

Her Silence Screams

Dawn Sutherland



“Church was my home.” As a foster child, the church that my adopted family attended became my world, its doors swinging wide every Sunday, Wednesday, and every revival service—not just a refuge, but the heartbeat of belonging. “Holiness” ruled us, threading purity through every lace hem and starched crease—no jewelry, no pierced ears, just the quiet hymns of a sacred life. My father stood like a saint in his deacon’s suit, steady as the morning light; Mom glowed her brightest on Sundays, her Sunday School tales spilling Jesus’s love over “her kids.” I ran after our Savior too, my heart wide open in that holy glow. But beneath that glow, something sinister stirred. We just didn’t have ears to hear it yet.

One particular Sunday morning, Mom nudged us to hurry so we’d slip through the church doors on time. She’d tamed my “bouncin’ behavin’ red hair” and I twirled in my “spinny dress.” My father’s white shirt gleamed with starch, and my mother looked radiant. While I can’t remember the sermon, the end of the service is still sharp and clear, a wound that still whispers.

In those days, our pastor would stand at the back door after every service and make sure he spoke to everyone.

He loved the people of his church and we knew it. But *that* Sunday, as the pastor shook my mother’s hand, he pulled her in and muttered, “If you wear that much makeup next week, you will not be teaching Sunday School.” Her smile disappeared. She had no words, just silence. Her face burned red and tears welled in her eyes with shame. She cried all afternoon, her light dimmed, and that hurt soaked into me, a crack splintering the home I’d found.

My mother barely wears mascara *today*, and she wore even less back then. She was never a rebel or a flaunter. It was a small ripple next to the deep rifts that rigid patriarchal theology has carved into the lives of other women—girls hushed, and spirits broken—but it was my first glimpse of control cloaked as faith.

Her Voice Faded

That Sunday’s sting was not a fluke. The pastor preached “God’s order” every week, his voice loud and steady: men led, women followed. My mother’s teaching was a fragile gift he could pluck away with one word. Men carried God’s voice, and women’s lips



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stayed shut unless they hummed along in compliance, quiet and pure. I was little and could not see past my fluffy dress, but I felt the ache of my mother's faded glow. Her face was not hers to brighten; it was his to dim. As I grew older, I began to see that it was not just *my* church; It was a shadow of something older where control dons faith's skin like a priestly robe.

When Faith Bends to Chains

Our pastor's whisper wielded "quiet spirit" like a whip—no context, just control; Scripture's grace bent to one man's will. He swung 1 Peter 3:4 hard and fast; that "gentle and quiet spirit" was a command, not a gift.

Holiness meant "plain" for the women in our church and my mother's dab of color was too "worldly"—a spark tempting men to stray. Women bore the weight of purity; Our skirts below the knees and our faces blank while men stood untouchable as God's shield. This is not the way Scripture sings; it is a stolen melody from a broken world where women's worth shrinks to silence, propping up power. This was about more than makeup; The tangible element of her beauty was twisted

into rebellion and used to keep her small. Makeup? Sin. A question? Defiance.

Eventually, she chose to step away from teaching Sunday school—not because she lost faith, but because she wouldn't be bullied into compliance. That choice, silent and resolute, stays with me; for it was not Scripture's heartbeat I heard in those halls but gossip. Genesis 1:27's "male and female he created them" was drowned beneath rules thicker than hymnals.¹ Our pastor's words were not guidance; they were a divine directive, steady as the men who spoke it as they stood in their Sunday suits. Women's voices turned to sin the moment they rose. Men spoke as vessels of God, control blooming like a wild weed choking off where love should have grown. Submission was preached from the mountaintops, while Jesus's call to care and to love relentlessly was silenced. The words "Wives, submit" echoed from the pulpit but the biblical phrase "to one another" never followed and "Be subject to one another" lay forgotten.² The half-truth of warped Scripture twisted chains around us and bad theology was wielded as a weapon.

Shadows Beneath the Steeple

Our pastor's words and patriarchal teaching weren't "guidance," they were a wall sealing doubts inside. We were pulled in tight. Family and friends beyond our church's doors drifted to shadows, voices outside marked unholy. Fear preached loudest. Step out and God's wrath awaited, a brimstone shadow trailing every rule.

No one ever said out loud, "Cut them off." They didn't have to. A neighbor who stopped attending our services was whispered about in prayer circles. A cousin who switched churches was "backsliding." People who asked questions were shamed into silence. "Worldly influences" was the warning and "carnality of association" the theology. The unspoken rule was clear: proximity to "those of the world" could make you unclean. Women knew better than to speak up and even some men learn to guard their words. Trust narrowed to the inner circle and everyone learned to smile while shrinking back. Outside voices did not just challenge doctrine; they threatened salvation.

Out from Under the Brimstone

As a little girl, I often went to sleep at night praying desperately that I would not go to hell. I was terrified I had forgotten to confess some sin and that I would be damned forever as a result. My heart pounded beneath the weight of our pastor's fire and brimstone words.

Salvation was reserved for those within our denominational walls who were saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost, evidenced by speaking in tongues—something that did not happen with me or my parents. Other churches might have used the name of Jesus, but we were told they did not *truly* know him. Some were called “lukewarm” while others were labeled completely lost. Anyone outside our circle lacked the fullness of truth and that made them spiritually dangerous.

I would lie in bed with hot tears burning my cheeks, begging Jesus to return before I had the chance to mess up again. I believed heaven could slip away with a single wrong move. When I got older, I finally ran away—from our church and from God. After years of living under tight control, patriarchy, and bad theology that weighed heavily on my soul, I deconstructed. It hit me like a ton of bricks; What was once my foundation fell out from under my feet. My mom’s hushed tears, the pastor’s words, our church’s rules—all of it coiled like fear around my throat until grace broke through and loosened its grip. Jesus chased after me when I ran and stayed firmly by my side.

I dove into Scripture on my own until finally receiving a doctorate in biblical studies; All that study unraveled the chains that bound my heart. I learned to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus, his love, his hope, and *his* theology. Now I stand with eyes wide open watching the twisted chains of a distorted “submit” and “quiet spirit” falling to ash as reconstruction rises through his relentless love. It took years, a wrestle of heart and mind, to peel back fear’s grip and to know the Jesus who stayed and resurrected my heart from the ash.

Why Her?

Why her? Why *her* tears? That one Sunday’s hiss bloomed from a theology that stretched well beyond our pews. I ran from that fire and rebuilt through a lifetime of study and prayer, but not everyone can go back to college to untangle their spiritual trauma. So now we turn to *her*—the woman who was silenced in the pews, the girl who once wept behind a closed door, the one who still flinches when scriptural doctrine is wielded as a weapon to harm.

We whisper, “You do not need to unlock ancient scrolls; you only need a heart open to the arms of Jesus. There, shame grows quiet and love holds steady.” We tell her about the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42)—the one

the world dismissed, but Jesus called to proclaim his truth. Her voice was freed and it rang out over her whole community.³ We remind her to lean into the voice of Jesus—the one that calls her beloved, strong, and free. It was never men’s rules that held the power. It was always *His* truth that freed the voice buried deep inside. So we lift her up and, in doing so, we lift one another. Her. Me. Every woman. All rising together.

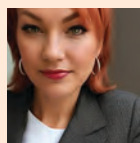
Why her? Because she is still there—in the pews, in the mirror, in the memory. She is still there in every woman who has been told to sit down, to stay quiet, to make herself small. Because her silence was never emptiness; it was a protest too holy to be heard by hardened hearts.⁴

Her silence screams.

And I cannot ignore it. Not anymore.

Notes

1. Genesis 1:27 affirms the creation of humanity in the image of God: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” This verse has long served as the theological foundation for human dignity, equality, and shared vocation. In this article, it is invoked to contrast the liberating intent of creation with the restrictive, gendered hierarchies imposed by misused church tradition. The *imago Dei* was not given selectively; it was bestowed on all—male and female—as co-bearers of divine image and worth.
2. Eph. 5:21–22: “Be subject to **one another** out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord” (emphasis added); v. 21’s call to mutual submission precedes v. 22’s directive, often omitted in preaching emphasizing wifely submission alone and reflecting the theological distortion addressed in this article.
3. John 4:39.
4. The phrase *hardened hearts* draws from biblical language used throughout both the Old and New Testaments to describe spiritual resistance to truth, justice, or divine revelation. Most notably, God speaks of Pharaoh’s hardened heart in Exodus (e.g., Exod. 9:12), representing his refusal to release the oppressed. Jesus later uses similar language to rebuke the disciples’ lack of spiritual perception: “Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?” (Mark 8:17, NRSVUE). In this article, the phrase evokes the kind of spiritual obstinance that fails to hear the cries of women silenced by extreme patriarchal theology—cries that are not quiet at all, but rather a protest too holy to be ignored by those with ears to hear.



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