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“WHAT ABOUT ALL THE MEN?”

By Al Miles

A Christian pastor and national trainer on strategies to prevent and end situations of domestic violence within faith communities reflects on the most frequently asked question he receives from male clergy and congregation members. He also challenges the commonly held notion that males have been granted special divine privileges to assume headship over females.



The hundred people in attendance at the church auditorium on that Saturday were all part of the congregation's leadership team: choir members, deacons, educators, senior and associate pastors. The focus of this particular day-long conference was on the unique challenges churches face when situations of domestic violence occur amongst couples worshipping within the congregation.

I began this particular session by recounting the story of a couple named Helen and William. Evangelical Christians in their early forties who had been married for 18 years—from all outside indicators this particular couple shared a wonderful life. They were the envy of people living in their small university town where both were well-respected and tenured professors. Everyone praised Helen and William because of their Christian commitment and deep love and respect for one another.

No one knew, however, that William had been abusing Helen their entire marriage. On one horrific occasion, which I shared with conference attendees, he poured scalding water all over her body simply because she had declined to have sexual relations with him that evening.

I read aloud to the group Helen's own recollection of William's criminal actions. "I was so shocked and frightened by what he did that I didn't even feel the pain of my second-degree burns until later," recalled Helen. "As I lay in bed crying uncontrollably over what this man, my husband, had done to me, William put his face very close to mine and said in an angry but even tone, 'Never, ever refuse to have sex with me again. I am your master; you are my servant—just as the Bible says. I'll be damned if I let my wife tell me what she will and will not do.'"

Attendees were visibly shaken by what they had just heard. I asked them to share their feelings; first and foremost, over the pain and suffering faced by Helen and, second, over the fact that a Christian man was using the Bible to justify the crimes and sins he perpetrated against his wife.

Despite the inhumane treatment of Helen, and my clear instructions, here are the first five comments I received from male participants:

- What about all the men being battered by women?
- We don't know the things Helen did to provoke William's anger.

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- Women can be just as abusive as men.
- Many husbands work hard all day and suffer abuse from their wives every night.
- What are the statistics on female batterers?

These comments, though certainly troubling, are very common. When situations of domestic violence amongst couples worshipping in Christian churches come to light, the usual response from clergy and congregation members alike, especially males, is to offer excuses and justifications for the actions of an abusive man. Children, job stress, mood swings, race, pets, Satan, upbringing, and the violated woman herself are all blamed for the man's criminal and sinful behavior.

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An abused Christian woman is frequently vilified. She is said to have "provoked" the man's anger by her actions and inactions; said to have caused him to "snap" by nagging him; and, of particular note, she is told by clergy and congregants that the abuse perpetrated against her is due to the fact that she is not in total submission to the alleged "God-ordained" authority of her male intimate partner.

It's critical to note that none of the above excuses are true. Women never cause the emotional, physical, psychological, sexual, or spiritual abuse men perpetrate against them. Not ever. Situations of domestic violence are always the result of a conscious decision and definitive choice on the part of an offender to use abusive and violent tactics.

Let's talk further about two issues: first, the idea that domestic violence is a crime and sin perpetrated as much by females as by males. Second, the frequent misuse of God, the Bible, and church doctrine and tradition by some Christian men to not only claim male headship and female subordination, but to also offer excuses and justification for the violence men perpetrate against women.

An Equal Opportunity Crime? Actually Not

Anyone in an adult or teenage relationship can be abused and abusive. But the idea that women abuse men at the same rate and intensity as men abuse women is not supported by national statistics. The American Medical Association estimates that more than two million women in this country are assaulted by an intimate partner every year [1]. At present, 85% to 90% of all reported cases of intimate partner violence are those in which a man violates a woman. Most male victims of intimate partner violence are violated by other males in same-sex partnerships. And, in terms of injury rates, injury severity, medical help seeking, depression, anxiety, and fear, women are more adversely affected than are men. In addition, recent research has indicated that while some women report using violence to dominate and control their partners, the predominant violence motivation offered by women is self-defense or retaliation for prior violence against them [2].

Furthermore, men use emotional, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse tactics against women far more frequently and intensely than vice versa. Crude putdowns; vile and vulgar name calling; destruction of property; physical harm or the threat thereof to one's intimate partner, children, pets, and to one's self; sexual abuse and sexual assault; are all commonly employed male tactics that are seldom used by females.

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However, the greatest debunk to the myth that women abuse men at the same rate and intensity as men abuse women, at least from a Christian context, is found in the use of spiritual abuse tactics.

Male Privilege—Ordained by Man not God

Let's return for a moment to Helen and William. On the night he poured scalding water all over his wife's body because she had declined to have sexual relations with him that evening, William offered Helen a biblical justification for the criminal and sinful behavior he'd just perpetrated against her. "I am your master; you are my servant—just as the Bible says." It is vital that all Christians, leaders and lay members alike, condemn such blasphemy. There is nothing in Scripture that supports either William's atrocious act or his claim of male superiority.

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Nevertheless, battered Christian women across the denominational spectrum are hearing from some clergy and congregation members, especially from males, that they, the women, must stay with, pray for, and obey the very men violating them. Somehow, though this is never fully explained, these acts of complicity and subservience will make everything okay in the relationship. As a result of this dangerous and inappropriate advice, scores of Christian women have suffered further abuse from their male Christian intimate partners. Sadly, some of the women have even been murdered by these alleged "men of God."

There is no evidence whatsoever that men, Christian or otherwise, are receiving such poorly thought-out spiritual counsel. It is extremely rare for any man to be told by anyone—inside or outside of church—to stay with, pray for, and obey any woman, let alone one who is abusing him. Why?

Christian Marriage—Equal and Mutual, not Male Dominant

In actuality, the overarching theme in Scripture concerning adult intimate partnerships in marriage centers on equality and mutuality. Equal love, respect, value and worth, and mutual privileges and responsibilities are essential qualities in all healthy Christian marriages. Husbands and wives are instructed to "be subject to" one another. In the original language of the New Testament, Greek, this means that both men and women need to behave responsibly toward one another, align themselves, and need to relate to one another in meaningful and respectful ways.

- Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph. 5:21 NRSV)
- For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. (Gal. 5:13 NRSV)
- The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also his wife. (1 Cor. 7:3-4 NIV)
- Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. (Col. 3:19 NRSV).

Clergy and congregants need to interpret and translate passages from both the Old and New Testaments, and promote doctrinal beliefs, teachings, and traditions that clearly affirm the equal value and worth of all humankind, both female and male. Privileges granted to males, in and outside of the context of marriage, must also be granted to females. This is surely what God intends.

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Conclusion

What about all the men? This is a very important question in reference to the widespread, yet significantly underreported incidents of intimate partner violence occurring amongst Christian couples. The inquiry, however, needs to be greatly expanded upon:

- What about all the men who have chosen to stand with women to work on preventing and ending the violence Christian males perpetrate against females and children?
- Why aren't more Christian men speaking out from pulpits and classrooms about this pervasive epidemic?
- Where are the Christian men who are willing to challenge the time-worn patriarchal system that offers males undue entitlement and privileges to yield an alleged God-ordained authority over females, children, animals and plants, and the entire universe?
- How are Christian men treating their own wives or other female intimate partners? Are they modeling healthy behavior and teaching their daughters and sons the equal love, respect, value and worth God intends for all humankind, female and male? Or, does the behavior of self-proclaimed "men of God" toward their own female wives and girlfriends support a male hierarchal construct?

What about all the men? I challenge male Christians who ask this question to look inside themselves—seek professional help to change behaviors that disrespect women, children, and any other of God's creations, learn more about the dynamics associated with domestic violence, and then decide to join women to work toward bringing an end to all the violence men perpetrate against women, children, and each other.

Notes:

1. American Medical Association, "Facts about Domestic Violence," cited in *Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know*, p. 27.
2. L. Kevin Hamberger and Clare Guse, "What Domestically Violent Men Say about Their Partners' Violence" (unpublished), cited in *Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know*, pp. 32-33.



Rev. Al Miles received his undergraduate degree from Anderson University and his Master of Divinity degree at the Anderson School of Theology, both in Anderson, Indiana. Since 1993, Miles has worked for Pacific Health Ministry at The Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii as the Coordinator of the Hospital Ministry Department. He speaks frequently to nationwide audiences from a wide variety of fields on domestic violence and teen dating abuse awareness. Rev. Miles has been an ordained minister in the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana) since 1983, and is

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