

# Forsaking Proverbs of Ashes: Evangelical Women, Donald Trump, and Rhetorical Grace

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**Abstract:** *By examining divergent evangelical responses to Donald Trump's discourses of sexual violence, I build rhetorical theory from everyday rhetorical practices by religious adherents and I offer feminist rhetoric teachers language that might help confront religion-informed support for rape culture. My analysis relies on theologian and Nazi-resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Through their social media writing in October 2016, prominent evangelical women Beth Moore and Jen Hatmaker enact a "costly rhetorical grace" that countered the "cheap rhetorical grace" stemming from "proverbs of ashes" (i.e., evangelical commonplaces) that permitted misogyny and rape culture to persist. These rhetors used costly rhetorical grace to deliberate about Christian values by revising evangelical commonplaces: viewing instances of assault and coercion as primarily about sex rather than power and violence, promoting instant forgiveness, and appealing to in-group identity and trust to diminish the need to confront rape culture.*

**Keywords:** *evangelicalism, grace, rape culture, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Donald Trump*

Your maxims are proverbs of ashes;  
your defenses are defenses of clay.  
—Job 13:12

In the biblical book of Job, readers encounter a story about God granting Satan permission to test the faith of Job, a religiously observant and apparently moral person. In the midst of calamities and griefs, Job listens to a friend offer traditional theological assertions about the righteousness of God, the sinfulness of those who suffer, the release from pain that will come by repenting of sin and simply trusting in the Lord, and the inevitable improvement of circumstances with time's passage (Job 11). The epigraph to this piece is part of Job's response to those assertions. While popularly imagined as a paragon of endless patience in the midst of suffering, Job's own words resist ready-made answers to the problem of pain and any depiction of him as a

stock figure of the servant who suffers in silence.<sup>1</sup> He hears these defenses of God as platitudes that offer nothing but death and brokenness (i.e., ashes of burnt substances and easily smashed objects made of clay). He argues with his co-religionists and with God (Job 13:15).

By rejecting theological explanations that sought to justify his predicament, Job offered inspiration for Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker's project in *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us*.<sup>2</sup> They share and examine experiences of interpersonal violence justified through appeals to God. Their work emphasizes violence done to women in the church—from Protestant women told to silently suffer, to a Catholic woman instructed by her priest to remain with her abusive husband because God will ultimately reward her pain. Taking their own and others' pain as starting points for theological reflection, they challenge discourses that encourage people to accept violence done to them and that allow violence to continue. That is, they confront contemporary proverbs of ashes. Inspired by their use of this term, I undertake theory building from rhetorical work by prominent evangelical women who confronted then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump over his sexually violent language and other evangelicals' defenses of him.

Days before the second U.S. presidential debate in 2016, audio recordings surfaced of Trump offering boastful comments about how his fame provided him license to commit sexual assault against women. Asked about his comments during the second debate with Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, Trump repeatedly characterized his remarks as "locker room talk" ("Transcript"). Listening to that characterization, I considered how to "[s]tand with women," the stance Vicki Tolar Burton seeks to achieve in her historical research into early British Methodism—a religious movement that opened discursive space for ordinary people, including women and marginalized groups (1). As I consider this moment from the 2016 U.S. presidential race, evangelicalism, and women's rhetoric, I seek to "stand with women" within evangelical subculture who confronted discourses that defend or enable sexual violence.

Long a cultural mainstay within the U.S., evangelicalism is diverse and not monolithic. Defined in various ways, evangelicalism tends to indicate

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1 There is a common expression that one who long endures trouble without complaint is said to "have the patience of Job." This imagining of Job is even found in progressive writer Arianna Huffington's popular *Thrive* (168).

2 Rhetorical scholar Kristy Maddux uses their work to critique the theory of substitutionary atonement (i.e., that Jesus had to suffer and die in the place of humanity) that undergirds Kenneth Burke's logology.

Christians who subscribe to a high sense of biblical authority, promote sharing religious faith, emphasize the life transforming experience of coming to faith, and highlight that salvation occurs through God in Jesus Christ's death by crucifixion (Bebbington 2-19; Noll 8). Despite its theological and political diversity, evangelical identity has recently been imagined as a mostly conservative stance. This image arises in part from what CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute Robert P. Jones calls "the White Christian Strategy": a political alliance between the Republican Party and white evangelical leaders to harness white Christian anxiety about increasing pluralism and diversity (79-110). Participants in the network giving rise to this strategy imagined themselves as working to preserve both religious and cultural traditions in the midst of social change.

Much of evangelicalism's preservation work has focused on regulating sexuality and gender. An observer of evangelical culture, Diane Anderson argues, "Sexual purity has become the one means by which the evangelical church separates itself from 'the world'" (20). Within evangelicalism, purity culture regulates adherence to culturally prescribed gender norms—especially femininity norms. According to Anderson, this discourse works together with what feminist scholars and activists term "rape culture," a label that names sets of attitudes and practices that work to trivialize sexual violence and normalize assault (150-54). These attitudes and practices regulate women's behavior and social responses to violence. I argue throughout this article that several prominent male evangelical Trump supporters illustrate these dynamics.

In contrast, several evangelical women leaders' social media responses to the Trump Tapes suggested the possibility of a renegotiation of evangelical identity and political priorities in regards to rape culture. Popular evangelical writer and speaker Beth Moore offered a series of four tweets that were widely perceived as responding to the sexualized language and abusive acts Trump described. Christine Caine, another Christian writer, retweeted Moore's third post, introducing the shared tweet with a single word: "This!" Retweets of Moore's fourth and second posts followed shortly thereafter. Jen Hatmaker, an author and HGTV personality, took to Facebook with a confrontation to Trump, with comments of compassion for those who have experienced the kind of assault he described, and with a call to readers: don't vote for Trump.

News and editorial reports in the lead-up to the election covered these reactions as signs pointing to shifts within evangelicalism. Writing for the *New York Times*, Laurie Goodstein cited Hatmaker's Facebook post as evidence of political "rifts" within evangelicalism ("Donald"). Laura Turner noted in a piece for *Politico* divisions within evangelicalism regarding how to feel about Trump ("How Long"). *Slate* contributor Ruth Graham collects numerous comments from evangelical women responding to the Trump Tapes and observed, "If

Moore's and Hatmaker's names aren't familiar to you, however, that's not because they're not important" ("The Evangelical Women"). Sara Groves, a celebrated Christian musician, commented for a piece in the *Daily Beast*: "Someone like Beth [Moore] can go a long way in helping Evangelicals recognize these major blind spots" around misogyny and sexual violence (qtd. in DuBois). Katelyn Beaty, the then-print managing editor for leading evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* and the first woman to hold that position, published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* that gathered a number of comments from prominent evangelical women and lamented, "It's actually hard to know which stung worse: Trump's words or our leaders' defense of him" ("No more"). These reports echo calls within feminist and rhetorical studies to pay more attention to religious women engaged in literate and rhetorical activity even when they may not appear wholly reflective of the contemporary moment's progressive politics (Mahmood; Mattingly; Mountford). Indeed, this sort of scenario is what rhetorical scholar Jeffrey Ringer seemed to have imagined when he argues that "vernacular religious creativity" may provide the basis for evangelicals' deliberative democratic engagement.

As I examine divergent evangelical responses to the Trump Tapes, I seek to build rhetorical theory from vernacular rhetorical practices by religious adherents and to offer feminist writing and rhetoric teachers language that might help confront religion-informed support for rape culture. To examine differences in prominent evangelicals' responses, I rely on theologian and Nazi-resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace." Cheap grace involves extending the church's blessing without actually confronting ideas and practices that destroy life, promote violence, and diminish hope. Costly grace involves both substantial individual and collective change undertaken as part of the religious life. Moore, Hatmaker, and other contemporary evangelical women were mobilizing rhetorical resources to enact what I call a *costly rhetorical grace* that countered the *cheap rhetorical grace* stemming from *proverbs of ashes* (i.e., evangelical commonplaces) that permitted misogyny and rape culture to persist. More precisely, Moore and Hatmaker *created opportunities for a relational openness that generated new understandings of painful experiences and for community transformation in light of those experiences and understandings*. These rhetors used *costly rhetorical grace* to deliberate about what Christian communities should value by revising these evangelical commonplaces: viewing instances of assault and coercion as primarily about sex rather than power and violence, promoting instant forgiveness, and appealing to in-group identity and trust to diminish the need to confront rape culture. In making this argument, I also draw on and extend work done by feminist rhetoric and literacy scholars on grace and women's rhetoric.

## Grace in Literacy and Rhetorical Studies

In secular terms, *grace* indicates a task artfully accomplished, a tumult endured with relative composure, an attack peaceably met. As a theological concept within Christianity, grace is God's mercy toward humanity for its sinfulness. Within Christian orthodoxy, sin means violations of divine law. These violations can occur through willful disobedience or inattentiveness.

Within rhetorical and literacy studies, some researchers, focusing on the literate and rhetorical activity of women forging community out of shared pain, find grace at work among their participants. Building on Sylvia Scribner's work, Beth Daniell observes that literate grace is often positioned as the culmination of a developmental process that moves from adaptation for everyday purposes, to power for exercising agency, to grace that confers esteemed status. Studying the literate activity of women in Al-Anon (a program for family members of alcoholics), Daniell argues that this trajectory was reversed among her participants. She found that the spiritual grace of community-grounded shifts in perception can serve as the basis for literacy as daily functions and advancement (143-44). Grace—as the women in Daniell's research received it “through informal, vernacular reading and writing”—took the form of a personal sense of agency and self-value (130). “[S]piritual awakening” for these women was “a change in understanding or perception” (Daniell 131). According to Daniell, the women reported that reading and talking about experiences different from their own increased their options for how to live (138).<sup>3</sup>

Literate grace comes through encounters with and exchanges about differences—significant and small—that enlarge the self's capacity to act and to make enabling meaning out of painful experiences. By entering into imaginative worlds crafted by authors with backgrounds different from their own and into the experiences of friends' lives, the women in Daniell's study were able to approach their own sufferings in transformative ways. Likewise, in a rhetorical analysis of the theologies crafted by women in a domestic violence shelter, Carol L. Winkelmann found that when participants placed the violence done to them into a context and discussed what they noticed about each other's stories, new theological stances arose that enabled them to act for themselves and for others (215). They led Winkelmann to “see grace as arising in

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3 Noting that many of the texts this group of white women discussed together were by African American women authors (e.g., *Beloved*, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, *The Temple of My Familiar*), Daniell explains that they present powerful female characters in the context of immense brutality, and “the theme of spirituality as a source of confidence” is central in these fictional works (122).

connection with other people; that is, grace is not simply God's divine power to forgive and transform, but their own relational openness in the context of family . . . and community that redeems" (212). Both Daniell and Winkelmann articulate the grace that is possible on the other side of violence and pain through literate and rhetorical activity.

These researchers attended to the experiences of women working toward a grace (i.e., a shift in perception accomplished through practices of reading, writing, and talking) within a community context that transformed pain and that created grounds for agency. This expansive sense of self-in-relation-to-others that generates a capacious agency resonates with Serene Jones's insights in *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* about the "surprising moment" of grace: "In full abundance, this grace strengthens the capacity to act at the very same time it invites you to fuller love of neighbor and ever-deepening love of the God who both frees and holds" (161). A costly rhetorical grace involves using available resources to make these encounters and shifts in perception and feeling more likely, and it involves working to change the larger community by revising the commonplace proverbs of ashes that justify suffering with cheap rhetorical grace.

## Rape Culture, Proverbs of Ashes, and Rhetorical Graces

An explanation of grace cited and valued by both liberal and conservative Christians was articulated by German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote about the problem of "cheap grace" and the need for "costly grace" against the background of rising Nazism in Germany. In 1937, Bonhoeffer wrote, "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession" (47). Theologian L. Gregory Jones explains, "Cheap grace denies any real need for deliverance from sin. . . . As such, cheap grace offers consolation without any change of life, without any sense of either dying or rising in Christ" (13). For example, as Christianity became part of the general background of western life, Bonhoeffer describes how monasticism arose as an effort to resist "the secularization of Christianity" (46). However, Bonhoeffer claimed that the movement ended up reinforcing worldly hierarchies of meritorious achievement and self-possession of the spiritual life. The monk's attempt to flee from the world turned out to be a subtle form of love for the world (46-48). In the contemporary moment, evangelicalism has achieved something quite similar in its construction and elevation of a culture of sexual purity.

If Bonhoeffer argued that cheap grace leaves the person and community unchanged in its wake, then a partial explanation of why that grace is ineffectual is that it neglects the question of repentance—of individual and community turning from one reality to another: “Let [the Christian] be comforted and rest assured in his possession of this grace—for grace alone does everything. Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolations of his grace! That is what we mean by cheap grace, the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner” (44). In contrast to cheap grace, Bonhoeffer advocates for “costly grace” that requires judgement for sin and repentance of the sinner (47-49, 257-58). Costly grace makes demands of the Christian—requires a constant turning (45). Such grace is costly because it may necessitate literally dying for the cause or a metaphorical dying to familiar habits and attitudes: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die” (Bonhoeffer 99). And, as L. Gregory Jones notes, “the goal of repentance, as with grace, is to lead people into community” (16).

For the contemporary evangelical community, a costly rhetorical grace involves making the turn away from its own investments in rape culture and misogyny—costly because it requires sacrificing old answers to many important questions and old identities that fail to cohere in light of women’s stories and re-interpretations of their experiences. Stories such as those told by the women in Daniell’s and Winkelmann’s studies help name as sinful those systems that promote or permit violence. That naming raises the possibility of community transformation resulting from repentance—not a guilty feeling, but a turning back to God’s plan, a turning from one set of desires to another (Borg 195; Fortune 53). Within evangelicalism, a high concern with sexual purity prevents serious confrontations with rape culture because the community’s frameworks allow evangelicals to understand rape as occurring only under certain circumstances (Anderson 147-69). Baptist pastor and author Kyndall Rae Rothaus likewise argues,

Likely [Baptist churches] all do agree that a stranger attacking and raping a woman by breaking into her house or grabbing her off the street is wrong. But there are countless stories of women who have been blamed for their assaults because they were drinking, or because of what they were wearing, or because they weren’t virgins, or because they weren’t careful enough, etc. Victim-blaming is a flagrant (not to mention psychologically damaging) denial of the crime/sin of assault, and victim-blaming is disturbingly rampant among Christians. (“Christians Need Consistency”)

This arrangement of values and narratives provides necessary background for understanding comments from several evangelical leaders in the wake of the Trump Tapes.

My analysis of their comments is informed by Ringer's work on vernacular religious creativity. Rhetorical activity that enacts vernacular religious creativity involves religious adherents arguing about or from faith-informed stances to engage in deliberative discourse (Ringer 37-38). Building on Patricia Roberts-Miller's work in *Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes*, Ringer describes deliberative discourse as oriented toward the following: action, the common good, negotiation across lines of difference, and robust argumentation (38-40). Ringer proposes three strategies through which vernacular religious creativity can occur: casuistic stretching, values articulation, and discursive translation (43-52). Most relevant in the instances I examine is values articulation: practicing situational flexibility and leveraging ethos to introduce "a novel or unexpected values hierarchy" (47-48).

## Cheap Rhetorical Grace Through Proverbs of Ashes

First, responses from many evangelical male leaders relied on a theology of purity that conflates sexual violence with sexuality generally, leading them to not acknowledge the central problems with Trump's comments are their abusive nature and their reliance on coercion. For example, Robert Jeffress, pastor of the 12,000-congregant "megachurch" First Baptist Dallas, described Trump's comments as "lewd, offensive, and indefensible" (qtd. in Bailey "Still"). Similarly, the founding executive director of the Christian Coalition, Ralph Reed, called the remarks "inappropriate" (qtd. in Bailey "Still"). The focus appears to be on violations of etiquette and on procedural concerns about an all-or-nothing understanding of sexual purity—one either has purity or not, and whatever else might be part of the situation doesn't really matter. Under that rubric, Trump's comments fail to measure up and that is unfortunate, but violence, coercion, and questions of consent fail to even register as issues. This lacuna is typical of evangelical narratives about sex. Anderson offers many examples of how materials from evangelical organizations and writers rarely acknowledge that stories they narrate depict not sex generally, but instances of abuse and coercion. For example, the emotional turmoil following sex within a coercive situation is presented as the natural consequence of sex outside of heterosexual Christian marriage (Anderson 154-57).

Second, leaders' responses demonstrated what scholar Pamela Cooper-White calls "an ethic of instant forgiveness" (251). Christians often identify strongly with the call to forgive those who harm them and to be "reconciled" with one another. While multiple scriptural references encourage these attitudes, Cooper-White argues that the church's forgiveness often offers a cheap



grace to perpetrators of violence and faint hope for justice to victims of violence, a failing that arises partially from neglecting discipleship's cost (i.e., the transformation required by practices of Christian subject formation) (255). Cooper-White also contends, "Reconciliation is often misunderstood in the church to mean an atmosphere of niceness and the suppression of conflict" (260). Such a rush to unity and conflict avoidance manifest in Trump supporters' defenses. In his statements, Jeffress went on to say that "the Bible teaches we are all sinners who all need Christ's forgiveness" (qtd. in Haverluck). Likewise, Jerry Falwell Jr. asserted, "We are all sinners, every one of us. We've all done things we wish we hadn't" (qtd. in Bailey "'We're all'"). The impulse toward instant forgiveness appears conditional—conditional not on the nature of the sinner's confession or the quality of his apology, but on membership within a pre-existing group or on the trust of group members.

Consequently, the final proverb of ash that undergirds these responses rests on the high value of in-group identity and a belief in the group's ability to easily identify and pursue the right course of action.<sup>4</sup> Anderson recounts the story of a woman harassed and coerced into a sexual relationship by a fellow churchgoer, and when the situation was reported to the pastor, he replied that the perpetrator should be trusted "because he's a Christian" (153). Group membership or alliance with the community can, as it were, cover many sins. Reed downplayed news about the Trump Tapes by highlighting a sense of evangelicals as a monolithic voting bloc that has a unified and clear agenda: "A ten-year-old tape of a private conversation with a talk show host ranks low on [evangelicals'] hierarchy of concerns" (qtd. in Woodruff). Eric Metaxas, evangelical author of a popular biography about Bonhoeffer, initially appeared dismissive of the Trump Tapes when he tweeted, "BREAKING: Trump caught using foul language, combing his hair oddly. Could this be the end of his campaign?" (qtd. in Winston). Metaxas later deleted the comment, asserting that he was unaware of the recording's content. He went on to condemn Trump's remarks while also equating them with Hillary Clinton's court-ordered legal defense of a child rapist and Bill Clinton's sexual history (Winston). From these perspectives, the community and reality itself are clearly viewed as stable and easily understood, and what's important to the group can be readily identified. This maneuver is also an illustration of the political alliance that relies on cultural nostalgia and social anxiety—what Robert Jones calls the White Christian Strategy. The White Christian Strategy also helps explain the strength and endurance of evangelicals' endorsement despite Trump's lack of thoroughgoing

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4 See Patricia Roberts-Miller's work for a close discussion of this form of argumentation and the social psychology research that informs it ("Dissent").

religiosity. Essentially, Reed, Metaxas, Jeffress, Falwell, and others told their audiences, *Trust us. We're Christians. Trump's a Christian. We know what's right.*

## **Costly Rhetorical Grace Through Values Articulation**

Women are leading figures in contemporary evangelical rhetorical production. As Tyler Wigg-Stevenson observed on Twitter, in fall 2016, Beth Moore, Jen Hatmaker, and Christine Caine each had more followers on that social media platform than various combinations of several longtime evangelical male leaders who vocally supported Donald Trump. Through social media writing in the wake of the Trump Tapes, Moore and Hatmaker enacted a costly rhetorical grace that sought to change evangelical culture.

The Houston-based ministry leader Beth Moore founded the highly influential Living Proof Ministries in 1994. As a woman who regularly addresses large crowds about matters of faith and devotion, Moore does not fit easily within the ostensibly rigid boundaries of the Southern Baptist Convention, a Protestant denomination that restricts ordination to men. By framing her activity as teaching (rather than preaching), Moore sidesteps some potential for controversy within conservative evangelicalism (Bailey, "Why" 25). Emily Cope argues that Moore "masterfully obscures the very fact of her preaching, a genre that excludes women from the role of rhetor. . . . Importantly, in the rhetorical space that she creates for herself, Moore offers a feminized evangelical message that revises the prevailing evangelical preaching tradition" (224). Through the creation of this rhetorical space, Moore achieves a high level of success. April Pressley reports that Moore's books are among the most popular items published by LifeWay Christian Stores, a major outlet for Christian cultural materials (20-21).

Over the course of an hour-and-a-half on October 9, 2016, Moore posted four tweets after the Trump Tapes revelations. The series began with a demand: "Wake up, Sleepers, to what women have dealt with all along in environments of gross entitlement & power. Are we sickened? Yes. Surprised? NO." In this first tweet, Moore mobilized a costly rhetorical grace that encouraged spiritually-grounded shifts in perception, shifts that would necessitate her audience taking action to confront the pervasiveness of rape culture. She addressed those who might be surprised by Trump's comments as "Sleepers," thus directly confronting readers who fail to consider issues of sexual violence or who, perhaps, disbelieve reports of gender-based violence, assault, and harassment. Naming this group "Sleepers" alludes to the Bible: "This is why it is said: Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you"

(Ephesians 5:14).<sup>5</sup> Through this reference to Scripture, Moore demonstrated her Christian literacy and appealed to the ethos she has crafted over more than thirty years in ministry work focused on women, work within a denomination that subscribes to complementarianism (i.e., the belief that men and women each have distinct, divinely ordered natures that make them best suited for different roles in domestic, church, and social affairs).<sup>6</sup> This allusion implies a comparison: the church learning about and coming to terms with the specifics of women's painful experiences—and their widespread nature—is like the light of Christ resurrecting the dead. By answering the demand Moore makes, repentance—a turning from one inadequate reality and identity to a different reality and identity—becomes possible. The grace—that is, the expansive agency emerging from a new perspective within a community grappling with members' traumatic experiences—that Moore extended here is costly because it links work to address sexual violence with a life spent dying and rising in Christ, with the work of Christian subject formation.

Leveraging her Scripture-invoking appeals to Christian ethos, Moore encouraged a substantial revision to an evangelical values hierarchy. Moore presented rape culture, sexual violence, and ignorance about these conditions as a terrain of sin that leads to internal or spiritual death. Consequently, she elevated concern about violence above the strong evangelical focus on purity. While evangelicals have produced voluminous commentaries about sexuality-involved or sexuality-adjacent domains (e.g., the moral conduct of heterosexual intimacy, LGBT sexuality, abortion, gender roles and identity), this attention to personal sexual morality has not often made violence and rape central to those conversations. As Rothaus argues, “[W]ithout doubt the primary sexual sin of our time is assault”; however, congregations “seldom, if

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5 “Sleepers” does not appear to be one of Moore’s frequently used terms or one that has special significance for her. In *When Godly People Do Ungodly Things*, Moore cites the Ephesians verse, mentions “sleepers,” and uses a more common term of direct address for her readers: “Beloved” (122).

6 For more about Beth Moore’s oratorical career, its context within the Southern Baptist Convention’s rising complementarianism and conservatism since the 1980s, and the rhetorical strategies she uses to both claim her role as a leader in women’s ministry and obscure the preaching that is part of that ministry, see Cope’s “Learning Not to Preach.”

ever, hear about rape from the pulpit" ("In the meeting").<sup>7</sup> Moore and Rothaus worked to refocus the mission of the church around sexual sin so that Christian communities interrogate systems that trivialize women's experiences and that place women at risk for violence.

The costly rhetorical grace Moore practiced contrasts with the cheap rhetorical grace extended by many prominent evangelical male leaders. In an elegant use of ellipse to confront without naming leaders who dismissed or downplayed the importance of challenging sexually violent language and actions, Moore further called into question the established ranking of evangelical values: "Try to absorb how acceptable the disesteem and objectifying of women has been when some Christian leaders don't think it's that big a deal." Recall how Anderson notes that appealing to the Christian identity of a man accused of harassment or assault frequently diminishes the force of the accusation among evangelicals and encourages the victim to doubt her own account (153). By taking to task high-esteem figures within her own community without specifically naming anyone, Moore rejected in-group identity and political affinity as bases for lenient treatment of a person who commits acts of, or mobilizes discourses of, sexual violence. In other words, she was uninterested in grace as niceness or as conflict avoidance.

Moore consequently opened space for others to distance themselves from stances and sentiments held by some vocal Christian leaders. "Try[ing] to absorb" the feelings of women who have dealt with violence involves asking new questions for the purpose of cultural analysis. Asking such questions implies a rejection of old answers about established values. When asking readers to take into themselves the experience of others, Moore promoted imaginative identification with survivors of violence and sexual assault in order to produce new understandings within the community at large. Like the participants in Daneill's research who took others' experiences into themselves and found these experiences a source of perceptual change, Moore's readers were called to a changed perception that might create the opportunity for new values to rise in importance against old values: repentance-as-a-change-of-life over forgiveness-as-a-niceness-for-getting-along, women's lives over gendered purity, addressing violence over promoting in-group identity and political alliance.

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7 Rothaus's comments came during a November 2016 meeting of the General Baptist Convention of Texas. As debate ensued over the question of whether the association should remain in relationship with Baptist congregations that take LGBT-affirming stances, a procedural motion ended discussion before she could speak as part of the official proceedings. However, a Facebook video records the statement she intended to make ("In the meeting").

Moore drew on the authority carried by her experience as a survivor of childhood sexual violence and of violent threats to build and extend grounds for identification and community: “I’m one among many women sexually abused, misused, stared down, heckled, talked naughty to. Like we liked it. We didn’t. We’re tired of it.”<sup>8</sup> Clint Bryan and Mohammed Albakry argue that Moore’s discussions of her abuse enable her “to connect interpersonally with others” (402). Invoking those experiences in this comment series connected her with other survivors and, by extension, connected “Sleepers” who hadn’t dealt with the reality of rape culture to the community of survivors, their concerns, and their allies. The authority Moore established through her confessional disclosure also allowed her to identify the problem of violence, to claim her own desires, and to refuse the expectations others might force on her. To name what she did and did not “like” resisted the gendered labor of being expected to anticipate and meet others’ desires—sacrificing her own desires and autonomy. She went on to write, “‘Keep your mouth shut or something worse will happen.’ Yes. I’m familiar with the concept. Sometimes it’s terrifyingly true. Still, we speak.” By closing this series of related tweets with an example of intimidation tactics and violent threats visited on women who might confront abusers, rapists, or harassers, Moore named her and others’ commitment to speak even if raising their voices is a personally costly endeavor.

While Moore avoided naming Trump, Jen Hatmaker entered more explicitly into political commentary in a lengthy Facebook post. Hatmaker has written about her life as a Christian woman in bestselling books such as *7: An Experimental Mutiny Against Excess*, has spoken to large crowds, and has hosted a show for the cable channel HGTV. Graduates of Oklahoma Baptist University, Hatmaker and her husband, after several years of service at an established church, founded Austin New Church in 2008 as a response to their growing concern for economic justice and relationship-oriented ministry with the poor. On the morning of October 11, 2016, Hatmaker posted to her Facebook page her response to the Trump Tapes. Two weeks later, she expanded on these comments, affirmed marriage equality, and supported the Black Lives Matter

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8 Moore has elsewhere disclosed her status as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Moore explains, “I became a victim of sexual abuse before the age of five by someone close to my family. This experience had a devastating effect on my personality. The abuse was intermittent, but it continued until I was nearly out of elementary school. Once it began, I became terribly insecure. . . . During my critically important developmental years, the effects of abuse wove its way into the fiber of everything I did, including the relationships I formed” (“Overcoming” 97).

movement (Merritt). Through several interconnected rhetorical choices in her Facebook post, Hatmaker established her audiences, appealed to an ethos these communities care about, and leveraged that ethos to revise evangelical values hierarchies.

Like Moore, Hatmaker located the primary problem with Trump's comments not in their generally sexual nature, but in their description of sexual violence. By directly confronting Trump and quoting his own words, she sought to indict the candidate for his language and actions. Her concern rested not on the use of taboo terms, but on the "terrifying, habitual, sexually abusive behavior toward women" that the then-candidate's comments captured. When Hatmaker rejected labels such as "funny, cute, harmless, or normal" or "guy banter," she insisted on naming the harm this discourse accomplished—both to the women its circulation might have re-traumatized and to all women through its acceptance of rape culture's assumptions about women's status as sexual commodities. Consequently, the costly rhetorical grace she demonstrated demanded a community-level perceptual shift within evangelicalism to re-center its vision on violence instead of purity. It also required her readers to engage with women's experiences of assault, which might move them to revise their explanatory stories about sexual violence and to act differently in light of those new understandings. Specifically, acting differently might mean voting differently. In short, Hatmaker argued that no political alliance is worth cheapening the Christian message—a message with the life and community transforming power of grace at its center.

The costly rhetorical grace Hatmaker argued for also involved rejecting instant forgiveness in favor of repentance as a process of identity and behavior reformation. This stance developed through claims that leveraged emotion in order to petition for some measure of justice. Hatmaker opened her post with compassion toward those who've experienced the acts Trump described, and with "fury" that a figure who enthusiastically described violence would be a presidential nominee who could characterize his language as "locker room talk." Hatmaker clearly found Trump's explanation of his remarks inadequate. In her refusal to accept the assault-normalizing label, Hatmaker insisted on what Bonhoeffer called the "justification of the sinner"—the need for confession and a change of life to be part of the grace experience (44). To portray his language in terms that made it seem ordinary, Trump offered a non-apology

and, thus, a lack of repentance.<sup>9</sup> Addressing Trump directly, Hatmaker told him that he “cannot kiss, grope, grab, and move on women without their permission.” In short, forgiving the speaker was not her concern. Changed behavior and language were the heart of her message.

Along with her focus on identity and change, Hatmaker leveraged relational categories and her Christian ethos to advocate for an expansive experience of agency that would enable her audience to confront cultural and religious commonplaces that authorize violence. To confront the behavioral model Trump provided in his comments, Hatmaker held up her male relations as examples: her sons, husband, father, father-in-law, and friends. In so doing, she also established her identity as mother, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, and friend. Such relational categories carry significant cultural cache generally and within evangelicalism. After reminding her audience of these esteemed positions, she made direct appeals to her audience along gendered lines. Through these remarks directed toward “women” and “men,” Hatmaker challenged some underlying purity culture concepts. Reminding women that they “are not just a sexual object,” she disrupted the assumptions that lead to a host of evangelical injunctions about how women are to behave, which are based in developing appropriate modes of femininity that *might* protect them from sexual violence. Likewise, in her address to men, she chipped away at purity culture’s all-or-nothing perspective on sexuality. By naming the actions Trump describes as “deviant,” Hatmaker reinforced her earlier focus on the problem as violence and abuse of power, not sexuality itself. By repeating the phrase “don’t believe it. Don’t listen” to open these two sets of remarks, Hatmaker urged readers to not accept identities grounded in sexual objectification or violence. Combined with injunctions of “[y]ou are not,” these statements subtly echo Jesus’s use of antithesis to introduce commonsense wisdom as well as ideas from sacred texts (i.e., “You have heard it said”) and then to overturn them (i.e., “but I say to you”). Even if not explicitly invoking religious language, she relied on relational categories and faith-informed sensibilities to argue for values different from those expressed by male leaders.

Religious sensibilities regarding reconciliation as an orientation toward right relations within a community context were also mobilized when

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9 Repentance is particularly important for someone who is a “baby Christian,” as longtime evangelical cultural warrior James Dobson described Trump following his political endorsement of the candidate (“Dr. James Dobson”). In the biblical book of Acts, when the young Jesus movement was growing after its founder’s crucifixion, Peter declared to a large crowd that, if they were to join the community, they must do the following: “Repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:36-41).

Hatmaker challenged commonplace assumptions about trust. Like the participants in Roxanne Mountford's study of women's approaches to preaching, Hatmaker (and Moore), in this instance, "focus not on the regeneration of individual souls but rather on the regeneration of *communities*" (149). The regeneration Hatmaker sought would come from shifting the locus of trust: a movement from trust in traditional evangelical leadership, as well as in the claims of privileged men, toward trust in women who share their stories of assault. This shift would promote the Christian goal of reconciliation: a restoration of right relationships after ruptures within a community and a "corporate transformation—a turning toward those who have been 'othered,' a restoring . . . of the whole society" (Cooper-White 260). To illustrate the rupture caused by sexual violence and discourses that promote it, Hatmaker quoted Trump's claim that "[w]hen you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything." Countering this sentiment, Hatmaker invoked "the millions of women [who] have been victimized then laughed off." Here, three issues of *ethos* and trust are at work. First, when accusations of violence are levied against a person with some measure of privilege and power, it is important to not automatically trust the individual in a secure position and to trust (that is, to believe) the account of the victimized. Second, being aware that patterns of violence and silencing work to disempower women on a significant scale means working to place victims' and survivors' stories at the center of the church's circle of concern. Third, all of this implies not simply trusting the endorsements of established evangelical leadership who claimed a values hierarchy that put primacy on traditional political alliances over the problem of rape culture.

## Conclusion: Problems and Possibilities

As the presidency of Donald Trump persists, attending to moments of ostensibly progressive or socially invigorating potential that occurred during his candidacy may point toward feminist and progressive interventions for the future. Looking at moments of resistance to misogynist discourse that emerged within the evangelical community immediately prior to the election may offer the opportunity to imagine political coalitions, community realignments, and rhetorical practices in the new moment. Theorizing and learning from critical rhetorics employed by religious women prominent in a constituency that voted so overwhelmingly for Donald Trump may point toward models for confronting rape culture and leveraging religious resources as part of that undertaking.

Exit polls showed 81% of white evangelicals who voted in the 2016 presidential election cast ballots for Trump (Smith and Martínez). Such a result might mean that not much has changed a decade after Sharon Crowley lamented the limited paths for invention that she discovered as a liberal, secular academic



for rhetorical engagement with fundamentalist and conservative evangelical Christianity; however, scholars of religious and feminist rhetorics continue to identify and amplify those figures within the target community who are forging news paths. In attempting to do likewise, I've tried to identify the rhetorical grace that urges change within the community that allowed, authorized, or abdicated responsibility for violence.

A focus on grace may risk individualizing and spiritualizing in escapist ways experiences of trauma and oppression that have systematic and institutional roots. Indeed, within Christian communities, and evangelicalism in particular, the social implications of grace are frequently downplayed against the importance of a personal encounter with God's forgiveness. However, Moore and Hatmaker relied on an understanding that, as Christians, they were liberated to engage in labor that might be difficult or uncomfortable. They certainly took personally, costly risks given the political conservatism of much of their audience.

As a theoretical stance derived from vernacular religious rhetorical activity, cheap rhetorical grace relies on the pull of in-group and out-group thinking, while costly rhetorical grace acknowledges that pull and resists it. Costly rhetorical grace confronts patterns of life that promote violence common both in the church and the wider culture. This confrontation requires that audiences who've not experienced victimization seek out the stories of people whose experiences are different from their own and try to identify with them. Moore and Hatmaker both demanded that their readers undertake such a project. Such work resonates with what Daniell reports about the personal and collective resources white women gained from reading African American women writers. Such an encounter with others is not a cheap rhetorical grace that makes readers feel good for learning about others or that simply provokes a momentary outrage to, or a sympathetic excitement over, stories that speak to systems of sinfulness. It is a costly encounter that requires community judgement not only of practices that perpetuate violence, but also of the people who engage in them—bidding audiences to change, die, and be reborn.

This project is not about deifying and thus accepting others' suffering or reducing complex lives to simple categories. Rather, rhetoricians can center our vision on the lives and stories of those who survive and thrive in the midst of unjust systems that inequitably distribute life's precariousness. That is, grace makes the most sense when lessons are drawn from people and communities who, as Audre Lorde put it of African American women, "were never meant to survive" (42). Engaging with such accounts helps Christians to identify systems that single some people out for greater suffering, name these systems as sinful violations of the divine order, and free them to undertake work that would change these systems—to imagine the world as other than how it is.

Ultimately, calls for costly grace in this instance appear to have been unsuccessful. On one level, the exit poll numbers cited above would suggest this failure. On another level, the extent of the backlash Hatmaker experienced also speaks to the rejection of costly grace. In a 2017 Good Friday blog post, Hatmaker reflects on the aftermath the 2016 election:

I became painfully aware of the machine, the Christian Machine. I saw with clear eyes the systems and alliances and coded language and brand protection. . . . I saw how it all works, not as an insider where I've enjoyed protection and favor for two decades, but from the outside where I was no longer welcome. The burn of mob mentality scorched my heart into ashes, and it is still struggling to function. ("My Saddest")

Articulating evangelical culture as a "machine" echoes Bonhoeffer's insight about cheap grace being "grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system," and "a general truth" rather than as a phenomenon uniquely responsive to different situations (45). Here, the machine or system resisted efforts to dislodge the tight articulation between partisan politics, purity culture, and evangelical identity. At the same time, in a moment that feels saturated with urgency about the collective direction of the U.S., no strategy for shifting communities should be discarded. It may well be that Moore, Hatmaker, and others planted seeds that will later come to fruition.

I end with a note toward the practice of costly rhetorical grace. In their critique of Crowley's work, Michael-John DePalma, Jeffrey Ringer, and Jim Webber argue that rhetors lose powerful resources for argumentation when absolutist discourse is dismissed in favor of liberal proceduralism. They offer a diverse array of sample counterstatements to illustrate the value of absolutist assertions to a robustly deliberative democracy. Moore and Hatmaker both employ absolutist assertions to reject old ideas and promote new identities, so costly rhetorical grace may involve generating and circulating absolutist discourse that aims to shift the culture. Here are few absolutist statements toward a costly rhetorical grace for the church:

- Enough of the cheap grace that accepts the constituencies brought to the church by women's leadership, but that refuses to reorder priorities toward the needs of this group.
- Enough of the cheap grace that lifts up women's testimonies, but that doesn't allow those stories to more richly shape the church's witness to the culture or other Christians.
- Enough of the cheap grace that offers maxims about purity and precepts about proper places, but that doesn't recognize how these

proverbs of ashes fail to speak life into the harm the world and the church has inflicted.

As I theory build from instances of vernacular religious creativity, I want to offer feminist writing and rhetoric teachers language—grace, proverbs of ashes, forgiveness, reconciliation, repentance, trust—that might resonate with evangelical and theologically conservative students. This language might prove helpful in confronting religion-informed discourses that perpetuate rape culture. The call of costly rhetorical grace bids the community come and die—so that it might be reborn as a more just and life-giving place. If there is salvation (and in Christianity salvation involves personal and social transformation), then it comes from seeing the brokenness in the world, acknowledging how each person participates in that brokenness, and moving forward into something new. The salvific work of grace, then, is here and now: a world redeemed and transformed in response to suffering.

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