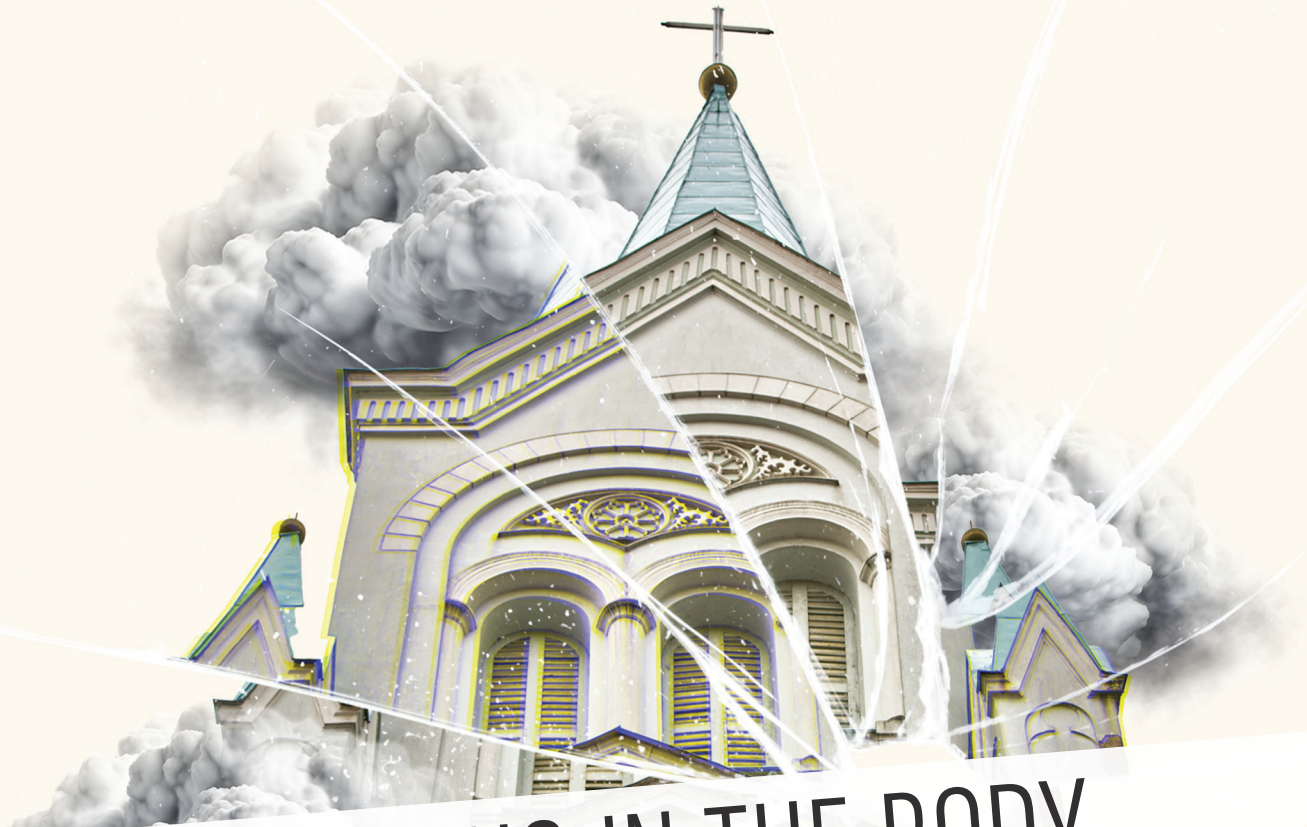


Autumn 2024

Mutuality

A Publication from CBE International



BULLYING IN THE BODY

How Slander Divides the Church

Navigating the Tempest

by Marissa Burt

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A Target on My Back

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with Craig Keener
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"Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19, NRSV).

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EDITORIAL STAFF

Editor: Carrie Silveira

Graphic Designer: Margaret Lawrence

Publisher/President: Mimi Haddad

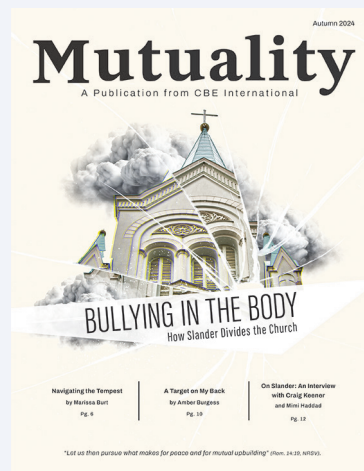
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“They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love”

There is an old song written by Peter Scholtes during a period of social and racial upheaval in the United States. Reflecting John 13:35, the song repeats the refrain: “We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord; they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love...”

Can that be said about ourselves, our churches, and our denominations? Bullying, gossip, and slander: three words that should not be a part of the Christian’s vocabulary yet are often strategies in our discourse with those who hold different beliefs from us. While egalitarian theology is CBE’s focus, we may find ourselves divided on any number of issues, from theology and doctrine to politics and beyond. How we navigate these moments reveals the condition of our hearts.

The Bible gives clear instruction on how to treat those with whom we disagree (2 Tim. 2:24–25, 1 Pet. 3:14–16). Jesus consistently challenged expectations, calling us to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:43–44). Whatever their positions, our brothers and sisters in Christ are not our enemies; a house divided against itself cannot stand (Mark 3:25). Over and over, we are called to unity and harmony as one body; the phrase “of one accord” appears more than twenty times in the Bible to describe the followers of God.

As seen in previous issues of *Mutuality*, being in unity does not mean we will agree on everything. It is the variety of perspectives, callings, and gifts working together that make the body of Christ healthy. Raising suspicion about someone’s beliefs or character under the guise of concern—without speaking with them directly and giving them a chance to clear up misunderstanding—is gossip. Getting caught up in a single narrative without room for others, consideration for context, or the other side of the story is a fatal flaw that can lead to blanket generalizations and misrepresentations. Perpetuating a single narrative without humbly checking the facts is destructive, as is remaining silent while others go on the attack.

We must be intentional not only about what we believe but also how we engage. This can be a challenge; when faced with someone who opposes us, the inclination to react or retaliate can be strong. We can lose sight of the person behind their argument, forgetting they too are made in the image of God. Character assassination, mockery, marginalization, and intimidation can seem like effective means of silencing

those with whom we disagree. As we will see in the pages of this issue, participating in gossip, bullying, and slander is a mortal sin, regardless of our intentions. The ends do not justify the means. The fruit of the Spirit is described as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). Outrage does not make the list. There is a place for righteous anger, but we must communicate it constructively, with love, as we seek reconciliation and peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ.¹

It is not easy, particularly when we ourselves have been the victims of slander. When we feel hurt, and especially when we are certain we are in the right, it is easy to respond with attacks of our own. But we are called in no uncertain terms to “not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing” (1 Pet. 3:9). Turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:38–40) and responding in love and mercy in the face of pain are examples given to us by Jesus himself. Even when we are called to speak the truth in love or protect ourselves by stepping away or turning to legal assistance, the Lord can give us a spirit of grace and forgiveness.

Some key questions can help us monitor our hearts when being drawn into conflict. Why are we so riled by a particular statement or belief? Do we seek to defend the Lord or our own ego, to retaliate or to understand? Three further questions can then help guide our response: “Is it true? Is it kind? Is it helpful?” In other words, are we adding light or just heat? Humble self-analysis in prayer will help us to respond in grace instead of reacting or falling silent. When we find that a brother or sister genuinely needs correction and exhortation, we are called to do so, first in private, with gentleness and humility, being characterized by love and peace (Matt. 18:15–17, 1 Thess. 5:11–18, Eph. 4:2–3).

In a world torn apart, unity and love are not easy, even in the body of Christ. Yet that is our radical call as Christians who are to be known by our **love**.

Notes

1. While some may cite Jesus’s turning of the tables in the temple, it is worth remembering that Jesus is God and, as such, is the rightful knower and final judge of our hearts—something none of us can claim.

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A Tale of Two Picnics

By Elizabeth Fields

It was the best of times...

A summer picnic burgeoning with young, ambitious church planters. Discount hamburgers on the rusty park grill. Potato and macaroni salad dripping in warm mayonnaise. Lilacs in bloom and kids running through midwestern grass with watermelon slices in hand. I slipped away from the beautiful chaos to nurse our newborn son while my husband chased our three-year-old daughter. A dear friend came to check on me after realizing I had been gone awhile. Her simple kindness helped me in my postpartum state feel seen and valued. Unified as a team, we planned to conquer our city with the love of Jesus.

It was the worst of times...

Five years later, we gathered at another picnic. Church planting ambitions shattered on the rocks of divisive criticism. Discord alienated hearts. Gossip betrayed friendships. Love grew ice cold. The sharpest knife could not cut through the awkward tension. People had a lot to say but sat in bitter silence. The kids lingered close with worry, sensing the conflict but protected from the details.

This painful dichotomy can harden the softest heart, running off the most faithful parishioners. My husband and I weathered the storm, but it also weathered us. It took years to untangle the damage. “Christians eat their own,” a dear woman expressed, still yanking out the shrapnel from her own church pain.

How can this detrimental experience be a consistent pattern that is so divergent from the unity detailed

in the book of Acts? During the Church’s explosive inception, “believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” “All the believers were together and had everything in common.” Every day they continued to meet together, “praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42, 44, 46–47; see also 4:32–34).

Church planters have poured over these verses for two thousand years, desiring eager implementation. However, they are often met with derailed faith, broken friendships, and efforts empty of God’s transformative power. We stand baffled by the disconnect.

Even though conflict is a part of life, *tearing each other down* will never build up the Church. Weaponizing words, aggressive natures, misrepresentations, false accusations, and exclusive mentalities are not characteristics of believers, but classic descriptions of a bully. This might be normative behavior in the world, but allowing it to seep into the Church perpetuates an agenda that is anti-Christian. Paul said believers should be perfectly united in mind and thought, with no divisions among them (1 Cor. 1:10). He tells Titus to warn divisive people (Titus 3:9–11). He writes in Romans to watch out for those who cause divisions, put up obstacles, and use smooth talk and flattery (Romans 16:17–18). Scripture is clear: Christians need discernment to avoid falling prey to deceptive, divisive agendas that stifle the Holy Spirit and live according to the flesh.

Therefore, how do we flourish in our churches and Christian relationships when we have an enemy bent on destroying and dividing us? I believe we must understand three key truths:

1. **Christ gave us victory.** Jesus told Peter that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church (Matt. 16:18). *That means hell is on the defensive—and the Church is on the offensive.* The body of Christ is called and equipped to advance and grow, while hell sits gated in defeat. John says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Yet Satan is a liar, “the father of lies” (John 8:44). He deceives us into thinking the Church is on the defensive. Powerless and fearful, we long to be raptured from this evil world more than we desire to go into all the world and make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Sure, we are hard pressed on every side, *but not crushed*; perplexed, *but not in despair*; persecuted, *but not abandoned*; struck down, *but not destroyed* (2 Cor. 4:8–9). Defeat does not define Christians, because we are more than conquerors in Christ (Romans 8:37)!
2. **God’s wisdom must guide us.** Harsh, competitive, aggressive personalities that use lies and character attacks, that demonstrate a desire to control or exclude others should alert leaders of a need for healing, not elevation. Placating insecurities fuels immaturity, not growth. We need to join James in asking for wisdom (James 1:5) because it’s an oxymoron to do God’s work without God’s help.
3. **Live filled by the Spirit, not the flesh.** Scripture explicitly teaches that God sets the ministry standard higher than humans can achieve. We can’t accomplish the works of God in our flesh. Paul admonished, “After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3). He says in Romans that the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God . . . “and *cannot* please him” (Romans 8:7). Likewise, Jesus said, “The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for *nothing*” (John 6:63). This word flesh is *sarx* in Greek, representing “the seat of sin and rebellion to God,” which can never advance God’s kingdom on this earth.

These three truths will help us address the destruction of division and avert the bully mentality from slipping into our own thinking, for no one is immune to the enemy’s cunning.

We might have some painful picnics. One day people love us, and the next day they’re ice cold. Jesus experienced the same disparity with followers vacillating from praise to hatred, but it didn’t deter his mission. With his eyes fixed on his father, he accomplished God’s will despite human rejection. Likewise, we need to welcome Jesus’s healing and move on in strength. Don’t give headspace to those who have caused heartbreak. We can’t move forward if we are rehashing and ruminating on the pain of the past. Dwelling on the hurt will only keep us stuck in resentment, preventing us from pressing on in faith. Here’s the thing: **People will cause us pain.** However, our hope is in Jesus, not people. Our hope is in Christ, not the church. His Bride is unstoppable when we embrace the victory, seek God’s wisdom, and live by the Spirit.



Elizabeth Fields has an MA in Christian Studies from Dallas Theological Seminary. She serves on the board of Finish Line Ministries International, helping equip women in Malawi, Africa, with leadership training and biblical teaching. She is a freelance writer who resides in Ohio with her husband, five children, and two dogs.

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church.





NAVIGATING THE TEMPEST

By Marissa Franks Burt



It wasn't that long ago that I preferred an unplugged 1990s existence to a 2020 world. No wifi. No smartphone. COVID lockdowns invited me to put off my Luddite ways and put on virtual connectivity. I bought a smartphone and joined X (formerly known as Twitter), that modern Areopagus where people "spen[d] their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21).

It's been a steep learning curve. The speed and reactivity of online conversations normalize outrage and contempt. When controversy quakes through a community, it sets

off a tsunami of inflammatory responses. Aftershocks of discussion follow: Has someone been unfairly canceled? Slandered? Did people respond according to Matthew 18? Responses to the responses compound the arguing.

Critics contend that public content needs to be publicly engaged, especially if it is blasphemous, heterodox, or harmful. Others dismiss concerns as "accusation against our brothers and sisters" (Rev. 2:10), naming all pushback to be slanderous. Like Paul's listeners in the Areopagus, some people ridicule while others want to engage "again on this subject" (Acts 17:32).

But how far is “too far”? When does exhortation cross the line into accusation? Church history reveals that believers have felt justified killing each other over doctrinal disputes, even as the church continued to schism. In the apostolic era, confusion and fighting resulted from incorrect or incomplete teaching, which is why most of the epistles were written specifically as correctives. Christians have always needed to contend for the faith once delivered, but we must do this without biting and devouring one another, lest we destroy each other (Gal. 5:15). Let’s take a closer look at how the early church navigated this tension.

When the apostle Peter caved to the requests of the Judaizers, Paul opposed Peter to his face (Gal. 2:11–14). Compare this to Paul’s seeming indifference toward others whose preaching was motivated by greed and self-interest: “What does it matter? Christ is still preached” (Phil. 1:18).

In other words, while Paul might have been willing to ignore swindlers who managed to communicate the gospel accurately, he refused to tolerate the teaching of those he calls “pseudo-brothers” and the hypocrisy of Peter. Why? *Because they threatened the integrity of the gospel.* Something different happened with Apollos, a powerful preacher who taught the facts about Jesus accurately but incompletely. Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside privately to instruct him, while Paul addressed the people who were impacted by Apollos’s ignorance (Acts 18:24–19:7). Well-intentioned people can still act in ways that require thoughtful reproof and swift repair.

What about the not-well-intentioned? The chaos of churches rife with quarrels leaves people especially vulnerable to bad actors like the heretical Hymenaeus and others who were identified by name and sternly rebuked (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17). This effort to safeguard against problems goes both directions. When Christians in Chloe’s household recognized something amiss, they drew Paul’s attention to it (1 Cor. 1:11). Paul didn’t muffle these whistleblowers but listened and responded. However, this doesn’t mean that every Christian is always responsible to personally and publicly correct everyone else.

It’s important to note that identifying problematic teaching is categorically different from experiencing differences of opinion. Sometimes people simply disagree. Paul and Barnabas were close friends who fought so sharply that they parted ways right after planning their reunion missionary tour (Acts 15:36). Co-laborers Euodia and Syntyche experienced the kind

of conflict that everybody in the church knew about—even Paul, imprisoned and far away, who rallied the entire Philippian congregation to help them reconcile (Phil. 4:2). Christians will experience conflict and need to sort it out.

IDENTIFYING PROBLEMATIC TEACHING IS CATEGORICALLY DIFFERENT FROM EXPERIENCING DIFFERENCES OF OPINION.

Sometimes Christians are to simply stay away from divisive people (Rom. 16:17–18). John warns against interacting in ways that could signal endorsement, and Paul tells Timothy to exhort the people entrusted to his care without getting ensnared in arguments (1 Tim. 6:11). Instead, Timothy should cultivate his own faith, root himself in sound doctrine, and pass that down.

Paul himself was contested, and he praised those who examined his teaching and compared it to Scripture and to what they knew to be true about Jesus (Acts 17:11). Disagreeing with a teacher is not sinning against them; James warns Christians that not everybody should teach because it’s a role subject to increased judgment (Jas. 3:1). Public teachers—including pastors, writers, or influencers—are not untouchable. Moreover, today’s global connectivity means the impact of any individual’s teaching extends well beyond their community accountability. If we identify all critiques as sinful accusations, we set people up as unchallengeable.

This leaves everyone vulnerable because wolves devour sheep. Jude uses the harshest of words for malicious false teachers infiltrating the church because the stakes are high: how people come to know and understand Jesus Christ himself (2 Peter 2–3; Judg. 1:4–16). Peter spends a lot of ink on severe descriptions of false teachers, then offers two short verses of direct instruction as the antidote: Grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus, be on your guard, and do not get led astray—a reminder that it’s always possible (2 Peter 3:17–18). Harmful teaching, bolstered by spiritual authority and done in God’s name, adds spiritual abuse to all manner of evil, resulting in exponential damage.

Because there isn’t a one-size-fits-all way to respond, knowing when to engage and when to step away requires discernment. When exhortation is needed, the goal is



WHEN EXHORTATION IS NEEDED, THE GOAL IS NEVER TO DOMINATE, TEAR OTHERS DOWN, OR ENABLE DANGEROUS PEOPLE.



never to dominate, tear others down, or enable dangerous people. The goal is to build Christians up to maturity, cultivating discernment through the constant practice of distinguishing good from evil (Heb. 5:1–14). Paul told people to evaluate a teaching's merit by how it compared to what he had taught and lived out when among them (Phil. 3:17, 4:9). John, who consistently refers to all false teachers, prophets, and ideas—whatever their source—as *antichrist*, focuses on acquainting people with Jesus (1 John 2:24; 4:1–3). Indeed, identifying what's out of step with the gospel requires a functional knowledge of what's in alignment with it as Jesus himself becomes our standard.

Does the gravity of protecting the gospel give us license to demean people with rapid-fire insults? *Absolutely not*. We all must reckon with how accustomed we've become to contempt. Publicly naming ways dangerous false teaching is out of alignment with the teaching of Jesus is different from maliciously excoriating any Christian with whom we disagree. James would not have us cursing and blessing with the same tongue (Jas. 3:1–12). What should mark all Christian discourse, public and private? Truthfulness, all humility and patience, boldness, and the prioritization of those listening, that it might give grace to all who hear.

We can disagree with one another and call out false teaching without resorting to the insults to which we've become accustomed. We will give an accounting for every careless word, including hate-filled, hastily typed ones that call others *fools*, *heretics*, or *not-a-Christian*. This should sober and shape our approach; we must communicate without malice, remembering that everyone we engage is a person for whom Christ died.

This does not mean we stay silent or downplay valid critiques of harmful ideas or placate dangerous people. We are to be people who tell the truth. Consider how the leaders at the first church council practiced discernment. They listened, discussed, looked for evidence of the Holy Spirit's work, and determined whether things aligned

with what they knew to be true from Scripture before communicating their conclusion with humility and charity (Acts 15). It has sometimes taken councils, public debates, and confrontations for the Church to stay on course through each generation's uncharted seas.

This analogy of storm-tossed teaching comes straight from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, an ancient port city. They knew something about tempests and contention: pressure from outside opponents and malicious false teachers infiltrating their ranks, tension from endless quarrels and incomplete teaching, and spiritual warfare coming from Artemis-worshippers and angry silversmiths. Talk about being blown around by winds of teaching and the cunning craftiness of people in deceitful scheming (Eph. 4:14)!

Paul says goodbye to his friends there for the final time with these words:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified. (Acts 20:28–32)

Paul warned that *from their own group* there would be false teachers. Even our preferred echo chambers can't keep all false teaching at bay. Paul knew the danger was real. He'd planted countless small churches and had witnessed them beset by all kinds of problems. What did

WE CAN DISAGREE WITH ONE ANOTHER AND CALL OUT FALSE TEACHING WITHOUT RESORTING TO THE INSULTS TO WHICH WE'VE BECOME ACCUSTOMED.



he do? He exhorted them to be alert, yes, but then he entrusted them to God and the message of God's grace, then got into a boat and sailed away.

This is counterintuitive and yet so in line with the constant tension we find throughout the Christian life. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and God is at work within us. We plant and water the seeds, and God makes them grow. We keep watch and stay alert for sound doctrine, even as we are entrusted to God and his grace, which will prove faithful. Because against all odds, the church at Ephesus found their way, protecting and preserving the faith they received.¹

It's a tempest out there. From the maelstrom of social media to the floods of self-platformed teachers to partisan winds that stoke fear and outrage, we, too, are weathering storm-tossed seas. We need each other to stay the course. We need the giftings of every single Spirit-filled believer to help us discern what's in step with the gospel and what's not, and this is the other metaphor Paul uses when he writes the Ephesians: a body fitted together in unity, growing up into maturity. Unity and maturity are connected with speaking truthful words and displacing every form of malice with kindness and compassion (Eph. 4:25–5:2). We are, like Paul, to proclaim the message of the gospel fearlessly and boldly, speaking as we ought to (Eph. 6:19–20) and, like the word of God's grace, speaking "only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Eph. 4:29). That is the kind of exhortation that will cultivate unity, keeping us alert, with our attention fixed on the instruction and

example of Jesus. This will anchor our souls in God's hope and set our compasses to the true north of Christ himself, the only one who will see us safely home.

Notes

1. Jesus commends them for it: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (Rev. 2:2).

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Marissa Franks Burt (MTh) is a novelist, the author of *In the Way They Should Go: How the Christian Parenting Empire Shaped a Generation of Evangelicals*, and *Where We Go from Here* (Brazos, 2025), and cohost of *At Home With the Lectionary*.

She lives in Washington with her husband, Fr. Aaron Burt, and their six children.

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A Target On My Back

Quiet Bullying Behind Closed Doors

By Amber Burgess



My first-hour class of high school Bible students exited the room as my second-hour students retrieved their grammar books for their daily assignment. Some of the students were perplexed from their first-hour Bible class with me, wondering why we would discuss women in leadership and ministry as a topic for our Friday discussion time.

One student said, “I don’t get what the big deal is about having only men lead. Aren’t men supposed to lead and be pastors?”

As a woman who was called to ministry standing before their very eyes, having gone to seminary and received advanced degrees, I was hurt that my example didn’t outweigh the flawed theology they were being taught elsewhere. I closed my teacher’s book and proceeded to explain to my students, from my own experience, why this topic needed to be discussed not only in the classroom, but also in their churches and youth groups. It was then that my mind went back ten years to when I had a target forming on my back.

The Formation of the Target

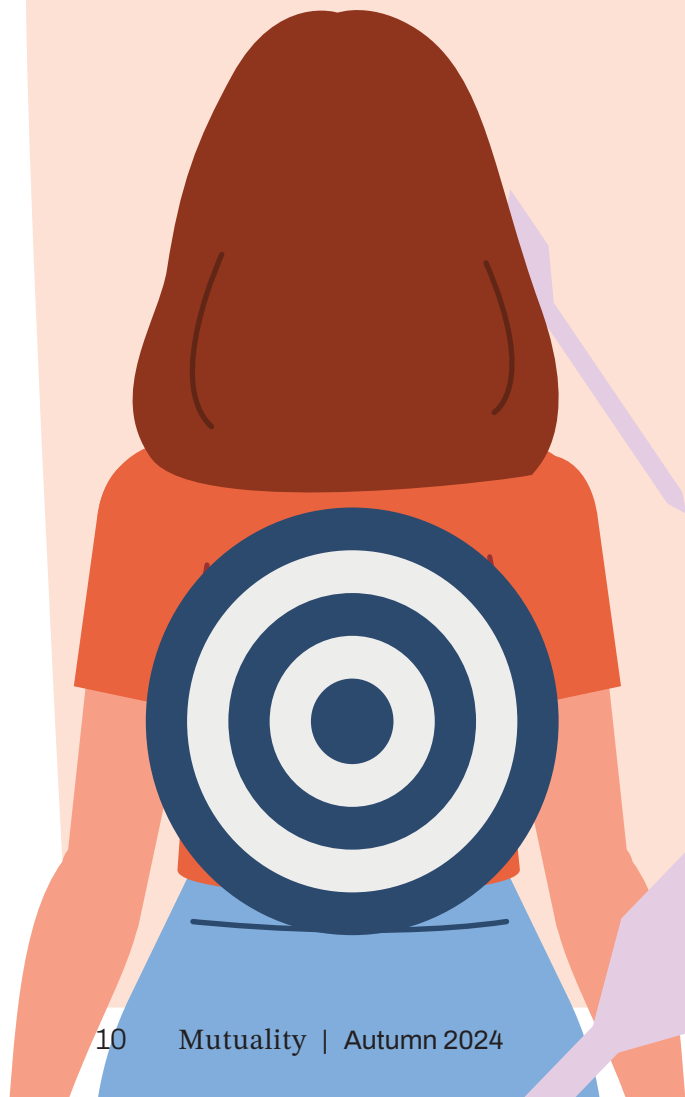
My undergraduate education was both academically demanding and transformative. I filled my schedule with biblical studies courses, including the infamous Hebrew I and II my second year. A few weeks into my first Hebrew course, the vocabulary and grammar started clicking in my brain and I moved to the top of the class. It wasn’t long before my professor started to notice.

One morning I was waiting for class to start when the professor came in and greeted me. We began to chat; he mentioned that I was doing well and that I must be smart. I looked him straight in the eye and without any hesitation I said, “I’m not smart; I just work hard.”

I had spent half my elementary years receiving additional help at school to advance my reading ability to meet grade-level standards. I was behind academically, and I knew it. As a result, I worked hard, a habit which continued as I became older.

My professor smiled and chuckled as he said, “If you are a hard worker, you should go to seminary.”

Not long after this, I could feel a target forming on my back, ring by ring, as students became aware of my affinity for learning Hebrew and working hard. Unbeknownst to me, my professor was using me as an example for other students to follow. Most students would be thrilled to serve as a good example, but for me, it only made me more



noticeable for the archers who had their arrows at the ready. It was then that the quiet bullying began.

Making the Target into a Shield

Though raised as a baptist, I was never told I couldn't be a pastor. My mother held leadership positions in the church, and so did her mother before her. I was surrounded by women who taught, led, and pastored me throughout my upbringing, whether they had a title or not. However, as I began to excel in my Bible classes at college, I quickly realized I would need to take the target that had formed on my back and turn it into a shield as my peers began going out of their way to corner me with their views on women in church leadership.

On more than one occasion, I was approached by fellow students who took classes with me. They quietly bullied me behind "closed" doors: They made sure to come when no one was around, while I was in classrooms waiting for class to start, walking out of the library alone, or sitting in the cafeteria early in the morning before heading to Hebrew class. They had assured themselves I was sinning, and they needed to confront me about my sin. But what sin? I didn't know sharing the gospel was a sin for a woman, or anyone, to do. After all, I had the examples of the woman at the well, the women at Jesus's tomb, Phoebe, Priscilla, Junia, and countless other women throughout history: Lottie Moon, Ann Haseltine Judson, Amy Semple McPherson, Susanna Wesley, and more.

At that time, I didn't realize I was being bullied. It wasn't until my fiancé at the time (my now-husband and forever ally) pointed out that my peers would intentionally approach me when he wasn't around, making sure there was no one else to hear their accusations and attacks, allowing their tongues of fire to stain the body of Christ (James 3:6) while hurling curses at one who was made in the image of God (James 3:9).

My shield was hit by arrow after arrow, but each time I stood my ground. I did not get angry or retaliate, but instead went to the college library to form my own biblical stance on women in church leadership. It was there that I found, in the stacks of old magazines, an issue of *Mutuality*. My world forever changed because I now had a resource that I could go to for help to form my case for the biblical basis of mutuality.

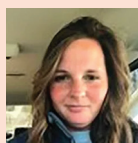
Leaving the Target Behind

It was then that I was able to let go of the target that had become my shield. When I found *Mutuality*, I realized

there were other people that believed what I believed, that women were gifted and called by God to do any and every good work from God, including preaching the gospel. I was not alone. Regardless of what others thought about women in church leadership, I was going to do what I was called by God to do, which was to preach the gospel as every believer is called to do (Matt. 28:19–20). I was finally able to put down my shield and leave my target behind.

Looking at my own students ten years later, I explained to them that women are often called to pursue ministry and church leadership but are targeted by those who disagree and, as a result, are often quietly bullied behind closed doors. Whispers, constant attempts to convince them that they have misunderstood God's calling, accusations of twisting the Bible or purposefully ignoring it—each attack an arrow in their backs. Consistent and ongoing discouragement, refusing to listen or work together, can crush even the strongest of souls, acting as a poison from the very people who are meant to encourage us (James 3:8).

Armed with biblical truths and an ally at my side, I was able to get through it. But there are women all around the world who are being silenced, bullied, and targeted for pursuing their calling, some without allies or resources to help them forge ahead. We, as the church, need to have discussions about women pursuing their callings and holding positions of leadership in the home, church, and world. We need to do this so that women who preach and teach on a Sunday morning are no longer stigmatized and bullied but instead are allowed to flourish as God's image-bearers. We all need to leave the targets behind—both those who have them on their backs and those who have their arrows at the ready. Our tongues must not hurl curses as arrows, but instead should bring forth blessing after blessing from God (James 3:10). We need to do this so the church can move forward together in supporting both women and men called by God to do vocational ministry and beyond.



Amber Burgess works for CBE International as the Associate Executive Director and Marketing Manager. She first started her ministry and nonprofit career working in youth and camp ministry. She holds graduate degrees in biblical languages and New Testament from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. Amber has a passion to mentor young women who are exploring their calling to ministry, as well as feeding her love for the Old Testament and biblical languages. Amber and her husband, Kevin, live in Minnesota with their three boys where they have worked side by side in ministry since 2012.

ON SLANDER

AN INTERVIEW WITH CRAIG KEENER AND MIMI HADDAD



We sat down with Craig Keener—leading NT scholar and CBE colleague—for an in-depth look at slander. Craig explored what the Bible says about slander and how we can respond to it in our lives and work.



Mimi Haddad: Craig, could you please share what you believe Scripture teaches us, as the church, about slander? What is slander, first of all?

Craig Keener: There are multiple Hebrew and Greek words that are translated as “slander” because there’s more than one way to commit it. Slander has to do with speaking against somebody maliciously; misrepresenting them is normally part of it. It’s not just being negative towards somebody, but being negative towards somebody with deliberate falsehood or misrepresentation. That’s pretty frequent throughout history—even before modern politics.

In Romans chapter one, gossip—which actually doesn’t always have to be false, but definitely isn’t well-informed—is what we might call a mortal sin. It’s death-worthy. The psalmist gets slandered by others (Ps. 31:13) and treats slander as a terrible (Ps. 50:20), even a death-worthy (Ps. 101:5) sin. Jesus talks about it; it’s in his vice list in Mark 7:22. Then it’s picked up in several other vice lists in the New Testament. Slander is listed with gossip in Romans 1; in 2 Corinthians 12:20, we find slander and gossip; in Ephesians 4:31, there’s slander with bitterness, wrath, and anger; in Colossians 3:8, the instructions for how to live a godly life, as in Titus 3:2, include “don’t slander anybody,” and there’s the vice list in 1 Peter 2:1.

Christians are the object of slander at various times, like in 1 Peter 2:12 and 1 Peter 4:4. Paul also gets slandered; he mentions it just briefly in 2 Corinthians 6:8. In Romans 3:8 he says the people misrepresent his teaching about grace, claiming he says, “Let us do evil, that good may come.” We read about it in Acts 21:21. James and the elders at Jerusalem are telling Paul and his colleagues, including Luke: “You see brothers, how many Jewish believers are devout in the law, but they’ve been told that you teach

Jewish people not to circumcise their children and not to follow the law. The agreement was that Gentiles don’t have to do this, but your critics wrongly think you’re telling even Jewish people not to do this.” People often think in binary terms, so instead of recognizing that Paul was just telling Gentiles they didn’t have to do this, his critics were accusing him of telling Jewish people they also didn’t need to continue circumcising their children or following Jewish practices. A single narrative misrepresents what Paul was teaching his people.

Mimi Haddad: When speaking of the severity of slander, you said that it was death-worthy. Would it lead to an execution?

Craig Keener: In Romans 1, yes, spiritually it’s death-worthy, like disobedience to parents and all sorts of other things in that list, arrogance and so on. Under Old Testament law, accusing somebody else and supporting that accusation with a false oath in God’s name was bearing false witness. If you did that in a capital case, you were committing a capital offense yourself and could be executed (Deut. 19:16–20). Jezebel arranges for false witnesses so that innocent Naboth can get killed and Ahab can seize his vineyard. Elijah consequently prophesies that God will destroy Ahab’s house and dogs will devour Jezebel (1 Kgs. 21:21–24). One gets the impression that God did not like this behavior.

The New Testament treatment of slander goes to the heart. Maybe you aren’t urging a court to execute someone, but if you falsely accuse them of committing offenses that merit death (such as blasphemy or idolatry), you have committed a death-worthy offense in God’s sight. Jesus’s critics accused him of blasphemy, for example (Mark 14:64), but their criticism of him was itself blasphemous (Mark uses

the same Greek term for their ridicule in Mark 15:29). It's also dangerous when people may think they're right, but they haven't researched the claims for themselves. They're just passing on somebody else's slander.

MH: Gossip.

CK: When we pass on misinformation that we've heard from others without first checking the information out, we participate in a web of slander. Gossip and slander can get people killed. In the 1800s, local malicious slander endangered Hudson Taylor's group of missionaries in China, followed by misrepresentation in the British Press, though God protected them.¹ In one case in Tajikistan, misrepresentation in local media led first to more inquirers about the gospel, but then to a church planter's martyrdom. That, in turn, precipitated the conversion of the martyr's son.² In Egypt, local gossip distorted a church's teaching as insulting Muhammad, leading to some 5,000 surrounding a church, with several killed and 90 injured.³

MH: I would say that places the burden on the shoulders of the church and of our judicial systems to do a careful investigation. It's important to remember that many of our laws in this country and elsewhere are based on Judeo-Christian principles—to hear not just the accused but both sides. Why must Christians address the issue of slander with sincerity, prayer, goodwill, and hard work?

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CK: Sincerity is pretty much opposed to slander in the New Testament. 1 Peter 2:1 says to rid yourself of all malice and deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. The next verse speaks of desiring God's honest (Greek *adolos*, "without deceit") milk.

MH: How has slander impacted your work?

CK: There are times when my work is neglected or rejected because I'm an evangelical, and people have their assumptions of what that means. There are times

in other circles where my work is neglected or rejected because I'm egalitarian, or because I'm charismatic—those are probably the two biggest things. Now I should say that there are plenty of complementarians and cessationists who read my work and are nice. They like the other things I write, at least. Having said that, there are some who aren't. I'll give an example from my first book on miracles.

When it first came out, *Christianity Today* did a story on it that included pictures of my wife and me, my wife being from Congo. Somebody on Amazon (who clearly hadn't read the book) said, "This guy is citing testimonies from Congo where they murder children as witches."

First of all, that was the wrong Congo; there are two Congos in Africa, and they got the wrong one. Secondly, only a minority of the book has to do with Congo, either Congo. Further, none of the circles I was citing murder child witches; they were all against that. It just basically came down to a racist thing.

There was a guy who reviewed my later book, *Miracles Today*, who totally misrepresented the book. Either he didn't read it, or he slandered it the whole way through the review. I found an average of four or five errors on every page of his review—blatant errors. I really didn't want to have to dialogue with him because he clearly wasn't approaching it from a scholarly standpoint. I'd rather dialogue with somebody who understands the rules of scholarly discourse, and, therefore, is able to have careful dialogue.

Then there was someone who went after my John commentary, as well as some other evangelical scholars' work. This critic repeatedly assumed the worst about our motives, painting us as liberal, but in so doing repeatedly misunderstood the literary conventions used in scholarly discourse. I don't suppose it was deliberate in my case, but some of the misunderstandings were so severe that I felt embarrassed for the critic and ultimately decided it was better not to respond. I would have had to use a level of discourse with which I felt uncomfortable, and it would have felt uncharitable.

I've had that a number of times in different spheres. The hardest I've been hit with in Christian circles, though, has been for *Paul, Women, and Wives*. It's the most controversial. I didn't know that when I wrote it. I figured it was more controversial that I was charismatic or that I held to a somewhat controversial eschatology, but being egalitarian turned out to be the most controversial at that time. Twenty years before, it would have been different, but in the mid-to-late 1990s, that was the dividing issue.

MH: Well, you were a hero at CBE and I'm sorry that things became painful. Can you explain the slander leveled at you because of your egalitarian views?

CK: Some of the people were nice about my views, and they didn't slander. They thought it was wrong, but they weren't deliberately misrepresenting. They may have misunderstood, but there's a difference between misunderstanding and deliberately misrepresenting or misrepresenting because they're ignorant. You see this a lot in comments sections online: people just exposing their ignorance, bringing up things that the author had already responded to in their work. It's frustrating when people do that. It's been so long since I wrote *Paul, Women, and Wives*. I got so much backlash for it; I became persona non grata in a lot of circles. That's mostly in the past now.

MH: On the back of your pain was a bridge to women's dignity, value, and leadership that was desperately needed and which the UN says is the basis for human flourishing. The UN found three years ago that it's the church's support that people rely on. They don't care what's published by the UN or by the NIH.⁴ What matters to them is what their pastors are teaching, and that's why your book led to spiritual and physical healing for so many. That's what makes it worth it.

THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MISUNDERSTANDING AND DELIBERATELY MISREPRESENTING.

Have you seen slander regarding the work of CBE or more broadly in egalitarian activism?

CK: Well, a lot of our time is spent cleaning up messes that have been made by incorrect teaching, misrepresentation of what the Bible teaches, and misrepresentation of what we teach as well. The big one is the "slippery slope" argument that if you start ordaining women, next thing you know, you'll approve of same-sex marriage. That's one of the big arguments.

MH: Slander squanders our resources, and that is part of why slander is so hard to manage. You end up having to clean up so many misrepresentations, like the "slippery slope" argument.

CK: You have so many people who are antagonistic toward the faith because they say that Paul was against women.

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That's a misrepresentation of Paul, especially in his cultural context, but it's something that a lot of people originally learned because of the way they heard Paul taught in the church, or because they read Paul outside of his original cultural context. They read him in our cultural context as if he were directly addressing us, and they misunderstood him. That's not slander, that's misunderstanding, but it often leads to slandering the gospel.

In the Roman world, Christians were suspect because they appealed to slaves, they appealed to women, and so on. In our day, they get the opposite rap. So where Paul is trying to respond to the objections of his day, people today hear it in our cultural context. That's why it's so important to read the Scriptures in their own cultural setting: to see what Paul is doing, what he was saying, what he was responding to.

There is a slippery slope, but it's not what they think. Critics point to all these more liberal churches and say that they started ordaining women and lost any compass regarding sexual morality. The slippery slope there wasn't that they changed their view to say, "Oh, Paul didn't mean what we used to say he meant." The slippery slope there was, "Who cares what Paul thought?"

That's it. That's the slippery slope. Whereas there were people ordaining women who were evangelical long

ONCE OUR WORDS GET OUT THERE, WE CAN'T CONTROL WHAT'S DONE WITH THEM.

before the liberals thought of it; Pentecostal and holiness movements had women in ministry way before. Over 27 percent of ordained ministers are women in the Assemblies of God. Try calling the Assemblies of God liberal. It's absurd. Or Church of the Nazarene, and so on.

MH: In the Global Methodist Church, they can't make enough gowns for women pastors. They're out of material and there are so many orders to fulfill. We also know the majority of abolitionists in the 1800s were Protestant evangelicals. The slippery slope idea came after the presentation of egalitarian theology by our good friends and leaders in the 1800s, not just in the US, but in India, in Great Britain, and around the world.

Getting back to your points, what can we do about people who slander us and our ministries? What have you done?

CK: Sometimes I try to ignore them and just pray, pray the Psalms. What I try to do, especially when it's a fellow Christian, is to try to reach out to them. Back when I had more time, certainly on the egalitarian issue, I tried to reach out and build bridges, and I found that to be fruitful because it broke down some level of misunderstanding, at least about me and sometimes about egalitarians more generally.

Sometimes they would say, "No, some egalitarians think this," so you can't always change people's minds, but at least you can turn the other cheek and show Christian love, and hopefully there'll be a Christian response.

MH: Is there anything we can do to prevent slander, Craig, do you think?

CK: It helps to make sure we're not guilty of it ourselves. Once our words get out there, we can't control what's done with them. At least we can help if in the context, we try to make sure we're not misrepresenting them. I've seen this in a current topic I'm working on where there are some people who are very conciliatory on either side, and they'll sometimes mention each other as being conciliatory.

MH: So being conciliatory, not slandering them ourselves, and being open to correcting caricatures if we're proven wrong is key. How do we respond when people slander us? It's one thing to work to prevent slander, but when someone intentionally and cruelly misrepresents you? I'm guessing you have felt this way.

CK: Yeah. What I found I need to do is to pray, let it go for long enough to cool down, pray, and often talk with a close confidant, usually my wife. When I pray, I get things in perspective about what really matters eternally. Sometimes the Lord will give me direction while I'm praying; sometimes he'll just give me perspective.

There was one issue where I'd been really misrepresented in a review, I didn't really want to dialogue with the

WHAT I FOUND I NEED TO DO IS TO PRAY, LET IT GO FOR LONG ENOUGH TO COOL DOWN, PRAY, AND OFTEN TALK WITH A CLOSE CONFIDANT.

reviewer, but somebody kept trying to set up a debate. The reviewer kept saying, “No, you should do this with me. We should go at this together.” I said, “Look, I’m not going to do it with you. You misrepresented me, and you’ve misrepresented everybody else where I’ve checked your sources.” So there comes a point where you turn the cheek, but there also comes a point where you tell the truth. I don’t go into it assuming that the person has bad motives, and even in that case, my assumption is more that the person is so fixated on their theory that they have a problem understanding other things rather than that they were deliberately misrepresenting.

Somebody else recently asked me to endorse his book. I get so many book endorsement requests, I can’t keep up, but I did take a look at this one and found that he misrepresented me as well as some other people. I thought, “I don’t think I’d better.”

MH: What did you do?

CK: I didn’t do anything. Next time I see him, if we’re chatting and it happens to come up, I’ll talk about it.

THERE COMES A POINT WHERE YOU TURN THE CHEEK, BUT THERE ALSO COMES A POINT WHERE YOU TELL THE TRUTH.

If not, I’ll let it go, because I don’t think I’m the only person who has experienced that. I don’t think he was deliberately trying to. In this case, I think it was a misunderstanding. So, in my own writing, I need to make sure to be more explicit about what I don’t mean the next time I say something like that. I think it was explicit in the context, but not clear enough to prevent that misunderstanding.

MH: I’m wondering about how to make reparations when one has been slandered or if there was a lack of clarity and understanding. The person may not be as well educated or alert to the sources that you are alert to and conversant with. It could be intentional and cruel, but have we a right to ask for reparations? Have we a right to say, “Okay, these things have happened and only God can question our motives, but what can we do now to make amends?”

CK: There was one time where I asked for a correction where something was really public. Then there was a different case where I didn’t ask for public repudiation, but the person spoke in front of about a thousand people and I was there. He said, “Craig Keener’s view is this,

but the correct view instead is this.” Well, the view that he described as the correct one was actually my view. I caught up with him afterwards and said, “The view that you presented as mine is not my view. The other view is my view.” He said, “Oh, I guess I should have read your book.” He had taken his understanding of my book from a misrepresentation by one of my detractors.

This also happened to me with the Asbury revival, the Asbury outpouring. I wrote a Facebook post and somebody interpreted it one way, then someone else saw that interpretation and it ended up in a major news article. I had people writing to me while I was participating in the outpouring asking me why I was against the outpouring! It was the exact opposite.

MH: That’s why investigative journalists and theologians, academics, and lawyers invest enormous time hearing from all parties. When you’re praying for God’s wisdom on all of this, how has God responded?

CK: He doesn’t always give me wisdom on how to deal with it. Sometimes he just comforts me, and I don’t really suppose that I have to deal with it. I just depend on his comfort. It depends on how influential the misrepresentation is. Sometimes it also depends on if I have time. One brother wrote me about somebody who misrepresented me, and I hadn’t seen the misrepresentation. To respond to it, I would have to go and watch the videos, but I don’t have time to do that. So I was glad this other person was responding for me as to what he thought I meant. I’m also not sure how much good it would do, because this person has an audience of hundreds of thousands. I’m not going to make a big difference responding to him. If I can get into a dialogue with him that his followers can hear, that’d be worth it, but I don’t really have that many people who listen to me.

MH: Well, thank you very, very much. We appreciate you so much.

Notes

1. Howard Taylor, Geraldine Taylor, *Hudson Taylor’s Spiritual Secrets* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 141–145.
2. Voice of Martyrs, *Hearts of Fire* 2:187–93. For other cases of slanderous misrepresentation, see e.g., 204–5.
3. Rupert Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith Under Attack* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 13.
4. 17 Rooms Global Flagship, “Gender Equality,” *2021 Room Documents* (2021): https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-Room-documents_Room5.pdf.

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Argula Von Grumbach

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

By Lark Kelsey

Bullying and slander are intended to silence opposition. When those tactics are successful, voices that could help the church are muted. For most of church history, bullying happened out of public view, but now it plays out on social media for all to see. In the 1500s, the printing press was the social media of the day. It was an essential tool used by reformers to share their thoughts outside the authorized seminaries and church pulpits. They wrote letters and pamphlets exposing the lack of a biblical basis for certain practices and challenged the established church to amend their doctrines. Those in power who had been accustomed to using bullying and slander now found their victims would not stay silent. One persistent woman was appalled by the coercive tactics of theologians at a local university, and she made her voice heard.

A COURAGEOUS WOMAN

Argula von Grumbach was a young mother to four children whose mind was influenced by her careful study of Scripture and the Protestant writings shared in her social circle. She was friends with Martin Luther, and the letters between them reveal her theological interests. A teenage university student, Arascius Seehoffer, occasionally acted as a courier between them. In 1523, Arascius was arrested after officials at the University of Ingolstadt caught him with Lutheran material.¹ He was threatened with death unless he publicly recanted his Lutheran beliefs by swearing on the Gospels.

Argula was shocked at this bullying and abuse of power by spiritual leaders and theologians. After waiting to no avail for others to speak up, she was compelled to act and wrote a private letter to the university. She explained both her reason for writing and initial hesitation: “I suppressed my inclinations . . . heavy of heart I did nothing because Paul says in 1 Timothy 2: ‘The women should keep silence and should not speak in church.’ But now that I cannot see any man who is up to it, who is either willing or able to speak, I am constrained by the saying: ‘Whoever confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father who is in heaven.’”² She took seriously her duty as a Christian to speak up: “This is why I am compelled as a Christian to write to you. For Ezekiel 33 says: ‘If you see your brother sin, reprove him, or I will require his blood at your hands.’”³

That she would write at all was unheard of, but the content of the letter reveals her fierce spirit and confidence in her cause. Her words are richly peppered with biblical references and allusions, and convey her deep faith. She pulls no punches when she confronts the rector and



entire council of the university with their sin. Like the prophets of old, she speaks with clarity as she points out the injustice of their abuse, saying, “How in God’s name can you and your university expect to prevail when you deploy such foolish violence against the word of God; when you force someone to hold the holy Gospel in their hands for the very purpose of denying it?”⁴ In her closing, she insisted the Spirit of God was speaking through her and provided the authority for her letter: “What I have written to you is no woman’s chit-chat, but the word of God; and (I write) as a member of the Christian Church against which the gates of Hell cannot prevail.”⁵

VICIOUS, VIRULENT, AND VIRAL REACTIONS

The response from the university was not contrite. The faculty theologians dismissed her as a “shameless whore” and a “female desperado.”⁶ Though it was not her initial plan to launch a public campaign against them, it was clear that private communication was ineffective. She reflected in a later letter, “I would have thought that they would have kept the matter to themselves.”⁷ Undeterred, she wrote to other religious and secular authorities and continued to implore those in power to consider the matter through Scripture. Handwritten copies of her original letter to Ingolstadt began to circulate and were later printed. By the next year, demand for her letters had triggered fourteen editions as well as the publication of seven other pamphlets. She became the first Protestant woman to be published, and around 29,000 copies of her letter were printed and dispersed.

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Though popular with the public, her writing had severe ramifications for her private life. The theologians of Ingolstadt indirectly made her the target of bullying, and they used coercive tactics in their attempts to silence her. Through their influence and social connections, her husband was fired from his magisterial position, and they faced financial hardship and marital stress. Outside the home, others used their spiritual authority and leveraged their pulpits to verbally abuse her. At least one professor gave angry sermons against “heretical bitches and desperate fools,” and more lewd names were slung at her.⁸ Powerful men of academia called for the duke to



“tame the hag” and ban publications of letters like hers.⁹ She apparently had physical threats made against her—yet she entrusted herself to God. “I hear that some are so angry with me that they do not know how best to speed my passage from life into death. But I know for sure that they cannot harm me unless the power to do so has been given them by God. He will keep me safe, for His name’s sake.”¹⁰ She took courage from knowing her suffering was not in vain and consoled herself with the thought that even if they succeeded in taking her down, it would cause other women to rise up: “I am persuaded too, that if I am given grace to suffer death for his name, many hearts would be awakened. Yes, and whereas I have written on my own, a hundred women would emerge to write against them.”¹¹

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The verbal attacks against her continued in the form of an anonymously published poem full of vulgar and derisive slander. She responded with a poem of her own appealing to Scripture’s confirmation of a priesthood of all believers that justified her continued writing:

“In Corinthians 3 we are acclaimed
The temple of the Lord we’re named.
God’s spirit is within you, read,
Is woman shut out, there, indeed?
While you oppress God’s word,
Consign souls to the devil’s game
I cannot and I will not cease
To speak at home and on the street.
As long as God will give me grace.”¹²

MODERN DAY ARGULAS

Five hundred years later, with the advent of the internet and social media, we are experiencing a similarly dramatic increase in the way ideas are spread. Female Bible teachers, theologians, and writers have gained access to a larger audience than was formerly available. While theological study is still primarily taught and controlled by men, more women now have access to training and resources and are using their gifts accordingly. Unfortunately, when

anyone dares to challenge people in power, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9), even within the church. Modern-day Argulas face enormous bullying in the form of foul epithets and unfair critique simply for speaking up about injustice or pointing out flaws in the doctrine of complementarianism. Perusing the comment section of social media posts leaves one disturbed at the behavior of men writing from the security of anonymous accounts who insult, hurl accusations of heresy, twist the Scriptures, or question someone’s salvation. Many of these same men have notes like “Husband, Father, Pastor” listed in their profile bios. It all feels eerily similar to the vulgar poem published about Argula using a pseudonym but presumed to be written by a professor:

‘For Scripture is twisted to your fancy.
Auntie dear, are you really that loony?
Do you think we’ve never read Scripture before?
So none can withstand your wondrous lore?
So arrogant, and without control
As if the Bible you’d swallowed whole.
It’s not a woman’s place to strut
With the words of God, or lecture men
But to listen like the Magdalene.’¹³

Even if they don’t stoop to public name-calling, they may use their power of influence as pastors or leaders in more subtle ways by calling into question a woman’s credibility without engaging in a substantive analysis of her content.

Prominent professors have reportedly questioned seminary applicants about their views on certain women, using their responses as litmus tests to weed out students. These same people were also allegedly texting

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At the core of this reaction are insecurity and fear. Malicious attacks, bullying, and slander are not tactics followers of Jesus should use.

each other about “how to handle” a particular female scholar. Reminiscent of those who had Argula’s husband fired, people are still seeking ways to silence those who have the audacity to speak truth to power.

FEAR OR FAITH

At the core of this reaction are insecurity and fear. When honest conversations are silenced and people are bullied, slandered, and exiled, one must wonder whether the motivations are to honestly to defend sound doctrine or protect fragile egos. We must be committed to defending the truth no matter the personal cost, but there are lines we should not cross in the effort to defend our conviction of what is true. Malicious attacks, bullying, and slander are not tactics followers of Jesus should use.

When we are the victims of character assassination, we can look for encouragement in the Scriptures and church history for stories of those who were steadfast against abuses of power. Those who have been maligned or pushed out will echo Argula: “A disputation is easily won when one argues with force not Scripture.”¹⁴ Following her example, our commitment to doctrinal integrity should not be measured by how we gatekeep and enforce our convictions upon others, but by how much we are willing to endure.

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When we are the victim of character assassination, we can look for encouragement in the Scriptures and church history for stories of those who were steadfast against abuses of power.



Lark Kelsey holds an MA in Theological Studies and is a current ThM student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Her next educational goal is a PhD program to research spiritual trauma. She currently works as a teaching assistant and writes online at www.LarkTheoSis.com.

Steering Clear of Slander

By Janis Balda

This article does not and is not intended to constitute legal advice and should not be relied on as such; each state has different laws, each situation is fact-specific, and it is impossible to evaluate a legal problem without a comprehensive consultation and review of all the facts and documents at issue.

Communication is hard work, even among those who consider themselves experts at it or who communicate as part of their job. What we communicate can have consequences, positive or negative, in private and public spheres. We can cause angst and aggravation by making sloppy statements; our automatic reactions come out of our mouths before we take the time to assess and analyze them, especially if we feel strongly about the matter at hand. We are all subject to cognitive biases that affect our judgments and decisions. In addition, it feels good to belong and to bond with those who think like us or are from our “tribe” against those who are different and cause us anxiety because they are perceived to be threatening. Polarization often occurs because of the need to belong, and it causes us to accept our own group’s pressure and biases. We also tend to blame individuals for what concerns us, rather than the situations or circumstances that affect and shape our

lives. This fundamental attribution error contributes to our willingness to discuss problems in terms of individual personalities, blaming someone’s character rather than the situation they are in. It leads to harsh judgment of others while excusing our own behaviors.

As a result, we can frequently resort to gossip. Through this informal sharing, we seek to collect evidence that confirms our beliefs and satisfies our confirmation bias—that is, information that supports what we already believe to be true, another form of cognitive bias. This tendency also means that we ignore or dismiss information that challenges our existing opinions.

Sometimes, though, more destructive and long-term divisions, conflict, and discord arise even within groups we choose to associate with. This can occur when, for any number of reasons, someone chooses to inflict harm on another person, group, or organization. Some of the most vivid social, political, and religious issues we are familiar with can be traced in some part to intentional statements meant to cast other persons in a bad light—to misrepresent what they said or what they intended—and thus influence others to attack or demean the person, their position, or their interests.

The result is that some people intentionally malign other people either verbally or in print for a variety of reasons. Defamation refers to anything communicated,

Slander is not considered free speech in the U.S.; a person cannot knowingly make defamatory comments against someone else.



either verbally (more transitory and labeled *slander*) or in print (more permanent and labeled *libel*), that harms the reputation or livelihood of a person, business, or organization, causing personal, professional, or financial damage. It occurs when a false statement made to a third party is presented as factual.

Considering what we hear around us, you may be surprised to know that slander is not considered free speech in

the U.S.; a person cannot knowingly make defamatory comments against someone else. If someone is defamed, they can sue in civil court and seek monetary damages. Generally such suits fall under state jurisdiction with state courts following the common law principles of defamation.

In order for a plaintiff to recover compensation for defamation, the plaintiff must prove the defendant was at fault for making the false statement. In the U.S., proving

How can we avoid slander and ensure our own speech falls under the category of “protected speech”?

- Recognize that your own introspection can be flawed, which is essential to addressing our cognitive biases. Paradoxically, it is the people who have more confidence in their own objectivity who often prove the most susceptible to bias and group pressures (Cohen, 2023).
- Communicate with the person whom you are feeling threatened by. It is better to talk after you have calmed down if the issue upsets you. Ask questions. This is particularly important to override the individual attribution bias; if we attempt to put ourselves into their shoes, we put our focus back onto the individual and how they do not act like we would. According to Stanford Professor and Psychologist Geoffrey Cohen, it is by asking questions and listening to the answers that we get better at empathic accuracy.
- Learn how to manage disagreement. Find help in the variety of conflict resolution trainings available in your community or industry. Acquiring the ability to create connection in our day-to-day encounters with people with whom we disagree is an essential skill in our world today, particularly as disciples of Jesus.

fault depends on who was defamed—a private or a public figure (*Gertz v. Welch*, 418 U.S. 323 (1974)). In certain circumstances, if the defendant retracted the statement or if it was based on privileged information (as are certain practices by employers in the workplace related to performance appraisals, evaluations, and other types of internal business communications) then the defendant may also be able to avoid being held liable for defamation.

We all have moments where we say something we later regret. Frequently the situation can be remedied by a sincere apology and a willingness, where possible, to fix our mistakes. Improving our communication, being mindful of our potential for bias, and seeking ways to manage disagreements will help us prevent more potentially damaging behaviors.

Resources:

- Geoffrey Cohen discusses his book *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* with Beverly Daniel Tatum, April 12, 2023, as part of the Academic Innovation for the Public Good book

series. <https://digitaleducation.stanford.edu/book-series/2023/Geoffrey-Cohen-belonging-science-creating-connection-bridging-divides>.

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For many years, Janis Bragan Balda served as legal counsel to churches, organizations, and multinational NGOs. She holds law degrees from the University of Cambridge and Loyola University, and currently teaches and publishes as a professor of international management and leadership.



The Dangers of a Single Narrative: How Slander Hurts Women

It was an exciting moment. Gathered to learn more about women's leadership, the speaker began by declaring their commitment to Scripture as an egalitarian. Everyone was thrilled, but within minutes that changed. Stunningly, the speaker demeaned biblical feminists as aligned not with Scripture, but with secular feminist ideals. Sweeping off the chess board all egalitarians but one, the speaker presented a single narrative that distorted truth—a misrepresentation seemingly for the sake of self-promotion. Sadly, this is the same tactic used by many complementarians. They too present a single narrative on women's leadership that sweeps off the table all biblical texts on mutuality and women's leadership to focus only on a single interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11–14, 1 Corinthians 14:34–36, and Ephesians 5:21–29. The attack on truth by a single narrative is too much a part of Christian and secular communication and is profoundly damaging.

Not long ago, a parent disgruntled by a coach who did not give their teen sufficient field time began to spread lies about the coach, resulting in his termination. He would later be vindicated by a slander lawsuit. Another coach, employed by an Ivy League university, was falsely accused and fired. Despite the school's prestige, this coach was never given an opportunity to address the allegations that disparaged his character. Later, his reputation was also cleared by a slander lawsuit. Those wrongly accused by a single narrative are highly motivated to recover their reputation and share their side of the story despite the time, pain, and cost it may take. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “. . . without justice, there is no peace.”¹ Certainly justice depends on hearing the truth. This is precisely the challenge in exposing the single narrative promoting male authority as God's design.

Thankfully, gaining justice and redeeming truth through due process that includes the perspective of the accused is a legal priority in the US legal system, which is based on Judeo-Christian values. Biblical texts challenging the dominance of a single narrative abound. Leviticus 19:11, 15–16 reads, “Do not lie. Do not deceive one another . . . Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality . . . but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people.” In the New Testament, Paul goes so far as to teach that slander is death-worthy in Romans 1:28–32.

Despite its pervasive presence in church history, the single narrative of Christian patriarchy has come under scrutiny

by theologians, historians, and church leaders worldwide. As a result, its capacity to deceive and distort Scripture is shrinking. Slowly but steadily, a far more consistent reading of Scripture is freeing God's gifts, calling, and empowerment of women. As egalitarian pioneers questioned the single narrative of patriarchy, many around world joined the quest for biblical truth on women. This is the history of the egalitarians who founded CBE.

Aligned with Scripture and critical of patriarchal culture inside and outside the church, CBE was founded to challenge the dominant patriarchal narrative through books, journals, events, and local chapters worldwide. CBE resources helped mobilize an international egalitarian movement to expose biblical misrepresentations embodied in the single narrative of male headship. These efforts continue to inspire churches, denominations, and organizations to “come let us reason together,” Isaiah 1:18. While we've reached a tipping point, there's much more work to do!

If you're an English speaker, you can find many excellent resources that expose false biblical allegations restricting women's gifts in the church, home, and world. Yet those who do not read or speak English or who do not have access to egalitarian resources may be especially vulnerable to the deceptions of a single narrative, placing them at risk for abuse. Because of the damage to girls and women in families, churches, and Christian communities, egalitarians have a call and opportunity to reach those outside the English-speaking world. For this reason, CBE hosts Spanish radio spots on women in Scripture and Mission which are having a huge impact. We also convene CBE conferences outside the US every other year. In 2025 we'll return to South America, where our resources mobilized significant egalitarian momentum in Brazil at CBE's 2023 conference in São Paulo. In preparation for next year, we need to translate key CBE resources into Spanish. To do this, we need your prayers and financial partnership. In gratitude for egalitarian resources in English, will you prayerfully be part of God's biblical liberation of those who have yet to hear? Join hands with CBE so that the next generation of Christians, worldwide, know that truth which sets Christian marriages, churches and organizations free of Christian patriarchy's single narrative. Thank you.

Notes

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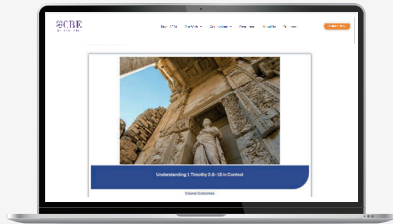
Recently Launched Projects and Resources



Mutual by Design is now available in Spanish for readers through CBE's online bookstore!



In April 2024 CBE's podcast, *Mutuality Matters*, launch a new theme focused on headship theology, called "Home, Church, and World: How Headship Theology Is Dysfunctional."



CBE's newest eLearning course, "Understanding 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in Context," is now available online! Online learners can now purchase the course for \$20 and have unlimited access.

Congratulations to the 2024 AMMS Winners!



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Laura Amodio, Fuller,
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Sarah Chang, Wheaton,
MA Higher Education and
Student Development



Sarah Reed, Northeastern,
MDiv w/ focus on Theology
and Social Justice

Praise and Prayer

Praise

- We praise God for the success of CBE's 2024 International Conference in Denver, Colorado. Many attendees came from around the US and internationally to learn from scholars, experts, and practitioners.
- We praise God for the completion of *Mutual by Design*'s translation into Spanish, which is now available for readers to purchase through CBE's online bookstore.
- We praise God for a new eLearning course focused on 1 Timothy, which will be a great tool for those new to egalitarianism, students, pastors, and lay people.
- We praise God for our donors, subscribers, and members, who support CBE so diligently through their work.

Prayer

- We ask for God's wisdom to guide our planning of CBE's 2025 International Conference in Argentina.
- We ask for God's guidance in reaching new communities and audiences worldwide through outside events, CBE publications, and CBE's online presence.
- We ask God for financial support from foundations and individuals for CBE's initiatives, like our Katherine Bushnell film, the Alvera Mickelsen Memorial Scholarship, our Christian radio project, CBE's podcast, and book projects, including translation projects, so more resources can become available in other languages.



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CBE International (CBE) is a nonprofit organization of Christian women and men who believe that the Bible, properly translated and interpreted, teaches the fundamental equality of women and men of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all ages, based on the teachings of Scriptures such as Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (NIV 2011).

MISSION STATEMENT CBE exists to promote the biblical message that God calls women and men of all cultures, races, and classes to share authority equally in service and leadership in the home, church, and world. CBE’s mission is to eliminate the power imbalance between men and women resulting from theological patriarchy.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

- We *believe* in one God, creator and sustainer of the universe, eternally existing as three persons equal in power and glory.
- We *believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- We *believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- We *believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- We *believe* the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally created in God’s image and given equal authority and stewardship of God’s creation.
- We *believe* that women and men are equally responsible for and distorted by sin, resulting in shattered relationships with God, self, and others.
- Therefore, we *lament* that the sins of sexism and racism have been used to historically oppress and silence women throughout the life of the church.
- We *resolve* to value and listen to the voices and lived experiences of women throughout the world who have been impacted by the sins of sexism and racism.



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CORE VALUES

- Scripture is our authoritative guide for faith, life, and practice.
- Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin that manifests itself personally, relationally, and structurally.
- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from women and girls what God has given them: their dignity, freedom, and leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy as God’s standard for human relationships.
- Christ’s redemptive work frees all people from patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.
- God’s design for relationships includes faithful marriage between a woman and a man, celibate singleness, and mutual submission in Christian community.
- The unrestricted use of women’s gifts is integral to the work of the Holy Spirit and essential for the advancement of the gospel worldwide.
- Followers of Christ are to advance human flourishing by opposing injustice and patriarchal teachings and practices that demean, diminish, marginalize, dominate, abuse, enslave, or exploit women, or restrict women’s access to leadership in the home, church, and world.

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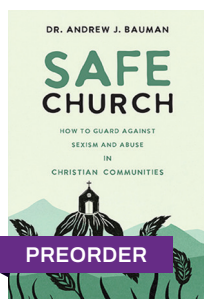
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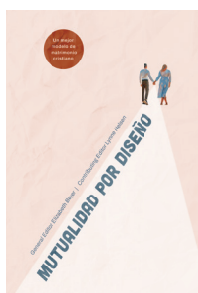
New in CBE Bookstore



Safe Church: How to Guard Against Sexism and Abuse in Christian Communities

Dr. Andrew J. Bauman

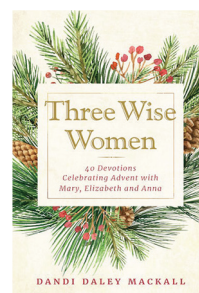
With practical advice on how to create more equity and less sexism and abuse in the church, this book is a vital resource for pastors, church leaders, and anyone who wants to make a meaningful difference in their own Christian community



Mutualidad por Diseño: Un mejor modelo del matrimonio Cristiano

Elizabeth Beyer,
Lynne Nelson eds.

CBE's book, *Mutual by Design: A Better Model of Christian Marriage*, is now available in Spanish! The Bible projects a vision of marriage in which men and women share the tasks of leadership and service as equals. This book, *Mutualidad por Diseño*, explores that vision.



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