

Does teaching submission encourage abuse?

Princeton Seminary is giving an award to Tim Keller, one of the loudest, most read, and most adhered-to proponents of male headship in the home.

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I am in the midst of a book tour, talking about [Healing Spiritual Wounds](#), and I have been amazed at how people delve the depths of theology and swim there with relative ease. Believers and non-believers alike think about complex ideas about God on a regular basis.

One question that often comes up as I talk about the book is the **relationship between domestic violence and the Christian teaching that wives must submit**. Specifically, people want to know if abuse occurs more often in homes where they are taught that husbands are the head of the household.

I have looked at this question, fairly extensively. In my own experience growing up, abuse and submission were very related, whether the teaching was the cause or the excuse for the abuse, I don't know. I do know that they worked together to create the discord. I also have the background of being middle-aged with many friends who got married as fundamentalists. As they leave their husbands, with visible and invisible scars, my immediate answer would be "yes." But as I look at research, I don't see it. Abuse happens across the board, with people in every belief and non-belief.

I worry about the data a bit, because people are self-reporting. After spending many years in both the conservative and progressive worlds, I know that what constitutes "abuse" is different in each place. What a liberal woman calls abuse may be par for the course for a conservative.

Please understand this.

Biblical womanhood, headship, and male authority teaches women that they have no right to choose... well... anything. A trip the mall is up to their husband, if he decides it's his business. If he determines that she needs to stay at home and homeschool her kids instead of teaching grad school with her Ph.D., then there is no discussion. She gets no say in the matter. If he decides that he wants to have sex, then her headache is of no consequence. If he decides that she needs to be thinner, then she goes on a diet. If he decides that she needs to wear makeup, then she goes to Sephora. None of this is considered abuse. It's considered the husband's God-given authority. And if a woman questions that authority, the full force of the church community, their social connections, and their Christian doctrine backs him up. I can tell you that growing up in this environment as a little girl was very abusive for me. Even aside from the physical violence in our home.

Typically, when I talk about these things on my blog on the esteemed *Christian Century* site, I get responses like, "Meh. What does this have to do with us, Carol? You left that church. Who cares what John Piper and Tim Keller teach about marriage? They're not our people." Happily, I have embraced that reality, and dealt with any trauma as something in the past.

Sadly, I can't do that any longer. Princeton Seminary, the flagship seminary of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is giving an award for [Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Witness to Tim Keller](#), one of the loudest, most read, and most adhered-to proponents of [male headship in the home](#). I am literally shaking with grief as I write this. I have spent years with women who have tried to de-program themselves after growing up in this baptized abuse.

I know that people are angry that Tim Keller doesn't believe in women in the pastorate. But, my friends, this goes much, much deeper than women not being able to be ordained as Pastors, Elders, and Deacons. **Complementarianism means married women have no choice over their lives at all.**

So as Princeton Theological Seminary celebrates Tim Keller's theology, I will be mourning. As he presents his lecture and receives his \$10,000 award, I will lament for my sisters who have been maligned and abused. So much of my ministry has been dedicated to aiding the victims of these poisonous beliefs. In these difficult days, when our president says that women's genitalia is up for grabs by any man

with power and influence, I hoped that my denomination would stand up for women, loud and clear. Instead we are honoring and celebrating a man who has championed toxic theology for decades.

God, help us.