

Wife Abuse: The Tragic Misconception of Submission

Note: This article first appeared in the July 1985 issue of Charisma magazine. Spousal abuse, even among Christians, continues to be a tragic problem in society today.

On the “other” side of town, Joe comes home after a few belts with the boys. A cold supper awaits him. The children are screaming. In moments Mary is lying on the floor, gasping for breath, blood gushing from her nose.

That’s the picture of wife abuse—or domestic violence—most of us have. We think it could never happen to us, to our friends or in the church. But it does. It strikes all walks of life.

Wife abuse can crush a woman physically, emotionally and spiritually. The wounds are deep, although some may appear just beneath the surface, hidden by layers of makeup. It also injures the children and the abusive husband.

Wife abuse includes simple battery, sexual abuse and far-reaching psychological damage. In any form, as time passes, it becomes increasingly destructive.

But there is hope for both the abused and the abuser. Shelters that provide safety and support to women are opening up around the country. Organizations such as the Salvation Army in Indianapolis, Indiana, offer in-depth Christian counseling for abused wives and their husbands. Reconciliation is considered the ultimate goal at some of these shelters. *(Note: There are many more organizations that can help these days and information can easily be accessed on the Internet).*

The chapter we have excerpted illustrates what Mrs. Green believes are misconceptions among Christians regarding the biblical principles of submission and headship. For a more

complete look at the problem, its causes and solutions, read the book, *Turning Fear to Hope*.

When his wife threatened to leave him, Al came to a pastoral counseling center as a last resort. The couple talked over their problems with a counselor. Before long it came out that Al abused Terri and, even though other conflicts had been discussed first, this was her reason for leaving.

“Look,” Al said defensively, “I’m a Christian husband and I try to live up to the standards set out in the Bible. I’m head of my home and I bear the responsibility for what goes on there. I have a right to have my way—the Bible gives me that right. Terri has to submit to me and obey me. When she doesn’t do what I say, it is up to me to see that she does. She has to do things my way. I’m responsible.”

For couples like Al and Terri, mutual submission has turned into one-sided exploitation. When this happens, something must be done to break the unhealthy patterns for the sake of both mates and their children because nothing could be further from the biblical standard Christ established. He was the perfect model of submission. “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, (who) ... humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:5,8, NKJV).

Jesus chose to submit to residing in an infant’s body, to growing up as a boy under the authority of human parents, to enduring the abuse of a criminal’s death at the hands of those He loved. His submission had a special, eternal purpose—our redemption, our salvation. All that He endured was to that end.

Jesus yielded to abuse when it served the purpose for which He came. But He made it clear to those to whom He submitted that He did so voluntarily, from a position of strength.

In the Garden of Gethsemane when He was arrested, He reminded

His followers that He had His own means of escape at His disposal if He wished to be rescued. Jesus said, "Do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than 12 legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:53).

During His trial Jesus corrected Pilate when he said he had the power to have Jesus killed or released. Jesus stated, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11).

The submission of an abused woman, however, is neither voluntary nor from a position of strength. Although she begins her married life eager to please her husband in every way, the abuse she suffers soon changes her service from voluntary to terror-induced. What she offered freely and lovingly at first is later taken from her by force.

All the humiliation and pain might still be worthwhile if it served some purpose, if it led to the conversion of even one lost soul. Does submission to a demanding, brutal husband result in his eventual spiritual awakening, as some hope?

Unfortunately, it doesn't. A wife's humble surrender to abuse merely increases her husband's contempt for her. Her compliance tells him that she agrees with him that she is as inadequate and as in need of domination as he says. All his erroneous attitudes of superiority, disgust and scorn are confirmed by her behavior. He despises her weakness.

"If a husband is allowed to continue [abusive] behavior without experiencing any negative consequences, why should he change?" asks Christian counselor Norman Wright. "He is simply being allowed to get away with something and in many cases his respect for his wife is lessened."

Pastor/author Louis Evans Jr., concurs. "After listening to some of the things such husbands demand of their wives ... I am convinced that a wife only reinforces her husband's arrogance and demeans herself by submitting to him. Nobody wins by such

appeasement.”

Submission is not a state of mindless subservience in all situations. Jesus Himself did not always submit in every crisis He faced. He did not submit when to do so would force Him to concede to evil. He did not submit to the desecration of His Father’s house (see Mark 11). Merchants legally sold their goods there with the blessing of the religious authorities—the same authorities to whom He would submit at a later time. These dishonest and greedy men were defiling a holy place, and Christ attacked them and threw them out.

It is the same with the abused woman. Her call to submit to her husband does not compel her to comply with evil. “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

“Some have taught that a wife should submit to beatings,” says Wright, “but I cannot see that violating one teaching of Scripture to fulfill another makes sense. If our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit, then we ought not to do anything that would bring harm to the body. That includes allowing one spouse to beat the other.”

A Christian woman’s first allegiance is to Christ. She submits to His authority over her and His wishes for her first. No one stands between her and her Lord. All other duties and loyalties come second. Jesus never submitted without good and sufficient reason. Luke 4 recounts an incident from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when He went to Nazareth and stood in the synagogue to read. He proclaimed Himself the Lord’s Anointed One, Messiah, and the people in the place became enraged. Dragging Him outside, they headed for a cliff and tried to throw Him off the edge. But it was not yet His time to die for them and He escaped. Submission in that case would have been for nothing, so God the Father’s plan did not

allow it.

In the years following Jesus' death and resurrection, His apostles also taught submission as a pattern of behavior for Christians. Again, submission was always to serve a purpose.

In marriage, submission was to give the world a picture of the beautiful relationship existing between Christ and His bride, the church. Paul finished his Ephesians discourse on husbands and wives by saying, "This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32).

As in the Old Testament where Jehovah described Himself as the faithful husband of Israel, here Paul pointed to marriage as a way of communicating to the world what the relationship of Christ is to the church. In the world in which Paul lived, where husbands were powerful and sometimes brutal masters answering to no one, imagine the witness that was provided by Christian husbands who put their wives' welfare ahead of their own and cherished and loved them tenderly. Nonbelievers truly envisioned Christ's love for His own from such a demonstration.

Within marriage, the purpose of a Christian wife's submission was to serve as a witness to her non-believing husband, Peter declared, "Likewise you wives, be submissive to your own husbands, so that if any do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives" (1 Pet. 3:1). Peter was anxious that Christian women not nag or pester their husbands about their new faith, but rather live in such a way that their actions might speak for them.

Submission within the body of Christ is to bring about harmony, spiritual maturity and the growth of each member. "With all humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another in love, be eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ... until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God ..." (Eph. 4:2-3,

13).

Still another purpose for submission was expounded by Peter and Paul. Peter said, "Submit yourselves to every human authority for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king, as supreme, or to governors ... For it is the will of God that by doing right you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men" (1 Pet. 2:13-15). Paul told Titus that the younger women in his church should be "subject to their own husbands, that the Word of God may not be dishonored" (Titus 2:5, NASB). Peter and Paul were concerned that the reputations of Christians be spotless and that the integrity of the gospel be maintained.

In relating this understanding of submission to the situation of the battered woman, it may be helpful to determine if endurance of continued emotional, physical and sexual abuse by one's husband accomplishes any of the specified purposes for which such behavior is recommended in Scripture.

First, the picture of Christ and the church: an abusive marriage certainly doesn't represent that relationship.

Second, the possible conversion of an unbelieving mate: As has already been pointed out, the abusive husband reacts to his wife's submission with more abuse and contempt, not contrition and repentance.

Third, harmony between believers and spiritual growth: The wife who allows her husband to continue to perpetrate criminal acts against her is not contributing to his welfare or growth. It is not in his best interests for her to allow their relationship to deteriorate into a terrorist versus hostage situation. Her submission destroys him as surely as his assaults destroy her.

Fourth, the reputation of the gospel: The abused woman finds public regard for her and her faith waning if she continues to permit herself to be mistreated. The longer the situation goes

unchanged, the longer the woman tolerates abuse without making a move to end it, the more her friends and relatives feel their concern for her ebbing. What is the matter with her, they ask themselves, that she allows herself to be so ill-used?

Skepticism turns finally to disgust and abandonment. She becomes an object of contempt. Even her children find themselves drawn more and more away from their mother when she does nothing to help herself. They feel betrayed by her because she will not stand up and be strong for them. They want and need security and protection, and she provides neither. Eventually they, too, give up on her and either turn to imitating their father or withdraw from the family altogether.

Nor does the abused Christian woman's submission—a product of her Christian faith—protect the integrity of the gospel message, for in despising her, people despise it, too. What kind of religion, they wonder, demands that a person degrade herself in such a way?

In short, the final disastrous effects of unchecked abuse may include condemnation and contempt from her husband, disillusionment and “burn out” of family and friends, withdrawal and rejection by her children, and disparagement of her faith by all.

Because submission then perpetuates abuse and accomplishes no good, some other response to abuse must be found for the Christian woman. Peter and Paul simply refused to submit when submission was inappropriate. When the rulers, elders, scribes and high priests at Jerusalem forbade Peter and John to preach the gospel, they did not yield to that authority. “Then they called them and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot help but declare what we have

seen and heard'" (Acts 4:18-20, MEV).

Although Peter believed strongly that Christians should be exemplary in their obedience to governing authorities (see 1 Pet. 2:13-15), he could not submit to demands that would have a negative effect on the spread of the gospel.

Paul also emphatically stated it was a Christian's duty to submit to governing authority: "Therefore whoever resists the authority resists what God has appointed" (Rom. 13:2). He wrote in his letter to the Philippians that Christians should imitate Christ who submitted to a criminal's ignominious death.

Yet in Acts 16, Paul himself did not submit to the wishes of the magistrates who had unjustly imprisoned him. "The prison guard reported these words to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates have sent to release you. Now therefore depart, and go in peace.' But Paul said to them, 'They have publicly beaten us, who are uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they secretly throw us out? Certainly not! Let them come themselves and bring us out'" (Acts 16:36-37).

Submission is supposed to accomplish something positive. When its effect would be negative, we may choose not to submit. Peter and John had to refuse to submit in order to continue to preach Christ. Paul had to refuse to submit in order to protect his integrity as a minister of the gospel.

What of the battered woman? She is called, as all wives are called, to submit to her husband. This is a clear and repeated message in the Epistles. When she can submit without ignoring her primary allegiance to the Lord, she should. But she must not allow herself to support or encourage a relationship with her husband that desecrates the picture of Christ's relationship to the church. She must not tolerate a situation that renders her incapable of raising her children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. She must not by her

passiveness become an accessory to her husband's acts of assault and battery.

"In such a case as this, a woman ought to calmly let her husband know (when they are not fighting) that if he ever lays another hand upon her, she will either notify the police and sign a complaint against him or separate from him," say Wright.

There are ways in which an abused Christian woman can submit, however. Although she flees from her husband and lets him know that she will no longer be a party to illegal acts of violence, she can tell him she wants to return to him as soon as he obtains professional help and has his behavior under control. She can conduct herself decently and with dignity during the separation, not defiantly or vengefully, not returning evil for evil, insult for insult. She can demonstrate a quiet and gentle spirit.

Submission is an essential ingredient in the life of every Christian, and it is not put aside or discredited here. But a kind of submission that requires a woman to yield passively to assault and degradation is not the answer to the problem of domestic violence.

In their research on family violence, Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz (*Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*, Anchor Books/Doubleday) found that a large amount of physical violence between mates was related to attempts on the husband's part to maintain a superior power position. In other words, men used violence as a way of demonstrating to themselves and to others that they were indeed in charge.

"You shut your mouth, you hear, or I'll shut it for you. No woman is going to tell me what to do in my own house."

"Every woman needs a good swift kick in the backside now and again because they have a tendency, you know, to get too big for their britches, and you have to keep them in their place."

“You’ve got to make sure you never let her get too smug, son. You’ve got to keep reminding her who’s boss around here. “

Abusive men are men who desperately need to be in charge. Their violence is partly due to a cultural norm equating masculinity, headship and the use of physical strength. Subtle teaching during childhood urges little boys to be rough and aggressive, to fight for what they want. As a result they learn that the way to be masculine is to be violent.

Traditional views of marital sex roles also lend support to the use of force. Men who are given the go-ahead to be the supreme authority at home then expect everything to go their way. They want the last say in every discussion; they want to make all the decisions. Physical violence seems justified to them if they need help in maintaining this level of authority. Eventually abuse comes to be perceived as normal male behavior.

Our heroes exhibit this kind of behavior, and it always seems to work for them. In order to regain control over his wife, for example, the cattle baron (John Wayne) spansks his obstreperous, rebellious wife (Maureen O’Hara), and although she screams and protests, the treatment does her a lot of good. After the disciplining, husband and wife, happily reconciled, walk off arm in arm into the sunset.

Add the approval of Scripture to society’s acceptance of violence, and the result is a deadly combination indeed.

“Nearly every abusive husband I counsel, Christian or not, at some time or other tries to justify himself by quoting from the Bible,” says one men’s counselor at a shelter for battered women. “They say, ‘The Bible says a man is the head of his wife. So I have the God-given right to do to her as I please.’ “

Scripture passages dealing with marriage and headship have been misused for years to justify male selfishness. When the

Bible calls the man of the house the leader or the head, it is not referring to what we commonly understand as leadership—aggression and dominance; instead, it is referring to imitation of God's relationship to Israel and Christ's relationship to the church. That is an entirely different thing.

The distinction between domination and husbandly leadership appears first in the Old Testament. God sent the prophet Hosea to Israel with a message for His unfaithful people. Hosea told them of the future restoration God had planned for them. God was looking ahead to the day when He would tenderly lead Israel back to Himself, and He spoke these words: "I will allure her ... And speak comfort to her ... I will give her vineyards ... And it shall be, in that day ... that you will call Me 'My Husband' and no longer call Me 'My Master' ... I will betroth you to Me forever ... in lovingkindness and mercy" (Hosea 2:14-20, NKJV).

God distinguishes here between the actions of a master and those of a husband, as He explains His future relationship to Israel. Among the latter, love and tenderness are foremost, and domination is nowhere to be found. God exhibits patient, faithful, enduring love for His spouse and continues to love her despite her shortcomings. Human earthly marriage ought to represent on earth what this divine relationship is like. "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God shall rejoice over you" (Is. 62:5, MEV).

In the New Testament, Christ's relationship with His church is our pattern for leadership in marriage. Paul calls husbands to be the heads of their wives as Christ is the head of the church. That headship is based on a relationship of total giving of Himself—His very life.

It is described in such terms in Ephesians 5: Christ gave Himself for us "an offering and a sacrifice to God" (v.2); He is the "Savior of the church" (); "Christ also loved the

church and gave Himself for it" ().

This headship involves nurturing and building up one's wife, giving to her as opposed to demanding from her. "In this way men ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord cares for the church" (Eph. 5:28-29).

Leadership among Christians is always the opposite of leadership in the world. The Christian leader is a servant, not a master. "Nor be called teachers, for you have one Teacher, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt. 23:10-11).

Christian leadership is not a matter of exercising power over another, but of using authority with a servant attitude. Christ Himself demonstrated the requirements of leadership while He was on earth. He said, "You call Me Teacher and Lord. You speak accurately, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15).

The matter of headship is illustrated by the manner in which Christ leads the church. He never bullies or overpowers, never forces or coerces. He leads only insofar as the church is willing to be led. He never breaks down the door but stands patiently knocking (see Rev. 3:20).

Biblical headship, then, is Christ-like servanthood and sacrifice. It is leadership by example, quite a contrast to aggressive rulership. When the term rule is used in connection with families in the New Testament, it adds a very positive dimension to the idea of husbandly headship.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul gives instructions for choosing church leaders. Each must be above reproach. Each must be "one who manages his own house well" (v.4). It is important to our

understanding of headship that we correctly interpret this word rule.

The Greek word is *proistemi*, which means, "to stand before as a protector, a guardian, a patron, a champion." Headship involves all these things. Husbands are to protect their handles, to guard them against the evil influences of the world. As a patron advocates for and advances a cause, so the husband is to promote the welfare of his wife and family, always taking care to act in their best interests. As their champion, he fights for them, defending and supporting them against all who might threaten them. He energetically seeks their safety and security, their physical and spiritual well being.

In some ways the commonly held evangelical view of marital roles constitutes a part of the problem of wife abuse rather than contributing to its resolution. This view must change. Mindless, fear-induced, one-sided wifely submission and coercive, authoritarian male leadership do not represent the biblical model of marriage.

Until believers commit themselves to conduct that is truly Christian, abuse will continue among church members.