



Violence against Women and Children: How Churches Can Respond

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Violence against women and children is a cultural issue that affects us all. Here, I will focus on those aspects of the issue that, I contend, most concern the life of the church. I will avoid the term “victim”—a label that shapes a person’s identity long after the experience of abuse is concluded—and speak instead about those who have been victimized, admittedly using a more cumbersome construction. I will not call this “domestic violence,” since that term suggests that the violence is directed against men and women in the home in relatively equal proportion, but contemporary findings indicate this is not the case;¹ thus, I will refer to this problem as violence against women and children. Finally, I will propose that congregations and pastors can make unique contributions to the healing process of those suffering the aftermath of violence in the home by providing a safe place where “for-giving” can be experienced. To maintain brevity I will not examine violence in same-sex relationships but suggest that much of what has been written about the dynamics between those who perpetrate the violence and those who suffer the violence applies in these relationships as well.

¹See, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ties That Bind: Domestic Violence against Women,” in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary J. Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996) 39–55.

To help women who have been victimized, pastors and congregations must first believe them. Then they can respond with a “for-giving” attitude—giving themselves for the other in a way that allows a new start.

IS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN A THEOLOGICAL ISSUE?

I recently completed teaching with a colleague an interdisciplinary course on violence against women and children. I first needed to confront my own shock and disbelief at the initial response from the class: “Is this really still a problem in our churches?” I wanted to respond, “Yes, particularly if *you* respond with disbelief to those who seek your assistance.” The students did not represent a “scientific sample” but do, nevertheless, illustrate an attitude that exists in our churches. This disbelief silences those who have been victimized and prevents them from seeking assistance. As we began the term, I wondered if we were inhabiting the same city, reading the same newspapers, and watching the same media reports, but I managed to curb my incredulity and commenced by naming the problem. Likewise, clergy and church members mirror the cultural response to those who suffer violence in the home when they respond in disbelief which ultimately leads to siding with the perpetrator, even if by default.

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Christie Cozad Neuger argues in her recent work that those who have been victimized need to be able to “tell the truth about these experiences of betrayal and *to be believed*. Without that community of belief, the trauma does not get resolved.”² As communities of believers, our churches have enormous potential to become communities of care. First, though, if we are to assist those who are victimized, we need to overcome our disbelief when the perpetrator is someone we know and respect. (I am alluding here to cognitive dissonance and will say more about this problem later.) Women who attend church often seek out their pastor for care and counseling when they realize they are living in abusive relationships. Sadly, however, the response given is all too often one of disbelief, in which the women’s feelings “appear to the pastor as too fantastic, too weird, or too mad to be taken seriously.”³ Still other responses include: “Why don’t you just leave?” or “What did you do to provoke him?” as if the matter were that simple. A woman who has been battered may even struggle with her own disbelief, since this is, after all, not a stranger but the man who in most instances made a covenant with her to be in a loving and safe relationship. Women are often afraid of the consequences of leaving, especially if there are children in the home. Who will protect them if she leaves? Fear is a primary reason for remaining. (For example, one study concluded that “50% of men who frequently assault their wives also frequently abuse their

²Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling Women: A Narrative, Pastoral Approach* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 94, her emphasis.

³Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women’s Silences in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 19.

children.”⁴) Moreover, violence may not end when women leave. Besides, simply telling a woman that *she* must leave or change shifts the blame or responsibility to her. While the victimized may need to learn new responses for stressful situations and improve their interpersonal relationship skills, violence in an intimate relationship is never justified.

When we do take the time to acknowledge violence against women as an issue of concern, do we also evaluate the situation for the children exposed to the violence? What is the impact of violence against women upon their children? As noted above, children also sometimes become victims of violence. Some will repeat the patterns of violent behavior they learned as children as they mature into adults. Others will perform poorly in school, suffer with depression, fearfulness, anxiety, sleeplessness, antisocial behavior, and/or become aggressive.⁵ Only recently have child protection workers begun to investigate the links between violence against women and child protection issues. And what about the women themselves?

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Women victimized in intimate relationships frequently present many of the same symptoms that children exhibit. Diagnoses may include anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder, dissociative disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, to name several. Some women who have been victimized may survive with their sense of self relatively intact and remain high functioning while others may engage in substance abuse or develop eating disorders. During the abuse, women struggle with alienation in isolation. Following the time of their abuse, many continue to struggle with issues related to self-alienation. Unhealthy coping skills, developed to survive in an unhealthy environment, are characteristic symptoms. These women commonly experience difficulty when attempting to give voice to their suffering because language adequate for articulating their story is absent, especially in a religious discourse that privileges male voices. The history of their abuse is, in part, the repeated denial of their voices. For those who want to help, attentive listening and resisting the temptation to “fix” the situation are required. I have spent many counseling sessions with women on the beginning of their journey to health who at first could only shed tears. They knew they were suffering but could not always describe what had happened to them.

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⁴Linda Spears, “Building Bridges between Domestic Violence Organizations and Child Protective Services.” Online: <http://www.vaw.umn.edu/documents/dvcps/dvcps.html> [cited 1 August 2003].

⁵Ibid.

text. Marie Fortune describes the experience of the one victimized as a form of involuntary suffering, concluding that

involuntary suffering is not chosen and never serves a greater good; it is inflicted by a person(s) upon another against their will and results only in pain and destruction. Sexual and domestic violence are forms of involuntary suffering. Neither serves any useful purpose; neither is chosen by the victim; neither is ever justified.⁶

The pain experienced at the first sign of abuse is a warning that something is amiss. The suffering endured over time indicates that a change is long overdue. The kind of suffering endured by those who experience violence and abuse is not redemptive but may provide an opportunity for transformation. Pastors and congregations have opportunities to become agents of transformation. In this context, becoming an agent of transformation may be understood as “refusing to accept injustice and refusing to assist its victims to endure suffering any longer.”⁷ (I want to add here that by the end of the term the students agreed that violence *is* still an issue of concern for the churches, noting that many of their own misunderstandings had been transformed.)

NAMING THE PROBLEM

The list of egregious acts that might be committed against women and children in the home is endless; it includes physical, sexual, and psychological (emotional/verbal) abuse, as well as harm caused to personal property or pets. Many women, especially those with children at home, are economically dependent and blame themselves for the abuse they experience, making statements like, “If only I were a better wife and housekeeper, these things wouldn’t happen.” Over time they experience an erosion of self-esteem and struggle with shame and self-blame. The shame is often so intense that when these women finally do seek medical attention they sometimes deny that their injuries occurred at the hands of someone else. Instead, they offer excuses like, “I fell down the stairs.” Then, during the third phase of the cycle of abuse (the first phase is an escalation of conflict, the second is the actual violence), they experience a glimmer of hope as the one who abuses them becomes remorseful, promising never to engage in abusive behavior again. Those victimized are most vulnerable at this point, particularly if they ascribe to religious beliefs that include a mandate to forgive. Why? Although acting in accord with their belief system, they are adjudged crazy by those who might be best situated to help them for remaining with the perpetrator. What if, instead of asking “Why does she remain?” we pose the question “Why does he batter?”

A man who batters his wife or partner does so in order to maintain power and

⁶Marie M. Fortune, “The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” in *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1998) 88.

⁷Ibid., 91.

control. He often struggles with low self-esteem, feels entitled, and may struggle with substance abuse.⁸ He makes excuses for his abusive behavior and often justifies himself because no one, including the church, holds him accountable. Early in my graduate school training, I worked in a counseling relationship with a woman whose husband served as an elected official on the church governing board. The pastor of the church was aware of the violence in the relationship but did nothing to hold the man accountable for his actions; thus, the man continued to serve out his term on the church board, and she ended up leaving the church. The pastor's wife contacted me to ask if I would be willing to work with the woman who had been victimized. This is a scenario that, unfortunately, repeats itself much too frequently. As I neared completion of this article, a colleague consulted with me about a similar situation. Why are we as pastors and Christians so reluctant to heed the voices in our communities when they finally break their silence and request help? Why are we so unwilling to hold accountable those who perpetrate violence?

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Listeners or care providers often experience cognitive dissonance, believing, for example, that they know the accused perpetrator well and have never witnessed even so much as an angry outburst. The man she describes couldn't possibly be the same one we know! He is a leader and well-respected member of the community, successful in his vocation. The accused appears to be a “nice guy” in public, but he may be a “nice guy” with a narcissistic personality disorder who uses secrecy and deception to hide his abusive actions.⁹ Our cognitive dissonance leads us to respond with disbelief, serving only to silence yet again the one who has been victimized. The abuser may even seek out the advice of his pastor before his wife does, thereby possibly eliminating one avenue of assistance. When his wife dares to break the silence and end the secrecy, she is often greeted by the wider community with accusations of destroying “the perfect family” and by an enraged husband at home. The acts of violence frequently become worse as the woman begins to exhibit more self-esteem and independence. (A word of caution: do not attempt to provide marital counseling unless both partners are present.)

Even when we are not overcome by cognitive dissonance, we are often fearful of somehow ruining the church's image in the community. Though we might acknowledge in private the suffering of a woman and her children, our public re-

⁸Nancy Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 10–11.

⁹James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 49–73.

sponse might well be one of minimization and denial of responsibility. We did not witness the violence take place, we rationalize. She could, after all, be expanding the truth. If it really did occur, she needs to be the one to take action. But, of course, she has taken action by trusting us with her story. We need only reflect on how unsuccessful has been this strategy of minimization and denial in many a Roman Catholic diocese to know that it is not an appropriate response. Do we ever, for example, within the context of a sermon, name the evil that takes place when men batter women in intimate relationships? Do we offer education for those victimized as well as those who victimize? Have we ever heard anyone, from the pulpit or in a church forum, name violence against women as an evil? We must name the problem in our churches if women and children are to believe that we are ready to listen and can be trusted. We may be fearful of the legal consequences that the one who perpetrates violence will suffer. As pastors, we might be called upon to minister to both parties and feel caught in the middle. Finally we, like the one who has been victimized, believe we are obligated to forgive. When we forgive too easily, without holding accountable the one who victimizes, we have rendered cheap a very costly grace.¹⁰ To become agents of transformation, we must refuse to accept injustice. Surely someone will now want to raise the question: “But doesn’t our mandate to forgive act as an impediment to health and safety, even as it reinforces the injustice?” What exactly does this mean, and how are we to respond?

A LOVING, “FOR-GIVING” RELATIONSHIP

Marie Fortune suggests that forgiveness should be a woman’s last step as she journeys toward wholeness. Forgiveness is a valuable resource, but it is not the same thing as reconciliation. A restoration of relationship between the one who has been victimized and the one who perpetrates the abuse may never occur, even though that might be our Christian ideal. If the woman who has experienced violence is able to reach the point of forgiving the perpetrator, that may well facilitate her healing process, providing her with significant psychological benefits. This process needs to take place according to her time frame—no one else’s.¹¹ Feminists tend to be critical of the idea that we are compelled to forgive an abuser, arguing that a Christian understanding of forgiveness may contribute to the woman’s refusing power or, worse yet, conspiring with her own degradation.¹² This would certainly be the case if the woman seeks forgiveness for acts of violence that she did not commit or if her offer of forgiveness becomes a vehicle for releasing the guilty party, allowing the abuse to continue. I suggest, following Julia Kristeva’s work

¹⁰Marie M. Fortune and James Poling, “Calling to Accountability: The Church’s Response to Abusers,” in Adams and Fortune, *Violence against Women and Children*, 452–453.

¹¹Marie Fortune, “Forgiveness: The Last Step,” in Adams and Fortune, *Violence against Women and Children*, 201–206.

¹²Carol L. Schnabl Schweitzer, “The Stranger’s Voice: Julia Kristeva’s Relevance for a Pastoral Theology for Women Struggling with Depression” (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2002) 222.

with women struggling with depression, that what a woman who has been victimized genuinely desires is “for-giving.”¹³

I have argued elsewhere that a woman reaching out for assistance yearns for a loving other who will “for-give” her, one who will be giving for her in a relationship.¹⁴ She wants forgiveness, but not necessarily what we would define as forgiveness in a traditional theological sense of the word. She suffers for want of love, with self-alienation or estrangement, and needs someone who will finally “give for her” in the context of a caring relationship. How does one “give for her” without overpowering her or depriving her of agency and voice? I am dependent here on Kristeva’s psychoanalytic understanding of the function of forgiveness in the process of

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an analytic relationship: “What is tact? To hear true, along with forgiveness. *Forgiveness*: giving in addition, banking on what is there in order to revive, to give the depressed patient (that stranger withdrawn into his wound) a new start, and give him the possibility of a new encounter.”¹⁵ Tact as a “for-giving” attitude is important in any caregiving relationship; it is “more than a social grace; it is a delicate perception of another’s affect” in which she comes to know herself in a new way by being given the possibility of speaking the truth about her experience, while the listener’s judgment is suspended.¹⁶ The pastor, counselor, or friend who listens with tact provides “a gift of understanding and judgment...to the other. I deprive myself of my own understanding and judgment, and I detach myself from my affect and my silence...I do not cease to ask questions.”¹⁷ I ask questions that provide the woman who has been abused an opportunity to give voice to her story, to reconcile the various pieces of her fragmented self so that her sense of self may be restored. She is provided with a hopeful opportunity for a new start and may begin to believe that God, too, loves her. The sermons she has heard, the lessons she has been taught *do* now include her. “For-giveness” in the context of a loving, caring relationship allows the woman who has experienced abuse to begin to define new possibilities in this world.

For the skeptic who is suspicious of rendering a theological construct into a psychological process, consider what Paul Tillich wrote about truth and reconcilia-

¹³See, especially, Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 175–217, and Julia Kristeva, “Symbolic Castration: A Question,” in *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 87–102.

¹⁴Schweitzer, “The Stranger’s Voice,” 222.

¹⁵Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 189, her emphasis.

¹⁶Schweitzer, “The Stranger’s Voice,” 220.

¹⁷Kristeva, “Symbolic Castration,” 90.

tion: "Truth is what reconciles, and reconciles not only in terms of restitution but in terms of creative reunion or growth."¹⁸ Truth, spoken in the context of a healing relationship in which the other listens with tact, initiates restitution of the self and introduces future possibilities of creative reunion and growth. These hopeful possibilities do not require an analytic relationship but merely an attentive listener, one who suspends judgment and asks thoughtful questions that demonstrate that the listener believes the woman who seeks help. The same can be said of assisting children who live in abusive situations.

HOW CHURCHES CAN RESPOND

Congregations and their leaders need first to recognize that violence against women and children continues to be a problem in *our* communities. There is no single profile of a man who batters, just as there is no single profile of a woman who has been battered. This profound problem affects us all. Violence transpires not only in the wider culture but within "church families," generally in silence. Disbelief is an obstacle that we, as well as those who are victimized, need to confront in order that the voices of those who have been abused are not silenced. We need to name the problem in our churches and then to listen with tact. The unique language that we have at our disposal for helping women and children is theological discourse. Our unique contribution can be to become communities where "forgiveness" is a possibility for those who have been victimized by violent intimate partners. ⊕

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¹⁸Paul Tillich, "Estrangement and Reconciliation," in *The Meaning of Health*, ed. Perry LeFevre (Chicago: Exploration, 1984) 9.