

Confronting Religious Shaming

—Ruth Tucker

Late afternoon, January 3, 2003. The academic dean's office. A routine evaluation after my first two and a half years of teaching at Calvin Seminary. I was the first full-time woman on faculty in the school's 125-year history. A single mother at 57, I was a confident and experienced professor. I came prepared with documents, assuming I would sail through the interview and be out by five-thirty, heading home to watch the news and eat leftovers. Although some colleagues had misgivings about the recently-installed three-man administration, I had no sense of impending doom—no clue that the upshot would be a terminal appointment and removal from tenure track. Indeed, in less than two hours I was so thoroughly shamed as an incompetent professor that I pitifully pleaded: *Does anyone have to know?*

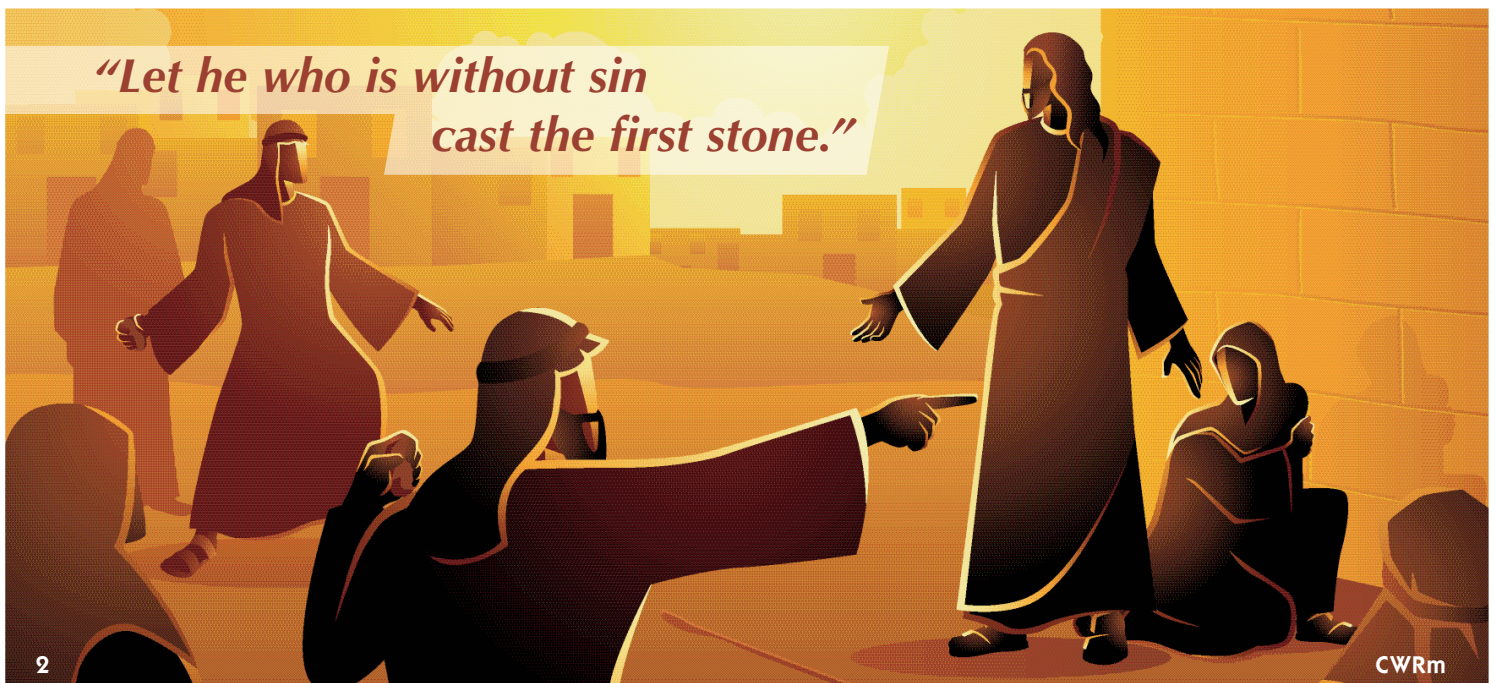
In researching my most recent book, *Fired at 57: My Fight for Justice in Christian Academia*, I have discovered that there is a long history of shaming women. The woman taken in adultery in Mark's gospel is a familiar example. Surrounded by misogynous stone-throwers who were unconcerned about the man involved, she was saved only by Jesus' intervention. The Samaritan woman is another case

in point. Treated with respect by Jesus, she has been slut-shamed by biblical commentators for most of two thousand years. Indeed, casting stones at this woman has become a hermeneutical sport, most recently summed up by prominent preacher John Piper: "a harlot, a Samaritan adulteress . . . enslaved to the flesh. Her spirit was dead . . . hopelessly carnal." That is one man's definitive assertion supported by no evidence. None.

Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, was forced to wear a blood-red "A" on her bosom, while the father of her child continued to wear his Puritan clerical garb. Though the term was not known in Hawthorne's day, Hester, like these biblical women was "slut-shamed"—a term for girls, not boys. And not just girls.

"SLUT-SHAMED" AT 57

I was slut-shamed at 57. When they had learned my fate, colleagues were upset, entirely unconvinced by the dean's accusation of deficient student and faculty evaluations. They were demanding proof. There was none. Only then did the seminary president accuse me of "ungodly conduct," defined in the Christian Reformed Church manual as sexual



misconduct. The President knew exactly how that would play out. Support from my colleagues vanished. They didn't want to get involved in defending a slut. So, I was essentially alone during the following three years in my fight for justice. .

From my own perspective, such shaming is more common

— **“Slut-shaming” (def.): disparaging, stigmatizing, or publicly humiliating women perceived to be violating ‘norms’ and expectations based in sexual double-standards.**

in religious circles than in the secular world but in reality, the shaming of women is embedded in the fabric of western culture. In fact, one can simply call forth terms used to disparage women. Just listen to the generations of jargon. She is a bitch, bawd, broad, battle-ax, crone, floozy, gossip, hen-pecker, harridan, harpy, hoe, hussy, hag, nag, slut, skank, shrew, termagant, tart, whore and many more—some too disgusting to mention. Should it surprise us that the worst slurs against a man refer to his contemptible mother: he's a bastard, a son-of-a-bitch?

Such shaming of females, however, is surely not confined to the western world. It is found in all cultures. The inferiority of girls and women is simply assumed. That was true in Kenya where I taught at a small college for several summers. Whether or not they were raised in polygamous households, my students all testified that the man was master of the house. Wife beating was common—even

defended by some of my students, insisting it was “discipline” for bad behavior.

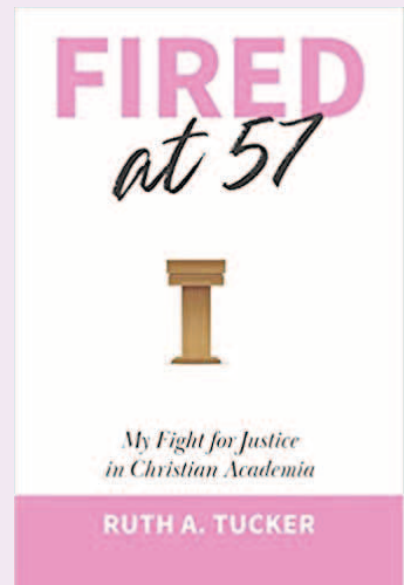
But one need not go to Africa to encounter wife-beating. As I tell in *Black and White Bible: Black and Blue Wife*, I hid bruises with long sleeves and turtle-neck sweaters for many years, too humiliated to report my

fundamentalist-preacher husband. Even after my young son and I escaped, I feared I would be blamed. I was deeply ashamed of what had gone on behind the closed doors of our

marriage. Even rape. Too ashamed to report it. After having read my book, young women have come to me telling their own stories, often insisting their words were strictly confidential, ashamed of others learning and fearing worse abuse if their husbands found out.

Ashamed. Yes, even too ashamed to report rape—particularly in Christian circles. “I remember feeling very ashamed.” These are the haunting words of Megan Lively when she was recently asked about a sexual assault when she was a seminary student. She had managed to go on in life. But after nearly two decades she was confronted by her husband on another matter and for the first time revealed to him her shame of what had happened. His first words: “You were raped.” She wasn't sure. Was she the one to blame? Maybe her memory was faulty.

With her husband's support and with the help of others, she was able to retrieve the records of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The report was still



Reflections on Ruth Tucker's *FIRED AT 57*

This month's cover story by Ruth Tucker is a courageous story of one woman's fight in the culture and workplace of our world, more specifically the world of religion.

The war against women has no boundaries and offers no exemptions. It is a no-holds-barred systemic war—and in the religious world, one that is smugly pronounced justified and necessary!

It is time, in both the secular world and in the religious world which is more relevant to this magazine, for a careful and prayerful, compassionate and Christ-centered focus on the war endured by women. It is no good to continue sweeping the dirt under the carpet—it is time for real and lasting change.

It has been my high honor and privilege to know Dr. Ruth Tucker for some 25-plus years. In the process of her rise to well-deserved prominence as a Christian author, scholar and professor she has experienced

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there. She had been dating a fellow student for only a few weeks. One night he came to her door. She let him in and he raped her. She reported the assault the following morning to the student affairs office but was immediately sent to President Paige Patterson. In his office, it was almost as though she was being raped again. There was no woman to talk with, and he wanted all the details—all of the scintillating details. Worse than that. It was her fault. Why did she let him into her room? He told her to forgive him. One last warning: *Do not report to the police.*

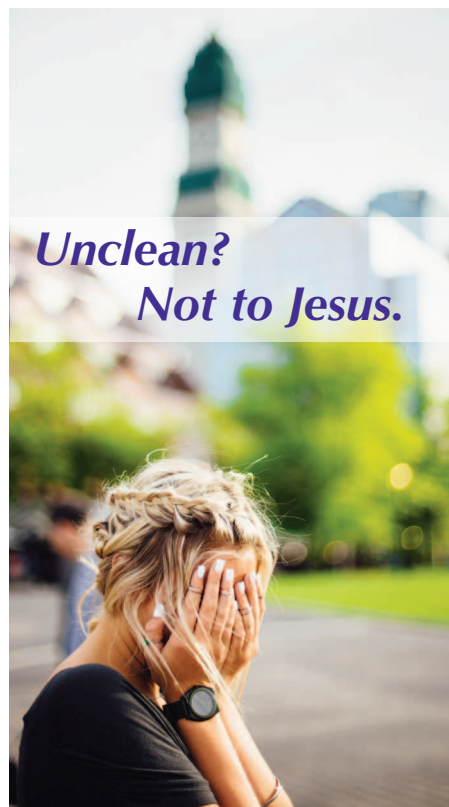
UNCLEAN? NOT TO JESUS

Because there had been similar reports relating to Patterson, her testimony many years later, along with those of others would force him to resign as president of the seminary.

In ancient times and even today in many parts of the world, rape turns a woman into damaged goods. Shame and guilt rain down. In biblical terms, she is *unclean*—the term encompasses the very essence of womanhood from the first menstrual period to childbirth and menopause. *Not so with Jesus.*

Whether the woman taken in adultery or the woman at the well, he had a penchant for being countercultural. And he healed the woman with an “issue of blood.” In fact, he drew attention to this shamed unclean woman who touched his garment. He might have just turned and whispered that she was healed. Instead, he let his disciples and the crowd know that she had a

serious condition and he healed her. He made her whole—and clean again.



I identify with that dear woman. I endured what I refer to as industrial-strength hot flashes. The hemorrhaging required surgical procedures, and on another occasion, two units of blood before the doctor would release me—all that while teaching at a seminary with all-male colleagues. They conversed about various health issues. Menopause, however, was off-limits.

In Victorian times women, whether struggling with morning sickness, postpartum depression, menopause or monthly periods, were often diagnosed and shamed by calling it hysteria. It should have come as no surprise to me that when the slut-shaming at the seminary came up dry, I was accused of being hysterical in a meeting with the

president two years earlier: 35 minutes of “incoherent rage.”

No prior mention? None. Not until I demanded (during later outside independent mediation) that he put in writing his accusation of “ungodly conduct.” Fortunately, the mediators didn’t buy it. Their report came down decidedly on my side.

Case closed? Hardly. The original fax from the mediators was supposedly “smudged” and thus, the board president and his team essentially flushed it down the toilet—a truly shameful act. I continued to be shamed and sidelined until I left the seminary in 2006 after my second terminal appointment expired, having refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement. I would find my own voice, however, in a blog and now in a book, hoping to encourage others to tell their stories.

As is so true with racism, gender discrimination is very difficult to undo, especially when it’s attached to centuries-old cultural norms—whether nineteenth-century Victorians, Protestant Reformers, medieval churchmen, Church Fathers or Hebrew law. Blame it on Old Aristotle, if you will. Woman is demonstrably inferior to man: anatomy-compromised, emotionally fraught, “an incomplete male,” or “as it were, a deformity.” But Jesus, often chiding his disciples, would have none of it. □

Ruth Tucker is a regular columnist for Plain Truth magazine and the author of her recent release, Fired at 57: My Fight for Justice in Christian Academia.