

How our theological narratives can reinforce abuse

Calvinists who believe in complementarianism are more likely to also believe domestic violence myths.

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I sat in the therapist's sparse office, looking out the window. I wasn't trying to avoid eye contact. I was trying to focus on her words. I let some bad habits slip into my marriage, and I was sorting them out. Mainly, I was reluctant to make decisions and inappropriately acquiesced to Brian. Not that he wanted me to. I had just brought so

much from my childhood into our marriage, and I had nurtured co-dependency in our relationship.

So, the counselor walked me through some very basic steps on being human. I read a lot of [Melody Beattie](#). I had to learn to make choices—simple things like declaring my favorite color or what kind of shirt I liked best. I had to ask myself how I felt. I had to listen to whether I was hungry. I needed to make a determination on what I wanted to eat. Occasionally, I needed to fight for things. Our marriage depended on it. It wasn't good for either of us for me to become a non-human in our relationship. Plus, I was a mother, and I didn't want to model my habits to another generation.

I had to learn to do these very basic things because I grew up in a complementarian home, which means that my parents believed that a wife should submit to the authority of her husband. In our home, my father had the final word on things, and the rest of the family's opinions didn't matter. It was a violent home. So out of self-preservation, I lost touch with very basic needs and wants. I wasn't allowed to have them as a kid, and then I brought all of that self sacrifice (unbidden) into my marriage.

This is all pretty embarrassing to admit. I have spent the last ten years, enjoying my writing perch as a kick-butt feminist/church consultant type. People think I'm courageous. And here I am, admitting that I had to go to a professional to admit that spaghetti on Tuesday afternoon would be delicious. For most people, that sort of thing is easily discernable. Not for me.

But I bring it up because as I have been traveling the last couple of months, I have had numerous conversations about the [Keller Kerfuffle](#). People don't understand why I oppose complementarian beliefs, or why I would consider the theology toxic.

So... let me say it again. **I had to go to a professional for three years to figure out that I could have a favorite color.**

I've gotten the response, Yeah. You had a difficult childhood. I get it. But where is the proof that complementarianism leads to abuse? It works for many people. We need something more than your anecdotes.

For that, I'm grateful for Dr. Steven L. Sandage and Dr. Shelley Rambo at Boston University who reached out to me to let me know what their team* is working on. They focus the intersection of theology and psychology, and they have studied

Calvinism, penal substitutionary atonement, concern for suffering, and domestic violence. They broke it down for me. Their study is still going through peer review, but let me share with you what they have taught me.

Domestic Violence Myths

For those who lived through domestic violence or worked with victims, we can detect the myths that allow the abuse to flourish. The false beliefs are powerful forces, because they blame victims, minimize the abuse, and shrug off the seriousness of it. They are things like:

- Women can avoid abuse, if they give in occasionally.
- A lot of domestic violence occurs because women keep arguing.
- Many women have an unconscious wish to be dominated by their partners.
- Women instigate most family violence.

Narrative Reinforcement

The research team found that Calvinists who believe in complementarianism are more likely to also believe domestic violence myths. Their theological framework acts as a narrative reinforcement in abusive situations. It can serve to sanctify 1) pain and punishment, 2) the denial and minimization of suffering, and 3) hierarchy. How does this happen?

Perhaps now we can look to my story as an example. When there was abuse in our home, I went to the church with my concerns. I was told that my situation was my cross to bear, that all things would work together for the good, and our family needed to submit to my father, just as the church submits to Christ. With that theological justification, I learned to accept pain as part God's redemptive plan.

This, of course, is not new ground. [Womanist theologians](#) have been pointing out these connections for many years. Yet, as church leaders, we need to be constantly vigilant to how our theology is used, particularly in vulnerable populations.

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