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Church of England Theological Approach

to Domestic Abuse

When considering theology and domestic abuse we have to realise that religious or spiritual factors are central to the victim’s understanding and response. His/her own faith and the support of Church can be vital in helping the healing process, while a lack of understanding regarding the Biblical perspective on abusive relationships by the victim or those he/she turns to for spiritual guidance and support can add to the emotional, physical and financial hurdles already faced.

The basis of our theological approach is summarised as follows:

* Human beings are created in the divine image to live in relationships of love, respect and mutual self-giving. This should be reflected in how intimate relationships are conducted.
* Tragically, the corruption of human nature which Christian theology names ‘sin’ means that the mutual dependence and shared vulnerability which are inseparable from intimacy can instead become the vehicle through which one person can inflict profound hurt, damage and abuse upon another.
* The pattern of living that is revealed through Jesus in his relationships with others entails that abuse of any kind is contrary to the will of God and an affront to human dignity. This entails a heavy responsibility upon the Church and its members to do everything possible to prevent or halt it.
* The good news of Christ promises God’s redeeming presence and power in situations of pain and suffering. Through rejection of patterns of violence, and support of those who have been abused, the Church is called to be a vehicle of God’s work of healing for both survivors and alleged or known perpetrators of abuse.
* The Church is committed to doing justice to the truth about God and human beings that is revealed in the Christian Gospel.

*A summary of Biblical verses that have been used to justify abuse and more helpful interpretations of these verses is given below.*

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| SCRIPTURE | UNHELPFUL APPLICATION | HELPFUL APPLICATION |
| Submission  **“Wives submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord”**  *Ephesians 5.22* | **Obedience**  The woman must obey her partner  **Not submitting causes abuse**  If a man abuses his partner it is because she is not being submissive enough. | **Mutual submission**  The previous verse 5.21 says “submit to one another” and 5.22 must be read in light of the mutual submission we should be giving to one another. To submit does not mean to obey, it means to choose to place oneself under another.  **Submission is a choice**  Submission cannot be forced, it must be chosen. Not submitting can never justify abuse. |
| Headship  **“For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body of which he is the Saviour”**  *Ephesians 5.23* | **The asserting of power**  The man is the head; therefore he has all the power and the right to assert it.  **Superiority**  Headship means being superior and having the right to take more than give. | **The laying down of power**  The example given of headship is of Christ’s headship of the Church. When Christ came to earth, he gave up all his heavenly power for his bride, the Church. The original Greek word used for head in this passage is Kephale. This word means the head of a river or the source of the river. It does not imply superiority. |
| Rulership  **To the woman he said, “… Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.”**  *Genesis 3.16* | **Rulership: a Right**  God determined men should rule their wives, therefore that is how it should be, | **Rulership: a Result**  A consequence of sin is that a man will rule over his wife, it is not God’s best plan for humanity, before the fall men and women were equal. |
| Creation of Woman  **“The Lord God said, “it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”**  *Genesis 2.18* | **Inferior**  To help means to serve, this verse shows that God created women to serve men and suggests they are inferior to them. | **Equal**  The word “helper” here referring to women, most often refers to God in the Old Testament usage (e.g. 1 Samuel 7.12; Ps 121.1-2). Therefore there is no suggestion of female inferiority. |
| Forgiveness  **“And forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.”**  *Matthew 6.12* | **Disregard**  Forgiving someone should mean disregarding what they have done and maintaining the same relationship with them regardless of whether they change. | **Consequences**  Sin has consequences and forgiving does not remove those consequences.  Forgiveness is a process and must not nullify the consequences of abuse or mean that the situation must continue as it always has.  Women should not have to stay in an abusive situation in order to forgive their  partner. |
| SCRIPTURE | UNHELPFUL APPLICATION | HELPFUL APPLICATION |
| Original Sin  **“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”**  *Genesis 3.6* | **Sin: Women and weaker** Eve took the fruit, and gave some to her husband; this shows women are weaker and more likely to be sinful. | **Sin: Equal responsibility** Man and woman were both participants in the Fall: Adam was no less to blame than Eve. Romans 5.12-21 “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” |
| Divorce  **“But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to become an adulteress …”** *Matthew 5.32* | **Contract**  Marriage is a contract and the person who cancels the contract, i.e. files for divorce is the one who is responsible. Therefore if a woman divorces a man for abusing her, she is at fault, not him. | **Covenant**  Marriage is a covenant; divorce is the breaking of that covenant. When a man chooses to be abusive, he breaks the covenant. If his wife chooses to divorce him, she is making public his breaking of the covenant,  not going against what the Bible says about divorce. |
| Suffering  **“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”**  *1 Peter 1.6* | **Accept**  Women should accept abuse and use the suffering as an opportunity to grow their faith. | **Refute**  By staying in a relationship where she is subject to abuse a woman is risking being murdered. When Jesus was tempted to risk his life, he said “it is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matthew 4.7). God wanted  abused women to be safe and protected. |

GKJ/DSA May 2017

Taken from the Church of England Guidance:  **Responding Well to Domestic Abuse: Policy and Practice Guidance March 2017**