

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WITHIN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES

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The Church must not 'sleep' while its own church families struggle with family violence. It must rise up to directly confront and battle against the problem of family violent... Otherwise, family violence will continue to destroy families for generations to come.¹

In today's world, and in today's church, we are constantly faced by a range of ethical issues which demand our attention and our response. One such issue which affects a devastating number of families globally is domestic violence. While it is easy to say that domestic violence is wrong, and is therefore categorised as unethical behaviour, what is less clear is how Christians should respond to the reality of domestic violence. Although violence against children is a very serious subject, this paper will specifically focus on violence suffered by women at the hands of their husbands within Christian homes, and though there are a number of reasons why violence may be present in any marriage or romantic partnership, this paper will look particularly at Christian doctrines or views that have been used to perpetuate violence against women within the context of Christian marriages.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE STATISTICS

In New Zealand, it is estimated that in their lifetime, 1 in 3 women will experience some form of sexual or physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner, and 1 in 2 women will experience psychological or emotional abuse.² This "pattern of violence against women that's broad and deep and horrific" needs to be taken seriously in the church, because churches are not exempt from the horrors of domestic violence.³ Although it is certainly true that men are sometimes the victims of abuse at the hands of women, this is nowhere near the norm.⁴ For example, in New Zealand between 2009 and 2012, 76% percent of people killed in cases of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

¹ Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko, *Christian Faith and Family Violence: A Report for Samoan Christians in New Zealand* (Dunedin: University of Otago, 2016), 8.

² Ministry of Social Development, "Statistics," *It's Not OK*, October 19, 2017, <http://areyouok.org.nz/family-violence/statistics/>.

³ Rebecca Solnit, "The Longest War," in *Men Explain Things to Me: And Other Essays* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 20; Nancy Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

⁴ Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 1

were women, while 24% were men.⁵ Solnit asserts that “Violence doesn’t have a race, a class, a religion, or a nationality, but it does have a gender.”⁶ In other words, while there is no obvious correlation between violence and race, class, religion or nationality, there is one undeniable pattern when it comes to violence: women are far more likely to be the victims of violence than men are, and men are far more likely to be batterers than women are.

WHAT IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE?

New Zealand’s Domestic Violence Act 1995 defines domestic violence as “violence against [a] person by any other person with whom that person is, or has been, in a domestic relationship.”⁷ The term “violence” is taken to include abuse of physical, sexual and psychological natures.⁸ This definition importantly highlights the fact that abuse does not have to be physical to be considered violence. Dr. Nancy Nason-Clark, a professor of sociology in Canada who has been researching the relationship between abuse and religious faith for almost 30 years, defines domestic violence as “all forms of violent or abusive behaviour that occur within intimate relationships,” including not only physical violence, but also “wilful neglect and sexual, emotional, or financial abuse as well as threats of intended aggressive acts.”⁹ A common thread that runs through all types of violence, Nason-Clark states, is “the abuse of power and control to hurt, shame, or humiliate another person.”¹⁰ Hester et al similarly describe domestic violence as “any violent or abusive behaviour (whether physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, verbal, financial, etc.) that is used by one person to control and dominate another with whom they have or have had a relationship.”¹¹ Likewise, Cooper-White defines domestic violence as “behavior that *intimidates and controls the battered partner, for the purpose of establishing and maintaining authority...* its aim is not primarily to discharge anger or stress, but to assert ownership and enforce control.”¹² A final definition states that “violence is first of all authoritarian. It begins with this premise: I have the right to control you.”¹³ It appears then that the most fundamental characteristic of domestic violence is not any

⁵ Ministry of Social Development, “Statistics”; “Intimate Partner Abuse” and “Intimate Partner Violence” refer to specific instances of domestic violence in which the abuser and victim are romantic partners.

⁶ Solnit, “The Longest War,” 21.

⁷ Ministry of Justice, *Domestic Violence Act*, 1995, 13.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nancy Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Marianne Hester, Chris Pearson, and Nicola Harwin, eds., *Making an Impact: Children and Domestic Violence: A Reader* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 18.

¹² Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 126.

¹³ Solnit, “The Longest War,” 27.

one particular type of action, but a particular attitude and intention to assert control in order to maintain authority. Any behaviour or action performed in service of asserting control and maintaining authority invariably becomes violent in some shape or form. Violence is about control.

IS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE REALLY A BIG PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH TODAY?

Given the emphasis on holiness and growing in Christlikeness that is prominent in the New Testament, one might assume that issues like domestic violence would be less common in Christian homes than in secular ones. Biblical imperatives to “love one another” (John 13:34) and “so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18), not to mention the various passages which deal specifically with marriage, should make an impact on the rates of Intimate Partner Violence within Christian marriages. However, as much as we would like to say that the church is free of this particular evil, this simply is not the case: “spiritual commitment, church attendance, personal piety, and religious traditions do not in and of themselves protect a woman from becoming a victim of her husband’s rage, nor do they ensure that a husband will always deal with his anger in socially and religiously acceptable ways.”¹⁴ In one study commissioned by New Zealand’s Crime and Justice Research Centre, the researchers questioned whether it is really possible to estimate the true prevalence of violence in New Zealand, or indeed in any setting, since domestic violence is often viewed as a sensitive and private family matter, and as a result, often remains locked behind closed doors.¹⁵ This is also true in the church. In fact, it may be even harder to determine the true prevalence of domestic violence within Christian homes due to a value in the church of happy, healthy family life, which can lead to a “strong but subtle pressure on families to maintain the appearance of tranquillity, even when the home is a pressure cooker of tension and abuse.”¹⁶

VIEWS OF WOMEN THAT HAVE PERPETUATED VIOLENCE

Submission

There are a number of ways in which the church has perpetuated the horrors of domestic violence. Certain teachings, while not causing domestic violence, have provided fertile soil in which violence,

¹⁴ Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 39.

¹⁵ Denise Lievore and Pat Mayhew, *The Scale and Nature of Family Violence in New Zealand: Review and Evaluation of Knowledge* (Wellington: Ministry of Social Development, 2007), 13.

¹⁶ Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 67.

a noxious weed, has been allowed to grow or persist unchecked.¹⁷ These weeds are further allowed to flourish by the misinterpretation and twisting of some of these teachings. One such teaching has to do with submission. Christian wives are taught to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18), and based on this instruction, many husbands have felt justified in exerting physical control by punishing their wives every time they perceived them to have stepped out of line.¹⁸ These women, after all, had been told to submit, and if their husbands believed that they were not in fact doing so, they were in violation of God's will. Wives are to submit. The Bible says so. Therefore, any refusal or failure to do so should be met with correction. Many husbands throughout Christian history have taken it upon themselves to "correct" their wives, believing it is their husbandly duty. For instance, one batterer described his belief that it was right for him to beat his wife in order to correct her lack of submission:

I thought it was right to beat her. I've never been the kind of person who hits for the sake of hitting. I've always had God on my side. I knew, I knew what was right to do, when she got too loose and wanted to take away the right to be the one to keep an eye on things and see that everything was done right. When she started taking control of things I had to beat her to put her in her place. It's perfectly clear, it says in the Bible too, the man is responsible for bringing the woman up.¹⁹

Among men who abuse their wives and call it "correction," there seems to be a belief that with the imperative for wives to submit to their husbands comes a command for husbands to correct their wives. In actual fact, corresponding to the instruction for wives to submit is the instruction for husbands not to correct, nor lead or discipline, but to *love* their wives (Eph. 5:25; Col. 3:19). Colossians 3:19 instructs husbands not simply to love their wives, but to "never treat them harshly."²⁰ Somehow, though, the instruction for wives to submit is much easier to dwell upon, and it is not uncommon for Christian men who do abuse their so-called insubordinate wives to quote verses like Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians 3:18 to justify their actions, fully believing that God is on their side.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Mercy Ah Siu-Maliko, *Christian Faith and Family Violence*, 19.

¹⁹ Eva Lundgren, *Feminist Theory and Violence Empiricism*, trans. Linda Schenck (Brookfield: Avebury, 1995), 245.

²⁰ Quoted from the NRSV.

²¹ Nancy E. Nienhuis, "Theological Reflections on Violence and Abuse," *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 50.1-2 (2005): 120.

Women as Morally Inferior

Related to the idea of submission is an attitude that sees the whole female gender as morally inferior to males. For centuries, Eve's part in the fall has been heralded as an indicator of some wickedness inherent in women that goes above and beyond the limits of regular human sin.²² Verses like 1 Timothy 2:14 are used as ammunition against women: "the woman was deceived and became a transgressor," not the man. Supposedly, the fact that Eve sinned first points to a moral deficiency that proves that all women have a greater propensity to sin than men do. The Early Church Father Tertullian clearly held this kind of belief:

Do you know that each of your women is an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age; the guilt must necessarily live, too. You are the gate of hell; you are the temptation of the forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law... you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not strong enough to attack. All too easily you destroyed the image of God, man. Because of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.²³

This kind of thinking in and of itself should be considered abusive, for it frames women as agents of the devil and places the heavy responsibility for the fall on their shoulders alone, while excusing Adam, who, according to Tertullian, the devil could not have led into sin without Eve's help.²⁴ When thinking of this sort is present, any lack of female submission may be seen as posing a significant danger to (male) society, and therefore, any action that keeps dangerous women in line will be viewed as a societal necessity.²⁵ We have come a long way in the two thousand years since the birth of the church, but sadly, the kind of thinking evidenced by early Christian thinkers like Tertullian still has a significant impact on how women are viewed and treated today. While most would never go so far as to say that women are agents of the devil, the fact that in many churches today men still tell women that a reason why they cannot preach or lead is that they cannot be trusted to correctly discern what God's word is saying reveals that the idea of women being morally inferior to men still has a hold on the church today.

²² Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 72–74.

²³ Tertullian, "The Apparel of Women," in *Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann (New York: The Fathers of the Church, 1959), 118.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Nienhuis, "Theological Reflections on Violence and Abuse," 119.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SUBMISSION AND ABOUT WOMEN?

Ephesians 5:21–33

One important passage used by Christian men as a justification for abuse is found in Ephesians 5. While abusers are correct in saying that this passage instructs wives to be submissive, this is only a tiny picture of how Ephesians 5:21–33 instructs wives *and* husbands to relate to one another. The first key verse to look at comes in 5:21, which comes one verse before the instruction for wives to submit. In verse 21, Paul instructs Christians to submit to *one another* out of reverence for Christ. This instruction sounds like a contradiction, since the word submission implies that there is some sort of hierarchy: the submitter places him or herself lower than the one to whom they submit.²⁶ Nevertheless, Paul instructs Christians to submit to one another, evoking an image of a perpetuate cycle of Christians serving one another. What Paul is getting at is that Christian relationships should be characterised by a mutual willingness to humbly and lovingly serve one another.²⁷ It is important to note that the submission here, as in the next verse, is not an enforced submission but a voluntary one: Paul instructs Christians that because of their relationship with and reverence for Christ, they should voluntarily choose to love and serve each other.²⁸

In verse 22, Paul gives the instruction that has been so tragically twisted by so many people throughout church history: wives, submit to your husbands. The idea of wives submitting to husbands was not counter-cultural for the first-century recipients of this letter, but the fact that Paul was not telling wives that they were subordinate to their husbands, but was instead instructing them to choose to submit themselves to their husbands certainly was.²⁹ In verses 23 and 24, Paul states that the submission of wives to their husbands should be like the submission of the church to Christ. At this point, we should probably ask what it looks like for the church to submit to Christ. Throughout the rest of his letter to the Ephesians leading up to 5:21–33, Paul gives Christians a number of instructions of how to live, some of which include leading lives worthy of their calling and striving for unity (4:1–3), speaking the truth in love and growing in the likeness of Christ (4:15), and putting on the new self (4:23–24), which is characterised by things like speaking truth, not letting anger lead to sin, choosing honest work and generosity over theft, speaking in ways that build up rather than tear down, and not being bitter, malicious, angry or slanderous, but instead being kind, tender-hearted and forgiving (4:25–32). In chapter 5, among other instructions,

²⁶ Lynn H. Cohick, *Ephesians* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 136.

²⁷ Peter S. Williamson and Mary Healy, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 157.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 155–56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

Christians are told to imitate God as beloved children, to live in love, to live as children of light and to be filled by the Spirit (5:1–2, 8, 18). These are a few examples of ways in which the church submits to Christ. It is noticeable that none of these instructions seeks to oppress the church in any way, nor is the church asked to be passive in its submission.³⁰ The particular instructions given in Ephesians paint the church as an active force committed to loving and serving Christ. Likewise, the way wives are instructed to behave towards their husbands is active and vibrant, characterised by values like unity, truth, encouragement, tenderness, kindness and forgiveness. Paul does not instruct wives to be doormats, but to actively choose to love and serve their husbands.

Meanwhile, husbands are also told to serve their wives, through sacrificial love (5:25–33). While Paul suggests that husbands' love for their wives should image Christ's love for the church, this is not what is seen in abusive relationships where submission is demanded. In fact, abusive behaviour that is motivated by a faulty view of submission dishonours Christ, because it reveals a complete lack of understanding of what Christ's love for the church looks like. Christ's love is sacrificial, not power-hungry, controlling and self-seeking.

John 13

Though not speaking specifically about submission, John 13 provides us with a beautiful example of what Jesus' love looks like and a wealth of insight about how Christians are to behave towards one another. First, in verses 1–15, Jesus washes his disciples' feet, choosing to take a position of great humility and service, before declaring that his disciples are to do the same for others. In these verses, Jesus provides his disciples with an example to follow of how to lovingly serve others. Witherington suggests that this account shows how Jesus' disciples "like Jesus, are called to be servants performing self-sacrificial deeds."³¹ Pride, an inclination to taking offense, and a desire to have one's way are simply incongruous with the kind of sacrificial, foot-washing love and humility which Jesus asks of his followers.

Later in the same chapter, Jesus gives his disciples a new commandment to love one another just as he has loved them (13:34). If we want to correctly understand the nature of the love Jesus commands in this verse, we must be careful not to read "Love one another" and then stop there. Jesus does not simply tell his disciples to love, he tells them what their love should look like: Their love should look like Jesus' love. As Köstenberger points out, loving one another was not a new concept: "What was new was Jesus' command for his disciples to love one another *as he has loved*

³⁰ Ibid., 161.

³¹ Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 237.

them—laying down their lives.”³² As with John 13:1-15, in 13:34-35, the kind of love which Jesus expects from his followers is an active, radical, self-sacrificial love. Jesus goes on to explain that by practicing such love, the disciples would signify to all looking on that it was Jesus who they followed (13:35). The imitation with one another of Jesus’ sacrificial love, which they had seen glimpses of and would soon see even more powerfully at the cross, would be a clear identifying feature of the community that follows and loves Jesus. Köstenberger comments that “This rule of self-sacrificial, self-giving, selfless love... will serve as the foundational ethic for the new messianic community.”³³ (John 13:34–35).

Returning to Ephesians, it is clear that the way Paul instructs husbands to interact with their wives is very similar to how Jesus instructs his disciples to interact with each other in John 13. In both cases, love is to be modelled after Jesus. Wives are instructed to submit to their husbands, but husbands are equally instructed to love their wives, and any attempt by husbands to love with their fists or with raised voices and threats simply does not imitate Jesus’ kind of love. McKnight suggests that Christians have become far too fixated on the word “submission,” giving the word more weight than it is meant to have rather than focusing on what it attempts to convey: that Christian marriages should be characterised by mutual love and service between husbands and wives.³⁴ Jobes likewise suggests that “When ‘submission’ of the wife becomes the central issue, the image of Christian marriage has already been distorted... marital love is understood as the resolve to live one’s entire life totally committed to the well-being of one’s spouse.”³⁵ Where mutual love and service is seen to be the dominant *modus operandi* of any Christian couple, conversations about “submission” never actually need to happen.³⁶ If either the husband or the wife acts in any kind of abusive way towards their spouse, it is because the culprit, whatever their gender, is not considering the needs of their spouse.³⁷

1 Peter 3:1-7

In 1 Peter 3:1-7, Peter gives instructions to women with unbelieving spouses before briefly addressing husbands about how they should relate to their wives (verse 7). In verses 1-4, Peter instructs women to be subject to their husbands (v. 1) and to have an inward beauty characterised

³² Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 423.

³³ Ibid., 423-24.

³⁴ Scot McKnight, *1 Peter*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 189.

³⁵ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 210.

³⁶ McKnight, *1 Peter*, 189.

³⁷ Ibid.

by a gentle and quiet spirit which pleases God, rather than an outward beauty characterised by ostentatious hair, jewellery and clothes (vv. 3–4). The reason Peter gives for why Christian wives should behave this way is that unbelieving husbands may come to know Christ as a result of seeing the way their Christian wives live (vv. 1–2). In the context of marriages between Christian wives and non-Christian husbands, submission serves a specific purpose: it is used as an evangelistic tool. Because verses 1–6 speak of non-Christian husbands, and because submission in these verses serves an evangelistic purpose, these verses cannot be used by Christian husbands to justify their demands that their wives submit. In a culture where submission of the wife is expected, quite likely, the conversion of a wife to Christianity would cause upheaval in the home, and may be perceived as rebellion against her husband.³⁸ Because Christianity was perceived in the first century as a social evil which disrupted the status quo, Peter instructs wives to submit to their husbands in order that these non-Christian husbands would have no complaint to raise against Christianity and may even come to faith themselves.³⁹

In Ephesians 5:21–33, we saw that when Paul gave an instruction for wives to submit to their husbands, he also gave an instruction for those husbands to love their wives. Peter similarly gives an instruction to wives, followed by an instruction to husbands.⁴⁰ In 1 Peter 3:7, Peter instructs believing husbands to be considerate of their wives in their shared lives and to show them honour, “since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life.” Far from naming women as inferior to men, Peter affirms the equal value of women as coheirs with men of the gracious gift of life.⁴¹

In the preceding passage (1 Peter 2:18–25) Peter had discussed Jesus as the example for Christian suffering, and in the following passage (1 Peter 3:8–22) he discusses suffering for doing right. The fact that these instructions to wives and then husbands are sandwiched between two passages about suffering has caused some to wonder if Peter intended to suggest that abused Christian women should stay with their abusive non-Christian husbands.⁴² However, Jobes points out that nothing in 1 Peter 3:1–6 explicitly speaks of domestic violence or of any kind of suffering, and that, in fact, verse 7 can be understood to include a prohibition against domestic violence.⁴³ In verse 7, Peter states that husbands should honour their wives “as the weaker sex,” which refers to the fact that, in most cases, the wife is physically weaker than her husband.⁴⁴ This does not point

³⁸ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 203.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 203–4.

⁴⁰ Note though that the “husbands” and “wives” addressed in this passage cannot be married to each other, since Peter is first addressing wives who have non-Christian husbands (vv. 1–6), before addressing Christian husbands (v. 7). It is not clear whether the husbands in verse 7 have Christian or non-Christian wives.

⁴¹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 207.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 206.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 206–7.

⁴⁴ McKnight, *1 Peter*, 186; Jobes, *1 Peter*, 209.

to any spiritual inferiority or deficiency.⁴⁵ It is probable, then, that when Peter speaks of “paying honour to the woman as the weaker sex,” he is indirectly teaching Christian men that they must not abuse their wives, who, after all, are “also heirs of the gracious gift of life.” After instructing husbands to treat their wives with consideration and honour, Peter closes verse 7 with the hope that “nothing will hinder your prayers,” implying that if husbands do become abusive, their prayers will not be heard by God.⁴⁶ This verse should be heard as encouragement to abused Christian wives, for it confirms the fact that the abuse they suffer is in no way sanctioned by God. Believing that God does not condone their abuse may be just what some battered wives need to gain the courage to leave abusive relationships.

Imago Dei

“If a God-idol is constructed in the image of those at the top of the power pyramid, then a vicious cycle is put into place in which subsequent generations of children are taught to believe that some people are more like God than others. Little girls grow up believing, mainly at an unconscious level, that they are created less in the image and likeness of God than their brothers.”⁴⁷

It is clear in the Bible that a special dignity and value is bestowed upon humankind. The New Testament is teeming with verses that point to the wonderful reality that Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God came, lived, died, was resurrected, and ascended to the right hand of the Father in order to reconcile sinful humans with the triune God. Early in Genesis, before the fall, the special value of humanity is made explicit in the fact that humans alone among creation are said to be created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). While some have argued that Eve, who “was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Tim. 2:14) sinned because she started out with some kind of moral deficiency, Genesis 1:27 gives no such impression.⁴⁸ In God’s image, the verse tells us, humanity was created in both male and female genders, and this implies that both genders are good and equally valued in God’s sight. However, the fall complicates matters. With sin, humans, both male and female, no longer image God as originally intended.

This image of God would have been lost to humanity forever if not for Jesus Christ. Cortez states that “As the one who is both fully human and fully divine, the true image of God, the redeemer of humanity, and the teleological focus of all creation, the mystery of humanity finds its most complete manifestation in Jesus.”⁴⁹ Humanity is redeemed, perfected, and most completely expressed in Jesus Christ, the only example of human life lived sinlessly, and therefore, the only

⁴⁵ McKnight, *1 Peter*, 186; Jobes, *1 Peter*, 209

⁴⁶ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 209.

⁴⁷ Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, 62.

⁴⁸ Nienhuis, “Theological Reflections on Violence and Abuse,” 115–16.

⁴⁹ Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 5.

human who could represent humanity before God. The image of God is undistorted in Jesus because of his sinless perfection, and through the Spirit, is shared with all who are in Christ, regardless of gender.

Galatians 3:28

Galatians 3:28 offers hope to women who have been told, implicitly or explicitly, that their value is somehow less than that of a man, or that they are somehow morally inferior. In Galatians 3:28, Paul states that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” What Paul is advocating here is not that gender, class or ethnicity no longer exist, but that these distinctions between people make no difference to one’s standing in Christ. In other words, females as well as males have equal access to Jesus and to salvation.

Complicity

While we may suggest that where Christian men become batterers, the fault lies with their own misunderstanding of the Bible and of how God truly wants men and women to relate, and possibly even with their lack of a true relationship with Jesus Christ, in many cases, the church has consistently failed to explicitly speak out against domestic violence. Although domestic violence is prevalent in the church, and many pastors claim to have met with men and women in their congregations for whom domestic violence is a reality, many churchgoers have never heard a sermon which directly addresses this issue, which means that they have probably never heard their pastors and preachers utter the words: domestic violence is wrong.⁵⁰ In failing to publicly call out domestic violence and name it as sin even though they know it is happening in their congregations, pastors and other Christians leaders may be complicit in the perpetuation of this evil.

In 1 Samuel 3:1–15, Samuel was called by God as he slept in the temple, and in verses 11–14, he received revelation from God that the priest Eli’s house would be judged because of the wickedness of his sons. Verse 13 is an important verse which we should consider when it comes to domestic violence, or any other evil within our churches which we fail to call out and rebuke: God tells Samuel, “I have told [Eli] that I am about judge his house forever for the iniquity *which he knew*, because his sons brought a curse on themselves *and he did not rebuke them*” (Emphasis mine). Eli failed to speak out against evils that he knew about, and as a result, he became complicit in that

⁵⁰ Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 153.

evil. God's intention to punish not only Eli's sons but Eli's whole family line makes it incredibly clear that this kind of complicity is evil in God's sight.

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT ABUSED WOMEN IN THE CHURCH?⁵¹

[T]here is not as much church-sponsored, concrete help for divided families in the weekly routine of church life as there is ongoing support for healthy families. Most church programs are geared to intact, nuclear families with children, despite the fact that growing numbers of the members do not experience life in this way... The assistance, then, that hurting, fearful abused women need may not be as forthcoming from the institutional church, or even the clergy, as one might expect or hope.⁵²

When thinking about domestic violence in the church, there are at least two levels which we need to address. First, because we do not want to settle for abuse and accept it as a simple fact of life, we must think about prevention methods to raise awareness about domestic violence in order to combat faulty thinking that may lead to violence long before violence itself ever rears its ugly head. Second, because abuse already exists in marriages in our congregations, whether we are currently aware of affected couples and families or not, we also need plans in place about how to respond to and support domestic violence victims, should they come forward in search of help.

Prevention—Let's Talk about Domestic Violence

The first and most prominent tool in our prevention toolbox is our words. Many abused women have expressed a longing that church communities will simply speak out loud about domestic violence, publicly denouncing it and raising awareness.⁵³ Two words are key: we must speak *publicly*, and we must *denounce* domestic violence. If we want to prevent domestic violence in our congregations, then we must talk about it openly and often, and make it clear to all who are listening that domestic violence is never condoned or tolerated. It is crucial that we do not shrink back from talking about this issue, for violence "flourishes most when it is ignored, minimized, or misunderstood."⁵⁴ Failure to speak out will leave victims isolated, it will leave abusers unimpeded, and it will leave everyone else ignorant. We have serious blind-spots in the church where domestic

⁵¹ In some cases, abusers will come forward seeking support to break their abusive habits. It is also possible that husbands will be victims of abuse at the hands of their wives. However, to avoid muddying the water, this implementation plan focuses on how to respond to and support female victims of domestic violence.

⁵² Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 110.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵⁴ Nancy Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 1.

violence is concerned, with many Christians, whether by refusal or by ignorance, not believing that domestic violence really is a major problem within church communities.⁵⁵ Therefore, we need to speak not only publicly about violence, but also clearly, making it evident to our congregations that it is a reality in church which needs to be addressed, that it is not acceptable, that it is not God's will, and that it is not a husband's prerogative.

We should use our words to speak out against domestic violence in a number of different contexts. Firstly, we should be regularly preaching sermons which explicitly address the topic of domestic violence. Repetition is an incredibly useful learning tool, and if we want our congregations to truly internalise the message that domestic violence goes against God's will, then we should be willing to preach that fact often. Though many pastors claim that they specifically address the issue of wife beating through sermons, "very few women parishioners seem able to recall such sermons."⁵⁶ While this could simply indicate poor memory, it may also indicate that pastors believe they are giving the issue of wife-beating more attention than they actually are. We may think that preaching a sermon about 2 Samuel 13, where David's daughter Tamar is raped and then cast off by her half-brother, Amnon, or about Judges 19, where, to protect himself, a Levite allows his concubine to be brutally raped and abused, is sufficient to show that we are against domestic violence. However, when we preach on these sorts of passages, we need to make sure that we are explicit in actually saying the things we want our congregations to hear. We need to actually speak the words: domestic violence is wrong. We cannot simply hope that people will understand our implicit message, but must instead be explicit to ensure they understand. Similarly, if we are preaching messages on topics like submission or suffering, we need to be clear not only of what we do mean, but also of what we do not mean. In other words, where our teaching may seem to permit domestic violence, we need to clear up confusion and plainly tell our congregation that we - and the Bible - are not condoning domestic violence.

Secondly, when women come to see us about other marriage or family issues, we should not be afraid to ask the question: are you safe? Some women may carry the heavy burden of their abuse, desperately wanting to tell someone about it but afraid to start the conversation, especially since not all pastors respond to news of violence supportively.⁵⁷ By asking the question and giving space for women to confide in us, we can demonstrate to women that we will give them support, should they need it. Even for women who have not been abused, asking this question will be useful, since it can serve to reinforce the position that domestic violence is never okay.

⁵⁵ Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 50–51.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁵⁷ Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 413.

A third space in which domestic violence can be denounced is in the context of Bible studies or life groups in which discussion and idea-sharing can help people wrestle together with biblical texts to discover God's heart on the matter of domestic violence. In this kind of small group setting, individuals can begin to internalise truths about domestic violence. Being an active participant in a conversation in which one can share perspectives, stories, questions and misunderstandings is often a more effective way to learn something than sitting and listening is. This means that in a small group setting where discussion is valued and encouraged, individuals have a greater opportunity or ability to internalise lessons and truths about domestic violence or any other topic that may be discussed. Sourcing and providing biblical resources for groups to use to learn about how God views domestic violence would be an immensely beneficial thing for church leaders to do for their congregations.

Response—Supporting Victims of Domestic Violence

When you bring an issue like domestic violence into the spotlight, it is possible that you will have an influx of people coming forward for support who are dealing with that issue. If we are committed to speaking publicly and often against domestic violence, we need to be ready to support hurting people who have been affected by domestic violence. It is not enough to just have a prevention plan; we also need a response plan ready to support women who are already in abusive marriages.

Partnership

When domestic violence happens in the church, particularly when “spiritual” language is used to justify the abuse, it may be very natural for us to want to deal with the abuse as an entirely spiritual issue.⁵⁸ This might mean we are inclined to want to deal with the issue completely in-house, rather than making referrals.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, this can be damaging to domestic violence victims, because, while we may be able to address the spiritual aspect of abuse well, there are other important areas of abuse which we are not adequately equipped to support abused women in.⁶⁰ Domestic violence does not only have spiritual implications: It also has medical, financial, emotional, psychological and legal implications, among others. For this reason, it is important that we form partnerships with professionals and groups in our communities who can help us to support abused women in our congregations. On our list of partners, we should include local support or survivor groups,

⁵⁸ Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 63–65.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶⁰ Collins, *Christian Counseling*, 408–9.

professional counsellors, local GPs, women's shelters such as the Women's Refuge, and even lawyers and local police. Having this network of partners will help us to be able to support women better, because through these partnerships and people we can refer domestic violence victims to, victims can receive multifaceted support that simply would not be possible if we try to do it all alone.

Creating safe space and speaking truth

Knowing from the outset that, where appropriate, we will call upon other groups and professionals to help us support abused women, one of the most important jobs we should be doing is helping abused women feel safe.⁶¹ Victims need to know that there are people who can function as emotional safe spaces, with whom they can talk about the complex emotions and issues that they have to deal with as a result of the abuse.⁶² We can provide this kind of compassionate and safe space for victims. When we talk with some women, we will probably discover that they have deep-seated beliefs about themselves, God, suffering, marriage, and abuse that come from misinterpretation and from twisted scriptures. Some believe that they deserved to be abused.⁶³ This false thinking can cause them significant anxiety, because they struggle to reconcile their desire that their abuse to end with what they believe. It is important, then, that when interacting with women who have been abused, we are intentional about speaking out truth that can start to replace lies. Some examples of things we might say are, "You did not deserve to be hit. It isn't okay that your husband did that," or "You are incredibly loved and valued in God's sight, and He does not condone what your husband has been doing." To counter lies, we should be ready to point to the true things that God says in his word about how immensely precious his daughters (and sons) are.

Conversation

Something as simple as conversation is an incredibly important tool for victims of domestic violence, particularly if their abuse involved high levels of isolation. In fact, telling their stories is a critical step required in order for abused women to transition in their own minds from victims to survivors.⁶⁴ Abrahams suggests that victims need three levels of contact: "First, normal, everyday conversation, then supportive talk – dealing with what had happened and planning for the future and finally, what might be described as healing talk – a space where they could reflect on their

⁶¹ Ibid., 409.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 412.

⁶⁴ Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 52.

experiences and learn to deal with their feelings in their own way.”⁶⁵ While a single person may provide support at more than one of these levels, it is important for victims to have a network of people to talk to so that their needs for conversation at these different levels can all be met, and the process of healing can flourish.⁶⁶

Because conversation is such an important tool for women to work through their abuse, an important job which we must take on is empowering women to build healthy networks or call upon the networks that they already have. One way churches can do this is by partnering with other local churches in order to form prayer and support groups which abused women can attend to meet others who share similar stories and who, by virtue of those shared experiences of intimate partner abuse, can relate to another and support each other on a level that others will not be able to. Another way we can do this is to invest time, energy and money into building strong women’s ministries within our churches so that in many cases, by the time violence comes to light, abused women already have strong ties with other Christian women to whom they can turn for support. Women need other women to build relationships with, to share experiences with, to trust, to laugh with, to grow with, and to turn to when life gets hard.⁶⁷ Any friendship between women that the church can help to foster will be an important source of support and comfort for women when, sometime down the road, they face abuse.

A NOTE AGAINST PRIDE

Finally, as already mentioned, it is important that Christian leaders build networks of people and groups to partner with as we attempt to support women through domestic violence. We should not be afraid to contact these people, particularly counsellors and women’s shelters, when we start to get out of our depth. We must particularly make sure that if pride is getting in the way of us reaching out to others who could provide better support in a particular area, we swallow that pride for the sake of the women we are supporting. We will play some role in supporting women, doing whatever we can to make them feel safe, loved, and supported, but there is no shame in asking others for help. In fact, being willing to ask other professionals and organisations to step in and assist us in providing support may stop us from causing victims further harm through ignorance and selfish pride.

⁶⁵ Hilary Abrahams, *Supporting Women After Domestic Violence: Loss, Trauma and Recovery* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2007), 59.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 40.