

DISOBEDIENT WOMEN

How a Small Group of Faithful Women Exposed Abuse, Brought Down Powerful Pastors, and Ignited an Evangelical Reckoning

ACADEMIC GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

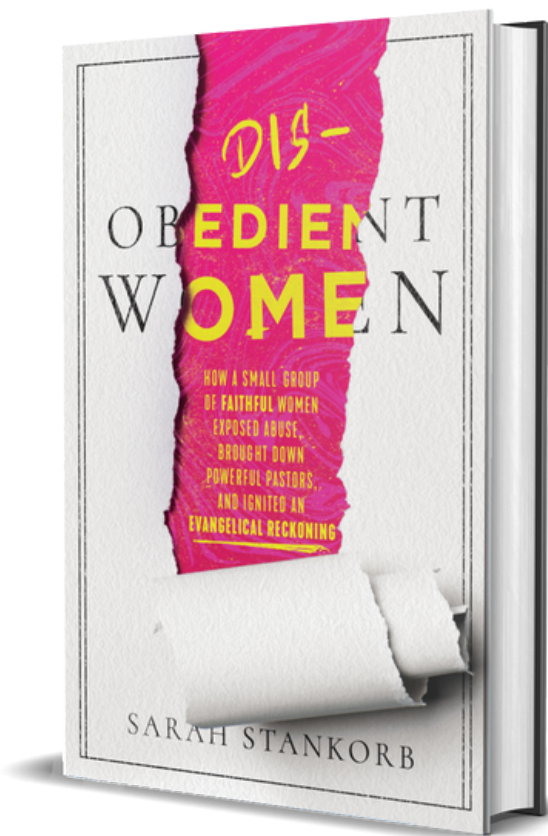
A generation of American Christian girls was taught submitting to men is God's will. They were taught not to question the men in their families or their pastors. They were told to remain sexually pure and trained to feel shame if a man was tempted. Some of these girls were abused and assaulted. Some made to shrink down so small they became a shadow of themselves. To question their leaders was to question God.

All the while, their male leaders built fiefdoms from megachurches and sprawling ministries. They influenced politics and policy. To protect their church's influence, these men covered up and hid abuse. American Christian patriarchy, as it rose in political power and cultural sway over the past four decades, hurt many faithful believers. Millions of Americans abandoned churches they once loved.

Yet among those who stayed (and a few who still loved the church they fled), a brave group of women spoke up. They built online megaphones, using the democratizing power of technology to create long-overdue change.

In *Disobedient Women*, journalist Sarah Stankorb gives long-overdue recognition for these everyday women as leaders and as voices for a different sort of faith. Their work has driven journalists to help bring abuse stories to national attention. Stankorb weaves together the efforts of these courageous voices in order to present a full, layered portrait of the treatment of women and the fight for change within the modern American church.

Disobedient Women is not just a look at the women who have used the internet to bring down the religious power structures that were meant to keep them quiet, but also a picture of the large-scale changes that are happening within evangelical culture regarding women's roles, ultimately underscoring the ways technology has created a place for women to challenge traditional institutions from within.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sarah Stankorb is a journalist, essayist, and the author of *Disobedient Women*. She was born near Youngstown, Ohio, and often found escape in books. She studied world religions and philosophy at Westminster College, a place surrounded by rolling Pennsylvania farm country. A chance to study abroad in Northern Ireland, then Israel further opened her eyes to how faith (and conflict) can shape people's everyday existence. She earned her master's degree from University of Chicago's Divinity School, where she studied ethics and South Asian religion and history.

Hundreds of her pieces have been featured in publications, including: *VICE*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New Republic*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, and others. Her beat spans religion, politics, gender, and power, but is informed by questions of basic morality.

NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Disobedient Women crosses disciplines, offering instructional material for coursework in Religion, Online Communications & Online Organizing, Journalism, and Gender Studies. Certainly, many suggestions are applicable across disciplines.

Pre-Reading Activities offer ideas to prep students and instructors for the text. The Examining Content section below draws out key ideas and discussion points appropriate to students in these fields. A thorough list of other texts that could compliment *Disobedient Women* in your syllabus closes this guide.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Students may benefit from reading one or more of Stankorb's prior works described throughout the course of *Disobedient Women* (e.g., a story for *Washington Post Magazine* on some of the bloggers; stories for *VICE* on [Doug Wilson's influence](#) and [Christa Brown's lengthy battle](#) with SBC). Students may also benefit from looking up some of the blog posts footnoted within the text as they read, both to see snapshots of an earlier era in internet history and also for further context. Instructors may suggest that students search social media channels for some of the hashtags mentioned in the book (i.e., #ChurchToo, #IStandWithSGMSurvivors, #SBCToo) or names of figures (e.g., Bill Gothard or IBLP).

The book is divided into sections that cover connected themes or religious institutions, which could help for pacing class time and provide natural breaks for reflection and analysis. Instructors might want to encourage students to journal a response to each section, asking if aspects of the women's stories resonated with them, and as the book progresses, what tactics people in the book used to speak out and amplify one another.

IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT TRIGGER WARNINGS

This is a book that is frank about child abuse, spiritual abuse, and sexual assault. Instructors should make a classroom agreement in advance to allow for discussion of the material in ways that are sensitive to students who may have had any of these experiences. Instructors absolutely should read the text before presenting it to students and offer a heads-up about the sort of themes that will be coming in the next reading.

Also share [this list](#) of resources in advance, in case reading *Disobedient Women* leads some students to realize they could use additional support or services.



EXAMINING CONTENT

KEY IDEAS

- *Disobedient Women* is an exploration of ways women's roles have been redefined within evangelicalism and how systematic silencing of women (and children) within such communities can contribute to abuse and coverup. How does pressure to reproduce as much as possible create difficult situations for adults and children within some evangelical families? How do gender roles come into play in managing these families day to day?
- The author, Sarah Stankorb, herself did not grow up as an evangelical, but describes her faith as being briefly sideswiped by the movement. Do you think this makes her a more objective observer? Would these stories have been reported differently if, say, Stankorb herself were a daughter of the Quiverfull movement? How have people of faith from outside evangelicalism been impacted by the movement in recent decades?
- In the homeschooling movement, and specifically among those raised within Bill Gothard's ministries, parents sought to raise a generation equipped, both in numbers and influence, to hold sway over the nation. How did abuse suffered by this younger generation lead to disobedience and rebellion from their parents and their stated goals for them? To what degree has that disobedience impacted their parents' goals for political domination?
- Christa Brown is framed as among the first who raised her voice online against a major institution and demanded an acknowledgment of systemic abuse. She also started her work very much alone. How effective do you think a single voice can be in a call for justice? What are the benefits—and complexities—of being part of a movement?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY TOPIC

RELIGION

- The author opens by stating “like millions of Americans, my own faith is still a question mark, a nebulous, softening, often-absent thing...” In what ways would the text have been different if the author did not share her own beliefs (or lack thereof)? Does her own crisis of faith add to the narrative, distract, or somehow undermine the other stories?
- Were you familiar with the name Bill Gothard? What about the Duggars? Consider the reach within the US of parachurch organizations such as IBLP and ATI (or Cru, for that matter). To what degree do ministries that exist outside the confines of a specific denomination have a greater capacity to reach broad numbers of people and influence them in more personal everyday ways? How did Gothard’s ministries influence the daily decisions of young people who grew up as part of his ministries?
- In the John Langworthy case, one victim’s mother says (pg. 95) that the way Prestonwood Baptist handled her son’s abuse made her lose faith, not in God, but in the church. Consider Pew Research Center modeling on the future of religious identification in America, which predicts less than half of Americans will identify as Christians within a few decades. Consider also a Gallup poll that shows while belief in God is at an all-time low in the U.S., still 81% of those polled do say they believe in God. Based on what you read in *Disobedient Women*, other texts and your own experience, what other factors do you think could be impacting Americans’ withdrawal from Christian affiliation? What do you think about the gap between those leaving the church and those who still say they believe in God?
- How do you think neo-Calvinist beliefs, specifically, a sense of humanity’s total depravity, influenced believers within the Sovereign Grace Ministries network? How did trust in pastors’ authority impact families’ process of reporting abuse to secular authorities?
- Given the experiences of women at Christ Church and affiliated churches, as reported in *Disobedient Women*, do you consider the root of reports of abuse to be Doug Wilson’s teachings on marriage or a side-effect of a broader project of dominion? In what ways do patriarchy within the church correlate with Christian nationalism, and where do the two diverge? Is an online resistance enough to stem the tide of either? Both?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY TOPIC

ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS / ORGANIZING

- Consider the flow of information into many of the families featured in *Disobedient Women*. Vyckie Garrison describes how she brought home most of her family's theology from homeschool conventions. The influences in these families included books, tapes or CDs of sermons, paper catalogs filled with homeschool curriculum, toys, and more media. How do you think the internet might have disrupted the evangelical marketplace and its tight influence on families like the Garrisons?
- As women started reaching out to *Recovering Grace* describing very similar stories, was the blog within its rights to run the stories using pseudonyms? If it were your website, would you worry doing so would put you at risk for accusations of liable or would your site merely be serving as a platform for other people's stories? Was it wise to encourage the women to connect in a separate online platform?
- Sovereign Grace Ministries was shaken by two types of online disclosures: "The Documents," which made a detailed and embarrassing case that church leader C. J. Mahaney was prideful and difficult to "entreat" (or correct); the other was more personal narratives shared on *SGM Survivors*. How were these two sets of disclosures different? How did Mahaney or SGM respond to each public disclosure? What attempts did the church make to respond publicly to each set of allegations? Were these methods successful?
- Consider the reach of evangelical organizations such as Focus on the Family in the 1980s and 90s. What modes of communication and forms of media were most effective for carrying such groups' messages? How did *Homeschoolers Anonymous* and homeschoolers on their personal blogs and social media, adapt the lessons of outreach they'd learned within evangelicalism to challenge the movement?
- Is it inevitable that advocate groups consisting of survivors of a societal ill will find internal tumult? How might a community of survivor/advocates guard against this, or is internal struggle healthy, forcing new, hard truths to the surface?
- Did amplification and organizing by evangelical and exvangelical blogger and social media communities make #ChurchToo different in some way from #MeToo? Was the Southern Baptist Convention's response to the "For Such a Time as This" rally and *Houston Chronicle* exposé a departure from the denomination's earlier approach to Christa Brown? To what degree do you think the subsequent Guidepost Solutions external investigation and eventual Department of Justice investigation were a result of years of online advocacy on the issue of sex abuse and coverup within SBC?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY TOPIC

JOURNALISM

- Stankorb writes, “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.” (pg. 5) How much of a journalist’s beat do you think is determined by personal interest? To what extent do you think the author’s reporting beat grew out of personal questions she was driven to answer? What were those questions?
 - The author balances interviews with sources—some multiple interviews spanning many years—with review of books and other media that were influential in their lives. As a reporter working on a longform story, how important do you think it is to attempt to reconstruct some of your sources’ influences? How would you approach this task?
 - There are a few sources in the book who use pseudonyms. It’s standard practice at most reputable publications to allow survivors of sexual abuse or assault to remain anonymous or use a pseudonym. Based on what you’ve already discussed in your program, if you encountered a source who was considering coming forward with assault allegations using their name, how would you explain to the source the potential implications of such a choice. How would their name make your story stronger? Would doing so create the potential for further traumatizing the survivor? What is your responsibility to your source’s mental health and how much are you, as a reporter, able to control?
 - If you were sourcing a story about the SGM class action case, how heavily would you rely upon blogged (sometimes anonymous) posts? Is it ethical to request interviews with sources sharing information in an online setting like this, one that is public but also seeming to serve therapeutic purposes? Under what circumstances would you feel comfortable reaching out to a source who had posted online in this way?
 - Stankorb describes working on a separate story when she learned details about a possible story in Moscow, Idaho. She seemed highly concerned for her initial lead, but still followed her curiosity to other sources. How, as a journalist, should one weigh following instinct, both in terms of sourcing but also which story to chase (especially when on deadline with another)? Stankorb mentions many sources for the story first wanted to communicate via secure channels, such as Signal. How would you approach learning more about a story with sources who seemed genuinely afraid for their security? Stankorb discovered while reporting that no record existed for reports of a case of child sexual abuse in Moscow, Idaho. In this case, an advocate subsequently made the report. If as a journalist, you discovered a crime involving a child had not been reported, what would you do? Would reporting a criminal allegation insert you, as the journalist, into the story? Does that matter? What is your ethical obligation?
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS BY TOPIC

GENDER STUDIES

- Consider how figures such as Mary Pride and Nancy Campbell were able to deploy their trusted roles as women within the movement to further define other women's aspirations. To what degree were figures like Pride and Campbell granted roles of authority (if only over other women)? How did both frame childbearing in large quantities as a female and Christian responsibility?
- How do practices such as courtship and stay-at-home-daughterhood keep parents in positions of authority over young adult women in their families? How does requiring permission for major life decisions, or ceding the decisions altogether, impact young women's ability to voice their desires? How do these higher-order dictates relate to other choices girls were pressured to make concerning purity or dressing modestly?
- Christa Brown's story illustrates how sexual assault may not be understood for what it is until much later in life. How did age of consent law and statute of limitations impact her ability to pursue a case? How did both seem to affect the Southern Baptist Convention's willingness to take her case seriously? Name some other cases where limitations in the law stood in the way of people pursuing justice.
- Consider the rules of femininity as presented to young evangelical children such as Eleanor Skelton. To what degree were their toys and media carriers of these strict rules? More or less than what they were hearing directly from church? What do you think about Wende Benner's self-reflection that as a young child, they thought "I am not a girl. I don't wanna be a girl." (p. 146) Even after they discovered they are non-binary, they wondered, "Am I just bucking gender expectations, these rigid, rigid gender expectations?" How does childhood experience with gender frame the questions people ask themselves about their adult gender identity?
- How was purity culture so effectively infused into evangelical youth culture? What were its historical roots and how does race interplay with purity culture? How did texts directed at adult women displace purity with new demands on married women's sexuality? Do you believe there is a unique toll from purity culture on queer women?



SUPPLEMENTAL READING

Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing*

Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*

Lyvonne Biggs, *Sensual Faith: The Art of Coming Home to Your Body*

Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*

Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*

Linda Kay Klein, *PURE: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*

Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus & John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*

Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*

Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next*

Bob Smietana, *Reorganized Religion: The Reshaping of the American Church and Why It Matters*

Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O'Neal, *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church*

Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*

Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*

Background Reading from Within the Evangelical Movement:

Nancy Campbell, *Be Fruitful and Multiply*

Marabel Morgan, *The Total Woman*

Mary Pride, *The Way Home*

John E. Rice, *Bobbed Hair, Body Wives and Lady Preachers*

