

Women on Trial: One Observer's View

My observation of the trial and my experiences therein are the repeated denial of a woman's physical self and the elevation of her spiritual, domestic, idealized self.

Written by Valerie Hobbs | Thursday, February 12, 2015

A minister has just been found guilty in an OPC trial of failing to get his chronically ill and disabled wife to church regularly enough. In this report, I examine how a disregard for women's physical needs characterized not only the trial itself but also the experiences of the women attending it.

On January 30-31, 2015, I attended the last stage of an ecclesiastical trial in the Presbytery of the Southeast (Orthodox Presbyterian Church) in Raleigh, North Carolina. I am a linguist at the University of Sheffield, and so my interest was academic to some extent. For several years, I have been researching the kinds of language used by Reformed Christians to characterize women and their roles in the home, church, and society. As this trial involves not just the defendant but also his wife, I attended to observe the kinds of language used to speak about the defendant's wife. However, my interest is also deeply personal, having grown up in the Reformed Christian church in the USA and experienced firsthand the fruits of a particular view of women. And so I attended the trial to witness and to record these matters as a Reformed Christian woman, as part of my conviction that matters affecting women should be witnessed by women.

The purpose of this report is neither to recount all of the complex events leading up to this trial nor to examine in detail the decision of the court. I have seen documents indicating that there are conflicts of personality, mitigating factors, stubborn hearts, and exacerbating events which have muddied the waters of this trial. I will not address those documents here, though I hope to do so at some later date. In this report, I seek to describe for those unable to attend my experiences during and impressions of the trial, relying on extensive notes as well as the speeches and statements I was able to type verbatim during the proceedings. What I aim to show in this report is that central to the trial itself and to my experiences therein are the repeated denial of a woman's physical self and the elevation of her spiritual, domestic, idealized self.

Trial Summary The first meeting of the trial began on April 27, 2013, although the trying of Charge 1, that of impugning motives to fellow members of Presbytery, specifically to members of the Visitation Committee and the Visitation Commission, did not commence until April, 2014. The last trial stage was primarily taken up by the defence of the accused with regard to Charge 2 of the 3 levelled against him (the third charge was later dismissed at this trial meeting on 31 January, 2015). Charge 2 reads: The Presbytery of the Southeast of the OPC charges [the accused] with violating the Fifth Commandment with respect to his inferiors, by failing to manage his own household well. Charge 2 was comprised of two specifications:

1. [The accused] has shown delinquency in the management of his household by the regular absence of his wife and daughter from the public means of grace in the corporate worship of the visible church.

2. [The accused] has hindered members of his household from receiving pastoral oversight and spiritual care from the Session having ecclesiastical jurisdiction over them.

A basic summary of the trial is as follows: After the defense presented its case, members of the Presbytery cross-examined the accused, the defense was allowed to redirect, the main defender gave his closing statement, and final speeches were made before a vote was taken on whether or not to sustain Specifications 1 and 2 of Charge 2. In a vote of 16 to 8 on both specifications, the accused was found guilty of Charge 2 by the OPC Presbytery of the Southeast. He now has 10 days to inform the Presbytery of his wish to appeal to General Assembly.

There were approximately 40 men in attendance throughout the trial, including the 24 Presbyters with voting privileges. In addition to me, there were four women in regular attendance in the meeting itself (all of whose husbands were attending and/or voting in the proceedings), and a handful of young women who helped with serving meals who also attended portions of the trial. There were also between five and ten additional women in the building who did not attend the trial itself but who prepared and served meals and made hot and cold drinks and snacks available throughout the trial. Women observers were included in these meals and welcomed and served at every stage.

Women's Physical Presence

Beginning with the warm welcome I received from two men at the start of the trial, I met and socialized with many kind and gentlemanly church leaders in this Presbytery. At least five men introduced themselves to me, exchanged pleasantries, and asked me to send greetings to shared acquaintances. Others, while expressing puzzlement at my attendance, also greeted me warmly, one remarking, 'Well, I'm glad you're here. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

The most frequent question asked of me was, 'Why are you here?' One presbyter asked, 'Did your father-in-law send you?' When I replied that I had come of my own volition, he said, 'Why in the world would you do that?' I gave the same answer each time: that I had come because the trial involved the situation of a woman in the Reformed church and that I had come to observe and witness. This answer seemed to surprise nearly everyone I spoke to, at least two remarking, 'Wow', others changing the subject after a few seconds of silence.

My presence, I began to realize, while unproblematic to most, was an anomaly. All of the women present, apart from me, were either preparing and serving food or attending with their husbands. I had come by myself, solely to observe the trial. That my presence in this capacity was unexpected and at times troubling was impossible to miss. One prominent trial participant scowled at me when I made eye contact with him in the fellowship room.

More worrying, however, was another, very different interaction. While I was talking with one Presbyter in the church sanctuary, one of the more vocal Presbyters (who eventually voted to sustain Charge 2) walked over and said, 'Introduce me to this person,' indicating me. The man I was talking to introduced me by my academic title. The new acquaintance then took my hand, which had not been outstretched, said 'Let's talk out here', and pulled me/led me by my hand into the corridor. With a smile on his face and standing rather close to me, he began asking me questions (which I have coded for later discussion).

- *Where have you come from?* (place of residence)
- *Do you know anyone in this area?* (personal connections)
- *So are you here mainly to visit those friends?* (reason for attendance; I replied that I had come solely for the trial, to witness it as a woman and as an academic)
- *How did you find out about this trial? Who told you about it?* (my source of information about trial)
- *Are you staying with friends?* (accommodation)
- *Well, then who is looking after you?* (personal care)

I laughed and said that I was very comfortable in the hotel and that I did not need any looking after. He then said,

- *I think it might be a good idea if you stayed at my house with my family.* (personal care)

I laughed and said, again, that I was very comfortable in the hotel. He continued.

- *Are you married?* (personal life)
- *How many children do you have?* (personal life)

Up until this point, I had assumed that perhaps this kind of conversation was just this man's particular manner (standing close, asking question after question, leaving little time for my responses). After all, we were strangers and he had smiled throughout. However, I began to feel this was an interrogation and even a form of intimidation. I tested the waters by asking about his children. He ignored this and asked me what church I attended. He then responded, 'So there aren't any Presbyterian churches in your town?' and then recommended I look up the pastor of a Presbyterian church in Scotland. He again invited me to stay at his home. At this point, the moderator was beginning role call, and another Presbyterian came into the hallway and told the man that he needed to go back in.

Whatever their motives, this Presbyterian's questions and behavior were, in my opinion, founded on the assumption that since my physical presence was neither domestic nor docile, it was unacceptable. This was evident in his use of the following strategies:

- disregarding the academic nature of the initial introduction and my subsequent reference to my academic interests
- leading me into the hallway by my hand (taking charge of my body and removing me from the trial room)
- asking me only indirectly why I was interested in the trial (*So are you here mainly to visit those friends?*)
- failing to respond to my attempts to discuss those interests
- leading the 'conversation' (what we linguists call topic raising) primarily towards matters related to my accommodation, personal care, and home life.

In these ways, this man brought his assumptions about my femaleness to the forefront of our conversation, determined I was an outsider, an 'other', since I did not fit within certain predetermined categories, and, I would suggest with some confidence, challenged and undermined the reasons for my presence at the trial.

Apart from this man's insistence on repositioning me within the bounds of acceptable domesticity, he presumed to touch me without my permission, for the purpose of removing me from a public to a private space. In doing so, he clearly indicated his intent to exercise control over my physical person. This presumption regarding the physicality of the women present was also encoded in the arrangements regarding the use of restrooms during the event.

There were no restrooms designated for women to use during the trial or even during breaks. The host church has two restrooms, both with multiple stalls, normally assigned one to each gender. During the entire weekend, a sign with the words 'Men's Restroom' was put over the women's restroom door sign. Before the trial began, one of the ladies explained that this is due to the many men attending. However, at least 10 women were present, both serving and attending the trial, a number which increased to at least 15 on occasion. The lady told me that this first time she would stand by the door to make sure no one went in but that I should 'try to slip out while the trial is in session when men aren't using the restroom.'

At one point, during a break, I waited outside the restroom doors (having already slipped out during the session) for nine minutes, watching men go in and out of the restroom without acknowledging me. Another woman was standing with me – she did not indicate to me that she needed the restroom, but her presence was also ignored. At one point, I asked, 'If this how things work? Do men go first and then women?' One man overheard and responded that there were men in both restrooms and I would have to wait. Finally, growing desperate, I asked another man if there was anyone else left. He said he didn't know. The other woman with me said, with some insistence, 'Well, can you check?' He looked in and reported that the restroom was empty. I removed the 'Men's Restroom' sign and went in, claiming my voice and reasserting my physical presence. When I came out, a man was standing beside the door (keep in mind that there was no line to the other men's restroom) and challenged my actions, 'I was wondering who had taken down the sign. I guess you're glad I didn't come in anyway.'

The claiming of the women's restroom, despite the presence of women in the church building, may seem to have an innocent explanation. The organizers were anticipating more men than women, after all. The possibility that more women attended than were expected, albeit disputable, should surely exonerate the organizers who covered over the women's restroom sign. And yet, the extra 'Men's Restroom' sign remained even after the trial began and the number of women stabilized. Further, the disregard of women waiting for the restroom by some Presbyters and the rebuke I received upon taking down the sign and claiming the restroom indicate that, in some respects, women's physical needs were considered unimportant and inconvenient.

The Spiritual vs. Physical Woman

Central to this case is the defendant's wife, a woman in her 60's who suffers from many medically substantiated chronic conditions and was formally classed as disabled in 1999 and covered by the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Also central to this case is extensive documentation by medical professionals substantiating the variable nature of the defendant's wife's illnesses and her difficulty in taking part in outside activities. I will here note and contextualize some direct quotations from speeches which took place directly before

the presbytery voted on whether or not to sustain the charges. I also stand here as witness to behavior during the trial which, together with the former, serve as evidence to an unsettling view of woman as ideal but not physical, as spiritual but not embodied.

Throughout his testimony, the accused explained that when he is asked about his wife's spiritual condition, he always begins with details of her physical condition because he sees them as inextricably linked. At one point, he noted, 'I cannot talk about one without the other'. There were therefore many occasions when the defendant spoke about his wife's chronic conditions and disability, many of which were deeply personal. As one Presbyterian pointed out in a speech toward the end of the weekend, it was appalling that this case had come to the point where the sometimes intimate details of a woman's suffering had to be paraded before a room of strangers. And yet, I noted several occasions when at least two men in the room, hearing the accused list these illnesses, surgeries, and hospitalizations and refer to his wife's 'physical and emotional trauma', rolled their eyes. At one point, again when the accused was explaining his wife's illnesses, a young pastor circled his forefinger around in the air, a motion widely recognized as meaning 'get on with it.'

Even more unsettling was a speech made by a Presbyterian who supported the charges, the gravity of whose words warrant the space given to some of them here (emphasis is mine).

...I so appreciate the defense's star witness, [name]. We have heard from [the witness for the defense] about his wife's illness and the extent to her illness. In cross-examination, [the witness] was asked on a scale of 1 to 10, about his wife's situation. And [the witness] said it was between an 8 and a 9 in severity. And yet, [the witness] was so diligent in his spiritual oversight of his family and particularly his dear wife that he went to great lengths so that his wife might attend to the means of grace. **In fact, with even some lament, [the witness] thought he might have overdone it a little bit, when on some mornings, on Sunday mornings, she didn't want to go to worship and yet he would get his wife up, lovingly wash her, dress her, feed her, buckle her up in the car and take her to the holy worship of God. There's a man who wonderfully exhibits what a husband ought to do in the spiritual oversight of his wife. For this Presbyterian, I was deeply moved, even convicted, but [the witness] understood that which is deeply important, that the means of grace, particularly the worship of God is how our Lord Jesus would give himself, grant grace, to his children so that we might be strengthened to live the next 6 days.** [The witness] understood that. In fact, [the witness] saw the connection then between the spiritual well-being of his wife and the physical well-being of his wife. He did not in any way seek to disrupt that unity, that bond, that connection. He saw it was crucial...

During this speech, there were murmurs ('mmm') and visible nods of approval from at least three Presbyters, particularly during the portions of the speech I have highlighted. Immediately after the proceedings, I asked the speaker whether or not my understanding of his speech was correct. Did he believe that a man who, according to him, admits to having overdone it in taking his chronically ill wife to church is exercising appropriate headship? He answered that it was only one or two times that this man had required his wife to attend church despite her ill health and that the witness' wife had appreciated his insistence. I asked, 'So you are putting a number on it? How many times would be inappropriate?' He answered maybe half a dozen, maybe more. I asked again, 'So do I understand you correctly that it is admirable Biblical headship to be too strict, at least somewhat, with regard to requiring a chronically ill wife to attend church (disregarding her

request to rest at home), but it is inappropriate Biblical headship to pay heed to a wife's physical condition, even perhaps to a fault, when she says she is too ill to go to church?' The Presbyterian replied that he hadn't said that and was instead expressing admiration that the witness had affirmed the connection between body and spirit. He clarified that without spiritual well-being, one cannot expect to have physical well-being. I said I had noted down his exact words and that he had described being deeply moved and convicted by a man who, according to him, admitted to going too far in requiring his chronically ill wife to attend church. The Presbyterian then replied, 'We in the OPC love women, don't we? [speaking to a man next to him] I almost make an idol of my wife. Excuse me, we have to go.'

In both the visible dismissal by Presbyters of the defendant's discussion of his wife's physicality and this Presbyterian's speech and comments, I detect a belief that appropriate headship of one's wife involves prioritizing her spiritual health at the expense of her body. Several Presbyters insisted throughout the trial, '[The accused's wife] is not on trial. [The accused] is on trial' and 'The issue is not her [the wife's] illness.' However, the defendant, as husband and head, was delegated by the church the care of his wife's body as well as her spirit. The defendant's acknowledgement and prioritization of his wife's unique physicality and its relevance to her spirituality was, at best, declared irrelevant and, at worst, mocked and discounted.

Consistent with this, the Presbyterian's speech indicates an unsettling view that spiritual well-being precedes and is more important than physical well-being, evident in his interpretation of the witness' testimony. I have since spoken with this witness about his testimony, and his memory is that he testified, with deep regret, that 'there were times', over a period of years, when he could've exercised better judgment with regard to taking his chronically ill wife to church. He also clarified that these were not isolated incidents, i.e. not one or two times. It is his belief that the Presbyterian did not intentionally misrepresent his testimony but that he perhaps filtered it in a certain way.

The issue here is not that the witness' leadership of his family was too heavy handed nor that his wife's illnesses and reactions to medication can be compared one to one with the wife of the accused (in fact, any such comparison between these women would be a grave mistake, given the variability of the effects of even the same conditions and medications on different patients). What I have observed in the trial and in my conversation with the witness are two loving husbands, both striving to serve their frail wives as best they can. The important point, instead, dear reader, is that the Presbyterian interpreted testimony in such a way as to reinforce a particular disregard of a wife's physicality. This indicates a worrying hypocrisy with regard to how biblical headship is interpreted and implemented, where it is acceptable and even commendable to lead a disabled wife with a certain severity, discounting her physical needs, but a chargeable offense to err on the side of compassion with regard to her physicality, as perhaps did the accused.

Closing Remarks

I will end this paper with the words of another Presbyterian, who, in my opinion, together with a minority of others, spoke bravely and boldly in defense of the accused's protection of his wife's physical and spiritual well-being. When the vote was cast sustaining the charges, four

Presbyters asked that their negative votes be recorded. Explaining his negative vote, one Presbyterian said,

It looks like we are playing tug of war over a frail woman, arguing about who has more authority over her ... It's unreasonable to expect a husband to knowingly exacerbate his wife ... That's what this is about. Who can tell [the defendant's wife] what to do ... The presbytery's hand is too heavy. And it is a hand too heavy for me to be yoked to.

While I met with much kindness and friendship during the course of this last stage of the trial and while there were many who treated me with respect and dignity, there is nevertheless a foreboding undertone to this trial and to its outcome, to put it mildly. In the bizarre restroom arrangements, in the responses to my attendance, in most of all the constant reminder that the defendant's wife's physical state was unimportant to the proceedings, this trial was about, fundamentally, the repeated denial of women as physical beings. One Presbyterian's final, seemingly innocuous but dismissive comments to me that 'We...love women' and 'I almost make an idol of my wife' perfectly encapsulate and exemplify this perspective. The acceptable female body is idolized and idealized as docile, domestic, spiritual, and without real physical needs. The fruit of these distorted views is tangible and ongoing suffering to many in the church whose bodies are 'other', who don't fit the mold. As the defense warned in his closing statement:

the very essence of the gospel is at stake. In terms of the eschatological ministry of Jesus Christ to the church, to the weak, to the disabled, to the brokenhearted...Indeed, the essence of the Gospel is before us in the presence of [the defendant's wife].

It is vital that we in the Reformed Church are vigilant against distorted views of disability, of women and of headship which disregard the physical and favor a harsh legalism. May we stand instead with the many these views oppress.

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Author's note: I am aware that some in the OPC have already complained to editors of The Aquila Report that my report misrepresents the trial. I have three responses: 1. My report was based on extensive notes and transcripts of speeches from the trial. But please note the subtitle of the article. 2. My report was read and commented on, prior to publication, by other attendees at the trial and by one other OPC minister. I am not the only one with such views of the trial. 3. I would be willing to engage with any specific criticisms of points I raise in my article. I can be reached at v.hobbs@sheffield.ac.uk.