

From Collusion to Correction:

Five Ways Pastors Unconsciously Reinforce Abuse, and How to Do Better

by Natalie Collins

In 2016, the conservative American media outlet, Christian Broadcasting Network published a piece in which Dr. Benjamin Keyes of Regent University (Virginia, USA) reported that, “Unfortunately, in Christian marriages we have a much greater frequency of domestic violence than we do in non-Christian homes.”¹ That’s significant in a country where one in three women has been subjected to abuse by a partner or ex-partner.²

For too many women, this isn’t a staggering statistic, it’s a daily reality.

Research shows that Christian men who sporadically attend church are more likely than any other religious group (or secular men) to assault their wives.³ Apparently men, especially those only nominally engaged with Christianity, are finding justification to abuse. They are not finding a message sufficiently forceful to change their behavior.

How is it that any man who walks through our church doors—whether once a year or once a day—can walk away believing that domestic violence is justified? Perhaps because precious little is being done to challenge it. A 2014 Sojourners survey revealed that only thirty-five percent of pastors have spoken more than once about domestic abuse.⁴

This statistic is alarming, but must not blind us to this truth: all pastors teach their congregants about abuse one way or another. When we preach, lead Bible

studies, or interact pastorally or socially with people, the language we use and the way we present topics will either reinforce or challenge an abuser’s narrative.

Given the prevalence of domestic violence, every pastor should assume they are preaching to women who have been subjected to abuse and to men who have perpetrated abuse. How should that change the messaging and culture of the church? The answer would be exhaustive. But as a start, here are five areas where popular teachings collude with abusive behaviors, and tips to reframe these issues to challenge abuse.

Gender Stereotyping and “Harmless” Jokes

Gender stereotyping and sexist jokes are often used to build rapport, either in personal conversations or during teaching. I recently attended a youth event where the speaker praised his “hot wife” and “beautiful daughters” and told us about the time he evangelized to a woman he described as a stripper. He made sure to let us know that, “I told myself to look at her face, not her chest.”

It can seem like harmless fun to joke about men being terrible at looking after children or women being bad drivers. But what are we telling the man in the room who shirks his parenting duties, driving his wife beyond the point of exhaustion, then shames her for being a

bad mother if their children misbehave? What about the man who drives recklessly, endangering and frightening his family, but refuses to let his wife drive because women are “bad drivers?” When pastors praise their “hot wives,” what are they telling the woman whose husband treats her as his trophy, forcing her to always dress up but constantly telling her she’s ugly and disgusting?

Offhand comments and sexist jokes are not harmless. They feed a culture that reinforces an abusive man’s views. They tell a woman who endures abuse that his behavior is normal and justified.

How we can do better:

Avoid these types of comments and jokes. Instead, make a joke that highlights the absurdity of a gender stereotype. Humor can be a good way to challenge a cultural norm without appearing confrontational.

Call out others when they make this type of comment or joke. You don’t need to be mean or self-righteous about it. Just make sure people understand that those comments aren’t welcomed in your church community and explain why.

Talk about this issue. In sermons, exhort your congregation not to engage in this behavior. In staff meetings and trainings, make it clear that this isn’t acceptable. When guest speakers come, ask them to refrain from these kinds of remarks.

The household codes in Ephesians 5 actually demanded that men lay down power and dominance over their wives in a way that was unheard of. The takeaway should be mutual submission and the laying down of power, not a call for men to be nicer patriarchs.

Headship and Submission

Many complementarians are clear that they are also seeking to address male violence towards women. I do not doubt that complementarian Christians can be pastorally sensitive to those who have been subjected to abuse, but can they address the root causes? I'm not so sure:

The most basic complementarian belief is that even though women and men have equal worth, God prescribes roles. In those roles, men lead and women submit. This is justified by poor teaching on headship and submission. Many pastors teach that this is the foundation of a healthy family.

Regardless of good intentions, this contributes to a view that men are superior to women. It is a pastoral imperative that any teaching on headship and submission assumes that some of the men present are abusing their wives. And that some of the women present are being subjected to abuse. This ensures that we filter our teaching through a lens of safety and an intention of not colluding with abusers.

How we can do better:

Not only is gender-role theology harmful, it's unfaithful to the Bible. Pastors need to do a better job with the biblical text.

A good exposition of the Bible's words on headship and submission would make it clear that Paul calls for reciprocal submission. Point out that the household codes in Ephesians 5 actually demanded that men lay down power and dominance over their wives in a way that was unheard of.

The takeaway should be mutual submission and the laying down of power, not a call for men to be nicer patriarchs.

Every time you preach on headship and submission, use the opportunity to speak specifically about domestic violence. Call out ways these teachings have been manipulated to justify abuse. No one should hear about headship and submission without also hearing about mutual submission and co-leadership.

Forgiveness and repentance

Research has found that religious women are not less likely to be subjected to abuse, but they are likely to endure abuse for longer.⁵ Why? One reason is our focus on forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a dominant theme in Christianity, but we must be careful! Often, forgiveness is equated with reconciliation. Or, it is said to nullify the consequences of someone's sin. This can be deeply harmful, because forgiveness does not fix everything. Forgiveness can only enter the picture when the one being abused is safe.

How we can do better:

When teaching on forgiveness, make it clear that forgiveness does not mean enduring further abuse. When Scripture talks of suffering, it is in the context of persecution for faith, not suffering through abuse.

Similarly, when we talk about repentance, we need to ensure that we are not colluding with the manipulative tears of an abuser. The person repenting has no right to demand forgiveness from those he has wronged. True repentance means an

abusive man must lose the power he has over his wife. And she, in turn, must gain liberation and fullness of life.

Prayer

How we talk about prayer can either hurt or help women being subjected to abuse. We cannot simply teach that "prayer changes everything." Prayer doesn't always change everything.

When we extoll the value of prayer and waiting on God, what does this tell the woman whose husband is systematically raping her? We give her hope that he will miraculously stop. If he doesn't, what will she think? Perhaps that she is not faithful enough for her prayers to be answered? Perhaps God wants her in this situation so she can grow spiritually? Or perhaps God is okay with what's happening?

When we teach carelessly about prayer, we plant the seeds of these ideas. In truth, all research suggests that abusers need to work with an accredited perpetrator program if they are to sustain any change. We have to do better.

How we can do better:

When you teach about prayer, make it clear that God's gift of free will makes prayer a partnership between the power of God and the power of human beings.

Don't just teach it, do it. Encourage and help women get to a place of safety. Connect them with professionals who can respond effectively. Find trainings on responding to domestic violence and require your staff to attend. Connect with advocates and ask for advice on how to make your church safe for women who are abused; and then

follow their recommendations. Prayer is important, but needs to go hand-in-hand with tangible actions.

Sex and Family

In our eagerness to preserve sexual morality, we have painted a simplistic picture of sex, where morality is all about where it happens—outside of or within marriage. Sex before marriage is always bad, and sex within marriage as always good. What does this communicate to those who have been abused?

Those who have been subjected to abuse outside of marriage hear that they are tainted and have sinned, when in fact they have been sinned against. It fosters guilt, shame, and secrecy instead of safety, healing, and freedom.

Within marriage, the truth is that sex is not always bliss. Sex after marriage can be abusive, coercive, unsatisfying, and immoral. Rape can be committed within marriage. When subjected to abuse within marriage, women may believe something is wrong with them if sex is not perfect like is “should” be.

To make matters worse, we stigmatize single parents, divorce, and separation, assuming these conditions result from

immorality. This creates pressure for women to marry and stay married to men who abuse them and their children.

How we can do better:

Teach more holistically about sex. It's not just about whether you're married or not. Talk to young people (and adults) about consent, coercion, and intimacy. Define rape, domestic violence, and healthy sexuality. Acknowledge that rape is usually perpetrated by boyfriends, husbands, and even church leaders. Talk about these issues in youth groups, premarital counseling, small groups, and Sunday gatherings.

When you preach or teach, present a true picture of sexual morality and immorality from Scripture. For instance, don't teach that Bathsheba seduced David. It's simply not true, and feeds assumptions about gender and sexuality. The truth is he saw (stalked?) her from his palace, used his power to coerce her into sex, then arranged for her husband to die in order save face. Call this out for the evil that it is. Challenge men to consider whether they are using their power to take advantage of women, and state unequivocally that it must stop.

Don't make offhand comments lamenting divorce rates or the tragic state of single mothers. When you talk about these topics, do it with care. Be clear that there are very good—and moral—reasons for people to find themselves in such a state. Make sure your congregation learns to welcome and support people without judgment or suspicion.

The church has endless opportunities to influence how people form and maintain relationships, from preaching to parenting classes, teen relationship lessons, premarital counseling, marriage enrichment sessions, and more. Being sensitive to how our communications can either collude with or challenge abusers, and support or alienate those subjected to abuse, can only strengthen our ability to make a difference and ensure the gospel is good news for all people.



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