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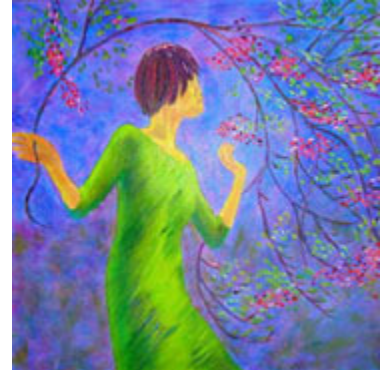
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TOLERATING AND STAYING

How a theology of female submission contributes to the prevalence of women tolerating and staying in violent situations

By Gerald W. Ford

Focus with me on the world where I work most of my days. It is the world of the Licensed Professional Counselor in Sugar Land, Texas. I am also licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist. I counsel at the Houston Center for Christian Counseling, a group of 30 Counselors committed to providing the best in both theology and mental health care.



In 18 years of counseling and 37 years in the pastorate, I have discovered that people tell their counselor much more than they tell their pastor. While I won't share the confidential information of specific clients, I want to share some insights about what my clients have taught me, about how they have learned to see their world. Many of the statements, by my clients who report abuse in their relationships, demonstrate how the traditional theology of female submission contributes to the prevalence of women tolerating and staying in violent situations.

Suffering for Christ

A willingness to suffer for Christ has been a part of the committed Christian character from the beginning. Being unashamed of the Gospel [1], knowing that we are blessed when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake [2], and understanding that we are likely to receive the same treatment from this world that Jesus received [3], become part of our belief system and lifestyle. We are called to run the race with patience [4]. Finding the ways to live these principles in the real and everyday world is certainly a proper pursuit for the believer. I frequently hear women, and a few men, who say that they are suffering in their marriage but they see it as suffering for Christ. They stay because they can view their suffering as something they are doing for the greater cause; it's what Christians do, they say. Yet suffering is not the core of Christianity, it is only an experience which will sometimes accompany the true core of Christianity, which is the Christ-like life. To be like Jesus may include suffering, but it also includes much more.

We must ask the question of whether Jesus suffered always, or if he had some boundaries of his own for when, for what cause, and how much he would suffer. A review of the Gospels will reveal many situations in which Jesus did not suffer silently, did not allow abusive behavior to go unchallenged, and gave his followers instruction to move away from rejection [5]. A misguided theory of suffering, when coupled with a misguided view of submission, may lead to the view that suffering violence is just part of a Christian woman's life.

I see women who are as afraid to talk about what they "want" as some men are afraid to talk about what they "feel." They tell me that they were always taught that women were the nurturers, serving others, and that they were in a marriage to attend to what others, especially their husbands, wanted. To speak of their

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wants, they believe, makes them sound selfish. This leads to worse results, because leaving “wants” unexpressed means that these wants will come out in some form of resentment, manipulation, or an expectation of mind-reading.

I think also of those women who take on a suffering/submissive role like they would take on a holy cause. They see themselves as martyrs in a cause. Tolerating more abuse and staying in an abusive relationship are seen as badges of courage. It may even be seen as the crucible where courage is made. If they were to leave, they might be labeled as a quitter, or a failure. They seem to blind their eyes to the truth that it is the abuser who is failing.

The High Priest and Spiritual Leader of the Family

Some of my clients tell me that their churches teach them to treat the husband as the “high priest of the family.” The phrase appears often when abuse is reported. Suggesting that men are the high priest of the family separates a woman from the birthright that is hers as an individual follower of Christ. The idea that all believers are priests before God is a scriptural concept meant to include every believer, male or female [6]. In a theological discussion of the priesthood of every believer, we believe that every soul has a God-given competency to relate to God as an individual. Yet an abused woman may not be hearing this message. She is often led to believe that her husband’s view of the will of God for the family is somehow “more informed” than her own. She “tolerates and stays” because she has been led to believe that her husband must be right, more holy, or more important.

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The abused woman may be told that having her husband as her high priest is for her own good, that she gets the benefit of his protection. She is promised that she will be treated like royalty. In exchange for making their husbands “special,” some of my clients have been promised by their church that their husbands will put them on a pedestal. This may sound good at first hearing, but in real life it becomes oppressive.

People on pedestals cannot be active, cannot move, and worst of all, the pedestal where the woman is placed is a pedestal in the dark. The pedestal keeps her in a dependent relationship. In similar fashion, a man who is on a pedestal in the daylight is simply a better target. The pedestal fails the test of realism, and it makes neither male nor female effective in solving the problems of everyday life. Despite the sometimes-made claim that denying the woman full voice in the marriage is counter-cultural and spiritual, the idea of the “pedestal wife” is simply a religious substitute for the secular idea of the “trophy wife” who has no purpose in her own right.

I also hear women and men speaking of the husband being the “spiritual leader of the home.” I also observe that when I ask what a “spiritual leader” does, very few people have any answers. As discussed in so many of the books and papers associated with CBE, there is no Scripture that speaks of anyone, husband or wife, as being the spiritual leader of the home. Scripture speaks often of Christians being spiritual people, Christ-like people, people who share the calling of God to love each other and to love and nurture their children. But to separate these partners into separate domains makes an artificial organization, rather than a healthy relationship between the two spiritual adults of the home.

“Just Love Them”

Some women report that people in their church admonish them to win their husbands to the Christian Life by “just loving them,” using I Peter 3:1-2 as a text. This passage speaks of winning them “without a

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word... as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior.” While the author’s meaning is true, the passage is often used incorrectly to suggest that a woman should put up with abuse and “just love them into the kingdom.” This was not the intention of Peter. If an unbeliever will not listen to our witness, Peter states that we should demonstrate our testimony by the way we live. This is the approach that should be taken by both Christian men and Christian women, in our efforts to communicate Christ to the world. It is not a sufficient approach for dealing with abuse. Beside this, if we are speaking of the marriage relationship, a good interpretation of the text would include a look at I Peter 3:7, where Peter tells men to honor their wife as a “fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.”

Stereotypes and Assumptions

The church has often followed secular stereotypes and assumptions. Perhaps these errors have been a part of society for such a long time that some in the church have mistaken them for Scripture, where there are no such ideas.

Psychiatrist Frank Pittman writes of the struggle that a young boy has with the image of the kind but subservient mother [7]. He describes the boy who likes his mother’s kindness and gentle, nurturing spirit. However, if he sees his mother abused by the father’s misuse of power, he may reach a dreadful conclusion—that kind and gentle people get abused by people with power. So, faced with a choice of being kind (and abused) or powerful, he chooses to be powerful, as defined by the ability to abuse a woman some day. Subtly, he is taught to be an abuser. In counseling I can tell the young man that kind and gentle people can also be strong and have power to solve problems without the need for power to abuse, but he may not believe what he has not seen at home. Sadly, it is often the church that has taught the false dichotomy between kindness and power, by teaching that women are built to nurture and men are built to be powerful, and that no one can really be both. Yet, Scripture speaks of both men and women as both strong and nurturing [8].

The church often defends these gender stereotypes and assumptions as though they were defending Scripture.

I hear women say things like, “I remember being strong before I got married.” Soon after saying this, she may say that she has heard, at church, so much about the “roles” that wives are supposed to have. Soon they may say that they have stopped thinking for themselves, stopped doing many things for which they believed they were gifted, and have become stuck in roles they have not freely chosen. This is an especially unhealthy idea to me as I do not find the Bible talking about “roles,” but rather talking about discipleship. As a disciple I am encouraged to love and to serve, but my gifts and calling are not determined by my gender.

The church often defends these gender stereotypes and assumptions as though they were defending Scripture. There are many occasions when a couple comes to counseling and hears of better ways to communicate, to problem solve, and to mutually build an effective relationship. But soon, the wife will tell me that her husband got home from counseling and spent hours lecturing her about the “proper order of things” and reading Scripture to her. Some tell me of a pastor who pulled them aside and warned them against counseling with anyone who did not follow their church’s views on male headship. Others tell of women at their church who are threatened by any other woman who steps outside of the traditional expectations. (Sounds like Martha and Mary [9].) I have heard women say they were asked not to come to the women’s group any longer if they were going to bring up egalitarian issues or address problems of abuse.

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How Can We Respond?

So what can the believer do in their church to address the problems of abuse and male hierarchy? Those of us who long to be a part of the solution can provide help in a number of ways:

- Come to grips with the fact that theology affects lives. Therefore, ongoing study of theology and gender issues (such as found in the works by CBE) will create a good foundation for healthy theology.
- Graciously but firmly identify yourself as an egalitarian. I hear many people who have good marriages saying that they believe the egalitarian message, but that they don't want to be seen as controversial. While there may be legitimate reasons for keeping egalitarian convictions private, we must understand that the expression of those convictions not only stand for truth but may offer the abused woman a lifeline to leave an unhealthy and dangerous situation. Actively promoting egalitarian views may also help men and women avoid the traps of abuse before they ever enter them.
- Make good literature available—donate egalitarian books to the church library and lead Bible studies about these issues.
- Refuse to join in with the jokes and jargon of many church group communications which suggest all men or all women are alike and enable gender stereotypes. I'm not talking about being argumentative, but I am talking about not playing the games that perpetuate the problems. One morning years ago, our pastor asked all the heads of households to stand, so both my wife and I stood. This quickly made a point for all to see.
- If you are in a loving and egalitarian marriage, let the happiness show. Tell people that it is working.
- Encourage your church to make referrals to egalitarian counselors who will be familiar with the issues of male headship theology. Further, encourage your pastor to speak out against abuse, making it clear that the Bible does not condone abuse.
- Join with others in supporting those who make the difficult choices to leave the abusive relationship. Do not allow the person who leaves abuse to be spoken of as "just another case of divorce." Some relationships deserve to end.
- Teach children in the church from an egalitarian perspective.
- Encourage and help women to take part in church leadership, committees, etc, not because the committee needs a woman's perspective, but because the committee needs the skills and character of the particular woman.
- Encourage the use of gender inclusive and gender respectful language in church publications, and use it in your own everyday speech.
- Build good relationships with others who are egalitarian, or who are curious about the idea and make a habit of encouraging one another.
- Persevere. Change is a long process, requiring consistency and patience.

Notes:

1. Romans 1:16
2. Matthew 5:10
3. John 7:7
4. Hebrews 12:1
5. Matthew 10:12-23
6. I Peter 2:9-10
7. Pittman, Frank S. *Man Enough: fathers, sons, and the search for masculinity*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1993.
8. I Thessalonians 2:1-8; II Timothy 1:7
9. Luke 10: 38-42

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