

*The Criminal Justice System, Women, and Christianity in the United States:  
Women of Faith Surviving, but not Reporting, Abuse*

Jessica Leigh Zaylia

**Abstract**

*In countries where laws and societal norms rely on a Judeo-Christian ethic, overt and subtle sexist attitudes affect women of faith and women of no particular faith alike. The church and the criminal justice system in the United States as well as other faith-based nations must discard oppressive beliefs and misogynistic traditions, many of which stem from biblical roots, if we care about justice and support for abused women.*

**Introduction**

Faith and religion must be considered in criminal justice practices when confronting situations involving abused women. Intersections of religion, abuse, and criminal justice are often overlooked or ignored in current literature. It is, therefore, the goal of this paper to explore one faith—Christianity—in the lives of abused women, not only to resurrect the discussion, but also to contribute a few nuances. Though some Scriptural references blame women who are sexually assaulted, and though other verses call for women's absolute submission to men, some churches take women-supportive approaches, holding the perpetrators accountable for their actions.

This paper examines certain roles that biblical language and Christian tradition play in women's reporting of crimes committed against them, particularly concerning sexual assault, domestic violence, and physical abuse. Like many women, those who subscribe to religious beliefs based on a fundamentalist Judeo-Christian ethic feel apprehensive about reporting sexual violence they experience. Some churches' use of particularly oppressive and patriarchal verses discourages reporting of abuse. However, such underreporting is not limited to those women who adhere to a specific ideology; fundamentalist and patriarchal foundations of Christianity pervade cultural and legal institutions, thereby affecting all women in societies where this ethic is paramount to its functions.

In order to increase women's likelihood of reporting abuse, inadequacies of pastoral counseling for abused women must be addressed and challenged, patriarchal and misogynistic fundamentalist teachings must be discarded, women must be informed of faith-based organizations (including, but

not limited to, churches, temples, mosques...etc.) that support women of faith in their precise needs. Additionally, law enforcement must also receive more extensive training on how to aid female survivors of abuse in ways that do not rely upon oppressive and blaming tactics, many of which can be traced all the way back to Deuteronomy.

### **Why Examine Christianity Specifically?**

There are three main reasons for examining Christianity (as opposed to other major religions) when looking at the criminal justice system in the United States. First, much of U.S. legislation concerning women, marriage, and property (among other things) are founded on a Judeo-Christian ethic. Second, contrary to lay belief, yet well known to scholars, religion (in this case, Christianity) and the state are intrinsically woven together, and this affects both Christian and non-Christian female survivors of abuse in complex ways. Third, 80% of Americans consider themselves to be Christian (West, 2004).

However, simply because the overwhelming majority of a country's citizens subscribe to a common religious belief does not per se lend to a "fundamentalist" society. What *does* is the lack of separation between church and state, which is visible in our courtrooms (e.g., swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God), in hotel rooms (evidenced by placement of the Gideon Bible in every hotel room in America), in politician's speeches (many times ending in "God bless America"), and even in the president's inaugural ceremony (via swearing in on the Bible).

### **RESEARCH**

This research is ongoing, and probably will be for many years. Findings are based on several qualitative methods, such as content analysis of church pamphlets, interviews with pastors, interviews with Christian women who have experienced sexual or physical abuse, and, finally, interviews with women who do not identify as Christian and have experienced sexual or physical abuse. I have limited my examples in this paper to one interview from each category (three interviews total). These particular interviews, though certainly not representative of all or even most experiences, are particularly illuminating and provide us with grave and clear understandings for a kind of social change in the United States that includes scrutiny and involvement between religious organizations and the criminal justice system.

Analyses are drawn from works by the following scholars and activists: Rev. Dr. Carolyn Pressler

(Professor of biblical interpretation at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in New Brighton, Minnesota); Dr. Harold C. Washington (Professor of the Hebrew Bible at St. Paul's School of Theology); Dr. Tracy Tolbert (Professor of Criminal Justice at California State University, who has worked extensively with female survivors of abuse and the relationships her interviewees had with various faiths or religions); Dr. Carol J. Adams (Ecofeminist theologian at Perkins School of Theology); and Dr. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite (President at Chicago Theological Seminary).

### **Exegesis & Literature Review**

This paper focuses on two Scriptural passages—one from the Hebrew Bible (or the Old Testament) and the other from the New Testament: respectively, Deuteronomy 22:23-29 and Ephesians 5:22-28.

#### *Deuteronomy 22:23-29*

Biblical scholar, Dr. Carolyn Pressler (1993; 1994), has written extensively concerning women and the Deuteronomic laws. In Deuteronomy 22:23-29, women are considered property of their fathers, husbands, and fiancés (Pressler, 1994). Violent acts against women are treated as property violations against whoever “owned” her at the time of the abuse. The following passage provides an example that rationalizes the rape of women by the men who own them:

<sup>23</sup> If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, <sup>24</sup> you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the girl because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you. <sup>25</sup> But if out in the country a man happens to meet a girl pledged to be married and rapes her, only the man who has done this shall die. <sup>26</sup> Do nothing to the girl; she has committed no sin deserving death. This case is like that of someone who attacks and murders his neighbor, <sup>27</sup> for the man found the girl out in the country, and though the betrothed girl screamed, there was no one to rescue her. <sup>28</sup> If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, <sup>29</sup> he shall pay the girl's father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the girl, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives (*Zondervan New International Version Study Bible*, Deut. 22:23-29, 2002).

Does the above-mentioned passage condone rape? In verse 23, we read the phrase “and he sleeps with her,” yet rape is implied because the same sentence finishes with “he violated another man’s

wife.”<sup>2</sup> Although the Deuteronomic law does not treat nor acknowledge rape as a crime per se (Pressler, 1994), the act of what is currently understood as rape<sup>3</sup> is discussed here, but as a property violation against either the girl’s fiancé or her father (Washington, 1998).

Women in this passage can also be charged with the violation of themselves, as their fiancé’s property if they are raped “in town.” Verses 23 and 24 presume that a woman can never truly be raped in a town, due to the sheer number of possible witnesses in a concentrated location. These verses assume that if a woman is actually being raped, she will scream, and since towns are filled with so many people who not only can hear a scream but are also willing to help out in these types of situations, she must, in this case, be having sex of her own volition. In other words, the lack of a scream supposedly alludes to consensual sex (Washington, 1998), which poses problematic for the rape victim. For, if a rapist covers a girl’s mouth with such force that a scream cannot be heard, the engaged maiden will nevertheless be stoned to death along with her perpetrator because rape is mistaken for infidelity (Washington, 1998). The rape victim is considered to have been disloyal to her fiancé and to have violated herself—his property.

However, the Deuteronomic laws state that a woman is not always held responsible for her own rape. In his analysis of Deuteronomy 22:23-29, Harold C. Washington (1998) elaborates that in verses 25 through 27, if the betrothed virgin is raped in the countryside, only the man is put to death because it is understood that the girl would have screamed for help without anyone around to hear her and save her.<sup>4</sup> There is a direct correlation between a woman’s actions and the location where rape occurs that establishes whether blame is to be placed on the victim. In a town, she is

<sup>2</sup> According to *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, © 1996, 1998 MICRA, Inc, definition number 4 for the word “violate” means: “to commit rape on; to ravish; to outrage.”

<sup>3</sup> Rape, in this passage, refers to heterosexual penile-vaginal forced penetration, with the man being the sexual aggressor and the woman being the non-consenting victim of his actions. Despite this extremely limited understanding of rape, other various contemporary definitions are neither discussed nor implied in Deuteronomy 22:23-29.

<sup>4</sup> Washington (1998) explains that the Hebrew word *piel* is used in this passage, and some scholars translate *piel* to mean rape. In other biblical references where *piel* is used, it is understood as a generalized term describing an overall “mistreatment.” However, in the case of Deuteronomy 22:23-29, *piel* “designates the sexual violation, or ‘misuse of’ a woman” (Washington, 1998). Rape (and not mistreatment) is therefore assumed in the text because, at this time, there were no specific words naming or concerning the violation of women, as women lacked independent political standing.

considered complicit in her own rape; rape is viewed as desired sex. In the countryside, the woman is a true victim.

In accordance with Washington's analysis (1998), punishment for raping a woman is implemented only on specific occasions and is based on whoever owned the victim at the time the violation transpired and whether the girl was a virgin. In Deuteronomy 22:23-29, a rapist is put to death for raping a woman only in one circumstance: when the girl is both betrothed and a virgin.<sup>5</sup>

Deuteronomy 22:29 states that a virgin who is neither betrothed nor married is owned by her father. Pressler (1993; 1994) and Norris (2001) explain that since a girl's father will no longer be able to collect on the full worth of his daughter's virginity as a prospective bride, the rapist must reimburse him for the monetary loss (Pressler, 1993, 1994; Norris, 2001). The victim/survivor of rape is not compensated monetarily or otherwise. In verses 28 and 29, if a virgin who is not engaged to be married is raped, the rapist does not receive the death penalty. Instead of being brought to the city's gates and stoned to death as in the first two scenarios, he is sentenced to marry the girl and pay her father the bridewealth of virgins—fifty shekels of silver.<sup>6</sup> This punishment, however, is more a sanction against the woman involved. If her rapist is forced to marry her, she has no choice but to accept, and must continually live with him.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> According to Deuteronomy 22:22, a rapist was also put to death if his female victim was married. However, she was sentenced to death, as well.

<sup>6</sup> Pressler (1993, 1994) describes what is called the “bridewealth of virgins,” which is the price for a virgin bride, payable to her father. In this case, the bridewealth of virgins equals fifty shekels of silver (Pressler, 1993, 1994). The philosophy behind a woman being stoned to death when she is raped in town may derive from the possibility that the girl's fiancé would have been monetarily cheated by having already paid the girl's father the bridewealth of virgins. During the Greco-Roman period, evidence of an intact hymen marked virginity in females. If the rape victim was a virgin no longer (because she had been raped, and her hymen, presumably, had been torn), her fiancé would have paid the fifty shekels of silver “for nothing.”

<sup>7</sup> One view concerning this passage is that sentencing a man to marry a woman he violated served as a protection for the woman he raped. Once raped and considered a non-virgin, I agree that, in this setting, a woman's life chances were threatened if she remained single. Yet, I argue that this is only so because once society believed women to be non-virgins, their lives held no monetary value, and hence, no value at all. This is still the case in many cultures. I further explore the ideology of virginity in my germinating work and have presented 3 different papers on the subject at consecutive conferences for the National Women's Studies Association.

Like Pressler (1993; 1994), Washington (1998) argues that instead of referring to the statutes of this passage as a list of rape laws, during this era, they more accurately fall under laws of adultery. This is significant in that “only a man can be aggrieved by an act of adultery, because adultery is defined as one male’s violation against another man’s right to possess a woman” (Washington, 1998). Any punishment for these crimes was not defined by the violation of a woman, but rather by the violation against whoever owned her at the time. Washington (1998) states that Deuteronomy lacks “recognition of an act of sexual violence against women.” His analysis continues:

The laws might be called “rape laws,” not because they provide sanction against sexual assault, but because they institute and regulate rape so that men’s proprietary sexual access to women is compromised as little as possible... they stipulate the terms under which a man can commit rape. (Washington 1998).

Deuteronomy 22:23-29 furthermore focuses upon women who were virgins, which was problematic for non-virgins because they lacked protections that coincided with being “owned” by someone (fathers, husbands, and fiancés) as a commodity with monetary value. In essence, virgins as property were both objectified and protected to some extent. Men may have been more inclined to attack female non-virgins because there is no mention of any penalty for violating them.

Negative attitudes toward women who assert their sexuality are also a current phenomenon in the U.S. criminal justice system. The following court decision illustrates this point. In 1995, Judge Albert Mestemaker of Hamilton County, Ohio ordered a man who had been convicted of battering his girlfriend to marry her as punishment for his crime (Washington, 1998). This gave no consideration to the defendant’s girlfriend—the victim of his crime—as she was simultaneously sentenced to live with her abuser (Washington, 1998). The philosophy behind this ruling can be traced directly back to Deuteronomy 22 (Washington, 1998) and exemplifies ways in which both society and the judicial system have been influenced by a Judeo-Christian ethic. After receiving public pressure, the judge reversed his order, but his original sentencing is comparable to similar standards of punishment found in the Book of Deuteronomy (Washington 1998).

Similarly, just as the passage in Deuteronomy is situated, today when women are raped and

assumed not to have been at the right place, at the right time, doing the right things, they are blamed. In Deuteronomy, they are sentenced to death along with their perpetrators for violation of themselves, as another man's property. Presently, in the United States, women who are raped may not be put to death, but they are neither supported nor believed if they are considered to have been wearing the wrong clothes, out at the wrong time, or with the wrong people.

### *Ephesians 5:22-28*

Ephesians 5:22-28 (especially verse 22) has been and continues to be used as a tool to keep married women in abusive relationships with their husbands because it mandates—first and foremost—that women are to submit to their husbands in everything. Ecofeminist theologian, Carol J. Adams (1995), discusses obstacles that married Christian women face when their husbands physically and sexually abuse them. Adams provides us with a recent account concerning a church-going Christian woman named Shirley who was perpetually raped and battered by her husband. Immediately following one particularly brutal incident, Shirley called her pastor for help. Her husband then picked up the other phone in the house and yelled, “I just raped my wife! What are you going to do about it, Pastor?” (Adams, 1995). Adams (1995) describes Shirley's pastor as a fundamentalist who not only advised Shirley to forgive and pray for her husband, but also failed to encourage Shirley to report the abuse. Adams (1995) furthermore explains that survivors of marital abuse and rape experience pressure to attend counseling with their husbands and feel discarded by their churches when they choose not to follow such advice.

Traditional Christian women, in particular, accept male dominance as a norm in their religious practices. Sue Monk Kidd (1996), in her book entitled *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, describes her transition from a patriarchal religious identity found in fundamentalist Christianity to what she calls “the Sacred Feminine.” Her struggle tells of sexist and misogynistic principles that are passed down from generation to generation, where women raised in this tradition internalize their own inferiority.

As an example, Kidd (1996) provides us with a glimpse into her childhood. One afternoon, after church, she and a few other children began to engage in “one of those heated boys-are-better-than-girls or girls-are-better-than-boys arguments” (Kidd, 1996). One boy, in an attempt to solidify male superiority, explained that God made boys the boss (Kidd, 1996). When the children confronted their Sunday school teacher for clarification, the teacher conceded that the boy was right... that God

put males in charge (Kidd, 1996). In this scenario, the Sunday school teacher had internalized her own supposed inferiority as a divinely established truth and passed the information on to the children, who internalized it as well. The boys, at eight years of age (Kidd, 1996), were keenly aware of their doctrinal rights to power associated with being male. Their contention, based on sex alone, was that God had given males authority over females. Ephesians 5:22-28 is one passage that lends support to the patriarchal idea of women's inferiority to men:

<sup>22</sup>Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup>For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup>Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. <sup>25</sup>Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup>to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup>and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. <sup>28</sup>In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself (Zondervan New International Version Study Bible, Eph. 5:22-28, 2002).

While the above passage indicates that husbands are supposed to govern their wives with care and tolerance, the women are nevertheless supposed to be governed. Although in verse 25, husbands are advised to treat their wives well, prior to that (in verse 23), by deeming husbands as the head of their wives, agency is taken away from women and given to men just as it is in Deuteronomy 22:23-29. Following that, verse 24 instructs wives to be submissive in *everything*. In verses 26 and 27, the analogy linking Christ and the Church to husbands and their wives suggests that wives are in need of cleansing from their husbands, implying that women are inherently dirty. Husbands are to make their wives "holy and blameless," also suggesting that women are innately sinful. Furthermore, the chronological order of the passage is significant because wives' submission is the primary focus; husbands' treatment of them is secondary.

This male/female dichotomy, in relation to power, creates hierarchies within Christian marriages, not to mention in a multitude of other social and physical circumstances. Adams (1995) indicates that when women survive abuse or rape at the hands of their husbands and confide in their pastors about the violence, they are not informed of biblical passages where women speak out and act against male domination. Rather, they are quoted verses of submission, subjugation, and inferiority

(Adams, 1995). According to Adams' analysis (1995), Ephesians 5:22 is one of many examples of the type of advice some pastors give when counseling married women whose husbands are abusive.<sup>8</sup>

The utilization of verses, such as Ephesians 5:22-28, in order to fulfill sexist and misogynistic agendas is problematic for abused women in many respects. "Fathers and husbands come to believe that their authority is divinely mandated, that God ordains men's authority in marriage... Ephesians 5:22-24 [is] taken as affirming theological justification for women's subordination" (Adams, 1995). Such a paradigm of power not only leads men to believe in their "innate superiority," but also causes women to simultaneously understand their female birthright as substandard and indifferent.

Women who have internalized notions of inherent female inadequacy feel conflicted when they experience abuse. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite (1985) attests that Ephesians 5:22 "is a very difficult passage for abused women struggling to find self-respect and some control over their lives." The passage is harmful because evangelical Christian women "believe what they have been taught, that resistance to this injustice is unbiblical and unchristian" (Thistlethwaite, 1985). They are caught between their desires to be good Christian women and their needs to heal from abuse. The situation becomes more complicated when abuse is on-going. Married evangelical Christian women who suffer from marital abuse are continually conflicted because their abuse is unremitting; they believe that passages such as Ephesians 5:22 are true and that submitting to their husbands is the will of God.

Although it has been several decades since the following comments have been made by once-prominent U.S. politicians, these quotes shed light on ways in which Ephesians 5:22-28 has shaped politics, policy, and the criminal justice system in the United States:

<sup>8</sup> Adams (1995) states that other verses of subjugation used against battered wives are Genesis 2, 1 Timothy 2:12-14, and 1 Corinthians 11:8. Genesis 2 gives a second account of the "creation" of human kind. The first description of creation is in Genesis 1 where God created man and woman at the same time. This second account in Genesis 2:18-23 describes the details by which woman was formed out of man. 1 Timothy 2:12-14 says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." 1 Corinthians 11:8 reads, "For man did not come from woman, but woman from man."

"But if you can't rape your wife, who can you rape?" – Senator Bob Wilson, Democrat, California, 1979<sup>9</sup>

"Damn it, when you get married, you kind of expect you're going to get a little sex."  
– Senator Jeremiah Denton, Republican, Alabama, 1981<sup>10</sup>

"It's a waste of the court's time to get into that area [of marital rape]... a woman who is in marriage is presumably consenting to sex. Maybe this is the risk of being married, you know." – Charles Burt, President, Oregon State Bar, 1979<sup>11</sup>

"Any woman who claims she has been raped by her spouse has not been properly bedded." – Unnamed Maine Legislator<sup>12</sup>

"A person may not be prosecuted under this article [concerning rape] if the victim is the person's legal spouse at the time of the commission of the alleged rape or sexual offense unless the parties are living separate and apart." – North Carolina statute (in effect until 1993)<sup>13</sup>

### *Synthesis*

Deuteronomy 22:23-29 and Ephesians 5:22-28 both depict men as owners and women as commodities. This holds contemporary significance because certain misogynistic attitudes concerning women and sexual abuse can be historically traced back to these two passages.

<sup>9</sup> Found at: <http://marriage.about.com/cs/maritalrape/f/maritalrape.htm> and also found at:

<http://www.actabuse.com/maritalrape.html>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Found at: <http://marriage.about.com/cs/maritalrape/f/maritalrape.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> North Carolina Code § 14-27.8. Found at: [http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/main.aspx?](http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/main.aspx?dbName=DocumentViewer&DocumentID=32701)

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It is therefore necessary to depart from particularly harmful passages in order to better assist and support women who experience violence at the hands of men. This is precisely what some churches are doing, and whether such churches explicitly and intentionally reject or inadvertently depart from misogynistic verses and passages seems unimportant.

## **Interviews**

### *Pastor DenBoer<sup>14</sup>*

One pastor in California, Duane DenBoer, both publicly endorses and, paradoxically, unconsciously rejects harmful passages such as Ephesians 5:22-28. In fact, Pastor DenBoer incorporates this passage into the pre-vow homily in the weddings he performs, emphasizing the importance of women's submission to their husbands, as required by the Lord in the Holy Scriptures... in everything. During one of these wedding ceremonies, the pastor states, "Now, I know that when you get back home, there are going to be a lot of decisions to make... about what goes where... and you might not agree about everything... but that's when you [looking at the bride] must submit to Paul [the groom]."

Perhaps the more atrocious statement came immediately afterward, when the pastor looked at the groom and proclaimed, "Now, Paul. *You* have the hard part." The idea here was that since husbands are instructed to care for their wives the way that Christ cares for the church, Paul's responsibility was greater than that of the wife's, and therefore is considered most difficult, as if surrendering one's entire life and submitting completely to one's husband is easy.

When I first confronted Pastor Denboer about the usage of Ephesians 5:22-28 in wedding ceremonies, his response startled me. "Let me guess. You took the stance that both women and men are to submit to one another equally."

"No, not at all." By this point, the two of us were clearly confused. His experience was that women who do not particularly care for this passage argue just that—the passage instructs women and men to submit to each other equally. In a way, I understand why some women might take this view. After all, in some epistles written by the apostle Paul, a great deal of egalitarianism seems to be

<sup>14</sup> Interview took place in 2006.

pushed. In this sense, Paul's call for women to submit to their husbands while men love and care for their wives may be viewed as consistent with Paul's other messages of equality.

However, several letters written by Paul certainly do not follow this same line. In fact, some biblical scholars have toyed with the idea that multiple contradictions in Paul's books mean one of two things. Either 1) Paul was utterly confused about Christ's message in male/female relationships, or 2) some epistles, claimed to be written by Paul, were actually written by a sort of imposter who copied Paul's writing style. Neither of these arguments, though, has been supported with overwhelming or irrefutable evidence.

Regardless, Pastor DenBoer's assumption concerning my take on the passage reminded me of something I had long ago forgotten. Women would rather negotiate and even change problematic and oppressive portions of their faiths (in this case, of verses) than challenge the creation and underlying politics of those problematic portions. To come to terms with one's faith as oppressive to "others," like gays and lesbians for instance, is one thing. To come to terms with one's faith as oppressive to oneself—as the actual person of that faith—is another issue altogether.

This is precisely why I stress here the importance of incorporating issues of faith and religion when dealing with women who have been abused. Perhaps women's shelters as well as pastors, counselors, and various individuals working within the criminal justice system (such as officers, attorneys, judges, and legislators) could benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of and approach to complicated connections between women who are surviving abuse and their religions. At the same time, women would also benefit if actors of these institutions were more knowledgeable and sensitive to their particular needs.

Returning to the original dialogue, after a brief period had passed in our discussion, Pastor DenBoer finally asked me once again about my personal opinion regarding Ephesians 5:22-28. When I explained that, unfortunately, some members and leaders of many faiths use religion as a means to fulfill their own agendas, and that this is also the case with the passage he quoted out of Ephesians, which has been used as a means to either justify abuse against women or to pressure women into counseling with their abusive husbands—resulting in further abuse, he was silent. Then inching

toward me, he whispered:

Well, what you are talking about here are evil men. And the Scripture tells us that men are supposed to care for their wives. Now, when men do that [abuse their wives], as far as I'm concerned, they have broken their marriage vows. In that case, what needs to happen is... the men of that church need to take that man and discipline him. Now, I don't mean that they should beat the crap out of him or anything like that, but they need to discipline him according to the Word. Then the church needs to come in and protect that woman... and make sure that she's safe.

Although Ephesians 5:22-28 is clearly used in this particular pastor's discursive repertoire, when issues of abuse were discussed in relation to this passage, Pastor DenBoer—and, hence, Faith Fellowship of La Palma, California, as a church—took a position that is not mentioned at all in this part of the Scriptures. They have instead created a course of action that, while not contrary to their beliefs, is certainly not in line with some of the more oppressively misogynistic approaches to Ephesians 5:22-28, and is, above all, supportive of women in these especially terrifying circumstances. Whether the church is patriarchal or whether Pastor DenBoer's response is based on patriarchal traditions seems irrelevant. What is important is that the church and its leaders need to take an official stance that places blame where it belongs: on the shoulders of the abuser. The abuser must be held accountable, and women must no longer bear the burden of her husband's abuse or the marriage itself, since he has broken his wedding vows. What is even more important is that churches take such responses one step further by not only encouraging her to report the abuse, but also to support her throughout the process.

*How Some Christian Women are Affected: "Jenny"<sup>15</sup>*

One interviewee (referred to as "Jenny") married at the age of 20 in order to adhere to the Christian tradition of marrying before having sex. She was raised in a non-denominational Christian church and did not want to "live in sin" (read: fornicate).

Her husband was also a Christian, who often "sang hymns from memory." His addiction to pornography, among other things, was unbeknownst to Jenny before they married. She discovered charges to credit cards for the usage of abusive pornographic sites that depicted acts such as caning,

<sup>15</sup> Interview took place in 2006.

fisting, verbal coercion, physical abuse and force, torture, and rape.

Jenny's husband exercised pornographic abuses against her body and against her will. Abuses included, but were not limited to, being held and slapped on different areas of the body for her husband's arousal, being the unwilling object of anal sex, and being what she experienced as "emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and financially manipulated and robbed." Jenny felt that her husband's actions against her fed his addiction to pornography and enabled him to maintain the power he wielded at her expense. She did not report the abuse because she wanted to be a good Christian wife, which, in her belief, meant that she had to submit to her husband in everything.

While she had the physical freedom and the resources to leave at any time, being a good Christian woman, following what she interpreted as God's law, kept her captive in her own marriage. Although she had sought the advice of members of her congregation, it was not until she felt that things were bad enough to confront her pastor that she finally received advice that she should leave the marriage. Everyone else had encouraged her to continue submitting... "if [she] submitted long enough, the Lord would finally hear [her] and help [her]."

*How Women of No Particular Faith are Affected: "Danielle"*<sup>16</sup>

Another interviewee (referred to as "Danielle") was violently raped by an acquaintance at a New Year's Eve party in the host's bathroom. When law enforcement arrived at the scene, they interrogated Danielle and questioned her actions, and, as a result, she felt blamed by the officers. Again, the misogynistic attitude of blaming the victim can be traced all the way back to Deuteronomy, and permeates nearly every facet of United States society.

That night, Danielle went to the hospital to undergo what is known as a rape kit. The nurse who was assigned to Danielle told her that "God knew the rape would happen. He knows everything, and when God closes a door, He opens a window." To say the very least, this was far from helpful. Danielle explains that the nurse made this statement immediately preceding commencement of the video taping, which is protocol during administration of rape kits. The medical professional whose job it was to aid rape victims had told her that the fresh atrocity Danielle just experienced only hours earlier was essentially all part of God's plan. The first thing that comes to mind regarding

<sup>16</sup> Interview took place in 2004.

God's supposed plan is what a terrible plan that was! No one deserves to go through what Danielle and many women experience. Next, this nurse worked at a public hospital, and her faith-based statement, regardless of inaccuracy, violates separation of church and state. How many other women received this horrible advice at the same hospital, by the same medical professional, after surviving the same horror? Furthermore, how many other professionals in how many other hospitals are retraumatizing rape victims in the name of faith and God?

### **Conclusion**

Some Scriptural references blame women who are sexually assaulted (e.g., Deuteronomy 22:23-29), and some verses call for women's absolute submission to men (e.g., Ephesians 5:22-28). Nevertheless, several churches take women-supportive approaches, holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, which is imperative if we care about women in society.

The support of religious leaders is needed in order to 1) increase reporting of physical and sexual violence experienced by women of faith, and/or 2) help ensure safety of both Christian and non-Christian women in these life-threatening and traumatizing situations.

This argument is not grounded in quantitative prediction. Rather, it is a hunch, based on endless hours of cumulative research between myself and other scholars in this area, who have interviewed women that have expressed reasons for not reporting abuse to law enforcement.

I furthermore suggest that informed, faith-based community involvement with local police (via workshops, seminars...etc.) may raise the consciousness of law enforcement and that this might, in turn, lead to positive interactions between the criminal justice system and female survivors of abuse, encouraging more women to report violence committed against them.

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