

How Did We Get Here?: Misogyny in the Church and World (part 1)

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This is a two part series. In part one, we'll trace the history and impact of misogyny. In part two, we'll explore what Jesus has to say about healthy, whole, male-female relationships in a more just world.

The #MeToo movement uncovered a fault line running across the entire country. Revelation after painful revelation exposed the pervasiveness of misogyny and sexual brokenness in the United States. Among the accused were Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, politicians Roy Moore and Al Franken, talk show host Matt Lauer, physician Larry Nassar, and perhaps most shocking, Willow Creek's founder and head pastor Bill Hybels.

The charges certainly didn't come as a surprise to the 321,500 Americans who are victims of sexual assault or rape every year. After all, this type of misbehavior has been happening for centuries. What was surprising was how quickly women mobilized and how effectively their unified voices shook the status quo.

I've spent the last ten months watching this unfold and wondering: what's next? Will women continue to courageously share their stories? Will Americans reckon with how our hyper-sexualized, misogynistic culture makes it nearly impossible to honor each other, form healthy relationships, and work together as equals?

However the culture at large decides to respond, Christians have an incredible opportunity to lead the nation beyond #MeToo. We have a chance to eradicate misogynistic behaviors and forge healthy partnerships between men and women. But in order to create a new and better path, we must examine our deeply embedded patriarchal patterns and learn from them.

A Brief History of Misogyny

The world did not become sexually broken overnight. It's been a long time in the making. The word "misogyny" is of Greek derivation and means "the hatred of women." Because very few men actually hate women, the definition needs to be expanded.

Misogyny is at work any time women are devalued, taken advantage of, overpowered, or marginalized. When a woman performs the same job with the same level of expertise but gets paid substantially less than a man (on average, 20% less), that's misogyny. A battered wife is a victim of misogyny. When a woman is raped and then questioned about what she was wearing, that's a double dose of misogyny. Misogyny tends to blame women for evil, even when evil is done to them.

Assumedly, the Greeks coined the word because they needed to describe how they were treating women and girls. The Greco-Roman world created breath-taking works of art, architectural masterpieces, and even the template for Western democracy. They also denied women a voice in that same government, widely practiced abortion, and left unwanted baby girls on their front steps or at garbage dumps where opportunistic families could take them and raise them as slaves or prostitutes.

Even today, carrying two X chromosomes can be akin to a death sentence. In China, India, Pakistan, and other countries, women are encouraged (or even mandated) to abort baby girls or to commit infanticide after their birth. According to author and journalist Sheryl WuDunn, "In the last half century, more girls were discriminated to death than all the people killed on all the battlefields in the 20th century."

How Misogyny Leads to Sexual Brokenness

Misogynistic beliefs often lead to sexual brokenness and sexualized violence because these unbiblical constructs permit men to abuse their power, refuse accountability, and mistreat rather than honor women. This is evident across the globe.

Like many other nations, the United States has an extensive and sordid history along these lines. From colonial times until the 1960s, black women were systematically raped by white men with total impunity. (Read *At the Dark End of the Street* for more on this.) A 2012 survey done by the Center for Disease Control states that one in five women (and one in seventy-one men) have been raped at some point in their lives.

Larry Nassar's case illustrates just how long perpetrators can continue their criminal activity when those in authority are complicit. The USA Gymnastics' team doctor sexually abused more than 160 young women and girls over the course of approximately twenty years, some as young as age six, even though multiple supervisors had been told what was going on.

While not as egregious as rape or other forms of sexualized violence, pornography is another manifestation of misogyny. It denigrates women, distorts God's intention for our sexuality, and has a far-reaching, nefarious impact. By depicting violent and dehumanizing sexual encounters, pornography programs men and boys to believe that women enjoy being mistreated. Statistics indicate that one eighth of all Americans regularly visit porn sites. That's forty million people who are objectifying and exploiting the women (and men) who appear on their screens.

How Misogyny Affects Men

Women and children are the most obvious victims of misogyny but men are also adversely affected. Carolyn Custis James writes in *Malestrom*:

“Men have lost sight of who God created them to be as human beings and as men. ... Through cultural conditioning that takes both benign and violent forms, they are cut off from significant, God-given parts of themselves that lead to human wholeness for fear it will make them less of a man.”

When the dominate narrative communicates that A.) manhood is measured by virility and that B.) men who possess traits perceived as feminine (e.g. empathy, sensitivity, or nurture) are less than, it fractures men's souls and leaves them feeling trapped by misguided cultural expectations.

A Complicit Church

In one way or another, we're all diminished by the long reach of misogyny— including the church. This is why activists Hannah Paasch and Emily Joy followed up the #MeToo hashtag with #ChurchToo. Churches should be safe places for everyone, not breeding grounds for perpetrators. But wherever unrestrained power and toxic masculinity are not redeemed by the cross, death and destruction will follow.

This is true across every denomination, as evidenced by Catholic priests who have engaged in pedophilia and Protestant organizations that have attempted to silence victims and cover-up sexual abuse. The latter include allegations against Bob Jones University (sexual abuse concealed by high level officials), Patrick Henry College (covering up on-campus rapes), and Sovereign Grace Ministries (which allegedly ignored two-decades of child sexual abuse).

Churches or Christian organizations that are rife with misogyny often abuse Scripture to protect their power. For example, when a denomination or church culture interprets passages such as Ephesians 5:22-24 and 1 Corinthians 7:5 to mean that husbands have the right to sex on demand, wives may conclude that their needs and desires are irrelevant and that they have no choice but to submit, regardless of the personal cost.

My husband and I recently taught a workshop on marital intimacy. One young couple walked out as we were explaining the importance of a wife being able to say "no." On the post-conference evaluation form, one comment (we assume it was theirs) read, “There's nothing in Scripture about mutuality in the bedroom. When I want [sex], I get it.” I grieve for his wife and all wives who have to endure that kind of selfish power play. And

I pity the husband because he will most likely never experience the deep intimacy that results when a couple can completely trust and respect each other.

It's impossible to pinpoint the exact cause of misogyny, but sin (both personal and generational), group think, evil spiritual forces (Eph. 6:12), the lure of power, and an inadequate understanding of God's Word all contribute. In part 2, we'll explore how God's creative intent for humanity provides the antidote to misogyny.

The Gospel: Antidote To Misogyny? (part 2)

In part 1 of this series, we established that sin, group think, evil spiritual forces, misuse of power, and an inadequate understanding of Scripture have led to misogyny and broken expressions of sexuality. Now that the origin and manifestations of misogyny are clearer, we can explore how the gospel offers the solution.

A Biblical Hermeneutic of Gender and Sexuality

Before we can experience whole and healthy relationships characterized by mutual respect and honor, we need to grasp God's creative intent for humanity. Genesis 1 reads,

Then God said, *"Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us." ...So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."* (Gen. 1:26-31 NLT)

These passages reveal that men and women are created as different but equal image bearers and are given the exact same mandate from God to be fruitful (not only through procreation but also via all other forms of creating) and to care for the earth and the earth's inhabitants.

In Genesis 2, the creation story gets more specific. "Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him." (Gen. 2: 18 NLT) The Hebrew word for helper is ezer which essentially means warrior sidekick—not subordinate or servant.

Per God's design, "a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." (Gen. 2:24) This is a breath-taking directive—one that elevates the purpose and the practicality of marriage beyond the ancient Middle East norms that mandated women leaving their own families to become the property of their husband's clan.

Jumping ahead to the New Testament, Jesus' interactions with women reveal a powerful alternative to the world's—and some churches'—understanding of male-female relationships. When he spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, he did not take advantage of or demean her but instead engaged with her theologically and personally.

Later, when "a sinful woman" poured perfume on Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair—a scandalously sensual act—he did not shame her or accuse her of trying to tempt him, but instead commended her before the men who were present (Luke 36:50). Again and again, he honored women and overturned oppressive gender hierarchies.

A New Way Forward

Given our legacy of broken relationships and deeply entrenched misogynistic practices, how can we follow Jesus' example and create a culture where the full flourishing of both men and women is normative? In Jesus Feminist, author Sarah Bessey writes, "Sometimes we turn over tables in the temple, and other times, we invite conversations and start with an apology." In this situation, we need both tactics.

#MeToo turned the tables over on the men both inside and outside the church who assumed they could continue to mistreat women without repercussion. However, just because women have decided that they're no longer going to keep silent when they're abused or mistreated does not change the reality that men still have more power—both in terms of physical strength and corporate structure.

For the misogyny-fueled mistreatment of women to end, men will need to both acknowledge how vulnerable they are to the invisible pull of power and, as a way of resisting that vortex, choose to give it away rather than hoard it.

Relinquishing power never comes easy. Men can move in this direction by choosing to relate to power as Jesus did. Though he had the capacity to call down legions of angels to smite the soldiers who pounded nails through his flesh, he surrendered that same power in order to free us from sin and death. His remarkable, universe-altering choice opens up the possibility for us to use whatever power we have for redemptive, life-giving purposes.

In order for this paradigm shift to happen, men and women will need to engage in honest conversations about broken relational dynamics and courageously confront any of the ways that cultural narratives have superseded Scriptural narratives.

For example, did God design men to have insatiable sex drives, which is how it's often spun—even from the pulpit? Or, is this a direct result of the fall, compounded by the entertainment industry and unrelenting advertising campaigns that mock men's integrity, objectify women's bodies, and use sex to sell everything from internet hosting to M&Ms? If we want a culture where both women and men can fully thrive without the threat of abuse or rape, we have to boldly confront and reject any unbiblical ideologies.

As a woman, one of the most powerful aspects of the #MeToo movement was when men began to listen and understand how their misogynistic beliefs and behaviors deeply wounded us. The week #MeToo swept across the internet, pastor Brad Wong of The River Church in San Jose, CA, led the men in his congregation to kneel during the Sunday morning service and audibly confess any of the ways that they had dishonored or disrespected women. I wept in gratitude upon hearing this.

Acknowledging mistreatment and abuse through confession is an integral step in repairing broken male-female relationships. Confession should include overt sins as well as stealthy sins of the heart such as apathy and cowardice. Much like systemic racism, sexualized violence and mistreatment of women will not end until enough men interrupt their brothers' behavior. And if confession does not lead to repentance, it's meaningless.

Honest confession and true repentance not only break the deadening silence that so often accompanies sexual abuse, they also pave the way for forgiveness. Rachel Denhollander, a lawyer who brought charges against sexual abuser Larry Nassar—and one of his victims—made this statement to her perpetrator during his trial:

Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. ... I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me, though I extend that to you as well.

Forgiveness is a powerful thing. As I write in *Making Marriage Beautiful*, “When we drop the charges against those who have sinned against us, we are not excusing their actions, minimizing the damages, or opening ourselves up to further mistreatment. We are simply agreeing that Jesus' redemptive work on the cross is sufficient.”

Victims get to determine the timeline for offering forgiveness. The church tends to rush victims to forgive, but victims must have agency to process their trauma and respond to the perpetrator when they are ready. Otherwise, they may be re-traumatized. Further, it's crucial to note that forgiveness does not necessitate reconciliation with an abuser.

By asking perpetrators to confess and repent and victims to forgive, Jesus is inviting us to follow him to the cross and the tomb, so that ultimately, we can share in his resurrection power and bring his kingdom to the earth. In the process, we learn how to love, honor, and respect each other.

When these heart issues have been addressed, there will not be a need for rigid boundaries (e.g. Billy Graham's rule of not meeting one-on-one with any woman other than his wife). Graham's practice might be appropriate in some cultures and for some men, but it's a culturally bound concession, not a biblical mandate. According to author Carolyn Custis James, "If men diagnose the danger as outside of themselves, they've misdiagnosed their problem. Jesus nails it by pointing out that lust is about a man's eyes and his heart, not the women. Christian men should be the safest [men] for women to be around."

Custis James continues, "The notion that things work better and human beings become their best selves when men and women work together is found on page one of the Bible. When God was launching the most ambitious enterprise the world has ever known, the team He put together to do the job was male and female." And according to Scripture, that team was very good.

It's undeniable that the #MeToo movement successfully empowered women to no longer live as silent victims. Time will tell if it also helps to reduce misogynistic practices such as rape and sexual harassment. One thing is certain: the church has the potential to lead this relational revolution—provided that men honor women as equal co-heirs and use their power to ensure that every human being has the opportunity to fully flourish.