

BRINGING THE CHURCH TO ITS KNEES: EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY, FEMINISM, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DISCOURSE

JANICE HAAKEN, Portland State University
HOLLY FUSSELL, Oregon Health and Science University
ERIC MANKOWSKI, Portland State University

ABSTRACT *In evangelical Christian communities, there is a small but significant movement to address the issue of domestic violence through the integration of 'biblical feminism' and traditional interpretations of scripture. This paper explores the multiple uses of domestic violence discourse in evangelical churches, including how categories such as domestic violence and family abuse may be used as a discursive strategy in resisting less readily articulated female grievances. Based primarily on participant observation of the Christians Addressing Family Abuse (CAFA) conference, the authors describe key conflicts that emerged between feminist and evangelical Christian frameworks, and the role of counseling principles in mediating conflicting understandings of domestic violence. The analysis explains how domestic violence has emerged as a focal point for women in both resisting and accommodating to church doctrine. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The auditorium of the Christian church where we gathered for a domestic violence conference was like a school gymnasium: functional, wired for sound, and simply decorated, primarily with flags. Two banners displayed over the podium announced the themes of the conference. One read 'Christians Addressing Family Abuse: Verbal and Physical Abuse – Both Are Painful' and the other read 'Continuing the Healing Ministry of Jesus to Hurting Families'. Many of the attendees were in this healing ministry in their churches, serving as assistant pastors,

counselors, or teachers in women's Bible-study groups. Although some men were scattered amidst the audience of 200 mostly white participants, this was predominantly a women's conference. More than this, the conference featured three dynamic speakers who identified themselves as biblical feminists as well as Christian counselors.

This paper presents a study of the domestic violence discourse that has emerged in this evangelical Christian community in Oregon. Based primarily on participant observation of the two-day Christians

Addressing Family Abuse (CAFA) conference, an analysis of literature distributed at the conference, and an interview with one of its key organizers, the study is part of a larger program of research at Portland State University focused on historical and cultural dimensions of women's accounts of domestic violence (Haaken, 2002; Mankowski et al., 2002; Haaken and Yragui, 2003). Participant-observation of the CAFA conference offered a rich opportunity to explore multiple uses of the category of domestic violence and the dilemmas that emerge for women as they attempt to reconcile conflicting beliefs.

Our study focuses on the CAFA conference – a group of largely white, middle-class women – because it presented an opportunity in our own region to analyze *border tensions* that surface at the boundary between feminism and a religious community that is, in many respects, antithetical to the women's movement. Christian feminists often identify the ideal of wifely submission to husbands – a belief widely endorsed in this community – as a primary cause of abuse (Bussert, 1986; Pagelow and Johnson, 1988; Wallace, 1988; Wood and McHugh, 1994; Gillett, 1996; Scholer, 1996). While some liberal churches, synagogues, and mosques have moved to integrate women into their liturgical practices, the religious Right, heavily constituted by evangelical Christians, is at the forefront of the backlash against feminism. At the same time, many women in conservative churches are enlisting feminist principles in their efforts to attract and hold female members (Wallace, 1988; Manning, 1999).

PREMISES OF THE STUDY

We began the study from the premise that evangelical Christian communities and doctrines are not monolithic and that the growth of evangelical movement in the late twentieth

century worldwide has been contingent in part on its capacity to respond to feminist critiques of the patriarchal family and to the changing aspirations of women. As Judith Stacey and Susan Elizabeth Gerard (1992, 99) note, 'The gender ideology and politics of born-again Christians in the US today are far more diverse, complex and contradictory than widely held stereotypes allow.' Similarly, feminist politics within the broader battered women's movement are more diverse and complex than commonly assumed (see Donovan, 1996; Hartsock, 1997). In working at the border between feminist and evangelical Christian politics, we sought to understand which currents of feminism were incorporated into the analysis of family abuse presented at the conference.

Through our participant-observation study of the CAFA conference, we sought to untangle some of these contradictory and complex currents. As women come to identify domestic violence as a political category and to reinterpret their experiences through this new lens, we were interested in how women in church communities reconcile this feminist critique within existing doctrines and religious practices. More than abortion rights, gay rights, or other demands for gender equality, domestic violence is an issue that may be introduced into religious communities without arousing immediate opposition. Even more than child abuse, which stirs charged debate over spanking and other disciplinary measures, wife beating is a practice that few in the US currently defend.

Our project is also informed by the post-structural turn in discourse analysis, an approach that foregrounds dynamic fluctuations in the use of language in social life (Parker, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1995). In the social sciences, poststructuralism is often contrasted with operationalism, a tenet

that scientific inquiry rests on establishing stable, measurable definitions of the phenomenon of interest. Whereas many studies of domestic violence begin with a definition – or a redefinition – of the term, our discursive approach maps the fluctuating phenomena the term encompasses within a specific community of experience (see Haaken, 2000, 2002).

This emphasis on dynamic shifts in the use of language is compatible with broader trends in feminist scholarship. Rather than conceptualizing gender as a fixed set of attributes or a role that is simply assigned to women, the trend is toward viewing gender as embedded in social interaction. This stress on ‘doing gender,’ as opposed to ‘having gender,’ holds important implications for feminist activism (West and Zimmerman, 1987). In identifying areas where gender relations are fluctuating and unstable, we may be better able to intervene in systems of male domination. Conflict and tension hold potential for change, suggesting a range of possible outcomes within a given historical situation.

Even as discourse analysis generates rich ideas for feminist organizing, there are dangers in focusing too narrowly on language. Our approach emphasizes the dialectical interaction between the world-constituting power of language, on the one hand, and the material conditions that give rise to the search for new concepts and categories on the other (Parker, 1992; Hartsock, 1997). Whether friendly or hostile to feminist ideals, women in church communities do experience shifts in gender roles born of the combined effects of structural changes in the economy and the movement for women’s rights. Indeed, as more women enter the paid workforce and dual career couples become more common, the material basis of male ‘headship’ has significantly eroded. Just as the legal lifting of restric-

tions on divorce in the US in the 1970s was associated with women’s increased economic independence, calls for liberalization of divorce within the churches may be similarly associated with changes in women’s economic status (Whipple, 1987; Wallace, 1988; Manning, 1999).

BORDER TENSIONS

The CAFA conference, the first for this organization based in Eugene, Oregon, drew participants from other western states as well as from local churches. Established in 1997 by social workers Carolyn Rexus and Jackie Hudson, CAFA provides separate counseling services to batterers and their wives, as well as educational programs for the church community. The organization also produces a newsletter featuring stories of women who are ‘breaking the silence’ around domestic violence, including one story written by the abused wife of a pastor.

Christians Addressing Family Abuse is a relatively small presence within the evangelical Christian community. But as religious women confronting the issue of family violence, they are by no means alone. Over the past several decades, groups have organized throughout North America to address family violence. Many of these are interfaith groups, such as the Gethsemane’s Comfort project in Eastern Canada. But beyond differences in religious affiliation, other cultural differences in women’s experiences with family violence are increasingly being addressed. Women of color, particularly, are bringing to antiviolence coalitions an awareness of the intersection of racism, sexism and class oppression in perpetuating cycles of abuse (Williams, 1994; West, 1999; Davis, 2000; Richie, 2000; Weis, 2001).

In initially learning about the CAFA conference, we found that there were palpable currents of ambivalence in our own feminist community. Some women’s advocates were

heartened by the willingness of evangelical churches to take up the issue of woman battering, whereas others were extremely wary, even contemptuous, of this 'born again' concern among conservative Christians over a feminist issue.

Our inquiry began with this same ambivalence as we sought to untangle the competing political interests underlying responses to domestic violence in the churches.

We wanted to explore areas of conflict for women as their emergent aspirations collided with doctrinal constraints. For some women, confronting the issue of battering signifies a profound crisis of faith – one that registers uncertainty over their place in the religious community. Joanne Brown and Rebecca Parker (1989, 3) describe this crisis, arguing that 'the reasons given by women who stay in the church are the same as those coming from women who remain in battering situations.' In both contexts, women may rationalize their oppression by making a virtue out of their suffering, or they may idealize male power.

Evangelical churches typically adopt interpretations of scripture that call for male 'headship' in the family and submission of wives to their husbands. The movement against domestic violence, more than other feminist issues, makes salient the destructive side of this hierarchical model of the family. Christian feminist Nancy Nason-Clark (1997, 1), for example, suggests that rather than providing a 'safe haven from the pressures and strains of contemporary life, for millions and millions of women and children, the home is something to fear.' This portrayal of the home as a danger zone for women challenges the stereotypical script of virtuous husbands, firmly guiding their devoted wives and respectful children.

Nason-Clark (1997) notes in her study of domestic violence discourse in evangelical churches that the problem of wife battering

is open to multiple interpretations. Conservatives typically understand it as a spiritual crisis – one that requires the combined efforts of a long-suffering wife and clerical advisors to subdue remnants of the Old Adam. Feminists, on the other hand, tend to interpret male violence as an extension of patriarchal authority – as a form of power and control over women – legitimized covertly, if not overtly, by the continuing domination of men in private and public life. Given the patriarchal foundation of conservative churches, shelters and other feminist crisis facilities must decide where alliances with churches make sense, and when issues like domestic violence are being appropriated to advance an antifeminist political agenda.

THE STUDY

Our study began with the premise that condemnation of domestic violence does not inherently, or of necessity, advance a feminist agenda, even though it is vital to any feminist program of social change. Just as divergent forms of moral reasoning may be brought to bear in adjudicating crimes such as murder, burglary, or battery, divergent political discourses may be mobilized in intervening around domestic violence. Starting with the question of how churches are framing the issue of domestic violence, we moved to focusing on whether domestic violence discourse *legitimizes* or *inhibits* a broader critique of patriarchal practices within the church. Does the discussion of domestic violence open up cultural space for challenging male domination or does it fortify the boundary between the 'good men' and the 'bad men'? Does the discourse destabilize patriarchal hierarchies or does it devolve into a melodrama, where benevolent patriarchs rescue virtuous Christian maidens from the stranglehold of evil men?

In the analysis of the conference that follows, we describe the conflict that emerged between feminist and Christian frameworks in addressing family violence. Specifically, a difference configured between those women who viewed domestic violence as symptomatic of the doctrines of the church, on the one hand, and those who viewed it as antithetical to church doctrine on the other. For the former, understanding domestic violence as a natural outgrowth of institutional and doctrinal practices represented a profound challenge to the basic structure of the church. For women who viewed domestic violence as a 'misunderstanding' of church doctrine, however, the problem was more readily isolated from religious beliefs and identity.

A second area of our analysis concerns the question of whether or not domestic violence serves as a conduit for less readily articulated female grievances. In other words, does domestic violence 'stand in' for other concerns of women – concerns that are granted less legitimacy in the church community? Battering – as a political discourse – may make concrete the more ambiguous or less dramatic areas of women's oppression. As the Reverend Joy Bussert (1986, 3) describes it, 'when we raise the issue of whether or not a woman ought to be beaten in her own home, we focus the male-female question in a very dramatic and poignant way in the minds and hearts of many people.' And in winning hearts and minds, women in this church community are enlisting secular principles of counseling and personal change.

The analysis that follows illustrates how the field of counseling emerged as a discursive space for reconciling the conflicting principles throughout the conference. Two key themes are presented: counseling and the churches and concepts of personal change. These themes, based on our content

analysis of material from the CAFA conference, led to a series of question and probes that guided our interview with Carolyn Rexius, carried out by the first and second authors. Rexius served as our expert informant, elucidating and clarifying the key themes that emerged at the conference.

CHANGING THE HEARTS OF MEN: COUNSELING AND THE CHURCH

Counseling is an area where women have gained a leadership role in conservative churches, even taking the pulpit at special events such as the CAFA conference, if not at Sunday services. So too, family violence is emerging as a 'feminine' terrain, an extension of women's traditional province of maternal authority and a domain where women are the recognized experts in the church community (Whipple, 1987). While men are granted authority over the family in evangelical Christian communities, the home is recognized as a province of feminine moral influence, albeit a delimited one (Armstrong, 1987). Much like middle management, wives and mothers, and particularly middle class wives and mothers, are invested with executive authority in carrying out directives from above.

Carolyn Rexius and Jackie Hudson acknowledge the struggle of women in the church community to achieve credibility as teachers and spiritual leaders. 'Two of the biggest issues in the church today,' Hudson suggests, 'are women and leadership, and the church and psychology.' These prove to be intertwined in that counseling has emerged in the churches as a site where women have struggled for greater influence, as well as an extension of their mothering roles.

Describing their CAFA work as a 'calling', Rexius and Hudson combine therapeutic and

spiritual conceptions of healing. For women who venture into forbidden territory, the notion of a *calling* may facilitate the expression of 'unwomanly' assertiveness within a framework of Christian humility and piety (Lawless, 1991). It permits a dissociation of the message and the messenger in that the latter is experienced as merely a conduit for the former. Framing one's rebellious impulses as a form of submission to a higher power is both an advance and a retreat; it challenges the boundaries of gender while working within their existing constraints.

Female authority emerged as a problematic issue in discussion of batterers' groups. But because domestic violence is framed as a threat to the family, women therapists are viewed as the natural allies of wives. Rexius explains how the men in her groups often make a distinction between 'woman' and 'mother,' the latter representing a more comfortable form of female authority. She adds that the men sometimes confide: 'Carolyn, I don't even think of you as a woman.' Rexius went on to explain that 'for most of them, it is their favorite night of the week . . . This is disconcerting to their wives.' In the interview, Rexius elaborated on the implications of this issue for feminists. 'They (the men) find the group very helpful, and nurturant . . . which, if you have background in the feminist movement, you know would make some people mad to hear – that these men are enjoying this.'

While establishing positive rapport is part of any process of effecting change, whether religious or therapeutically directed, Rexius's repeated emphasis on how men enjoy the groups suggests that she is responding to an anxiety in the community. The notion of women-led groups of men are an anathema in some quarters of the Christian community because they do strain the boundaries of acceptable female authority. Women may have some provisional authority over their

husbands, but this rarely extends beyond the family.

In responding to this anxiety, Rexius relies on traditional images of feminine influence. While the training materials distributed at the conference and the presentations advance an equality model, they also preserve stereotypical gender differences. One of the worksheets used in the groups for batterers illustrates this tension in CAFA between a doctrine of equality, on the one hand, and traditional conceptions of gender on the other. Titled 'Biblical Explanations of the Vulnerabilities in Marriage', the worksheet exhorts the Christian man to 'love her and be willing to lay down your life for her, don't be harsh with her, understand her, treat her with equality.' The Christian woman is directed toward a companion set of ideals, similarly consonant with conventional gender scripts: 'Treat him with respect and honor, (have a) gentle spirit, quiet spirit, be pure.'

The CAFA workbook for batterers draws on scripture to fortify patriarchal authority, even as it de-legitimizes it. While men are commanded to treat their wives with equality, they also are encouraged to preserve the ideal of the husband/protector. The workbook offers I Peter 3: 7 as the 'umbrella verse' of the program: 'Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.'

While this verse advances the idea of male superiority, it also may serve as an ideological 'umbrella' for Rexius and Hudson to expand the domain of women's rights within the constraints of their religious community. Since men who batter are judged to be remiss in discharging their husbandly duties, wives have the right to make stronger claims. Establishing her alliances with women part-

ners, Rexius asserts that 'wives are the ones who issue a report card.' The safety of women and children, she stresses, is 'our number one concern.' Continuing with this principle, Rexius describes battering as a cancer. Marriage is 'like an x-ray machine' and wives are the 'real diagnosticians of the illness.'

The role of counselor also places women in the position of renegotiating the boundary between the secular and the spiritual. Counseling is often threatening, Rexius and Hudson suggest, because it is associated with a weakening of religious faith. For many church members, the threatening aspects of counseling are compounded by the focus on gender dynamics in the family. In the interview, Rexius discusses this dilemma in her own work.

In the last few years we have worked so hard in the Christian community to offer an answer to people who are struggling in their homes and we have attempted to make that unthreatening. I think that many people are very unhappy in their marriages and often times they cross the line of what we now define as abuse, which we also consider psychological and verbal abuse. So we have men in our program who haven't crossed the line physically, although we have many who have crossed the line physically, but they have been just as hurtful verbally and emotionally. And so they are coming because – as I said before, most are not mandated – because they want help, so we have a lot of men now who are referring other men.

For CAFA organizers, family violence and abuse signify an acute conflict necessitating secular interventions that go beyond spiritual counseling. Women counselors also may be the mediators between the secular and the spiritual in that counseling is associated with a more maternal authority. Unlike the preacher who pronounces judgment, the woman counselor dispenses compassion and maternal guidance. Rexius suggests that

most men feel very guilty about their violence. She goes on to distinguish between men who defend what they view as a right to hit their wives and those who feel ashamed at having lost control by lashing out. On one level, this distinction is an important one. If men *believe* they have a right to hit, they are less apt to change than if they do not hold such a belief. At the same time, too much emphasis on this distinction can obscure the dynamics of abuse. Many women have learned to focus on the 'inner' motivations and feelings of men, ignoring the overt abusive behavior at considerable cost to their own wellbeing. Ritualized displays of repentance on the part of men also are frequently part of a continuing cycle of domestic violence.

In the interview, we asked Rexius about the significance of this distinction. 'I try to get them (the men) to see how they cannot really get what they want from women this way', she explains. The problem is with 'a paradigm of headship defined by a man being responsible for his household and as the one who is going to be held accountable if they are in deviance with his interpretation of what God wants.' She claims that virtuous motives, such as an exaggerated 'sense of responsibility' comingle with selfish ones. The typical male batterer may have a 'sprinkling of personality disorder that lets him do it, or maybe just 'narcissistic features that predispose him somewhat for what you would call misogyny.' But she adds that this same typical man is 'not anti-social . . . he is a person who wants to know and be known and actually is making some movement in that direction.' This clinical distinction is enlisted to establish a boundary between the good men and the bad men, between the more and less redeemable batterers.

Rexius takes great pains to stress how good men sometimes do bad things, even in

their attempts to lead a godly life. There is a certain allowance within fundamentalist Christianity for moral lapses, because the devil plays a dominant role in the religious cosmology as the perpetual tempter. Within this religious framework, the man's assault on his wife may be seen as going beyond the 'rule of thumb' just as child abuse is often construed as disciplinary practices that 'go too far.'

While introducing constraints on male authority, Rexius's typology stops short of challenging the legitimacy of patriarchal rule. The unrepentant wife beater readily emerges in this discourse as the 'old patriarch' whereas men who feel bad about hitting their wives, frustrated by their failure to communicate their wishes and needs, are represented as the 'new patriarchs'. Yet there may, indeed, be differences between the 'old' and 'new' prototypical patriarchs, distinctions that do signify cultural shifts in socially permissible expression of male dominance.

REDEMPTION, DELIVERANCE AND DIVORCE

One of the conflicts in the domestic violence field concerns differing assumptions about how people change, and whether batterers are able to change (see Mankowski et al., 2002). Some feminists argue for a purely criminal justice approach to intervening with batterers, insisting that only the force of law and the threat of sanctions will modify male behavior. Other feminists counter that policing institutions have never been very effective in modifying destructive behavior and are more apt to be an instrument of oppression than they are liberating for women.

Jackie Hudson introduced the heated debate over intervention versus treatment with batterers. In describing the interventionist stance, she points out that there are

ample reasons to be wary of therapy for batterers. Therapists can easily collude with the abuse by focusing on underlying dynamics rather than on confronting the abusive behavior. Further, in therapy groups, men may hear the stories of other men and rationalize their own behavior, saying 'at least I didn't do that.'

Hudson is attuned to the politics underlying these two stances and to the differences in implicit understandings of male violence. She notes that interventionists are more apt to take a strictly political approach to male violence, arguing that 'men batter because they can . . . The problem is patriarchy.' They take a highly confrontational, directive approach to working with men in groups, arguing that mandatory arrests are more effective in curbing battering behavior than is counseling. Therapists, on the other hand, are more apt to view batterers as emotionally damaged, or as suffering from a personality disorder and thus in need of treatment. While agreeing that male privilege is at the center of the problem, Hudson went on to caution against 'either/or thinking' or 'splitting.' To assume that 'when the patriarchy is overthrown, the problem will be solved' is to engage in this form of absolutist, either/or thinking.

As Rexius takes the podium again, a man in the audience ventures a question. He asks about the 'value judgement' in this movement – particularly among 'interventionists' – that these are 'bad men'. Yet the churches see them as 'basically good men.' He asked how the speakers reconcile this seeming contradiction in outlook.

'Yes,' Rexius concedes, 'some think that the only good man is a dead man . . . Yet some men are so damaged that they are never going to be different than they are. And if you open up the program to mandated clients, you move into the area of the criminal lifestyle.' This later point seems to

place the 'bad men' outside of the churches and within the criminal justice system. This discourse also positions Rexius and Hudson as protectors of what may be experienced as a precarious boundary between the church and a more threatening realm of male violence.

Hudson intervenes at this point, engaging Rexius in an interchange over differences in their views – an interchange that was impressive in its candor. Hudson defends the interventionists, and mildly chastises Rexius for casting the feminist position in overly simplistic terms. Rexius responds by confessing her own confusion over which stance to take, and how she alternates in her thinking from day to day on the issue, sometimes leaning toward a therapeutic position and sometimes toward an interventionist one.

A woman from the back of the room then breaks in, describing herself as an interventionist and cautioning that treatment can cover over the problem by colluding with batterers. In response, a woman from the front row counters that 'Christianity does not allow us to see men as bad, since we have all fallen.' God can change people, she exhorts, and there is always hope.

Many of these responses could be interpreted as indicating conflict within this church community over the very therapeutic authority the presenters are advancing, an authority that has a decidedly feminist as well as a feminine cast. Rexius, particularly, frequently alternated between positioning herself inside and outside feminism. 'Don't lose sight of the Christian population we work with', Rexius instructs us, assuming a position of distance for a moment from the 'population' she serves. 'We often work with people who are distrustful of secular ideas.' This is one reason the church does not always cooperate, she goes on to explain. At other times, Rexius uses terms such as 'the feminists' or 'feminists would say', distancing

herself from the women's movement. In that she notes in the interview that most women in her community 'are not comfortable with feminism' this distancing may be motivated by her desire to align herself with these women, against feminism. Yet she and Hudson are quite courageous in identifying themselves as feminists and in speaking out so publicly in this conservative church community, located within a very liberal college town. In negotiating the borders of such communities, there also may be a tendency to project onto 'the feminists' some of the unmetabolized elements of women's conflicts – as individuals or groups. Rather than acknowledging anger or hostility toward men, these feelings may be placed outside the community, onto the 'otherness' of feminism.

Toward the end of the second day the audience was invited to respond to some of the 'common messages' instilled in a Christian upbringing. One woman started with: 'God hates divorce.' Others eagerly chimed in: 'Forgive, forgive, forgive.' 'You need to submit.' 'You are a thorn in his flesh.' 'Just pray about it.' 'Marriage is forever.' 'Thou shalt not divorce.' 'She caused the Fall.' 'Men have to be in charge.' As this discussion continued, the audience became particularly engaged around the question of whether abusive men should be forgiven and whether the failure of men to change was a legitimate cause for divorce. One woman stood and spoke, starting hesitantly but gathering firmness as she spoke. 'I am a Christian, but a realist', she began. 'Often our faith keeps women blind . . . We can't make them change if they don't want to.'

Another woman raises her hand and describes the situation of a Christian wife married for 18 years who is very unhappy. 'She believes marriage is for life, and she feels stuck in a box.' She may go to see a therapist, but the 'problem gets diverted

because it is assumed that the therapist put this in her mind.'

Hudson pauses, finally stating that 'we don't advocate divorce.' At the same time, she suggests that 'many women have chosen to walk away from the church because they have felt they have to choose between their faith and their lives', a comment met with hearty applause. This dialogue over the redeemability of abusive men leads to further discussion of how to reconcile spiritual and secular conceptions of transformation, a central theme of the conference.

By the close of the conference, discussion had turned to the question of *the church's capacity to change* – a question that followed the debate over whether batterers could change. Several participants suggest that men are able to batter because church leaders often teach that women are defective – that they need to be corrected. Another participant asks whether CAFA is doing anything about 'this history of institutionalized misogyny and sexism in the church.' Rexius responds that 'there are only six or seven of us', reminding the audience that it takes more than one small organization to change a church. Softening her tone, Rexius adds that 'not all men are violent . . . (and) we will never get the job done without the help of men.'

But neither do all women suffer battering. As the conference came to a close, one woman, identifying herself as an assistant pastor and counselor, introduces the question of whether women may be battered metaphorically: 'Many women I work with are not being battered, but are feeling emotionally abused and a walking death. Yet the church says only adultery is a basis of divorce. What about these women?'

Rexius responds sympathetically, suggesting that 'There is more acceptance in the faith community now that marriage shouldn't imprison people . . . Often the divorce hap-

pened, long before the legal action.' This interpretation seems to steer a middle ground between maintaining the prohibition against divorce and offering women an escape clause. Although God hates divorce, Rexius offers, God hates unhappy marriages just as much. Rexius suggests that when the man's abusiveness or bad treatment have 'killed' the marriage, women have some liberty to leave. As the day winds to a close, a woman in the back rises, attempting to summarize the sentiments of the group: 'The church is vastly divided on this issue. We must look to Christ.'

DISCUSSION

'In many churches, women are seen as rocking the boat,' Jackie Hudson suggested on the second day of the conference. Christians Addressing Family Abuse organizers and participants at this gathering are, indeed, rocking the boat, even as they attempt to steer a course between the shoals of gender equality, on one side, and the rock of patriarchy on the other. Domestic violence is a powerful point of departure because it is a vivid marker of women's oppression. Terms such as 'dangerous' and 'unsafe' were invoked throughout the conference in making salient the precarious situation of women who submit to the rule of husbands. The failure of the clergy to intervene effectively on the behalf of battered women was frequently cited by speakers and participants alike as a call to action. Women were 'called' to intervene, even though the interventions of the day featured the transfer of responsibility for women's wellbeing from the patriarchal clergy to the 'maternal' guidance of female clinicians.

While terms such as *male privilege* were based on a feminist critique, participants and speakers at the CAFA conference differed in the extent to which they framed domestic violence as an effect of patriarchy.

Rexius wavered between viewing it as embedded in a system of domination within the church – that is, as a structural problem – and approaching it as a misunderstanding of Christian doctrine. She charged that clergy often collude in the subjugation of women by invoking the biblical mandate that wives should humbly submit to the authority of their husbands. The Christian message of humility is often exploited as justification for patriarchal control, Rexius insisted. Hudson, however, was less ameliorative in her portrayal of the tension between the church and feminism, and conveyed more of the intransigence of the church around issues of gender equality.

While therapeutic intervention was a central focus, the conference went beyond clinical formulations in bridging spiritual and secular conceptions of transformation. As these Christian women are changing the climate of tolerance around woman battering, they also are engaged in a much broader project of reform. This project includes challenges to patriarchy in both the familial and the religious spheres, and challenges to the ideal of preserving the family at any cost. Participants gave testimony to the enormous burdens born by women in the upholding of this ideal, and to the growing refusal of women to submit to male authority.

As a women's issue, domestic violence does create a space for women to challenge patriarchal rule, even if the discourse is limited to reigning in male entitlement. Marie Fortune, Director of the Center for Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence, describes this catalytic potential of the anti-violence movement. In defending abused women, she was often in opposition to the clergy in her own church community. In carrying out this struggle, Fortune (1991, xv) emphasizes that, 'my task was not to try to save the church from itself.' As women grapple with the affinity between male head-

ship and male privilege, between humility and wifely submission, the emergent dissonance may broaden into demands for reform that go beyond the issue of family violence. Further, the connections between domestic violence and patriarchy may be more transparent in communities where female submission to male authority is explicitly sanctioned. Unlike sexual infidelity or child sexual abuse, where the transgressor is clearly violating the moral dictates of the community, the 'chastisement' of wives is consonant with the sanctioned male hierarchy within the church. In other words, it could be construed as a failure on the part of a husband to carry out his church-sanctioned mandate of maintaining control over his family effectively.

Domestic violence discourse in this church community also has been appropriated in a way that paradoxically reinforces some aspects of patriarchy. Both speakers at the CAFA conference expressed concern that if women are forced to choose between their Christian faith and their own survival, they may choose the latter. The message is that the church must change to accommodate the changing expectations and experiences of women, but this change may be more rhetorical than substantive. Since the nineteenth century, women have been granted some moral authority as wives and mothers to hold men in check, particularly in the area of male vices (see Epstein, 1981). Christians Addressing Family Abuse organizers and participants went beyond moral outrage against battering, however, raising deeper questions about the role of religious communities in supporting a worldview that makes this behavior more likely.

The discursive category of domestic violence also may serve as a container for more diffuse forms of distress in the church community, blunting discussion of more subtle or normative forms of gender oppression, for

example, the unequal division of labor within the household. If extreme, overt abuse is the primary available context for challenging male domination, women may feel that less dramatic, more mundane forms of misery are less legitimate to address. Further, women may feel that 'at least he doesn't beat me' in reconciling themselves to an oppressive situation.

Domestic violence has emerged as a focal point for female ambivalence concerning the church, and counseling principles a context for addressing that ambivalence. The denouement to the story depends on the ability of conservative Christian churches to accommodate to changes in the culture, particularly challenges to traditional gender roles, while maintaining fidelity to the idea of the inerrancy of scripture. Discourse on family violence provides a moral and political framework for this work of accommodation, and for what may be merely a reformist modification of patriarchal structures, a demand for an upgrading of female authority rather than a struggle for genuine equality.

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