

## MISOGYNIST THEOLOGY CAUSES EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL ABUSE IN HOMES AND CHURCHES

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://Flyingfreenow.com), and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.*

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 3 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have Rebecca Ferris, and we are going to talk about church. Rebecca and I are friends online and we were texting one day on Facebook messenger, and she sent me a link to a movie review of "I Survived 'I Kissed Dating Goodbye.'" I'll just tell you, both Rebecca and I are first generation homeschoolers, and she was saying "I wonder how many women married an abuser because of this philosophy. I did." So that's what I thought we'd talk about. Actually I said, "Hey! This would make a good podcast episode idea." So here we are! We're going to talk about that. Rebecca, why don't you tell me a little bit about your experience with that book and how you met and married your abuser. And by the way, Rebecca was married to her abuser for... seventeen years?

REBECCA: Twenty years total by the time the divorce was final.

NATALIE: Okay. And she is now remarried to a wonderful man, and we're going to talk about that too, later. But this whole podcast episode is going to be all about church, spiritual abuse, the kinds of things that we were programmed into as women, and how that brought us to a place where we were actually the perfect candidates to be abused.

REBECCA: Absolutely. Well, what I didn't share in my other story is that I was actually adopted at the age of thirteen.

NATALIE: Oh, can I interrupt just really quick? I forgot to say that Rebecca just did an hour-long testimony time that is going to be exclusively available only to Flying Free members. Because we had done that video and there were so many more things that we wanted to talk about, that's why we decided "Hey, let's do a podcast interview too!" So if you are not part of that Flying Free support group, it opens up every four months. I'm not sure when you're going to be listening to this podcast but depending on when you listen to it, if you go to my website which is [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com), all you have to do is sign up to get on my mailing list at the top of that page. I don't spam people. I only send out an email here and there, but you will get an email when that group opens back up again and once you're in the group, you can hear Rebecca's whole story. It's an incredible testimony of a woman going from crawling to flying, which is what Flying Free is all about. Okay, I'm really sorry I interrupted.

REBECCA: Oh, not at all, not at all.

NATALIE: Keeping it real here. Okay, go ahead.

REBECCA: So I was adopted at thirteen, and I grew up in a children's home that was supported by an independent fundamental Baptist church. That is code word for "crazy." Most independent or super conservative churches I have ever come across have many things in common. The one is their view of women. In this children's home, I was sexually molested for years. A lot of trauma early on. I was adopted by an amazing man who married my biological mother, so that's a whole other story. My adoptive father was Italian and did not know God. In fact, he was very far from it. He was a very connected Italian, as we call it. He made his money in not such great ways, but he had a lot of it. Well, a year after he adopted us, a Baptist door-knocker knocked on our front door, shared the Gospel with him, and he became a Christian. He stopped doing all of his bad things and gave his life over to supporting missionaries. So just an amazing testimony there, but because my dad was in his fifties when he became a Christian, did not grow up super educated, was very street smart, extremely street smart, my abusive mother was always taking us to churches that were this abusive type church, meaning they had very defined roles for what a man could do and be and what a woman could do and be.

And that was just the beginning. We began homeschooling. I would say a lot of people think those first generation homeschoolers were like the pioneers and they were fighting the system and all this. Most of them were just homeschooling because they were hiding abuse. Very abusive homes in those early years. More abusive than not, I would say. And I've got a lot of experience in this world. So once we started homeschooling, of course you go to these homeschool conventions, and who is there talking but the Harris family. And Josh Harris, of course, was there. He was two years older than I was and we kind of hung out. All the teens would hang out together at those events. Then my parents became active in the homeschooling world and started traveling to conventions. I wasn't just a homeschooler. We were headlong into it. It wasn't the homeschooling that was bad, it was the isolation and the extreme Christian views that only got more extreme. So by the time I was fifteen, we had a strict rule in the house that the only friends you could have were your siblings. You could go to church, but you don't have church friends. Of course you didn't go to school, so you didn't have friends there. So isolation, because even at church, those kids going to public school, we've got to be careful of them. So that was not healthy. When Josh Harris' book came out, of course my mother read it, and we were never allowed to date. Basically, you were allowed to court, but courting meant you were 100% sure that person was going to be your spouse, but they had to pick you. You couldn't pick them

because you're a woman.

NATALIE: Right.

REBECCA: So obviously, having an abusive mother coupled with abusive philosophies that you're living by. In the home at that time I had one older sister, and the rest of the kids were younger than me. My older sister loved the system and she stayed in it and is still in it. I didn't. I wanted to go to college but no. No college for women. Women don't need to be educated. They need to bear more children. I wanted to go into the air force. I wanted to be a fighter pilot. Oh my word, that was like saying I wanted to be a prostitute. I mean, I got slapped in the face for even saying it.

NATALIE: Wow.

REBECCA: So when I turned eighteen, I left home. I met my abuser at eighteen. He was in his thirties. I really believe my dad thought he was doing the absolute best for me. He was a great and wonderful dad. My mother was just abusive. Totally bipolar, just really not a good person. What they did with their children is we were totally unprepared for the world. I married an abuser, and my sister below me married an abuser. My brother never got his feet under him and has struggled his whole life. I could go down child by child, and there's not one child that has a healthy life primarily because of the church and its teachings that my parents believed and bought into. And even after I married an abuser, we began going to this church. So I'm coming out of this rough childhood, abusive situation. My mother had been divorced several times so in my immature brain, I attributed all of the family mess to divorce. And guess what? That's what the church wants you to think. So it went right along with it. So we visited a few churches, and this one church just talked heavily about the importance of family, the importance of staying married, the importance of raising your kids and homeschooling them and all this. I really bought into, out of a genuine desire to have a, ironically, normal life, this idea that it's all based on submitting to your position as a woman. During the time I was between fifteen and eighteen, my dad understood my mom was abusive, so he allowed us opportunities to get out of the house frequently, and I worked for him from an early teenage year. I would spend twelve to fifteen hours a day in the office just so I could avoid being at home. Because of that, I learned bookkeeping and accounting. I learned computer programming. I learned how to run a business. I learned logistics. I learned inventory management, retail versus wholesale, all these business things. I went to the meetings that my dad had and I sat there and learned everything about how to do business. So here I am, I'm eighteen, I've never held a man's hand, but I know how to be an accountant. I know how to file taxes. I was filing taxes for people at seventeen years old.

NATALIE: Wow.

REBECCA: But yet I didn't know the first things about relationships, and I surely didn't understand what love was. So, I got pregnant because my abuser lied and said he was sterile. I had to marry him. I wasn't given a choice. Because of the church's teachings, I never felt I had a choice. Then we started going to this church that we found and it seemed good. It seemed like the people were good. It seemed like they wanted to do the right thing, but I was just so incredibly naïve and such a people-pleaser and always looked at everyone as what I would do and be. So I would look at an abusive pastor who maybe had done something or maybe an abusive pastor's wife and go, "Oh, she didn't really mean that. I'm sure she meant this." I would always excuse people, because I would never say that to somebody. I would never hurt somebody that way. But in the midst of all of that, there was this constant hammering of this underlying philosophy that successive marriage was on the woman's shoulders to bear. Successive children was solely on the woman's shoulders to bear. Oh, they would mention the "godly man" and the "head of the household." Man, if I've heard "head of the household" one time, I've heard it a million. And ironically, it's nowhere in Scripture. There's not one place in the Scripture.

I have a dear friend who is Jewish, and so she goes to synagogue, and I have the most fascinating conversations with her because she's stoutly Jewish, so she's really, really studying the Torah. She's really talking to the Rabi's. It's fantastic that this came into my life. I'm questioning everything I was ever taught. I ask her, I'm like, "So what did the Jewish people believe because obviously, patriarchy started with Abraham their father, so help me understand that!" And she's like, "No, Jewish people do not believe that the man is the head of the household. They believe that the women are actually more spiritual, that the woman's prayers are more valuable." She goes, "The men have to pray seven times a day because men tend to be bad people." It's so ironic that the church is where it is today. It is one of the most frustrating things coming out of an abusive situation, to questioning why I was in it, to learning what I've learned from how the Bible was translated, to how this misogynistic... and I know people are like, "Oh, that's a dirty word." No it's not. It's a real word just like "narcissism." It is rampant in the church. Yes, I live in the Bible belt. We say the buckle is right here in Tennessee. Over the buckle is the oppression of women, really. And people say, "Oh, this is not happening in other places. Your one church was extreme." It wasn't one church. I went to six different churches in my twenty-year bad marriage. Some were Baptist, some were non-denominational, some were Presbyterian. I grew up in an assembly of God church. I felt very well-rounded.

NATALIE: You are well-rounded. And you know what? I've heard your versions of your

stories from literally dozens and dozens and dozens and dozens of women. They have the same story of abuse in their church. It's not just one denomination. It's any church that teaches the idea that men have a power-over position over women. If you teach that, that is the foundation for abuse. That is abuse because the definition of abuse is power and control. So it would be the opposite if a church taught that women have power and control over men. Same thing. You've got an abusive situation. Power and control is abuse. That is not the Gospel.

REBECCA: What's so interesting is if we look at some of the books of Paul, Paul is actually talking to churches that are having a problem with power over that the women are doing. That's when he's saying "Women need to be silent." He's not saying because women are less-than. He's saying "Look, you're being abusive, and then other times it's men being abusive. We are human." My new husband, he's amazing, he has been in law-enforcement for more than forty years, from military to special forces, FBI, all of that. He's from local PD. Very well-rounded. Sometimes I will get so frustrated and I will tell him, "Ugh, I can't stand the church. It's just abusers," and he'll go, "No, no, Becky. It's just people." In his experience, he has arrested a tremendous number of so-called pastors, elders, deacons, leaders from churches for anything from sexual misconduct, rape, indeceny, to pedophilia.

NATALIE: I was just going to jump in and say, I just recently heard that of the top ten professions that abusive people hide in, being a pastor or a religious leader is number seven.

REBECCA: Wow. I would love to know what number one is. But, he goes, "A bad person will always look for the opportunity to be where he can perform badness and cover it up. You know, sometimes that's pedophiles. They hide in the boy scouts. Do you know how many boy scout leaders we've arrested?" So it's not just the church, but it is a lot in the church. And I don't want to discount... there are some good churches and some good pastors. I can't necessarily name a whole lot, but my husband tells me they're out there. But I think what's interesting is that another hard thing for women is that we go to churches, and your gut tells you "There's something wrong here," because that power-over is satanic, and it is oppressive, and you can feel it in your gut when you walk into a church. Just like a mom can have that intuition, like "That guy is probably a pervert," you've got to listen to that. The hard part, though, is you feel in your gut something is wrong, but you look around and there's all these happy women. So there's something wrong with me, because I'm seeing stuff and nobody else is seeing it. I was sitting in a church about a year ago, and I have a really hard time going to church. I get anxiety and panic attacks because I really endured a severe amount of abuse in churches. It was Mother's Day, of all days, and the pastor made this crack about women

and everyone laughed, and I just stared and I just thought, you know, obviously I don't want to be a prude and like, can't joke about anything, but what he said was an indicator of how that church operated.

NATALIE: Right.

REBECCA: And I never went back after that day because it was, you know, a power-over. Men are superior. Women are inferior. I've been called a feminist I-don't-know-how-many times because I dare believe I have the right to be equal. But the problem is there are so many in the church, whether they realize it or not, that have the power-over belief system even if it's not fully in play. It's a foundational belief that most churches believe because it's ingrained. It started hundreds of years ago when the Bible was translated and verses were added or taken away or changed to make women secondary beings. So from there forward, that's all we've known in our churches. And so even when you say, "Oh no, they don't believe that," people still believe in that in their church.

NATALIE: Yeah. One of the things you said way back at the beginning... you said you didn't have a choice when you got pregnant. You had to marry this guy because you didn't have a choice, but I think when we did the other interview you had said "My choices were either marry him or basically be rejected." Everyone would kick you out.

REBECCA: Well, and I proudly say I've been excommunicated from three churches.

NATALIE: You've got two up on me.

REBECCA: I know. So one was for the divorce, obviously. One was weird. I got a letter saying we were excommunicated three months after we left. I don't even know what that was about. That was a church where I started a company, and the church said "You can't start a company without getting our approval because you're a woman." This was a reformed Baptist church, mainstream.

NATALIE: Talk about power and control. Unbelievable.

REBECCA: Oh I know. So I just wrote a very kind, loving letter saying "We appreciate you. We thank you for all you've done." I feel like I went from the absolute worst church and every time I visited a new church, it was a little less cultish and controlling. But yeah, three months after we had left I got a letter saying I had been excommunicated for disobedience.

For people who don't know my story, I was married to an abuser who refused to work. For seventeen years he did not work. And when he did work, he would get fired right after the six-month mark so he could draw unemployment. So he was extremely lazy, extremely self-centered. I had no option but to figure out how to provide for my kids. But the church said I wasn't allowed to work outside the home because I was a woman. Of course, they would quote all those Scriptures, taking them out of context. So I learned this is where God's grace comes in. Even in that muck and mire, the Lord provided avenues for me to program from home. I would start at 6:00 in the morning. At about 8:00 I would stop, wake the kids, and homeschool them. When they were down for naps, I would work another two hours. After dinner, we would have baths and bedtime stories. I would work another four to five hours. So I could get an eight hour day in of work and still homeschool and provide for my kids. I had no other life because there was no time for it, but even in the midst of all of that the Lord made a way.

So that first church, because I had no income... the church income began to diminish, and the pastor was not able to be paid. He was a former engineer, and so he wanted to start this engineering firm. He knew I had business knowledge and experience. I could build websites, I could put together sales teams, all of that. So he asked if I could work with him. And I thought "No, because I'm not able to work outside the home." And he goes, "Well, for the pastor you can." And I was thinking "This doesn't make sense." But in the back of my mind, "Oh, maybe this is a way for us to get off of food stamps." That was all I cared about: providing for my kids. So I went to work. I built a multi-million dollar company in two years, and when I took the kids to Washington D.C to meet a friend and for a little vacation to see D.C., this pastor who had stolen my identity racked up a \$180,000 in loans and credit cards in my name, and I had no clue. I came back from that trip and found a note on my door saying that I had been excommunicated from my church because the pastor's wife said that God told her that I was trying to have an affair with her husband by working for him.

NATALIE: Unbelievable.

REBECCA: I know. Even as I am telling you this story I am thinking, "What in the world?"

NATALIE: It's so insane.

REBECCA: I was twenty-four years old. I was raised in such naïvety and I was just totally clueless. That was actually one of the most difficult times in my life, because not only did we not have a church, and of course we had no other friends but our church friends because of isolation, but then to nearly lose my home because I found out about all this debt that he had dragged up in my name?

My situation, I know, is pretty extreme because nowadays you can track your credit and know when somebody is using it. I found out later that he had done this to seven other women. So he was a career criminal. But everything on the outside looked like it was this wonderful church. Everyone had happy families. It was never the case. Another thing I realized is abusers tend to gravitate towards abusive churches, because it helps them maintain their abusive control.

NATALIE: Yes. Again, it's got the foundation that the entire structure and belief system is built upon. That belief system is that women are less than men, and if you've got that there, that excuses and justifies any kind of psychological, spiritual power and control over another human being.

REBECCA: Absolutely.

NATALIE: The thing that keeps striking me when I think about the church and what it teaches... I'll see posts on Facebook, and it all sounds so spiritual and so holy and so godly. They way they twist it, they make it sound like if you rise up and say "No, this isn't right!" If you try to elevate women to their proper status as human beings made in the image of God, they call you a feminist or whatever. But this is the exact opposite of love. This is the exact opposite of how Jesus Christ came and how He lived His life. He laid down His rights. He laid down His power in order to love the people that He was around. So when you've got entire structures that are saying "We're going to say that certain people with certain body parts are better than and deserve certain rights while other people with other body parts do not deserve those same rights, do not deserve that same honor..." You said in the interview that we just did, you said that the church is never, ever going to influence the world as long as they have that structure set up, because it is the antithesis of who Jesus Christ is, of who God is.

REBECCA: Doesn't it amaze you... there's no way to say what percentage of American churches or churches worldwide that believe this way. It is a high percentage because it started back with Augustine. We're talking translation of the Bible period. You know, as you were saying that, you're absolutely right: it's nothing like what Jesus came to say. Ironically, the only way to sustain this system, they have to go one step further. If you want to maintain the control, we not only have to convince women that they are less than and that they have a position. Of course if they came in and just said "You know, women are less-than" it would never fly. But if they come in and say "There is a God-ordained system, a program, a twelve-step," that's how they sell it. And of course they're twisting Scriptures, but they have to twist more Scriptures to even maintain it. I'll give you one example. I subscribe on Facebook to a couple of different pages, and there's one and she's a very sweet woman, but she's always posting things that are not



Scripturally correct. A big one, and this is what keeps women in the power-under position, is forgiveness. You need to just forgive. The reason that you're saying women should have equal rights is because you're a bitter, unforgiving woman. But the reality is, the Scripture never tells us to forgive without the offender repenting. There are so many foundation blocks that are keeping this really crazy system in place. I believe forgiveness is one of the big ones. We live in a church system and society where if a man rapes a woman, the church is more concerned about the woman forgiving the rapist than holding the rapist accountable. And the same thing with abuse. They are more worried about keeping the marriage together than dealing with the abuser. And it all comes down to the power-over. They've got to maintain it, and the only way to maintain it is to continually twist the Scriptures. Forgiveness is one of many examples.

You know, Natalie, sometimes it can feel overwhelming. Like, why is God allowing the one thing He put on this earth... which makes me question whether the church building itself is right, because the church should be the body of people, and we have morphed that into a church building and a paid salaried staff and all this, and power, and you know, where does God ever say that the church is about power-over? Everything in the NT that points to any type of church or community or gathering is about people serving each other. But like, where do you go from recognizing it to changing it? I don't know. I think for me, it starts with my five kids, and it starts with challenging them. I have a daughter who is engaged right now. She's getting married in about six months. She's starting marriage counseling and she had a discussion with me just two days ago. She said "But what if we're wrong, and the man is supposed to be in charge?" So that told me that even though everything we've been through, we have been so ingrained with "women are second-class." She's studying to be a lawyer. She's very analytical. She's a smart chick. She's out in the world and in school. For her to say that really blew my mind. And it just goes to the underlying issue... there's so many steps. You've got to bring awareness to women of the issue, and you have to make it important enough to change. And unfortunately, the obstacle of overcoming the men that want to keep that power structure is almost impossible.

NATALIE: Yeah. I was going to say, my answer to her would be "What if we're right, and men are supposed to be like Jesus?"

REBECCA: Yeah. You know what I told her, and I've said this to several women: "Can you name me any other relationship where somebody has to be in control?"

NATALIE: Right.

REBECCA: And you know what, I have had women say to me "Well yeah. At work, or the

government.” And I said, “No. At work, you get paid for somebody to tell you what to do. In the government, you pay taxes so that you can live in that city or in that country. That is an exchange of a benefit for a payment. That is not a relationship.”

NATALIE: Exactly. And the thing is, those leaders, those elected leaders or those teachers or those police officers, those people are put in places to serve you. Teachers serve by giving you information so that you can make a life for yourself. Police officers serve you by protecting the community. Your government officials serve you by representing you in government. So they’re actually serving. And I know that you hear Christian people say “Well, these men are servant leaders.”

REBECCA: No.

NATALIE: No, that’s like putting an earring in a pig’s snout or spraying perfume on the pig to make it smell like it’s something that it’s actually not.

REBECCA: Natalie, that has to come from that missing book in the Bible that everyone keeps referring to that I just can’t find.

NATALIE: Exactly. It’s not even common sense. I think that the older that I get, I feel like I’m finally shedding a lot of mythology and landing on number one, the common sense that God gave us, and number two, it all boils down to Jesus Christ, who He is, He is the center of the universe, and what He came to teach us and to model for us which is love. It really just boils down to love. And we have to close now. We could probably have twelve-hour podcasts right? But I want to close with this. There was a Facebook discussion thread kind of about this kind of thing, and someone who I’m pretty sure wasn’t saved (there were some atheists that were kind of chiming in), and one of them said “You know what, as soon as you say the name ‘Jesus,’ then I know that it’s going to be something stupid and not common-sense and whatever.” And that right there, it’s in your face. It’s saying that we as a church, because of this false foundation that’s built on a power-over structure, we are dragging the name of Jesus Christ through the mud, because Jesus Christ has nothing to do with that rotten, disgusting, foundation that the church has built on. Jesus Christ is not that foundation and yet, because they’re using the name of God as their weapon of control, they have blasphemed the name of God. That is the thing that probably troubles me, disturbs me to the depths of my being more than anything else. It doesn’t even disturb me remotely a speck as much as it disturbs God.

REBECCA: On that note, when I read about Jesus, and obviously I read from a very different perspective today than I did ten years ago, Jesus was always upset with the so-

called Christian leaders. And then I take one more step back and I think “Okay, what did those Christian leaders really do?” You know, to some, they were very abusive. But to most, they weren’t. And that’s the problem. If you think about the religious leaders, everyone followed them. Everyone went to church for the most part back then. And just like today, most people go to church. Most people don’t follow the pastor to the T, but in each situation, Jesus was calling them out for specific abuse to more individuals, not whole groups. I think nothing has changed in that respect. It just has a new facade.

NATALIE: Yeah.

REBECCA: I don’t know if that’s encouraging. Let me tell you what’s super encouraging. This is the only time in human history where women have a platform called the internet to educate, to encourage, and to comfort each other. Natalie, what might seem like this overwhelming task, this overwhelming mountain to climb, we just might be laying the ground-work for what our great grandchildren completely take care of, just like slavery. I really do think the way that the church views women goes back to the way they viewed slavery.

NATALIE: Yep. I agree. And amen to everything you just said, and that is what I’m hoping. The internet, people can bash it, but it is an absolutely incredible tool that’s going to be transformational, I believe, for the church.

REBECCA: How different would your life have been, or my life, if I had been able to find a group on Facebook that were having similar issues with their husbands and then being able to pinpoint and recognize what it was? And then the same with the church. I would have learned, I think, fifteen or twenty years earlier, what I was actually involved in and then had been able to get out. Obviously the Lord has everything for a reason, and I don’t mean that God’s in control of everything. We have choices. We make those choices. And sometimes we’re just stupid. And then we wise up and we make better choices.

NATALIE: But information does help, you know?

REBECCA: It does! I know we’re running short on time. Let me just say, too, I used to say the word “conviction” all the time back in those early days. “Oh, I was convicted of this,” or “I was convicted of that.” It sounds so spiritual, doesn’t it? But, at the end of the day, the only way that you can be convicted of is what you know. It’s what you’ve been educated towards. You know, sometimes people are educated that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , and that’s what happens in church. You are educated that you should be and think this way and then all of a sudden, you say “Oh, well, God convicted me of this.” And I had a really

hard time going back and thinking “So that wasn’t really God.” There’s a lot of times in my life I thought it was God and it wasn’t. It was a really messed up way of thinking taught by the church that led me to think that I was hearing from God.

NATALIE: Yeah.

REBECCA: That’s a whole other topic though.

NATALIE: It is. We’ll have to get together and do another podcast episode.

REBECCA: Absolutely.

NATALIE: All right. So, thank you for joining us, Rebecca. It’s been super fun to spend the last couple of hours with you. For the rest of you who are listening, if you have not already subscribed to this brand-new podcast, I encourage you to do so. Also, if this is a subject that’s important to you, please leave a comment and share it with other people that you know, other women that you know that may be interested. That’s it for now and until next time, fly free.