernize old ideas and use digital networks and influencer logics to spread them.

## References

- Beal, Bethany. 2015. “Feminism Is Laughing at Our God.” *GirlDefined* (blog). March 13, 2015. <https://girldefined.com/feminism-laughing-god>.
- Burke, Kelsy C. 2012. “Women’s Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches.” *Sociology Compass* 6 (2): 122–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2011.00439.x>.
- Burke, Kelsy, and Amy McDowell. 2021. “White Women Who Lead: God, Girlfriends, and Diversity Projects in a National Evangelical Ministry.” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 7 (1): 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649220903759>.
- Diefendorf, Sarah. 2019. “Contemporary Evangelical Responses to Feminism and the Imagined Secular.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44 (4): 1003–26. <https://doi.org/10.1086/702035>.

Gaddini, Katie Christine. 2021. "‘Wife, Mommy, Pastor and Friend’: The Rise of Female Evangelical Microcelebrities." *Religions* 12 (9): 758.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090758>.

Girl Defined. 2019. *Christian Girl, Live for Something Greater*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5leaVw0O-qQ>.

Laughlin, Corrina. 2021. "#AmplifyWomen: The Emergence of an Evangelical Feminist Public on Social Media." *Feminist Media Studies* 21 (5): 807–21.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1711794>.

Mikkelsen, Sage, and Sarah Kornfield. 2021. "Girls Gone Fundamentalist: Feminine Appeals of White Christian Nationalism." *Women’s Studies in Communication* 44 (4): 563–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2021.1911895>.