

Spirit, submission, power, and abuse

A response to teaching on female submission and the scourge of domestic violence

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In their 2017 expose, “Submit to your husbands’: Women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God,” Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson show that “the church is not just failing to sufficiently address domestic violence, it is both enabling and concealing it.”¹ It is noteworthy that the very first case cited by Baird and Gleeson is of a Pentecostal woman, “Sally”, who “found little comfort in her Pentecostal church, which she had turned to repeatedly. Counsellors there simply advised her to forgive him. She also told her pastor her story, but no one followed it up.” There is no suggestion that Pentecostalism is any worse (or better) than any other Christian movement, and the point being made is that domestic violence is a challenge confronting the whole church. But there is value in responding to the reporting from a Pentecostal/charismatic perspective because Spirit-oriented movements may be uniquely positioned to take the lead in modelling theological cultures and institutional structures that empower resistance to all forms of domestic

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violence. But for that to occur, it is first necessary to hear the testimony of women who say that this has not been their experience.

Before attending to the detail, I recognise that there is some concern, following the arguments of Andrew Bolt and others, that the claims of Baird and Gleeson may be both inaccurate and a part of the ABC's supposed "war on Christianity."² It is not my purpose here to judge whether the ABC has an anti-church bias. Whatever the case, defence of the church's reputation should take second place to the horror of domestic violence. Baird and Gleeson provide evidence that certain Christian perspectives about masculinity and femininity have exacerbated the problem of violence faced by too many women.³ And the stories they recount are but the latest from women who have been making the same accusation against churches for at least the last two decades.⁴ Indeed, it is because of the stories that women have shared with them that Baird and Gleeson ask the church some important questions, to which this paper responds.

Baird and Gleeson: "Do abused women in church communities face challenges women outside them do not?"

On the face of it, Christian leaders have reason to be defensive about the charge that their teaching and practices contribute to the problem of domestic violence. On the contrary, Christian teaching on love, modelled on the exemplar of the life and teaching of Jesus, is radically opposed to all forms of violence, especially domestic violence. Churches that emphasise the theological priority of the Scriptures rightly assert that there is no New Testament text which justifies domestic violence, and many passages explicitly condemn it. Jesus defines the message of the kingdom as being radically different from the violent empires of this world; the kingdom is populated by peacemakers (Matt 5:9 NIV). Just as Caesar's rule is enforced by violence, including the crucifixion of Jesus, the kingdom of God is represented by the refusal of Christ to fight violence with violence and, instead, give of himself on the cross (Jn 18:35–37). Even the texts whose meaning is disputed by those for and against male headship frame the relationship between the husband and wife as being self-sacrificial—as insisting "that husbands love their wives as Christ love the church, and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25).

That Christianity is fundamentally opposed to violence is not in dispute (although, as I shall argue later, there is a place for anger). But in respect to

violence in the home, Baird and Gleeson's question is subtler. They are not asking whether the Scriptures condemn violence, but whether Christian teaching and practices surrounding male and female relationships create familial cultures that enable and conceal abuse—a term that encompasses emotional/psychological, physical, spiritual, and sexual abuse, and any form of oppressive violence.

The issue at stake is one of power, since enablement and concealment are the products of power. And the problem for some sections of the church is that their teaching and structures are overwhelmingly oriented to buttress the power of men and to disempower women. It seems to me obvious—except complementarians do not find it so—that churches that do not ordain women, or that keep women out of the pulpit and away from decision-making bodies (such as local church eldership and denominational structures), create and sustain potentially dangerous, gendered hierarchies of power. The problem is not only that women have few people within such male-centred hierarchies with whom they can talk, nor that women's concerns are rarely thought of by institutions whose authority structures are wholly or predominantly male (domestic violence is a problem for everyone, but it is more commonly experienced by women). The foundational issue is that the symbolic message of male power and female powerlessness are given divine warrant, which no ancillary teaching against violence, nor pastoral support for those subject to it, nor emphasis on self-sacrificial love (a matter to which I will return), can overcome.

In comparison to male-only-led churches, charismatic church traditions (including Pentecostalism and others) have usually ordained women, recognising that gender is irrelevant to spiritual gifting and empowerment. Even so, there is a sizeable gap between charismatic ideals and concrete social structures. For example, women make up more than half of Pentecostal congregants in Australia, but their representation declines markedly at the higher levels of local and denominational authority.⁵ In practice, Pentecostal churches—like most others—continue to empower men and, while not silencing women altogether, at least hear less from them than women's spiritual gifts warrant. This goes some of the way to answering another of Baird and Gleeson's questions: "why have there been so few sermons on domestic violence?" The self-evident answer is that domestic violence is an issue that confronts women more than it does men, and there are not enough women preaching for the topic to be given serious attention in the

pulpit. The Scriptures themselves were written mostly by men and, as a result, they rarely reference the topic directly; this is an absence that continues in churches that normally practice expository preaching. Even so, pastors concerned about the issue of domestic violence could easily draw on the Bible's thoroughgoing critique of violence and reversals of power, which are readily related to women's experiences in the church and home.

It is worth asking why women's participation in churches that have no restriction on female ordination nevertheless tends to decline as they move further up the hierarchy. In part, the decrease in female involvement in church hierarchies is a simple reflection of a similar glass ceiling in the broader society (which, of course, is no excuse). But I am also of the view that, notwithstanding egalitarian conceptions about spirituality in the church, common (but by no means universal) Christian teaching about gender relations in the home—the assumption that men are meant to be the head of the home, and women are meant to submit to their authority—bleeds into broader church structures and cultures, especially because the male-female relationship is often delineated in terms of men's spiritual authority over women. And so, what emerges is that movements without formal restrictions on ordination nevertheless convey the implicit message that male authority and female submission in the home and church has the divine imprimatur.

The “Pentecostal gender paradox” is that women who lead in the church and society are also required to submit to their husbands at home.⁶ This does not mean that women living under this paradox are necessarily subject to abuse. Cheryl Catford notes that most Pentecostal women negotiate “an intriguing position where they hold to wifely submission but also to a view of marriage in terms of partnership and mutual support.”⁷ She goes on to observe that there is a gap between the rhetoric of submission and its practice; that submission is largely symbolic, while in practice most modern Pentecostal women are “pragmatically egalitarian,” reinterpreting “the ideology of male headship so to render it effectively of no consequence.”⁸ That many women can navigate the tension between theologies of submission and modern views of female power does not, however, free the church from the charge that such theologies establish a dangerous power imbalance. On the contrary, it shows that unless women can strip patriarchal theology of its practical effect, then they are at risk of abuse.

I realise that there are complex and fraught disagreements about biblical teaching on gender equality and notions of headship. But the exegetical

debates between complementarians and egalitarians have been argued to tedious impasse elsewhere, so I shall not take them up here. I read the trajectory of Scripture as being thoroughly egalitarian, and hold that in Christ racial, economic, and gender divisions are overturned (Gal 3:26). I recognise also that many sincere Christians believe that the Bible teaches that a man's role is to lead and be the head of the home, and a woman's role is to submit and obey, and I know that most of these people are horrified by domestic violence.

However sincere their belief, it cannot go unchallenged, and at the risk of repetition, the point is that theological ideas and church structures that disempower women relative to men will inevitably enable and conceal domestic violence. One of the questions that Baird and Gleeson ask is, "Do perpetrators ever claim church teachings on male control excuse their abuse?" Their qualitative research shows that men do draw on Church teachings to such ends. Defining masculinity to include authority over women exacerbates the possibility that men will exercise that authority violently, and use their power to cover up abuse. And framing femininity to include submissiveness to men socialises women into accepting violence and allowing its cover-up. Again, no attempt to nuance the meaning of authority (as loving and self-sacrificing power) and to set the limits on submission can override the fundamental logic. Lauren McGrow, who grew up in a Pentecostal church but was also surrounded by domestic violence, makes the point better than I can:

Religious messages of obedience and second-class status encourage women to absorb a sort of violence, covered over with piety, that I first witnessed with my Grandma and then repeatedly as I grew up . . . The most striking memory I have is going to the toilet at her house. In the bathroom, a hole had been smashed in the wall directly opposite the toilet seat. It was a shock to see as you were peeing. Grandma covered the hole with a cheap orange wall hanging that had Psalm 23 printed on it:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

She couldn't afford to get it fixed I guess so she decorated around the violence. No one ever spoke about this. But that dark mouth was full of words. It was like staring into an abyss that never shut up. I read that scripture over and over again. This is how I was taught to fear men, from the shattered walls and silence that surrounded us.⁹

Part of the difficulty confronting Christian women is that the language of power and submission is found at the heart of faith, especially in Jesus' self-sacrificing humility on the cross that frames his ascent to resurrection power (Phil 2:5–11). And in one of the more prominent theories of the atonement, salvation is accomplished by the self-sacrificing submission of Christ to appease the wrath of the Father, and so pay the price due for our sins. Yet, as feminist theologians have noted, theologies of the cross that elevate Christ's submissive suffering as the ideal paradigm for Christian life—and more pointedly, as constituting a model for Christian women—inevitably justify and sustain female oppression and domestic abuse.¹⁰

In fact, the story of the cross is poorly read as Jesus' passive acquiescence to divine power. And it should go without saying that the events of the Passion unmask the horror of the abusive violence of the powerful, a violence so capricious that it crucified the Messiah.¹¹ The gospel upends power and raises up those that, throughout history, have almost always been rendered submissive: the poor, the sick, the slave, the racially different, the disabled, the refugee (or any political outcast), and women. While, in the long history of the church, Christians have sometimes justified the submission of blacks, slaves, and Jews to powerful (white) elites, more often, the church has been motivated by the gospel to challenge such ideologies. It is now obvious to everyone that any talk of submission or silencing in the context of race, religion, money, and disability, however beneficent the master, is an act of violence that buttresses power, and is antithetical to the Kingdom. That too many fail to appreciate that this also extends to gender is frustrating and tragic, if unsurprising.

Female silencing and disempowering in the church and home, buttressed by theo-ideologies of submission, are accidents of history that can be changed. And Pentecostal and charismatic churches are well placed to be leaders of change. Without the centuries-long institutional tradition that makes it difficult for some older denominations to innovate, there is nothing

stopping churches that are open to the creative newness of the Spirit from being agents of change. On the contrary, movement leaders can draw on a rich heritage of female leadership—on the prominent role of women in all Pentecostal and charismatic revivals—to argue that the Spirit empowers women to lead in all spheres of life. In Australia, for example, the first Pentecostal church was planted by Sarah Jane Lancaster and, under her leadership, more than 50 per cent of churches established by 1930 were led by women.¹² Lancaster was a determined first-wave feminist and against firm opposition she argued strongly for the full equality of women in all spheres of life.¹³ In 1929–30, Lancaster published a series of articles written by her colleague, Mina Brawner, entitled “Women in the Word,” which began with the following challenge:

Let me put the proposition in plain English—The Divine call, unction, education, natural ability, faithfulness in service, must all be weighted in the scale of sex. And the male sex weights more in the sight of God and the Church, than all these qualifications plus the female sex! Charging God with the folly of anointing and equipping His handmaidens for service, and then disqualifying them because they are what he made them—His handmaidens. It was a new idea to me. I must confess to a momentary feeling of impatience at such an archaic viewpoint.¹⁴

Today, the idea of a “Christian feminist” does seem oxymoronic, even morally outrageous.¹⁵ Christians reject the feminist attack on what they take to be the divine structure of the family, and feminists judge Christianity as irredeemably patriarchal. Christian women negotiating this context sometimes take the strategic decision to describe themselves as egalitarian rather than feminist (for example, Christians for Biblical Equality) and they usually replace teaching about male headship and female submission with affirmations of mutual submission. But, given that we live in a society where male power (and its accompanying violence) predominates and women’s voices are less often heard, a stronger posture is needed, and the point of feminism is to take an active stand against patriarchy and to elevate female power to be the equal of men. And to Christian feminists, any talk of a woman’s submission, however mutual, is liable to misuse, unless accompanied by concrete empowerment; taught from the pulpit, embodied in the preachers

whose voices we hear, and embedded in the social structures by which we are organised. And a Spirit-led feminism has its grounding in the Scriptures, especially for Pentecostals and charismatics, in the Acts 2 narrative: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.” A Spirit-led feminism is thus no oxymoron, but a potent call for theological and structural change, an insistence that the charismatic and biblical ideal of female empowerment can be a defining value of the life of the church and of Christian families.

In fact, a Spirit-filled feminism is already emerging in Australia. Consider Tanya Riches’ account of growing up as a woman at Hillsong Church:

It’s hard not to call Hillsong feminist. Women at Hillsong write and lead chart-topping music, preach the sermons and do pastoral care. Women are involved in every level of the organisation, from Senior Pastor Bobbie Houston to the joyous cleaner, Ruth. I quickly “got” that I could work in any career I wanted to, if I worked hard.

Hillsong women are of all ages, political persuasions and socio-economic realities. As women we’ve grappled with the actual limitations and possibilities of having a female body. Sex. Childbearing. Or maybe not in both cases. I’ve watched friends at church decide to pursue movie-making ambitions, while others decide to quit to rear their children. I love hugging little ones each Sunday and sharing the pains of teething online—but it’s not definitive of Christian womanhood.

Every Sunday a community of women negotiate the expectations society places upon them, seeking to find a better balance between personal health, family and public life. Strong women. In fact, I suggest this community is very intelligent in negotiating all of the voices making demands.

So, if you see me with a newly released Colour Your World Conference #2 T-shirt that screams “GET YOUR BRAVE ON”, then just know I wear it as a feminist.¹⁶

The idea of a Spirit-led feminism may still face resistance from those who blame the third-wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s for the sharp increase in divorce rates that occurred at the time. But to blame divorce on feminism is to commit the fallacy of cause and effect, especially given the extent of the social and cultural upheaval that marked the period. And we also need to ask, is divorce always a bad thing?

Divorce

In addition to asking questions about power, Baird and Gleeson invite churches to think about their teachings on marriage. “Is the stigma surrounding divorce still too great and unforgiving?”

Christian teaching understands committed and loving marriage as being central to the flourishing of spouses, children, and the wider society, and sees marriage as a holy good established by God. While Roman Catholicism elevated the ideals of priestly celibacy (a life devoted only to God), it also developed a complementary sacramental understanding of marriage that treats marriage as sacred and permanent, and so does not permit divorce and remarriage (although a similar end may be achieved by way of annulment).¹⁷ And while the Reformation moved away from the mysteries of the sacramental system, in rejecting celibacy evangelical movements have often elevated marriage as the highest form of personal piety, even as the means of embodying the *imago dei*—seeing the relationship between men and women as a reflection of divine love.

In the context of high divorce rates in western societies, and for the value of stable families, in their sermons and teaching church leaders have sought to do what they can to emphasise the value of loving families and committed marriages. The problem, as the research and case studies of Baird and Gleeson make clear, is that this pro-marriage stance coincides with the ideology of female submission, as well as Christian teaching about forgiveness, that can trap women in cycles of abuse. No marriage is perfect, and all relationships depend on the healing power of forgiveness. But in situations of abusive power imbalance, forgiveness can be a weapon of control that cements the status quo. As Margaret Fraser notes, following her research into domestic violence, “Abused and unhappy Pentecostal women are, in addition, placed in the unenviable position of having to forgive ‘seventy-seven times’ as they wait for God to heal their marriages (Matt. 18:22).”¹⁸

To forgive is to let go of anger and the desire for retribution, and its centrality to Christian faith is revealed in Jesus' words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). Paul commands his flock to "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col 3:13), but knowing when and how to forgive takes wisdom. In the gospels, forgiveness begins with Jesus, and it is a mark of his power; "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" (Lk 5:23). Jesus directs his command to forgive, not to persons who have experienced abuse or oppression—at least not in the first instance—but to those in power; God forgives sinful humanity, the master forgives the debtor, the father forgives the prodigal son and asks the older brother to do the same.¹⁹ Forgiveness is central to the gospel because it serves the purpose of justice, reconciliation, and peace, but this also means that it does not stand on its own.

God, who holds ultimate power, forgives unconditionally; but, for it to be transformative, even divine forgiveness needs to go together with repentance. A woman subject to domestic violence is in a situation where she does not have the power to forgive with transformative effect. If she forgives too quickly or easily, nothing is done to rectify her situation or to hold the abuser accountable for his actions.²⁰

Feminists have responded to the systemic paternalism that enables abuse by refusing to forgive or submit. Instead, they express their rage and take-up power by unmasking individual and systemic patterns of male violence. Never has this rage been more apparent than in the 2017 global outcry against the sexual harassment that has, for too long, been perpetrated by men in positions of power in politics and the media. And rage—a term I am using here instead of anger, as it suggests visceral and emotive fury—is an understandable and appropriate response to sexual harassment and domestic violence. Rage that persists can be self-destructive, but its more controlled cousin, anger, is needed to address the individual and systemic patterns of male power within the ranks of the church that give violence its sustaining authority. Anger might not seem like an appropriate disposition for people of faith, but Jesus railed against the unjust powers of his day, overturning the tables of the money changers (Matt 21:12) and castigating unjust authorities as "a brood of vipers" (Matt 23:33).

Baird and Gleeson asked whether the church was too unforgiving of people who have gone through divorce, but this implies that women who divorce violent or oppressive husbands need forgiveness. For Christian

women, abuse can be spiritual, damaging even their concept of God and relationship with Christ. Certainly, such marriages do nothing to glorify God, and nor do they fulfil the purpose of enabling families to thrive in Christ. Thus, for women and their children, divorce may not be a sin that needs forgiveness, but a just and liberating empowerment; an important beginning to the journey of healing and long-term flourishing that has long been a central emphasis of Pentecostal and charismatic spirituality.

Ideally, healing would include a time when a woman that has been subject to male violence can forgive the person who has perpetrated violence and his theological enablers. But that can only be when she is in a position of power (especially when she has the power to speak out and seek justice), when her righteous anger has been expressed, and her own liberation effected.

It should be obvious that, once again, the problem we are dealing with is not divorce but submission. To encourage a woman to submit to a man as a means of preserving a marriage is inherently dangerous. The key is to recognise that any mention of submission must raise the corollary of power. Submission and power are speaking about the same thing from the opposite point of view. Thus, the biblical injunction to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21) might be better interpreted as “empower one another out of reverence for Christ.” Read this way, women (and men) whose marriages subject them to power-destroying, emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual violence can feel empowered to reveal abuse and end destructive relationships.

Finally, Baird and Gleeson ask, “if the church is meant to be a place of refuge for the vulnerable, why is it that the victims are the ones who leave churches while the perpetrators remain?”

The answer is that it should not be so. Churches intend to be places of grace and healing, and where they find themselves caught between a person who perpetrates abuse and a person who has experienced violence, the latter is the one in need of congregational embrace and support.

The challenge of the gospel is that grace reaches people who abuse and those who have been subject to abuse alike. Precisely how the church responds to those who perpetrate violence is complex, and mirrors the issues raised by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The Final Report of the Commission found that religious leaders often showed insufficient consideration for the person that disclosed child sexual abuse, minimised the nature of the sexual conduct that was reported to them,

were reluctant to remove people who had perpetrated abuse from positions of ministry, and too easily gave them second chances.²¹ As churches wrestle with their response to the Commission and its findings, it is clear that they need to include the scourge of domestic violence in their deliberations.

Conclusion

Churches have responded in different ways to Baird and Gleeson's findings. Some have rejected them, questioning the validity of their research as well as the conclusions they have drawn.²² Others have ignored them. Yet others have issued public apologies and promised to be clearer in their teaching—that female obedience to the male head of the home does not require submission to violence of any sort.²³ Too few, however, have been willing to listen to the deeper point that Baird and Gleeson (and the numerous women who told them their stories) are making; that theo-ideologies that entrench male power and female submission enable and sustain psychological, physical, spiritual, and sexual abuse. And until these ideologies are overcome and women are empowered to be leaders in the church and the home, substantive change has little chance of taking root.

In this paper I have responded to the questions raised by Baird and Gleeson as a male Christian leader, an ally of feminists, and a Pentecostal. I have not shied away from the culpability of Pentecostalism for the domestic violence that has occurred in its communities, but I have also asserted that Pentecostals have been and can continue to be leaders of change. I am asking the whole church to listen to the brave voices of women who have been subject to abuse, and to the rallying cry of Spirit-led feminists, including Baird and Gleeson, who, far from being enemies of the church, are agents of its healing. Their work, and the chorus of female voices that have risen in response, are a vital reminder that female empowerment should be a defining value of the life of the church and of Christian families.

Endnotes

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