

# SPECIAL REPORT

## A Biblical Response to Marital Abuse Leslie Vernick DCSW, LCSW



Every week I receive frantic calls and e-mails from Christian women who feel scared, trapped, hopeless, and helpless because their most intimate relationship is abusive; verbally, physically, sexually or all three.

Church leaders often lack the skills necessary to address the problem in a wise and competent manner. **How do we look at domestic violence biblically?**

1. **It is always sin.** Malachi 2:16-17; Psalm 11:5; Colossians 3:19 Abusive speech is never an acceptable way to communicate (Colossians 3:8).
2. **Violence is never an appropriate response to being provoked.** People provoke us all the time but we are still responsible for our response (Ephesians 4:26; Luke 6:45). When Moses was provoked by the Israelites sin, God held Moses accountable for his temper outbursts.
3. **Biblical headship does not grant a husband unlimited power** over his wife, the right to remove her choices from her, or the right to have his own way all the time (Mark 10:42-45; Ephesians 5:1,2; Eph. 6:21-29).
4. **God's purpose is to deliver the abused.** (Psalm 5,7,10, 140, Acts 14:5)

So how does a Christian respond? The apostle Paul encountered some spiritually abusive leaders in 2 Corinthians and he tells us not to put up with it (2 Cor. 11:20). He also encourages us in Romans 12:21 to not be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good.

Below are some biblical guidelines that will help you respond to the evil of domestic abuse with good toward the victim and perpetrator.

1. **It is good to protect yourself from violent people.** (Proverbs 27:12; Prov. 11:9) David fled King Saul when he was violent toward him. The angel of the Lord warned Joseph to flee with Egypt with Jesus because Herod was trying to kill him. Paul escaped from those who sought to stone him.
2. **It is good to expose the abuser.** (Eph 5:11) Bringing the deeds of darkness into the light is the only way to get help for both the victim and the abuser.
3. **It is good to speak the truth in love** (Matthew 18:15-17) When someone grievously sins against us and will not listen, it is good to bring the matter before the church for additional support and authority.
4. **It is good to allow the violent person to experience the consequences of his/her sinful behavior.** One of life's greatest teachers is consequences. God says what we sow, we reap (Gal. 6:7) A person uses violence at home because he gets away with it. Don't let that happen. (Prov. 19:19). God has put civil authorities in place to protect victims of abuse. The apostle Paul appealed to the Roman government when he was being mistreated (Acts 22:24-29). We should do likewise.

As we look at the entirety of Scripture, we never see God endorsing the misuse of power over another individual or giving a husband entitlement to misuse or mistreat his wife. Below is a ten (10) point summary statement on healthy relationship and marriage.

1. God designed marriage to be a loving and respectful partnership, not a slave/master one where one person dominates and controls the other. Tim Keller in his recent book on marriage writes, "The Christian teaching [on marriage] does not offer a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice but rather mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice."<sup>i</sup> When one spouse seeks to gain power and control over the other and bullies or intimidates using words, finances, physical force, or the scriptures, he or she is not only sinning against their spouse but also against God's plan for marriage.
2. Every healthy adult relationship requires three essential ingredients to thrive. They are mutuality, reciprocity, and freedom. Mutuality means that each person brings into the relationship honesty, compassion, and respect. Reciprocity involves a give and take, where both people in the relationship share power and both people in the relationship share responsibility. Lastly, a healthy marriage needs freedom to express one's thoughts, feelings and needs without fear as

well as freedom to respectfully challenge someone's behavior or ideas. When any of these three ingredients are missing we may be in a relationship with someone, but it is often difficult, unhealthy, and sometimes destructive.

3. All relationships involve angst, disagreement, and struggle. When a conflict arises mature people engage in conversations where they discuss, negotiate compromise, as well as respect one another's differences, feelings and desires. They work on solving their problem, not attack one another.

An abuser, controller, or manipulator pushes and pressures to get his/her own way by ignoring stated or implied boundaries, trying to get you to back down, or to make you feel guilty or afraid so that you will give in and give them what they want. In an abusive marriage, a spouse is not allowed to be different, have her own thoughts, feelings, desires or agenda. She is not loved for who she is, but for his idea of who she should be. When she fails to live up to his idealized image, punishment results.

4. When a person is seriously sinned against, Jesus provides instructions on how to deal with it in Matthew 18. We are to go to them and speak to them about it. However, when that conversation does not result in repentance, no reconciliation of the relationship can take place, even if forgiveness is granted. Relationships are damaged by sin and are not repaired without repentance and restitution. Joseph forgave his brothers long before he saw them again when they came looking for food in Egypt, but he did not trust them or reconcile with them until he saw their hearts were changed. (Genesis 44,45).

Marriage is not the sole exclusion to these Biblical instructions. If anything, verses describing the marriage relationship aim for even higher standards on how individuals are to treat one another.

5. When a person or spouse respectfully speaks up against injustice and oppression in a marriage (or anywhere else for that matter), God is with them. When a spouse speaks up against the abuse and injustice in her marriage, as a Church, we need to come along side and hear her and provide church our support and help. In practicing Matthew 18, she is seeking true reconciliation and is attempting biblical peacemaking, but she is not willing to be a peace at any price peacekeeper.

We often hear that God hates divorce but in the context of Malachi 2, God is rebuking an unloving, unfaithful husband, not denouncing a desperate wife. In addition, God hates haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a

false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers (Proverbs 6:17-19). He also hates pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech (Proverbs 8:13). These are often the very sins that are present in a destructive marriage.

6. If the abuser refuses to listen, refuses to repent or change, the blessings of a close marriage are impossible. Unconditional love does not equal unconditional relationship. God loves humankind unconditionally but does not offer unconditional relationship to everyone. Our sin separates us from God and our repeated unacknowledged and unrepentant sin also separates us from one another. Marital intimacy, trust, fellowship, and warmth cannot exist where there is fear, threats, intimidation, bullying and disrespect of one's thoughts, feelings, body, or personhood. A marriage with no boundaries or conditions It is not psychologically healthy, nor is it spiritually sound
7. One person in a difficult/destructive marriage can make the relationship better by not reacting sinfully to mistreatment, not retaliating and not repaying evil for evil, but one person in a difficult marriage **cannot make a bad marriage good** all by herself. It takes both people working together. Sometimes Biblical counselors place an inordinately heavy burden on one spouse to somehow maintain fellowship and intimacy in a relationship while they are repeatedly being sinned against.
8. If the couple desires biblical change, as people helpers, we must not attempt to heal their marital wounds superficially by pushing reconciliation or promising peace when there is no true peace (Jeremiah 6:14) To be Biblical peacemakers, we need to understand there is no quick fix to these difficult situations and they must know how to walk this couple (often separately for a season) through the counseling stages of safety, sanity, and stability, until they reach security. (See my book, The Emotionally Destructive Marriage to understand how to move through these stages.) There is no mutual counseling possible without first establishing some history of safety, not only physically, but emotionally and financially.
9. When trust in a marriage is repeatedly broken (through deceit, infidelity, abuse, or unfaithfulness in various ways) the marriage is damaged. The gift of consequences<sup>ii</sup> can be a painful but potent reminder that the wrong-doer will not reap the benefits of a good marriage when they continue to sow discord, sin and selfishness. Consequences may include legal ramifications, church discipline, and/or loss of relationship through separation if warranted.

10. Church and pastoral support and accountability are absolutely necessary if a couple is to heal from a destructive relationship pattern. Secrets destroy and where there is an atmosphere of loving accountability and support with zero tolerance for manipulation or abuse of any kind a marriage has the best chance for genuine healing.

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<sup>i</sup> The Meaning of Marriage Tim and Kathy Keller, page 47 New York: Dutton, 2011

<sup>ii</sup> The gift of consequences is talked about in detail in my book, *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*, Chapter Nine, (Waterbrook, 2001).