

DISOBEDIENT WOMEN

DISCUSSION GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Author Sarah Stankorb opens by sharing a bit about her own faith and family background. Do you think it is necessary or valuable for readers to know this personal information about a person about to report on abuse within the church?

Does Stankorb's withdrawal from faith ring familiar or if not, do you feel you can you still trust her as a narrator even if she has a differing perspective?

CHAPTER ONE

Vyckie Garrison describes discovering a successive series of influences that encouraged her to become the “right” kind of Christian mother. Have you ever found yourself in a situation in which you've let yourself become shaped by a series of influences that you initially thought would better you as a person, then later regretted it? Did it only affect you or the people you cared about?

Garrison made the point that she was the one who brought home the resources that had shaped her family's beliefs, later wondering, “Why would I participate in my own oppression and abuse and even bring it on myself?” Sit with that question. If not answering it from what you've read about Garrison's story, do you agree that women at times participate in bringing about their own oppression?

CHAPTER TWO

Daughters such as Ashley Easter were taught to be submissive and mild, to plot their transition from girlhood to a fast progression of homemaking, marriage, and motherhood—with a stopgap of stay-at-home-daughterhood in between if necessary. Consider how tight control of young women's lives, both within families and influenced by evangelical media, reflected anxiety concerning women's autonomy. Why might so much energy have been invested in defining girls as docile and women as under men's leadership throughout the 90s and into the 2010s?

CHAPTER THREE

Had you heard of Bill Gothard before reading this book? The Duggars? Whether you grew up aware of IBLP or ATI, can you imagine growing up inside a system where your parents place great trust in a leader, basing your education, religious choices, and even how you dress on that person's teachings? How would it feel to be selected by that leader to serve? What would it be like, as the women in the book recall, telling your parents such a leader made you uncomfortable?

CHAPTER FOUR

Picture running Recovering Grace when the first story of sexual harassment surfaced. What information would factor into your willingness to run the account?

Rachel Frost recounts how reading "Charlotte's" post reordered what she'd long ago filed away as inappropriate but likely not intentional behavior by Gothard. Have you ever had the experience of entirely reevaluating a past memory due to a shift in perspective? Do you believe you saw the event more clearly, and if so, how so? Did seeing things differently compel you to act in some way?

CHAPTER FIVE

The Duggars have been the most famous ambassadors for Gothard's ministry—and a certain brand of conservative Christianity in general—making Josh Duggar's various charges a stark example of hypocrisy in the secular press. Do you think the attention on the Duggars, either their reality show or Josh Duggar's abuse, has been fair or proportionate?

Had you previously heard of the Gothard case? Given challenges such as statute of limitations and potential of countersuit, plus the emotional toll, and in this case, an attorney who fell short, do you imagine that you would be willing to step up for a lawsuit if you were a potential plaintiff in a case such as this?

CHAPTER SIX

When you were a teenager, did you understand the age of consent? Were you raised to obey faith leaders?

Upon recognizing what happened to her as a teen was abuse, Christa Brown initially made relatively small requests of her childhood church and the Baptist General Convention of Texas—a written apology, press statements, perhaps a labyrinth garden and sculpture. Without the years of antagonism from the church and time spent gathering other cases on her blog, do you think Brown would have become so insistent on tangible reform?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stankorb has interspersed the book so far with personal anecdotes here and there, but in this chapter, the author shares more of herself. Why do you think that is? Do you think she wants the reader to understand how periods of losing her physical voice impacted her as a writer or is this more a message about her faith? Or is this chapter more personal in nature as a sort of homage, focused as it is on Rachel Held Evans?

Among the bloggers in this book, Held Evans is likely the most well-known. Did you read her blog or books? If so, was hers a voice that spoke to a spiritual need you weren't finding fulfilled elsewhere?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Have you ever, like Dee Parsons, felt like God must be playing a joke on you, by placing you in such an undeniably uncomfortable position?

Have you ever needed help telling an uncomfortable truth and been fortunate enough to find a person brave enough to help you tell it? Julie Anne Smith faced lawsuit over speaking up online about her former church; Amy Smith has a fractured relationship with her parents due to her work on the John Langworthy case and subsequent blogging. Outside any professional roles, what sort of costs would you be willing to pay to tell what you see as the truth, particularly truths in situations that do not even directly concern you?

CHAPTER NINE

Have you ever been part of a group headed by charismatic leaders? In hindsight, were the group dynamics healthy?

Have you ever been in a position such as Pam Palmer's, completely overwhelmed with worry for a child? Did you place your trust in someone else—a pastor, doctor, police officer? Looking back, were you and your child's interests their central focus?

Have you ever been shut out of a community that was once core to your identity, like Shannon Truesdale was? How might having lost that identity made worse the complexity of abuse she describes within her own family?



CHAPTER TEN

Why do you think those who were blogging were discounted as vengeful, gossips, liars?

Can you imagine the turmoil at your own church or organization if internal documents were published online, or do you trust that your leaders are transparently as they appear to be? This chapter includes another court case that fell apart—do you take this as evidence of no true criminal conspiracy to cover up abuse across SGM or the difficulty of seeking justice in cases such as these?

The chapter closes with moments surrounding the Nathaniel Morales case: Morales found guilty of abuse, but also feelings of guilt that church staff didn't do enough that got outweighed by an impulse to protect the church's financial standing. Have you ever had to fight—or even witnessed someone successfully convince—an institution to do what's right over its own financial interests?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Did you grow up with any of the influences mentioned early in this chapter: Focus on the Family (or Dobson's *Strong-Willed Child* or *Dare to Discipline*), Adventures in Odyssey, Vision Forum, Left Behind, or Abeka? What was that like?

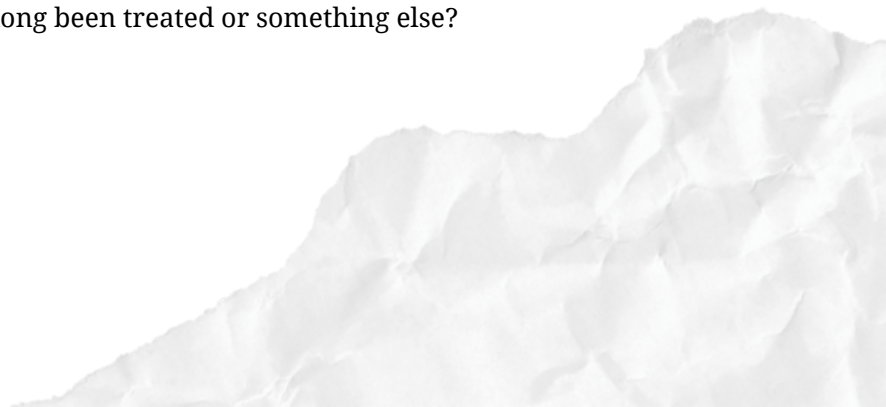
To what degree do you believe parental anxiety feeds into the forms of discipline they come to rely upon? Why do you think a figure like Dobson became so urgently relied upon by so many evangelical parents?

CHAPTER TWELVE

What were your impressions of Christian homeschooling prior to reading this chapter?

In a way, Homeschoolers Anonymous became an online “found family” for many homeschool young adults questioning or rejecting aspects of their parents' movement; Eleanor Skelton lived a version of that in her own apartment. Did you have moments in your young adulthood, finding others who understood aspects of your history you didn't have to explain—what was that like? Were you good for each other, or was there an inherent messiness in trying to help others with similar baggage?

Much of this book focuses on how white, evangelical Christianity siloed women for generations, how would you describe modern treatment by the movement toward nonbinary and transgender people? Is it merely an extension of how women have long been treated or something else?



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Was your young adulthood impacted by purity culture? Was it baked into your faith or something that merely bled into your life via secular education or pop culture? Did you encounter *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, the idea of courtships, or waiting to kiss until marriage?

Have you previously considered how much of our language surrounding virginity is laden with terms linked to whiteness?

What does the pressure of purity do to a girl, like Lyvonne Briggs, for whom choice was robbed at such a young age?

Consider the relationship purity culture creates with one's body—the urgency to cover it up, the detachment one might feel from an assaulted body, and the strangeness of ever finding pleasure in such a thing (once sanctioned allowable in marriage) after years of such training.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Do you accept the premise that (white) women's piety can be traced back through the Victorian era, Reconstruction, the influence of fundamentalists such as John Rice, but that the most important standard bearers have been women, such as Elisabeth Elliot, Phyllis Schlafly, and Marabel Morgan? Is it fair to see Elliot, Schlafly and Morgan as part of the same project (what with Elliot's restraint, Schlafly's political prowess, and Morgan's "sizzle")?

Do you think women speaking up online against purity culture and the hypocrisy of their faith leaders was a product of simply coming of age—old enough now to speak up—or doing so at a crucial time in history when the Access Hollywood tape gave them undeniable cause?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Is it inevitable that activist groups will fracture, that powerful passions will lead to internal hurt? Do you recall seeing #ChurchToo? Did it surprise you, strike you as different from #MeToo? Is it a surprise that just as there were evidently many abusers in positions of power within media and politics, the church was not immune?

How were churches' responses different from secular institutions? There's unique power in being able to come forward online, with #ChurchToo, but also a cost—painful renown, exposure, as Emily Joy Allison notes, a level of fame that comes within evangelical spaces. Would you know to factor that into the decision to come forward?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Many of us carry guilt from childhood, when we were told we were “bad”—the abused kid, the assaulted girl. A major moment for Jules Woodson was hearing from her old friend Darcy, who years later, merely asked what really happened. She simply offered to listen to the truth, rather than fractions of rumor. Have you ever provided a listening ear that allowed a person to see their story in full?

Later, Dee Parsons and Amy Smith provided similar roles, through their blogs but also with their support as Woodson’s story attracted global press. Imagine the shock of such an intimate disclosure going viral. What sort of support would you need?

As the sources in the book converged for their 2019 For Such a Time as This Rally, some believed the movement for sex abuse reform had spiritual origins. Do you agree? Do you see something meaningful in this group of women preaching for reform?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Have you spent any time in a close-knit community? Can you imagine how someone as defiant as Sarah Bader might be perceived, regardless of her motivations?

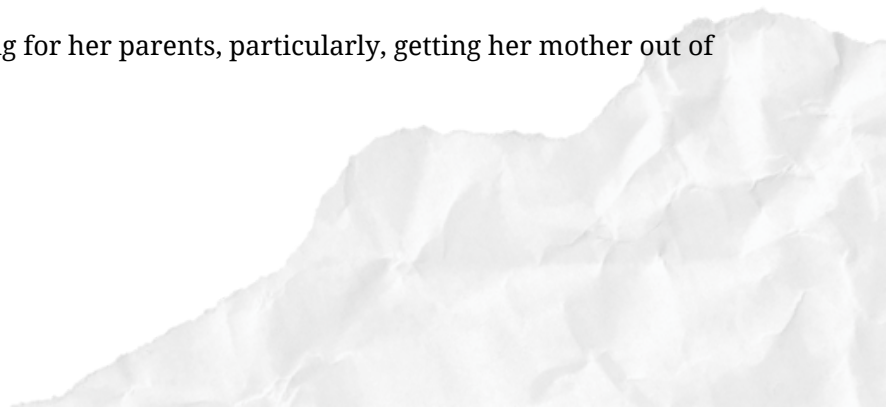
If you’ve never heard of Douglas Wilson, what are your first impressions: entrepreneurial (with all these publications and schools) or a provocateur with a limited audience? How might it impact your view of sex to read in your own pastor’s book that women have rape fantasies and men dream of being rapists?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

If you placed full trust in your pastor (and his wife) and were taught your wifely responsibility was submission to sex to your husband, what would it take to defy such teachings? Can you imagine living in an environment in which you knew other women were receiving such advice—or like Abigail, being told that to keep their husband from sleeping with someone else, she must become a “master of female sexuality”? Do you think you would become an advocate, even knowing how your neighbors might turn on you?

What do you think of Wilson’s blog post “Potiphar’s Wife, Survivor”?

Why do you think Stankorb shares about caring for her parents, particularly, getting her mother out of her childhood home, in this chapter?



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Given what you've read throughout the rest of the book, what do you consider the overlap between Christian nationalism and Christian patriarchy? How does taking dominion over the country relate to taking dominion over women at home and at church?

At this point, were you surprised by the curriculum lesson relating to slavery Priscilla and Aquilla was shocked by years ago?

What do you make of Wilson's paranoid rant about the FBI?

Given everything she's witnessed and heard—from the victims she still fights for—can you identify with Bader finding something still in the doxology despite her lack of personal belief?

CHAPTER TWENTY

In the case of the Southern Baptist Convention, do you suspect that debate over critical race theory was sparked as a useful distraction from the sex abuse crisis? How often is one form of abuse played against another in an institution to avoid dealing with either?

Woodson and Brown belong to a community of survivors no one would want to join—a group long vilified by churchgoers. Why do you think Stankorb brings up again that Brown had wanted to be a pastor herself? Would things have been different if Brown had belonged to a church that valued girls and women? Is it a shock that an SBC staffer had indeed kept a list of abusers?

Earlier, Stankorb describes sitting in a mostly empty movie theater, not praying exactly, not able to. Why do you think the author describes knowing how some of her sources clung to God through hardship when she couldn't and wanting to pray when she couldn't? What do you think she hopes to communicate about the American church, if anything?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Can you imagine how Brown might have felt hearing that the Department of Justice was investigating the Southern Baptist Convention after so many years of advocacy? How would you feel?

Do you see elements of Homeschoolers Anonymous' early warnings in the new manifestations of the Christian homeschool movement or legislation now impacting public education?

Although many aspects of this book are rooted a decade or more back in history, do you sense that some elements of it are now coming to fruition? How might the careful, moral disobedience of women in restrictive, Christian communities serve as instructive or be improved upon, to face further challenges ahead, either to the country or the church?