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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



Confronting Religious Shaming

by Ruth Tucker

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Confronting Religious Shaming

—Ruth Tucker

Late afternoon, January 3, 2003. The academic dean's office. A routine evaluation after my first two and a half years of teaching at Calvin Seminary. I was the first full-time woman on faculty in the school's 125-year history. A single mother at 57, I was a confident and experienced professor. I came prepared with documents, assuming I would sail through the interview and be out by five-thirty, heading home to watch the news and eat leftovers. Although some colleagues had misgivings about the recently-installed three-man administration, I had no sense of impending doom—no clue that the upshot would be a terminal appointment and removal from tenure track. Indeed, in less than two hours I was so thoroughly shamed as an incompetent professor that I pitifully pleaded: *Does anyone have to know?*

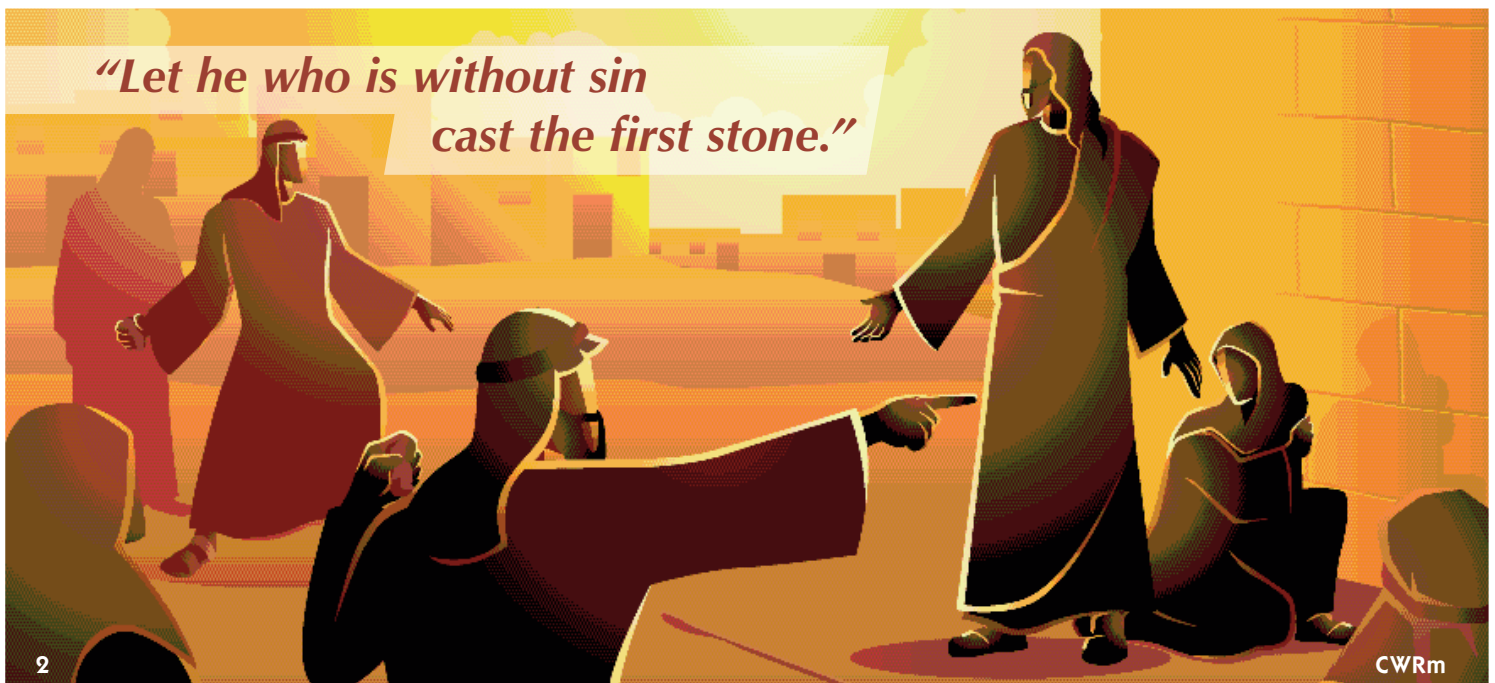
In researching my most recent book, *Fired at 57: My Fight for Justice in Christian Academia*, I have discovered that there is a long history of shaming women. The woman taken in adultery in Mark's gospel is a familiar example. Surrounded by misogynous stone-throwers who were unconcerned about the man involved, she was saved only by Jesus' intervention. The Samaritan woman is another case

in point. Treated with respect by Jesus, she has been slut-shamed by biblical commentators for most of two thousand years. Indeed, casting stones at this woman has become a hermeneutical sport, most recently summed up by prominent preacher John Piper: "a harlot, a Samaritan adulteress . . . enslaved to the flesh. Her spirit was dead . . . hopelessly carnal." That is one man's definitive assertion supported by no evidence. None.

Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, was forced to wear a blood-red "A" on her bosom, while the father of her child continued to wear his Puritan clerical garb. Though the term was not known in Hawthorne's day, Hester, like these biblical women was "slut-shamed"—a term for girls, not boys. And not just girls.

"SLUT-SHAMED" AT 57

I was slut-shamed at 57. When they had learned my fate, colleagues were upset, entirely unconvinced by the dean's accusation of deficient student and faculty evaluations. They were demanding proof. There was none. Only then did the seminary president accuse me of "ungodly conduct," defined in the Christian Reformed Church manual as sexual



misconduct. The President knew exactly how that would play out. Support from my colleagues vanished. They didn't want to get involved in defending a slut. So, I was essentially alone during the following three years in my fight for justice. .

From my own perspective, such shaming is more common

————— **“Slut-shaming” (def.): disparaging, stigmatizing, or publicly humiliating women perceived to be violating ‘norms’ and expectations based in sexual double-standards.**

in religious circles than in the secular world but in reality, the shaming of women is embedded in the fabric of western culture. In fact, one can simply call forth terms used to disparage women. Just listen to the generations of jargon. She is a bitch, bawd, broad, battle-ax, crone, floozy, gossip, hen-pecker, harridan, harpy, hoe, hussy, hag, nag, slut, skank, shrew, termagant, tart, whore and many more—some too disgusting to mention. Should it surprise us that the worst slurs against a man refer to his contemptible mother: he's a bastard, a son-of-a-bitch?

Such shaming of females, however, is surely not confined to the western world. It is found in all cultures. The inferiority of girls and women is simply assumed. That was true in Kenya where I taught at a small college for several summers. Whether or not they were raised in polygamous households, my students all testified that the man was master of the house. Wife beating was common—even

defended by some of my students, insisting it was “discipline” for bad behavior.

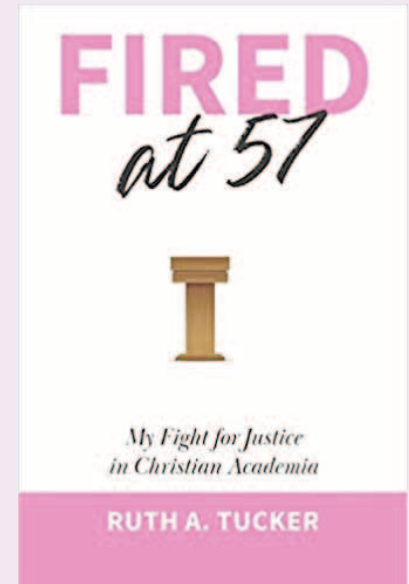
But one need not go to Africa to encounter wife-beating. As I tell in *Black and White Bible: Black and Blue Wife*, I hid bruises with long sleeves and turtle-neck sweaters for many years, too humiliated to report my

fundamentalist-preacher husband. Even after my young son and I escaped, I feared I would be blamed. I was deeply ashamed of what had gone on behind the closed doors of our

marriage. Even rape. Too ashamed to report it. After having read my book, young women have come to me telling their own stories, often insisting their words were strictly confidential, ashamed of others learning and fearing worse abuse if their husbands found out.

Ashamed. Yes, even too ashamed to report rape—particularly in Christian circles. “I remember feeling very ashamed.” These are the haunting words of Megan Lively when she was recently asked about a sexual assault when she was a seminary student. She had managed to go on in life. But after nearly two decades she was confronted by her husband on another matter and for the first time revealed to him her shame of what had happened. His first words: “You were raped.” She wasn't sure. Was she the one to blame? Maybe her memory was faulty.

With her husband's support and with the help of others, she was able to retrieve the records of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The report was still



Reflections on Ruth Tucker's *FIRED AT 57*

This month's cover story by Ruth Tucker is a courageous story of one woman's fight in the culture and workplace of our world, more specifically the world of religion.

The war against women has no boundaries and offers no exemptions. It is a no-holds-barred systemic war—and in the religious world, one that is smugly pronounced justified and necessary!

It is time, in both the secular world and in the religious world which is more relevant to this magazine, for a careful and prayerful, compassionate and Christ-centered focus on the war endured by women. It is no good to continue sweeping the dirt under the carpet—it is time for real and lasting change.

It has been my high honor and privilege to know Dr. Ruth Tucker for some 25-plus years. In the process of her rise to well-deserved prominence as a Christian author, scholar and professor she has experienced

Continued on page 6

there. She had been dating a fellow student for only a few weeks. One night he came to her door. She let him in and he raped her. She reported the assault the following morning to the student affairs office but was immediately sent to President Paige Patterson. In his office, it was almost as though she was being raped again. There was no woman to talk with, and he wanted all the details—all of the scintillating details. Worse than that. It was her fault. Why did she let him into her room? He told her to forgive him. One last warning: *Do not report to the police.*

UNCLEAN? NOT TO JESUS

Because there had been similar reports relating to Patterson, her testimony many years later, along with those of others would force him to resign as president of the seminary.

In ancient times and even today in many parts of the world, rape turns a woman into damaged goods. Shame and guilt rain down. In biblical terms, she is *unclean*—the term encompasses the very essence of womanhood from the first menstrual period to childbirth and menopause. *Not so with Jesus.*

Whether the woman taken in adultery or the woman at the well, he had a penchant for being countercultural. And he healed the woman with an “issue of blood.” In fact, he drew attention to this shamed unclean woman who touched his garment. He might have just turned and whispered that she was healed. Instead, he let his disciples and the crowd know that she had a

serious condition and he healed her. He made her whole—and clean again.



I identify with that dear woman. I endured what I refer to as industrial-strength hot flashes. The hemorrhaging required surgical procedures, and on another occasion, two units of blood before the doctor would release me—all that while teaching at a seminary with all-male colleagues. They conversed about various health issues. Menopause, however, was off-limits.

In Victorian times women, whether struggling with morning sickness, postpartum depression, menopause or monthly periods, were often diagnosed and shamed by calling it hysteria. It should have come as no surprise to me that when the slut-shaming at the seminary came up dry, I was accused of being hysterical in a meeting with the

president two years earlier: 35 minutes of “incoherent rage.”

No prior mention? None. Not until I demanded (during later outside independent mediation) that he put in writing his accusation of “ungodly conduct.” Fortunately, the mediators didn’t buy it. Their report came down decidedly on my side.

Case closed? Hardly. The original fax from the mediators was supposedly “smudged” and thus, the board president and his team essentially flushed it down the toilet—a truly shameful act. I continued to be shamed and sidelined until I left the seminary in 2006 after my second terminal appointment expired, having refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement. I would find my own voice, however, in a blog and now in a book, hoping to encourage others to tell their stories.

As is so true with racism, gender discrimination is very difficult to undo, especially when it’s attached to centuries-old cultural norms—whether nineteenth-century Victorians, Protestant Reformers, medieval churchmen, Church Fathers or Hebrew law. Blame it on Old Aristotle, if you will. Woman is demonstrably inferior to man: anatomy-compromised, emotionally fraught, “an incomplete male,” or “as it were, a deformity.” But Jesus, often chiding his disciples, would have none of it. □

Ruth Tucker is a regular columnist for Plain Truth magazine and the author of her recent release, Fired at 57: My Fight for Justice in Christian Academia.

Doing the Work

—Ed Dunn


I'll never forget her words: *Good job, Ed, good week—you are really Doing the Work!* My counselor's words would ring in my ears from the time I left her office until I would return again the following Friday afternoon. My counselor's office had become a safe space, one I'd grown more comfortable within with each new visit. Week-in and week-out at a set time and within that comfortable space, her reinforcing message was clear: *Keep Doing the work!*

"A counselor?!" you may ask. "Why did you need a counselor, Ed?" That's a fair question. As a follow-up to my last column entitled, *Let the Past Be the Past*, please allow me an opportunity to share a time in my life when I was put in a position to have to follow my own advice.

It was early 2003 and at that time, I had been married for nearly fourteen years. My wife, new baby girl and I had recently made a move from the sunny and seventy-seven degrees of Los Angeles, California, to the cold and gray of a Boston, Massachusetts winter. In retrospect, I'm not quite sure what we were thinking, moving to Boston in the dead of winter, but the prospect of a bigger job and a slightly more approachable housing market led us all to charge headlong into a new chapter of our lives.

The truth was, my wife and I needed a new chapter in our lives. We were looking for a new start. After fourteen years together, our marriage had grown tired. Add to that fact the death of my wife's mother due to cancer and the realities of her own postpartum depression, and it was clear we needed a new space in which to breathe.

To shorten a long and painful story, our move to a new city, a bigger job with more



*"A counselor?!" you may ask.
"Why did you need a counselor, Ed?"*

pay and even a beautiful, white colonial gambrel on a charming, tree-lined street did not change what was not working between us. The fact that I was traveling almost every week with the demands of the new job made things even more difficult. By the end of 2003, my wife decided to leave Boston and return home to Los Angeles. She filed for divorce shortly thereafter.

I was exhausted and completely devastated by what had happened to us. And so, I sought the help of a counselor. It has been said that time heals all wounds. It has also been said that hindsight is often 20/20.

Although well-meaning friends and family offered both pieces of wisdom in an attempt to comfort me, at the time, I felt my life was falling apart, and must admit, I found little comfort in such wisdom. In time, however, with the support of my counselor, in our process of *doing the work*, I would come to see that both pieces of wisdom were true.

— *Be still, and know that I am God*
(Psalm 46:10).

From my childhood, I've always loved this verse. In the difficulty I was facing with the divorce, I came back to this verse time and again. It might seem paradoxical to quote a verse from the Psalms about *being still* in the midst of a painful story about *doing the work*. It's not.

of meditation, prayer and conversation, but eventually, I was able to listen more fully, to forgive the hurts I'd caused and those caused by others, and to let the past be the past. In *being still*, reflecting and talking it out each week, I was *doing the work*.

Jesus is with us in the midst of our pain. No matter what we may face; a divorce, a loss of a loved one, or any number of health, financial or family traumas, Jesus gives us his peace and promises to walk it out with us. **Being still, trusting God and living in and by his grace involves doing the work.**

I know in my own life, Jesus helped me

to be still and to do the work I needed to do. He may have even helped guide me to the counselor I worked with each week. Although I can't be certain of that, I am happy to give him the credit. With her help, I was able to heal and to make the changes I needed to make. I was able to grow. *Doing the work* has become a way of life, and I thank God for his help and comfort along the way. □

Ed Dunn is the author of Let the Past Be the Past.



My counselor's office had become a safe space...

The words of this verse served me not only as a spiritual inspiration, but also as a physical way in which to *do the work* I needed to do.

My counselor helped me to slow down. She helped me to get quiet. In the process of our weekly visits and the **work we were doing** together, we began to explore some of my past, some of my life experiences and how I was repeating certain patterns in my life that needed to change. It took time and lots

FIRED AT 57 (cont'd from page 6)

and endured the world of religion and its academic and publishing institutions in a way few women have.

In the preface to her gutsy, honest, authentic and uncompromising, let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may *Fired at 57: My Fight for Justice in Christian Academia* she says:

"This volume is devoid of god-talk on my part, though loaded with it from those who fired me at Calvin Seminary. Such god-talk may seem odd to those outside the Christian workplace. Here firings are sugar-coated with the 'I've prayed-about-it' defense. Indeed, if words are taken at face value, my firing was an incredibly holy process, hours upon hours of fervent prayer, God leading every step of the way. At one point I was even accused of not sufficiently appreciating their prayers on my behalf. This whole dynamic in Christian culture is nothing short of spiritual abuse."

Religion has attempted to hide its abuse and oppression by its use of "holy" in-house language and by liberally smearing God's name all over its toxic and evil behaviors like one would put lipstick on a pig.

When the thin veneer of the profane use of God's name and hateful religious makeup is removed, the pig remains. I am thankful that Dr. Tucker, along with many others in all areas of our culture, has chosen to take a stand against the Taliban-like abuse of women, whether one calls it misogyny, bigotry, sexism or gender discrimination.

Read Ruth Tucker's book — you will be glad you did.

—Greg Albrecht



Changed in the Presence of Pure Love

QUESTION

When a person dies, is their eternal destiny locked in? How could a soul or spirit stand in the presence of PURE LOVE and not be changed? Is death the end of God's pursuit of us or will we have an after-death chance to respond to his love?

After over fifty years of fear and mistrust of God because of teachings that he is bloodthirsty and vengeful and would kill his own son to satisfy HIS displeasure with HIS creation, I have come to believe God is not like that AT ALL. If God has put it into my heart to love my children enough to die for them, surely he is capable of more love than I have or can even imagine. Even if in this earthly life we have made horrible choices and decisions, wouldn't God's divine love and mercy offer more opportunities to be "transformed"?

RESPONSE

Some great thoughts—they are biblically coherent and Christological. Here are some of my thoughts on this topic:

I do not believe eternal destiny is "locked in" at death. Nothing in Scripture would lead us to assume this, but of course much dogma within Christendom insists upon it. Many believe that their attempts to proclaim the gospel and "save" people are the primary if not the only way God uses to channel his grace and to illuminate the minds of those whose hearts and minds are darkened. I say to that—if eternal destiny depends on religion, then God is not God!

I believe that physical death is not the end of God's pursuit of us, and I base that belief primarily on the full and complete (as I understand it) revelation of God within the pages of the Bible. I base that belief on the natural revelation of God, in creation and within life experiences—he is not bound by time and space, he is not owned or operated or controlled by religion. He has not rewarded any earthly religion the sole franchise to

represent him on earth and to make specific reservations in the afterlife, somewhat like a travel agent or Expedia.com, if you will. He is God and we are not. Thank God for that!

My hopeful perspective of God's pursuit of all of us—and I do mean ALL—is that he will do whatever it takes to win us. However, I also think he allows us to make choices and respects our choices—many biblical passages speak to this, perhaps none better than the Prodigal Son, when the father "lets" the son leave his house. He honors the son's request for his inheritance—he respects his son's decision, though of course he knows it will lead to heartache and misery. The son is not, it seems, a small child—but a full-grown adult. That said, I dogmatically do not agree with the universalism that insists God will "save" everyone no matter what—such a view is akin to a forced marriage.

While I did not spend 50 years of fear and mistrust of a bloodthirsty god of violence and wrath and vengeance, I put in almost 40 years in such a religious hell on earth ... and with you, I absolutely believe that God is not at all like what many people think he is. That is, in my opinion, perhaps the greatest sin of Christendom—a warped and twisted view of God, which of course then distorts all perceptions of those who would worship him.

My sense of his love, mercy and grace is that what we have done is entirely immaterial to his love—our behaviors, good or bad, do not predispose him to like us more or less than he already does. His love is consistent, equal and favorable to all—he knows exactly who we are, what we have done, and what we are capable of. He made us. He is our heavenly Father. We do not surprise him or scandalize or shock him. That does not mean he is displeased with anger, lust, indifference, violence, hatred and the like—he is of course more pleased when our lives resemble the Sermon on the Mount than they do by what we see exemplified and glorified in the kingdoms of this world. □

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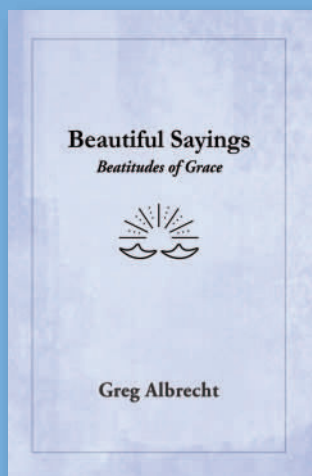
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