

3 Truths That Will Transform an Abusive Marriage

The Democratic Republic of Congo has the dubious distinction of being the rape capital of the world. Statistics show that almost 40% of women in eastern Congo have been victims of sexual violence because rape has been used as a weapon of war by soldiers. So, I wasn't surprised to learn that multiple women who attended a conference I hosted there two weeks ago had experienced rape.

During that conference in Goma, a city near the Rwandan border, I taught couples some simple Christian principles to encourage unity and intimacy in marriage. While I taught from Ephesians 5:25 ("Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church..."), I asked a pastor to come to the stage to wash his wife's feet while she sat in a chair. I explained that the verse from Ephesians is a reminder that Jesus served his disciples by washing their feet, and that a husband should learn to serve his wife with compassion and humility.

People in the audience began to whisper and laugh nervously as the pastor got on his knees in front of his bride. The people had never seen a scene like this. Men from Congo do not kneel in front of their wives! Men are considered superior to women, and women are expected to be subservient.

I explained that male domination often leads to abuse in marriage, even in Christian homes, and that such cruelty is rooted in the original fall of man in the Garden of Eden. I also gave some examples from other parts of Africa that remind us of this abuse:

- In Kenya, some men in the Masai tribe require their wives to sleep on the floor next to their beds

- In parts of western Uganda, wives are not allowed to eat the chicken they prepare for their husbands. Meat is for men only
- In one isolated tribe in Nigeria, women who get married must have their two top front teeth extracted to show that they are not eligible brides
- In many parts of Africa, men believe having multiple wives is a sign of prosperity

I also explained to my friends in Congo that this problem of abuse is certainly not limited to Africa; it is evident everywhere, including the United States. I also explained that many Christian men never allow the Holy Spirit to set them free from the sinful tendencies of male superiority and domination. Sometimes, evangelical believers weaponize verses in the Bible about wifely submission to make an excuse for domestic violence or verbal abuse.

God never intended marriage to be about hierarchy, domination, control or abuse. If we aim to stop abuse in the wider culture, Christians must begin by discipling men to break free from this patriarchal attitude. We must take these three scriptural steps:

1. A husband must treat his wife as an equal. It's true that God asks women to submit to their husbands; yet in the same passage in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, husbands and wives are instructed to submit to each other (see Eph. 5:21). Paul taught that married people have authority over each other's bodies (see 1 Cor. 7:3-4), stressing the concept of mutual submission. And Peter warned husbands that their prayers would be "hindered" if they do not treat their wives as "fellow heirs of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7, NASB).

If wives are fellow-heirs, that means they are equals. The gospel not only restores human beings to a relationship with God, but it reaffirms the dignity of women and their equal value as human beings created in God's image. When a husband

understands this and treats his wife with honor and respect, his marriage will reflect heaven's values.

2. A husband should love his wife selflessly. Many Christian husbands ignorantly think Scripture gives them the right to bark orders to their wives, force sex, manipulate them with threats or even hit them. They interpret the verse "the husband is the head of the wife" (Eph. 5:23, MEV) to mean that they can sit in their recliners like kings while their wives do all the housework while they offer no support. In God's kingdom, "headship" is not dictatorship—it is servanthood. Paul introduced a radical concept: "So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself" (Eph. 5:28). This is the opposite of a cocky, macho attitude. A husband who loves Jesus will get out of his recliner and help with the dishes, play with the children and share the burden of family responsibilities while offering his wife protection and affirmation. A husband's love should be selfless, tender and sacrificial.

3. A husband should encourage his wife's spiritual gifts. I've known many Christian men over the years who kept their wives under tight surveillance. An insecure husband doesn't want his wife to further her education, start a career, make money or assume any role of leadership or influence because he views her as inferior (or maybe he fears his wife's success will expose his weakness). Yet a husband should be his wife's biggest cheerleader. The man who was married to the Proverbs 31 woman, for example, praised his wife—not only for her virtue but also because of her success in her family, her ministry and the marketplace (see Prov. 31:28-29).

The Holy Spirit has the power to subdue the male ego—regardless of nation or culture. But we will never overcome the crisis of domestic abuse until we begin teaching the gospel of gender equality and challenge Christian men to swallow their patriarchal pride. Let's quit promoting erroneous religious notions about male domination and get back

to what the Bible really says about equality, mutual submission and honor.

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