

The church's response to sexual assault survivors

We should not be surprised when Christian men belittle and ignore women who speak out. Biblical heroes of the faith do the same.

by [Gay Clark Jennings](#)

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Detail of David watching Bathsheba bathe, from illuminated manuscript on parchment, 1475.

Since Christine Blasey Ford came forward to tell her story of being sexually assaulted by new Supreme Court justice Brett Kavanaugh when the two were teenagers, many female clergy have been logging long hours listening to stories of sexual abuse and harassment from women they know, and sometimes women they don't. In Facebook messages, at coffee hour, and in anguished late-night emails, women who belong to the church and women who left long ago are summoning the courage to tell the stories of what happened to them at the hands of fathers,

boyfriends, brothers, classmates, colleagues, bosses, and yes, clergy and bishops.

Plenty of clergy are doing heroic work providing support and care for women reliving trauma, and many are doing so while struggling themselves with memories of abuse. But the institution of the church has little to offer abuse survivors in the way of liturgy, public prayer, or formal acknowledgement of the pain that has seared their lives.

Our silence originates in the Bible, where women are largely anonymous, treated as property, used as sexual slaves, and demeaned by men as heroic as David and as divine as Jesus. Women who are called by name account for no more than 8 percent of the people in the Bible, and fewer than 50 of those actually speak. As [Hebrew Bible professor Wil Gafney](#), who teaches at Brite Divinity School and is author of *Womanist Midrash*, writes, “The number of women and girls submerged under the story lines of the text are beyond counting.”

As Gafney and other womanist and feminist scholars have demonstrated, in the Bible rape is normative. Abraham can be read as selling Sarah to Pharaoh for sex twice, Amnon rapes Tamar and suffers no punishment at the hands of David, and the men of Gibeah gang rape a woman offered to them by a man trying to protect another man. Even God uses rape imagery when angered by Babylon, Israel, and, in an extended victim-blaming fantasy in [Ezekiel 23](#), Samaria and Jerusalem.

These stories—of men who rape and abuse and of women who stay silent—are part of the faith tradition that girls and women absorb while sitting in the pews of our churches each week. They have permeated our culture and shaped our expectations about how men ought to behave toward women and how women ought to respond. So when a woman gathers her courage to speak—to object to being treated like women in the Bible are treated—we should not be surprised when Christian men belittle and ignore her, just as the heroes of their faith have done in stories passed down for millennia.

If the Bible has provided a model for the abuse described by Ford, Deborah Ramirez, and Julie Swetnick, the unbridled anger of Kavanaugh and Senator Lindsey Graham, and the mocking derision exhibited by President Trump and Senators Mitch McConnell and Orrin Hatch, then Christians have a particular responsibility to insist on change. Victims of abuse must be treated with justice and dignity whether they speak in church, in court, or in public life, and their stories must be heard with

respect and taken seriously by people in authority.

But although some prominent Christians stated their opposition to Kavanaugh's confirmation, the response of too many white male faith leaders was to double down on our old biblical patterns. Senator John Danforth, an Episcopal priest who shepherded Justice Clarence Thomas's nomination through the Senate in 1991 by working to discredit Anita Hill, last week expressed his sympathy for Kavanaugh by saying that his reputation was being "trashed" by Ford. After 328 of my sister clergywomen in the Episcopal Church [wrote a letter to the New York Times expressing their dismay with his statement](#), he lashed out in anger at them.

Fortunately, we do not have to rely on Danforth and other distinguished churchmen to reclaim the Bible and our faith traditions. Scholars, laywomen, clergy, and seminarians like the ones I appointed to a special committee on sexual harassment and exploitation earlier this year are insisting that our church acknowledge not only the ways in which it has abused and silenced women, but also how our patriarchal systems of authority have led to women being paid and promoted less, taken less seriously as leaders, and ignored in the imagery we use to speak about God.

Even as we work to make the church safer for women, we must also dismantle the ways that our faith traditions have helped to create the culture in which Ford and so many women like her learned to endure the pain of abuse in silence. We need not turn our backs on the Bible to do so. Groundbreaking interpretive work done by Gafney and others is teaching us to pay attention to marginalized women in the Bible and hear anew the voices of Rebekah, Miriam, Hannah, and Esther, among many others. We no longer understand Mary's Magnificat as the hymn of a meek and mild girl, but rather as a cry for justice. And historians and biblical scholars alike have reclaimed the reputations and voices of the women who supported Jesus' earthly ministry.

The Bible provides us with the voices of women that can help guide and inspire us to demand that women be heard and respected. As Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler [wrote recently](#), our situation "might just be saved by the Mary Magdalene rule which is: believe women when they tell you things."