

Break Free From the Patriarchal Spirit

Mexico is a violent place for women. When I visited the city of Monterrey a few years ago, a pastor's wife named Estér told me she visited a hospital every month to pray for one or more women who had been seriously injured by their husbands. In some cases, the victim was a minister's wife.

"It is so common here," Estér told me. "The pastor's wife just goes home from the hospital, puts makeup on her bruises and never tells anyone what happened."

Last week, I traveled to the city of Querétaro in central Mexico to speak at a Christian men's conference. During my visit, I learned that a new wave of domestic violence has hit the country. It is estimated that at least seven women are killed every day in Mexico by their husbands or partners.

And the violence is becoming more deadly due to increased rivalry between drug cartels. Women are often used as pawns by gang leaders to inflict revenge on each other.

Two years ago, more than 7,000 women had been reported missing in Mexico, half of them under the age of 18. Domestic violence is often the reason Mexican women try to sneak over the U.S. border.

How can we respond to this tragedy? Of course, we should provide shelters and counseling for female victims. But the most effective strategy is to go to the root of the problem—by confronting the men who abuse. And this must start in the church, because Christian men often abuse their wives and then justify their behavior with Bible verses.

For too long, the evangelical church has ignored the problem of abuse, and this has enabled abusers. We insist on teaching

that men have some kind of God-ordained power to be “priests of the home”—when Scripture actually teaches that all Christians—male and female—are priests. (The Bible actually never calls husbands “priests of the home.”)

God never intended marriage to be about hierarchy, domination, control or abuse. If we are ever going to stop abuse in the church, we must teach men to break free from a patriarchal spirit. We must take these three scriptural steps:

1. **Treat your wife as an equal.** It’s true that God asks women to submit to their husbands; yet in the same passage in 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), again 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 heir[s] of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7, NASB). If wives are fellow-heirs, 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. When a husband understands this and treats his wife with honor and respect, his marriage will reflect heaven.

2. **Serve your wife selflessly.** Many Christian husbands ignorantly think Scripture gives them the right to boss their wives around, bark orders, demand sex or manipulate them with threats. 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 and take care of the children.

That is not a marriage, it’s slavery. In God’s kingdom, “headship” is not dictatorship—it is servanthood.

Paul introduced a radical concept: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). 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. A husband’s love should be sacrificial.

3. **Encourage your 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 or assume any leadership role because he views her as inferior (or maybe because his wife’s success exposes his weakness). Yet God’s desire is for a husband to 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 the marketplace (see Prov. 31:28-29).

The Holy Spirit has the power to subdue the male ego. But we will never overcome the crisis of domestic abuse until we begin teaching the gospel of gender equality and challenging 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. {eoa}