Faithfully Dissident Daughters

Reclaiming Christian Womanhood beyond Patriarchy

Chelsea Kim Long

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"'Faithfully dissident'—if those two words don't seem to match, think about Jesus. Or think about Mary. Or think about St. Francis and St. Clare, or Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King. When you read Chelsea Kim Long's beautiful, insightful, and compassionate new book, you'll want to add your own name to the list of the faithfully dissident. I highly recommend this book!"

—Brian D. McLaren, author of *Faith after Doubt* and *The Great Rift*

"Chelsea is an author and thinker to watch. I have long been compelled by her lens on faith as it is lived out in the real world. With *Faithfully Dissident Daughters*, she delivers a wise, accessible guide to carry and share as we reclaim our God-given freedom. This book redeemed decades of bad, broken, and lazy theology. It is a must-read for all who long for a faith that does not inflict harm."

—Shannan Martin, author of *Counterweights*, *Start with Hello*, and *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*

"*Faithfully Dissident Daughters* deconstructs harmful theology and reconnects you with the inner wisdom that allows true faith to flourish. Tapping into diverse hermeneutics and intimate personal narrative, it shows how we can cultivate the expansiveness of Christianity. This is a book that will guide you home to yourself."

—Gemma Hartley, author of *Fed Up* and *No One Loves an Angry Woman*

"There is a tradition, ancient and unbroken, of women who knew that the Divine was bigger than the men describing it—and Chelsea stands squarely in that lineage. This book is not a departure from Christianity—it's a contribution from its deepest truths."

— Scott Erickson, author of *Honest Advent* and *Say Yes*

"Do you need to reclaim wholeness and liberation? How would the world change if we believed that God is as feminine as God is masculine? Are women's bodies and lived experiences sacred spaces where God dwells? In *Faithfully Dissident Daughters*, Chelsea unflinchingly tackles such questions and produces a manifesto wherein women can put together the fragments of their faith in ways where purity culture and problematic evangelicalism have torn faith apart. This is a must-read for those who are reconstructing faith."

—Angela N. Parker, Associate Professor of New Testament and Womanist Thought, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and author of *If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I?*

"As a therapist who has sat with women in the wreckage of what patriarchal religion does to the female body and soul, I recognize what Chelsea is doing here. She is naming what has long been unnamed, and she is doing it with both theological threading and the kind of embodied honesty that heals. *Faithfully Dissident Daughters* understands something I have staked my clinical and spiritual life on: the body does not lie. When the church silences a woman's intuition, her emotions, her reproductive experience, her very flesh, she doesn't just lose her voice. Sadly, she loses herself. Chelsea traces this unraveling and offers a path back. This is a book about reclaiming faith. About finding the God who was never afraid of your womb, your questions, or your dissent. I believe this work will give countless women permission to stop apologizing for being exactly who God made them to be. Read this. And then pass it to every woman you know who is still trying to make herself small enough to fit inside a theology that was never built to hold her."

—Christy Angelle Bauman, author of *Theology of the Womb* and *Her Rites*

"Chelsea offers a courageous invitation to faithful dissent. Challenging the patriarchal structures that have silenced women, she reimagines Christian faith as a place where women

can actually reclaim their voices, embrace their truest selves, and belong without compromise."

—David Hayward (a.k.a. NakedPastor), pastor-turned-artist

"For any woman who has been taught that God does not look, think, or act like her, this book is for you. Chelsea's thorough examination of the Divine Feminine in the Christian faith finally gives women permission to trust themselves."

—Meghan Tschanz, author of *Women Rising* and host of *Faith and Feminism* podcast

"I grew up with a version of God that kept women small, but I see now it was the God of patriarchy that was small all along. Chelsea doesn't just dismantle anti-woman theology—she keeps going, offering a way back to a God worth trusting. *Faithfully Dissident Daughters* is more than feminist theology; it's a manifesto, a summons to a new vision of discipleship. Tender, rigorous, and unafraid of the hard questions, this is a book I'll be recommending for a long time."

—Brian Recker, author of *Hell Bent*

"The wisest teachers, prophets, and storytellers don't simply serve answers: they teach us how to ask difficult questions. And I often tell my children that God *loves* questions. Questions invite closeness, clarity, and connection. If we love someone or something, our inquiry honors and feeds that love. And if something is true, our questions cannot diminish or destroy it. That is why I have always appreciated Chelsea's voice. She asks brave questions with humility, spice, and fierce love for God and for people. Rather than imploding our faith constructs, *Faithfully Dissident Daughters* invites us into more integrated, more honest, and ultimately more beautiful ones. I am grateful for Chelsea's relentless question asking and for the way it gently draws us all toward greater intimacy with God, ourselves, and one another."

—Mariko Clark, author of *The Book of Belonging*

"Chelsea has written a compelling account of a spiritual and theological journey of faith. Leaving a conservative, evangelical tradition did not involve a rejection of Christianity. Rather, she discovered resources in the broad tradition that allowed her to see both the Bible and faith through new lenses. This well-written book will appeal not only to those who share her experience but to all who seek a deeper relationship between Christian faith and their lived experience."

—Cynthia M. Campbell, president emerita,
McCormick Theological Seminary

"*Faithfully Dissident Daughters* is an essential guide for any woman wrestling with her place in a patriarchal religion. Chelsea offers an introduction to a liberative, feminine, and embodied theology through a tapestry of scriptural interpretation, church history and tradition, and her own story of motherhood, grief, and deconstruction. *Faithfully Dissident Daughters* is both a valuable resource and a tool for empowerment. I have no doubt that Chelsea's authenticity, vulnerability, and audacity will not only stick with you but also inspire you to embody your own form of faithful dissidence."

—Mattie Mae Motl, PhD candidate
in New Testament and public scholar

"Chelsea has written a raw, courageous, and timely book that reclaims Scripture, the stories of women, and the narratives about who God is, with wisdom, tenderness, and theological depth. Refusing the false choice between faithfulness and freedom and between a reverence for the Bible and a liberation from patriarchal theology, she shows that the gospel itself is good news for women's whole selves. This is an inspiring and brave work that will help many of us find language for our own stories and fresh confidence in the God who calls us beloved."

—Chine McDonald, author of *Unmaking Mary*

"In *Faithfully Dissident Daughters*, Chelsea bravely shares her experience of being broken open by the reproductive

complexities of motherhood and, on the other side, discovering a deeply embodied theology that honors the sacred wisdom we hold within. Chelsea invites us to tune into our intuition, trust our lived experience, and recognize the holy already present in our bodies and lives. This is a beautiful, liberating narrative of leaving behind what constrains us and embracing the truth of who we are."

— Katey Zeh, CEO, Religious Community for Reproductive Choice, and author of *A Complicated Choice*

"Faithfully Dissident Daughters is an important and timely work for all who yearn to be free from the Christian teachings constructed to keep women small and men in control, teachings that Chelsea reveals are a far cry from the life and message of Jesus. To read this book is to discover that dissidence is not rebellion against the gospel but a deeper, truer faithfulness to its radical call to love. It is written for those bold enough to dream of an expansive and inclusive Christian community and, with equal generosity, for those who are not yet able to imagine that such a thing is possible."

— Brandon Nappi, lecturer, Yale Divinity School

"Few people are so lucky to receive a gentle hand and firm voice to lovingly tell us, 'there's another way.' This is the gift of Chelsea's writings on pursuing the Divine Feminine in Christianity: we behold a kinder form of grace, leading women into lives that reflect the multifaceted forms of us."

—Camille Hernandez, author of *The Hero and the Whore*

"In *Faithfully Dissident Daughters*, Chelsea takes up space in the divine narrative. By owning the fullness of her story, her womanhood, and her humanity, she points us toward a God often portrayed as indifferent to all three. With this offering, Chelsea helps us see God in high definition."

—Trey Ferguson, pastor and author of *Love Is Good Religion* and *Theologizin' Bigger*

"Chelsea shares a journey that is uniquely hers and also one that many women know too well: the product of a religious upbringing that separated them from their bodies, leading them to mistrust their own instincts and experiences. This book offers a deeply human account of how to leave behind those harmful belief systems and fully embrace a faith that can make us well. Her personal narrative woven together with social and biblical commentary provide a living witness to the liberating love of God."

—Erin Wathen, pastor and author of *Resist and Persist* and *Calling All Angels*

"Chelsea writes, 'my dissent is born of commitment, not cynicism.' With these words, Chelsea invites those who are still deeply compelled by the way of Jesus but have grown weary of the oppression done in Jesus's name into a necessary tension. What does it look like to remain tethered to Jesus while letting go of harmful and destructive theologies? This book is not an answer manual—Chelsea has left behind the need for packaged and pat answers—but an invitation to stay with the questions long enough to be transformed."

—Drew Jackson, poet and author of *God Speaks through Wombs* and *Touch the Earth*

"Chelsea does what so many are afraid to do: she goes to the deep places in herself and in her inherited theologies and asks what must be discarded, what must be kept, and what must be reimagined. Her storytelling is thorough, articulate, humorous, and insightful—easy to follow, hard to forget. These are the words I think of when I think of this book. And when I think of Chelsea."

—Tamice Spencer-Helms, theo-activist, cultural theorist, creative director of *Black Modern Mystic* podcast, pastor of the Clearing Online

"Many readers will relate to what Chelsea calls a 'crisis of theology' rather than a crisis of faith. The reality for many spiritual seekers today is that the version of Christianity they grew up with no longer fits their lived experience. In sharing her own experience and offering resources from the Christian tradition, both ancient and contemporary, Chelsea provides a way through the wilderness toward a compassionate, embodied, wholehearted faith."

—Lee Hull Moses, pastor and author of *More Than Enough*

"*Faithfully Dissident Daughters* makes room to be non-anxious, to move toward God who is both feminine and masculine, and to stop treating your body as something to manage rather than inhabit. This book offers a vibrant picture of a God who loves us as we are, in wonderfully imperfect bodies that are ours, with an intuition we're invited to trust. For every woman who is moving toward Jesus through accepting who she is made to be, here, at last, is a yes."

—Sara Billups, author of *Orphaned Believers* and *Nervous Systems*

For all the dutiful daughters who only wanted to look into the face of God and see their own reflected back

Betrayal of any kind is hard, but betrayal by one's religion is excruciating.

—Sue Monk Kidd

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Foreword

I was only three years old when I learned that unquestioned obedience was the only way to save my dastardly and wayward soul. That's when my sweet mom taught me my first Bible verse. I remember feeling triumphant when I successfully memorized Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (KJV).

At the time, it didn't occur to my vulnerable toddler mind that the first spiritual idea I internalized was that my embodied wisdom was inherently wicked and untrustworthy. Mom taught me the verse in support of her parenting philosophy that children should "obey quickly and quietly," which felt like faithful parenting to her. Though she meant well, the effects were disastrous. As a young girl, I internalized the belief that since my embodied wisdom was inherently wicked and untrustworthy, I needn't bother listening to or trusting it. Rather, my salvation lay in unquestioned obedience—to my parents, pastors, and to the white patriarchal god of my spiritual origins.

Naturally, I wanted to avoid damnation. (Who doesn't?) So I learned to ignore my embodied wisdom and instead rely on the orders and "should" that came from authority figures. Like Chelsea Kim Long, the author of this beautiful and life-saving book, I'm an Enneagram 1. Moral perfection is my jam. So I valiantly adhered to every rule, successfully completed every Bible, missions, and discipleship program I encountered, and busied myself becoming the most unimpeachable Christian on the planet. Before long, the physical presence of an outside authority wasn't necessary to keep me in line. By then, the outside authority had built an entire colonial settlement in my head with a constant, hammering string of "shoulds." My

liturgy of shoulds kept me faithfully in place even when the teachings and actions of the white patriarchal church and its god wreaked havoc on my Black female body.

It all came to a crashing halt during the #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #ChurchToo movements when my digestive system fully ceased to function and I lay bedridden for several months. That's when I finally realized that my devotion to a controlling, maniacal, petulant god that denied the sacredness of my Black-and-female body was literally indigestible.

I could no longer ignore my embodied wisdom, so I mustered up just enough desperate courage to begin asking questions about the legitimacy and accuracy of the god I had been taught to worship and obey. And I began gingerly searching for nonmale and non-white faces of the divine. In all honesty, my most pressing question at the start of my quest was "Is this even legal?" Though I wanted to be free to fearlessly question and wander, I was still tethered to the belief that faithfulness means never interrogating the beliefs that had been instilled in me. The three-year-old in me was terrified that questioning and wandering would result in eternal damnation.

At the time, I wish I had encountered a book like the one you are holding in your hands. If you've picked up *Faithfully Dissident Daughters*, there's a good chance you were raised in a faith tradition that didn't empower you to be spiritually adventurous. Perhaps you were never given the tools to boldly spelunk the depths of history to encounter the liberating and inclusive truth that lies buried beneath Christianity's white patriarchal trappings. Perhaps your faith tradition silenced rather than championed your questions. Perhaps it covered up rather than cared for your trauma. Perhaps you don't yet know that you are sacred and that your embodied wisdom is proof that the Divine uniquely dwells within you. Perhaps you are like me, and your definition of faithfulness does not permit you to freely explore, question, and reclaim.

If so, this book is for you. For me. For us.

Chelsea has gifted us a trustworthy and liberating guidebook—one that awakens us to our God-given, inner spiritual authority,

lovingly steers us as we courageously ask the questions we were taught to never ask, and shepherds us as we faithfully liberate a Christianity that has been weaponized and used as an instrument for oppression, suppression, and alienation for far too long. I assure you that as you read this book, you will find the holy audacity to freely explore, question, and reclaim.

Among the deftly researched history and biblical interpretation that anchors *Faithfully Dissident Daughters*, Chelsea vulnerably weaves her own reclamation journey. This too is an empowering gift to us. For in the same way stories shaped and constrained us, stories will expand and liberate us. Chelsea's sacred story is a candlelight tenderly steering us as we take our next steps into the holy liminal space that lies just beyond what we think we know about the Divine. Our journeys will not look like hers, and that is a good thing. We need an infinite variety of spiritual journeys if we want to experience the kaleidoscopic face of the Divine.

The world desperately needs faithfully dissident people who are brave enough to explore, question, and reclaim in their own inimitable way. I'm honored to journey alongside you and immensely grateful for Chelsea's courageous guidance.

Christena Cleveland
January 2026

Introduction

Wake up from your sleep,
Climb out of your coffins;
Christ will show you the light!
—Ephesians 5:14b MSG

The book you are holding in your hands is the result of over ten years of reflection and working out my salvation with fear and trembling. I got married at the ripe young age of twenty-four and could barely wait to live out this dream that I'd held for so many years, the peaceful happily ever after, my reward for a life of obedience and faithfulness to God.

Up until the age of twenty-six, I didn't struggle to align my identity and my life experiences with the white, evangelical way of seeing the world. Being a cradle Christian who "asked Jesus into my heart" at age three, Jesus didn't save me from an *exciting life of sin*. I was a white, middle-class girl born in the late eighties during the heyday of an incredibly powerful cultural, religious, and political movement that had been designed to form a safe bubble around me. In elementary school I got to dress up as a candle to sing "This Little Light of Mine" with Psalty the Singing Songbook in a Billy Graham crusade and later watched the band DC Talk perform on the main stage. I fit easily into a world that was built with me in mind. I comfortably walked the path laid out for me—a white, cisgender, heterosexual, obedient daughter.

Throughout most of my childhood, I was at our nondenominational megachurch three to four times a week. It was my place of refuge, a place that felt like mine. I knew that building like the back of my hand—the best hiding spots, where to find the free coffee and the comfy couches, and even one day stumbled across the closet that housed all the clowning ministry costumes and face paint. Yes, my church youth group went on mission trips and dressed up like clowns, performing skits for the sake of the gospel.

Fundamentalism exists along a spectrum. I grew up feeling like a normal kid, all things considered. I was homeschooled through sixth grade, but my mother also always worked outside of the home. I wasn't allowed to dance at my Christian high school prom, but I knew every single pop song on the radio. The fundamentalism in my worldview, however, manifested in a total unwillingness to consider other perspectives about what the Bible says and how we were supposed to live in response to it. The boundary lines were clear, and belonging was tied to belief. For the first two and a half decades of my life, belonging was survival, and I worked hard to align my own thoughts and experiences to match what was modeled for me in Christian spaces. I was able to exist in those spaces just fine until, quite suddenly, I wasn't.

As soon as I became pregnant with my first baby two years after getting married, I started to feel alone. It bothered me when I heard couples say, "We're pregnant!" because in my own pregnancy, I couldn't find a "we." Certainly, my husband played a role in the conception, and this baby would be *ours*. The pregnancy, though? From the very first moment, that experience was uniquely *mine*. I didn't know how to share it with my husband because it wasn't happening to his body in the way it was happening to mine. It was the first splinter in a crack that eventually ripped my whole worldview apart, forcing me into a crisis of theology where I felt I had to choose between myself and the church I loved.

When I stopped attending my evangelical church at the age of twenty-seven, I couldn't understand how I, a girl who had

been dubbed the "Countess of Christianity" at her Christian high school senior prom, could feel left out of church culture. Why, when I looked around the white evangelical church landscape, was I not seeing my people anymore? Why was it that even though we professed to believe the same things and love the same God, our lives, values, and opinions seemed so different? In the midst of the disorienting pain, I began to search for answers.

I realized I had grown up with two conflicting beliefs: one, that I was able to hear the voice of God through my relationship with the Holy Spirit and reading the Bible, and two, if my convictions based on my hearing of the voice of God or my reading of the Bible fell outside the interpretation of the church, I was wrong every time. This bred in me an inherent lack of self-trust, a need to always look for answers and guidance from some external source of authority, usually a man. The constant squashing of my intuition coupled with the need for guidance led to chronic, sometimes debilitating, anxiety.

It wasn't until I began having deeply feminine experiences related to pregnancy and childbirth that I discovered I could never fully belong in that worldview for one simple reason: I was a woman in a patriarchal structure. Once I saw that the structure had been built by men and the interpretation of the Bible worked well for the empowerment of men, I couldn't stay in that world anymore. I couldn't see my femininity reflected in and affirmed by the God they had made in their image. I had no theological framework for understanding the traumatic experiences in my reproductive journey, either. The vision I had been given for faithful Christian womanhood was too narrow to contain me, so I fled. Of course, I didn't understand this at first. It took years to trace backward through my life to find the threads that had pulled me into this complete unraveling.

THE MILLENNIAL EXODUS AND ME

From 2009 to 2019, there was a 16 percent decrease in the number of millennials who identified as Christian. In 2019,

only 22 percent of millennials said they attend religious services at least once a week, 64 percent of millennials said they attend worship services a few times a year or less often, and 22 percent "never" attend religious services.[1]

When I stepped out of my evangelical church in 2014, I could see I was a part of some kind of movement of folks leaving the church, but my own exodus left me bewildered. I hadn't given up on God, Jesus, or even Christianity. I had been told that being a faithful Christian woman meant something very specific. If I wasn't that anymore, what was I? I read every book I could get my hands on from women who fought hard to craft a life that felt like their own after escaping fundamentalist structures, and almost every book revealed something they believed disqualified them from being counted among the faithful, so they left the flock. I had many friends who saw themselves out of the church based on their evolving worldview, and I grasped for answers for the difference between me and them. Why did they feel like they had to leave, and why did I so badly want to stay?

The fundamentalism I grew up with insists you cannot embrace certain identities like being a feminist or a part of the LGBTQ+ community, cannot support certain causes like abortion rights and marriage equality, and should not prioritize your career over your role as a mother if you want to remain faithful to Christ. I certainly had my moment that I felt surely disqualified me from faithful Christian womanhood, which I'll tell you about later, but a nagging question remained: Wasn't Jesus's core message one of inclusivity? To me, the gospel seems to say that if you want to be in, you're in. If I wanted to remain counted among the faithful but also wanted to fully accept myself and the experiences life had handed me, could I do that? Could I find a version of faith in Jesus that allowed me to see myself as a woman reflected in the image of God? Is there a version of faith in Jesus that embraces other people with marginalized identities and allows them to see themselves in God too?

I walked through many lonely years trying to wrestle my way into a version of faith that reflected my reality and contained

my life experience. As I peeled back the layers of what I had been taught, I began to trust something new: my intuition, my body, and my own lived experience. I realized that these were not things to suppress—they were sacred tools, gifts from God, guiding me deeper into a more authentic faith. Through this process, I started to reimagine Christian womanhood outside of the narrow, prescriptive image. What if we embraced a version of faith that allowed us to be who we really are—whole, complex, and unashamed of the reality of our lived experience? What if we could read the Bible with a new lens—our own? What if we could become faithfully dissident?

To be faithfully dissident is to remain rooted in the love of God and the way of Christ, while dissenting from distorted expressions of faith that harm, exclude, or diminish human dignity. It is a posture of tension: refusing to abandon faith altogether and refusing to comply with oppressive forms of religion.

Being faithful means remaining tethered to Jesus, Scripture, spiritual practices, and the guidance of the Spirit. My dissent is born of commitment, not cynicism. I love the tradition enough to wrestle with it, question it, and seek its healing. Being dissident means standing against systems, teachings, and cultural practices within Christianity that seek to silence, marginalize, or erase. I dissent for the sake of my faithfulness to the teachings of Christ—love, justice, and radical belonging.

I don't know where you find yourself today. Maybe you're firmly and happily on the inside of belonging like I once was, or perhaps you're on the outside edges, trying to discern if you can stay. It's possible you walked away, hurt and confused, convinced you were better off without any form of Christian belief, or maybe you've been living into a new version of faith in Christ for some time now. Maybe you grew up in progressive Christian spaces, but you still see the impact of white supremacy and patriarchy in those spaces too.

As I explored the breadth and depth of Christianity outside of the worldview I had been handed, I felt a sense of loss—and betrayal. How did I not know that contemplative Christianity had existed for millennia or that women had been mapping

their experiences onto their ideas of God in the form of feminist and womanist theology for decades? How had I never heard that Mary Magdalene was arguably the disciple who understood Jesus's message the best, or that there is a strong thread of the Divine Feminine hidden in plain sight in the Scriptures I knew and loved so well?

I dream of an expansive view of faithful Christian womanhood large enough to contain the experiences of anyone who wishes to claim that identity. I want you to have permission to call harmful things harmful and not feel like you must perform mental gymnastics to make an ancient text mean something that it doesn't in our modern context. I want all of us to stop using the Bible as a weapon. I want us to uncouple our belonging from the need to believe in a specific way, our worth from a standard of masculinity or white supremacy we could never attain.

For things to change, we cannot keep relying solely on personal responsibility to change ourselves. We must also demand that the system changes, that our theology changes. It's both bottom up and top down. We must live our feminism, live our theology in our individual lives, and ask for more from the church. The system won't change until we show up asking to be acknowledged and speak up about the ways we feel excluded in theology and practice.

LET'S DO THIS WORK TOGETHER

I wrote this book for me, as I constructed a theology and embodied practice that could hold my real life and experiences and allow for authentic spiritual growth. It's also for you, because during my years of exploration I learned the most by reading the stories of other women. Seeing their ability to make changes in their own lives reminded me that I could do the same in mine. I needed a book about a woman who chose herself and got to keep her faith too. I write from my own experience of reproductive struggle and motherhood because that's

where these insights first took root, but this book is not only for mothers. This book is also not only for women, because I discovered a bigger God, a God who makes space for the lived experiences of all people.

The system won't change until we have more women being honest about our lives and asking for society and the church to meet us where we are. I share my story to show some of the mundane, real-life dynamics we must confront to effect change and to belong in our own lives on our own terms. This book is not a memoir, although I share stories from my personal life. I wrote this as a model, showing what it took for one woman to wake up, become honest in her own life, and stop blaming herself for things that weren't solely her fault.

In 2020 I had a clear moment when I realized I'm not the problem. I refused to take on full responsibility for dynamics in my own family and work life that made me feel hopeless and trapped. I decided to honor my emotions and step into full honesty, which I had been afraid to do previously because it would inconvenience other people. Sometimes, you are not the problem, and it's OK to ask people to make changes for you, in your family, your church, or elsewhere.

We need more of us to tell our stories of how we effected change in our own lives, the things that worked and didn't work, because this is how we move things forward. I am grateful for the work of writers and thinkers who have studied and advocated for another way. Their insights spurred my personal action.

Throughout the last decade of rebuilding my faith, the fruit of the Spirit, a passage found in Galatians 5:22–23, has remained a cornerstone. It says, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things." Is the embodiment of my beliefs leading to an increase in love, joy, peace, etc. in my life and the lives of those I impact? If so, I can trust that the Spirit is working in my life. I can also detach my need for validation from the voices of people who try to use the Bible to justify the embodiment of

their beliefs that lead to fear, despair, worry, frustration, indifference, hypocrisy, disloyalty, or pride.

I'm going to share my story and tell you how I've learned to see God. Not because I think my story looks like yours and you should take on my perspective, but to show you that all our stories have their own divergences and because of that, your perspective is as valid as mine. I want to show you how I came to see Jesus wrestling over the pain of childbirth, labor, and delivery in the Garden of Gethsemane because I, too, have had my own Garden of Gethsemane moments at the end of each of my pregnancies. I've learned from womanist theologians like Christena Cleveland to see Christ as our Black mother. I recently had a trans woman tell me the story about Jesus that helped her realize he understood her unique experience of being misunderstood by family. The point isn't that you need to see things my way but that you have permission to see things your way—and that God speaks through your life.

To be sure, every generation of women has been born into a world that is becoming more hospitable to us. I want that change to accelerate. I don't want women to reach rock bottom and have to dig their way out over a course of ten years like I did. I'm impatient with the way of the world, because I can see a future church that brings liberation for all. I want that future church vision to accelerate so my children and yours can grow up in church environments they don't have to heal from. I hope this book encourages you to be self-reflective and to take embodied action toward the life you want for yourself and for the church as a whole. Will you do this work with me?

PART I

Awakening

1

The Cost of Denying Yourself

To be faithfully dissident means refusing to live fragmented and reclaiming wholeness as God's truest desire for us.

> "For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"
> —Jesus (Matt. 16:26)

I wasn't there the moment I was reborn, the moment I became a mother. I floated above my body. I couldn't feel anything from the waist down beyond pressure and tugging. I felt nothing but exhaustion and defeat.

I don't remember the first time I held my firstborn child. I don't even remember if he cried when they pulled him out of me, faceup, or if I heard his first sound at all. I only remember my lower body hidden from my view behind a sheet, snatches of the song that was playing, snippets of conversation between the medical staff. My baby was born on a dreary morning in late June, sunny-side up and alive. And I wasn't there. My body was cut in half, and my heart was shattered to pieces. That detachment wasn't new. It was the culmination of years of learning to deny myself, to separate my mind, my emotions, and even my faith from my embodied existence. *Who will hold me?* I wondered. *Who will put me back together again?*

I had spent my entire pregnancy preparing for my goal: an unmedicated hospital birth. It felt vitally important to achieve that goal perfectly because I so desperately wanted to be the perfect mother. I read every book and scoured the internet for

helpful articles, hired a doula, and explored a contingency for every situation. I refused to entertain the idea that I could have a C-section. That would not happen to me; I had been waiting for my whole life to become a mother, and I wanted it to be the magical, empowering experience that I'd heard it could be.

My husband Colby and I attended the hospital birthing classes, practiced swaddling a doll, and discussed our birth plan down to the finest details. We rehearsed the phrases to use if doctors suggested interventions. *What are the risks of waiting one more hour? Can you clear the room so we can make a decision? Is there anything else we can try first?*

We'd seen friends with their newborns, holding them close and imagining that bliss, waiting to hold our own. I was twenty-six and so ready to be a mom. Colby, at thirty-four, felt behind—most of his college friends were already on their second child. We'd gotten married two years before, after meeting on a yearlong mission trip. I fell in love with him for his steadiness and for the ways he led with strength and humility. He loved how aligned we were in faith and our values and how much I prioritized my relationship with my family. When we met, he was about to turn thirty, and to my twenty-two-year-old self, he seemed like such a grown-up.

This made me feel safe; fresh out of college, I was feeling young and unsteady on my feet. He was already out in the adult world with a full-time teaching job. It also didn't hurt that he was a California surfer boy with bright blue eyes and an easygoing personality. Our shared faith felt like the perfect bond between us. Our worldviews aligned, both shaped by white evangelical Christianity—me, the homeschooled girl from the Midwest, and he, the missionary kid. Together, we believed in an ideal future: marriage, kids, a life of stability. I moved across the country to Orange County, California, after we got married, eager to live out that ideal future, to create a family, and to raise my children with love and devotion.

We got pregnant after six months of trying. I saw it as a blessing, a fulfillment of my faith. I posted online about how hard those months of waiting were and how grateful I felt

when the pregnancy test was finally positive. I mused on stories throughout Scripture, like Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, and thanked God for the miracle, believing it was an act of God's faithfulness to me.

I believed that God was the giver of life and desired for faithful Christian marriages to produce children. I wrote, "I can't explain why some people are unable to have children, and I believe God's goodness is just as true for them as it is for me. That being said, I truly believe that through my faith and God's power, He created a new life." It is easy to believe in God's goodness when you get what you want.

We didn't pick a name until later in the pregnancy. We chose the name Calvin so that he would have the same initials as Colby, his father, and his grandfather. We were so certain, so sure of this path. We enrolled in parenting classes at our evangelical church, where they taught us that parenting wasn't just about raising children—it was about shaping souls, guiding them toward eternity. We wrote our family mission statement: *We want to be a family that honors God above all.* The instructor reminded us that we can only parent spiritually out of our own relationship with God. We must prioritize that because, at the end of the day, children will observe it all. What we *do* holds so much more weight than what we *say*.

Early labor began in the middle of the night on a Sunday. I endured it through the night, contracting and breathing through it. By morning, I turned to Colby and said, "It's happening." Our little birth team—Colby, my doula Christiana, and my dear friend Kristen—spent hours at home, moving from room to room, trying out movements that would help Calvin shift into a more optimal birthing position.

Time held no meaning for me as I shifted from the living room to my bedroom, to the baby's room, and back again. With every contraction, I told myself this was the pain God had designed me to endure, but as each hour began to stretch longer, I began to doubt.

By Tuesday evening, we could no longer deny that something seemed off. We headed to the hospital. When we arrived, I was

9.5 centimeters dilated—so close. My water broke with a dramatic pop, and I remember thinking, "*Finally*." Relief collided with agony as my body begged me to push—yet the centimeters refused to budge. Each passing moment pulled me deeper into exhaustion, further from hope. We tried everything, yet as Wednesday morning dawned on the fifty-sixth hour of labor, the doctor told us we had no other options left. We weren't in an emergency situation, but every moment we stayed there, we moved toward the inevitability of an emergency.

Colby and I asked the staff to clear the room so we could make a decision. Despite the exhaustion threatening around the edges of my consciousness, my resolve was strong. God had created my body to do this, after all. I never imagined this scenario. Colby finally made the call, calmly but firmly moving us down the only path we had left for safely meeting our baby. I might have waited forever, maybe to the point of imminent danger, but I also trusted my husband's wisdom and discernment. He needed me and my baby to come out of this experience alive, and I depended on his steadiness to make that decision for us.

I signed the papers, but I can't say that I truly consented to the C-section. They wheeled my body into the OR and prepared *her* for the surgery, but *I* was somewhere else, somewhere far away, backed into a corner, silent and paralyzed there by my complete and utter defeat. The thought of God being anywhere near that operating room didn't enter my mind. I felt alone, immobile on a bed as my baby was forcibly removed from my body, safely out of my sight.

In the sterile quiet of the recovery room, I held Calvin for the first time. My heart should have been full, but I felt numb. Somewhere between my labor and that operating table, I'd left a part of myself behind and I didn't know how to call her back.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPIRITUAL DISCONNECTION

What I couldn't see in that operating room was how my disconnection wasn't just physical—it was a spiritual wound I had

carried long before that moment. That moment, so far from the earthiness and sacredness of birth, was the beginning of the consequences of living fragmented. I'd trusted that my faith would carry me through anything, yet it had also taught me to leave pieces of myself behind. But wholeness, I've learned, is what God wants for us. And wholeness begins with a reclamation of the goodness God placed in our bodies and spirits from the beginning.

My first birth wasn't the first time I disconnected my body from my Self. In fact, this is a protective skill many of us unconsciously value. Depending on your life and experience, you might have a lot of practice in dissociation. In fact, you may have been directly taught by the church to "take up your cross and deny yourself" (Matt. 16:24) and considered this kind of disconnection to be holy. In this version of faith, we are often asked to deny parts of ourselves in favor of following Christ. But what if splitting off parts of ourselves, separating our bodies or our emotions from our spiritual life, was never what Jesus had in mind for his followers? I have come to see the spiritual life as a journey toward wholeness, calling home all the parts of ourselves we had previously exiled. This is an important key for us in our journey to becoming faithfully dissident.

In the beginning, God created humanity and called it good, a reflection of the image of God. Yet somehow, much of mainstream Christian culture paints our humanity in a negative light. We've been taught that some emotions are bad or, at the least, untrustworthy. And our bodies? Well, they are destined to betray us with inclinations to sin, and we should "cut them off" (Matt. 18:8 KJV).

Christianity's relationship with the body has been complicated from the start. "Mortification of the flesh" is a long-standing and varied Christian practice ranging from self-denial (fasting, vows of celibacy, "giving up something" during Lent) to even more extreme forms of self-harm—all in the name of helping the practitioner "participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet. 4:13 NIV).

In the books of Romans and Galatians, the apostle Paul often writes about "the flesh." In Galatians 5, it sounds like

he's pitting our body against our spiritual life: "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want" (vv. 16–17).

Beth Allison Barr writes about the church's "long-standing disdain for the female body" in her book *Becoming the Pastor's Wife.* This split between spirit and flesh shaped how women were viewed as weak or dirty, and how the church controlled women's access to holy spaces and even to God.[1]

As part of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, newly formed Protestantism turned away from rituals and embodied practices of the Catholic church and focused on the written text of the Bible, highlighting the importance of engaging the mind. In the seventeenth century, philosopher René Descartes wrote of a separation of mind and body, influencing a dualistic perspective that has lingered for centuries. The Christianity that I inherited was impacted by these ways of thinking, and my early faith very much lived in my brain, primarily defining belief as an intellectual assent to a set of ideas rather than being defined by actions. Practically speaking, this led to a modern Christian culture that thinks saying you believe the right things covers a multitude of harmful actions.

A paradigm shift helping us reunite body and mind began in the twentieth century when philosophers coined the term "embodied cognition," highlighting how our thinking is not only influenced but potentially shaped by our physical experiences in the world. In 1980, University of California, Berkeley, Professor George Lakoff published his research in *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff's research on conceptual metaphors, such as associating "up" with happiness and "down" with sadness, reveals the profound interplay between physical and metaphorical experiences.[2] In one study, research participants were asked to recall either a time of social acceptance or rejection. Those with "warm" memories of acceptance perceived the room temperature as being warmer than those who recalled experiences of social snubbing when they were treated "coldly." This study

showcases how our bodies respond physically to the metaphors we use to describe interpersonal interactions.

These insights remind us of the profound connection between our bodies and our spirituality. Simply put, we cannot divorce our spirituality from our bodies, as our bodies are the home for all our spiritual experiences. Think about that. Every spiritual experience you've had has happened within the context of your body. So, how can the body truly be opposed to our spirituality?

Paul's writings about "the flesh" have contributed to the negative or fearful view of the body many Christians hold. The problem is the word "flesh" in these verses isn't referring to our physical bodies, our literal flesh and bones. We need a new translation for this word to help us shift the lens. Through the work of Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and contemplative Christian, I have learned that any time I encounter this idea of "the flesh" in Scripture, I can replace it in my mind with the idea of the ego.

The ego is, according to Richard Rohr, "that part of the self that wants to be significant, central, and important by itself, apart from anybody else. It wants to be both separate and superior. It is defended and self-protective by its very nature. *It must eliminate the negative to succeed at this*."[3] When we let the ego drive our lives, we will be continually tempted to cut off the parts of ourselves that threaten our significance, our importance, or our ability to feel morally superior to other people. In religious spaces, this can look like denying our questions or hiding our perceived flaws because it might jeopardize the appearance of having it all together.

Rohr also shares the related concept of the shadow, which comes from the work of psychologist Carl Jung. Rohr's definition of the shadow is

> *what you refuse to see about yourself, and what you do not want others to see*. The more you have cultivated and protected a chosen persona, the more shadow work you will need to do. Be especially careful therefore of any idealized

> role or self-image, like that of minister, mother, doctor, nice person, professor, moral believer, or president of this or that. These are huge personas to live up to, and they trap many people in lifelong delusion. . . . The closer you get to the Light, the more of your shadow you see.[4]

GOD'S DESIRE FOR WHOLENESS, NOT SEPARATION

Returning to Galatians 5, how would the meaning change if we saw the word "flesh" and instead read "ego"? "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the ego. For what the ego desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the ego" (Gal. 5:16–17a, author's version). In my version, it's our ego, our false self, or the personas we put on that are contrary to the Spirit. The ego itself is not evil, in fact, your ego is a necessary part of your psychological structure, but your ego is not you.

Jesus often warns against hypocrisy in his teachings. When we let the ego run our lives, hypocrisy can abound because it causes us to ignore all the "negative" aspects of ourselves and project them onto others. Rohr describes our process to reckon with that which has been pushed into the shadow as "shadowboxing." Wrestling with our shadow is a necessary part of the spiritual journey toward being a more whole, fully integrated human.

Galatians 5 also outlines the fruit of the Spirit. For most of my life, I saw the fruit of the Spirit as something I had to *try* to be. I remember thinking as a teen in the church that I'm not spiritually mature, which is why some of the teachings didn't make sense to me, but maybe one day, if I keep *trying really hard*, I will mature enough to become a loving, patient, or kind person. But what if the fruit of the Spirit is not something you have to muscle your way into achieving? We'll discuss this at length in chapter 6.

In Matthew 5:8, in the middle of what many consider the most core group of his teachings, Jesus says, "Blessed are the

pure in heart, for they will see God." Because I had grown up with the teaching of original sin, I saw this as an indictment against myself. I didn't see myself as "pure in heart" because I had been told that I was a sinner with a "deceitful" heart. I don't see myself that way anymore, and in chapter 7, we'll consider how you can see yourself in a different light too. In the next chapter, Jesus talks about the eye being the lamp of the body: "So if the [very] light inside you [your inner self, your heart, your conscience] is darkness, how great *and* terrible is that darkness!" (Matt. 6:23 AMP).

What if instead of believing you are inherently bad, your emotions are untrustworthy, and your body will lead you to sin, you could begin to see yourself as a beloved human being having normal human experiences? When you stop trying so hard to be good, and just focus on accepting and being yourself, you will begin to experience more wholeness. That's what Jesus is talking about when he says, "Blessed are the pure in heart."

When you're living from this whole self, non-ego-driven place, you will start to manifest the fruit of the Spirit in your life. The fruit of the Spirit is not something you have to work to attain. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control already exist within you; they just get covered over by ego and your defense mechanisms and all the ways you have had to fight just to survive. Your ability and desire to live from a Spirit-filled, rather than a self-serving, ego-filled place directly impacts how much of the fruit of the Spirit can shine through your life. What if that's what Jesus actually wanted from us?

Too often, the concept of "denying yourself and taking up your cross" has been wielded as a weapon against people whose identities don't line up with the idealized versions the church paints for us. For me, the persona I was determined to uphold was that of the idealized wife and mother. Achieving a specific birth experience was tied up in the ideal, and mine had fallen far short of that ideal.

In the first few months of motherhood, my feelings of failure consumed me. I had no idea how to process my

labor-and-delivery experience, so I pushed it down into the shadows. I tried to focus on the good: We both made it out alive, right? That's what mattered, everyone told me, and I didn't want to think about it. Early motherhood can be excruciatingly hard. I resented being needed on a three-hour rotation for breastfeeding. I felt stressed out on the days when my baby wouldn't stop crying, and it was up to me to figure out why. It felt like the craziest thing I had ever done, on top of being exhausted, emotional, and full of doubt.

I couldn't find God in the midst of it. I tried to listen for God's voice, but I heard radio silence. I begged God to speak to me, to send a verse, or come to me in a dream, but I did not feel God. I couldn't understand why this was happening to me. I had always anticipated the joy of motherhood, the version that had been sold to me as the pinnacle of any woman's existence, but I had no idea what to do with all that pain. One night, I sobbed on the couch to my husband, "I want my life back!"

I was so ashamed about the ways I was struggling, about my birth story. This was supposed to be my happily ever after; why was it so hard? I wasn't ready yet, newly postpartum, to give up the persona, but this experience brought a staggering realization that trying really hard to live up to an idealized version of motherhood wasn't going to be enough. Too much was out of my control. Perhaps you, too, have experienced the disconnect between what you hoped for and what reality delivered. Perhaps you've wondered where God was in the middle of your own darkest moments. Maybe it was a divorce or separation, the unraveling of what was supposed to be "forever." Or maybe it was coming out as queer, when your identity collided with church teachings and family expectations. Perhaps it was a chronic illness or disability, where you faced limitations in a culture that equates worth with productivity or healing. Or maybe it was singleness into midlife, when the church's narrative about marriage as the ultimate goal left you unseen.

THE SACRIFICES WE MADE FOR CHRISTIAN CULTURE

After Jesus tells his disciples to take up their cross, deny themselves, and follow him, he goes on to say, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?" (Matt. 16:25–26).

Although I was mostly unaware of the bet I was making, I had unwittingly thought that by adhering to the rules of white evangelical Christian culture, I would "gain the whole world"—safety, security, control, and belonging. I had forfeited so much of my own sense of self to gain those things, and life wasn't a happily ever after as promised. It turns out that for me, accepting myself—not denying myself—was the starting place. It would take years for me to call back the parts of myself that were cut away that day in the operating room and all the years before—to see how the birth of my son was also the beginning of a kind of rebirth for me.

My first birth was the start of a journey I never knew I needed to take—a journey back to myself. This was about more than my body, this pregnancy and delivery, or even motherhood. It was about the stories we carry, the beliefs we inherit, and the still, small voice that I'd always heard within. I didn't know it then, but I was on the cusp of discovering a new way of being—one that would challenge everything I thought I knew about faith, womanhood, and myself.

And like so many stories of rebirth, mine would begin with learning more about how I had gotten here.

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