

Portrait of a Deviant Woman

Vulnerable members of the church are frequently portrayed as abnormal and even deserving of suffering

Written by Valerie Hobbs | Sunday, September 24, 2017

Rather than asking, what could have possibly happened to Jessica to lead to her actions, people instead asked, what kind of perverse person would do this? See the difference there? The portrait of a vulnerable person as deviant allows us to avoid examining our actions towards them. It means we can point the finger. That person is crazy! Nothing she says can be trusted! These portrayals serve the purpose of self-protection and, we hope, expulsion of the vulnerable and problematic person. We can then carry on as we were.

This is the second in a series of three posts (the first post is [here](#)) about the ways in which one PCA church has responded to a case of abuse. In this post, I examine the ways in which Jessica was constructed as deviant and what purpose this ultimately serves.

As mentioned in the previous post, to date Jessica has filed two separate complaints with her presbytery. One involved the dispute with members of her congregation and the other involved the clerk of the presbytery, who verbally abused her for nearly two hours on the phone. In early October, 2015, the shepherding committee contacted her to inform her that her complaint against her session was out of order administratively. She told them about the phone call with the clerk, attached an audio file and transcript of the phone call, and asked to have no further contact with the clerk. In a meeting the following month, according to Jessica and two of her friends who attended with her, a member of the shepherding committee said that he couldn't be sure that the recording was even real. Maybe it had been digitally altered in some way. The implication was obvious. *Jessica is a liar.*

This marked a trend I have observed throughout the approximately two years that I have witnessed (and at times been involved in) Jessica's interactions with the church court system. That is, individuals charged with the spiritual care of Jessica have by their words and actions tended to approach her with mistrust and repeatedly portrayed her as deviant, all without substantiation.

For example, on 25 November, the shepherding committee contacted Jessica, using ½ page of a 5-page letter to acknowledge, albeit kindly, the ways in which she had been hurt by the session. The rest of the document they used to convince her to drop her complaints against the session and the clerk on such grounds as that pursuing these would 'further sully' her reputation in the presbytery and 'hinder [her] real potential as an advocate.' Aside from the irony of their belief that it is Jessica (and not they themselves) who should be an advocate, note their assumption that her reputation is already damaged. Damaged by what? Her own church's past betrayal of her? Her persistence in asking that her complaints be heard? Her refusal to accept ostracization and bullying, abusive language?

Time passed, Jessica was passed through several commissions, as various members delayed and/or resigned, necessitating the appointment of new members, requiring that Jessica start from scratch. Jessica learned that her session had called in a licensed counselor who had

never assessed her, never even met with her, to advise on her mental state, an obvious ethical violation. Why? Jessica had been abused by her husband, treated unjustly by her church leadership and was now refusing to be treated thus again. She wouldn't give up. She wouldn't be quiet or submissive. *What woman behaves this way? Something is wrong with her.*

Jessica began to feel ever more invisible. Desperate to be seen and heard, she painted a dress with all of the names the clerk had called her and wore it to presbytery. She began carrying a sign reading 'Justice not abuse' with her to church and placing it at her feet during worship as a form of lament. She showed up unannounced at the small group who had turned her out and shared her struggles as a prayer request. She began speaking publicly about her complaints on social media. Unsubstantiated rumors sprang up in abundance out of the false peace she had unsettled and began to fly: *She carries a gun; she is dangerous; I'm afraid of her.* The portrait of Jessica as a deviant oppressor took on flesh in abundance.

All came to a head. In September, 2016, Jessica filed a formal complaint against the clerk, against the advice of the shepherding committee. Also in September, 2016, her session indicted her. They charged her with contempt towards church leadership, focusing on three specifications: (1) escalating her complaint against members of her former small group by sending open letters; (2) refusing to comply with the session's directive to cease from bringing a sign to church and (3) likewise refusing to cease from attending her small group.

And yet, Jessica was encouraged. Finally, she could require her session to face all of the events leading up to the current indictment. In her usual style, she began preparing thoroughly. She sought the advice of an experienced pastor in the PCA regarding the Book of Church Order. She told her session that she would be calling them as witnesses, and so by necessity the matter should be referred to the presbytery level, to ensure some measure of objectivity.

Such preparedness seemed to catch her session by surprise. They delayed the trial. Eventually, they dropped the charges, explaining that **she** had made it impossible for them to pursue their charges. Her senior pastor told her he might not live long enough to recover from such an ordeal as **she** was putting him through. This she learned after months of silence, only after attending a session meeting without warning and explicitly requesting an update. The senior pastor told Jessica that the session would consider no future complaints unless she recanted certain statements she had made about her dispute. Jessica reported that one session member told her that he had listened to the entire phone call recording with the clerk, after which he simply held her gaze, as if to say, so what? *Jessica is a problem. Jessica is a merciless tormentor of old men. Jessica is guilty. Jessica deserves cruel verbal abuse.*

Vulnerable members of the church are frequently portrayed as abnormal and even deserving of suffering. I'm reminded of the Carrick case in the OPC, where the president of GPTS and members of the Presbytery of the Southeast characterized a disabled woman who was unable to attend church as burdensome and spiritually weak. As for Jessica, **she didn't behave like a wounded female is supposed to behave. She wasn't quiet. She wasn't submissive to those who hurt her. She talked about her problems openly, without shame. Time passed, but she didn't just get over her trauma. She made people uncomfortable with her dress and her sign. Was she a woman or some kind of monster?** Rather than asking, what could have possibly happened to Jessica to lead to her actions, people instead asked, what kind of

perverse person would do this? See the difference there? The portrait of a vulnerable person as deviant allows us to avoid examining our actions towards them. It means we can point the finger. *That person is crazy! Nothing she says can be trusted!* These portrayals serve the purpose of self-protection and, we hope, expulsion of the vulnerable and problematic person. We can then carry on as we were.

How will Jessica's church and presbytery respond now that their actions are being called to account? What will the effect of this case and others like it be on the church as a whole? How will you respond when a vulnerable neighbor's difficulties unsettle your habits and way of life? In the next post, I examine further the efforts of Jessica's church leaders to sustain the status quo, at Jessica's expense.