

The Yellow Wallpaper: Reflecting on Aimee Byrd's Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

Description

by [Bree Mills](#) | November 01, 2020

[This article](#) originally appeared in [Priscilla Papers](#), CBE International's academic journal, on November 1, 2020. It is re-printed with permission.

After reading the introduction to Aimee Byrd's *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, [1](#) I admit I put her book down to go and read *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a book that sparked Byrd's thinking and prompted her to write. Only then did I return to reading Byrd's book.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a profoundly disturbing novella by American social reformer and feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, penned in 1890 and published in 1892.[2](#) It is the semi-autobiographical story of a woman suffering from post-partum depression, in an era when this disorder was misunderstood. The woman is prescribed rest therapy, a complete removal of any mental, social, or physical activity. She is placed in a room with yellow wallpaper and bars on the windows while she is cared for by her husband and her sister-in-law, Jenny. The woman speaks well of her husband and his care for her, and while the readers can see her participation in her own oppression, the narrator cannot. She begins to see another woman in the wallpaper, desiring to break free, and over time tears at the wallpaper to free the woman trapped within. It ends in her husband finding her raving mad in the room, having freed the woman from the wallpaper, and the voice of the narrator shifts to become the voice from behind the wallpaper. The two women are one, and she has freed herself from the confinement in which she and her husband both participated.

Byrd's aim in using Gilman's book is clear. She is asking us to consider where we might be blind to the impact of our culture, our history or evangelical tribe, or worse, where we might be complicit in our own oppression. As followers of Jesus, it is time to peel back the wallpaper on the sisters of Christ. Byrd says:

Here I am asking you to look for the yellow wallpaper that has been left behind in your church. Maybe it's been there so long that you have learned to live with it. In fact, you may not even notice it anymore. Or perhaps you don't have been nagging at you with all

its confusing lines”but you know how hard it is to peel away old wallpaper. And you don’t want to lose church members over it. Heck, you don’t want to lose your own job over it. (227–28)

Tribal Responses to Calling out the Wallpaper

Seeking to peel away the wallpaper in any church is a recipe for conflict, and the way Byrd has been treated in response to her book has demonstrated this once again. As a social media storm raged, some of those who profess to follow Jesus resorted to name-calling and to comments on her appearance, but offered comparatively few comments on her theology. Byrd dared to question her own tribe and found herself cast out. Unfortunately, hers is not the only example of this in modern evangelicalism.

Tribalism is growing in the church. Despite the many biblical passages that call us to unity, Christians seem to be finding more and more reasons to divide. From the seemingly menial discussions on music genre, to the more theological discussions on human sexuality, the church continues to divide into tribes. Byrd’s book is directed to her own tribe, calling church leaders to engage in thoughtful discussion and critique of the biblical manhood and womanhood movement. As someone who self-describes as a complementarian, Byrd is not dramatically advocating a feminist agenda, but simply that we would seek to disciple people into the likeness of Jesus, rather than disciplining them into “biblical womanhood” or “biblical manhood.”

We need to peel off this yellow wallpaper and reveal our true biblical aim. We are not directed to biblical manhood nor biblical womanhood; we are directed to Christ. Our aim is to behold Christ, as his bride, as fellow sons in the Son. (132)

The response she received demonstrates the wallpaper in the room where she once sat, as well as the cost for pointing it out. Whether you agree with her theologically or not, Byrd’s book is a theologically rigorous and clear call for people to be disciplined into the likeness of Christ. Experienced ministers understand we do not disciple people in a vacuum. Every person is constantly being disciplined by media, culture, friends and family, even by their church and not always into the likeness of Christ. History constantly reminds us of the mistakes we have made as the church and the ways we have sought to disciple people into the likeness of Christ. The church, as the gathering of God’s redeemed yet still-fallen people, will never be perfect, no matter what tribe you ascribe to.

So, as a church, how open are we to seeing the ways we fail to disciple people into the likeness of Christ?

An Australian Example

Recently, two journalists sought to point out a different sort of yellow wallpaper. Julia Baird and Hayley Gleeson wrote several articles on domestic abuse in the Anglican church in Australia.³ While many thanked them for their contribution, a significant number of church leaders responded by attacking these two courageous women. Domestic violence is a significant problem in Australia, and our churches are not immune. The Melbourne Anglican Diocese has responded by looking at how to equip church leaders and communities to respond to and prevent family violence through clergy training as

well as resource and policy development. The program is based on the national Preventing Violence against Women framework, “Change the Story,” developed by Our Watch, an organisation committed to the prevention of domestic violence in Australia. This framework affirms:

Although there is no single cause of violence against women and their children, the latest international evidence shows that there are certain factors that consistently predict “or drive” higher levels of violence against women. These include beliefs and behaviours reflecting disrespect for women, low support for gender equality and an adherence to or rigid stereotyped gender roles, relations and identity.[4](#)

Kevin Giles has recently released a book linking the headship of men and the abuse of women, which is bound to have a similar “tribal” response to Byrd’s. In this brief book, he pulls together both scholarly research and writers on domestic abuse and violence to make a strong case that a complementarian theology contributes to domestic abuse and violence.

At this point of time there is no avoiding the fact that there is a relationship between domestic abuse and violence and biblical teaching on the headship of men and the submission of women. Scholarly studies on domestic abuse and violence are agreed that the primary driver of this scourge is a sense of male entitlement; the belief that men should lead simply because they are men, and women should be submissive simply because they are women.[5](#)

As a Church, we do not want to believe that our theology would harm others. I do not believe any Jesus-following Anglican in the Australian Church desires to see women harmed. We know that Jesus treated women with incredible dignity and respect, at a level unheard of in his time. He spoke to them in public, he demonstrated compassion, he healed them, he allowed them to learn as disciples, and trusted them as his witnesses.[6](#) Our desire is simply to follow Jesus as faithfully as we can. For some of us, that would include a particular view of men and women and their roles in the family and the church. We believe this is God’s way, and the way for human relationships to flourish.

But what if our long-held beliefs are the yellow wallpaper? What if they are an expression of the culture we inhabit, more than the lifestyle of Jesus we seek to follow?

Are we willing to respond in openness as others call out the yellow wallpaper that we fail to see? My experience in ministry, as a woman, has often made me a safe person for others to share with. Over the years, I have heard of people within our egalitarian Church whose husbands have used Scripture to justify abuse. I have been contacted by those outside of our Church, partners of clergy, with a similar experience. I have been contacted by women in churches which fall on all sides of the debate, telling me of the way their pastor has used his position and Scripture to justify abusive treatment. It is a real issue in our churches, in our clergy, and in our community. The wallpaper has been peeled back; we can no longer deny the links that exist, no matter how much we know and believe they should not be an outcome of whatever gender theology we accept.

An Opportunity for Change

In the current Covid 19-enforced season, many of us have an opportunity to stop, to reflect, and to ask

these questions about our churches, our theology, and our leadership. With less activity, fewer in-person meetings, there may be time for reading and reflection. I believe one of the privileges of this season is a freedom to reimagine church. The world post-Covid19 is going to be different. There is time to reflect and consider afresh a new approach. Never have we had such an opportunity to bring culture change to our churches.

We can stop and take stock of our wallpaper. We can review our tribalism. We can choose to listen to other tribes and come together like never before. Australians are incredibly individualistic—we know what is right, we know how things should be done, and we are happy to cut down anyone who speaks differently. With that in mind, I suggest that Christians in Australia and around the globe would benefit themselves and others by moving forward with a commitment to the following four actions.

Listen to Other Tribes.

In the current season, with most of the conferences around the world moving online, we have a unique opportunity to hear from other voices. Many of us are good at listening to respond, but do we listen to really listen—to hear their heartbeat, to hear what God has been speaking to them in this season and what God might be saying to us through them? We have the opportunity to step outside of the echo chambers of social media, seek out different voices, and deeply listen.

Ask Others to Point out the Wallpaper.

There are issues we cannot see without help from others. We need to be open to other voices who will speak them out. Are you willing to speak to the women of your church, or even better, to secure an independent consultant to speak to the women of your church, to hear and understand their experience? No matter your theology, if you seek to love and serve women as sisters in Christ and see them grow into the fullness of Christlikeness, will you open yourself to hear their voices and listen to their struggles?

Those of us who are ministers of the gospel hold a position of power, and it is not always easy for people to raise these issues with us. We need to be proactive in seeking their responses in safe ways. Even getting the opinion of a trusted colleague about blind spots you may not be able to see or a book they recommend is a good start. I have made it a habit to ask those from different perspectives and tribes what books I should read; Byrd's was one such recommendation, and I am thankful for it.

Pray, Wait, Seek Counsel, and Proceed Slowly.

We need to be slow to respond. When someone challenges core beliefs, or an area we are passionate about, our natural response is defensiveness. You may be feeling it reading this article. That may be the right, good, and true response, and if it is, it will still be there tomorrow. The least Christlike behaviour I have seen is often online, posted quickly, in response to an article (or, perhaps, the title of an article) that stirs an emotional response. Rather than jumping to defend your tribe online, whatever tribe that might be, stop. Pray. Wait. Seek counsel. Proceed slowly. Take time to pray through your response. If possible, do not respond out of emotion; allow emotions to settle and pass, and respond from a clear head. If possible, get someone else to read through your response for you and pray with you about the response you feel you need to make.

The same should be said about seeking to bring change in your church. If you are convinced

something needs to change, stop. Pray. Wait. Seek counsel. Proceed slowly. This season has given us the opportunity to do this. I believe there is incredible wisdom and experience in the Anglican Church of Australia, and surely in other denominations as well, if we would be willing to lay down our independence and our tribal lines, and to seek counsel from one another.

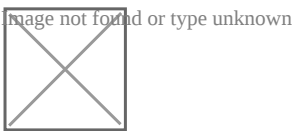
Seek Christlikeness above All Else.

Above all, I think Aimee Byrd's call was clear. We should be seeking to disciple everyone to be more like Christ. As ministers of the gospel we should be seeking to demonstrate Christlikeness in all we do, in the way we lead, the way we speak, and the way we engage with others online. The response to Byrd's book online was far from this. Christians should never engage in name-calling, personal attacks, or bullying. No matter how much you disagree with another person's theology or standpoint, they are still a person created in the image of God and must be treated as such.

Sometimes our tribalism blinds us. When others behave in a similar way, it leads us to excuse or accept inappropriate behaviour, to accept them as part of the wallpaper. As followers of Jesus, our lives, words, and every action should be emulating the grace, generosity, and love of Jesus that we see in the Gospels.

Notes

1. Aimee Byrd, *Recovering from Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: How the Church Needs to Rediscover Her Purpose* (Zondervan, 2020). [See also the CBE review by Kurty Darling](#).
2. First published in *The New England Magazine*, recent reprints include those by 12th Media Services (2017) and by Martino Fine Books (2018).
3. See, for example, <https://abc.net.au/news/2018-05-23/when-women-are-believed-the-church-will-change/9782184>.
4. See <https://ourwatch.org.au/change-the-story>.
5. Kevin Giles, *The Headship of Men and the Abuse of Women: Are They Related in Any Way?* (Cascade, 2020) 36.
6. See Luke 8, 10, 13, 24.



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Date Created

13.03.2021

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