

What should be the church's response to Domestic Violence?

By Joy Butler

(Taken from the book 'Domestic Violence and the Church' by Helen L Conway)

The church needs to understand the Biblical reasons for responding to the issue of Domestic Violence.

It should also ask – What does the Bible say and what does God require of us?

People will give various good reasons for domestic violence. A doctor, a counselor, a psychiatrist and a woman who has been beaten by her husband will each share their understanding. When all these reasons are put together and we add the teachings from the Word of God – then the whole answer can be found. The Bible provides the answer – SIN. *(Read Isaiah 59:2, Psalm 51:5)*

The church needs to understand how Satan traps people into a sinful behavior pattern if it is to help change that behavior. The Bible says that Satan is very clever and we need to be awake to his plans. The Bible talks about an army and soldiers attacking after much planning and so should the church plan to attack this problem. *(Read Ephesians 6:11-12, 2 Corinthians 2:11, Acts 10:31, 1 Peter 5:8)*

It is clear that violence in all forms is condemned in the Bible and is sin. This sin includes physical, verbal or mental violence. It is contrary to God's plan for the world. *(Read Genesis 6:11, Psalm 11:5, Ezekiel 45:9, Matthew 5:21-28, James 3:6-8)*

Satan tried to trick Jesus when he tempted him in the desert. Jesus was able to quote Scripture and defeat Satan. The church needs to know the Scriptures and understand them clearly to be able to answer in truth when people try to change the meaning of the Word of God. For example the Bible talks about '*train up a child in the way he should go*'. A father may beat his wife and make his son watch and teach him that this is the right thing to do to keep the wife in order. Even though it is hard for the son to watch his mother being hurt he eventually learns to accept it as normal. Research shows that this happens again and again in homes where violence is common.

It is hard to change the way people do things but we must know what the Scriptures say and try to understand the heart of God and then the task can be achieved.

How should the church respond to domestic violence?

Once the church understands that domestic violence is sin, it needs to look at the results of violence and decide how to respond. There are 4 results of violence:

1. Domestic Violence destroys marriages

Studies show that on average a victim suffers 35 assaults before she seeks help. But before that, the very first incidence of violence destroys the spirit of the marriage. The Bible is clear that marriage is divinely ordained. *(Read Genesis 2:18, Proverbs 18:22)* It is more than just physical union in the act of sexual intercourse. It is about emotional closeness, trust, confidence and sharing of hopes and dreams together. It is about treating each other as more important than one's own self. *(Read Genesis 2:24)*

Domestic violence destroys the marriage promise, the couple is no longer united and one controls the other. The couple will no longer work together and they will begin to despise each other. The wife may see in the man she married a threat and a danger and will retreat from him. The husband will begin to see his wife as a wayward partner to be controlled and someone he can

take out his anger and frustration on. The act of physical union will often stop altogether or become a violent act of rape within the marriage. The terrible result is the destruction of the plan of God to bring fulfillment to two people. (*read John 10:10*)

2. Domestic Violence destroys the safe environment for children

The Bible shows the picture of children being brought up in a safe and protected home with clear teaching about right and wrong. The parents will guide the children, following the pattern of God who loves His children. When there is domestic violence, it destroys any hope of such a safe place.

3. Domestic Violence destroys a fullness of life

The Bible shows a gospel available to all – a life of peace, joy and love. When domestic violence happens in a so-called Christian home, the effect is to remove the fullness of life, which should exist in that marriage. No person can take away from an individual Christian, the love, peace and joy that comes from following God. However, in a Christian marriage, those qualities should also be between the partners as they seek to help each other in their Christian walk.

The victim's life will probably be restricted. She may be forced to stay in the house, be prevented from talking with friends or relatives, be ashamed of her bruises and not feel free to talk honestly with others. She may lose all her self-confidence and feel abandoned by God. If she is constantly told she is no good and criticized she will not be able to seize all life's opportunities with confidence.

The abuser will also lose fullness of life. His friends may turn their backs on him, church activities may be restricted, his relationship with his children will be damaged and he may even have to face court charges. He will be prevented from walking closely with God. (*Read 1 John 1:6*)

4. Domestic Violence causes other side effects

Domestic violence may make the woman take the children and leave the home. This often causes poverty. The mother and children will have to find shelter somewhere and in some cases, they have to hide and may never see the father again. Poverty, oppression and fatherless children are all things, which grieve the heart of God. He is not prepared to stand by and see these people suffer. (*Read Psalm 72:12-14*)

As God's people on earth, the church must have the same attitude of God to the victims of domestic violence.

The public/private response

Police have been slow to respond to domestic violence issues in homes. It has been said that the police should care for the public order and not be concerned with private home concerns. So the police have traditionally dealt with public problems such as street crimes, drug dealing, stealing and traffic problems. At the same time people have suffered behind closed doors. It was considered that domestic violence between adults was private and that adults should be responsible for their own actions, privately.

This attitude is now changing because of the efforts made by those who work with domestic violence. Police, social groups, courts and social services are becoming more involved. However, the church faces the same problem – how should it respond to domestic violence whilst

seeking to uphold family values? These same 2 options of public and private response also affect the church.

1. A 'private response'

This view argues that domestic violence should be dealt with in the private, personal and sacred place between husband and wife and nobody should interfere. Sometimes the wife is told "it is a trial and tribulation that you must bear on your Christian walk". She might be told to pray harder or try hard to be a better wife. She is often told that this is what submission means in the Bible and that the man must have authority over her. The wife must be left in the marriage – for better or for worse.

2. A 'public response'

Domestic violence should be acknowledged as a problem that is in every society. It must be clearly understood that it is sin and is the responsibility of the sinner. **The church needs to be heard to condemn domestic violence from the pulpit and in the Bible studies and marriage classes it teaches. It also needs to speak outside the church walls as well. The church needs to be more active in caring practically for victims of domestic violence. It needs to actively promote social reforms and programs, which help with the problem.**

What about submission?

This teaching more than any other causes people to be slow to become involved in fighting domestic violence.

Ephesians 5:21-23 says:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord...

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church....

This Bible teaching on submission is rooted in the teaching on love. It is also about the relationship between Christ and the church. So, we look at the submission of the church to Christ. The church comes to Christ with trust and love because of His care for the church. Christ cherishes, loves and protects His people, (*Read Psalm 17:8, Matthew 23:37*) He covers His people with the shadow of His hand, the same hand that created the world to shelter, protect and show tenderness (*Read Isaiah 51:16, Exodus 33:22*). The church comes to Christ with the full confidence that he will not harm them. Christ is the head of the church and He is a servant king, giving free will, benefit and fulfillment to His bride. The Bible shows that the human marriage is a reflection of the relationship between God and His church.

Submission in marriage is a two-way responsibility –

- 1 'Wives submit as to the Lord' – the wife is to place the same trust and confidence in her husband as she does in her Lord. She is to live in faith. Without this she cannot open herself up to the intimate union intended to be in the marriage.
- 2 'Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loves the church' – husbands need to love, just as Christ loved the church. This is about self-sacrifice and always acting for her best interests. They are to love their wives as they do their own bodies. If one hurts their own body it usually shows a sign of mental illness.

God gives any authority given to man. God does not give violence. There is no Biblical authority given to use violence to get submission of the other person. The Bible condemns violence in marriage. (*Read Malachi 2:16*) The garment was a symbol of the protection the man would give his bride.

The church's duty

The church needs to protect the oppressed and needy. At the same time it also needs to uphold the family unit. Often the family breaks up, the victim escapes and the abuser is left. No steps are taken to make sure a second victim does not receive the same violence. The church should focus on stopping the violence altogether. The long-term aim should be to keep the family together but without the violence.

Healing and recreation – The Bible says '*nothing is impossible with God*' Luke 1:37

High places to be destroyed – The Bible teaches that sin should be destroyed. An example of this was the high places used for idol worship by the heathen nations. (*read Numbers 35:52,52; Leviticus 26:30; 2 Chronicles 14:2*) Following this principle, the church should try to destroy all domestic violence.

Divorce is not what God wants – Jesus said '*what God has joined together, let man not separate*' but violence is not the biblical pattern. The church should be concerned to stop the violence and also help to rebuild the damaged relationships.

The father heart of God – the church needs to react to domestic violence with the father heart of God. He is shown to be a God who takes action to save and rescue His people from those things, which threaten or destroy them. If the church is to be effective it needs to feel the pain of Habakkuk when he saw the state his society was in. (*Read Habakkuk 1:2,3, 13; 2:1*) Dealing with the issue of domestic violence is never going to be easy or quick. It is only the healing which comes from being right with Christ that can truly end all the hurt and pain caused by domestic violence.

Conclusion

If it is understood that domestic violence has its roots in sin, as the Bible says, then it must be that the church has the power and authority to fight against this violence. Only the church has full access to the weapons needed for that warfare: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the readiness of which comes from the gospel of Christ, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. (*Read Ephesians 6:13*)

It is the church's responsibility to take spiritual and practical measures to bring about the end of domestic violence and to offer healing to those who are hurt by it.