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**New Identity in Christ: Counseling Women
Who have been Sexually Abused or Raped**

LaVerne Bell-Tolliver¹
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

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Introduction

When I was asked to write this article, I thought of two possible ways of handling the material: I could either write it from a totally professional and objective standpoint, or I could also disclose that I too have been a victim of this type of trauma. The reason that I ultimately chose to write from the latter position is the fact that so many people have been sexually traumatized and find it extremely difficult to reveal the information to anyone. Unfortunately for many of them, the pain, fears, shame, and other emotions may remain locked within. These feelings may well influence future decisions and

¹ LaVerne Bell-Tolliver, MSW, MABC, Ph.D., LCSW, Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Post-Masters Marriage and Family Therapy Certificate Program, University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Social Work. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to LaVerne Bell-Tolliver, UALR School of Social Work, 2801 South University, Little Rock, AR. 72204, or lbolliver@ualr.edu.

behaviors these women make, as well as the thoughts they have about themselves, others, and life in general. I therefore chose to model the behavior that I would like for readers who may have experience the trauma of being raped or sexually assaulted by briefly sharing information concerning my assault. It is hoped that by sharing a little of my story, readers will become more understanding of and compassionate to the needs that other victims may have in order to help them appropriately move forward on the path of healing.

I was a victim of date rape at the age of 19 while I was away from home for the first time and in college. I was unaware that I had to be concerned about being harmed by someone I knew and thought I could trust. Because I was a virgin at the time, I believe that this act affected me even more profoundly because of what I saw as the loss of my dreams and hopes for a happy marriage to a loving husband and followed by the birth of healthy and happy children. I learned first-hand of the emotions that many victims experience and that are discussed in this article.

Since that time and in my professional life, I have also provided therapy to many girls and women who were sexually abused as children or raped or assaulted as adolescents or adults. I understand and can directly identify with the questions that women may have concerning their identities—who they are after experiencing the trauma, and more importantly, who they are in Christ.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2010), one in every 1,000 ages 12 and over in the United States were victims of rape or sexual assault. Rape was defined as “forced sexual intercourse including both psychological coercion as well as physical force.” Although violent crime rates (including murder, rape and sexual assault, robbery, and assault) have decreased since 2000 (Truman & Rand, 2010), and are down by 39% according to this report, the emotions that victims of these crimes experience are profound.

I describe the emotions and possible behaviors that females may display as result of experiencing the trauma. I then explore the impact of the crimes of rape and sexual assault on women from a spiritual standpoint, consider the victims’ new identities in Christ, and discuss therapeutic methods of counseling those women who have been traumatized by rape and sexual assault. Throughout, I identify persons from the Bible who may have suffered from the trauma of rape and

sexual assault. For the purpose of this article, the terms “rape,” “sexual abuse,” and “sexual assault” will be used interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

A. Emotions and Behaviors of Victims

Females of all ages have been raped and sexually traumatized (Pratt, 2005). When they experience some form of sexual assault, their feelings of emotion may range from shame, to fear of negative social repercussions or guilt (Fontes, 2007). When Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–20), she may have experienced many feelings ranging from shock, betrayal, grief, and despair. Feelings of grief and loss are common during such situations (Miller, Cardona, and Hardin, 2006). Tamar knew how she would be treated by others within her culture at the time, and therefore pleaded unsuccessfully with Amnon to cease his attack on her. The fear of what others might say is all too often based on reality, in that perpetrators, parents, relatives, friends, or community members might blame the victim for the assault (Webster & Dunn, 2005). Unfortunately, after the rape, Tamar lived in despair and never again saw herself as someone of worth, dignity, or worthy to be loved (2 Sam. 13:20).

Victims, even children, might be told that they invited the assault, because they either dressed too provocatively, looked at the perpetrator in a sexual manner, or otherwise engaged in some type of sexually inviting behavior. As a result, some victims are afraid to let anyone know that they have been abused (Crisp, 2007; Fontes, 2007). Victims may change their appearance or behavior in various ways in order to prevent a recurrence of the same situation (Crisp, 2007). All too often, women suffer from such clinically classified disorders such as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (Whetten et al., 2006), anxiety, depression; that includes a lack of psychological well-being in general, and they often report having poor physical health (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005).

Victims of sexual assault may subsequently engage in self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse, high-risk sexual behaviors, and some even become abusive toward others (Kim & Williams, 2009; Whetten et al., 2006). Others may engage in self-injurious behaviors that might result in bringing significant harm to themselves (Wagner & Rehfuss, 2008). Many times these women are unaware of the reasons for employing such practices. Unfortunately,

the behaviors are frequently used as a psychological defense to cover the pain they are feeling, and those defenses tend to bring their own set of negative complications, e.g., drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases, or further loss of integrity and esteem.

Consider the possibility that Rahab, “the harlot” (Josh. 2:1–21; 6:22–25), may have been a victim of an assault. Scripture does not inform us how Rahab arrived at the decision of becoming a prostitute. It simply proclaimed that as her occupation. Certainly, the occupational options for women who could not marry were limited in that day, although people belonging to nations other than Israel may have had a wider range of choices. Nevertheless, Rahab chose, as do many women who have been sexually abused or raped, to become a harlot, a profession and set of behaviors that eventually lead to a cycle of degradation, despair, and possibly even death. Thanks be unto God, that He chose to rescue her from this life, to redeem her of her sins, and to rebirth her and her family to a different nation that would eventually yield the Savior of the world.

B. Influence of Sexual Assault on Women from a Spiritual Standpoint

Victims of sexual assault frequently suffer damaging blows to their senses of self. They may wonder who they are and whether they are considered as persons of worth or dignity after the occurrence of the incident. As mentioned earlier, their perceptions may well be complicated by the messages they receive from such persons as the perpetrator, family members, friends, or the community in general (Greenspun, 1994). During normal phases of development, children and adolescents look to some of these same people for affirmation of their self-worth. Depending on the age of the person when the assault or *assaults* happened, the victim might still be in their formative stages of psychosocial development (Kim & Williams, 2009). Such a trauma, along with the messages they receive, have a great potential to heavily influencing the outcomes of them successfully mastering their current and future developmental stage crises; and it is hard for anyone to successfully develop after such trauma.

For example, adolescents in general must answer such major questions for themselves as:

Who am I?

What do I believe in?

What is my purpose in life?’

Later, into young adulthood and the subsequent stages, a sense of self-worth may be reaffirmed or maintained internally as they learn how to navigate social, career, religious, and intimate relationships (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010). A person who is victimized by trauma may experience both a distorted sense of self-worth from both the internal and external messages they receive. As a result of that trauma, victims tend to react both positively and negatively to religiosity, to spirituality, and to God.

The term “religiosity” describes the practices that are utilized to build and strengthen one’s relationship with God. Some of those practices include church attendance, prayer, reading the Bible, and other types of religious literature, including watching and listening to some types of religious information and music (Chatters & Taylor, 1998). “Spirituality” describes the personal beliefs that give meaning to existence and provides a sense of a connection to the universe and a higher power (Wilkerson, as cited in Bell-Tolliver & Wilkerson, 2011). While these terms are frequently used interchangeably in literature, as they will be used in this manuscript, they are also frequently used separately.

A Christian believer has taken a step beyond mere *religiosity* and *spirituality* in that he or she has placed a deeper trust in the Redeemer. This step transcends religious practices and a general sense of belief in a higher power and the universe. Indeed, this profession of faith moves the individual into the beginning stages of a personal relationship with Christ.

Several studies have proposed that victims of childhood sexual abuse have been found to subsequently have negative opinions toward God and religion (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith, as cited in Kim & Williams, 2009; Hall, as cited by Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005; Russell, as cited in Crisp, 2007). Some child victims of incest found it difficult to see their Heavenly Father separately from their earthly fathers who sexually abused them, and therefore distanced themselves from God.

“Who we are and our relationships to others, including God, are tested in the light of our experiences” (Crisp 2007, p. 302). The

“experiences” of being sexual traumatized brings victims face to face with the test of determining how to move forward in a totally different world and with a different self. For many victims, their response is to leave the church, to distance themselves from religious practices, and decrease spiritual beliefs. Unfortunately, decreased physical and mental well-being are also associated with people who select this option (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005). This makes sense: to whom would a victim turn for hope if he or she no longer sees a loving and saving God as an option to run for refuge?

C. New Identities in Christ

While it is not difficult to understand the reasons that many victims of such violent crimes as rape and assault would question the safety of world as they know it, or turn from God as they know Him, it is important for the body of Christ to have a response for those who are still in the questioning phase of their journeys after having been assaulted. It is also important to recognize that there might be at least three categories of victims. Those categories are separate from the developmental stages that are mentioned earlier in this article.

First, there are victims who are unsaved, and as such do not know Christ, or have a relationship with him. This group can also include those who attend church, but have not gone far beyond that point.

Second, there are believers who have accepted Christ as their Savior, but have not matured very much in the faith.

Finally, there are believers who are spiritually mature, who are studying, living, and learning about God on a daily basis, and who are committed to leading Godly lives (Matt. 13:3–9).

The *horror*—it is *imperative* for us to note certain facts as we address the horror of sexual assault. We who are believers realize and acknowledge that we live in a fallen world (Gen. 3). As a result, we recognize that all manner of sinful and evil acts occur (Rom. 1; Gal. 5:19–21). As a matter of fact, we are all sinners, both as a result of being born in the family of Adam (Rom. 6:12–14) and because of our own sinful works (Rom. 3:23). We also confess that, although we are sinners and certainly deserving of death (Rom. 6:23), Christ Himself

provided the solution for us by becoming the propitiation for our sins, both Jew and Gentile (Eph. 3:14–18).

There is another issue, however, that is critical for women who are victims of sexual assault to realize and accept: they are not to bear the burden of guilt for being raped or abused. This world will continue to have people who commit crimes because, as humans, we have free will. Many victims have taken on the unnecessary guilt for having been attacked and doubt their previous course of actions: some will say, “I should have?” or “If only I hadn’t.” As mentioned earlier, these statements are often compounded by the messages victims receive from friends, family, perpetrators, and even the legal system.

These horrendous feelings or emotions often carry victims into bottomless pits of anger and depression. While it is of critical importance to help women victims arrive at the point of understanding that all of us have sinned and are in need of a Savior, it is also crucial to help them to understand that they should not take on the responsibility of bearing someone else’s guilt and sin. That point of awareness and acceptance can prepare victims for the opportunity to establish a new and real identity in Christ on the basis of

1. Needing Him to forgive them of their personal sins (Rom. 10:9–10),
and
2. Because they need His healing and total cleansing power (Mark 6:53–56).

There is a freeing power in discovering that they are new creatures in Christ.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ,
he is a new creation;
old things have passed away;
behold all things have become new
2 Cor. 5:17 NKJV

As a result of becoming a daughter of God (John 1:12), the victim no longer has to bear the marks of shame, guilt, or uncleanness.

Healing of shame begins when a woman identifies and confesses the lies she has believed about herself. She then must begin to replace those lies with biblical truth about who God is and who she is as His beloved child—a person of

immeasurable worth, righteous and uncondemned (*The Woman's Study Bible*, 1995, 1933).

This healing process helps victims begin to establish their new identities. Indeed, they no longer have to remain in the role of “victim.” For many who have been abused, the shame and guilt that is involved may bind victims in an emotional bondage or prison. As they heal by understanding *who they are in Christ*, they become aware, first, that God is with them and that they do not have to fear the workings of the world, no matter how strong the challenge may be (Heb. 13:5–6). Second, as they heal, they are being increasingly transformed by the renewing of their mind to live according to the truths of God, and not according to the messages of the world (Rom. 12:1–2). Third, they realize that they actually have spiritual power, given to them by God, even the mighty power to fight the fears within and the outside worldly messages they receive.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3–5, *Today's New International Version*)

Imagine how excited Mary Magdalene must have felt when Jesus healed her from the demons within (Mark 16:9). Although she may or may not have been sexually assaulted, Mary was traumatized in ways that few of us can imagine in the U.S., though some do suffer similar injustices today in countries that legalize abuse of women. After being healed by Jesus, however, Mary faithfully served Him in ways that still allow us to think of her and to thank God for her service to the Kingdom (John 20:11–18).

A huge dilemma for women victims is the belief that God could have prevented the act of sexual assault from occurring to them. Given the fact that He is all-powerful and sovereign, they might reason, He *should have* prevented this horrendous tragedy from occurring. Such thinking can, and indeed has brought many to the point of leaving the church (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005). What tends to happen is that these women may have developed a form of distorted thinking.

Instead of recognizing that humans are responsible for their willful acts of disobedience to God, many victims choose to blame God Himself. Instead, the Bible holds “men responsible for their voluntary actions alone, or more strictly for their choices alone” (Finney, 1992, p. 184). In this case, the perpetrators are responsible for the trauma they wrought upon the victims. Finney reminds us of the scripture from James 1:14–15 (NKJV):

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

Tragically, this death is spread not only to the perpetrator, but also to the victim. For the perpetrator, the consequence is separation from God because of his willingness to engage in the voluntary act of disobedience. For the victims this could potentially mean, as it did once to me, death to beliefs, dreams, hopes, plans, etc. God, however, has not failed to provide the victim with the opportunity to be healed, strengthened, loved, and transformed, even in spite of the terrible circumstances (1 Cor. 10:13). Women have been able to move past the anger and confusion, and they have been able to discover the great truth that God truly does love them.

Although studies have demonstrated that women victims distance themselves from religion after being attacked, other studies have also found that God’s love, or one’s relationship with God, has been found to serve as a protective factor for victims (Kim & Williams, 2009; Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005). These findings were explained by virtue of the fact that those who have identified God as their internal source for esteem were not as significantly affected by what occurred to them on an external basis. In other words, their personal relationships with Christ seemed to protect them from the powerfully negative and traumatic attacks of the world (Eph. 6:12).

D. Therapeutic Methods of Counseling Women Victims

The church and counseling community must prepare a therapeutic response for women who have been sexually assaulted. Crisp (2007) reports that the church has a negative history to overcome; in previous years, victims have reported their abuse to the church and have frequently been rejected, not believed, or even placed in harm’s way by being told to obey one’s parents or authority

figures. As members of the body of Christ we are equipped to meet the needs of the body (1 Cor. 12). Fouque and Glachan reported that many people who participated in Christian counseling that was “directive and authoritative” (2000) spoke negatively of it, explaining that they felt blamed for having committed sins related to being sexually abused. The authors argued that this approach could “violate boundaries, repeat an abusive situation or use the survivor client to meet the counsellor’s own unrecognized needs for power and control.” Unfortunately for victims, it is quite possible to re-experience the abuse in a variety of settings, including the counseling environment. This serves as a caution for persons who are not licensed or who have not received education in counseling; particularly in the area of sexual abuse, unskilled helpers should strongly consider referring victims to the appropriate sources for help in order to prevent the possibility of well-intentioned re-victimization. (Fouque & Glachan, 2000).

Only a few studies exist currently that focus on spiritually or biblically therapeutic interventions that have been developed for women victims of sexual trauma. One is *Solace for the Soul*, and below a few others approaches are given.

Solace for the Soul was developed by Murray-Swank (2005). This “non-denominational” spiritual intervention utilizes seven themes during individual therapy: “images of God, abandonment and anger at God, spiritual connection, shame, the body, and sexuality” to help victims focus on the spiritual challenges they experience and to utilize spirituality as a coping resource (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005, p. 192). Although the article identifies this approach as non-denominational and spiritual, as opposed to being Bible centered or strictly Christian in nature, *Solace for the Soul* actually refers to various types of religious beliefs including “Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Sikhism” (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005, p. 192). Nevertheless, participants have found this approach to be effective for them. The fact that spirituality is used within a therapeutic setting is a significant step forward in working with clients. One participant made a favorable comment, “Although I haven’t let go of the anger completely, I am working towards God” (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005, p. 201).

Within the secular therapeutic community, Narrative Therapy has been utilized with victims of sexual assault, and more particularly with childhood sexual abuse victims (Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2006). Narrative Therapy is an intervention that allows clients to tell their stories and assign their own meanings to those stories, before moving forward and co-constructing, with their therapists, a strong, more empowering resolution to their future lives (Nichols, 2010). This approach can be quite helpful to women who have been victimized, as many experience feelings of powerlessness or helplessness after having been assaulted on several levels. This approach also allows them to externalize their problem, so that, instead of internalizing the guilt, blame, shame, etc., the victim is able to verbalize these emotions and to then move to a new role beyond that of “the victim” (Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2006).

This type of therapeutic approach could be helpful within the Christian community. Victims can become greatly empowered as a caring professional, a pastor, or a fellow church member listens and models a spirit of servanthood to a victim.

I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth—praise to our God. Many shall see it and fear and will trust in the Lord. (Ps. 40: 1–3).

That short passage contains similar elements to Narrative Therapy: (1) God is listening to individual’s story or complaint. He does not try to stop the person or to place blame on him. (2) God not only listens and hears, but as He hears the person, and the individual is taken out of the pit—in this case, a pit depression or despair. (3) The individual is moved from having shifting emotions and negative thoughts to a new place with a different type of foundation—a solid rock. (4) During this process of being moved to a new construction, the person is transformed. He has a new direction in which to go, a new story or “song,” and a sense of hope and thankfulness, “praise to our God.”

One victim described that pit as being so deep that she could not see the light of day. However, later, she was able to accomplish much more than she ever thought possible. Imagine what Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, may have accomplished with her life if she had received help of this sort to deal with the trauma of rape (Gen. 34). Although

some of her brothers avenged the act that was taken against her, she did not have many options to be comforted or healed.

Rather than offering a therapeutic model of treatment, Crisp (2007) provides several suggestions to consider as interventions with victims who are seeking spiritual therapy. As she identifies potential pitfalls of therapy for women of faith because of their relationships with the church, she also provided these interventions: (1) Help victims to renegotiate their images of self and God by encouraging them to see God as resurrected, and therefore a God of hope; (2) Encourage victims to break the silence of abuse in order to begin the healing process. This includes the silence they may have maintained as they refrained from praying; (3) Educate victims about the emotions of anger and forgiveness from a Biblical perspective (Eph. 4:26, 31–32), by encouraging them to recognize Christ also demonstrated times when He was angry, yet He did not sin (Mark 11:15–17). It is important to allow appropriate expression of these emotions by equipping victims with skills that allow them to effectively manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.

Some survivors will come to the point when they have thought about killing their abuser or even wanting to.... Provided such thoughts remain just that and are not enacted, this energy of anger and resolution to move forward should not be stifled. Too often, there are stories of Christians who didn't feel they could express their anger to God, and hence didn't. (Crisp, 2007, p. 307)

The focus should be on allowing the Holy Spirit to move victims past the negative emotions and into a future of safety and healing. If such emotions are repressed, victims remain stuck in the past.

In the case of child sexual abuse, various forms of family therapy have also been found to be helpful for each member of the family, particularly if the perpetrator is out of the home and the home is found to be safe for all members. Non-offending members need to have as much therapeutic intervention as the victim (Fontes, 2007). The fact that abuse may have occurred to only one person does not lessen the influence of the act on the entire family. Frequently, each member will also need to be involved in individual therapy prior to, or simultaneously, with receiving family therapy in order to resolve their own feelings of guilt, shame, anger, even denial, or blame against the perpetrator, the non-offending parent, or the victim.

Although it is not unusual to involve the perpetrator in the therapy process, therapists and pastors must be very cautious in introducing that person into family therapy. Just as in the case of domestic violence, new instances of sexual abuse could be occurring without the professional becoming aware of the incidences until much later in the therapy process, that is, if the family continues to be engaged in therapy (Greenspun, 1994).

Movement from the *holding on* of these emotions is promoted when victims are able to recognize and accept that God’s love for them is not conditional (Kim & Williams, 2009), and that their self-worth is not connected to the violent assault that fell upon them. If the family is not physically or emotionally available to victims, a supportive church congregation may be the best measure of support. The church, or a group of members from the church, could model unconditional love toward victims as they move forward in their journey, exchanging their role of “victim” for their new identity as “Victorious in Christ.”

Summary

This article described various emotions and behaviors that females may display as result of experiencing the trauma—or, rather, the horror of sexual and other assaults. It is not uncommon for women victims to engage in self-destructive and injurious behaviors as a result of experiencing a traumatic injury, such as sexual abuse or rape. Whether the individual is a child, a teen, or an adult, this attack has the potential for creating major problems with identity and self-esteem. Biblical models provided examples of some of the pain that is experienced by women who have been raped and sexually abused.

From a spiritual standpoint, some victims tend to lose faith in God or to turn away, erroneously believing that God failed to protect them. Unfortunately, other victims may have encountered people within the church, even counselors or pastors, who provided a message that indicated the victims were responsible for allowing the attack. Those powerfully negative messages only serve to reinforce the shame, guilt, and anger that may be building within the individual.

Rather than to remain steeped in the shameful experiences brought on by an assault, we discussed the need to help victims discover their identities in Christ. Taking on a new identity provides the opportunity to discover that they are new creatures in Christ, that remaining in

him and growing in Him will renew them and transform their minds, and that they will become victorious rather than victims, as they become equipped to defeat thoughts of fear, anger, shame, and more with spiritual weapons (2 Cor. 10:3–5; Eph. 6:10–18).

Among the very few evidence-based Biblical counseling theories that are available to women in the Christian therapeutic community, I described one of them: *Solace for the Soul*. This method provides spiritual-based therapy that focuses on seven themes to address with victims: “images of God, abandonment and anger at God, spiritual connection, shame, the body, and sexuality.” Areas addressed by other therapeutic interventions for victims of sexual abuse and rape include:

1. Allowing victims to tell their stories of the abuse, and thus break the silence of what happened;
2. Encouraging victims to view their images of self and to cast off the distorted view that they may have taken on as a result of the abuse; and
3. Encouraging them to see God as resurrected, and therefore a God of hope.

The article cautions the use of family therapy in situations of incest. It is extremely important to make sure that the victim, other family members, and the perpetrator work on individual issues sufficiently for all parties, including the therapist, to ensure the safety of the victim. Although healing, and even though the process of forgiveness can take place within the context of family therapy, make no mistake, a great deal of work would need to be accomplished by all before all are ready to move forward to this therapeutic venue.

A gap exists in therapeutic models that are specifically designed to provide evidence-based biblical counseling for victims of sexual abuse. Although there are some models of Christian counseling available, some studies report negative results in that participants leave feeling as if they are responsible and therefore guilty, of having been abused.

Yet, there is hope, as we have shown, for several studies report that participants who have a strong faith in God are able to recover from horrible traumas. Therefore, it is critically important for scholars

to continue to explore effective methods of helping victims resolve traumas.

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