

DIVORCE: UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES?

By Susan Ives Spieth*

In his book, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, James Hurley states that a wife should stay and submit to her husband — even if he is abusive. According to Hurley, “she is to continue to live a godly life even with an abusive pagan husband who can in no way be considered to demonstrate Christ’s love for the church.”¹ Here, Hurley is talking about the marriage between a Christian woman and a non-Christian man. But since he advises her to remain with her abusive pagan husband, I can imagine that he would even more emphatically advise her to remain with her abusive Christian husband. Yet I believe that the Bible supports a woman’s decision to leave her abusive husband. Specifically, I believe Saint Paul’s teachings support my contention. My purpose here is to show why Hurley’s answer is unsatisfactory and how we should support and counsel the battered woman in light of several Pauline statements.

Like Hurley, many pastors would hold that the marriage commitment takes precedence over the sanctity of a woman’s life.² These Christian leaders have used the Scriptures prohibiting divorce to support their beliefs that “marriage” is more important than the individuals in the marriage — even though the quality of that marriage may be anything but holy. “Maintain the marriage at all costs” seems to be the belief among many Christian pastors.

In James and Phyllis Alsdurf’s *Battered Into Submission*, a group of pastors were asked to rate just how intense marital violence would have to be in order to justify a Christian woman leaving the home. “One-third of the respondents felt that the abuse would have to be life threatening. Almost one-fifth believed that no amount would justify a woman leaving.”³ Abused women have been told over and over again that “God hates divorce,” and “unless there is adultery or desertion, there is no biblical basis for divorce.” “Such attitudes make it very difficult for a woman to end even a violent relationship.”⁴

First, it is important to understand some of the problems involved with advocating a “stay at all costs” attitude for abusive marriages. The facts are that many women live with some kind of abuse from their spouses. In 1981, the United Methodist Church conducted a survey on violence against women. The results indicated that “one in every thirteen had been physically abused by her husband, one in every four had been verbally or emotionally abused.”⁵ Another fact is that many of these abusive marriages eventually come to a boiling point. The battered wife will sink into depression and may find her refuge in drugs or alcohol. She may kill herself or even kill her attacker. Or she may just be beaten to death. In every case, the family grows abnormally and dysfunctionally. Sometimes, the best-worst case is divorce. The grave human sin of abuse “is bound to result in the dissolution of some marriages.”⁶ In light of

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the fact that divorce may always be inevitable in such cases, the counsel to “stay and submit” is meaningless — and God’s Word has been of no value to those seeking help.

So far, many clergy have been insensitive to the issue of wife abuse. “The damage of physical and emotional abuse on a marital relationship is often far deeper and more irreparable than can be imagined.” If the clergy continues to counsel abused women to “go home” without further compassion and action, the problem will only worsen.

According to the Alsdufs, many pastors will advocate separation but not divorce for those in abusive situations. The problem there, however, is that separation is merely a precursor to divorce because so many abusers refuse treatment.⁸ So the question remains: What is the abused Christian woman to do and how should we counsel her? Should we advise her to stay in the marriage and “keep praying?” Or — should we help her pack?

The longest New Testament discourse on marriage is given to us in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter seven. I would like to explore Paul’s theology on marriage and human relationships to determine how we should view this problem of marital violence.

Chapter seven was written in response to a series of questions from the church in Corinth concerning Christian living. Paul begins this chapter, “Now for the matters you wrote about . . .,” and he proceeds to answer their questions on sexual and marital relations. Many pastors like to quote v. 10, “A wife must not separate from her husband.” This statement is often viewed as an absolute without regard for the context from which Paul is addressing. Immediately following in v. 11, Paul states, “But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.” Based on this verse, some pastors will concede that separation for a time may be warranted. But, they caution, a woman is still bound to her husband and she must not divorce and remarry.

What has been overlooked in both instances is that Paul is addressing a specific issue, at a specific church, at a specific time in history. Paul is not dealing with the issue of battered wives. The Christians at Corinth had asked Paul whether they should continue in their marriage relationships or begin leading ascetic lives of celibacy. Paul and these first century Christians expected “the immediate return of Christ and the dissolution of all societal structures in the world.”⁹ They wanted to know if it was right to have sexual relations or if they should do away with physical things. To this question, Paul begins the chapter by stating that, “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” In other words, they are not to give up their spouses. They are not to go the other extreme and share spouses or visit prostitutes either (for some believed that the body was separate from the spirit altogether and they could do whatever they wanted).¹⁰ But they can share intimacy with their own spouse. In v. 2-5, Paul states this advice more clearly:

“The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife’s body does not belong to her alone,

but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife. Do not deprive each other except by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer."

Again, this passage has been abused by Christians to argue that the woman's body belongs to the husband (and can therefore be abused). But Paul is talking about sex here. He told the Corinthians to continue in their marital states — giving equally to each other. He addresses both sexes about their duties of tender intimacies to each other. Note that Paul allows abstinence only when there is mutual consent. Paul sees the marriage covenant as one of balance where both man and woman are fulfilled.

This is not the case in the abusive marriage, however. The violent husband wants to dominate his wife and injure and defile her. He drives the lovingness right out of the marriage by his despicable behavior. There is no mutual consent in anything. The abusive husband usurps the wife's personhood and robs her of her joy.

So then, v. 10-11 sums up the point that Christians should remain married. Remember, Paul is talking about marriages under normal circumstances.¹¹ The marriage covenant is still intact. Paul is not talking about a situation where a husband is beating his wife.

In v. 12-14, Paul gives instruction to those at Corinth who were married to non-believers. In v. 15, Paul states that if the unbeliever leaves, then the Christian is not bound in that circumstance. Clergy often use this verse to state that only the unbeliever can walk away, but if the woman is a Christian, she must stay with her husband. Based on v. 16, the abused woman is told that "she is called by God, even in her painful situation, faithfully to demonstrate the obedient love of the church for Christ by her submissive love for her husband."¹² The pastor may add, "her suffering love for her husband not only shows the church's love for Christ but also shows the willing suffering and love of Christ for His church."¹³

The problem with this kind of advice is that it is terribly insensitive to the woman's plight and it distorts the meaning of God's Word. Paul has said nothing about an abused woman being "called" to her situation. She is no more "called" by God in that circumstance than the Christian is "called" to work in a brothel. God does not call us to live in sinful circumstances. The abuse is sin. The battered wife is constantly surrounded by that sin. It is not her sin, but just the same, she is in a sinful situation. But Paul has made one calling very clear, "God has called us to live in peace" (v. 16). Paul is talking to both partners about peace within marriages and within their lives. Paul urges peace for those in normal marriages — how much more would he urge it in violent marriages?

Secondly, comparing an abused woman's suffering to Christ's suffering is nothing short of heresy. Christ freely submitted Himself to the suffering of the Cross for our redemption. He was willing to die for our sins. The abused woman is suffering against her will and for no good purpose. She is merely

a victim.¹⁴ Her suffering in no way correlates to witnessing for Christ. In fact, it is often only through action on her part — leaving, pressing charges, etc. — that forces the abuser to face his sin.¹⁵

From I Corinthians 7, we have seen that Paul, first of all, addressed non-abusive marriages. Secondly, he addressed the equal responsibility between the husband and wife to mutually satisfy each other. (Paul stresses this point again in I Corinthians 11.11-12.) Paul also tells us that God has called us to live in peace. We have seen some of the ways that legalistic Christians have misused these passages and rendered God's word useless and possibly more harmful. But what else does Paul have to say regarding relationships and how are we to apply that to our counsel to battered women?

In Colossians 3.19, "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them," Paul plainly states how men ought to treat their wives. This verse is often overlooked — quite possibly because it follows "Wives submit to your husbands . . ." Some pastors will remind battered wives of this verse while failing to confront the abuser with his sinfulness. Clergy who neglect to hold husbands accountable for loving their wives cannot morally or theologically hold wives accountable to submission. To do so, would be to misuse God's divine recipe for peace in the family by using only half of the ingredients.

Another Pauline passage that relates to this subject is Philippians 2.4, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." This time, Paul is not speaking about marriage necessarily, but he is referring to how we should treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. The abusive husband clearly violates this imperative, but also the Christian community violates it when it mandates that the wife must remain in the marriage in every circumstance. It is unconscionable to allow a woman who has been beaten to return to that situation for more beatings. Clearly, Christians who look the other way or do not support the battered woman in a way that removes her from the danger are not truly concerned with her welfare. They have trivialized her problem and have "solved" it with their own judgmental cookbook remedy.

Lastly, I Corinthians 6.19 seems to sum up all that is wrong with wife battering: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" Here Paul is addressing the problem with the widely held Corinthian belief that the body was of no spiritual importance and, therefore, could indulge in all kinds of appetites. Many Corinthian Christians believed that only the soul mattered and the body was free to have its way. The body was made for its instincts, they argued. But Paul refutes this kind of free thinking. Paul states that when one joins himself with a harlot, he becomes one with her. Far better, Paul argues, to join oneself with the Lord and become one spirit with Him (v. 16-17). Then Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit, given by God, dwells in their bodies and their bodies are not their own. Not only their souls, but even their bodies have been bought with a price.

Here we see two great points for counseling the battered woman. One, the

Holy Spirit dwells in us. That reason alone should constitute action on our part to stop the violence against the body. Those who counsel a battered woman to stay in her situation will have to answer one day for why they allowed the temple of the Holy Spirit to be beaten down. Secondly, Paul said that we were bought with a price and that we are not our own. Therefore, if a man's body is not even his own — then how much less ownership does he have over the body of someone else? It follows that since a man does not even have the right to defile his own body, he has absolutely no place abusing the body of another human being.

The abused woman is God's temple. How can a pastor possibly sit by and let someone destroy it? How can he counsel her to return and submit for more destruction to God's temple? Jesus drove out those who desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. He overturned tables and benches in His righteous anger at their abuse of God's Holy dwelling place. We too, should rise up in anger at the destruction of God's temple in the home.

These are just three more examples of Pauline statements which I believe show how we should counsel the battered woman. Her safety should be our first concern, encouraging her to separate herself from the abuse. If she is willing, we should help her to find a safe haven from her husband. Intermediate steps can then be taken to try to reconcile the family. If, however, reconciliation is not possible, then our counsel may well be divorce. If the abusive husband refuses to acknowledge his sin and take the road to repentance, then the marriage can never be godly. The sin of violence will remain and God does not sanction violence in the family. "Not only can the abused woman separate and divorce, it is her duty to consider every option in order to protect her life and the lives of her children."¹⁸

What happens when legalistic Christians adamantly refuse to concede that divorce is necessary and, in fact, that divorce of the heart and soul has already taken place? They render God's word useless. An abusive husband is in direct defiance of God's imperatives in I Corinthians 7 and elsewhere. The violent husband, who refuses to change, sins against all Scripture that speaks of God's plan for familial relationships. When God's imperatives are not followed, the outcome will always be divorce of some kind. It may be divorce of the soul, it may be infidelity, it may be death, but divorce is inevitable. God's word has meant nothing. It has spoken to neither party.

Those who forbid divorce, even in the gravest of circumstances, fail to see that their counsel will be meaningless. Sometimes, breaking the marriage is the only answer. We should be prepared to recommend divorce if there has been too much harm — irreversible harm. "God cannot sanction that much harm."¹⁷ Sometimes more good is done when the marriage splits.

Our counsel to the battered wife may have to be "enough is enough." Like Jesus, we may have to protect God's temple and drive away its violators. Like Paul, we should offer hope and peace to the women who desperately need our compassion and understanding — not our judgment.

ENDNOTES

¹ James B. Hurley, *Man and Women in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1981), p. 154.

² James and Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered Into Submission* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989), p. 158.

³ Alsdurf, p. 158.

⁴ Kathleen Hofeller, *Battered Women, Shattered Lives* (Palo Alto: R & E Research Associates, Inc., 1983) p. 76.

⁵ Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 96.

⁶ Myrna and Robert Kysar, *The Assundered* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), p. 70.

⁷ Alsdurf, p. 117.

⁸ Alsdurf, p. 123.

⁹ Kysar, p. 73.

¹⁰ This information came from Dr. W. Myers' lecture, 25 April 1991, Cleveland State University classroom.

¹¹ Marie M. Fortune, *Keeping the Faith: Questions and Answers for the Abused Woman* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 37.

¹² Hurley, p. 154.

¹³ Ibid, p. 154.

¹⁴ Fortune, p. 20.

¹⁵ Alsdurf, p. 101.

¹⁶ Fortune, p. 36.

¹⁷ W. Myers' lecture, April 18, 1991.

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