

Queries & Controversies

Q: *How should you counsel a couple in a case of domestic violence?*

A: *Helping the Victim*
"The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble." (Psalm 9:9)

Couples who publicly sit at peace in church pews can nevertheless be at war. They attack each other, defend ground, attempt manipulative guerrilla tactics, and declare occasional truces. When war has been declared, there is sin on both sides; but, especially in violent marital wars, typically a strong male oppresses a female. With God's grace these afflicted women will begin to look to the church for help. When they do, what are some basic biblical parameters that should guide your ministry to such women?

You Hear the Cries of the Oppressed

The victim must be heard. As an imitator of Christ, you begin by listening to the cry of the afflicted (Psalm 10:17). Granted, this is self-evident; there could be no other starting point. But there is a background against which listening is something more profound than simple data gathering or a perfunctory first step. First, our Lord encourages the cries of the oppressed. The sheer number of psalms that call out for God's protection indicate that we serve a loving Lord who never tires of listening to and acting on the groanings of the needy. God is the righteous judge who hears injustice and hates oppression, but He is more than a judge. He is the one who, in unfailing love, comes close to His oppressed people. His listening occurs in a relationship between the weak one and the compassionate Hearer-Shepherd.

To further underscore the importance of hearing, realize that some victims of violence are reluctant to speak openly. They may fear that openness will lead to retaliation by the perpetrator; they may feel ashamed that they contributed to the war (though they are not responsible for the violence done to them); they may consider their problems unworthy of an elder's or friend's attention; or they may feel ashamed that their husbands could dislike them to the point of violence.

Some are reluctant to speak because of the tendency of some shepherds to move quickly to the refrain, "Forgive and forget." In other words, as soon as the perpetrator asks for forgiveness, the responsibility falls on the victim to both forgive and to never raise the subject again. Not only is the idea of immediately forgetting sin dubious teaching, but to make "forgive and forget" the premier biblical encouragement in situations like this is to leave women feeling as if they are now the guilty ones because they can't drop the issue. In light of these teachings and tendencies, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of really listening to the afflicted woman. Help for the woman begins by hearing, not as a detective who wants to quickly solve a case but as a brother or sister who mourns with those who mourn.

Since biblical hearing is coupled with action, you might determine that hearing (especially if the violence has been personal and dangerous) means taking the victim for a medical examination, calling the police, or providing a temporary safe place. If the home is potentially unsafe, it is wise to inform the perpetrator that his wife has revealed the violence and is being kept at an undisclosed safe place.

If the woman is confident that returning home will not lead to her physical harm, then your listening should include a more

systematic review of the violent, controlling patterns in the marriage. This information is most helpful when it is written and specific. Then the perpetrator can be confronted according to Matthew 18 and made to understand that the church leadership takes domestic violence very seriously and will act to protect the wife even as they seek to minister to him and hold him accountable.

You Teach the Oppressed to Put Their Hope in God

The victim must be encouraged in her faith. As in all suffering, she may think that God is indifferent and aloof or that the perpetrator is all-powerful. Either way, affliction is always a time for God's people to know and rely on our God who hears. Furthermore, if a victim is ever to move towards a repentant perpetrator in love and to open herself to love and trust, she must be strengthened by a robust faith. She especially needs to know the following:

1. God does not forget (Psalm 10, 56:4). Personal trouble does not mean that God has forsaken His people. Rather, the constant biblical evidence is that God is on the move in response to prayers for deliverance. While we cannot always observe this deliverance immediately, God will, no doubt, deliver His people. The story of God's work in their lives is not over. Remind victims to keep their eyes open, watching for God's strong hand in their lives.

2. Jesus knows our sufferings. In His own body Jesus experienced violence at the hands of His own people. In fact, His experience surpasses our own because He suffered even to death. When we see this suffering, it can actually begin to lighten, or outweigh, a woman's grief.

For the woman who feels forsaken by God, the sufferings of Jesus can be a great comfort. It is a comfort that exceeds the sympathy and comfort extended by other women who have endured similar experiences. That is, at a women's shelter a victim of violence will be surrounded by people who understand; in the throne room of God she will be embraced by One who understands perfectly, grieves deeply, and loves completely.

3. The cross is the timeless evidence of God's love for His people and His "toughness" with sin. Sin and suffering will always remain a mystery. Neither make sense in a world God created as good. Yet what is clear is that God's love, demonstrated to us in Jesus, exceeds the boundaries of our imagination; and

His justice leaves observers silenced. In a world where a woman cannot trust the one closest to her, the greatest blessing you can offer is the assurance of God's loving and watchful presence.

You Teach the Oppressed to Disarm the Abuser

The victim must know how to preempt and respond to ungodly anger. Whether or not the woman returns immediately to the home, she must learn "a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). Too often her responses to violence fluctuate between timidity and revenge. Both reveal the perpetrator's ongoing control and dominance in her life. Instead of these two extremes, wives need to be led in a biblical course that is humble and powerful.

A key text is Romans 12:21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." In the context of Romans 12 the passage suggests that radical freedom from perpetrators consists of loving the enemy more, not less. This moves us beyond the question, "What do I need from him?" to "How do I overcome with the love of Christ?"

1. When in doubt, confess your sin to the perpetrator. There might be no more powerful response to the sin of others. Everyone knows how difficult it is to confess sin to another person, but to confess it to a violent abuser seems utterly impossible. But a woman who is strong in the Lord does not stand on her own righteousness; rather, she can stand on the righteousness of Christ and can therefore confess her own sin. This, of course, does not imply that her actions caused the violence or abuse. The confession is simply for sin that God has exposed in her life.

2. "Then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). For some women confrontation might be harder than confession. It might be easier to assume they deserved sinful treatment than to make a stand against sin. Or they might be afraid that confrontation will lead to divorce. But a way to love the perpetrator is to clearly portray his sin and its consequences. Minimizing or ignoring—for either party—can be spiritually deadly. Such confrontation should be done in the presence of another.

3. Forgive quickly, but don't allow the perpetrator's request for forgiveness to be the end of the discussion. Reconciliation *begins* when the perpetrator asks for forgiveness. In situations when there has been an outbreak of violence, this violence uncovers a larger pattern of demandingness, control, and arrogance.

Such patterns should never be swept away with the words, "Will you forgive me?" The flesh and the devil thrive when hurts and sins are kept in the dark. Because this is so, one way a wife can love is to let her husband know the consequences of his sin in her life. This is not done to hurt; it is done to heal.

4. Speak with gentleness and love. In a world where advanced technology is power, we often overlook the power of words. Words, however, can disarm angry people. It can be a great encouragement for a woman to know that "a gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). Although the woman is not the cause of the violence, she nevertheless has some power to subdue it with humility, gentleness, and love.

Domestic violence is as damaging to a marriage relationship as adultery. We should never minimize its impact on the victim. But, as with all suffering, we should also never minimize the grace of God to these victims. God reserves unique glimpses of Himself to those who have been oppressed, and He gives power to shake off the twin enemies of timidity and rage.

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A: *Helping the Perpetrator*

"The grace of God has appeared...teaching us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives" (Titus 2:11f).

People who publicly sit together in church pews on Sunday morning are not thereby prevented from doing violence to each other once they get in private. Ministry to the violent—like ministry to any with immediately destructive sins—demands wide-awake, bold, knowledgeable intervention, full of grace and truth. The perpetrators of battery (like sexual predators) are criminal, as well as wicked, as well as highly deceptive. The perpetrators of domestic violence need grace—effectual grace, life-changing grace, real grace. As they become willing to stop and look at themselves in the mirror of truth, as they embrace the Messiah as He is in fact, they can and will genuinely change. Scripture says a great deal about the sins of anger and violence and the ways of the Redeemer of sinners. What considerations ought to control your efforts to help such men (and, sometimes, women)?

The Common Need for Grace

Violent people have much in common with other people—both with those who would help them and

with those they hurt. We are all basically alike, 1 Corinthians 10:12-13 tells us. Interpersonal hostility comes in many forms—attitudinal, verbal, financial, physical, sexual. It comes with many degrees of intensity, from grumpiness and bickering to assault and murder. Every argument is, in principle, on a continuum with outbreaks of actual violence. So domestic violence is not different in kind from other typical sins. This fact produces both confidence and humility in those who seek to help others. If you know how to deal with your own sins of anger, you will have good things to offer others who struggle. I [DP] once counseled a couple who had had a gunfight in their home! Personal repentance from irritability and a critical attitude helped me both to understand them and to proceed sure-footedly. Would-be counselors of the violent are not the sinless coming to the sinful. We are finders of grace coming to those who need grace.

Similarly, you should typically expect to find two sinners embroiled with each other, not one irredeemable monster oppressing one innocent victim who needs no redemption. God will be at work in the lives of both people. So explore incidents of violence in detail. You will usually find places where both parties need Christ's grace to change. Perhaps one party draws most of the attention because he acts with his fists; but, on closer inspection, the other party may skillfully and perversely wield her tongue in ways that goad to violence. Outbursts of violence are usually extreme instances in more widespread, low-grade patterns of conflict. Look for the common sins that both parties share, as well as for the unique outbreaks of sin in one party. You want to help both people become more loving, wise, and peaceable.

The truths in the previous two paragraphs must be handled with great care by those who would minister: batterers distort these truths regularly. Are all of us tempted to anger? Batterers will turn that into an excuse: they are "just one of the boys," and violence is not that serious. Are the victims of violence also sinners, whose sins often play into and play off of the batterer's sins? Batterers will turn that into an excuse and an accusation: the fault really lies with their victims. You who would help must know the previous two paragraphs, but don't let the batterer twist truth into gross lies.

The Fog of Evasion

You need to know what violent people are like because they easily create a fog of confusion and evasion. Sin is deceitful; that is the lesson of Jeremiah 17:9. Violent people neither know themselves nor let others know them. You must know this. They are habitual