

Incarcerated Women: Theological Reflections on Their Stories

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During the past several years, I worked as senior chaplain of women at one of the nation's largest jails in Orlando, Florida. My experiences have left me with many conflicts and questions that I am still sorting out about women, our world, and the role of faith in it.

Madison's story (not her real name), and those of so many like her, helped create my conundrum. She was beautiful: tall, extremely thin, with lightly toned African American skin. With such striking good looks, she could have walked off the pages of a glamour magazine just as easily as into the chaplain's office. She sat down where dozens of troubled women, young and old, came every day. Barely old enough to be in jail at all, Madison's wide eyes looked deep into my own as she began her session with a question: "Can I be a prostitute and a Christian at the same time?"

She began pouring out a story, pieces of which I had heard hundreds of times. She had been raised in foster homes throughout her life, and, when she turned eighteen, she was sent out on her own, alone, with no resources, home, support structure, education—nothing. This beautiful child immediately fell into the sights of one of the many human merchandisers who prowl the back corners of our world. Baited with promises of fame and hopes of love and family, this child took the inducement.

With the casualness of discussing nail polish or favorite hair styles, she turned around and lifted her shirt to show me a back that looked like a scene from *Roots*. She revealed hundreds of ugly scars from beatings—violence that forced her submission and sent her into the dark streets of the sex trade, selling her body and soul because she believed she had no choice. Just as certain as the slavery in *Roots*, she, too, was a slave. With genuine sincerity, she wanted to give her life to Jesus Christ, but she considered that she had no life to offer, that her will was not her own.

This inmate's story might have been little more than another sad footnote to one more harrowing day if it did not represent the overspill of a terrifying and rising tide of human suffering. A modern sexual slavery industry is not only flourishing in Asia and Africa, but right here in our own American communities.

Human trafficking

In a very practical sense, nowhere is a better scriptural understanding of egalitarianism needed more than in the church's response to human trafficking, both domestic and international. While the church world strains out gnats of gender semantics, the world at large seems to be swallowing a camel that could wipe out all hopes and efforts at finding a more biblical paradigm for gender relations. Like a tsunami, the sex trafficking industry is

sweeping across our shores through an international deluge of pornography, and it threatens to redefine women, even Christian women, according to what is most base and vile among us. Its pandemic arms reach the world through the Internet, testing the veracity of God's people and their leaders.

The greatest obstacle that stood against the abolition of the slavery of blacks before the Civil War was a lucrative economic machine created by the sale of persons. Pitted against this powerfully evil force, abolitionism must have seemed an all-but-futile endeavor. Nevertheless, our ancestors, Christian mothers and fathers of conscience, spoke out against the grievous sin in their midst until they moved the mountain. They refused to stand silently by as their family members—fellow members of the family of humanity—were bought and sold as property.

The U.S. State Department agrees:

[A] modern form of human slavery has emerged. It is a growing global threat to the lives and freedom of millions of men, women, and children. Today, only in the most brutal and repressive regimes, such as Burma and North Korea, is slavery still state sponsored. Instead, human trafficking often involves organized crime groups who make huge sums of money at the expense of trafficking victims and our societies.¹

Yet, the purchasing of women for sexual slavery has evoked barely a yawn from today's Christian community. Why are we so willing to look the other way, or not to look at all, when women around the world are bought and sold every day like chattel into lives of torture and pain? Where is the outrage? Calls for change elicit a chuckle: "It's the oldest profession." So was slavery, murder, subjugation, and greed—all pillars of an evil kingdom Christ died to overthrow.

Looking closer

Whether or not the average churchgoer has clarified it in his or her mind, today's American church preaches and holds a popular theology of women. Generally speaking, the overall influence of Christianity upon culture has had a positive effect upon the lives of women. Yet, the church's response to human trafficking and prostitution through the ages has been less than robust. Has the church's practical theology of women fueled a weak response to human trafficking or even opened the door to such abuse? To address this question requires a better understanding of the human sexual slavery industry. By far, women outnumber men as targets.

The merchandising of women

In 2004, the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report said, "Of the 600,000 to 800,000 men, women, and children trafficked across international borders each year, approximately 80 percent are women and girls, and up to 50 percent are minors"; "The data also demonstrated that the majority of transnational victims were trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation." These numbers do not account for the multiplied millions of women and girls who are trafficked within their own national borders.²

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Such figures include many of the female inmates who populate our local jails. About 40,450 of the nearly 2.6 million female arrests in 2007 involved prostitution charges.³ This number does not reflect drug-related charges often linked with a complex of behaviors that include prostitution. Although popular wisdom suggests these female inmates freely chose their lifestyle, my experience at the jail indicated that the truth was much more complex.

Early sexual abuse

Early sexual abuse and later incarceration are strongly linked:

Between 6 percent and 14 percent of male offenders and between 23 percent and 37 percent of female offenders reported they had been physically or sexually abused before age 18. A review of 16 studies estimated that for the general adult population 5 percent to 8 percent of males and 12 percent to 17 percent of females were abused as children.⁴

Other painful statistics draw a link between incarceration and sexual abuse. Nationwide, a third of women in state prison, a sixth in federal prison, and a quarter in local jails had been raped before their sentence. Among state prison inmates, one in twenty men and one in four women said they had been sexually abused before age eighteen.⁵ Of 150 female inmates interviewed in a United States prison, 59 percent reported sexual abuse in childhood.⁶

In a brief from the National Institute of Justice, research conducted in 1995 indicated that “compared to victims of childhood physical abuse and neglect, victims of childhood sexual abuse are at greater risk of being arrested for one type of sex crime: prostitution.”⁷ Individuals with a history of sexual abuse were found to be three to nine times more likely to participate in prostitution and pornography than those without such a history.⁸ One study found “an estimated 300,000 children in the United States are at risk of being sexually exploited for commercial use.”⁹

The phenomenon of female inmates—once considered a rarity—is increasing at an exponential rate. I believe this reflects an increase in the sexual exploitation of women within U.S. borders: “Although long considered too small a population to warrant extensive consideration, women now constitute the most rapidly growing segment of the prison population and the segment about which we know the least.”¹⁰ By 2000, the total number of female inmates nationwide had increased by 92 percent since 1990.¹¹ The yearly rate of growth for incarcerated women is 1.5 times higher than the rate of growth for men.¹² “Between 1977 and 2001 the population of all prisoners grew by 348 percent—from 300,024 in 1977 to 1,344,512 in 2001. The population of female prisoners grew by 592 percent—from 12,279 in 1977 to 85,031 in 2001.”¹³

The gap between incarcerated women and men is narrowing precipitously: “In 1977, there were 23 men for every woman in state and federal prisons. In 2001 there were 15 men for every woman in prison.”¹⁴ At the Orange County Jail, on January 9, 2009, 12 percent of the inmates were female compared to 88 percent male.¹⁵ Today, the national population of women in prison is as large as the city of Trenton, New Jersey.¹⁶

Not only are many of these incarcerations linked, directly and indirectly, to sexual abuse in childhood, they are also part of a complex of behaviors involving self-abuse through addiction.

Drugs, addiction, and incarceration

My many discussions with incarcerated women revealed a recurring pattern: a downward spiral beginning with early sexual abuse, moving to a nearly unbreakable link to drugs/alcohol addiction, then to prostitution, numerous incarcerations, mental and physical illness and breakdown, finally ending in early death.

Bureau of Justice statistical data suggest a strong linkage between addiction and prior abuse:

Illegal drug use and regular drinking were more common among abused State prison inmates than among those who were not abused. An estimated 76 percent of abused men and 80 percent of abused women had used illegal drugs regularly, compared to 68 percent of men and 65 percent of women who had not been abused. About 69 percent of abused men and 58 percent of abused women reported drinking regularly at some time in their lives, compared to 60 percent of men and 38 percent of women who were not abused.¹⁷

Women are more often incarcerated for less violent crimes than are represented in this downward spiral:

Since more women are convicted for non-violent, drug-related crimes than for any other, [minimum] sentencing policies have had a particularly profound effect on women. Ten years after mandatory sentences for drug offenses were enacted, the number of women sentenced to state prisons has increased ten-fold.¹⁸

The link between abuse, addiction, and incarceration is a strong one: “Abused State inmates were more likely than those reporting no abuse to have been using alcohol or illegal drugs at the time of their offense. This pattern occurred especially among female inmates.” An estimated 80 percent of abused women had used illegal drugs regularly. Forty-six percent of abused women committed their current offense under the influence of illegal drugs, and 33 percent were drinking.¹⁹

A paper presented at the conference *After the Crisis: Healing from Trauma after Disasters*, held in April 2006 in Bethesda, Maryland, reaffirmed the linkage between early sexual trauma, drug addiction, and incarceration. According to an expert panel, those with severe trauma histories are as likely to end up in jail or prison as in mental institutions: “Estimates of the prevalence rate of trauma reach as high as 80 percent for women presently incarcerated in jails and prisons.”²⁰

Early sexual trauma

Clearly, early sexual trauma has a devastating and enduring impact upon a life. Examining the statistics with respect to age of occurrence clarifies the matter even further. A Bureau of Statistics analysis of reported sexual crimes said that

[O]ne percent of victims of these crimes were 54 or older. Seven percent of victims were over age 34. Another 12 percent were ages 25 through 34, and 14 percent were between the ages of 18 and 24. The remainder, over two-thirds (67%) of all victims of sexual assault reported to law enforcement agencies, were juveniles (under the age of 18 at the time of the crime). More than half of all juvenile victims were under age 12. That is, 33 per-

cent of all victims of sexual assault reported to law enforcement were ages 12 through 17 and 34 percent were under 12. Most disturbing is that one of every seven victims of sexual assault (or 14%) reported to law enforcement agencies were under age 6.²¹

The single age with the greatest number of sexual assaults reported was fourteen. There were more victims in each individual age group between three and seventeen than in any adult group, and more victims age two than in any age group above age forty. For victims under age twelve, four-year-olds were at the greatest risk of sexual assault. These crimes are committed almost exclusively by males against females: “Nearly all of the offenders in sexual assaults reported to law enforcement were male (96%).” Females were six times as likely as males to be victims of sexual assaults; i.e., 86 percent of all victims were female. Very often, those who sexually assault these young girls are fathers, brothers, uncles, stepfathers, and boyfriends: “About half (49%) of offenders of victims under age 6 were family members, compared with 42 percent of the offenders who sexually assaulted youth ages 6 through 11, and 24 percent of offenders who sexually assaulted juveniles ages 12 through 17.” Most of those who sexually assault young children are known to them: “Sixty percent of all sexual assault offenders were classified by law enforcement as acquaintances of the victim.”²²

These results are echoed in my observations at the Orange County Jail. Each month, I processed more than 300 ministry interviews, called one-on-one sessions, using my own time and the time of about ten other well-trained, experienced female ministers, both paid staff and competent volunteers. We heard many variations of the same recurring story: The woman, usually young, often reported being molested or raped by a father, mother’s boyfriend, uncle, or another “protector” figure early in life, sometimes so early that the details were painful to hear. Seeming to internalize the objectification, she began acting out sexually, using drugs to “stuff and run” from inner pain with which she could not cope. The drugs often led her to prostitution, and the prostitution and/or drug abuse often brought her into jail.

Immediately prior to my transition from the Female Detention Center, we launched a chaplain’s dorm to provide faith-based treatment for the women during their incarceration, with the hope of placing them in continuing aftercare upon their departure. I asked the women to complete a sexual abuse assessment survey to gather statistical information regarding the less formal interview observations made by our team linking early sexual abuse to consequent sexualized behavior and crime.²³

The voluntary survey was completed by twenty-one women who answered questions regarding their first sexual experiences, when intercourse first occurred, whether these experiences represented abuse and molestation, how they felt about themselves afterwards, whether pornography was available in the home, what the faith commitment and family composition was, and whether or not the individual believed her incarceration was linked to early, negative sexual experiences.

Regarding their introduction to the knowledge of sex, three said a male relative took advantage of them and “showed” them

about sex in a way that made them feel “unsafe” or “violated.” Five said their earliest sexual experiences, including touching, kissing, petting, etc., occurred after six but before eight years old. One said her earliest experience was before six years old. Only four reported that sexual activity began after sixteen years old, with most experiencing some level of sexual activity (five women) after fourteen but before sixteen years old.

One said intercourse occurred before six years old. Three said intercourse occurred after eight but before ten years old. Three said intercourse occurred after twelve but before fourteen, and six said intercourse occurred after fourteen

but before sixteen years old. Seven women said their first experience with intercourse occurred after sixteen years old.

Regarding the faith commitment of the families of women who experienced intercourse before the age of sixteen, one individual said that someone in her family was a church pastor, one said someone in the family was a lay leader, three families attended church regularly on Sundays and during the week, two attended on Sundays only, one attended on Christmas and Easter only, four attended at one period of time but left and never returned, and only two families never attended church at all.

Of those who experienced sexual activity before age sixteen, eleven families did not have pornography around the house. One family had pornography that was kept hidden, three had pornography that was kept out of the reach of children but could be accessed by them, and only one family directly encouraged its children to read pornography.

A surprising thirteen women had both a mother and father in the home. Three had no father present, and the mother never brought in a boyfriend. One mother had boyfriends who did not live with the family, and one had boyfriends who did live with the family.³⁴ As to family structure, five women said their fathers and mothers were equal partners, four said their parents loved and respected each other, two said the woman did not respect the man, two said the man in the house abused the woman, three said the man in the house cheated on the mother, and five said the woman ruled the house. Three said the woman in the house cheated on the man, and two said the woman in the house abused the man. Three said the man in the house did not respect the woman.

When asked if early sexual experiences had an impact in later life, one said it destroyed her life, five were deeply affected, and five said they were not sure. Did their early sexual experiences impact their incarceration? Two said these experiences were the reason they became addicted, two said they led to prostitution, four said they were the reason they rebelled, and two said they left them feeling angry and hateful. Nine women did not see a connection.

Two-thirds of the women experienced sexual intercourse before the age of sixteen—which, if the male involved was an adult, falls within the definition of statutory rape—and most reported that it left them feeling negative about themselves. Not all of the women were incarcerated for prostitution, but about 80 percent were incarcerated for drug-related offenses, which often included prostitution. Not being arrested for prostitution did not ensure that the woman was not or had not worked as a prostitute.

In embracing patriarchy and female subjugation, have our churches failed to provide a just and moral foundation for the protection of our daughters—and sons?

Safe at home?

At the very least, we can conclude that often families are unsafe places for little girls, and that early, negative, and abusive sexual experiences have occurred far more often in an incarcerated population than in the general population. Female children increasingly are targets of lust and sexual violation, and they seldom walk away unscathed. Sometimes they are thrust into a life of self-abuse, escape and drugging, and lifelong sexual violation through prostitution. Although their pathway to wholeness involves taking responsibility for their own sinful choices, we must consider the possibility of a link between a legal pornography industry and the sexually predatory behaviors it creates. As with American African American slavery and abolition, clearly the society as a whole bears some culpability, including the Christian community.

As my team and I worked with these women, I felt as though I were walking among the ruins of a society derailed by lust and perversion. Many of these women reported some link to a local church, but did those churches shine a beacon of moral redemption into sin-corrupted family systems? In embracing patriarchy and female subjugation, have our churches failed to provide a just and moral foundation for the protection of our daughters—and sons? If egalitarianism that honors, respects, and protects both genders had been preached for the past two thousand years, would life have been different for so many of today's young women?

Gender abuse from the pulpit

Although the church has been the cultural champion of families and children, its patriarchalism has had the effect of diminishing the value of women. We have been handed down a “Christian” paradigm of thinking about women that competes against biblical core values of the dignity and sanctity of all human life, including female human life. Has the church's historical theology of women fueled a weak response to the sexual abuse of women and girls or even opened the door to such abuse?

Historically, the church has taken the pagan Greek notion that women were created for the use and pleasure of men, overlaid it upon Christian theology, and called it “divine order.”²⁴ Early Christian fathers borrowed a value-based hierarchal understanding of life from the Greeks that assigned greater worth and privilege to males. Tagged the “Great Chain of Being,” the divine order involved a hierarchal declension of beings, with God at the top, and, at the human level, males listed as closest to God. Women fell beneath the men as lesser beings. Arthur O. Lovejoy writes,

By these assertions [of Aristotle] there was established, from the very beginning of natural history [from the time of the ancient philosophers], a principle which was long to remain authoritative: that according to which living beings are linked to one another by regularly graduated affinities. . . . Thus from Aristotelian science two ideas—very differently elaborated and, in truth, rather loosely connected with one another—were received as a legacy by natural history in the Renaissance. The one was the idea of a hierarchy of beings; a philosophical dogma which Christian theology, following Neo-Platonism, had often made the theme of an essentially speculative interpretation of the universe.²⁵

This hierarchy of value, power, and contribution poured into the church through the early church fathers. The Great Chain of Being dramatically influenced other schools of thought including Darwinism, Nazism, American racism, and gender bias. Because of their lower place on the Great Chain of Being, women were considered by the Greeks to be inferior and, in fact, not fully human: “Socrates often referred to woman as ‘the weaker sex’ and declared that ‘being born a woman is divine punishment since a woman is half-way between a man and an animal.’”²⁶ Aristotle wrote that the female is a “monstrosity,”²⁷ and a “deformed male,”²⁸ which occurs in the ordinary course of nature.²⁹

Early church fathers, influenced not by Scripture but by the ancient Greeks, laid an unbiblical foundation that undermined the pillars of Christian justice and dignity of all persons for centuries following. In direct contradiction to Genesis 1:26–27, Augustine said, “but separately, as helpmate, the woman herself alone is not the image of God; whereas the man alone is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined with him.”³⁰ In other words, Augustine considered man a higher order of being, closer to God and more perfectly like him.

Greek orator Demosthenes (384–322 B.C.) asserted that women existed solely for the use of men: “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children.”³¹ This pagan notion that women were created for the sexual use of men was embraced and not challenged by some early church fathers. For example, Augustine encouraged the perpetuation of prostitution. He said, “Rid society of prostitutes and licentiousness will run riot throughout. . . . Prostitutes in a city are like a sewer in a palace. If you get rid of the sewer, the whole palace becomes filthy and foul.”³²

Murky, confused theology

In a church encumbered by confusion regarding the purpose and value of females, church leaders have inherited a flawed moral platform from which to launch aggressive reforms or herald a cry for change. Much like Southern preachers during slavery, their own sense of moral clarity has become murky, making them part, not of change, but of maintaining an unacceptable status quo. Our murky morality has betrayed us even further. The church's longstanding confused and conflicted theology of women heralded from pulpits has been translated from the perspective of the pew to be a license of gender entitlement.

For example, sexual addiction expert Steve Gallagher says that, in counseling Christian sex addicts, the most difficult aspect of the process is convincing the men that they have done anything wrong at all:

Men who come to us for help are often struggling with the deepest perversions imaginable. With this in mind, it would probably surprise you to see how they rate themselves spiritually. Typically, the applicants rate themselves fairly high on everything except self-discipline. . . . The majority of them come into the program thinking of themselves as being fairly godly people with only “one small problem.” It takes months of patient work on the part of our counselors to help a man see that he is not as godly as he has thought he was and that there is much work to be done in his life.³³

Gallagher insists that sexual sin is pervasive both in the pulpit and the pew. Sex addiction “is not only pervasive in the American culture at large but is a festering sore within the Church itself—from the pulpit to the pews.” In fact, “a recent survey taken by *Promise Keepers* revealed that sixty-five percent of the men questioned reported the regular usage of pornography.”³⁴ This begs the question: How many Christian men have remained completely unaffected? And what has been the cost to females with respect to self-esteem and understanding their divine purpose?

Better theology

Even in responses to the growing cancer of internet pornography among Christians, one is challenged to find arguments based upon the value, dignity, and sanctity of women as created in God’s image for God’s purposes, not for men’s personal desires.

A better theology of both men and women, one found in the Genesis account of the Godhead, must be universally heralded and embraced as a platform for the dignity of all humanity, women—and, yes, former and even current prostitutes—included. The Christian community must reach for a deeper understanding of identity and authority based upon the Trinitarian reflection of the *imago Dei*.³⁵ The church needs to stress the certain understanding that all women are created in God’s image, and that when we defile that image—through internet pornography, prostitution, incest, or any and all sexual abuse against females, real or imagined—real change is unlikely.

The suffering of God’s incarcerated daughters cries out for change. But, practically speaking, can we really expect change to arise solely from a male leadership heavily influenced by popular images that sexualize and objectify women? Or will change come about only when righteous women find their voices, when women realize they are mothers in the church and these strangers—these incarcerated women—are their daughters? I am speaking in terms of authority and responsibility. Half of the world is made up of women. If just a small percent asserted themselves for the sake of these daughters, change might be possible.

It is imperative that all of us raise our voices for truth and justice for our daughters and their daughters. We must raise the standard of God’s truth with respect to the dignity of all persons, female and male. Madison and millions like her are waiting for our voices to rise up and break her bonds—and to set her free.

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