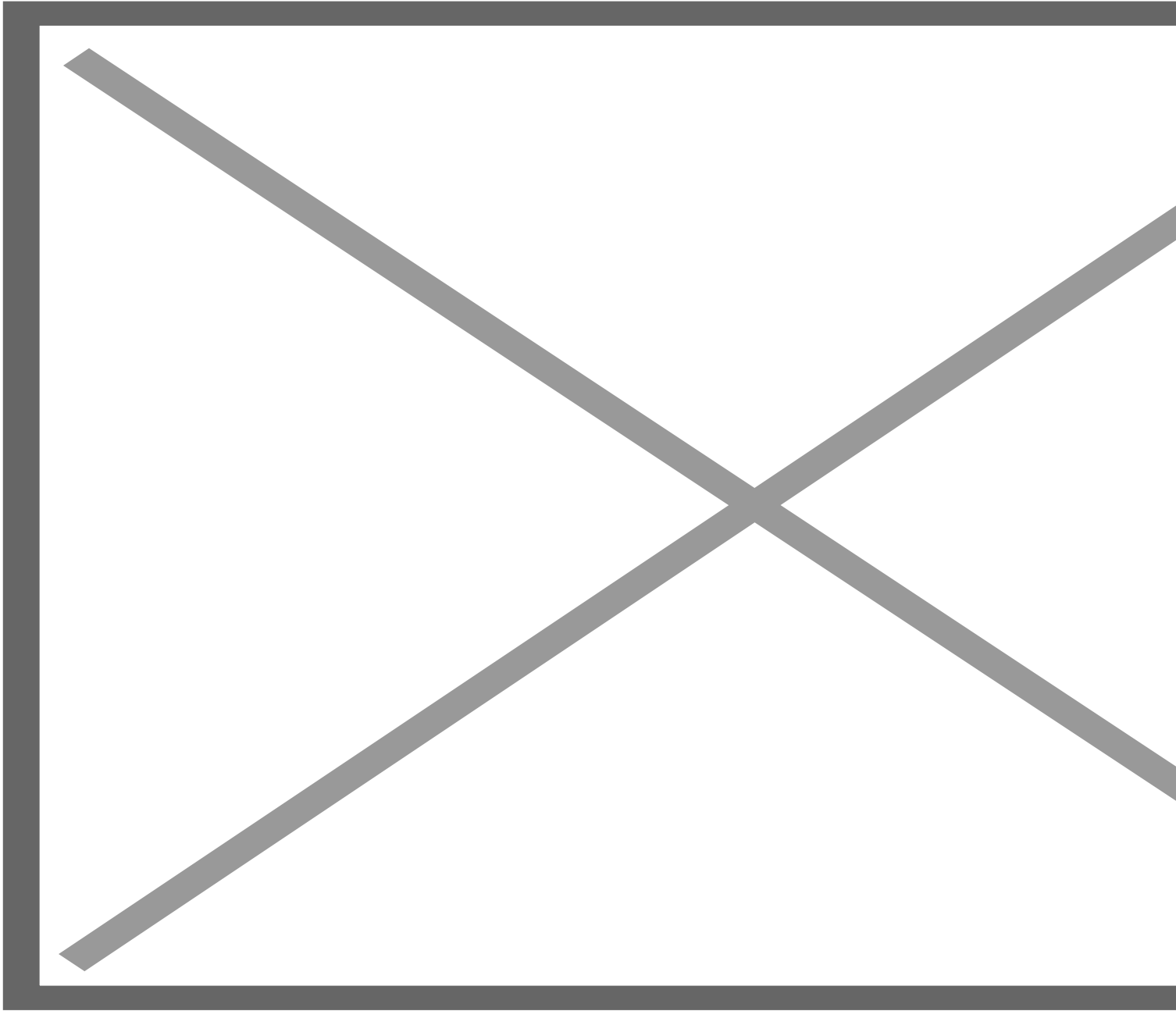


Douglas Wilson's theology of victim blaming

The Christian nationalist pastor proposes that women are responsible for preventing men from committing sexual violence—by being subservient to them.

by [Danielle Tumminio Hansen](#)
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The first time I spoke publicly about being raped, I was at a conservative Christian college, a campus I'd never visited before, a place where I didn't know anyone in the audience.

The rape wasn't a secret. My close friends had known for decades. I'd mentioned it in academic articles, and it was the focus of a book I published on theology and sexual violations.

But this felt different, more vulnerable. I knew my friends well enough to trust them. These were strangers. And while I wrote for strangers, I'd always felt protected by the distance between writer and reader—it allowed me to carefully choose my words. I never had to look into the readers' eyes. Speaking eviscerated that distance.

It didn't help that this group of students was—I assumed—unlike me in many ways. Yes, we both called ourselves Christians, but I was of the liberal Protestant variety. They, by and large, were Southern Baptists, Christian nationalists, evangelicals, conservatives. Not only were our theological beliefs different, but, statistically speaking, our beliefs about sexual violence were, too. They were [more likely to adhere to rape myths](#) and to have [defended Brett Kavanaugh](#) during his confirmation hearings. They were also more likely to believe that acquaintance rapes—what I had experienced—[ought to be labeled as consensual sex](#).

It might have been easier not to have come. But I'd promised myself to accept any speaking engagement I could around this topic because I wanted Christians to understand sexual violations better. I wanted to educate faith leaders. I wanted other survivors to feel less lonely, and I wanted to prevent other people from being hurt.

As the clock ticked, and more and more students crowded into the room, my mind spun out scenario after scenario in which their beliefs clashed with mine, in which I could do nothing to gain any kind of credibility.

Perhaps there's no greater communication divide, I thought, than one Christian speaking to one another.

It was Adam and Eve that made my hands stop shaking. I was about 20 minutes into my talk when a student asked me about the Fall—what role did it play in rape today?

I'd prepared notes that I was carefully, almost neurotically, reading from. I put them down. I started talking about sin and evil. I leaned into the Christian vocabulary we both treasured. Rape results from sin, I said. It results from individual sin and collective sin, from sinful views of gender, from sin embedded in language, from rape myths that distort the truth of what healthy sex is. I owned that these sins were systemic, insidious, entrapped in many of our religious communities. Sometimes, we didn't even notice them—they were just a part of the way things are.

That I could speak so honestly to this group was remarkable to me. But just as remarkable were the comments that individual students made when the talk was over. Some politely thanked me. Others whispered their own stories. And then there was this one young man—I will never forget this young man—with an earnest, round face, who'd been waiting near the back of the line, encouraging others to go ahead of him. Once everyone was gone, he asked, "If you could do one thing to prevent other women from being assaulted, what would it be?"

"Better sex education," I responded immediately.

He took a minute to mull this over. "I was taught the most helpful thing would be to give every woman a gun. Then she could shoot her attacker."

Now I needed a minute. I'd been researching rape for years, and I'd never heard someone propose this solution. It seemed so simple—teach a man to fish, and he'll feed himself for a lifetime. Give women a gun, and she'll protect herself for a lifetime. But I knew it was also unrealistic.

“If I had a gun, I wouldn’t have been able to reach for it,” I told him “But even if I had, the attacker could have grabbed it and shot me.”

The young man I met surprised me, but he’s far from an anomaly. Many people learn to think about sexual violence this way from their faith leaders, and their faith leaders are influenced by prominent pastors—like Doug Wilson.

Wilson is a Christian nationalist who’s made headlines for saying the US should be a Christian theocracy. He is a proponent of patriarchy. He believes we should repeal the 19th amendment and eliminate the voting rights of women. He says men should “[provide and protect](#).” He believes women are “[the kind of people that people come out of](#),” He’s [endorsed corporal punishment](#) for children. He’s used a vile expletive to [describe women he disagrees with](#) and defended his [word choice as prophetic](#).

And for some people, he’s the only Christian minister they know.

Wilson has managed to make significant inroads with government leaders. Last year, he opened an outpost of his church in the capital. [Mark Meadows and Jim DeMint](#) sponsored the first service at an event space run by a MAGA think tank. Pete Hegseth is a member, and he’s made no secret of it—Hegseth [reposted a video on X](#) last year in which Wilson says women should lose the right to vote. Back in February, he invited Wilson to [preach at the Pentagon](#).

Wilson and I may both think there’s a correlation between patriarchy and rape, but we don’t think the correlation’s the same. [My research](#), my life, and my theological commitments have all led me to believe that patriarchy enables rape—that rape is more likely when men’s power goes unchecked, when women lack authority and credibility.

Wilson thinks the opposite is true—that rape occurs when women disavow patriarchy. For him, [it’s like this](#): Imagine a person leaves their wallet on the dashboard of their car, cash sticking out. That person goes about their business, knowing the neighborhood isn’t safe. Then someone robs the car. Wilson believes the burglar should be prosecuted. But he also thinks the owner isn’t blameless. Had he not left the wallet, the burglar wouldn’t have had anything to steal, wouldn’t have been tempted to sin. Women who don’t accept patriarchy are like the car owner, prone to poor decision making, tempting rapists with their bodies and their minds. As [Wilson puts it](#), when women don’t accept “the protection of fathers and brothers, what it amounts to is a tacit, implicit, if not overt acceptance of the propriety of rape... They ought to stop doing that.”

Wilson’s understanding of rape is obviously problematic. It doesn’t account for male rape victims. It also doesn’t account for women who are raped even though they are obedient to men, accept the protection of husbands and brothers, and [live by patriarchal principles](#). Nor does it account for human complexity. After all, many people who are seen as “[good men](#)” are rapists, and many people who appear to be sleazebags are not. But perhaps the strangest, most contradictory part of Wilson’s theology is this: It proposes that women should become subservient to men because that’s the only way to keep men from sexual deviation. This makes no sense. If men are supposed to protect women, then they shouldn’t need women to protect themselves from men.

It’s true that among Christian nationalists, only a minority agree with Wilson. Most people don’t want the US to be a Christian theocracy, and most don’t want women’s right to vote repealed. Then again, it was the fringe [pro-life Roman Catholics](#) who left leaflets on cars in church parking back in 1978 that would inspire the Republican party to make abortion a centerpiece of its platform, ultimately leading to the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* nearly 50 years later. If Wilson continues to successfully persuade those with power, the center will not hold. Things will fall apart.

In the past five years, Wilson has managed to gain access to the highest echelons of the United States government. He's garnering increasing respect both inside and outside the political world. As he told NPR, he's gone from interacting with reporters who would call him a Nazi and a fascist to being taken seriously by them. Now, he says, he and his followers "[have risen to the dignity of needing to be intelligently opposed](#)." CNN, NPR, and *The New York Times* have all reported on him, conducting interviews that last the better part of an hour. They've ushered him up to a giant metaphorical platform, affording him free air time to share his beliefs. (something, I realize, I am also doing right now).

Wilson admits he's playing the long game. The prize he eyes is what the US could be in 250 years, and he's picking his battles strategically to get there. [First on his agenda](#) is to make abortion illegal, then overturn Obergefell, the Supreme Court case that made same-sex unions a right. His plan is to win the public step by step, day by day, one spiritual chisel at a time, to his way of thinking.

My fear is that the more Doug Wilson speaks, the more accustomed we'll all become to his rhetoric. We'll begin to wonder if it's worth learning more about him, maybe try to find some common ground. Even as I researched this article, I found myself searching for things Wilson and I both believe. Turns out neither of us are fans of forever wars. We're both opposed to pornography. We both think girls deserve a "[first-rate](#)" education, although Wilson says it's to help them be good wives and mothers, whereas I'd say education is a *de facto* good, regardless of what God calls you to in life. I began to wonder if I might enjoy chatting with him and his wife over a burger and Coke. Perhaps, I thought, we could find a *via media*. Then I remembered that this same man thinks I should have no right to vote.

Patriarchy is an awful lot like the gun that student told me about. Both tempt us to believe that a woman can protect herself from rape if she has the right equipment at her disposal—the right bullets, the right Scriptures, the right man. The allure lies in the simplicity. But patriarchy is no panacea, and its proof lies in the testament of real lives.

The other day, my mother reminded me that she couldn't hold a credit card in her own name until 1974, nor could she obtain a loan. The law forced her to bind her financial life to her husband, her father, to the men who were supposed to "provide and protect." The consequence was her bound freedom. She also mentioned that she remembered when North Carolina and Oklahoma became the last states to outlaw marital rape. That was in 1993, a scant 33 years ago.

This is just a snippet of what life in the US looked like when patriarchy was even more more systemically tolerated than it is today. Women had less power, less credibility, and fewer resources. Men weren't better off in that world either—they faced their own pressures and limitations that prevented them from discerning how they might truly flourish, from hearing who God was calling them to be. This shouldn't be the world we're striving for, because it's not a world with less suffering. It's a world with more.

The patriarchal society Wilson envisions as a God-designed utopia strikes me as Sartre's *No Exit*, hell turned into other people. It turns discernment into a sin and molds God into a convenient male idol instead of letting God mold us. It forces men and women into spiritual cages where they don't belong. It forecloses how the Holy Spirit might act in their lives, stifling how it might inspire them to be something beyond what patriarchal handcuffs demand.

In cases of rape, it also prevents accountability, leaving sins unnamed and unaddressed. Victims suffer more both because they're blamed more and because their religious beliefs about culpability clash with their experience of harm. None of this leads to human flourishing. None of it is in service to a world in which the old things pass away, vanishing sorrow, crying, and pain for good (Rev. 21:4).

If I've learned anything from the decades I've spent studying trauma, theology, and sexual violations, it's that neither guns nor patriarchy can protect you. There are "good men" who rape, and sinners—because we're all sinners—who are victims. If we really wanted to create a world in which sexual violations dissipated like clouds before a rising sun, then we'd stop selling spiritual snake oil. We'd speak hard truths. We'd risk costly accountability. We'd prioritize loving our neighbor—*all* our neighbors.