

Separation as a Means of Reconciliation in Abusive Relationships

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There is a major epidemic in today's society that is rapidly gaining attention. It exists in many different forms and is very difficult to define. Society has learned to deny it to the extent that it is often not even identified or recognized. It affects men and women of all ages, income levels, races and educational levels. It can occur in every type of home and within every type of family, including those which appear to be strong Christian homes. By nature, it is a very secretive problem that stays behind closed doors. The problem is domestic violence, which can be defined as any situation involving the physical, verbal, emotional or sexual abuse of children, spouses, or others within the household. While the information in this paper may be applied to each of these different situations and possibly others, it will be presented here as applied to a wife who is being physically abused by her husband.

Domestic abuse is an extremely difficult situation for a pastor to deal with. The challenge increases if the couple happens to be active members of the church or friends of the pastor. The purpose of this essay is to introduce a strategy for dealing with domestic abuse that encourages a time of separation as a means of protecting the victim, treating the problem, and reconciling the marriage.

Why Separation?

A period of physical separation may seem like an overly drastic step. The reason it may be necessary is twofold - separation produces change and it protects the victim. It can be the key which prevents future abuse and permits real change and healing to take place. Most important, physical separation is the only way to help assure the victim's safety. The home in which abuse has occurred in the past is not a safe place to be. While abuse varies in form, severity and frequency, domestic abuse experts have discovered a pattern known as the cycle of violence. This cycle is repeated in nearly every abusive relationship. The necessity of physical separation becomes clearer once this pattern is identified and understood.

The cycle begins with the tension mounting phase which escalates to the point when the abuse occurs. Following the abuse, there is a period of seemingly sincere regret and remorse by the abuser which leads the victim to falsely believe and hope that the abuse will never happen again. Unfortunately, extensive research indicates the abuser will not change when the victim remains passive and understanding. The honeymoon period soon wears off and tension once again begins to build. The severity and frequency of the abuse generally increases with each cycle.

Explaining the cycle of violence to a woman and identifying this pattern in her own relationship may help her realize that the cycle needs to be interrupted to produce change.

Scriptural Application

The goal of protecting oneself is seldom sufficient to convince a woman to remove herself from her situation. The victim of ongoing abuse often falsely believes that she deserves to be beaten. One of the greatest challenges of working with Christian women is helping them understand what Scripture truly says about the issues of trust, forgiveness, headship, submission, separation and divorce. At the same time, her willingness to abide by the Word of God can be used to help her rethink the misconceptions and misinterpretations she may believe. Directing her to examine what Scripture teaches on these issues is the greatest tool available to encourage separation.

Trust: Christians believe that if they trust God, he will take care of them and nothing harmful will happen to them. While God ultimately provides protection for us, he also wants us to express our faith in him through our actions and by taking care of ourselves. Hebrews 11 has a listing of acts of trust: Cain and Abel, Noah and the ark, Abraham and Isaac, and Moses' parents. These examples from Scripture show that God wants us to

have a strong trust in him and to act upon it. For a woman in an abusive situation, such passages provide the encouragement to act. With this Scriptural support, her attempt to end the violence can be expressed as an act of faith rather than an act of doubt.

The victim who remains passive while waiting for the abuse to end has forgotten God's infinite ability to change people and circumstances. The victim needs to be empowered to make active changes in her life. Leaving her husband and seeking outside intervention may be the most loving thing a wife can do for him, for herself, and for their marriage. The abused wife is not to keep enduring the beatings.

Forgiveness: Many Christian women believe if their husband says he is sorry after a beating, they are obliged to forgive and forget by accepting his apology and acting like nothing happened. However, there is a difference between repentance and remorse. Whipple (1987) describes the two in this way, "Remorse is a temporary emotion that is part of the cycle of violence, while repentance is a change of heart that leads to change of action." If the husband is unwilling to seek counseling or tries to talk her out of pressing charges, he is only remorseful, and not repentant. Matthew 3:7-12 shows the importance of bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance. The abused Christian wife needs to expect and require behavior change, not just promises. Forgiving her husband does not mean setting herself up to be abused again.

Submission: The Bible's teaching on submission is an easy way for an abuser to justify his behaviors based on his misinterpretation of the teaching. This creates a great dilemma for the abused Christian woman. Her husband is often able to take passages out of context to reinforce the belief of both of them that he is actually carrying out God's commands. She begins to believe that she must tolerate being beaten by the very one whom God instructs to love her as Christ loves the Church. She is under the impression that husbands have the responsibility of disciplining their wives and that the batterings she receives from her husband can be biblically defended. She fails to realize that in all of Scripture there is no example to support the contention that a man's position as head of the house allows him to physically, verbally, emotionally or sexually abuse his wife.

The fact that submission is a principle that applies to all Christians is often overlooked. Passages such as Colossians 3:20, 1 Peter 5:5, Romans 13:1, or Ephesians 5 give specific instructions to all Christians, including husbands, regarding submission. Love and submission are mutual obligations in a Christian marriage. Each is a mirror image of the other. Colossians 3:19 instructs husbands to love their wives and to not be harsh with them. 1 Peter 3:7 commands husbands to ". . . be considerate as you live with your wives. " These passages and further understanding of this teaching help reinforce for the woman that both she and her husband need to redirect their thinking on the subject of submission.

Sanctity of Life: Often an abused woman feels that it is her God given duty to stay in the marriage at all costs. It is important to point out to her that the sanctity of her own life is as important as the sanctity of the marriage. God wants her to protect the body he has given her by not allowing herself to be abused. Permitting the abuse to continue is going against God's will and can even be considered as a form of suicide.

Passages such as Psalm 139:13-14, "We are fearfully and wonderfully made by God" and 1 Corinthians 6:19 "...your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit..." can be used to support and encourage a woman with this concern.

Divorce: "But God says that he hates divorce" is an argument that is often heard. Separation is not the same as divorce. Leaving the home to protect oneself often leads to real treatment of the problem. A wife's decision to separate from her husband may be used by God to move him toward healing, change, and reconciliation. The Bible indeed allows for a time of separation to pursue peace in the home. 1 Corinthians 7:11 states, ". . . if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. "

The abused woman also needs to understand that it is her husband who has broken the bond of love and commitment by his abuse, even though he has not physically left the home. He is considered an unbeliever by his action and his unwillingness to change, even if he professes to be a Christian.

Difficulties for the Pastor

The decision to leave and the actual separation need to occur before the abuse becomes so severe that this approach is ineffective. Most women do not consider a separation until they are desperate. In most cases this

approach needs to be initiated by a trusted and reliable person such as the pastor. This can be a very difficult thing to do for a number of reasons.

First, the encouragement to leave may be misinterpreted. The purpose of the separation needs to be clearly understood. The primary intention is to bring about change, repentance and reconciliation. The danger of separation is when a person who is unhappy in their marriage uses it to rationalize an easy way out. The rightness or wrongness of the separation depends entirely on true intent, which only God can judge. Separation should be encouraged in the context of a means and step toward reconciliation and strengthening of the marriage.

Secondly, it is often harder to teach a Christian man to love his wife than to force a Christian woman to submit to her husband's authority. It is an easy trap in which to get caught. Urging a woman to separate from her husband may mean a long and difficult struggle for the pastor working with this couple in which the outcome is far from certain. It means that the husband must be confronted with his sin. The pastor may be criticized for the methods that are used and accused of having the wrong intentions. It will require much patience on the part of the pastor. It may seem easier to send the woman home with the instructions to be a better wife, to pray harder, or to submit to her husband's authority. However, this temporary solution almost always guarantees that no change will occur and places the victim in further danger.

Reconciliation is the ultimate goal in marital counseling although it is not always the immediate answer. There is comfort when it is realized that when the intention is reconciliation, we are free to encourage the best means possible to bring that reconciliation about, including separation.

Making Effective Use of the Separation

While it may take quite some time to encourage the victim and build her up enough to take an active part in changing her situation, encouraging and empowering her to separate is only the beginning. Once the woman realizes what she needs to do, she decides when and how she can safely present the plan in a loving way to her husband. It often helps to have some supporters with her for encouragement and safety. But the separation alone is not going to reconcile the partners in the marriage.

Throughout this process, the pastor is encouraged to continually consult with a qualified and reliable counselor. Once the physical separation occurs it is often useful for the pastor to refer the couple to a professional therapist. Ongoing counseling can become very involved and time consuming. Individual sessions are necessary for both victim and abuser to focus on their own individual issues, as well as joint sessions to explore the unhealthy patterns in their relationships. Pastors are encouraged to make use of and work with professionals who are trained in the area of domestic abuse.

The period of separation is the opportunity for the abuser to demonstrate that he is truly repentant. His willingness to commit to counseling is a positive sign. He needs to learn strategies for controlling his anger and destructive behaviors. The abuser's feelings also need to be addressed. His angry feelings may be directed at the pastor, his wife, the world, God and perhaps, even at himself. Some of the feeling of anger may be appropriate, but alternative behaviors for dealing with these feelings must be learned. An overwhelming sense of guilt and shame for the terrible things he has done is common. He may also feel helpless in making the necessary changes. The abuser needs someone to confront him and still express caring concern. His behavior needs to be labeled as a sin that can be forgiven. He also needs to be assisted in searching Scripture and God's commands regarding the appropriate role of the husband. His misunderstandings need to be dealt with just as the victim's were. The illustration of the shepherd using the rod to rescue and lead the sheep rather than to beat them may be a good place to begin.

The victim needs continual support and encouragement that she is doing the right thing. She may be dealing with her own feelings of guilt over bringing this problem out in the open. She needs to be reminded of the long range goal of a restored, happy and safe marriage. She can be challenged to find ways that her behavior can show that she truly does forgive her husband. She can also explore ways in which she can help the abuser release his frustrations in less destructive ways. Although she was not the cause of the abuse, her faulty beliefs enabled the abuse to continue.

Successful Reconciliations

Unfortunately, after all the time and effort, there are many women who return to their husbands only to have the abuse begin again. This often happens when the wife returns to her husband prematurely, before any real changes have taken place.

The woman needs to understand that forgiveness does not mean she is condoning her husband's actions. He still needs to face the consequences for what he has done. The chronic wife beater must prove that he has changed and to prove that it takes time - lots of time. Another reason the abuse often begins again is once the couple is back together, they often discontinue counseling and no longer work on changing the underlying issues.

When the time arrives that all involved are confident that it is safe for the woman to return, there is still much work to do. Follow-up sessions with either the pastor and/or a professional counselor are necessary. The couple needs to be aware of the possibilities of slipping back into the old patterns and to learn to prevent those behaviors from taking place.

Individual issues need to be explored with husband and wife together so they can begin supporting each other in these areas. The couple needs to daily ask each other for forgiveness and find ways to express this forgiveness. They can work together to develop a plan to reduce the chance of falling into the same patterns. They need to establish support systems and learn to rely on them as necessary. This makes the couple accountable to someone so if the abuse returns, it is not kept a secret as it was before. Another couple in the congregation may act as a mentor to contribute to strengthening the marriage and to help prevent old patterns from redeveloping.

Conclusion

Working with an abusive couple can be very difficult and frustrating. As with any counseling situation, there is no surefire method that guarantees success in every situation. Therefore it is best to be prepared with as many alternate strategies as possible when becoming aware of an abusive marital relationship. While encouraging a couple to separate from each other may initially seem questionable, and while there are many logistical obstacles that need to be dealt with as well, a period of separation can be very effective when remembering that reconciliation is the ultimate goal, but not the immediate answer.

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