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Faith in Action for Social Justice

Boys Don't Cry and other dangerous lies

**Healing men
from the explosive
violence bottled up within**

by Richard Rohr

**Patriarchy makes
a comeback**

by Anne Eggebroten

ALSO:

**Palestinian Christians:
"The occupation is a sin!"
The agony and ecstasy
of community life**

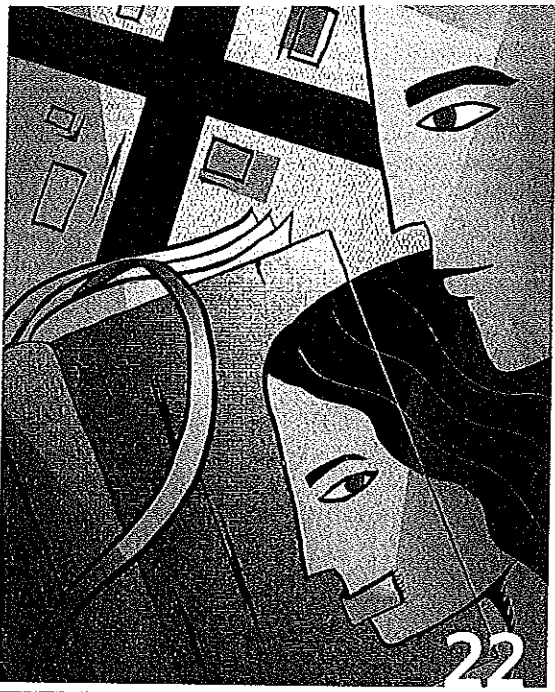


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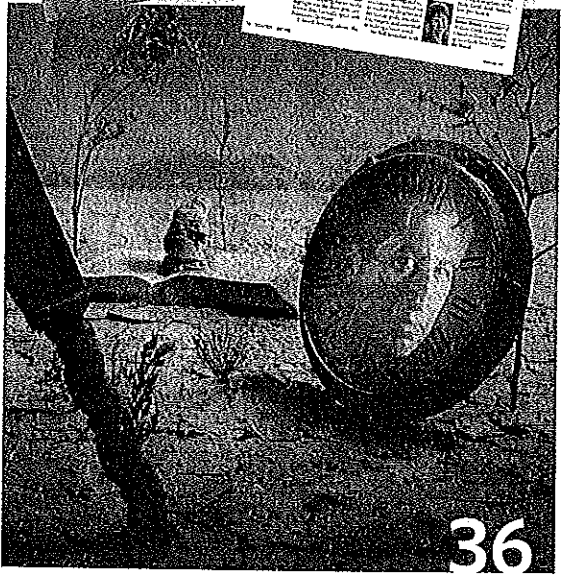
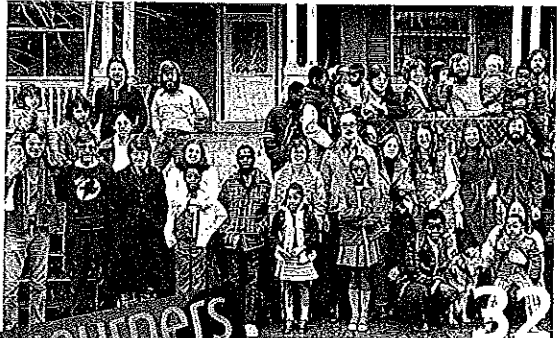
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The Persistence of PATRIARCHY

Hard to believe, but some churches are still talking about male headship.

TODAY I'M ATTENDING a megachurch—Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California—where God is male, all the pastors, deacons, and elders are male, and women are taught to live in submission to men. My husband, visiting Phoenix for a week, texts me that a woman is preaching in the Episcopal church he found near his motel.

These two different worlds exist side by side: congregations where men and women are equal partners in service of Jesus Christ, and others where gender hierarchy is taught as God's will and the only truly biblical option. On Sunday morning we all drive past

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one flavor of gender teaching to worship in another. And those in egalitarian churches often have no idea of the wide reach of "complementarianism"—the term, so much nicer-sounding than "hierarchy," used these days by neo-patriarchalists to describe their view

of men's and women's different roles.

In Sun Valley, the sermon by Pastor John MacArthur, comparing the accounts of walking on water in different gospels, is excellent; I guess that's how megachurches get started. After church, in the crowded visitors' room, I'm welcomed by a friendly woman about my age, a physical therapist with a degree from the college where I teach religion.

I ask her, "Is women's submission to their husbands stressed in this church?"

"Yes, it is," she says. "A ship can have only one captain. But it's not enslavement." She tells me she's fortunate that her husband is "not the domineering type. We take a difficult issue to God in prayer.

I rarely have to let him decide."

I'm thinking about women who are advised not to leave abusive marriages, but I don't bring this up. At least things aren't as extreme as they sound on the church Web site. There, I had listened to Anna Sanders lecture women on how to live in submission to their husbands. "We need to beat down our desire to be right and have our own way," she had said, citing John Piper, Nancy Leigh DeMoss, and Martha Peace—all authors published in the last decade. "It's his way, his rights, his expectations, and his plans. ... Be a helper."

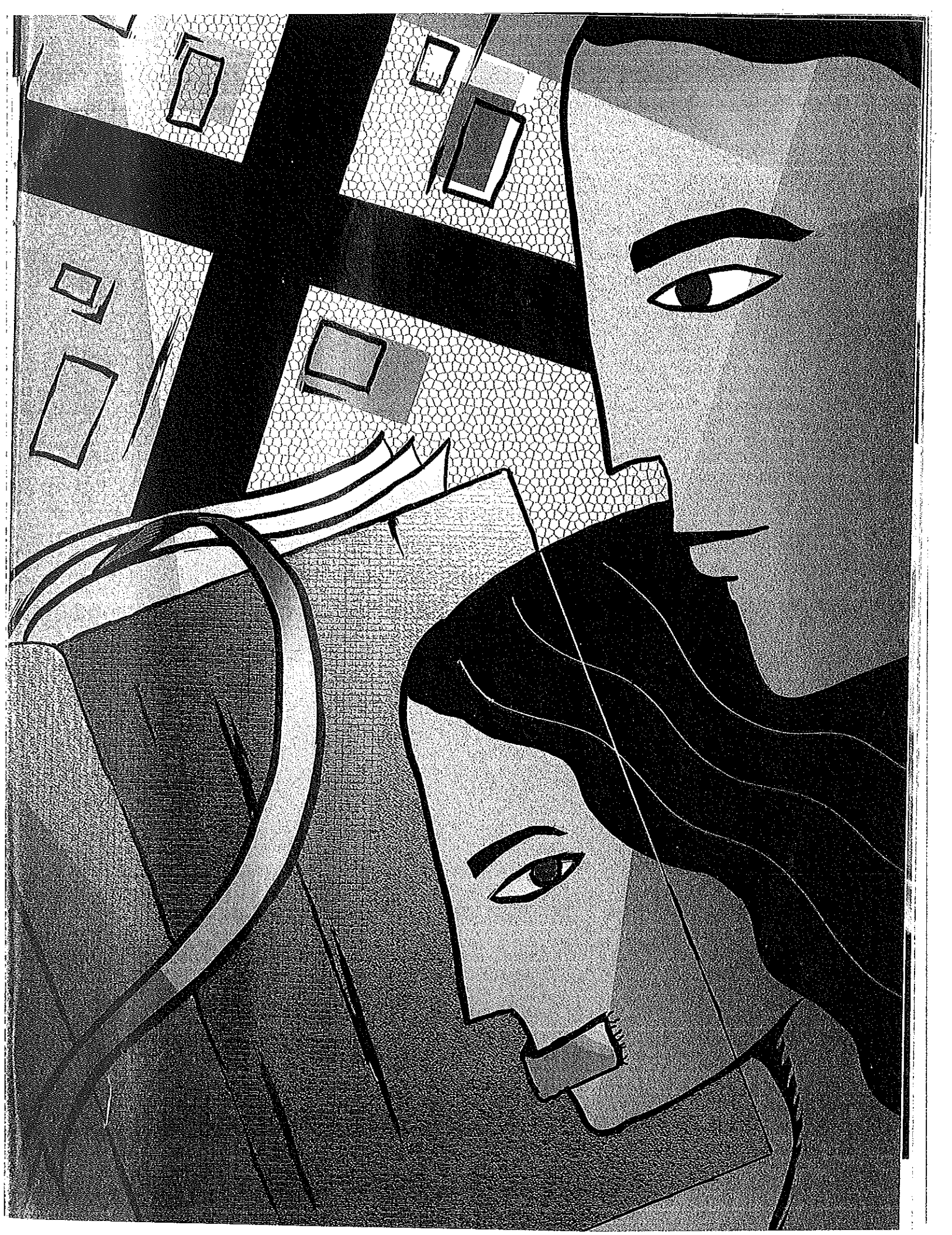
I'm stunned to find that the 300-student Master's Seminary on the church campus enrolls only men. Even in the Catholic Church, women can study in seminaries to become lay ministers doing religious education or hospital or prison ministry.

After my chat with the physical therapist, a couple in their 30s, who converted from Judaism to Christianity 12 years ago, urges me to visit again. I ask my submission question.

The husband speaks at length about how well it works. "A tie goes to the runner," he says. "What does that mean?" his wife asks. He tries to explain, but neither she nor I gets it. He continues to discuss being the head of his wife: "It's not supposed to be noticeable that I'm in that position."

It's time to get out of here, I tell myself. I'm feeling tense, as if I might cry or launch into a diatribe. I walk the acres back to my parked car.

THE WORDS OF Sara VanScoy come to mind: "I'm tired of being a second-class citizen." A medical doctor and psychiatrist who served 11 years in the Air Force, she earned a master's degree in divinity summa cum laude at Bethel Seminary in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in May 2009. Though praised



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by her professors for her gifted preaching and teaching, she has not been hired "by any church anywhere" to pastor in either a lead or associate role.

She worships in the Southern Baptist church where she grew up in Jonesboro, but she can't be hired there. In 2000, the Southern Baptist Convention changed its statement of faith to say that "the office of pastor is limited to men." (Two years earlier, they had amended the statement to say that, although a wife is "in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him," she is "to submit herself graciously" to him, because she has "the God-given responsibility" to be her husband's "helper.")

"It's sad, really, that the only place in my entire life that I have experienced gender discrimination is the church," VanScoy emailed me. "Certainly God never intended to gift a woman to do something she was not intended to do."

Much of the debate hinges on Genesis 3:16, God's words to Eve: "And he shall rule over you." Hebrew scholar Phyllis Trible translates the line as "he will rule"—not a command or an entitlement, but God's view ahead into a future where men will dominate women. As The New Oxford Annotated Bible's notes put it, "The man's rule over the woman here is a tragic reflection of the disintegration of original connectedness between them."

But traditionalists claim that male rule is God's will; such neo-patriarchalism promotes injustice in home, church, and society. It gives men too much power, exposing them to temptation, and has often contributed to domestic violence.

"I was married to a conservative Christian husband and we had five children," writes a young mother in Austin, Texas, who suffered emotional and physical abuse before finally leaving the marriage. Now she has earned a master's degree in social work and wants to help others: "I would like to do anything I could to educate women in these fundamentalist Christian groups (mine was [based on the teaching of] Bill Gothard) to get out with the sanity that they have left!"

Here's the question: Is God permanently committed to the kinds of social hierarchy that existed in the first and second millennium B.C.E. and continued until recently, when education and voting were opened



to women? Or does the vision of Paul in Galatians 3:28—"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"—take precedence?

IN THE 1970s, evangelical men and women scoured "problem passages," examining the meaning of Greek words and the authorship and audience of Paul's letters. With books such as *All We're Meant To Be* by Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty (1974) and *Women, Men, and the Bible* by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (1977), biblical feminism changed from an oxymoron to an accepted term in many evangelical churches.

In others, however, it became a demon to be fought. By 1987 the "Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood" appeared, to counteract the impact of the Evangelical Women's Caucus and the newly founded Christians for Biblical Equality.

The assertion is that men and women are "equal in being though unequal in role." *Discovering Biblical Equality* co-editor Rebecca Merrill Groothuis does an excellent job of presenting the logical fallacy of this claim: Different but equal sounds good, says Groothuis, but how can it be "logically possible for the same person to be at once spiritually and ontologically equal and permanently, comprehensively, and necessarily subordinate?"

Believers in gender hierarchy point to verses such as "it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Corinthians 14:35) and "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission" (1 Timothy 2:11). Various evangelical feminists approach the Corinthians passage in different ways: 1) Paul is speaking to a unique situation in Corinth that doesn't apply to now, 2) women in the audience should not whisper

and disrupt worship—but they can preach, 3) Paul is quoting others with whom he disagrees here, and 4) verses 34-35 began as someone's marginal comment, later copied right into the text.

To conclude that women should be silent and not hold office in the church, you have to overlook Paul's requirement that "any woman who prays or prophesies" must have her head covered (11:5). You also have to get around Paul's praise of Phoebe as "a deacon" (Romans 16:1) and his greeting to Junia as "prominent among the apostles" (16:7). Then you must ignore evidence that the "pastoral epistles" (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) were written in honor of Paul long after he died and reflect a second-century debate over women's roles in the church—whether to conform to social customs for the sake of winning converts, or to advocate radical social equality (and often celibacy) in the last days before the Second Coming.

Then there's that word "helper." In Fuller Theological Seminary's bookstore, I picked up a book called *Created to be His Help Meet*. There's no mention of the Hebrew word *ezer*, the word translated as "help," in the whole book. In this and other complementarian books, it's understood to mean "subordinate helper"—but, in the Bible, God is described as our *ezer* some 16 times, including Psalm 121:2: "My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

So what is the will of God for women today: silence or preaching, subjection or mutual submission? Many Christians in all denominations, including evangelicals aren't even asking this question any more—yet the neo-patriarchal movement remains widespread.

"Hallowed be thy name," we say, but injustice carried out in the name of God, supposedly on the basis of the Bible, turns others away from this God.

"For freedom Christ has set us free," wrote Paul to the Galatians. "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." ■

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