

Let's Be Honest—Christian Women Have Been Hurt in Church

Comedian Bill Cosby wasn't laughing yesterday when he was led out of a Pennsylvania courtroom in handcuffs. He was sentenced to prison for drugging and sexually assaulting a woman 14 years ago. The judge in the case labeled Cosby "a sexually violent predator"—a statement that brought tears of relief to dozens of Cosby's other alleged victims.

Welcome to the uncomfortable #MeToo era. Ever since Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein was accused almost a year ago of forcing actresses to trade sex for acting jobs, sexual harassment has become the dominant headline in America. Everyone is staring at this elephant in the room—especially women, who once were too afraid to talk about it.

Yet I have found that we really aren't talking enough in the church about the obvious tension between the genders. Christian women are deeply wounded—not just because of sexual abuse but also because of blatant gender prejudice and insensitive comments from their brothers in Christ.

I decided to do an informal poll on social media yesterday. I asked my female friends on Facebook and Twitter to share what they considered the rudest comments or behavior they had endured from men in a church setting. Reading their answers (some were posted publicly, and many privately) was overwhelming. I divided their responses into categories:

- 1. Blatant sexual abuse.** Many of the women I polled were victims of abuse that happened on church property. One woman from Alabama said she was groped and fondled by a church leader when she was a teenager—and she never went back to church until she gave her heart to Christ at age 30. Another

woman was raped in the church parking lot, and no one on the church staff intervened or offered pastoral care.

2. Come-ons and inappropriate touching. Numerous women I contacted experienced this. One said that two married men reached over and kissed her, but she refused their unwanted advances. Another woman said a pastor looked down her shirt while standing over her. A female missionary said she was terrified after an ordained minister groped and fondled her. Several women said they felt uncomfortable when men from the church ogled them, stalked them, made sexual comments or tried to hug them too closely.

3. Bizarre gender bias. A woman was counseled by a man in her church that she should not have an epidural during childbirth “because pain is part of a woman’s punishment for sin.” Another woman was told that she was in sinful violation of 1 Timothy 2:15 if she did not immediately start having babies regularly after getting married.

4. Demands for “submission.” One woman from Texas was told by a pastor that she must stay in her marriage regardless of her husband’s physical and verbal violence. “I stayed in a very abusive marriage for 20 years,” she said. By the time she did divorce, her children had grown up. “Unfortunately, the abuse had ruined their chances of a healthy home life by that time,” she added.

5. Insensitivity to single women. Several single women told me they were shamed publicly by men in the church with comments like “Why aren’t you married yet?” or “What’s wrong with you? Why are you still single?”

6. Comments implying that women are always to blame for sexual sin. One woman from Georgia needed a ride to the airport during a Christian conference, and she asked a male minister for help. He refused because he said he was not allowed to be in a car alone with another woman. “This wasn’t harassment,

but it was sexist in that I am a sister in Christ, a fellow minister,” she said. Other women recalled being told in church that the reason men struggle with pornography is because women don’t dress modestly. “I grew up feeling that I was to blame for men’s porn addiction,” one woman said.

7. Blatant condescension. A 30-year-old ordained woman from Georgia said she encounters subtle sexism when male ministers call her a “girl” after she preaches. “Men who are my age are not spoken to that way. They are treated as peers,” she said. “Some people may not think twice about, and I know it’s never meant in a bad way, but I feel it reveals how some people view a 30-something woman in ministry vs. how they view a 30-something man in ministry.” Other women said they felt invisible because church leaders regularly referred to them as “John’s wife” or “Bill’s wife” rather than by their own first name.

8. Refusal to affirm a woman’s spiritual gifts or callings. The majority of responses to my question related to this topic. Women have been told they should never preach or lead in the church, and some who did step out in their leadership gifts were called “Jezebel” or worse. Others were installed in pastoral roles but not allowed to use the title “pastor.” Others were told that the only time God uses women in leadership “is when a man refuses to step into his rightful place.” (Almost all women called to full-time ministry shared stories of an uphill battle.)

I don’t believe the women I heard from this week are resentful. They are not grinding an axe or looking for ways to punish men. I know many of these women personally. Some of them hesitated to share their pain because they don’t want to be perceived as whiners or complainers. They have tended to be quiet about these injustices, and they only talked about them because I asked. They are godly women who simply want dignity and a seat at the table.

I believe it's time for godly men to offer sincere apologies and genuine sensitivity. The devil wants to divide men and women, and he can manipulate the #MeToo movement to trigger a nasty gender war. We can diffuse that tension by changing our macho attitudes. It's time for us to listen to each other and value each other. It's time to stop abusing, muzzling and minimizing the spiritual gifts of our sisters in Christ.