



# Revelation and Testimony in the Age of #MeToo and #ChurchToo

COURTNEY WILDER

Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary published a blog post titled “Witnessing” in which she responds to the #MeToo movement, typically identified in social-media contexts with the hashtag #MeToo, and the Gospel of John. In bringing the Gospel text and the social movement together, she recognizes the powerful revelation in the voices of women collectively disclosing their experiences of abuse. Just as the gospel teaches us as Christians to respond when someone is abused, the #MeToo movement provides us insight into the meaning and experience of the gospel. Since Lewis’s initial blog post in December 2017, the movement has spread at a dizzying pace; political figures—including a nominee to the Supreme Court—powerful business leaders, respected academics, popular entertainers, and many men and women of lower profile have been identified as abusers of their power.

Analyzing the beginning of the Gospel of John during the Advent season, Lewis writes, “Giving witness to the light is not always comfortable, and is sometimes very painful. But, it exposes what needs to be brought out into the open, and, in the end, insists that the light will indeed shine, overcoming the darkness that has hidden so much for so long.”<sup>1</sup> What has been brought into the open over the

<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, “Witnessing,” *Working Preacher* (blog), December 11, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y3m7tvyk>.

*Walls are more than just physical barriers that divide people, there are also other kinds of walls that serve as figurative divisions. There are ways in which these walls divide Christians one from another, ways that need to be deconstructed in our faith communities.*

course of the last several years are the stories told by many, many women of being sexually harassed, assaulted, and harmed, typically by men they had reason to trust. The cracking open of these stories has felt at times like a floodgate.

Adjacent to, and in conversation with, the #MeToo movement is the #Church-Too movement. That these social movements are referred to by social-media tags reflects something of the grassroots nature of this phenomenon. Any ordinary person can read about the experiences of others and can add her own voice to the chorus, and there are many choruses. Like other cultural centers of power—politics, entertainment, academia, the tech industry, and many other kinds of workplaces—the church has engaged in the practice of concealment. This is beginning to change; secrecy is being upended.

---

*That these social movements are referred to by social-media tags reflects something of the grassroots nature of this phenomenon. Any ordinary person can read about the experiences of others and can add her own voice to the chorus, and there are many choruses.*

---

The presence of sexual abuse within religious communities is not new. The Roman Catholic Church has long been the subject of disclosure of abuse at the hands of priests. The Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) points to published accounts by reporter Jason Berry,<sup>2</sup> who began documenting the Church's actions in response to abuse in the mid-1980s.<sup>3</sup> SNAP argues that "this is a deeply-rooted systemic flaw in the governance of the church, which will not be remedied by pious statements, carefully crafted apologies, or the removal of a handful of offenders."<sup>4</sup> Native American and First Nation children, especially those forcibly enrolled in Catholic boarding schools, suffered particularly acute harm. As Naomi Schaefer Riley argues in *The Washington Post*, despite efforts at reconciliation and healing, the damage to Native American people who were students at the schools remains profound. "This trauma, shared for decades by Native American youths across Canada and the United States who were sent to Catholic schools, is at least in part to blame for the high level of alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide in Indian communities."<sup>5</sup> The Catholic Church continues to respond to sexual abuse scandals as they emerge. As recently as September 2018, Pope Francis defrocked a priest in Chile, Fernando Karadima, in response to accusations of abuse dating as far back as the mid-1980s. There has been widespread outcry about

<sup>2</sup> "FAQs," SNAP, [snapnetwork.org/faqs10215](http://snapnetwork.org/faqs10215).

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Jost, "Sexual Abuse and the Clergy," *CQ Researcher* 12, no. 17 (May 3, 2002): <http://tinyurl.com/yyd8gr6a>.

<sup>4</sup> "FAQs," SNAP.

<sup>5</sup> Naomi Schaefer Riley, "Catholic Schools for Native Americans, Known for Abuse and Assimilation, Try to Do Good," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 2016, <http://tinyurl.com/y4ootk39>.

corruption within the Catholic Church in Chile. The pope had earlier accused victims who spoke out of slander.<sup>6</sup>

But other Christian denominations have problematic cultures and practices as well, which are coming to light. In November 2017, Hannah Paasch and Emily Joy created the hashtag #ChurchToo after Joy disclosed prior abusive experiences within the church on Twitter. Joy writes on her blog that after Paasch got in touch to talk about the tweets:

I suggested a hashtag to virtually compile the stories and conversations, and after we batted a few ideas back and forth we settled on #ChurchToo—a nod to the extremely popular #MeToo movement, first conceived of by black activist Tarana Burke a decade ago and recently blowing up all over social media in the wake of sex abuse allegations in both Hollywood and Washington. Our thought process was that we wanted to emphasize the fact that these things happen in Church, Too—and based on our own experiences growing up in the church are often covered up or sometimes even rewarded by those in power.<sup>7</sup>

The hashtag caught on quickly. Of particular interest to Joy, Paasch, and other women who tagged their stories with #ChurchToo is the degree to which sexual abuse, harassment, and misconduct within religious communities is blamed on the female victims and how frequently male leaders who publicly confess are immediately forgiven without any systemic reflection on what kind of religious structure sets up abusers to cause harm again and again.

One case in point is Andy Savage, a megachurch pastor who publicly confessed to sexually assaulting a teenage girl and received a standing ovation from his congregation for his so-called bravery. He made his conduct public in early January 2018 and only stepped down from his position in late March after intense backlash. As *Christianity Today* notes, “Church leaders had been aware of his misconduct, which had taken place at a church in Houston, prior to hiring him.”<sup>8</sup>

Read those words again: Savage disclosed his history of sexually assaulting a teenage girl when he was a twenty-two-year-old church leader; the congregation hired him anyway. How could this be possible? In Savage’s public confession, he framed his actions as a “sexual incident,” which is an insidious and, one can only assume, intentional concealment of what he actually did.<sup>9</sup> Jules Woodson, the woman Savage assaulted, has publicly identified herself and told her story. The *New York Times* headline covering her story was “I Was Assaulted. He Was

<sup>6</sup> Francis X. Roca and Ryan Dube, “Pope Defrocks Chilean Priest Accused of Sexual Abuse,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y7lluv5o>.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Joy, “#ChurchToo,” *Emily Joy Poetry* (blog), November 27, 2017, [emilyjoypoetry.com/churchtoo](http://emilyjoypoetry.com/churchtoo).

<sup>8</sup> Kate Shellnut, “#ChurchToo: Andy Savage Resigns from Megachurch over Past Abuse,” *Christianity Today*, March 20, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y8nwpny3>.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Johnson, “Tennessee Pastor Andy Savage Resigns Weeks after Admitting ‘Sexual Incident’ with Minor,” NBC News, March 20, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/yxa4dbkn>.

Applauded.”<sup>10</sup> Savage was Woodson’s youth pastor, and one day he drove her to a secluded spot and sexually assaulted her. Woodson recounts that in the moments after the assault, Savage panicked, apologized, and said: “You have to take this to the grave with you.”<sup>11</sup> Part of his abuse of power was the assault itself, but part of it was an attempt at enforcing Woodson’s silence about what had happened. Devastated, Woodson eventually told her church’s lead pastor what Savage had done; he responded by telling her she had participated in the attack. Savage was removed from his position without public disclosure of the reason, and the church held a going away reception for him.<sup>12</sup>

The lead pastor from Woodson’s former congregation has now resigned from his position and apologized to Woodson for “failing to protect her.” He asked her forgiveness.<sup>13</sup> This apology only addresses part of his sin: he failed to protect her from Savage’s assault, and he also failed to believe her testimony to him of the harm that had been done to her. Instead of believing Woodson, he actively protected Savage and his career. This is, as the current groundswell of revelations demonstrates, far from unusual.

Savage’s career, or perhaps more accurately, his brand, has been impacted by Woodson’s revelation. As Amy Smith documents in her blog post “Silent No More” for the blog *WatchKeep*, Savage had a practice of condemning men named in the #MeToo movement on social media (his Twitter account is now set to private). Other tweets promote intimacy and teaching children about privacy and bodily respect.<sup>14</sup> This now seems hypocritical beyond belief.

---

*Savage’s career, or perhaps more accurately, his brand, has been impacted by Woodson’s revelation.*

---

On Savage’s own blog, a post promoting his now-cancelled book *The Ridiculously Good Marriage* remains visible. One tip he provides (*italics mine*): “When you break the norms of your intimate life, it can add a freshness to your marriage. *This is especially true if you tend to be the less sexually motivated spouse.* Your willingness to initiate and even surprise your spouse with intimate touch could be a connection breakthrough your marriage has been waiting for.”<sup>15</sup> Normalizing the experience of engaging in sex with a partner who is, as Savage writes, “less sexually motivated” stands out very starkly when read alongside Woodson’s story of

---

<sup>10</sup> Jules Woodson, “I Was Assaulted; He Was Applauded,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/ycwta9j8>.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Smith, “Silent No More: A Survivor of Sexual Assault by Prominent Memphis Pastor Andy Savage Shares Her Story #MeToo #ChurchToo #SilenceIsNotSpiritual,” *Watch Keep*, January 25, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y52y32r9>.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, “Silent No More.”

<sup>13</sup> Woodson, “I Was Assaulted; He Was Applauded.”

<sup>14</sup> Smith, “Silent No More.”

<sup>15</sup> Andy Savage, “5 Ways to Make Your Marriage Ridiculously Good in 2018,” *AndySavage.com*, January 3, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/yxw2t765>.

being assaulted and blamed for that assault in accordance with sexual mores that emphasize purity rather than consent.

Woodson's disclosures and the #ChurchToo movement have gained purchase, especially among female religious leaders. Presbyterian pastor Cynthia Jarvis writes in the *Christian Century* in December 2017, "I have to say that the time has come to add male clergy of every theological stripe to the growing list of gropers, tongue-thrusters, ass-grabbers, and sexual predators."<sup>16</sup> Writer and pastor Ruth Everhart, author of the memoir *Ruined* about a rape at gunpoint she survived as a college student, argues,

The #MeToo movement shows no signs of slowing. Powerful men are being held to account for their past sexual harassment and abuse of women. This is nothing less than a cultural shift—affecting primarily the worlds of entertainment, media, and politics. But what about the church? As a person of faith and as a pastor, I wish that the church were on the forefront of this moral movement. Instead, Hollywood and Washington are showing the church how to pursue justice. The lack of allegations against church leaders is not due to a lack of victims. Rather, the church is still prone to keeping its skeletons locked in the closet. I believe this from personal experience.<sup>17</sup>

This response is not uniform, of course. As allegations about Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh emerged during Senate confirmation hearings, Christian evangelical leader Franklin Graham responded on the Christian Broadcast Network, "It's just a shame that a person like Judge Kavanaugh who has a stellar record—that somebody can bring something up that he did as a teenager close to forty years ago. That's not relevant." Graham doesn't argue—as perhaps he could have done—that the accusations have not been demonstrated to be true. After noting Kavanaugh's denial of Ford's accusation, Graham continues in his comments, "Regardless if it was true, these are two teenagers and she said no and he respected that so I don't know what the issue is."<sup>18</sup> Graham's position suggests that he accepts at least the possibility of truth in Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's account of Kavanaugh's attempt to rape her, during which, per her testimony to the United States Senate, she believed he might accidentally kill her while trying to cover her mouth to muffle her screams.<sup>19</sup> Graham simply doesn't see such an attack as relevant to Kavanaugh's qualifications for a lifetime appointment to the Supreme Court and characterizes it as "respectful" behavior.

<sup>16</sup> Cynthia Jarvis, "I Can't Even Remember the Names of All the Men on My #ChurchToo List," *Christian Century*, December 21, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/y3do9h3c>.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Everhart, "When #MeToo Becomes #ChurchToo," *The Arc*, January 9, 2018. <http://tinyurl.com/y2op8doh>.

<sup>18</sup> Eugene Scott, "Amid Kavanaugh Allegations, Some Evangelical Leaders Focus More on the Courts," *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/y2ry68qb>.

<sup>19</sup> "Read Christine Blasey Ford's Opening Statement," *Chicago Tribune*, September 27, 2018, <http://tinyurl.com/yymnp29>.

What responsibility do Christians have to the act of disclosure? The prologue of the Gospel of John opens with a claim that speaks to the reader on many levels: “The light shines in the darkness; the darkness will not overcome it” (John 1:5). Once revealed, the presence of God cannot be concealed. The darkness will not prevail against the presence of God, and no attempt at concealment of truth will prevail, either. Christ is identified in this prologue as both fully divine and fully human, as both the gospel that is proclaimed and the source of truth and life. The Word is described powerfully in John 1:1 as “with God,” and then by verse 10 he is in the world and with the world. Because of this exposure to Jesus, the writer of the Gospel (and the hymn underlying the prologue) is able to testify. The light enlightens; God’s immanence in the incarnation is what provides this illumination. God being in solidarity with human beings, fully human and present with us in joy and suffering alike, is part of the revelation. Moreover, as verse 3 tells us, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” The author of the Gospel, by including this text, reminds the reader that the incarnation is part of a carefully formed divine plan. The Gospel reveals to us that we are designed, our very lives when they are configured at creation are designed, to be with one another, to be practitioners of revelation, and also to be subject to having the light illuminate our sins. There is no room here for taking the brutal truth of an assault to the grave; there is no closet in which skeletons can be hidden.

---

*What responsibility do Christians have to the act of disclosure? The prologue of the Gospel of John opens with a claim that speaks to the reader on many levels: “The light shines in the darkness; the darkness will not overcome it” (John 1:5).*

---

The stories women and men tell about abuse are powerful, crushing, and typically do not make the pages of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. When I was in high school, I volunteered as a peer advocate for the rape crisis line in my hometown. It was an education in gender dynamics, power differentials, and economic structures. When I went to college, I volunteered for four years as a peer advocate at the university’s crisis center; there was no shortage of people, mostly women, seeking support, and no shortage of people, entirely women, to provide it. Not long after I began my first teaching job, I took a position on the board of a not-for-profit agency in the town where I teach that does prevention and education work and provides advocacy and crisis response for survivors of violence. I served for six years and was privileged to witness and support the work the agency did with and for its clients.

The stories of the many clients of these organizations would curl your hair. The stories of women like Woodson and Ford and of women and men speaking truth and tagging it #MeToo or #ChurchToo are harrowing. Again and again,

we hear and read about abuses of power that hurt and humiliate and traumatize victims. Often, perpetrators continue systematically abusing victims for years, unchecked by moral or legal authority. Thus far, our social and political and religious structures have largely failed to seek justice on victims' behalf.

As Karoline Lewis observes, "Sometimes . . . a biblical text emboldens you, empowers you, encourages you to give witness to your life."<sup>20</sup> Philosopher Susan Wendell argues that the experience of being believed when you talk about your experiences, of having the recognized power to speak the truth about your life, is called having cognitive authority, and it is not granted evenly to all human beings.<sup>21</sup> People with more social power, people with institutional authority, white people in a racist society, people with impressive educational pedigrees, men in a patriarchal society, people with money and access to powerful supporters, people whose stories reinforce social norms do not have to struggle for this authority.

Wendell is writing specifically about medical diagnoses and their power to shape a person's understanding of her body in contexts of illness or disability, but cognitive authority is also somewhat fragile during other bodily experiences: "The illusion of control is probably most desired when experience of the body seems most out-of-control, as in pregnancy and birth, illness, injury, or dying."<sup>22</sup> Being out of control, having one's body outside of one's own control, can happen in any number of ways, but certainly sexual assault is one example. A person's experience of sexual assault or similar trauma can be very effectively dismissed and their cognitive authority erased by someone who has power over them, including a pastor or other religious authority, and including powerful political figures. Losing the ability to speak the truth and be believed compounds the harm done to the abused and protects their abusers, and we see in both the #MeToo and the #ChurchToo testimonies that it happens all too often. Correspondingly, giving witness is a speaking of truth, and having that truth recognized and believed is vitally important to women and men and children who have been harmed. The gospel speaks to us in our anger, our suffering, our desire to act in solidarity with others; it teaches us to recognize and affirm the cognitive authority of women who say "me, too."

What would the Jesus of John's Gospel have us recognize about the process of disclosure of the #MeToo and the #ChurchToo movements? I think it is this: Revelation directs us to the opportunity for restoration and salvation. The work of the gospel is to shine a light and to teach us to keep shining lights as we need to. I remember the story of a woman who left her abusive husband literally on foot, with the clothing she was wearing and a baby on each hip. She saw one chance for salvation, and she took it, without even a toothbrush to her name. She is safe now. The gospel not only provides us with narrative about the incarnation, it proclaims

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, "Witnessing."

<sup>21</sup> Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 117.

<sup>22</sup> Wendell, *Rejected Body*, 121.

a set of practices. The work of the gospel in this woman's life was to affirm that the abuse she endured was wrong, to provide a lighted path to safety, to shelter her and her babies, to help her rebuild her life and her support system.

For us to respond to proclamation, to not only hear but also do the work of the gospel, requires us to see disclosure as revelatory. Disclosure not only creates solidarity between women, although it does that; it not only creates the opportunity for men to repent and to bear the consequences of their actions, although it does that, too. If we are to live out the gospel, we must see disclosure—every “me, too” story, and every “church, too” story—as revelation that precedes justices. Those women, these women, we women, are proclaiming truth. It is truth that must be heard and believed.

---

*The gospel not only provides us with narrative about the incarnation, it proclaims a set of practices. The work of the gospel in this woman's life was to affirm that the abuse she endured was wrong, to provide a lighted path to safety*

---

Part of that truth is the call to take action. What has gone wrong with us, with our culture and especially with our churches that woman after woman speaks these terrible truths? Emily Joy provides a list of affirmations and observations, including this: “At the root of #ChurchToo stories are patriarchy, male leadership coupled with female submission, purity culture, evangelical personality cult culture, lack of sex-positive and medically accurate sex education, homophobia, and white supremacy. Commit to dismantling these things and addressing these root causes in your faith community today.”<sup>23</sup> This illustrates how once the light is shining, it illuminates many rooms: #MeToo leads to #ChurchToo and once we understand that proclamation is necessary for salvation, there is no stopping us. With a similar argument, evangelical writer Rachel Held Evans refers to the Gospel of John on Twitter, responding to the furor over whether the accusations against Judge Kavanaugh are sufficiently serious to make a difference in his nomination process. She writes, “[Religious leaders] . . . always said ‘the world’ would not understand our sexual ethic because ‘the darkness cannot comprehend the light.’ Maybe the world just doesn’t get a sexual ethic in which being gay is a sin but chronic infidelity, sexual assault, & ‘pussy-grabbing’ are just guys being guys.”<sup>24</sup>

For her part, Everhart concludes, “As difficult as it is, I believe this cultural movement is a gift to the church. We have the opportunity to lead boldly rather than to trail timidly or argue defiantly. Victims can come forward and give voice to their stories, not as an act of malice or bitterness, but because the church needs to do better. The church must pursue justice.”<sup>25</sup> What this means

<sup>23</sup> Emily Joy, “#ChurchToo.”

<sup>24</sup> Scott, “Amid Kavanaugh Allegations.”

<sup>25</sup> Everhart, “When #MeToo Becomes #ChurchToo.”



for the church is coming to understand revelation in a new way and ending a long practice of covering over the truth, covering over abuse, hiding coercion and harassment and assault. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. ☩

*COURTNEY WILDER is professor of religion at Midland University. She holds a PhD in systematic theology from the University of Chicago Divinity School.*