

DIS-
**OBEDIENT
WOMEN**

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HOW A SMALL GROUP OF FAITHFUL WOMEN
EXPOSED ABUSE, BROUGHT DOWN POWERFUL PASTORS,
AND IGNITED AN EVANGELICAL RECKONING

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INTRODUCTION

I grew up a Sunday-morning Presbyterian, and later, a youth group Methodist. Church was an obligatory respite, if in practice, a little boring. Only deep into my teens did my faith become one where sin and salvation were fixed, battling entities in my life.

When I was a high school senior, I found myself at a church hall dance in a neighboring town. I'd met the Christian electronica-pumping DJ a few times. He was straight edge and single. His pants were baggy, and he wore his hair long on top with frosted tips.

I climbed onto the stage where he was hunched over CDs to say hello. I thought I was flirting. He asked me something, grabbed my hand, and prayed. The thumping drive of the music was so loud I couldn't hear what he said, but when done, he pulled me into a hug. His salty teen-boy cologne clung to his T-shirt, which had little rips at the neckline. I thought he might like me. He turned off the music and asked me to testify at the mic.

Evidently, I'd just been saved.

My heart pounded with reverb from the now-muted music. Had I missed it? My eyes misted up, not over my salvation but panic that I'd done it wrong and now needed to tell a lie. About *Jesus*. My mind raced for an alternative: spill family secrets to a room of sweaty teens.

"Things have been hard at home." That much was true—and good reason for divine intervention.

"My dad..." I trailed off.

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As mortified as I was not to know what to say about Jesus, I also could not bring myself to voice the details of my homelife. It was my job to protect my mom from my father, including the public shame of acknowledging how bad his drunken rages got. Each night, I prayed to God for safety, waiting for my father to pass out. Where was Jesus then? Now, anticipation of public declaration about my frightful homelife (a condition I'd prompted) choked the words in my throat. My eyes stung. I couldn't say more. The DJ supportively and platonically squeezed my shoulder. He took the mic.

He could chalk up another salvation by way of sacred techno. Jesus had a new soul, one who was never positive she'd actually been saved. I didn't even grasp what salvation might mean, exactly. Saved from what? To what end?

Soon after, I got to know a Pentecostal preacher's son. We dated briefly, and his whole youth group laid hands on me, speaking in tongues. I worried their state resulted from my evident condemnation.

If I hadn't been so eager to crack the formula for salvation, I doubt I would have been so susceptible to influences eager to define sin, to tell me who I was in relation to God's kingdom.

But one of my best friends, another preacher's son, took me with him to a Bible study in the cushy suburban home of an evangelical pastor. I sat uneasy in the pastor's homemaker-tidied living room, as conversation inevitably strayed to damnation of all sorts: gays, immodest women. I wanted faith to bring me closer to heaven; all the talk seemed to be about hell.

Yet a holy desire consumed me. In that dank prism, I somehow found a defiantly compassionate God. My usual practice of prayer for God's protection turned into a torrent of conversation with a loving God whom I pictured preparing a better life for me. When I helped other people, I felt a lightness inside that harkened to the divine.

Eventually, I began thinking God was calling me to become a minister. When I told my good friend who took me to Bible study, pity filled his

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clear, gentle eyes. Overlooking our female associate pastor, he reminded me that according to Paul, women should not hold authority in church.

A seed of uncertainty rooted itself within. If I could be wrong about that call, how else might I have erred? What kind of God wouldn't trust women to lead? Why, from a Bible with so many inherent contradictions and antiquated practices, was this a mandate that should stubbornly loom over me? I studied, prayed, eventually went off to divinity school. My questions could not square. I graduated an apostate.

It took years for doubt to dissolve my faith, and when it did, I found myself in seeming solitary possession of a heart broken by losing the church. I didn't know anyone else who had loved God so much, then broken away. This was in the early 2000s, before believers would commonly broadcast their process of deconstructing their childhood faith. I went from calling myself a Christian to any number of things: agnostic, nonbeliever, atheist, "it's complicated."

Not knowing how to categorize my withdrawal from faith, I read everything I could and wound up with two religion degrees. Finally, I started consuming whole websites written by people with upbringings very different from my own but who shared some of the same core theological and moral questions. We started talking, and I wrote about them.

I never intended to become a religion reporter. Yet for years now, my imagination, my workday, has been consumed by people who suffered much more than having disappointing Scripture quoted at them. They were abused by their church or pastor, or by their family justifying harm as Christlike and necessary.

Most of them, I first met online.



In the early aughts, platforms such as Blogger, WordPress, and Typepad created new mechanisms for self-publication, with 152 million blogs

active by 2010. People wrote about everything from sports to recipes to politics. It's difficult to remember when our relationships formed solely in the terrestrial world and few of us participated in a broad, virtual nexus of people known only by their typed words and online avatars.

By 2009, a wave of blogs about faith and questioning some of the impacts of evangelicalism's ascendant effects started popping up across the internet. Cross-posting links and sticking up for one another on social media, real bonds formed between bloggers. Often launched or maintained by women, and in particular women whose home churches ignored women's voices, these posts exposed the harsh reality in which many had been raised. Their audience was hungry for community.

My own dalliance with evangelicalism had been as damaging as it had been brief. I wasn't raised in a cultural mash-up of the Christian franchise VeggieTales and Focus on the Family's political rhetoric like millions. Merely hearing from a few trusted people that women must submit to male authority in matters of faith and home started a cascade of doubt for me. But for girls raised deeper in the evangelical movement, their school curricula, film, radio, and even their toys underscored those messages.

As I read the blogs and eventually started interviewing bloggers, I learned how they were taught that they were responsible for protecting their own sexual purity and that of boys around them through modest dress. They'd believed that if they were physically abused at home that it was a form of discipline. Many reasoned that if they were sexually abused or assaulted, it was their fault. Their sin.

In geographic and theological isolation, as girls, they'd had little way to know how many others felt the same hurts, endured the same damage.

When I began reporting, I never anticipated covering religion. It still hurt too much to talk about faith. But discovering the blogs was a reporter's bounty, a harvest of raw material and personal anecdotes that connected lived moments of faith to major religious and political institutions. The political influence associated with various ministries and homeschool

organizations was fascinating, but what reeled me in were stories of faith harnessed, faith broken, faith messily transformed.

Maybe I was trying to better understand the elements that ruined my faith by reading about the more extreme theologies that informed the margins of what had been my own. But mostly I had stumbled upon a maze of puzzles I only partly understood. I had never attended a True Love Waits training that teaches sexual abstinence until marriage, but I did come of age during purity culture's boom. I'd never heard of the pastor Bill Gothard or Quiverfull's eager procreation until I read the blogs about them, but the curious rise of Mike Huckabee, Sarah Palin, reality TV's Duggar family, and for a spell, what felt like most TLC programming, seemed to reflect a religious and cultural phenomenon I'd missed, one that happened in some other churches. Among other sorts of families.

By the 2010s, I was working as a freelance writer for national publications, and as I reported about these women's heartbreak and successes, I revealed people lodged within harmful systems, trying to drag institutions toward what's healthy, what's right. I witnessed others quit what hurt them.

Together, they disobeyed efforts to silence them and in so doing, began serving a higher purpose. It was a reformation in digital space.



My years reporting on women's experiences at what felt like the fringe of American Christianity grew into a fascination I couldn't quit. I learned just how influential those faith communities were and how much the general public needed to know their stories.

Then #MeToo shook our major institutions, and Americans began reckoning with the ways our culture enables and covers up sexual assault and abuse. The Trump era drew a bright, shining line under church leaders' hypocritical support of an alleged abuser while ignoring women

coming forward with allegations within their own congregations. I'd been writing about women I first discovered online, and their battles against abuse revealed how among our powerful institutions, sometimes the church is the most effective mechanism for covering up spiritual, sexual, and physical violence.

Only after the chaos of the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, with its Christian flags, prayer, and "Jesus Saves" signage aplenty, did it occur to me that in writing about Christian and theologically questioning women bloggers and online activists, I'd been covering a countermovement, led by women, to reform the most powerful religious movement exerting political force in our country in my lifetime: white, Christian evangelicalism and its spawn, Christian nationalism.

Together, my sources' influences could read like a Venn diagram, displaying overlaps between evangelical Christianity, patriarchy, nationalism, racism, and a church celebrity culture that elevates all brands of false authority.* I aim to show how these themes hummed as background noise of the theology that shaped their lives. In the flux between is abuse of power; physical, spiritual, and sexual abuse; and spiritual torment.

They detailed for me how *good* and *evil* were treated as such clear-cut categories, how anything—feminism, secular government, blue jeans, asking questions—that resided outside their pastor's definition of goodness became marked as evil.

Oh, how they wanted to be good.

Their circumstances were unique. They were in confrontation with a version of faith that didn't respect their autonomy or recognize how much they had to teach. The internet granted them a platform when some of their churches did not allow a pulpit.

* I use this term two ways. First, the logical fallacy, in which the opinions of an expert in one realm are accepted in another. (Within evangelicalism, there are plenty of figures who are famed speakers or great at turning the church into a thriving business, but who slapdash exegesis.) Second, unquestioned and unquestionable authority is thrust upon people (say, a man over his wife) regardless of his qualification to make sound family decisions and based upon a single pair of traits: that he is male and claims to be a Christian. There's a lot of talk about why that should work in theory or at least theologically. This book is full of examples for when it does not.

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They aren't perfect people, but they are real. Most would never have chosen this life or work.



Abuse is a unique violence when paired with faith. It takes people at their most vulnerable, raw and innocent, and attempts to dominate a secret place. There's a loneliness in people's voices as they recount spiritual wounds—whether they come from pastoral manipulation, a cultlike control, or childhood rape.

After my own faith disintegrated, I still had one other remnant: ears attuned to the notes of violence, trauma, and faith. I became drawn to those who once (and some who still) leaned on God as I had. I come at this work with proximity important for understanding, but with crucial differences in experience. The spiritual grief I experienced losing my faith is different from the religious trauma of my sources. And as much damage as an abusive parent can cause, the nature of spiritual abuse is different. My father terrorized me, but from a young age, I understood something was wrong with *him*. I didn't understand him as an emissary for God on earth. God was my ultimate refuge.

I suspect the revelatory power of the online reckoning in recent years is the sheer number of people who believed themselves a solitarily, wounded being until, thanks to the internet, they suddenly became aware of an overwhelming reality: Their wounds were common. Perhaps the thing worse than being wounded and alone is knowing that you are part of a community of wounded and that those you trusted with your soul knew and didn't care enough to stop it for any of you. To help you heal.

The women, and some men fighting alongside them, in these pages accessed the virtuous stamina to hold their churches to higher standards, even though they were taught as children that their voices were better kept quiet. Even as important faith leaders accused them of lying, of committing the sin of gossip, of betraying their faith, they kept going.

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Their shared struggle can be a unifier, connecting people with profound political and religious differences. When in hell, decency can forge a bridge.

I chose the title *Disobedient Women* as a tongue-in-cheek reclaiming of the smear cast at many women who defied authority, which I will argue deserved defiance. Some of my sources over the years were socialized as girls and now identify as male or nonbinary or were raised as a boy and recognized their female identity later in life. They have valuable expertise in what it means to be raised in an environment where your childhood gender defines your educational, career, religious, and familial aspirations. You will also find men who were hurt by the same teachings; some were sexually assaulted and their abuse was covered up in the same way that abuse against women and girls was. You'll find some people who were both victim and abuser.

Abuse survivors may want to take this book slowly. I try to be frank for those who don't understand. I'm sorry if you do.

Last, a surprisingly optimistic thread weaves through all this. Like millions of Americans, my own faith is still a question mark, a nebulous, softening, often-absent thing, but seeing the conviction with which some stayed in the church and used the loudest platform available to seek reform sparked something within me. Not faith exactly, but perhaps its close neighbor—hope.

1

QUIVERFULL

In my early days reporting, I might do an interview with a “mompreneur,” then spend the afternoon poring over Pew Research Center stats on Americans disaffiliating from religion. I’d write about startups trying to make clothing, coffee, or even concrete more environmentally sustainable, then search for religion articles, wondering why no one else was talking about the fact that growing numbers of *women* were leaving the church. I suspected the phenomenon presaged an important cultural shift.

When faith is inherited, it’s often mothers who ingrain affiliation in their kids. They organize the baptisms, funerals, and pancake breakfasts. They drag their kids to church, much as my own mother did each Sunday. Traditionally, throughout the world, and in almost every religion, women were more religious than men.

While more men were still nonbelievers than women in the U.S. in

the 2010s, women were catching up, with millennials like me representing an even greater turn away from religion. A few sociologists of religion (and in turn, I) found female rejection of faith to be a sort of canary in the coal mine for the future of religion and the church in America. I was just one among the millions who had walked away.

So, I perked up when one of the crowdfunders I'd reported on gave me a tip about a funding campaign on his site to save the home of a woman who would soon be named American Atheists' 2014 Atheist of the Year.¹

Vyckie Garrison was no garden-variety secular empiricist. Nor was she among the growing numbers of women my age who were sluffing off faith. Vyckie, fifteen years my senior, had lived a far more extreme version of faith than I'd ever encountered. For me, lost faith was a breakage; for her, it had been an escape.

As I started reading on her blog, *No Longer Quivering*, an intellectual door opened for me. I've been passing through versions of that door, learning what I can, tracing women's stories across the internet and into the world, ever since.



Vyckie's childhood homelife had been chaos—she didn't know her father, and her mom dabbled in crystals, pyramid power, and natural healing.² She moved out at fifteen, married at sixteen.

"That was pretty much a disaster,"³ she told me. Those early years led her to crave stability, answers.

She found them listening to a Christian radio station where she discovered the Bible offered an objective set of rules. Order.⁴

Vyckie met her next husband at a church picnic.⁵ But she fell into Christian homeschooling by accident. Her four-year-old daughter was precocious and an early reader. Their pastor's wife suggested homeschooling her just for kindergarten. Vyckie didn't think she could manage it, but the pastor's wife insisted—it was just a year. Between the homeschool curriculum

and her Christian homeschool support group, Vyckie was introduced to a series of notions that affirmed the choice she'd made was good.

She swallowed the rhetoric and reshaped her life.

She continued homeschooling because she'd accepted it was the "godly way." Public schools were "basically evil, run by a bunch of secular humanists who were just going to turn the kids into lesbians," and they were part of the World System, she learned. "Satan is the one in charge of the World System."⁶ God should be her child's educational focus.

When we talked, Vyckie explained to me how churches like hers didn't allow young adults to date, but instead practiced what she described as a form of matchmaking via courtships.⁷

From speakers at Christian homeschool conventions, Vyckie heard children are a blessing from God, and God should be trusted with family planning. She should bypass Sunday school or other activities where her children could come in contact with worldly kids. She also learned the husband is a family's spiritual leader and the wife's godly role is to serve as his helpmeet (a biblical term for a helpful companion, popularized in some churches as an accommodating and submissive wife).⁸

Talking to Vyckie, and later reading primary sources from within the movement, I started to put together a rough sketch of a crusade that encourages having as many children as possible, to create a "full quiver" of arrows in an "army for God."⁹ A favorite Bible verse, Psalm 127, served as the rationale: "Children are a heritage of the Lord, and fruit of the womb is his reward."¹⁰ Happy is the man with a full quiver. Women's wombs, then, could forge weapons for the Kingdom of God.

Vyckie wore dresses, with a shirt or turtleneck underneath. She grew her hair out to her waist.¹¹ On the radio, she listened to R. C. Sproul, a theologian and advocate of Christian patriarchy.¹² (She found conservative, Christian Focus on the Family "pretty liberal."¹³) She followed teachings gleaned from a ministry called Vision Forum, subscribed to *Patriarch Magazine*, and though she didn't refer to herself as "Quiverfull" per se, subscribed to the *QuiverFull! Digest*.¹⁴

Together, she and her husband ran a business: a Christian newspaper called the *Nebraska Family Times*.¹⁵ Vyckie edited and published. Her husband handled sales and distribution.¹⁶ In 2003, her family was named Family of the Year by the Nebraska Family Council, a conservative, religious policy organization.¹⁷

But Vyckie's body was taxed by pregnancy. She has a chronic bone disease and adrenal problems, and during pregnancy developed preeclampsia and gestational diabetes. Her first three babies were C-sections.¹⁸

"When I didn't die and my baby didn't die, then that was confirmation, you know, we were on the right track,"¹⁹ she said. She thought God was blessing them.

Finally, though, Vyckie's doctor told her, "You really, really cannot keep doing this. This is going to kill you." Her husband had a vasectomy.

But over subsequent years, Vyckie read transformative books, such as *Be Fruitful and Multiply*, in which author Nancy Campbell argues "God calls our children arrows...in the context of Bible days, arrows were for the purpose of war! We are in a war today and God needs arrows for his army." A warrior wants as many arrows as possible to slay the enemy. God's blessing is "maximum population."²⁰ Campbell offered an etymology lesson: Woman is a "womb-man." Motherhood is a God-given purpose. When I interviewed Campbell for my article about Garrison, Campbell told me the womb is "the very seat of who we are as a woman."²¹

Elsewhere, Campbell argued "fruitfulness of the womb is always considered a blessing. Barrenness was considered a curse, a shame, and a disgrace."²²

Beginning background research, I read a popular book called *A Full Quiver*, by Rick and Jan Hess, which discounted common reasons families might have for limiting the number of children they raise—ranging from overpopulation and food shortage to the cost of a massive brood. They pointed out that avoiding childbearing would hardly help starving "little kids on the other side of the earth,"²³ ignoring the possibility of hungry, impoverished children in the West, or in fact, within Christian families.

There was no need to worry about depletion of natural resources due to overpopulation because “God gave to man the command and ability to fill up the world with people and to subdue the earth for their own needs.”²⁴ Fathers (as sole breadwinners) would be able to provide for their children with God’s help. “Attention, fathers,” the Hesses wrote, “living a life of faith in God with regard to our family size may just be our Divine ticket to a better job.”²⁵

Vyckie read in *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality*, Mary Pride’s thesis, that women’s essential role—at home and for the health of a Christian country—was to make themselves open to as many children as God would grant.²⁶ “Why doesn’t it bother us that, thanks to family planning, the number of Christians in the next generation is being thinned out from *within*?” Pride puzzled. But she offered a back-of-napkin alternate formula: Say Christians are 20 percent of the population. “If each Christian family had six children, and the humanists, feminists, and others kept on having an average of one...then in twenty years there would be sixty of us for every forty of them. In forty years *90 percent of America would be Christian!*”²⁷

Pride suggested, per God’s gracious design, most women would have a reasonable span between pregnancies, given a year or two of breastfeeding. After her fame grew, Pride responded in her subsequent *All the Way Home*, to women asking why despite breastfeeding they were having children so close together. “My theory is,” she wrote, “that God is making up for lost time with many of us who are still willing to have children. He is giving Christians in this generation a chance for revival instead of just shutting the door on us.”²⁸

Pride, who published the magazine *Practical Homeschooling*, was considered one of the four pillars of the Christian homeschooling movement, along with Michael Farris, founder of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA); Brian Ray, founder of the National Home Education Research Institute; and Gregg Harris, author of *The Christian Home School*, a foundational reading within the movement. One set of workshop

tapes produced in 1996, *Mary vs. Martha*, features Gregg Harris's wife, Sono Sato Harris, who shared how she had once been a "barren woman," not literally but "influenced instead by careerism and feminism."²⁹ But when she gave birth to their first, Joshua, then Joel, and once the number of her children swelled to six, she had to settle down at home. She describes the practical challenge of mothering vibrant, messy children while serving as their teacher. Sono Harris played on a verse from the book of Luke, creating two archetypes for women, a "Mary" focused on care and loving and a "Martha" so invested in organizing a tidy, well-functioning home she misses the point of having Jesus visit them.

It can be hard for a "Mary" to learn to be a "Martha," and vice versa.

"Can a leopard change its spots or an Ethiopian the color of his skin?"³⁰ she queried her listeners. She continued with Martha-type lessons on organization through decluttering.

Whether storing household items in carefully labeled storage containers as Sono Harris suggested or Nancy Campbell asking a reader to answer just what might qualify as a "quiver full," evangelical women who consumed this content, went to the seminars, and patterned their days and reproductive choices on the advice within could have an intellectually coherent worldview reinforced over and again by internally consistent and trusted sources.³¹



In Pride's work, Vyckie learned that birth control blocked God's prerogative over whether a human soul can come into existence. Pride declared that the Pill was associated with hypertension, blood clotting, fungal infections, and, possibly, cervical cancer.³² Campbell, for her part, argued that birth control pills precipitated abortion; both Campbell and Pride framed IUDs as abortive.³³

Pride's argument that compelled Vyckie most deeply, though, was that Christian mothers seeking salvation through childbearing may run some risks, but no more than Christian missionaries who risked death

answering their calling. “Even if maternal missionary work has some hazards (what missionary work doesn’t?), the noble way is to face them with courage,” Pride wrote. “Likewise, we really ought to honor women with medical problems...who are willing to serve God as mothers.”³⁴

“I had such a martyr’s mentality,”³⁵ recalls Vyckie.

She accepted Campbell’s advice on vasectomy reversals and encouraged her husband to reverse his. He did, and more children followed.³⁶

Pregnant with their fourth child, Vyckie was set on a home birth. “If you’re trusting God with your family planning...you have to be the most natural,”³⁷ she reasoned. Over the course of the pregnancy, she packed seventy pounds onto her ninety-five-pound frame. She was miserable and cried to her midwife, saying she wanted to see a doctor.

Instead, the midwife told her a Bible story about Moses leading the children out of Israel. They were getting manna from heaven and grew weary, and God rained down quail. They had meat in abundance but leanness of soul. Not wanting leanness of soul, Vyckie worried that if she was asking for a doctor, “do I trust God?”

Toward the end of the pregnancy, Vyckie was having contractions almost continually, maybe a minute long and intense, coming every five minutes—but she wasn’t dilating. Her midwife suggested a warm bath. Relax. She was exhausted, sitting in the tub, when her eyes tripped over a razor.

“It came to my mind, if I just cut my wrist, then maybe this midwife would believe I can’t handle this,” she recalls.

Eventually, she was taken to the hospital. The doctor later told her he’d never seen any woman in her condition—a *preventable* state. Her blood pressure had bottomed out. As the anesthesiologist put the oxygen mask over her face, she said, “I really, honestly thought I was about to meet my maker.”

But she and the baby survived.

By the fifth baby, she did have a home birth (and truly couldn’t have afforded another C-section).³⁸ Her sixth was another vaginal delivery. Her seventh she planned to have at home, unassisted, but after one

contraction, she knew something was wrong. It was good she listened to her own intuition—something she often didn't, had been trained not to. It was too easy as a woman to fall under Satan's influence.

Nevertheless, she asked to go to the hospital, and there she learned she was having a uterine rupture.³⁹

Again, mother and baby survived. Her eldest daughter took care of the newborn, staying with them at the hospital, bringing the baby to Vyckie's breast as she slowly recovered.

Vyckie got pregnant again, and again. Miscarriages followed.⁴⁰

Managing the house full of kids became too much, Vyckie told me.⁴¹ She couldn't keep up with homeschooling or even feeding the kids three meals a day. "My kids were not getting educated."⁴²

There was such a vast disconnect between the godly prescriptions she was attempting to follow and the result in her lived experience. "I was trying to manifest, I guess, the world in my head, in my home," she says. But the distance between just made her "study more and try harder and pray more and submit more...in this desperate attempt to get it right."⁴³

And it was killing her.



Another element of Vyckie's urge to live right was a sense of duty to honor her parents. Although she had been raised without her dad, in an effort to fulfill that obligation, she reached out to her father's extended family.⁴⁴ This is how she connected with an uncle who happened to be an atheist.

Vyckie's father warned that her uncle could confuse her faith. She felt insulted, as if "some atheist uncle is going to talk me out of my Christianity." She liked the uncle immediately, and they kept in touch via email. While he made no attempt to "de-convert" her, he asked questions about how she lived. This challenged Vyckie to explain choices she considered Bible-based to someone who didn't believe in God.⁴⁵

All of it tested Vyckie's ability to articulate a clear rationale for her beliefs without being able to lean on shared theology, given premises. It was harder than expected.

She'd built her life entirely around what she was taught God wanted. But as she struggled to describe her world, her certainty faltered until she got to the point where she didn't believe in Jesus.

"It all just kind of came crashing down at once,"⁴⁶ she recalled.

Vyckie ran.

She was coming apart physically and mentally and left home on her own and stayed with a friend in Kansas City for two weeks, which naturally escalated marital conflict. When she returned, her husband left and took the kids to his mother's. Their network of Quiverfull families tried to negotiate on her husband's behalf: She could only see her children if she got back into the "right relationship with Jesus."⁴⁷

Vyckie went to the courthouse and filed for divorce. When we first talked, she saw her ex-husband as a victim of the beliefs they'd adopted. The rigid gender roles they adhered to damaged him, she felt, and gave sanction to his worst traits and suppressed his natural, good qualities.⁴⁸ She was the one who brought the ideas home, after all. Her ex, who is blind, was not the one going to conventions and lugging home books. She was left wondering, "Why would I participate in my own oppression and abuse and even bring it on myself?"⁴⁹

In the end, she won custody but was also sunk in debt. But she was out, and her children were safe. Now she only needed to figure out how to rebuild their lives.



After her divorce, Vyckie had been thinking back to a friend from her home church, a mother of eleven who had contemplated killing herself, thinking it might be the best thing for her children and husband. Then,

her friend's logic ran, "All these other Christian families are going to rally around my husband and kids." Her friend thought the other families could take better care of her children than she could, because regardless of effort, their lifestyle didn't work. Everyone was so unhappy.⁵⁰

Instead, the friend lived with Vyckie for about six months after she left her husband, then ultimately lost custody of her children.⁵¹ That loss, more than anything, demonstrated to me the risk women in high-control religious communities face. They pour everything into what they believe is the best way to raise their children and, if they leave, jeopardize losing them in the attempt to free them and to save themselves.



Just as Vyckie had undertaken a gradual adoption of stricter and stricter theology,⁵² she later systematically processed what her faith had been and how it impacted her kids and her own life. With her friend, she started a blog called *No Longer Quivering*. It was a place to write down what they had experienced, try to figure out "what was it that had appealed to me. What was my thinking?"⁵³

Surveying *No Longer Quivering*, I found photos of Vyckie, a blonde who wore glasses and seemed fond of floral-print dresses and tops. In current pictures, her kids wore T-shirts and shorts or jeans.⁵⁴ It was a leap from the older family shots with waist-length hair and frumpy cardigans.

Within months, *No Longer Quivering* (NLQ) was built out with forums and a growing community.⁵⁵ As the site gained attention, Vyckie "loaded NLQ with keywords" and got it to the point where *No Longer Quivering* would appear at the top of search results if someone googled particular ministries.⁵⁶ If a family was searching evangelical-famous pastor "Bill Gothard" or his ministry "Institute in Basic Life Principles," Vyckie says, "they're getting information from us, saying, *warning!*"⁵⁷ The margins ran with NLQ's Twitter scroll, ads for blogs *Under Much*

Grace (with a graphic that read “fight the mental burqa”) and another for *Quivering Daughters*.*

NLQ writers tackled Christian patriarchy, too, arguing “‘Biblical Womanhood’ turns Scripture (often in well-intentioned ways) into a spiritual abuse guidebook, a manual for how to slowly but steadily crush every last spark of life in your bones.”⁵⁸ One post, “Daughter of the Patriarchy,” described the shame a young woman lived with growing up to believe her developing body was “Satan’s trap” for men.⁵⁹ (It’s worth noting that years later, on online message boards, some former homeschoolers turned on Garrison; they couldn’t support someone who’d raised her children as they had been.)

On NLQ, Garrison shared pull quotes from OneNewsNow, an outlet she used to follow and republish in her “pro-life, pro-family” newspaper. Doug Phillips, who then ran the evangelical organization Vision Forum, and another “family advocate” named Geoffrey Botkin had been quoted in an article equating the Pill and abortion. Phillips further claimed “our daughters are going to be asked by their physicians whether they want to carry their children or put them in external wombs, which have been created by the scientific community so that women no longer have to carry babies.” Vyckie warned that although the Quiverfull movement represented a small segment of evangelical Christianity, “its ideals are making massive inroads into mainstream thought via these ‘pro-family’ organizations.”⁶⁰

After learning about Vyckie’s life, I couldn’t help but wonder, who were these guys, Phillips and Botkin, and why were they so anxious about their daughters’ wombs?

* It’s unsettling to look back at the aughts and how commonly burqas were used as metaphors of oppression within Christian communities (where Islamophobia was nearly a norm). It makes sense that over a decade later, when sociologists such as Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry studied Christian nationalism that Islamophobia was a common characteristic. By then it had been normalized for years—both within Christian communities but also across the U.S. broadly. Readers will see other examples, but this detail is one among those I am including, hoping the reader pauses to feel unsettled seeing this language through modern eyes, and I think here, see an example of someone working to leave a system but still carrying some of the residue of its biases.

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