

Reading Guide

for

The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy,
revised edition

by Allan G. Johnson

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Justice for Women of the Church in Society Program Unit



Introduction

Allan Johnson offers one of the most careful and accessible explanations of patriarchy that I have read. I commend to your reading this highly usable volume, which offers an analysis that not only gives us hope, but also can lead to change.

Among leaders in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America who have read and studied *The Gender Knot* are Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, the members of the Church Council, the executives of the ELCA's churchwide organization, and the Justice for Women alliance, an interunit staff team at the churchwide organization.

My hope is that the following study guide may serve as a map for the terrain of ideas he outlines and as a foundation for discussion between women and men. Only when the whole body of Christ works together to understand and to change the legacy of patriarchy in church and in society will change take hold in the church.

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Suggestions for using this study guide:

- You may find it most helpful to read through the guide for each chapter immediately before reading the actual chapter so that you have some idea of the main ideas. The summaries and questions for chapters 1 and 2 are combined below due to the interdependence of the material in these first two chapters.
- Although dialogue with others is highly recommended, this guide can easily be used wither for your own reading and study or in group discussion.
- *The Gender Knot* is not a theological book, yet you are encouraged to look for the theological connections between Johnson's analysis and your faith tradition. For a number of theological resources, please visit the Justice for Women Web site at www.elca.org/justiceforwomen.

Chapters 1 and 2: “Where Are We?” pp. 3-26 and “Patriarchy, the System: An It, Not a He, a Them, or an Us,” pp. 27-50

The first two chapters of *The Gender Knot* are key to having a common vocabulary on patriarchy. Below are abstract versions of these two chapters.

Chapter 1

Johnson looks at patriarchy as a social system, something we all participate in. A patriarchal society promotes male privilege, which is unearned advantage given to males (5).

Basic change to create a different kind of society does not come from making some women powerful. Rather, we must reach into understanding and altering the system of patriarchy (8).

One of the problems in working to alter social systems is that in the U.S. we evaluate sexism on an individualistic basis, rather than looking critically at the ways in which “sexism is embedded in major institutions” (17).

Working to understand and alter patriarchy is difficult work. We would rather ignore it or resist it (22). We resist because it is hard to admit that women are oppressed; because we don't want to admit that men are privileged; and because we don't want to admit that our most intimate relationships can be full of the tensions of a patriarchal social system (22-25).

But patriarchy is not a personality problem or the result of a few “bad” people or an implicit way of saying that men are cruel. Key to seeing how we can make a difference is being able to understand that patriarchy is a social system in which we all participate.

Chapter 2

Being able to see the ways we participate as individuals in social systems helps us to see that we have an opportunity: if we make different choices within a social system, then we cause different consequences (32).

If we stay focused on individual transformation or on social problems that affect women, we will not be able to alter patriarchy (35-38).

Individuals are absolutely part of change, but we are best equipped as individuals when we see ourselves as participants in a larger system (45).

Johnson looks at the problem of violence against women for a case in point (44ff.) and argues that violence against women is a consequence of patriarchy (49). The solution he proposes to altering the consequences of patriarchy is *to help us to think about how to participate differently and how we are responsible for making changes.*

Discussion Questions, Chapters 1—2

While you are reading these introductory chapters, take care to note the following:

I. Specific definitions:

patriarchy

privilege

system/individual

paths of least resistance

sexism

misogyny

sex

gender (“Sex” and “gender” are implicitly defined on p. 21. See the vocabulary handout for more specific definitions at www.elca.org/justiceforwomen.)

2. From experience or observation, try to identify specific examples of the definitions that come to mind for you.

Chapter 3: “Why Patriarchy?” pp. 50-77

Here Johnson offers a view to the elements of patriarchy and an analysis of why and how patriarchy works so effectively.


1. Review Johnson’s definitions of sex and *gender*. On what bases does Johnson argue against essential definitions of sex and gender?

3. What do you find especially exciting or illuminating in the first two chapters? Why do you suppose this is?

2. According to Johnson, what keeps patriarchy going?

4. What do you find yourself resisting in the first two chapters? Why do you suppose this is?

3. How do you define power? How does Johnson define power?



4. How would you define power from a theological or faith perspective? On what basis does your theological definition of power rest?

6. Johnson talks about men defining each other in patriarchy (pp.56ff.) Taking up his line of inquiry, how do we define “a real man” in the U.S.? How do you define a “real man” in your denomination? —in your congregation? —in your community? —in your family? By what means do we train each other into “real men” in each of the above groups?

5. Do you have power? How do you use it?

7. How does Johnson outline women’s roles in patriarchy? Again, taking up his line of inquiry, how do we define women’s roles in the U.S.? How do you define a “real man” in your denomination? —in your congregation? —in your community? —in your family? By what means do we train each other into women’s roles in patriarchy?

8. What are some of the justifications for male domination in history? How do some of these justifications for male domination show up in Christian theology and church practice throughout history?

9. How might the history of male privilege affect your role in this time and place? In other words, how do you see your own contemporary context differently in light of historical patterns of male domination?

10. How does Johnson suggest we will begin to find a way out of the system of patriarchy? What does this mean for you and your various communities?
(*Communities can refer to church denominations, congregations, schools, governments, families, etc.)

Chapter 4: “Ideology, Myth, and Magic: Femininity, Masculinity, and ‘Gender Roles,’” pp. 78-98


In chapter four, Johnson analyzes socially created gender roles. He argues that to see patriarchy, we must be able to see how gender is constructed within it. To see how gender is constructed, we need to have helpful ways of paying attention and to be willing to concede that what seems normative might not be.

Three helpful hints for reading this chapter:

First, it will be helpful to review what sex and *gender* are in the vocabulary reference sheet. (www.elca.org/justiceforwomen)

Second, Johnson warns readers not to get lost in personality issues when thinking analytically about gender. Third, Johnson urges readers to understand gender roles as tools of a social system.

1. What does Johnson mean by inherent “human qualities”?



2. According to Johnson, why do we gender (using “gender” as a verb here) human qualities? Johnson refers to the ideal of opposite sexes as “cultural magic” (79). How does patriarchy benefit from the cultural ideal of “opposite sexes”?

4. Identify paths of least resistance with gender roles. In other words, what mode of operating or being is the safest from social reaction, negativity, violence, or control against challenges to gender roles? What do the paths of least resistance regarding gender roles look like on the following three levels: individual, institutional, and cultural?

3. Think of a time when you went outside the bounds of gender roles or expectations. What happened? Was there any cost to you or to others? How did you feel? How are “femininity” and “masculinity” tools for social control?

5. Johnson shows the link between gender roles and patriarchy. What ends up happening is that women are portrayed and understood as marginal to what really counts. Take some time to identify and reflect upon the ways in which women are portrayed and understood to be marginal to what really counts in your own context. How are gender roles and patriarchy at work in these various places?

Chapter 5: “Feminists and Feminism,” pp. 99-130

In chapter five, Johnson explains and explores a core definition of feminism, addresses some prevailing stereotypes about feminists, lays out some of the basic contours of several feminist theories, and ultimately argues that feminism is a vital tool in addressing a patriarchal social system. In other words, he is arguing that feminism is necessary to being able to see what the problems are and to paying attention to the problems and their solutions. (See the summary of chapter four above.)

One potentially compelling, implicit connection obvious to many Lutherans is between feminism and eschatology. Much as Carl Braaten argued almost forty years ago in *The Future of God* and Ted Peters argued more recently in *God—The World’s Future*, the proleptic promise of God’s future calls us both within our present and beyond the present, urging us towards transformed creation. Although Johnson speaks from a sociological and not a theological perspective, his description makes clear that feminism as a way of knowing and doing is a call to a transformed future. (For Lutheran feminist theological resources, please see the ongoing theological bibliography and resource site at www.elca.org/justiceforwomen.)

1. What is feminism, according to Johnson’s sociological perspective?

2. For what reasons does he argue it is invisible? Why does Johnson argue that feminism’s invisibility is a problem? (99-101)

3. Johnson argues that critics veer away from criticizing the *content* of feminism itself and instead focus on “‘issues feminism’ and feminists” (102). What are the problems he sees with this? According to Johnson, when is feminism most threatening to patriarchy? (104) Why do you think he makes this argument?

4. Johnson argues that we need to differentiate between feminism and feminists. Take a look at the stereotypes of *feminists* that Johnson outlines (104-112). Take note of how he counters each one. Is this differentiation helpful for you? If so, how?

5. He concludes the section on stereotypes by stating, “[T]he ongoing waves of criticism—whether warranted or not—are combined with a general absence of thoughtful public discussion of what feminism is about. Over time, this creates the illusion that patriarchy either doesn’t exist or, if it does, it doesn’t deserve serious attention” (112). How will you help to illuminate patriarchy?

6. What are feminism’s “core ideas”?

7. Johnson describes feminism as “a way of thinking—of observing the world, asking questions, and looking for answers—that may lead to particular opinions *but doesn’t consist of the opinions themselves*” (112). If we take his way of thinking as a reasonable aide in our own thinking, how might feminism as a particular “framework for analysis” (112)—grounded in the idea that gender inequality is real and that it is a problem—begin to inform how you and your congregation and/or community live, act, and lead?

8. Although there are other feminist theories, Johnson describes the following: liberal, radical, Marxist, and socialist. Look for the core description he offers for each. How does each theory describe the problem and what to do about it?

9. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each one? Which one do you think best describes the way/s in which you and your congregation and/or communities have understood the problem? In what way/s would you enrich and strengthen your understanding?

10. At the end of chapter five, Johnson frames a positive use of feminism in terms of “being” and “doing” (128-129). What does he mean?

11. If we’re serious about patriarchy as a problem, what are we called to do? (129) How does this make you feel?

12. Johnson makes a clear call to men to take up the responsibility to change the patriarchal social system. If you are a man, how does this make you feel? Try to think deeply about your response. If you are a woman, how does this make you feel? Try to think deeply about your response.

Chapter 6, “Thinking about Patriarchy: War, Sex, and Work,” pp. 133-153

In this chapter Johnson connects systems of war, family, economics, sex, and reproduction to patriarchy, arguing that when these systems are organized according to who has the most privilege and power, a patriarchal status quo is powerfully reinforced. He is showing how patriarchy ends up being justified. The result, he argues, is that we members of society end up seeing patriarchy as normative. He then analyzes how each of these systems (war, family, etc.) begs for transformation.

1. A lengthy quote from Johnson’s introduction is a key point of inquiry: “Reality is always being socially constructed. Whatever groups have the most access to and control over resources and institutions through which reality is shaped—from education to the media to religious dogma to political ideology—will see their views and interests reflected in the results. This means that those with the biggest stake in changing the world—lower classes, white women, and people of color—typically have the *fewest* resources and the most difficult time getting their experience accepted as ‘real,’ much less as a legitimate basis for social criticism and change” (133-134).

How does your denomination or congregation, for example, socially and theologically construct what is “real”? Other community groups? Who has access to creating what is “real”? Who has resources (monetary and otherwise) to create it and to effect change?

2. The way that Johnson analyzes each of the systems of war, family, economics, sex, and reproduction relates to another key statement in his introduction of the chapter: “Perhaps the bedrock of patriarchal ideology is the belief that it is necessary, socially desirable, and rooted in a universal sense of tradition and history” (134).

In what ways do patriarchal ideals of war, family, economics, sex, and reproduction each help to support “the bedrock of patriarchal ideology”?

Chapter 7: “What Patriarchy?” pp. 154-177

Here Johnson looks at five specific ways in which patriarchy is reinforced: through invisibility, denial, consensus, false parallels, and thinking that male suffering means there is not male privilege.

1. What is the key to male privilege, according to Johnson? How is male social invisibility different from female social invisibility?

2. Why is the denial of male privilege and patriarchy particularly effective? What positive move does denial prevent?

3. According to Johnson, why do women collude with patriarchy? What is the paradox of oppressive power Johnson explains?

4. What are false parallels? What implications do false parallels carry for policy and polity in your denomination, congregation, and/or communities?

5. What connection does Johnson make between male suffering or misery and male privilege?

6. Begin to name for yourself one or two ways in which you might live and lead differently because of what you may see differently now.

Chapter 8: “It Must Be Women,” pp. 178-204

Although this chapter may at first read feel as if the focus is on individuals, Johnson is making his case that how we interact with each other as men and women creates the social acceptance of patriarchy as a social system, something that affects cultures and institutions, too. The key concept Johnson explores here is control and how deeply central control and fear are to the success of a society ordered upon the disparities of privilege and power in patriarchy. This chapter is perhaps not easy to read, but it is critical for reflection and action.

1. In order to explain the oppositions between males and females inherent to the success of patriarchy, Johnson writes, “Only in a patriarchal context does it ‘make sense’ to require boys to reject their mothers and, by extension, all women as a way to form a stable masculine identity and promote male privilege” (190).

How does Johnson’s assertion match your own experience? What could you do differently in order to de-center the opposition that Johnson is explaining?

2. As in other parts of the book, Johnson raises the role of “paths of least resistance.” (See, e.g., 193.) How and why do paths of least resistance support patriarchy? How might you be a leader in your own context in resisting paths of least resistance?

3. Johnson offers a list of ways in which females are controlled (195). How is your denomination, congregation, and/or community called to be different?

4. In this chapter Johnson explores men’s roles in the solutions to transform patriarchy. He holds out an invitation: “Men can work for change if they can see how they participate in ways that maintain and perpetuate it” (204). How does this make you feel?

Chapter 9, “Shame, Guilt, and Responsibility,” pp. 207-223

In this chapter, Johnson lays out a framework for thinking through responsibility to create a reality of mutual power and gender equity.

1. Why is responsibility critical in unraveling “the gender knot”?

2. What are the key components of responsibility?

3. How does Johnson explain men's responsibility in particular for resisting patriarchy? Why is he focusing on men?

Chapter 10, "Unraveling the Gender Knot," pp. 224-243

Here Johnson names some ways of working for change.

1. Which of Johnson's suggestions did you like the best? Why?

4. Why don't guilt and blame work to effectively resist and subvert patriarchy?

2. How could you lead in your own context using one of Johnson's suggestions? What do you need for the suggestion to work?

5. What are the dangers Johnson outlines in involving men in the work to transform patriarchy?





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