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Reformation
& **REVIVAL**
JOURNAL

**CHRISTIAN
COUNSELING:
THE CARE OF SOULS**

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*P*rophetic is that dimension of ministry which more confrontationally seeks improvement in large groups and systems. Pastoral places more emphasis on personal health and growth, including intimate interpersonal relations with family and other small groups.

*P*ast practice reflected a sense of conflict between prophetic and pastoral. Deeper exploration suggests not contradiction but mutual reinforcement. Recognition of this interdependence modifies the practice of both functions and has implications for total congregational programs.

HARVEY SEIFERT, *DICTIONARY OF PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING*, 963.

Domestic Abuse in Christ's Kingdom



Barbara W. Shaffer

*D*omestic abuse in the United States is an insidious, oppressive blight that eats away at the safety and stability of the family. Conservative estimates are that one million women experience domestic violence during an average twelve-month period.¹ Other estimates place the prevalence rate at four million women.² In response to increasing awareness of this secret terrorism, the 1994 Violence Against Women prevention legislation declared that domestic violence is a violation of human rights.³ It is also a felony in all fifty states and a violation of the marital covenant. According to Christian researcher Nancy Nason-Clark⁴, the statistics suggest that it is far more dangerous for a woman to go home than to be alone at night on the streets of a city. What a chilling thought!

Domestic abuse occurs across racial and ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and educational levels. Researchers have not been able to compile a unique profile of a woman that would predict that she will most likely end up in an abusive relationship. Most victims appear similar to other people. For reasons having to do with shame and economics, middle class and affluent women may not readily disclose the abuse or seek treatment.⁵ If they have private therapists, they may avoid detection in many prevalence surveys.

Domestic abuse is also an evil that occurs in some form in

"good Christian homes" in every congregation. (Since the vast majority of domestic violence is male against female, the masculine pronoun will be used to identify the perpetrator. There are cases where the woman is also abusive.) While the overt target of this abuse is the wife, children experience "collateral damage" as they witness, overhear and/or sense the terrorism that occurs within the privacy of their home. Since domestic abuse is, as is all sin, an equal opportunity destroyer, it also inflicts severe consequences on the perpetrator.

It is very difficult to know exact prevalence rates of domestic abuse in the families of theologically conservative congregations. The problem is shame-laden for the victim and a "poor testimony" for the family and the church. In many groups the family is given such an elevated position that it is considered immune from accountability. The result of these attitudes and values is that usually nobody wants to address domestic violence in the family: don't ask, don't tell. If a church does acknowledge the problem and encourage data-gathering, there is a tendency on the part of other congregations to attribute the presence of abuse to something that lies within that particular church, such as its denominational affiliation or its geographical location. The truth is that abuse in all its forms is a matter of the human heart. Thus, it may safely be said that there are abusers in the pulpit and the pew and on the boards and committees in every denomination and every seminary. Moreover, if it is accurate, as long asserted by researchers, that the prevalence of violence against women does not seem to be significantly impacted by religious practice or affiliation, then the rate of violence in Christian families might be expected to be similar to that in the general public.⁶

Domestic abuse is not limited to the United States. A multitude of research studies reveal that abuse of women in the home is also a "pervasive problem" in South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. In individual countries, prevalence rates of domestic physical assault within a twelve month period range from 6.3% to 52%. These appalling statistics do not include verbal and sexual abuse.⁷

The Body of Christ is often in a position to intervene in domestic abuse situations and offer protection, healing and hope to those involved. Evangelical women tend to consult other Christian women and their pastors when they have problems in their families.⁸ It is imperative, therefore, that members of the Body, especially the clergy, know what domestic abuse is and what interventions might be made.

To abuse is to use wrongly, i.e., in a manner not intended by the originator, and thereby cause injury or damage. In domestic abuse, power and authority and strength are exercised against the woman rather than for her sake, thereby abusing the person and the relationship. In Christian couples, the rationale often given is that the husband is the head, the one who wields the power and must be obeyed by the one who is charged with the responsibility of being submissive. Thus, a distorted notion of headship sometimes leads to treatment of the wife that could not have been intended by the Creator God who said, "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them" (Colossians 3:19).⁹

Domestic abuse has many forms. Broadly speaking, it involves using physical strength or presence to control; using sexual coercion to control; using words or voice to control; physically attacking, damaging or injuring pets and property to control. It is, therefore, physical and/or sexual and/or verbal and psychological in nature. The goal is to intimidate and control.

Domestic violence usually does not start with a violent physical attack. Rather than a sudden loss of control, there is generally a preliminary pattern of obsessional, controlling behavior that worsens incrementally. The maltreatment begins with increasingly severe emotional abuse that is verbal (e.g., calling her names; making demeaning comments, threats, accusations; questioning her intensely) and behavioral (e.g., removing her checkbook, money and/or car keys, isolating her from family and friends), followed by escalation to physical acting-out (breaking personal objects, throwing things, tearing her clothes, driving recklessly to scare her). The physical violence may begin with shoving and pushing, followed by

slapping, choking, hair-pulling, punching, forcing sex, and then the use or threatened use of weapons.

It is crucial to note that in addition to the aforementioned overt actions, domestic abuse also involves the creation of an atmosphere or environment of expected abuse. It is always only a moment away. This psychological aspect of the abuse has at least two related implications. The first is that the woman lives with constant stress wearing on her mind, emotions and spirit. This state of siege, in turn, leads to fear reactions to just about any of the abuser's behaviors, even those that may appear quite innocuous to the uninformed outsider. What may look like an overreaction on the part of the woman may actually be a fear response conditioned by cruelty and unpredictability.¹⁰

Lenore Walker,¹¹ one of the pioneer investigators of domestic abuse, has described a three-stage, predictable cycle of violence that she says occurs in about two-thirds of battering incidents. The first stage is a period of tension-building characterized by suspicion and jealousy and a dark, obsessive, brooding irritability. If the woman tries some strategies to calm him down and those tactics work, she will then tend to take responsibility for his behavior, believing she is capable of controlling it if she just says or does the right things. The second stage is the acute battering incident as the building tension is vented on the woman. This is the shortest period of the cycle, and she has no control over when it ends; only he can decide when to stop. The third stage is the so-called honeymoon stage, during which the perpetrator is contrite, full of apologies and explanations and tearful assurances that it will never happen again.

A very significant aspect of the domestic violence scenario is verbal abuse.¹² This insidious attack draws no blood and leaves no marks or scars that would alert one to injury and the need for assistance. Like carbon monoxide, it is toxic; like brain-washing, it wears down the mind and spirit. Since words usually precede and accompany physical abuse, words can become substitutes for physical abuse. So if the abuser starts to criticize and criticism has been a forerunner of violence, those

words generate fear and alter (control) the woman's behavior as though she had been hit.

There are several features that make verbal communication abusive. First, abusive communication exerts power over the other person instead of demonstrating relational openness and equality. For example, withholding information through passive silence or minimal responses prevents conversation from moving ahead to problem-resolution, finalizing of plans, or mutual understanding. Ordering instead of asking is another example, as is making threats. Second, abusive communication demeans the other person instead of demonstrating respect and kindness. Criticizing, judging, name-calling or "joking," especially in front of others, are examples. Third, abusive communication is manipulative instead of candid. Guilt-tripping, history revision, and "forgetting" are deceptive means of achieving a desired end. Since our words reflect our heart (Matthew 12:34-37),¹³ engaging in any of these verbal behaviors even infrequently is cause for concern and reparative action. When there is a pattern of these verbal behaviors, the line has been crossed from a mistake to verbal abuse.

The impact of domestic terrorism is pervasive for victim, perpetrator and child witness, as all experience some degree of physical, psychological, emotional, or spiritual damage. The woman, as she lives in continual fear, may experience depression, high anxiety, somatic symptoms due to prolonged stress, eroded self-confidence, decreased parenting effectiveness, and overwhelming shame. She may also experience significant spiritual confusion as she struggles to sort out if she is being punished by God; if she should demonstrate faith in God by trying to endure; if she should submit to sinful behavior; if a loving God would require her to suffer, not necessarily for being a Christian, but for being a woman.

The perpetrator reaps a twisted psychological, emotional and spiritual harvest. His relentless control and outbursts increase in frequency and intensity, feeding a deceived notion of entitlement. Self-control weakens; self-centeredness increases. The fact that the Christian perpetrator usually erupts only

at home suggests that he is making choices to hide what he recognizes at some level to be ungodly behavior. Every such choice further hardens his heart against the Holy Spirit and solidifies the attitudes and behaviors in his character. The apostle Peter says that a man's prayers are hindered when he is not understanding toward his wife (1 Peter 3:7).¹⁴ Imagine the hindrance when he abuses her!

Children in violent homes are sometimes impacted even before birth. Many women are battered during pregnancy, with the majority of the blows aimed at the abdomen and breasts, resulting in miscarriage, premature birth, birth defects, learning difficulties. As might be expected, the children can themselves be abused by their father or develop post traumatic stress from witnessing the abuse of their mother. It is not unusual for female children to become involved as adults with an abusive man and for male children to become abusive men. The tendency to abuse is transmitted inter-generationally.¹⁵ Some children feel caught in the middle because they love both parents and are also terrified of their father. Some children try to placate their father and, taking on the adult role of soother or counselor, experience the loss of their childhood. All are at risk for abusing drugs, running away, acting promiscuously. Spiritual confusion is another of the high prices exacted by abuse in the home as they hear religious justification for the abuse and witness the repeated switch from piety outside the home to relational paganism inside the home.

When spousal abuse is exposed, a frequently asked question is, "Why doesn't she just leave?" The implied completion of the sentence is "... if it's so bad." There are many reasons she does not "just" leave. Typically, she has been living in constant fear and with relentless verbal abuse, both of which have worn down her confidence in her ability to make decisions on her own. She is often consumed by shame and may believe that somehow she deserves this treatment, since she has repeatedly been demeaned in every aspect of her being. Sometimes the perpetrator has some status in the church and she fears no one will believe her. If she is depressed, she has lost

hope in the future and sees only darkness. Many, many Christian women seem to equate separating for safety's sake with divorce and so are reluctant to make that step, even as a temporary measure. If there are children, she does not want them to grow up in a "broken family." If she does not work outside the home, she may lack current training and skills to secure employment to support herself and her children. Sometimes she stays because she loves her husband and thinks if she just tries harder he will not be so angry.

If the Body of Christ is to bring help and healing to these desperate situations, the approach must be multi-pronged, grounded in the Scriptures, and include a strong emphasis on prevention. Before becoming involved, the pastoral staff and those who will work with them must count the cost. Numerous resources will be needed that will require much time and energy to develop. Involvement in even one domestic abuse situation will require a lot of time, possibly years, and a lot of patience for the continual ups and downs. Anyone who confronts this situation will encounter at one time or another great personal discomfort and even danger. There must be an unflinching commitment to prayer and personal repentance. This work involves first doing battle with one's own abusive tendencies, for no one is immune from the sin of selfish domination of others, and then doing battle with the evil of domestic abuse instead of ignoring or minimizing it. Finally, there must be a firm commitment to this: There is nothing that justifies using any person wrongly. Nothing.

Becoming involved in this arena also requires participants to wrestle with several questions. Some of those are: What does God say about justice and mercy and defending the helpless? Is it consistent to defend the unborn against the hand of the abortionist but not defend women and children against the hand of an abuser in the home? Do sanctity of life concerns apply only to the unborn and the terminally ill? What do biblical headship and submission look and sound like? Is this particular congregation going to tacitly condone the existence of "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones

and all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27b)¹⁶ by focusing solely on "keeping the marriage together" at any cost and not addressing meaningfully the private sins of abuse that occur behind the closed doors of a Christian family? (In fact, the marriage is being destroyed by violence, not by a wife who tries to keep herself and her children safe.) What is the application to domestic terrorism of Paul's words in Ephesians 5:11-12 to "take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret"?¹⁷

An effective, systemic approach to helping people snared in domestic abuse begins at the top of the church structure. First of all, the pastoral staff and the ruling board must treat and speak of their wives with consideration and respect and then communicate clearly in every venue that domestic abuse is wrong and will be assiduously addressed. In order to acquire a basic understanding of the dynamics and issues, the pastor can invite a knowledgeable professional counselor to attend a staff meeting or Saturday workshop to educate and equip those in leadership positions. Further understanding can be acquired by reading some of the many books on the topic. The pastoral staff can also develop position papers on domestic abuse, separation, divorce, and the sanctity of life, thereby going on record that domestic abuse has considerable importance as an issue the church will become involved in. Writing such position papers will require those involved to wrestle with "conventional wisdom" versus what the Scriptures say. These documents, based on Scripture passages and principles, can be reviewed every two years and refined, if necessary, to reflect growth in experience and understanding. One staff member can be charged with the responsibility of leading the development of a whole program of prevention and intervention.

Preventive actions include preaching several times a year on violence in the home. God's character and name are defiled when any domination and abuse are justified by a distorted use of Scripture. Physical, emotional, sexual, verbal and spiritual abuse must be clearly defined and accompanied by

specific examples. It is important not to present worst case scenarios on those occasions, because they are easily dismissed by abusers who do less than the examples cited. The topic of terrorism in the home can be discussed every several years in an adult Sunday school class or in home church gatherings as part of a series about marriage, communication and parenting. Making books on the subject available in the church library can also help with preventive education. Christian marriage must also be clearly defined and must include emphasis on attitudes and motivations as well as on behaviors, for the human heart is deceitful and deceived.

It is particularly crucial to instruct junior and senior high school-age children about abuse in relationships, although Christ-like behavior in relationships should certainly be taught throughout all age levels. Knowledge of the human heart suggests, and hours of listening in the counseling room confirm that abuse happens in the dating relationships of Christian young people. Often high school students believe that romantic jealousy (a major cause of violence) is really a sign of love! Such a notion paves the path to an abusive relationship.

In addition to education aimed at prevention, a congregation needs to consider how to help those who are embroiled in an abusive household. One of the first things to do is to become familiar with the state and local laws that might impact the situation and the resources that can be accessed. Knowing the names, addresses and phone numbers of emergency rooms, shelters, attorneys, employment training facilities, and the like can greatly facilitate lining up support for a woman in danger. It is even better to have established some sort of relationship with specific individuals in the public sector who can help. If she is to make use of these resources, she may need transportation and child care and various other kinds of practical support.

On a more interpersonal level, there are several key things to do to help the abused woman. First, she needs someone to talk to who will listen, comprehend her fear and panic, avoid blaming or minimizing, and remind her of God's faithfulness

and care. Because it is prudent to protect oneself from danger (Proverbs 27:12),¹⁸ she also needs to develop a "time out" plan to use when the abuser seems to be ready to act out. For that she will need to have a spare set of car keys hidden some place easily accessible to her, some extra money in case she has to leave without her purse, and a safe place to go. The safe place can be someone's house or the mall, depending on how long she may have to stay away. She will need to plan the easiest and quickest way to exit the house, alerting the children to the need for hasty departure if necessary. If a time out is not enough and if she sees a need to leave more permanently, she must add to her time out supplies a change of clothes for herself and the children, important papers (e.g., social security card, birth certificates, bank card, prescriptions for herself and the children), and a longer-term safe place to go. Some congregations have prepared "safe houses" for abused women to go to that are either owned by the church or that are the homes of church members who have been trained to take appropriate action to protect her and her children.

The first objective in abuse situations is to make sure the woman and her children are safe and remain so. It is very important to respect her decisions, even if she decides to return to an unsafe situation. Some women are actually safer staying with the abuser because they may be able to monitor his mood and take protective measures instead of being ambushed at the office or in front of their child's school. The decision to return (or not) must be hers. She should not be sent back to a dangerous situation with instructions to pray more and submit more. There is abuse because there is an abuser, not because she has not prayed or submitted enough.

If she separates for a period of time, she may need someone to go with her if she must drop off the children for visitation with their father. Legally, a father cannot be kept from his children unless the court says so. She may also need someone to go with her to court appointments since she is more vulnerable to being threatened if she is alone. She may also benefit from parenting classes. Some churches design specific Bible studies for a woman dealing with an abusive marriage. She

needs to be encouraged to pray for wisdom and courage and the grace to respond in ways that honor Christ. She will probably also need to see a professional who is experienced in providing the needed counseling.

The abuser himself also needs help. He is often wounded from childhood experiences of rejection, abandonment and abuse. He most likely grew up seeing his father abuse his mother. His wounds are so deep and pervasive that offering him apt help requires more experience, training and skill than lay persons usually have. The abuser is quite often a charming man who is well-liked and so it is extremely difficult for most people to believe that he could be abusive or *that* abusive. In fact, his Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde presentations are even confusing to the ones who live with him on a daily basis. When confronted with his sin of abuse, he will often cry copiously, express repentance, and vow never to do it again. Usually he will also blame her for his actions, minimize what happened, or deny that certain things were said or done. Often he will take actions that can be very superficial like attending a Bible study or a Promise Keepers rally. If he stops the physical assaults, he will usually continue with verbal abuse, which controls through intimidation and demoralization and leaves no visible trace.

Since the pattern of deception is so pervasive within him and between him and others, attending group therapy with other men who abuse is the standard of treatment. One of the main functions of the group is to help him see his abusive behavior clearly and develop empathy because without the ability to deeply understand and feel the impact of his behavior, he will not change. He must learn to process his impact, not just his intentions.¹⁹ The church can help most by providing an accountability group of men who will love him, pray with and for him, teach him about God's love and grace, understand his dynamics, and hold him to the commitments he has made to change his behavior. The accountability group must have access to his wife so that she can give her perspective on his behavior since his reports are typically self-serving. However, she will need lots of dependable support, or she

may be too frightened to mention any infractions. Since one of the premises of marriage counseling is that both parties share equal responsibility in the creating and solving of problems, there must be *no* marriage counseling until the abuser has given credible evidence over time of having mastered the skills of empathy and anger management.

As mentioned earlier, the children in abusive homes are at great risk for emotional, physical, behavioral and spiritual damage.²⁰ A caring congregation can offer support through Sunday school and the youth group. Adult leaders can help by listening a lot; validating the children's feelings of fear, bewilderment, and anger; and assuring them of God's love, care, and goodness. Adult leaders and other youth, if they know, can pray with and for these children and encourage them. Often, custody issues are opportunities for retaliation, threats and control, and the children can feel as though they are part of the problem between their parents. These situations can bring about a crisis of faith in many children, and they need responses from the church that are not trite or trivializing.

Domestic abuse in all its forms is an oppressive evil that attacks the hearts, minds and bodies of its victims and hardens its perpetrators, generation after generation. Historically, our God has admonished his people to stop doing religious activities that are meaningless to him but rather pursue righteousness and justice and encourage the oppressed (Isaiah 1:13-17).²¹ And he has always offered forgiveness and healing to the broken. As the Body of Christ in this world, the church is accountable to speak the truth and obey his bidding. May the church speak and obey in this matter, to the honor and glory of Christ.

Author

A licensed psychologist, Dr. Barbara Shaffer works with Diane Langberg, Ph.D., and Associates in addition to having a private practice. Her training includes a masters degree in Biblical Studies from Covenant Theological Seminary, and she has taught at Reformed Episcopal Seminary as well as serving as guest lecturer at Biblical Seminary, both near Philadelphia.

Dr. Shaffer's professional work includes individual and marriage therapy, clinical supervision, and speaking to both lay and professional audiences. She and her husband live near Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

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