
Clarifying Words on Wife Abuse

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Several years ago, I was asked in an online Q&A, “What should a wife’s submission to her husband look like if he’s an abuser?” One of the criticisms of my answer has been that I did not mention the recourse that a wife has to law enforcement for protection. So let me clarify with seven biblical observations.¹

1. Every Christian is called to submit to various authorities and to each other: children to parents (Eph 6:1), citizens to government (Rom 13:1), wives to husbands (Eph 5:22), employees to employers (2 Thess 3:10), church members to elders (Heb 13:17), all Christians to each other (Eph 5:21), all believers to Christ (Luke 6:46).

This puts the submission of wives and husbands into the wider context of submission to Jesus, to the civil authorities, to each other, and to the church. This means that the rightness or wrongness of any act of submission is discerned by taking into account all the relevant relationships. We are all responsible to Jesus first, and then, under him, to various other persons and offices. Discerning the path of love and obedience when two or more of these submissive relationships collide is a call to humble, Bible-saturated, spiritual wisdom.

2. Husbands are commanded, “Love your wives, and do not be harsh with them” (Col 3:19). They are told 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” (Eph 5:28–29). The focus of a husband’s Christlikeness in loving his wife is “love your wives, as Christ loved the church and *gave himself up for her*” (Eph 5:25).

Christian husbands are not Christ. They are finite, fallible, forgiven sinners. They do not stand

in the place of Christ. Their wives relate directly to Christ (Heb 4:16; 11:6), not merely through their husbands. Husbands do not have the wisdom or the power or the rights of Christ. Their likeness to Christ in leading their wives is limited and focused by these words: *He gave himself up for her . . . nourishing and cherishing . . . not harsh with them.*

Therefore, an abusive husband is breaking God’s law. He is disobeying Christ. He is not to be indulged but disciplined by the church. The wife is not insubordinate to ask the church for help. A Christian woman should not feel that the only help available to her is the police. That would be a biblical failure of her church.

3. But recourse to civil authorities may be the right thing for an abused wife to do. Threatening or intentionally inflicting bodily harm against a spouse (or other family members) is a misdemeanor in Minnesota, punishable by fines, short-term imprisonment, or both. This means that a husband who threatens and intentionally injures his wife is not only breaking God’s moral law, but also the state’s civil law. In expecting his wife to quietly accept his threats and injuries, he is asking her to participate in his breaking of both God’s moral law and the state’s civil law.

God himself has put law enforcement officers in place for the protection of the innocent. “If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13:4). A wife’s submission to the authority of civil law, for Christ’s sake, may, therefore, overrule her submission to a husband’s demand that she endure his injuries. This legitimate recourse to civil protection may be done in a spirit that does not contra-

dict the spirit of love and submission to her husband, for a wife may take this recourse with a heavy and humble heart that longs for her husband's repentance and the restoration of his nurturing leadership.

4. The church should not harbor an abusive man or woman whom the civil authorities would punish if they knew what the church knows. We are called to mercy. "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). But there are times when mercy to one demands justice for another. This is often the case with criminal abuse. Moreover, there are many ways to show mercy toward a guilty person who must pay fines or go to jail. We are seldom in a position where the choice is simply mercy or no mercy.

5. For many women, the thought of a husband going to jail and losing his job and being publicly shamed is so undesirable that they often endure much sin before becoming desperate enough to turn to the authorities. What I want to stress is that long before they reach a point of desperation—or harm—the women of the church should know that there are spiritual men and women in the church to whom they can turn for help. By way of caution and lament, I cannot promise that every church has such spiritual, gifted, and compassionate men and women available for help. But many do. The intervention of these mature brothers and sisters may bring the husband to repentance and reconciliation. Or they may determine that laws have been broken and the civil authorities should or must be notified. In either case, no Christian woman (or man) should have to face abuse alone.

6. When Jesus commands his disciples, "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt 5:39), he is describing one way of love: the testimony that Jesus is so sufficient to me that I do not need revenge. This was the way Christ loved us at the end: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:22–23).

But this is not the only path of love open to those who are persecuted. The Bible warrants fleeing. John Bunyan wrestled with these two strands in the Bible of how to deal with persecution:

He that flies, has warrant to do so; he that stands, has warrant to do so. Yea, the same man may both fly and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be. Moses fled, Ex. 2:15; Moses stood, Heb. 11:27. David fled, 1 Sam. 19:12; David stood, 24:8. Jeremiah fled, Jer. 37:11–12; Jeremiah stood, 38:17. Christ withdrew himself, Luke 19:10; Christ stood, John 18:1–8. Paul fled, 2 Cor. 11:33; Paul stood, Acts 20:22–23. . . . Do not fly out of a slavish fear, but rather because flying is an ordinance of God, opening a door for the escape of some, which door is opened by God's providence, and the escape countenanced by God's Word, Matt. 10:23 (*Seasonable Counsels, or Advice to Sufferers, in The Works of John Bunyan, vol. 2, p. 726*).

7. When the Bible says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction" (Jas 1:27), it implies that Christians with means and strength take initiatives for the weaker. The "visitation" in this text is not for nothing. It is for help—for provision and protection. The point is this: when Jesus commands his disciples, "Turn to him the other cheek also" (Matt 5:39), he does not mean that, if I can do something about it, I should allow you to be slapped again. Again, it is the camaraderie in the body of Christ that breaks the cycle of injustice.

My closing plea is to all Christian men, and in particular to the leaders of churches: herald a beautiful vision of complementarian marriage that calls men to bear the responsibility not only for their own courage and gentleness but also for the gentleness of the other men as well. Make it part of the culture of manhood in the church that the men will not tolerate the abuse of any of its women.

ENDNOTES

¹This article originally appeared at DesiringGod.org, and it appears here with permission.