“Rise Up Warrior Princess Daughters”: Is Evangelical Women’s Submission a Mere Fairy Tale?

Marion Maddox

Many evangelical and Pentecostal churches emphasize men’s headship (authority) over women. Yet women in such congregations often work outside the home and exercise forms of church leadership. Several studies have concluded that headship talk is mainly an identity marker for religious communities otherwise little distinguishable from the surrounding culture. A case study of Sydney’s Hillsong megachurch reveals that headship language does much more. Read in a broader context than relationships between individual men and women, headship forms part of a
discourse about authority and submission that encompasses pastors’ authority over laity, the state’s authority over citizens, and Christian authority over secular society.

“Wives, Submit to Your Husbands”

“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord” instructs the New Testament’s Letter to the Ephesians. While Jesus’s ministry displayed a culturally unusual openness to women’s participation, the earliest Christian communities found women’s status contentious (for example, Eph 5: 22–32; 1 Cor 15: 34–35; 1 Tim 2: 8–15).

Many modern Christians continue to do so. While many evangelical and Pentecostal churches allow female pastors, for example, some require them to function under male oversight. Men’s authority over women, at least in church and home, is a prominent theme in many evangelical and Pentecostal churches.

A growing literature has explored evangelical churches’ emphasis on male headship, generally downplaying its real-world effects. An emerging scholarly consensus suggests that although clergy and members endorse male headship, real-world evangelical marriages are likely to be more egalitarian. Married evangelical women often work outside the home, while some studies suggest that married evangelical men make more involved fathers and more domestically engaged husbands than married men in the general population.

Moreover, even the rhetoric is inconsistent. Sociologist Sally Gallagher reports: “Ninety per cent of American evangelicals believe in the ideal of husbands’ ‘headship,’ which to 80 percent means being the ‘spiritual leader in the household,’ and for 53 percent means that the husband also has final authority for making decisions. Two-thirds consider feminism ‘hostile to Christian values.’ Yet 87 percent also agree that ‘marriage should be a partnership of equals.’”

3 Wilcox, Soft Patriarchs.
While “the underlying model remains primarily one of hierarchy and gender-defined ‘roles’ within the family,” Gallagher maintains that the model does not determine practice. Rather, language of female submission and male headship acts as a “distinguishing mark of evangelical identity” as an “embattled” minority against what they consider a “secular” majority. Without this, Gallagher suggests, little would distinguish the evangelicals in her study from the surrounding culture.

Similarly, sociologist Bradford Wilcox proposes that “Conservative Protestant patriarchy is moving in the direction of being more symbolic than practical. Conservative Protestants still overwhelmingly endorse male headship but this headship appears to be more of a salve for men’s threatened manhood than a license for them to exercise authority over their own wives or demand they stay at home.”

The widely accepted conclusion—that an inconsistently applied ideology of male headship serves essentially as a rhetorical marker of difference—leaves important questions unanswered. Why should it be gender rather than something else that marks this boundary? Why do these churches invest so much in maintaining seemingly contradictory beliefs and practices? And, if we accept that the gendered theological hierarchy is scarcely felt within individual marriages, is that the end of the story, or does the headship script exert a more tangible force elsewhere?

Existing studies have largely concentrated on comparing the ideology of authority within marriage to the experiences of married couples in relevant communities, often through ethnography of a single congregation. This essay, similarly, considers the teaching on gender at Sydney’s Hillsong Church, as renowned for its vast annual men’s and women’s conferences (the latter attracting over 17,000 women in 2008) as for its globally influential music sales and links to conservative politics. The present inquiry differs from those that have preceded it in that it examines headship discourse beyond any impact on individual marriages. First, it examines not just teaching on gender directed to women, but also directed to men and to the whole church. Second, when examining teaching directed specifically to women, it considers not only material on gender and relationships with men but also topics including wealth and prosperity, Christian living, and the end-times. These apparently gender-neutral topics receive noticeably different treatment for women-only audiences than for the church as a whole.

Examining Hillsong’s women’s program in isolation might suggest that the language of submission is balanced by a focus on empowerment. Hillsong’s teaching on gender might seem to reinforce the arguments of scholars Wilcox, Kristin Aune, and John Bartkowski that female submission and male headship are essentially rhetorical constructs, doing little more than marking boundaries

6 Wilcox, Soft Patriarchs, 143.
for a community largely indistinguishable from the consumer culture that surrounds it and which it deliberately mimics in many ways. Given the context of Hillsong's wider teaching, however, the women's messages suggest rather more.

A satisfactory account must explain why Hillsong devotes vast resources to otherwise puzzlingly huge, sexually segregated conferences. Attendees at women's conferences are exhorted to diet, exercise, use makeup, get “pampered,” and even resort to plastic surgery to conform to a narrow, fashion-magazine definition of “beauty.” Men’s conference attendees, meanwhile, are encouraged to “lead,” “take authority,” and discover their similarities to God. Rather than look for the submission discourse’s effects in husband-wife relationships, it is more revealing to examine these traditional images as exemplars of a worldview. The language of male headship finds its meaning, and exerts its force, in a broader frame, which includes Hillsong’s teaching not only about gender and sexuality but also about authority and submission more generally—for example, pastors’ authority over laity, and the state’s authority over citizens—and about power and the place of Christians in the wider society.

Welcome to Hillsong

Hillsong megachurch, in Sydney’s northwest, is Australia’s largest religious congregation, over twenty thousand people attending its services each weekend. Many times that number encounter its teachings through televised services (broadcast, according to the church’s website, in 160 countries), CD and DVD sales, books, and conferences. Hillsong’s annual three-day women’s conference, Colour Your World (often shortened to “Colour”), regularly attracts over fifteen thousand women. Part of the Australian Assemblies of God denomination, which in 2007 changed its name to Australian Christian Churches, Hillsong has established satellite congregations around Australia and overseas, each carrying the Hillsong name and often local versions of the various Hillsong conferences. At the time of this writing, Hillsong has offshoots in Amsterdam, Brisbane, Cape Town, Copenhagen, Kiev, Konstanz, London, Melbourne, Moscow, New York City, Paris, and Stockholm.

During Australia’s most recent period of conservative government (1996–2007), Hillsong became known as the regular place of worship for a number of state and federal parliamentarians and public figures, including at least two members of Parliament from the governing Liberal Party, as well as the party’s state director for New South Wales and the national president of its youth wing.

7 For a discussion of Hillsong’s emphasis on conventional beauty expectations, see Marion Maddox, “Prosper, Consume and Be Saved,” Critical Research on Religion 1, no 1 (2013).
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(both subsequently elected as federal members of Parliament). Prime Minister John Howard opened Hillsong’s expanded facilities in October 2002, and the church was a regular and prominent host of politicians, mainly conservative, at its conferences and special events. Hillsong was, therefore, unusually well-integrated into the structures of secular power.

Over that period, economic and social conditions for working women and aspects of women’s reproductive rights measurably deteriorated. I am not suggesting that Hillsong was the cause of this policy shift; nevertheless, the church’s political prominence suggests, borrowing a term from William Connolly, that its views on authority, submission, and gender contributed significantly to the “resonance” between religious conservatism, social conservatism, and neoliberal public policy that were a feature of Australia’s “Howard decade.”

This analysis draws on sermons and books by Hillsong senior pastor Brian Houston and his wife, Bobbie Houston, and on other church publications, audiovisual materials, and online material. In addition, I attended Hillsong Sydney during 2005–2010, visited Hillsong Paris in 2007, and attended Sydney’s 2008 and 2009 Colour Your World women’s conferences including, in 2009, a facilitators’ training session for Shine, the church’s outreach program to women and girls.

Helpmeets and Leaders

Early twentieth-century Pentecostals, including the Assemblies of God, were noted for egalitarianism. Believing that a vocation to preach or prophesy came directly from the Holy Spirit, those earliest generations were reluctant to challenge claims to divine inspiration. The same radical spirit that enabled black male preachers in mixed-race congregations also saw women, black and white, taking early leadership. In Australia, more than half of all Pentecostal congregations founded by 1930 were established and led by women.

9 In Australia, the main conservative party is the Liberal Party. When in power, it governs in coalition with the rural-based National Party.


13 Maddox, God under Howard, 86–102.

Today, women are accredited as pastors in the Australian Christian Churches (ACC) and teach in the church’s theological colleges. However, female pastors no longer enjoy access to the same authority. Only 4 percent of Australian Assemblies of God in Australia (AOG) pastors in 2001 were women, and no woman sat on the national executive board. Women in AOG/ACC ministry tend to belong to husband-and-wife teams, their authority often deriving more from their husband's status than from any formal qualifications. Female pastors’ work typically focuses on children, youth, and women.

Bobbie Houston has admitted that she “never attended Bible college.” Nevertheless, she notes that “our roles are that Brian is . . . senior pastor, and because I’m married to him and connected in heart and soul with him . . . I am seen and respected as senior pastor with him also.” Brian Houston explained: “We’re very much a team. . . . I’ve got a conservative, biblical idea that a man should take a role of leadership in his life, but I certainly don’t adhere to the mentality that a woman must submit or that she should be pushed down.”

Within the framework of heteronormativity, Hillsong emphasizes gender complementarity, with men’s and women’s roles sharply differentiated according to standard gender stereotypes. Bobbie Houston warned the 2006 Hillsong men’s conference, “when you guys . . . don’t lead, don’t influence . . . it badly affects us [women]. . . . We can survive without you . . . but it doesn’t lend itself to health.” Hillsong’s ten-week “Woman to Woman” course, offered through Hillsong Evening College, has discussed “right and wrong submission.”

Gender complementarity includes frequent reminders of male inadequacy. As the website for the Hillsong women’s organization, known as the Colour Sisterhood, explains, “some men still fail to understand the fragility of wives and daughters entrusted to them”—a failure that “distorts truth and shrouds tender hearts in darkness.” Repeatedly throughout Colour 2008, Bobbie Houston hinted that attenders might have violent or abusive husbands, warning, “don’t go home [from the conference] too excited, tizzy and wound up—go home with grace and humility.” Visiting evangelist J. John read the conference a collective apology on behalf of all men for their mistreatment of women, adding that “Louie [the session’s other male presenter] and I just pray that [your] husbands, brothers and sons will come to their senses.”

Neither John nor any other speaker suggested that women in violent or

16 Bobbie Houston, His & Hers: Four Significant Messages for Kingdom Men and Women (Australia: Hillsong Leadership Ministries, 2006).
18 Houston, His & Hers.
dangerous marriages should leave. On the contrary, Bobbie and Brian’s son Ben (also a Hillsong pastor) advised that “you’re women, you’re better than us, whatever you’re going home to.” Bobbie agreed, saying, “we’re big, we can step back from an argument. Someone has to step down, to leave a space for God to work, and God put it in feminine DNA to do that.” At Colour 2006, Bobbie preached that “if things are really awful at home, adapt—this one’s a commandment, sweetheart—adapt, yield, be submissive, adapt. It takes a strong woman to do that. It’s a strong person that can draw back.”

If submitting and adapting are not enough to stave off divorce, a woman may find herself heading a family. However, women’s domestic leadership is always anomalous. Bobbie Houston advises women’s pastors ministering to divorced women: “When there is no man around to lead the home, teach them how to hear God’s voice and know His will for themselves.”

At Colour 2008, in a session entitled the “Savvy Panel,” Bobbie interviewed eight men, including husband Brian and son Ben, about their relationships with women in church leadership. The men explained how they had to become patient with women’s ways of communicating, such as women’s need to talk far more than men do, and to discuss their emotions before being able to address the topic at hand. All participants acknowledged that women can hold leadership positions, including, in some circumstances, over men. But all nine participants (including Bobbie) concurred in describing women in leadership as having been “released” for the role by their husbands. Even two men who had married women already in formal ministry spoke of “releasing” their wives to continue their premarriage roles. Stephen Crouch, a businessman and husband of pastor Donna Crouch (née Quinn, a Hillsong youth pastor both before and after her marriage), explained that “as blokes we have a few problems, and one is ego,” but that Donna had overcome this by ensuring that he “never once felt second.” Bobbie responded, “thank you for releasing Donna,” adding that she herself felt “very released” by Brian.

Bobbie Houston then asked Robert Fergusson why “some men are so bad at releasing women.” Fergusson, who with his wife, Amanda Fergusson, lectures at the Hillsong International Leadership College, explained that men find it difficult to “release women” because men “are fundamentally insecure” and “selfish.” Male inadequacies can only be overcome through an encounter with Jesus, which men attain through “their women praying for them.”

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22 Bobbie Houston, I’ll Have What She’s Having: The Ultimate Compliment to Any Woman Daring to Be in Leadership (Castle Hill, NSW: Hillsongs Australia, 1998), 116–17, emphasis added.
But women allay men’s insecurities through more than prayer. Fergusson described how, when they met, Amanda “was a theologian,” while he was “a new Christian” with little biblical knowledge. Yet “she would come to me for biblical advice,” dispelling the feelings of inferiority he might otherwise have suffered. Fergusson compared his own response favorably to that of another man who refused “to release his wife, who was a doctor, into [leadership in] the congregation” because he feared her success would make him “look silly” by comparison. Women are “often disenfranchised,” in which case they are not the only losers: “men miss half the heart of Jesus. I found it by releasing and empowering my wife.”

**Feminism and Femininity**

Often adopting feminist catchphrases, Bobbie Houston has produced a CD set entitled *Shaping a Twenty-First-Century Women’s Movement*. Women’s events and promotional materials regularly talk about “empowerment.” Billboards advertising Colour 2008 read, “Jesus Christ: The Greatest Liberator of Women,” and, at the conference, Bobbie announced enthusiastically that the event coincided with International Women’s Day (“It wasn’t planned like that, it just happened”). Colour events and promotional materials also regularly talk about empowerment. That empowerment, however, has aspects with which feminists might find themselves at odds. Bobbie cautions that “being a woman of strong conviction must not be confused with misguided feminism,” which involves “women trying to be men, when God created them women.”

In the blurb for her two-CD set *She Loves and Values Her Femininity*, Bobbie Houston explains:

> Femininity—the quality or nature of being a woman—is created and purposed by the Father to compliment [sic] the strength of masculinity . . . we need to value and celebrate Heaven-breathed womanhood in all its beauty, softness, vulnerability and tenderness. . . . Godly femininity can be wonderfully disarming and significantly powerful in its contribution to the Body of Christ. It is no wonder that throughout the ages femininity has faced unrelenting attack, leaving many women ashamed and confused about this God-given gift.

Treading a careful line between appreciation of feminism’s achievements and

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26 Ibid.
28 Houston, *I’ll Have What She’s Having*, 159.
29 Bobbie Houston, Catrina Henderson, Betty Johnson, Donna Crouch, and Andi Andrew, *She Loves and Values Her Femininity* (Australia: Hillsong Leadership Ministries, 2007).
rejection of its ideology, she lamented at Colour 2006 that “many women do not like men, sadly with good reason. Many women’s suffering is at the hand of men. But I do not want this conference to be . . . men-bashing. If we begin to look remotely feminist . . . then we are on the wrong track.” In a sermon preached to a weekly women’s meeting in late 2007 and broadcast online, Bobbie asserted that her message is “not feminist in nature, not feminist in the negative sense”:

For many women on the earth [feminism’s] cause has been birthed out of incredible pain and despair. In many ways you and I are living the fruit of it. And it’s easy for you and I as believers to be judgemental about that whole feminist thing and . . . I don’t want to do that because I don’t want to lessen a person’s pain, their despair . . . so we’re gonna be wise with this.

She called for Hillsong women to build a “sisterhood,” even though “that word has been used a lot in the feminist movement”: “The essence of the feminist argument . . . is equality with men. . . . But for us, who live in the kingdom of God, who’ve been born again into the truth and the wonder of almighty God, that’s already been purchased. . . . We are . . . seeking to bring back balance and order.”

**Sex, Submission, and Cosmic Order**

Hillsong’s message of gender complementarity leaves unclear whether women’s desired other is a husband or God. The theme of God as ideal husband is not unusual in evangelical women’s literature, but at Hillsong the sexual connotations can be unusually explicit. As Colour 2007 concluded, a screen across the stage lit up with the words (from Gen 2:23) “And she shall be called . . . Woman!” as the participants were showered with confetti and balloons, while the sound system blasted Frankie Valli’s “I Love You Baby.” The celebratory atmosphere underscored Colour’s mission to “place a value upon womanhood,” but the kind of value implied in the song—”You’d be like heaven to touch . . . the sight of you leaves me weak . . . I need you, baby, to warm the lonely night”—emphasizes women’s sexual value to men (particularly given Hillsong’s rigidly heteronormative framework). But not only to men: Hillsong women are exhorted to “fall in love with your creator. . . . Let Jesus Christ be all over you. Let Him be in your life, your mouth, your dance, your step.”


32 Houston, *I’ll Have What She’s Having*, 221.
scene in the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, Houston urges her readers not to "settle for a fake experience, let's go for the genuine article."  

Houston has described God addressing her as "sweetheart," "darling," and "my love." Speakers at Hillsong women's events often refer to Jesus as "the most important man in my life" or "the love of my life." According to Hillsong youth pastor Donna Crouch: "Whether you're married or single, you can know Jesus as your husband. You can have the hottest and most rocking marriage. You don't need men's affirmation because you have that from Jesus—a link with Jesus that only women can have." To another Hillsong leader, God whispered: "'Hey, babe, stop chasing men and start chasing me, it's much more fun!' Ever since, 'God is my husband, my main man.'"35

Where women desire God as their (divine) other, Hillsong men's relationship to God is more by identification, a theme disseminated through men's groups, courses, and conferences. In his 2006 Fathers' Day sermon, Brian Houston preached that fathers "have a great model in God," while sons "have a model in Jesus." For mothers, by contrast, God is not a role model but a substitute male who steps in when necessary to fill a gap. Bobbie Houston described a mother suddenly abandoned by her husband who "took hold of God and His grace. She felt Heaven's response, 'I'll be your child's father, I'll fill the gap in his life, trust Me.'"36

Both sexes can attend courses such as the eight-week "Wild at Heart," which "invites men to recover their masculine heart, defined in the image of a passionate God and invites women to discover the secret of a man's soul and to delight in the strength and wildness men were created to offer." The course uses John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, which argues that "God created men to be dangerous," while churches present a "feminized Jesus" and mistakenly turn dangerous men into "nice guys." Men must rediscover the dreams they entertained as little boys: "A Battle to Fight," "A Beauty to Rescue," and "An Adventure to Live."37

**Princess Theology**

Such statements—God as a woman's "main man," while human men fight battles—hint that male headship and female submission apply in some bigger arena than the domestic. Its significance for actual men and women is

33 Ibid., 56–57.
34 Ibid., 91, 100.
35 Houston, "Femininity."
36 Houston, *I'll Have What She's Having*, 117.
to demonstrate “healthy complementarity” as a step to restoring the damaged divine order.

Colour 2005 was advertised by a seventeen-page glossy-white brochure embellished with silver glitter and images of tiaras and flowers. Its front cover announced, “For the love of a princess he came, from heaven to earth he came,” while billboards on major highways proclaimed, “Hey, Princess! Heaven believes in you and so do we.” Though subsequent conferences took different themes, the princess motif remained. At Colour 2008 and 2009, a number of participants wore plastic tiaras. The many stalls sold T-shirts with slogans like “Daughter of the King” and “Warrior Princess Daughter,” some decorated with diamante-studded tiara and sword. Friends greeted one another: “G’day, Princess!” After massaging my hands with perfumed body butter, a Shine facilitator asked, “How was that, Princess?” Graduates from Mercy Ministries Australia, a Hillsong-linked crisis program for teenage girls and young women, received a Tiffany bracelet with a heart charm engraved with a Bible verse on one side and “Forever a Princess” on the other.38 Tanya Levin’s memoir People in Glass Houses: An Insider’s Story of Life In and Out of Hillsong recalls that, as her relationship with the church was souring, she received a seemingly automatically generated card: “Happy birthday, Princess!”39

Hand-in-hand with Hillsong’s emphasis on conventional beauty goes an emphasis on youth. Bobbie Houston invariably addresses her audiences as “girls,” “chicks,” or “girlfriends.” Participants in Colour 2008 received preconference materials addressing us as “chicky babes.” The princess image is similarly infantilizing. Little girls dress up as princesses, read fairy tales about princesses, and envisage passively awaiting their prince. Princess-themed merchandise (including Barbie’s many princess incarnations and Disney’s multibillion-dollar princess line) is marketed to girls ages three to seven. Once girls are old enough to imagine and pursue their own projects, they usually outgrow the princess fantasy.

Hillsong’s princess theme has become sufficiently pervasive for some critical Pentecostal theologians to talk about “princess theology.” Jacquie Grey, the academic dean at Alphacrucis Bible College in Sydney, argues that Hillsong’s princess theology promotes “idolisation of the physical body” and consequent self-loathing of women who “fall short of the glory of their god.” Not only does “princess theology” emphasize a particular, capitalist version of feminine beauty, Grey argues, but it implies passivity—the princess waiting to be rescued by her

38 Mercy Ministries Australia closed in 2009, following allegations of medical neglect and an adverse finding by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.
39 Tanya Levin, People in Glass Houses: An Insider’s Story of Life In and Out of Hillsong (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2007), 265.
prince. It undermines self-worth “through the conceptualisation of a princess in medieval terms of commodity in the currency of territorial feudalism.”

Princess theology goes along with an intense focus on physical presentation, which reflects commercial versions of beauty. Colour conferences feature “pamper” stalls, decorated to resemble the cosmetic counters of an upmarket department store, offering makeup, manicures, and hairstyling. Visiting speakers exhort women to “turn to the person next to you and say, ‘You’re the best-looking person I’ve seen all day,’ or, ‘You’re looking skinnier by the minute.’” The aim is to build women’s self-esteem. The consequent “empowerment” may be undercut, however, by other aspects of the “beauty” message: “How are you going to do anything that just might surprise your man when you need a hydraulic crane just to turn over in bed? You . . . might be happy with your weight—but is your husband happy with your weight?”

The princess image, combining vulnerability, beauty, Disney-style commercialism, and childhood, encapsulates several features of what feminists like Angela McRobbie and Sarah Projansky identify as a partly ironic but ultimately regressive postfeminist “girl discourse.”

Prosperity

Notwithstanding its impeccably manicured princess awaiting and then submitting to her prince, Hillsong has female preachers and worship leaders. An earlier version of the Colour Sisterhood webpage had a section entitled “Working Sista’s,” which announced, “We love it that women work and are pursuing the call of God on their lives! As a Working Sista you are a vital part of the Hillsong Sisterhood adventure.” “Working Sista’s,” unable to get to the weekday women’s meetings, were invited to buy recordings.

And women in paid work can buy other things. The “prosperity gospel” template is far less prominent in the women’s program than at mixed and men’s events; indeed, I found only one reference to wealth or prosperity in any of Bobbie Houston’s preaching or that of other speakers at Hillsong women’s events. Unlike their husbands, women are not urged to make money, but to spend it—on clothes, makeovers, diet, and exercise.

41 Bobbie Houston, She Loves and Values Her Sexuality! (Australia: Hillsong Leadership Ministries, 2004).
Women should also spend money at church. Women’s giving is no less supernaturally interpreted than in the general prosperity gospel investment model; but the returns are of a different order. The first daily offering at Colour 2008 was introduced with a warning against the “enemy,” who needs constant repulsion, while the forces arrayed against him require constant replenishment: “There is an enemy of our souls, a siege is laid against us. But he trembles when we pray, and when we give. The sisterhood is an untapped prayer force and financial force. When we [women] rise up, there will be a rebuke in the heavens for the devourer. So the offering is critical.”

Warrior Princesses Dress for Combat

The themes of gender complementarity, female submission, male headship, and princess theology might be expected to play out in relationships between husbands and wives. To an extent, they do, particularly with respect to the hierarchically ordered pastor couple and advice to women living with domestic conflict or violence. However, these themes also fit a larger vision.

Hillsong, and the Australian Christian Churches, belong to a particularly politically activist worldwide movement, known variously as Pentecostal Third Wave or New Apostolic Reformation. The movement’s rejection of congregational democracy in favor of theocratic leadership reflects a wider authoritarianism. During the 1990s, dominion theology emerged as an umbrella term for a collection of diverse theological views sharing the idea that Christians have a responsibility to take control of political institutions, running them according to (a particular conception of) divine law. As early as 1985, US evangelist (and now Left Behind—“over 65 million copies sold”—publishing sensation) Tim LaHaye set out a program for dominion before the then-estimated 27.8 million television audience of Pat Robertson’s 700 Club: if “every Bible believing church—all 110,000—decided to . . . raise up one person to run for public office and win,” then “we would have more Christians in office than there are positions.”

In a much-quoted passage, Presbyterian theologian George Grant, again in America, spelled out:

Christians have an obligation, a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ—to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness.

But it is dominion we are after. Not just a voice.
It is dominion we are after. Not just influence.

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It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time.
It is dominion we are after.
World conquest. That's what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish. . . . And we must never settle for anything less.47

The dominionist flavor in Hillsong's women's programs hints at future rule by Christian men and women as the final fulfilment of its present-day authoritarian ethos, in which God rules through hierarchical structures in church and family.

This theme is more submerged in Hillsong's teaching directed to men, and to the entire congregation, than it is in its teaching to women. In Hillsong's early years, apocalyptic themes and end-times expectations rang through all the church’s teaching. As the church gentrified and its leaders moved farther into the corridors of mainstream political and business power, however, such confrontingly countercultural language became an impediment to further growth and influence, and was quietly dropped.48 These days, dominionist keywords and catchphrases can be easily missed among Hillsong's more prominent references to personal self-transformation, motivation, self-belief, and prosperity—with a notable exception. Explicitly apocalyptic language, with a dominionist flavor, is regularly heard at women's events. Bobbie Houston preached to participants at Colour 2005: “If we are going to . . . be at the frontline of what God is doing on the earth . . . we need empowerment, . . . we need authority. We need to rise up warrior princess daughters. It's about authority.”49

But not authority over husbands; on the contrary, a proper appreciation of hierarchical complementarity is what fits a Christian couple to take dominion: “There is an evil one who does not want men and women functioning in healthy complementary roles. . . . He wants the conflict between us to remain so we will continue to wrestle each other for power and position. . . . If men and women get this right and learn how to complement and complete each other, then everyone and everything under their dominion will be benefited.”50 Bobbie Houston repeated at Colour 2008 that “in Genesis, God empowered us to take dominion,” a reference to Gen 1:26, in which God promises the soon-to-be-created humans “dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” Donna Crouch explained that men and women are part of God’s “created order . . . a team, to rule and conquer and enjoy this beautiful earth that he gave us.”51

51 Houston, “Femininity.”
Bobbie Houston’s books and sermons often refer to the approaching “end-time harvest” of conversions in a worldwide revival, and often employ militaristic images of impending conflict. One T-shirt prominent in Colour stalls, alongside the sword-and-tiara motifs, shows a khaki image of a lean, muscular woman lacing her boots, superimposed with the words “Troops gathering.”

Houston portrays women’s mobilization as crucial to the fulfilment of end-time prophecies. She told Colour 200: “There’s urgency in the hour. Some men don’t get it [about women’s abilities] but that shouldn’t stop us preparing... So we rise up, hold ourselves ready, for when the men look around and notice.” She recounted how, after preaching about women’s mobilization on a previous occasion, she was approached by a tearful Jane Evans, wife of Ashley Evans (senior pastor of an Adelaide megachurch and cofounder of the conservative political party Family First), saying: “Bobbie, God gave me this vision, and you got up and preached it. I saw this valley, and the army of God gathering, gathering, gathering.” Jane Evans saw herself standing behind the army, “and at the forefront was Jesus Christ, our commander in chief, and the army of God was gathering, gathering.” Evans said, “Lord, there’s movement, but there’s not enough movement,” to which Jesus replied, “Yes, Jane, because I’m waiting for my women.” Houston concluded her recounting of the vision: “So we have to be diligent and prepare... So I’ll just do whatever it takes to be beautiful and available, feminine, gorgeous.”

Leaving aside speculation about theo-erotic fantasy, being gorgeously available for Jesus’s army is the other side of Hillsong’s emphasis on women’s submission to men. Both are parts of a fairly elaborate theology that emphasizes power, submission, and the eventual cosmic triumph of Christians over non-Christians.

Authority as warrior princesses is what compensates Hillsong women (at least rhetorically) for adopting “right submission.” If submitting to one’s husband sounds disempowering, “healthily complementary” Christian couples under the husband’s headship are a crucial component of God’s strictly hierarchic creation. Maintaining right relationships between the component parts is a necessary precondition for the “end-time harvest,” ushering in an era of Christian dominion. Submission is a temporary trade-off in return for Christian couples ultimately attaining world domination hand-in-hand.

In the meantime, wives submit to husbands, laity submit to pastors, and junior pastors submit to senior pastors. A set of three CDs on leadership, featuring Christine Caine from Hillsong’s ministry team, begins by advising potential leaders on “how to stay submitted to your leaders.” Though she and her husband run their own Equip and Empower Ministries, Caine emphasises that her leadership is only possible through “staying submitted” to the Houstons. As Bobbie Houston explains:

EVERY CHURCH HAS A SPIRITUAL HEAD. If you understand God's delegated authority and how the Body of Christ works in our individual churches, then you will understand that the spiritual head, is the Senior Pastor and his partner... They are appointed by God to be shepherds over your soul. If sheep didn't need shepherds, God would have created it differently. Sheep are gorgeous but can be incredibly vulnerable sometimes... they are very funny creatures to watch. They're born to follow. If one jumps, they all jump. If they fall over they often can't get up. They just lie there with their cute little hoofs in the air, looking helpless. They need love, care, green pasture and they need to be led with strength.3

Because female submission, along with eventual Christian conquest, is justified much more openly in Hillsong's women's program than in its generic and men's programs, Bobbie Houston's "princess" dicta allow insights into how Hillsong's underlying authoritarian teleology works as a theology for this present world. The theme of male headship fits less neatly into domestic relationships than into a far-reaching authoritarian order. Irrespective of its realization in individual members' marriages, the megachurch's male-female functionalism attaches to the overarching, neoconservative ideology that became especially visible during the so-called culture wars.

**Sex, Power, and God's Sweethearts**

Hillsong demands compulsory heterosexuality. The church has run courses to “cure” homosexuals; lesbian inclinations were “treated” in the Hillsong-aligned Mercy Ministries; and Hillsong regularly hosts guest speakers from the international “ex-gay” movement such as former transsexual Sy Rogers. Former Assemblies of God pastor Anthony Venn-Brown, whose ministry included Hills Christian Life Centre (as Hillsong was then known), was removed from ministry when he came out as gay. His autobiography describes his unsuccessful struggles in a church that regards homosexuality variously as a sin to repent or an illness to heal.4

Hillsong's differentially gendered relationship to the divine is problematic for both sexes. For heterosexual men, in such an intensely homophobic environment, devoting themselves to such a thoroughly gendered God raises the problem of their potential feminization, similar to the problem of homoerotic theology identified by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, in which men are exhorted to “love, in ways that are imagined erotically and sensually, a male deity.”5

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3 Houston, *I’ll Have What She’s Having*, 140–41.
Hillsong’s solution to men loving a male God is to position men ever-closer to divinity. The more men identify as co-leaders in the “image of a passionate [male] God,” the smaller their risk of being feminized through their devotion.

Hillsong women experience a different set of tensions. These arise from the confluence of messages of compulsory heterosexuality, gender complementarity, a commercial interpretation of femininity, and women’s positioning as a male God’s desired “sweetheart.” Appropriating the language of feminist empowerment to an ideology of “right submission” and a commercial (and product-driven) standard of beauty reinforces rather than challenges the view of women presented in advertising and popular culture.

The complex interplay of power and submission in Hillsong’s teaching to women about gender needs to be considered not only in relation to its teaching to men about gender and to women about other issues but also in the light of the tensions and anxieties that surround twenty-first century urban Western women’s status in secular culture.

Hillsong was founded in 1983 and rose to national prominence during the 1980s and 1990s antifeminist backlash.66 Upheavals in popular culture pointed in contradictory directions. On one hand, the controversy generated by books like Katie Roiphe’s *The Morning After* suggested that feminism had made women overly puritanical.67 On the other hand, cultural critics remarked on the rise of “raunch culture,” in which women willingly, and with varying degrees of irony, embraced symbols of their own sexual oppression, from Playboy insignia to clothes with deliberately sexualizing slogans.

Women’s sexuality, autonomy, and authority remain fraught both within and outside megachurch auditoriums. In relation to gender, as in several other respects, megachurch culture reflects, amplifies, and sanctifies dynamics present in the surrounding culture.68 Far from acting as a boundary marker differentiating conservative evangelicals and Pentecostals from their secular communities, Hillsong’s teaching on gender reproduces and intensifies the tensions inscribed in the wider culture. The pressure to be—and, even more, to look—perfect, while living out complex interplays of submission, autonomy, and authority, gives a theological gloss to many women’s everyday experience. Hillsong’s teaching on gender, apparently out of step with an Australia celebrating its first female prime minister and governor-general, in fact resonates effectively with the tensions and strains about women’s roles and expectations that suffuse that wider culture. The resonance between the complicated and ambiguous

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religious and secular anxieties about women’s role and status—where each set of messages amplifies the other without ever having to articulate exactly what is implied—invests moves in the political arena toward restricting women’s agency not just with an aura of sanctity but also with the hint that fewer choices and more submission might, after all, be the way to empowerment.