



THE

Caryn A. Reeder

SAMARITAN

WOMAN'S

Reconsidering John 4 After #ChurchToo

STORY



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Samaritan Woman's Story* by Caryn Ann Reeder.

Copyright © 2022 by Caryn Ann Reeder.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com

1

WOMEN, SEX, AND SIN IN THE CHURCH

IN MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE, Jesus talks about the kingdom of God. In John, Jesus talks about himself, often in lengthy sermons. Other people—John the Baptist, Martha, a man who was born blind—also talk about Jesus. The Gospel of John further explores Jesus' identity through the narrative structure of sacred times and spaces: Passover, Sabbath, the temple, the wilderness. This Gospel recenters the significance of Israel's sacred times and spaces on Jesus. He is the manna that feeds God's people (Jn 6:35). He works on the Sabbath because God is still at work (Jn 5:17). He is the living temple, the presence of God once again camping out among the people (Jn 1:14, 2:19).

This pattern is established in the narrative by John 4, when Jesus passes through Samaria on his way home from the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. He sits down by a well to rest, and, as readers might expect, the location has theological significance. Jacob and his sons dug the well on the land they purchased from the people of Shechem (Gen 33:19). This place is one of the first pieces of the Promised Land that the people of God possessed, a sort of down payment on Abraham's covenant.

In this space, Jesus meets a woman. A single man meeting a woman at a well—in the Bible, stories that begin this way end with marriage (Gen 24:10-51, 29:1-30; Ex 2:15-21). But the story in John 4 disrupts the pattern. The woman is not single. Moreover, she's a Samaritan, and as the story reminds us, Jews and Samaritans have a long history of conflict, division, and animosity.

Instead of romance, this story is about religious tensions and rivalry, with overtones of what we might today describe as racism. The Samaritan woman

confronts Jesus with the most important questions of the divide between their two peoples: Where should God be worshiped, in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem or the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim? Whose father is Jacob and, therefore, who should rightly possess this very well beside them? Who are the true people of God, the Jews or the Samaritans?

So, in John 4, Jesus returns to Galilee following Passover, the festival that celebrates God's salvation of Israel from enslavement in Egypt so that they can be God's holy people in God's holy land. On his way home, Jesus sits down by a well that symbolizes this heritage, and he meets a woman who thinks this very same space symbolizes her own heritage. And they have a long, serious, focused conversation on the division between the Samaritans and Jews.

This conversation is remarkable. Often in John's Gospel, what begins as a dialogue quickly turns into a monologue from Jesus (as happens with Nicodemus in Jn 3:2-21, and the disciples in Jn 4:31-38). But at Jacob's well, the Samaritan woman is a real partner in the discussion. Her responses and questions indicate her awareness of history, theology, and current events. She is insightful.

In response, Jesus clearly announces the changing identity of the people of God—no longer Jew or Samaritan, but something else. And he clearly announces his own identity as Messiah and "I am." The woman in turn models the response to Jesus that John's Gospel expects (compare Jn 1:6-8; 1:32-34; 9:1-38; 20:30-31). Over the course of the conversation, she goes from identifying Jesus as a Jew, to recognizing him as a prophet, to realizing that he may just be the Messiah. She then testifies to his identity in her hometown.

"I am" statements litter John's Gospel. Sometimes, they are used to explain specific elements of Jesus' identity (the bread of life, the light of the world, etc.). But sometimes, they are references to God's name in Exodus 3:14. Jesus' announcement to the Samaritan woman in John 4:26 is the first of these.

As Jesus' metaphor in John 4:35-38 anticipates, the nameless Samaritan woman's testimony leads to a great harvest. Her neighbors listen to her! Because of her words, they follow her back to the well to meet Jesus for themselves. They believe in Jesus on account of the woman's testimony as

well as Jesus' own words (Jn 4:39-42). While Jesus' disciples are off buying food, this woman, a Samaritan and relative stranger to Jesus, does the work of God. She is an apostle.

But this isn't the way the Samaritan woman's story is usually told in the church. Instead, pastors and teachers focus their attention on one part of the exchange: John 4:16-18.

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AND THE CHURCH

[The Samaritan woman] was an outcast and looked down upon by her own people. This is evidenced by the fact that she came alone to draw water from the community well when, during biblical times, drawing water and chatting at the well was the social highpoint of a woman's day. However, this woman was ostracized and marked as immoral, an unmarried woman living openly with the sixth in a series of men. The story of the woman at the well teaches us that God loves us in spite of our bankrupt lives.

GOT QUESTIONS MINISTRIES, "WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE WOMAN AT THE WELL?"

Early in the third century, Tertullian, a Christian theologian in Carthage, described the Samaritan woman as a prostitute.¹ In an otherwise positive portrayal of the woman's intelligence and apostolic zeal, John Chrysostom told his congregation in fourth-century Antioch that the woman was guilty of wicked, shameful sin.² For John Calvin a millennium later, the woman's gender and marital history overwhelmed her story. He derided her as an adulterer who forced her husbands to divorce her.³ Nineteenth-century revivalist Dwight L. Moody used John 4 to preach God's power to save even a "fallen woman" (that is, a prostitute) like the Samaritan woman.⁴

¹Tertullian, *On Modesty* 11.1.

²John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 31-34.

³John Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John 1-10*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, Calvin's Commentaries (1961; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 90.

⁴Dwight Lyman Moody, "Salvation for Sinners," in *The Gospel Awakening: Comprising the Sermons and Addresses, Prayer-Meeting Talks and Bible Readings of the Great Revival Meetings*

There are disruptions to this interpretation. Chrysostom's representation of the woman as an apostle is echoed by Marie Dentière in the sixteenth century and Virginia Broughton in the twentieth century, for instance.⁵ But the emphatic accusations of adultery and prostitution resound across the centuries to our own day, as the quotation above from Got Questions Ministries indicates. The history of interpretation of John 4:4-42 in the church reflects a consistent association of the Samaritan woman with sexual sin, and a consequent minimization of her presence and contribution to the narrative.

There is a theological purpose to the characterization of the woman as a shocking sinner, as this sermon preached by Charles Spurgeon shows:

I think that I hear one ask, "Do you mean to say that that woman was saved?" Yes, I expect to meet her in Heaven. Among the fair daughters of the New Jerusalem, the woman that was waiting at the well will surely be found! "But she was such a shocking character," says one. She was a shocking character—I hope that there is not any woman here half as bad as she was, though there may be, and there may even be some worse than she was—but she was saved and so will you be, if you go the same way that she went.⁶

The Samaritan woman's story exemplifies the grace of God. Interpreters celebrate John 4:4-42 as a story of hope for all sinners, even those women who sin in the same way the Samaritan woman did.

In addition, interpreters use the story to encourage particular evangelistic practices. Jesus transgresses boundaries—Jew and Samaritan, male and female, respected rabbi and (as one interpreter says) "that kind of woman"—to share the good news of salvation.⁷ He then convicts the woman of her sexual sin because the condemnation of sin is a necessary step in salvation.

Conducted by Moody and Sankey, 20th ed., ed. L. T. Remlap (Chicago: Fairbanks and Palmer, 1885), 530-31.

⁵Marie Dentière, *Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre and Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*, in *Marie Dentière: Epistle to Marguerite de Navarre and Preface to a Sermon by John Calvin*, trans. and ed. Mary B. McKinley, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 55; Virginia W. Broughton, *Women's Work: As Gleaned from the Women of the Bible*, in *Virginia Broughton: The Life and Writings of a National Baptist Missionary*, ed. Tomeiko Ashford Carter (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 17.

⁶Charles Spurgeon, "Sychar's Sinner Saved," *Spurgeon's Sermons*, vol. 38, *Christians Classics Ethereal Library*, <https://ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons38/sermons38.xli.html>.

⁷Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible and What We Can Learn from Them* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 1999), 92.

In these ways, Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman provides a model for evangelists to follow.⁸

This version of the Samaritan woman's encounter with Jesus is quite different from the one I told at the beginning of the chapter. As you may have guessed, I think the common interpretation of this story in the church significantly misrepresents it. Sin is an important theme in John, and Jesus warns people against continuing in sin.⁹ But sin is not mentioned in John 4:4-42. Neither is forgiveness. Jesus does not tell the woman to repent or change her life, and there's no indication that she does (or even, as we'll see in the second part of this book, that she could).

The insistent insertion of sin into the Samaritan woman's story has several problems. First, when sin becomes the lens for viewing the woman, a particular interpretation of her marital history overrides the rest of the story. The woman's intelligence, her insight, and the power of her words are diminished (and sometimes disappear altogether). The sexualization of the woman reduces her to an archetypal femme fatale. Instead of a model for discipleship and leadership in the Christian community, her story becomes a warning of the dangers of women's sexuality.

Second, this representation of the woman as sexual sinner separates her from Jesus' messages in John 4:4-42. Interpreters sometimes explore the story's contributions to understandings of God and worship without much attention to the woman.¹⁰ Others question the woman's ability to understand what Jesus says.¹¹ However, the Samaritan woman is a real conversation partner in John 4:4-42. Her responses to Jesus drive the story forward. Notably, she introduces the question of the proper place for worship that sparks Jesus' message. To reduce the woman to a sinner in need of salvation minimizes her significant contribution in this narrative.

This minimization represents a third major problem with the prevailing interpretation of John 4:4-42. The characterization of the Samaritan woman

⁸For instance, John Calvin, *St. John 1-10*, 94; Scott Hoezee, "John 4:1-38: 'Welling Up,'" sermon preached at Calvin Christian Reformed Church, <http://yardley.cs.calvin.edu/hoezee/2002/john4.html>.

⁹Note Jn 5:14, 8:11, 8:24, 9:41, 15:22-24, 16:8-11.

¹⁰Tertullian, *On Prayer* 28; Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 16.11.

¹¹Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 581; John Piper, "Not in This or That Mount, but in Spirit and Truth" (message given June 28, 2009), *Desiring God*, www.desiringgod.org/messages/not-in-this-or-that-mount-but-in-spirit-and-truth.

as an adulterer or prostitute exemplifies the dehumanizing, reductive sexualization of women in the theology and practice of the church. This pattern of interpretation endlessly repeats: Deborah and Jael, Bathsheba, Mary Magdalene, the woman who anoints Jesus in Luke 7:36-50. These women (among many others) are categorized and defined on the basis of gender and sexuality.¹²

As a consequence, their active participation in the story of Israel and the early church is diminished or lost entirely. The standard interpretations of biblical women impede their identification as leaders. This in turn limits the identification of these women as models for leadership in the church. Men cannot learn from their stories, and women are left without opportunity for active participation in the church or recognition for their contributions to the church.

Moreover, the reductive sexualization of women in the Bible teaches a message about women in the church: they are interesting or worthy of attention only with respect to sexuality. Women become objects of male desire and (consequently) stumbling blocks that cause men to fall into temptation and sin. The sexualization of women in theological tradition places the burden of sexual sin on women, at the same time making women available to men's gaze, desire, and action. As the history of the church shows all too clearly, this combination of minimization, limitation, and sexualization creates space for the victimization of women.

Because this book focuses on the story of the Samaritan woman, and because so many of the recent allegations of sexual assault and rape have come from women, I have chosen to limit my discussion to the particular issues of women (including adolescent girls). But women are not the only ones to experience sexual abuse. Young children and men are also assaulted, and while the majority of assailants are men, women are also abusers. This book is focused on one element of the crisis of abuse, but the argument has implications for other vulnerable peoples and other biblical stories.

The history of interpretation of John 4:4-42 is revealing. It opens a window into Christian understandings of sex and sexuality. It displays the church's

¹²See further Sandra Glahn, ed., *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2017).

minimization of women in the Bible and marginalization of women in Christian communities. These messages can have devastating consequences for the church.

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The problem of the metaphor's unintended effects remains. It is not enough for many readers and hearers to be told, upon hearing such shocking and brutal language, that the rape or torture just portrayed was (no worries!) "just" a metaphor—particularly when the real brutality suffered by some parishioners instantly upstages whatever the biblical point may have been.

JOHN L. THOMPSON, *READING THE BIBLE WITH THE DEAD*

John L. Thompson's comments concern the imagery of the prophets: unfaithful wives, vivid portrayals of prostitution, and horrifying depictions of sexual violence directed against women. He pushes us to consider the effects of this imagery on readers.¹³ How do we interpret texts like these? Especially, how do we interpret texts like these when we know that at least one in six women in the United States has been sexually assaulted? When, among Black women, that number is one in four, and among Indigenous women, one in three? When, from ages sixteen to nineteen, girls are four times more likely than anyone else to be raped or assaulted?¹⁴

In addition to physical assault and violence, 65 percent of women globally report incidents of unwanted touching, leering, comments, explicit photos, and solicitations. Compared with rape, these daily experiences may seem unimportant. But these less-physical forms of assault are part of a web of violence against women. When harassment becomes normative, so do more physical forms of assault.¹⁵

¹³Rachael Denhollander, *What Is a Girl Worth?* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2019), 89-90, addresses this same issue from the survivor's perspective.

¹⁴These statistics come from the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (www.rainn.org/statistics) and the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence (<https://vawnet.org/sc/gender-based-violence-and-intersecting-challenges-impacting-native-american-alaskan-village-1>). While these statistics are specific to the United States, international data suggests similar trends around the world (with significant variation between countries and regions).

¹⁵See Pamela Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 65.

The way the church reads, interprets, and teaches the Bible matters. It matters for victims and survivors of sexual violence. It matters for perpetrators of sexual violence. How we use the Bible has consequences for the values, relationships, and messages of Christian communities. To misrepresent or omit traditionally feminine imagery or stories about women limits our understanding of God, God's people, and God's kingdom.

Take, for instance, biblical representations of God. Many metaphors come from nature (God is a rock or a fire). Others reflect masculine images like fathers, kings, or shepherds. But the Bible also portrays God as a woman giving birth, a mother bear avenging her cubs, and a woman cleaning her whole house to find a lost coin (Is 42:14; Hos 13:8; Lk 15:8-10). If we ignore these representations of God, we stunt our own knowledge of God. In the process, we also make it more difficult to recognize the image of God in women.¹⁶

Deborah the prophet spoke God's word to Israel, and all the people respected her judgment (Judg 4-5). Women traveled with Jesus along with the twelve (male) disciples (Lk 8:1-3). Paul recognized Phoebe as a leader of the church (Rom 16:1-2). When we claim that Deborah only led because no good men were available, ignore the presence of women among Jesus' closest disciples, and demote Phoebe from deacon and patron to servant, we effectively marginalize women in the story of God's people. These interpretations weaken the church by preventing women from using their gifts of speaking, teaching, and leadership.¹⁷

Sometimes, all too often, the stories we choose to read together and the messages we proclaim don't just limit our understanding of God or dilute our practices of faith. Sometimes the ways we read the Bible endanger women. The creation of woman in Genesis 2:18-25 and her transgression and its consequences in Genesis 3:1-16 are used to teach the inferiority of women, their greater inclination to sin, and their necessary subjugation to any and all male authority. The instructions to wives in 1 Peter 3:1-6 are used to

¹⁶See further Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992; repr., New York: Crossroad, 2018), 3-6, 34-42, 79-107.

¹⁷Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women: Fresh Perspectives on Disputed Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), explores these ideas more thoroughly. See esp. pages 25-26, 114, 128-29.

discourage women in abusive relationships from seeking help or leaving an abusive partner.¹⁸

Likewise, the intersection of women, sex, and sin has serious consequences. Dinah bears the responsibility for her assault because she left her father's home to visit the Canaanite women (Gen 34). This interpretation sends a message about rape. It is the woman's fault: What was she wearing? Where was she? How was she behaving? She deserves what she gets for leaving the safety of her father's house and placing temptation in a man's way.¹⁹

Bathsheba bathes naked in what she knows to be the sight of the king. She seduces David, a man after God's own heart, into the sin of adultery (2 Sam 11). This interpretation ignores the power imbalances highlighted in the narrative. It blurs the distinction between adultery and assault. It also warns godly men against the danger of sexual, seductive, power-hungry women.²⁰

The sin of the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears is defined as prostitution (what other kind of sin could a woman commit?). This woman is identified with the woman who anointed Jesus before his burial, who is then named as Mary the sister of Martha, who (on the basis of a shared name) is identified with Mary Magdalene. By this chain of interpretive moves, the "apostle to the apostles" becomes a reformed prostitute. The collapsing of four people into one minimizes women's contribution to Jesus' ministry. It also reduces four complex stories to a single, simple message centered in women's problematic sexuality and immorality.²¹

These interpretations are imposed on the biblical text. They ignore narrative clues that suggest a different message—Dinah's brothers' understanding of what has happened to her in Genesis 34:31; Nathan's

¹⁸See Amanda W. Benckhuysen, *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 11, 49-50 (and throughout); Peppiatt, *Scripture's Vision*, 44-54; Caryn A. Reeder, "1 Peter 3:1-6: Biblical Authority and Battered Wives," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25 (2015): 519-39.

¹⁹John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 188-92; Mary DeMuth, *We Too: How the Church Can Respond Redemptively to the Sexual Abuse Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2019), 34-36.

²⁰See Sarah Bowler, "Bathsheba: Vixen or Victim?" in Glahn, *Vixens*, 81-100; Ruth Everhart, *The #MeToo Reckoning: Facing the Church's Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 100, 113-24.

²¹The three anointing stories appear in Lk 7:36-50; Mk 14:3-9 (paralleled in Mt 26:6-13); and Jn 12:1-8. See further Karla Zazueta, "Mary Magdalene: Repainting Her Portrait of Misconceptions," in Glahn, *Vixens*, 255-72.

condemnation of David's abuse of power in 2 Samuel 12:1-7; the broad meaning of "sinner" in Luke's Gospel. These interpretations also miss the responsibility men bear for their own sexual morality.

As Linda Klein notes, women in contemporary churches are often told they are "stumbling stones" to the men around them. Their bodies, clothing, and behavior make men fall into sexual sin.²² In other words, women endanger men. The solution is to control women's presence in the church with, for instance, dress codes, restrictions on leadership, and the "Billy Graham rule" (which limits the time and space men share with women other than their own wives).

In March 2021, a young White man shot eight people who worked at massage parlors in Atlanta, Georgia (one man and seven women, six of whom were of Asian descent). The shooter, who was active in his church, allegedly attributed the violence to sex addiction. He killed eight people in order to remove the source of temptation—a shocking, disturbing outworking of the identification of women as "stumbling stones." Responding to this violence, Rachael Denhollander warns that Christian teachings on sexuality "can be life and death," particularly for minoritized communities (as discussed further below).²³

However, in Mark 9:42-48 the stumbling stone refers to the abuse of a vulnerable person. Here and in Matthew 5:27-30, Jesus demands that men who objectify women (or anyone else), seeking to satisfy their own sexual desires, police themselves to the extent of maiming their own bodies.²⁴ Paul's prohibition of the use of prostitutes in 1 Corinthians 6:15-16 protects these enslaved men and women from abuse by Christian men.²⁵ Instructions to a church leader in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 demand sexual integrity in all relationships

²²Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Touchstone, 2018), 3.

²³Rachael Denhollander, @R_Denhollander, Twitter thread, March 17, 2021, https://twitter.com/R_Denhollander/status/1372220091048333320.

²⁴Marie Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 101-2, addresses Mt 5:27-30 as representative of sexual violence.

²⁵Though this protection may not be the primary purpose of Paul's exhortation, it is a consequence.

with the people of the church, putting the responsibility for ethical behavior entirely on the leader.

These New Testament texts address men, reflecting the patriarchal cultural norms of the first century. But the warnings and instructions apply to all people. No one should take advantage of someone else, not by the way they look at, speak to, or treat the other person.

To restrict the Bible's women to their (sexualized) bodies and physical desires, to interpret women's words and actions as the deliberate seduction of men: These messages misrepresent the biblical text. They define women as sexual objects. They limit women's contributions to God's kingdom to sex. These messages make women's bodies available to men, and also make the women complicit in any action the men might take. Harassment, assault, and rape are reduced to mutual sin. And women are blamed for the "sin" regardless of their age, social position relative to the man, fear, or shame.

READING THE BIBLE AFTER #CHURCHTOO

*I wonder if the stranger who raped Melissa grew up hearing
Scripture interpreted to make women rape-able.*

RUTH EVERHART, *THE #METOO RECKONING*

The reductive sexualization of the women in the Bible has dangerous consequences for women of all ages in our churches. It contributes to the creation of an environment within which sexual abuse can develop and flourish. As with Everhart's story of Melissa, raped in a hallway during a Christmas Eve worship service, the stories of sexual assault that have been told as part of the #ChurchToo movement make the danger clear.

In October 2017, Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey published nearly thirty years of accusations of sexual misconduct by Harvey Weinstein. The publicity of Weinstein's case—and the speed with which he lost his credibility and his freedom—encouraged many women and some men to share their own experiences under the hashtag #MeToo (originally

proposed by activist Tarana Burke in 2006). A wildfire of allegations grew against actors, directors, politicians, and more.²⁶

#MeToo also inspired victims and survivors of sexual abuse, harassment, and wrongdoing perpetrated by Christian leaders to tell their stories. One of these women, Emily Joy Allison, tweeted her experience of being groomed by a youth leader in her church when she was only fifteen years old. Allison's friend, Hannah Paasch, added the hashtag #ChurchToo, and within a day the first story had been augmented by many more.²⁷

Of course, these allegations are only the latest in a long history. Beginning in the second century, church leaders expressed concern for the safety of unmarried women dedicated to service in the church if men saw and desired them.²⁸ Reports of harassment, exploitation, and rape among anchorites, monastic communities, and churches appear in sources from the Middle East and across Europe, up to and beyond the Reformation.²⁹

More recently, from the 1980s on, survivors and investigative journalists have revealed the systemic abuse of children, women in religious orders, and others within the Catholic Church around the world. Protestants are also implicated, as witnessed by the abuses in various American contexts: seminary professor John Howard Yoder; pastors Bill Hybels, Jack Hyles, and Andy Savage, among others; a number of churches associated with the Southern

²⁶Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades," *New York Times*, October 5, 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html; and *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement* (New York: Penguin, 2019).

²⁷Emily Joy Allison (@emilyjoypoetry), Twitter thread, November 20, 2017, <https://twitter.com/emilyjoypoetry/status/932789409551929345>; see also Hannah Paasch, "Sexual Abuse Happens in #ChurchToo," *HuffPost*, December 4, 2017, www.huffpost.com/entry/sexual-abuse-church-too_n_5a205b30e4b03350e0b53131. Emily Joy Allison has related a fuller version of her story and her experience of making her story public in *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2021), 6-18.

²⁸Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 14.2; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Timothy* 8; John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. John King, 2 vols. (1847; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 2:218. This is a generous interpretation of these authors (who each put the burden of assault on the women rather than on the men who desire them), but they did at least show awareness of the danger of assault for women.

²⁹See, for instance, *Life of Maria the Harlot* 3 in *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources*, by Benedicta Ward, Cistercian Studies 106 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 92-101; Fructuosus of Braga, *Rule for the Monastery of Compludo* 17; Dentièrre, *Epistle*, 70-71; Jeanne de Jussie, *The Short Chronicle: A Poor Clare's Account of the Reformation of Geneva*, trans. and ed. by Carrie S. Klaus, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 62.

Baptist Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Methodist Church, and tragically, many more.³⁰

Unfortunately, until recently few people understood that these incidents of abuse in the church were part of a pattern rather than isolated or disconnected cases. The silencing of victims and survivors to protect institutional reputation further obscured the crisis of sexual abuse. #MeToo and #ChurchToo amplify survivors' stories, forcing us to recognize the extent and severity of the crisis.³¹

In social media posts, articles, and books, survivors are able to tell their own experiences unmediated by institutional perspectives. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements make the prevalence of the experience of harassment and assault across a variety of church contexts clear, relatable, and hard to ignore: "I interned at a church in college. A male pastor that made it clear to me that women cannot be pastors came up behind me and started playing with my hair. #churchtoo."³²

The contributions to #ChurchToo humanize the statistics of sexual assault in the church. In a 2008 survey, 2 to 4 percent of women in the United States reported sexual advances from religious leaders. Eight percent of women in this survey knew of a situation of misconduct on the part of a pastor, priest, rabbi, or other leader in their own worshipping community. In two other surveys, 39 percent of clergy self-reported their assault of a congregant, and a shocking 76 percent knew of a case in another church.³³

As alarming as they are, these numbers are likely lower than they should be due to the silence of victims, survivors, and institutions. Some estimates

³⁰These allegations are reviewed by Wietse de Boer, "The Catholic Church and Sexual Abuse, Then and Now," *Origins* 12, no. 6 (2019), <http://origins.osu.edu/article/catholic-church-sexual-abuse-pope-confession-priests-nuns>; Denhollander, *What Is a Girl*, 140-42; Everhart, #MeToo; Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 273-88; Allison, #ChurchToo.

³¹Cf. Kantor and Twohey, *She Said*, 181-82.

³²Laura (@hannlaub), Tweet, November 21, 2017, 12:04 p.m., <https://twitter.com/hannlaub/status/933063647823265792>.

³³Mark Chaves and Diana Garland, "The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Advances Toward Adults in Their Congregations," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (2009): 817-24; Diana Garland, "The Prevalence of Clergy Sexual Misconduct with Adults: A Research Study Executive Summary," *Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, <https://www.baylor.edu/clergysexualmisconduct/index.php?id=67406>; Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, 149-51.

suggest 60 to 70 percent of assaults are never reported.³⁴ The paralyzing effects of fear, shame, and the awareness that very few cases are successfully prosecuted contribute to this particular statistic. Underreporting is one of the many reasons that the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements are so important for empowering victims and survivors.

“Following the #churchtoo hash with interest. Many #metoo stories at the hands of the church. And me? I was made to sign a purity contract at age 11. And witnessed a man confess from the pulpit having sex w/a child. Praised for his bravery. No further action.”³⁵ As Elizabeth Halford’s experience suggests, allegations of harassment and assault are not easy for a church community to hear. Victims and survivors repeatedly report having their allegations silenced or covered over. Analysts and activists explain this sort of response as an indication that many Christians don’t understand the legal definitions of assault, how it happens and why, or how it affects victims and survivors. Suppressing allegations protects the church as an institution at the expense of the safety and healing of its members.³⁶

Sometimes, criminal acts are redefined as mutual sin or an inappropriate relationship. A pastor or other church leader might confess to falling prey to temptation or to having an affair. The identification of sexual harassment or assault as “sin” makes it a matter for the church to address without the involvement of law enforcement. When leaders or congregants confess their “sin,” they are forgiven by their churches—even, as in Elizabeth Halford’s story, applauded for their honesty and transparency.³⁷

Sexual violence is sin, as Marie Fortune insists. It is not natural, godly, ethical, or good. It violates the humanity and integrity of another person.³⁸ However, when perpetrators or church communities identify assault as “sin,” they usually mean mutual, nonviolent, noncoercive choices and actions taken by both participants. In essence, this approach makes the victim guilty of the sin of being assaulted.

³⁴Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, 107.

³⁵Elizabeth Halford (@TheAlphaBetty), Tweet, November 21, 2017, 3:56 p.m., <https://twitter.com/TheAlphaBetty/status/933091785915621376>.

³⁶See Anne Marie Miller, *Healing Together: A Guide to Supporting Sexual Abuse Survivors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2019), 34-42, 73; Everhart, #MeToo, 35, 53.

³⁷See also DeMuth, *We Too*, 20-23; Everhart, #MeToo, 136-40.

³⁸Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 1-4, 29-31, 66-69.

These reactions indicate the church's acceptance of abusers' false representation of abuse. As Mary DeMuth says, it is absolutely essential to recognize that sexual assault is not about sex, love, or relationship: "This is *not* about consensual affairs. This is about coercive control and abuse of power."³⁹

Occasionally, pastors and other leaders are asked to leave a church. But without criminal charges or public awareness of the allegations, they are free to repeat the abuse. Often, no action is taken against an alleged perpetrator. Perpetrators have admitted that they choose to be involved with churches because they know people are inclined to trust, to be nice, and to forgive.⁴⁰ The way that church communities (fail to) handle allegations of abuse perpetuates the abuse.

At the same time Christian communities praise and forgive male leaders, they shame women and girls for their unwanted sexual experiences: "#churchtoo: when I was told that I shouldn't have gone over to his house by myself. Not that they were sorry. Not that his role would be changed. Just that I shouldn't have gone over there alone (wearing a dress) because it caused him to be 'overcome by lust.'"⁴¹ Responses like this demonstrate the lack of awareness of issues of consent, power dynamics, and the trauma of assault. They also are the consequence of specific theological perspectives on sex, sin, and women.

The church has historically struggled to separate sex and sexuality from sin. In part, this connection develops from condemnations of certain categories of sexual intercourse in the Bible. Some New Testament texts seem to question the morality of any sexual intercourse (1 Cor 7:1-9, for instance). As we will see in chapter two, the ascetic inclinations of the early church compounded the definition of sex, whether with a legitimate spouse or someone else, as sin. The association of sex with sin has never entirely dissipated.

Sexuality also gets tied to gender in contradictory ways. Christian tradition has often depicted men as sexual actors and women as recipients.

³⁹See DeMuth, *We Too*, 118; and also Everhart, *#MeToo*, 47-55.

⁴⁰DeMuth, *We Too*, 54-55.

⁴¹Hannah (@hannahelisabeth), Tweet, November 21, 2017, 1:15 p.m., <https://twitter.com/hannahelisabeth/status/933081493668286464>. See also DeMuth, *We Too*, 126-29; Everhart, *#MeToo*, 140. Even when the case involves two legal adults, power imbalances in a clergy-parishioner relationship make consent impossible (see Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, 152-54).

Men are created by God to have authority in the church, society, and family. As a consequence of their natural (manly) power, they also have an uncontrollable sex drive. This understanding effectively excuses men from acting on their desires. They are only doing what God created them to do, after all.⁴²

Correspondingly, women are created by God as “helpmeets” (a term based on the King James translation of Gen 2:18). In terms of sexuality, they are taught to be submissive, subordinate recipients of male attention. As we will see, according to various Christian messages, women (sometimes limited to White women) do not have a natural sex drive. Their drive is rather to accept a man’s invitation.⁴³

The construction of women’s identity around men’s sexuality is, as many note, a significant factor in preventing girls and women from knowing that they can say no. Consent is murky in the midst of this gendered dichotomy between male and female.⁴⁴

The reactions and responses of Christian communities to allegations of abuse show another competing view of women: like their mother Eve, women tempt men to sin by using makeup, wearing clothes, having bodies, being present. The same women who are defined as submissive recipients become seductresses as soon as a man acts on his natural sex drive. The shaming and blaming of victims and survivors of assault excuse perpetrators by, as Ruth Everhart says, making the victim into the perpetrator.⁴⁵

The racialization of sexual stereotypes exacerbates this concern for minoritized women in the United States. For instance, Tamura Lomax addresses the construction of Black women as insatiably sexual: “black women and girls are marked by hypersexuality and pursuance as an essential component of coming

⁴²See Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28-31, 61; Everhart, *#MeToo*, 140; Du Mez, *John Wayne*, 91-95, 170-79, 277.

⁴³DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 112-13; Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 162-63; Du Mez, *John Wayne*, 91-92.

⁴⁴Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, 19; DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 31; D. L. Mayfield, “Focus on the Family,” *Christ and Pop Culture* (blog), August 7, 2015, <https://christandpopculture.com/focus-on-the-family/>; Susan A. Ross, “Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 632-52, esp. 639-42.

⁴⁵Everhart, *#MeToo*, 140. See also DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 112-13; Miller, *Healing Together*, 36, 174; Du Mez, *John Wayne*, 277-78.

of age—regardless of sexual experience or consent.”⁴⁶ The consequences of this racist construction are tragically clear in the statistics of rape and assault experienced by Black women. Similarly, the intersection of racialization and sexualization results in “mass objectification, exoticization, and fetishization” for women of Asian descent, factors underlying the mass shooting in Atlanta in March 2021.⁴⁷

Christian teaching has repeatedly defined women as inferior to men in terms of physical strength, intellectual ability, emotional control, personal discipline, authority, and power. The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements bear witness to the devastating consequences for women, children, and men. Male priests, pastors, youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, volunteers, and congregants are empowered to see girls and women as objects of desire to take and use. It’s not their fault, according to their own communities, because women bear the responsibility for men’s choices, behaviors, and actions. The reputation of the church or institution and the ministerial voice of the men are more valuable than women’s bodies and souls.

THE SAMARITAN WOMAN AND #CHURCHTOO

The treatment of the Samaritan woman in the history of interpretation is a textbook case of the trivialization, marginalization, and even sexual demonization of biblical women, which reflects and promotes the parallel treatment of real women in the church.

SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS, *WRITTEN THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE*

This book falls into two major sections, each with its own brief introduction. In part one, I explore the history of interpretation of the Samaritan woman. The interpretation of John 4:4-42 from Tertullian to today offers a window

⁴⁶Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion & Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), xii.

⁴⁷See the Asian American Christian Collaborative’s “AACC Statement on the Atlanta Massacre and Ongoing Anti-Asian Hate,” www.asianamericanchristiancollaborative.com/atlantastatement; and Nancy Wang Yuen, “Atlanta Spa Shooting Suspect’s ‘Bad Day’ Defense, and America’s Sexualized Racism Problem,” *Think* (blog), NBC News, 18 March 2021, www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/atlanta-spa-shooting-suspect-s-bad-day-defense-america-s-ncna1261362.

into the history of the sexual objectification of women in the church. As Sandra Schneiders says, the way the church tells this story (and others like it) has clearly contributed to the formation of troubling, dangerous perspectives on women, perspectives that cannot be separated from the abuses perpetrated against women. I will delve more deeply into these connections in chapter four.

While the focus through part one will remain on the majority interpretation, we will also listen to dissenting perspectives, men and women (okay, mostly women) who remind us of the Samaritan woman's agency, intelligence, and participation in the work of the gospel. A growing number of biblical scholars and pastors today agree with this minority report. In part two of this book, I follow these examples to propose a reinterpretation of John 4:4-42 focusing on the woman's contribution to Jesus' revelation of the new identity of the people of God.

Read in this way, the Samaritan woman's story challenges the church to value women as preachers, teachers, and equal participants in the kingdom of God. As I suggest in the conclusion, the work of analyzing the history of interpretation and exploring a reinterpretation of John 4:4-42 in this book offers guidance for reading the Bible after #ChurchToo. It is possible to resist the tendency to sexualize and minimize women in the church. Replacing the reductive sexualization of women in biblical texts with more constructive habits of interpretation is a necessary element in a Christian response to the crisis of sexual assault.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/the-samaritan-woman-s-story