

Appendix 1: Domestic Abuse and the Bible

God's Purpose for Marriage

The perpetration of domestic abuse is a most heinous crime in any context, but it is particularly so when it occurs within the Church in Christian homes. Abuse within marriage and the family fundamentally violates the purpose for which they were instituted. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God with the intention that they would reflect His image not only to one another, but to their posterity. The primary purpose of marriage and family is to transmit God's values from generation to generation so that He would remain known (see John 17:3). The reason why domestic abuse is such a heinous sin is that it not only warps individuals' concept of themselves, but it profoundly distorts the image of God for both victims and perpetrators.

The Great Danger of Emotional & Psychological abuse in Religious Communities

Abuse manifests itself in many ways, but it cuts particularly deep wounds in the form of spiritual abuse. Abuse of any type occurs when someone has power over another and uses that power to harm. Emotional & psychological abuse happens when a person with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit another. In this context, the Bible itself can become an effective weapon in the hands of an abuser. History is replete with the misuse of the Scripture to justify evil. This was true of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. It was true of those who enslaved African men, women and children. It was true of those who sought to deny women suffrage, and it is true of domestic abusers who distort biblical passages to justify their abuse of power. Abuse in Christian communities involves using the principles of evil in the name of Christ. C S Lewis said it well when he penned "Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst" (Reflections on the Psalms, 31-32).

The seriousness of this form of abuse is indicated by the fact that Jesus spent more time challenging spiritual abuse than any other social problem of His day. He berated the leaders of the church stating, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in (Matthew 23:13). Jesus indicates here that one of the primary problems with spiritual abuse is that it can lead to people rejecting the church and more importantly, rejecting God. Abusers who claim to be Christians present a false view of God and a false way of serving Him.

The Misapplication of the Bible

The Bible has been wielded by abusers to teach that men are superior to women (Gen 1&2); men are more intelligent (1 Tim 2:8-15); the woman's place is in the home (Titus 2:3-5); wives must be subservient (Eph 5:22-33); husband know best (1 Cor 14:33-36); and wives have no right to refuse sex (1 Cor 7:5). While theologians have and will continue to debate the real meaning and application of these passages, any interpretation of God's Word must be consistent with His character of love, grace and justice.

Those who assert that wives should submit to their husbands tend not to emphasise the command to, "love your wives, and do not be harsh with them" (Colossians 3:19). It is one thing to assert that the husband is the head of the wife, and that she should subject to him in all things, but the context of the passage is that husbands should "love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her . . . so husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies" (Ephesians 5:25-31). The standard by which husbands are to treat their wives, is the self-sacrificing love of Jesus. Husbands who abuse their wives forfeit the privilege of headship in marriage. Ellen White comments that, "Neither the husband nor the wife should attempt to exercise over the other an arbitrary control . . . Entire submission is to be made only to the Lord Jesus Christ . . . When husbands require the complete subjection of their wives . . . they place their wives in a position contrary to the scripture" (The Adventist Home, 118-119). However we interpret the concept of biblical headship and submission, it cannot include force, coercion, intimidation, and violence.

Church leaders may also be guilty of unwitting complicity with abusers by misapplying the biblical theology of suffering. 1 Peter admonishes believers to be submissive to abusive authority (2:18-20), to follow Christ's example of quiet suffering (2:21-22), and to share joyfully in Christ's suffering (4:13). It is therefore, not uncommon for survivors of abuse to be told that their suffering is God's will for their lives and if they just submit and endure, then God will reward their faith. Such rationale is both erroneous and dangerous in the context of domestic abuse. It gives licence to perpetrators to abuse their spouses and disempowers the sufferer from acting in their own best interest. There is nothing redemptive in suffering in and of itself. There is nothing virtuous or meritorious in affliction if you can legitimately escape it. It is appropriate to flee persecution (Matt 10:23). Jesus Himself avoided unnecessary persecution (Luke 4:29-30; John 11:53). Many survivors feel that their marriage vow obligates them to endure every physical and emotional violation of their humanity. However, they have the right to protect themselves from harm and the husband who abandons Christ-like headship also forfeits the right to covenant privilege. Every healthy relationship, including marriage, requires healthy boundaries with unsafe people.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness, repentance and new life in Christ are central to the gospel, but some simplistic understandings, or misunderstandings, of forgiveness have prompted actions and statements that have caused further harm and damage to those who have experienced abuse. For example, the idea that forgiveness involves forgetting persists, but a new start does not mean that the past is forgotten and there are no consequences. Indeed, forgiveness may well mean that offenders have a greater sense of obligation than before, as they are encouraged to recognise and take responsibility for the damage, profound harm and trauma that resulted from their actions. Repentance does not mean that someone is wholly reformed, previous patterns of behaviour have been left behind, or there is no risk of reoffending. Through God's grace there is the possibility of change for all, but for trust to be re-established, change has to be demonstrated in the context of a community that exercises discipline and demands accountability. Safeguarding processes are part of this.

Abusers do violence to the Bible in order to do violence against their spouse. Our response to the challenge of domestic abuse can only be as effective of our understanding of the problem and the remedies we provide for survivors of abuse can only be as effective as the theology that underpins them. It is the responsibility of the church to recover the true meaning of the Bible. Its role is to exemplify the ministry of Jesus who declared, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18). God is on the side of the oppressed and we should be too, to "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; for the rights of all who are destitute" (Proverbs 31:8).