

When patriarchy trumps theology

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I picked up the *Tribune*, and my mouth fell open at the headline on the bottom of the front page. It was 1993 and I was living in Chicago. The paper made an editorial decision to not only report the cold hard facts of the homicides in the city, but to tell at least one story each day exploring the details of the childish accidents, domestic violence, and premeditated revenge. Reading the heart-breaking articles, seeing the innocent faces, and feeling the deep wounds—the stories seemed to pierce the city. The narratives changed me. I had been an Evangelical Christian, a born-again believer, who supported gun laws. But after seeing the harm that they caused every day, I could no longer hold to my political stance.

It's been twenty years and I haven't wavered in my position, and each time I read about a new shooting, I become more resolved about gun safety. Scriptures make me long for the day when our "swords would be beaten into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks." I cannot think of a more beautiful urge--our tools will be used feed one another rather than kill each other.

Oddly, today **Public Religion Research just came out with [a report](#) that says that 64% of evangelicals who say "pro-life" describes them very well oppose stricter gun laws.**

*How can this be?* If life is the most important thing in a political and theological belief system, why would you support the death penalty, support wars and oppose gun violence prevention? For many people, the term "pro-life" ought to lead to pacifism, so this system of ideals seems completely perplexing.

One way to understand why this contradictory set of views makes sense in the minds of so many is to remember the nature of patriarchy. A very crude understanding of a patriarchal culture points to a system where a father figure will provide and protect. Others in a family system will give up some of their rights and choice for that provision and protection—or they "submit."

Many white Evangelicals point to Scriptures that say that the husband is the head of the household, as Christ is the head of the church. In the minds of some, it follows that guns, war, and the death penalty are means of protecting their families.

When an issue like birth control comes up, you might also be confused why some Evangelicals would be against it. With the rise of birth control, women became more educated and they entered the workforce. As a result, women began to increase their agency. They did not need to be protected or provided for in the same ways as they may have in the past. Women were able to divorce a spouse without the fear of not being able to survive.

Christianity has been entangled in patriarchy so much that many believe that it can never be unraveled. Because Evangelicalism was so closely tied to patriarchy, I left the Evangelical movement. Yet, I still identify as "born-again." Being "born again" reminds me of a Holy Spirit Mother who gives birth. It reminds me of the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit broke the bonds of patriarchy, so that women and girls began to prophesy and see visions. It reminds me of the fact that in Jesus Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. It reminds me of the movement of God, who empowers women to become educated, to provide for their families, and to leave their abusers. And the Spirit gives us the strength to imagine a world in which we pound down our weapons into tools to nourish one another.