

How Misinterpreting Scripture Can Fuel Abuse Against Women

Domestic abuse occurs among Christians and non-Christians at nearly the same rate. How can we make the church a place of refuge for battered women?

Five years into her second abusive marriage, Maggie* and her new husband surrendered their lives to Jesus Christ. Their spiritual commitment gave Maggie hope that her tumultuous marriage could be saved.

But when the physical abuse continued, Maggie sought help from their pastor. She told him about the terrors of living with a man who once had her pinned against a wall and choked her until she heard something snap in her neck.

Her evangelical pastor's counsel: Go home, pray and submit.

"If your husband kills you," he concluded, "it will be for the glory of God."

Maggie survived both her husband's merciless torment and her pastor's chilling advice. But like many battered women, she found her place of refuge not in the church, but in the world—at a women's shelter in Texas.

"Domestic violence is a major problem in America and in the church," says pastor and marriage counselor Jimmy Evans of Amarillo, Texas. "But the church has not treated it like a serious problem."

Statistics underscore its seriousness. According to a joint study by the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 2 million women are physically assaulted by a current or former spouse each year in the United States. With the average number of annual assaults per

victim estimated to be 3.1, the total number of assaults per year is 6 million.

In addition, one-third of all women who seek medical care have suffered domestic violence. It's said to be the No. 1 crime in America and the least-reported.

The most shameful statistic: Many of its victims—and perpetrators—are Christians.

Maggie, whose experience led her to work with other domestic violence victims, said that half the women who sought help at the shelter where she worked were Christians. Trapped between their theology and the reality of their situations, they often withheld vital information from the staff.

"They were afraid to take advice from the world. They were very protective of their husbands," says Maggie, who became the shelter's liaison to Christian women.

Don Sapaugh, former president of Rapha Treatment Centers in Dallas, says reluctance to share information is especially characteristic of pastors' wives who suffer some form of abuse. "They don't know where to turn," he says.

Many of the calls to Rapha's confidential ministers' hotline are from women who are being abused by their minister husbands. But some are from pastors who want to confess they've been abusing their wives.

Is There Safety in the Church?

Christians, whether they're ministers or laypersons, say good counsel is hard to find. Maggie, who is now a missionary married to a "wonderful Christian man," sometimes questions whether she was right in leaving her abusive ex-husband. The counsel of her pastor, who later admitted his error, continues to haunt her.

The type of non-help Maggie received is not unusual, Evans

says. "Pastors simply don't know how to counsel an abused woman," he says.

At least one study seems to confirm Evans' opinion. In a survey of battered women who had successfully escaped their abusers, the victims ranked clergy last in helpfulness.

Why aren't women finding more safety in their churches? At least part of the problem, experts say, can be traced to misinterpretations of scriptures about marriage.

The Bible passage most often used to "justify" abusive behavior is Ephesians 5:22-24: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything."

Sapaugh says this passage is terribly mishandled. And some pastors, he says, "set up man-made criteria for what is and what isn't submission, and end up throwing spousal abuse in the middle of it. I'm confident that's not the intent of Scripture."

Evans agrees. Biblical submission, he says, does not include physical violence or the violation of personal sovereignty. "The Bible doesn't ever lend itself to somebody being abused," he says. "The Scriptures tell us to defend the defenseless" (see Prov. 31:9; Is. 1:17).

He directs both the abused and the abuser to read to the end of the chapter. Paul commands husbands to cherish their wives in the same way that Jesus "nourishes and cherishes" the church (Eph. 5:29).

Dr. Jekyll ... Mr. Hyde

According to experts, about half the abuse committed by Christian men is physical or sexual, and the rest is emotional

abuse involving mental manipulation. Often this second type of abuse is taken less seriously by the church, trapping many Christian women in an emotional prison.

John was the divorced worship leader in a nondenominational charismatic church in West Virginia. Rebecca, a divorced church member who kept to herself, knew little about John and was surprised when he asked her out. In 1990, one year after their first date, they married.

"I was careful this time," says Rebecca, whose first husband was abusive. "I thought I was safe marrying a Christian."

But the man Rebecca married went through a sudden transformation. "He changed completely on our honeymoon and never changed back," recalls the 32-year-old accountant.

John verbally pummeled her, criticizing everything from her appearance to her basic failure as a human being. The abuse intensified, yet he continued to lead worship, verbally pounding away at his wife between services.

Rebecca sought help from a doctor. He prescribed antidepressants, and she began to believe she was losing her mind.

After two years, Rebecca reported the abuse to her pastor. Still, it was eight months before John was removed as worship leader—even though the church's leaders were aware of the abuse. By then, Rebecca had moved out of their house.

Before their separation, Rebecca had succeeded in getting John into several counseling sessions. But they were counseled together—a practice many experts say is a prescription for failure.

In their case, the experts were right. John became a master of manipulation, ignoring the advice he was given and placing the blame for their problems on her. Such blame-shifting

characterizes the central problem in all abusive relationships: the overwhelming need for the abuser to control another human being.

“[The controller] refuses to own up to his own behavior, much less admit that there might be something wrong with it,” write Ann Jones and Susan Schechter in *When Love Goes Wrong*, a secular book on abuse that Rebecca credits with preserving her sanity. It’s considered by many, including religious counselors, to be the definitive work on spousal abuse.

In cases of physical violence, Jones and Schechter write, it can be dangerous to counsel husband and wife together because the victim may face worse abuse after she blows the whistle.

One victim’s husband beat her mercilessly for telling their counselor about the abuse; the following day the woman killed herself. Because of situations like this, some mental health agencies prohibit the simultaneous counseling of husband and wife in abuse cases.

Suffering in Silence

Thoughts of suicide place Christian women in a dual bind. They’re not only shocked that their emotions have plummeted to such depths, they’re also afraid that they’ve permanently damaged their relationship with God.

As a result, many women suffer in silence. One example is Victoria, a 42-year-old woman from Kentucky. A Christian since age 12, Victoria believed God had brought her the man of her dreams when Frank came into her life in 1974. As a new Christian, Frank had renounced his rebellious lifestyle and returned to the fold of his prosperous family. Soon after, he settled down with his bride.

But less than a year after they married, their church embraced the teachings of the shepherding movement, which emphasized the authority of church leaders in both the public and private

lives of parishioners.

Overnight, Frank changed from a loving, caring husband into an overbearing tyrant. Whatever his pastor dictated, Frank enforced in his own home.

Victoria was told what to believe, what to read and how to wear her hair. When she questioned the pastor's total control over their lives, Frank branded her as rebellious and unsubmitive.

Within a short time Frank became a leader in the church, which added a new dimension to his need to control. Years of tyranny eventually took their toll, and Victoria reached a point when she simply wanted to die.

"Women who are being controlled often have thoughts of suicide," Evans says. "By the time abused women come to me, they're so devalued that they typically have feelings of self-abuse."

In Victoria's case, Frank's prominence in the church and the community enabled church members to look the other way when it became clear that he had emotionally abandoned his wife. He has managed to retain his leadership position in the church, despite their pending divorce.

Exposed by the Light

Abusive marriages don't have to end up like Victoria's. In many cases Christian couples have found the path to emotional healing and reconciliation.

Tim and Karen met while they were college students involved in a student ministry. Within months they were engaged and married shortly before their senior year. Soon, though, Tim's plans to attend seminary were shattered by Karen's unexpected pregnancy. The pressures of supporting a family triggered an eruption of violence against Karen.

At the time, the couple lived in a medium-sized city, which gave Tim an anonymity that enabled him to abuse his wife with impunity.

Eventually, two factors entered their lives that made a huge difference: a pastor who dared to confront and a job opportunity back in Tim's hometown.

Shortly before leaving the city, Karen's pastor intervened on her behalf (Tim had long since stopped going to church). He confronted Tim about his abuse and provided him with practical advice on how to deal with anger.

In 1983, Tim and Karen moved to the rural town where Tim's family had lived for generations. Suddenly, Tim was faced with a level of accountability he'd never known before.

"Living in a small town with a population of 2,000 has a fishbowl effect," he says. "I had a job as a teacher, and my behavior reflected on me professionally."

By 1985, the abuse had stopped completely, and Tim made himself accountable to others. Meanwhile, Karen forgave Tim and found emotional support among her Christian friends. Today, Karen, Tim and their four children attend church together.

There's no question in Tim's mind that what reversed his abusive behavior—and healed their marriage—was exposure. His message to both the abused and the abuser is clear: Make abusive behavior known immediately.

"Abuse and violence feed on darkness," he says. "Admitting that abuse exists sheds light on the sin. We've been too willing to allow secret sins to exist. The cure is exposure to the light."

The Way Out of Abuse

There is now a nationwide counseling hotline for victims of

domestic violence, something numerous agencies have tried for years to make available to both victims and abusers.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline can be reached by dialing (800) 799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233).

Several organizations provide information or referrals to agencies, support groups and professionals who assist victims of domestic abuse.

The following resources may be of benefit to you, if you or someone you know is a victim of domestic violence. We encourage you to contact them.

Alliance for Children and Families

(800) 220-1016

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

(202) 452-0109

Minirth Clinic

(888) MINIRTH (1-888-646-4784)

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

(303) 839-1852

National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence

(202) 429-6695

Rapha Treatment Centers

(800) 383-HOPE (1-800-383-4673)

Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence

(206) 634-1903

Rapha Treatment Centers Ministers' Hotline

(800) 383-4673

Videos:

Broken Vows, a one-hour video with study guide; available through the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (see phone number above).

** Not their real name*

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