

The Changing of the Gods: Abused Christian Wives and their Hermeneutic Revision of
Gender, Power, and Spousal Conduct

By

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Introduction

Biblical feminists – save a handful of sociologists of religion – often bear the challenge of recasting religion as a reparative framework for Christian women. What has transpired, in part, is a momentum to “bring women in.” More specifically, translations that obscure or distort feminine references/imagery have been challenged or reformulated to expose egalitarian undercurrents in the Bible and religious traditions.

The work of feminist theologian, Susan Thistlethwaite is one example. In her influential article fusing liberation theology with abused religious women’s resistance, she calls for a “wider” hermeneutic – or interpretive – framework, which can offer the commitment and resources needed to challenge abuse oppression. Believing that “abused women are the victims of an unjust power distribution in society” that is “contrary to the will of God,” she suggests that scrutiny of biblical texts could reveal structural inequalities that facilitate mistreatment. As a result, abused religious women might be open to more emancipatory readings, which preserve their doctrinal commitment and contextually address their trauma.

Purpose of My Paper

Inspired by Thistlethwaite’s interpretive analysis, I explain how two formerly abused religious wives exposed a more contextual, egalitarian interpretation of gender, power, and social relations within the Christian marriage. Through narrative, I demonstrate how alternate ideological contexts and biblical interpretations helped subvert restrictive readings, especially those pertaining to women and submission. I begin with a closer look at the authorities and institutional trends associated with evangelical Christian marriages and their implications for abused religious wives.

Religious Institutional Authorities and the Abused Christian Wife

Churches are dependent upon on intact, nuclear families for their strength and endurance. Violence against women of church families undermines the rhetoric of “happy Christian living” and disrupts the imagery of solid congregational families. Thus, when abuse does emerge within church families, some institutional leaders may minimize or decenter the problem of spousal violence. Inadvertently or not, part of the institutional silence on wife abuse in Christian homes resides in the way abuse is understood and presented. Many evangelical clergy are aware of the socio-cultural factors related to abuse and use them to explain violence in non-churched families. When uncovered in their own congregations, however, violence is often associated with spiritual dysfunction (i.e., sin, depravity, and spiritual immaturity) and/or scriptural misapplication. In fact, clergy may be “very slow” to propose the dissolution of even a violent marriage. Many prefer temporary separation followed by counseling and, if possible, eventual reconciliation.

Some of the most prolific contemporary Conservative Protestant family media suggest a similar commitment to marital intactness. Despite their popularity, hard-line, religious media discourse appears to only go so far. A number of evangelicals draw on the language of a husband headship that is receptive to mutual responsiveness and partnership. Decision-making among many religious couples is often pragmatic, far from rigid, and generates negotiation in even the most traditional households. Consequently, in practice, many evangelicals seem to espouse a *symbolic* or token husband-headship.

If evangelical marital conduct and power norms are as pliable as research suggests, it then becomes important to address how abused religious women might

subvert readings/traditions that might further compromise their safety. Many religious feminists and egalitarian writers perceive unilateral or wifely submission as one such example. Some advise that a woman disempowered by fear of injury, psychological abuse, and economic uncertainty survives her relationship from a position of weakness rather than a religious code. Others emphasize a different view of submission, which they suggest – if honored – has no feasible fit in an abusive marriage.

A growing number of biblical feminists and equality-minded religion and gender violence scholars have confronted interpretations of a unilateral or *wifely* submission. They assert competing biblical passages and broader meanings from isolated texts, most of which recast submission as a mandate requiring spiritual and developmental reciprocity. By subverting dominance/subservience binaries, they offer scriptural leverage to disavow its misuse, impose accountability on *abusers*, and present abuse as separate from the will of God. Consequently, *mutual* submission has been framed a “safer” marital practice and the Bible a transformative resource for abused women encumbered by traditional power norms.

In keeping with this translation of marital conduct, I consider the interpretive journeys of two formerly abused Christian wives, Kenya and Denise. Paying close attention to feminist threads in their rethinking of abuse and scripture, I also expose the experiences and contexts that began their revision of marital conduct and submission.

Reformulating Submission: The Praxis of Two Formerly Abused Christian Wives

“Kenya”

Kenya is a separated, 56-year-old, African-American Baptist living in the southern United States. Her husband, identified as “Weston,” is a career military

professional. Although a son of minister, Kenya describes Weston as largely unchurched throughout their marriage. They have been legally married for more than 30 years and have two adult children.

As a young, stay-at-home wife, Kenya pursued no independent analysis to manage her emotionally abusive marriage. Instead, in times of marital tension and psychological maltreatment, Kenya appealed to the advice and example of a Christian aunt, hereafter called “Aunt Ruby,” who had reared her from childhood. Kenya perceived her aunt and her uncle as “two of the smarter people in the world.” She saw their 40-year marriage as evidence that her aunt “really knew how to keep a marriage together.” Thus, Kenya complied with Aunt Ruby’s suggestion that she become non-responsive or “submissive” to her spouse but especially during episodes of emotional abuse.

It was not long before the practice took its toll. She became depressed, physically ill, and developed headaches. Furthermore, according to Kenya, submitting to her husband in times of marital discord “didn’t solve anything.” Believing that she had few options through her own efforts to “change” Weston’s behavior, Kenya “just wanted God to fix him.” As his mistreatment worsened, Kenya’s prayers gravitated to requests for “strength” to accept his behavior. While she considered a number of responses to her husband’s psychological maltreatment, leaving the marriage was not one of them. Succinctly put, “(Aunt Ruby) felt you’re not supposed to get a divorce, and this is what you accepted when you got married. So, you work it out.”

Kenya’s silence during emotionally abusive episodes and her ideas on gender and conduct in the Christian marriage came under interpretive scrutiny and revision during a

Baptist Sunday school discussion. With much enthusiasm, Kenya quoted the scripture that more contextually addressed her trauma. As she read, she hurried through language of husband headship and settled upon a passage she came to associate with shared marital authority.

*Here it is! I Corinthians, 7th chapter, 3rd verse: Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence and likewise unto the wife to the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body but the husband. **And likewise, also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife . . . [italics added].***

She continued:

[The scripture means to me that] I have as much right in this marriage as [Weston] does . . . And I found submission in the Bible...But here, in this scripture, I know [now] it's a partnership [Either Weston or I], will have to do the 'final' say. But [the passage] means [that] if I'm better in this for us – [and] what I do is for us – then I have the 'final' say, because I can explain to him why we should do it this way.

Overall, Kenya's emergent interpretation of gender and marital conduct made a clear and immediate impact on how she responded to her mistreatment. Once non-responsive to emotional abuse, she began to voice opinions as well as discontent. As her hopes of change in Weston's behavior began to weaken, she uncovered a scriptural alternative to remaining in her abusive marriage. Kenya interpreted from the Book of Colossians that "one (partner) can go to the east and one . . . west and become reconciled" She believes the reading gave her religious grounds to escape her emotionally abusive spouse. The couple has been separated for nine years.

"Denise"

Denise is a white, 47-year-old, charismatic Christian. She resides in a small, rural southern city. A homemaker, Denise is the mother of four children. She has experienced the gamut of abuse explored in this research, having survived physical and emotional

abuse and marital rape. Denise divorced her husband of more than twenty-five years about two years before her interview. Like Kenya, Denise's former husband is military personnel and unchurched, though a "non-practicing Catholic." He hereafter is identified as "Ken."

A Catholic by marriage, Denise became involved in a charismatic, fundamentalist church community. It was during a Christmas gathering, when she first perceived wifely submission as a requirement and potential liability. A male church member told Denise that "the Bible said the woman is to be submissive to her own husband, lest the will of God be blasphemed," after she reprimanded him for rudely ordering his wife. His response jarred Denise: "I sat there and I went, 'You're kidding?'" She recalled that her "fear of God, realizing that (God's) got standards and ways" provoked significant concern over what wifely submission meant for her as a woman surviving abuse. In her prayers, she asked, "I have to be submissive to my husband, God? (So), how low do I have to go here?" In recalling her confusion and pain, Denise explained, "I had that same mentality a lot of other women have. [That is] Christian women just don't get divorced." Rather, "(y)ou be submissive no matter what, and you obey no matter what."

For Kenya, a Sunday school discussion provoked an immediate search for the controls she soon after placed on men's power and conduct in marriage. However, Denise's re-thinking of wifely submission was a long, gradual process made possible through an intersection of both spiritual and secular milieus. She joined a church, where some empathized with her trauma. In addition, Denise's educational pursuits, including sociology coursework, helped awaken a more critical, secular assessment of her Ken's conduct.

Both secular and religious milieus converged on the day she escaped. One morning, inexplicably compelled by what she described as divine guidance, Denise began to hurriedly clean her home and pack belongings that were special to her. Later that day, a Christian couple from her church that knew of her trauma saw what she was doing and urged her to escape her abusive home. Denise accepted but agreed to leave after the couple called her pastor for permission.

Revolving bouts of regret and guilt marked Denise's escape and subsequent divorce. She attributes part of her insecurity to some members of her faith community. While they demonstrated support in some ways, several alleged that Denise's educational pursuit and she "not being submissive enough" compromised her marriage and family. Even worse, her youngest son elected to live with his father and was hostile towards her. As if preparing to exemplify their strength, much of Denise's Bible study began to center on women whom she viewed as skilled and resilient. She recalled:

I was 'growing' . . . I began reading in the Bible women like [Abigail]. .. I never knew about Abigail in the Bible [nor]Nabal, [her husband]. She was married to an abusive man and ...she was right by her household regardless of him. I didn't know about any of these kinds of women, until after I had come out [of my abusive marriage] and started studying [the Bible].

During her research, Denise happened across a passage that helped her "grow in the word, *submission*." Her renegotiation of the practice began with a reading in the Book of Psalms. More open to discourse that took into account women's fair treatment, she perceived its message as repudiating controlling, abusive husbands. Denise also framed the disclosure as a caring, deliberate effect of divine intervention, through which she could expose relational "standards" that undermined wife abuse.

[God fosters] relationships that could be healthy. . . .The Book of Psalms. It says [that] violent men, angry men – you don't even sit down and eat a meal with these folks! . . .

.Well, how in the world do you [marry] and go to bed with someone, when you can't even sit down and eat beans and cornbread with them? So, I hadn't really learned God's standards [of marriage]. I had to learn [them]. . . .So, submission? . . .[I learned that] you don't submit under evil [husbands]. You submit under righteousness.

Like Kenya, despite the new controls given to submission, Denise did not change her belief in its mandate. However, unlike the conception that once brought confusion and anxiety, her new hermeneutic of gender, conduct, and marital authority resembles one of “fellowship” between Christian “partners.” Denise compared her emergent meanings with the temperament of Christ. She also explained how “balance” between husbands and wives encourage a mutually satisfying relationship. Quoting Ephesians 5:25, Denise stated:

A woman is to submit, but it's in a whole context. You just don't pull verses out [of context]. . . . [A husband] is to nourish her, cherish her, wash her with the Word [of God]. I mean it's a blessed, sweet fellowship. So, it's gotta be a balance [in marital relationships] – and they don't come through with that 'balance' part.

Denise is currently an independent domestic violence counselor. She conducts informal group sessions with abused women in her home free of charge. Unhesitant to share her story, she informs abused Christian women and others that submission is appropriate with a “righteous” spouse.

Brief Discussion

Early revelations about wifely submission offered no interpretive space for agency or challenging mistreatment without comprising religious precepts. Their interpretive praxis, however, proved constructive in this regard. For instance, Kenya seizes agency by subverting gender as grounds for decision-making power, adding that the “final say” need not be jointly assumed. Instead, her reappropriation of scripture substantiates that decision-making befits the partner most competent to manage the

matter at hand. Denise's new interpretation of submission has some semblance of mutuality. However, it is only in the sense that individual decisions are for the mutual benefit of decision-maker and family. Thus, her reformulation enables her to operate within marriage as a capable but, when necessary, independent actor. Moreover, Kenya's situational retooling of submission permits inclusion in issues important to her family and *herself*. This is especially evident through her display of opinion after hermeneutic praxis.

Denise established control by constructing boundaries around who is worthy of the practice. In other words, her reformulation casts submission as a privilege limited to men who equate marital relationships with "balance," "partnership," or more ideally, "a blessed, sweet fellowship." By reframing the traditional Christian marriage as such, Denise makes room for wives' relational power in several ways. For example, Denise's emergent investment in a mutually reverent "partnership" transfers relational responsibilities onto husbands *as well as wives*. In addition, her finding that women not "submit under evil" but "righteous" men undermines the teaching that all husbands are entitled to have submissive wives. For both women, in fact, their emergent views conveyed some skepticism toward some men's use of power, a steady critique among feminists.

Conclusion

As those who organize reality and resolution through a sometimes-explicit ideological lens, many abused religious women may *objectively appear* acquiescent in their reaction to violation. However, by examining the meaning making of abused religious women, it is not only plausible to expose the discursive and structural

conditions that mediate their worldviews and choices. It is also possible, as emphasized here, to lay open the often-observed strategies that constitute their agency. As the Kenya and Denise's stories illustrate, Bible-believing wives – abused or not – might harvest and negotiate a number of scripts. Some could subvert discourses once presumed unequivocal or with little recourse. Engagement in equality-minded religious settings and discourse may be the first step in renegotiating oppressive meanings and marital practices for some abused Christian women.

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