

A Pastor's Perspective on Leading in the Face of Abuse

9/24/16

- Both genders experience abuse; 1 in 4 woman, 1 in 6 men; both genders can be abusive – although rare don't dismiss it if a man shares he is being abused by his wife, mother, female boss...this is a human sin nature problem
- I was fortunate to be raised in a healthy Christian home and congregation. My upbringing granted me a deep commitment to scripture, but also infused me with a conservative understanding of male female spiritual roles; some of which God led me through scripture to rethink and reframe
- Note that I resolved early in life that I would change my mind on no belief or theological framework unless God's Holy Spirit used the scripture to change my mind. This has served me well but I was surprised how often immersion in the scripture led me to indeed rethink my religious traditions.
- Tell story of VS in New York City – young girls off the street
 - o Saw God transform through
 - Meeting Christ
 - Holy Spirit cleansing
 - Community of support and acceptance

Tell story of first pastorate in heart of conservative religious culture

- o God began to bring us woman who were survivors of early childhood sexual abuse, and a team of healed and restored woman who ministered to them
 - I was a slow learner in trying to figure out how to minister to these courageous, strong; but deeply wounded woman; but they and God were patient with me
 - Critical learning was to not push to forgive – let that be HS work
- o Needed to rethink forgiveness to define it biblically:
 - Christ extends forgiveness to all, but the relationship is only restored when the one who wronged Christ confesses fully
 - When God forgives, that does not mean the story is silenced; rather it is told as redemption (or half the scripture would not be written!)

Discovered with deep grief that the statistics are true: there is a higher percentage of abuse in conservative religious cultures than in general society:

- Nearly all of the married woman coming to our ministry from conservative religious cultures had church leaders tell them to go back to their abusive husbands and “do a better job of submission”, “give him more sex”, “keep a cleaner house”, “better train the children”, etc, I came to recognize this as blaming the victim AND failing to confront the perpetrator which denies him the chance of rising to his God given role. In other words this counsel violates what God calls both genders towards
- God led me to recognize that a high view of marriage does not preclude helping an abused spouse move out. A high view of marriage faces the reality when a marriage no longer exists as scripture defines.
- Tell story of the awful dilemma of “Jody” – “either leave husband or your son will be killed by him

Sent me back to the scriptures – a study of marriage and divorce

- Even in OT law God “allowed” divorce due to hardness of hearts – why in the age of grace as Christ’s body were we extending less grace to woman caught in abuse than God empowered Moses to do in the law? How can we claim to be Christ’s body when we are harsher with law than was Moses, let alone Christ?
- Any study of the scriptures helped me see that when God says “I hate divorce” he is not stating a hatred of divorced persons but of the impact of divorce; like a person who lost everything to a tornado saying “I hate tornadoes” does not mean they hate persons who experienced one!
- Before sin entered the garden men and women were equally commissioned to subdue the earth and rule it. (Gen. 1:27-28)
- The only other time in scripture the Hebrew word translated “help meet” (Gen. 2:18) in the KJV is used it is God who is said to be a “help meet” to Israel. Whatever “help meet” means, it is clearly not a term of subservience.
- The struggle for dominance came into the human family as a result of sin and introduced the threat of violence to control. (Lamech in Gen. 4:23-24)
- Question: “He will rule over you” (Gen. 3:16): Is this God prescribing what He wants due to sin, or describing the consequence of sin? This outline proposes that it is God describing what He sets out to reverse through Jesus.

Male dominance came into the world through sin. Jesus came to reverse the consequences of sin. Do we want to protect, or look away from, in the church what Jesus died to eliminate? Should we not lead the way and model the good news? Is Christ's work on the cross (Jn 3:16) not enough to address all sin (Gen. 3:16)?

My journey took me into the NT where I was convicted by awareness that the only people Jesus seemed to consistently be irritated at were the religious leaders who were fully confident that because they knew what Scripture said they knew what God meant; such that they missed what God was now saying in Christ.

- God began to show me that I was not offending him if I began to defend woman who were in abuse – I was only offending the conservative religious culture of my upbringing --- a Pharisee tendency
- I discovered that Jesus consistently uses his power to defend the powerless
 - Woman at the well
 - Mary who took the position of a student at the feet of her teacher versus Martha who wanted her sister in the kitchen
 - Jesus publically confronting his host Simon when Simon shamed the woman who anointed Christ's feet
- Jesus said that it would be better for those who hurt a child to be have a weight tied around their neck and be dropped into the sea; so why does the body of Christ so often protect the powerful instead of the powerless?

Article that opened my eyes to the way our religious culture misuses Eph. 5 to give a framework that protects abusive men

- Submit is first “to one another out of reverence for Christ”
 - Then the pairing is:
 - Husband is head – of the wife – body
 - Husbands sacrifice – wives submit
 - Husbands love – wives respect
- When sermons pair “wives submit because husbands are the head” it misrepresents Paul's message to uphold the garden tragedy sin consequence – it ordains into permanence what Jesus works to reverse
- Biblical image of “submit” is not subservience but “sub-structure under the common mission”

I believe “head of wife” means God holds us men accountable to take the initiative to sacrifice so alienation can be bridged, “as Christ gave himself up for the church”.

This is neither the garden tragedy made permanent, nor secular feminism. It is gospel!
In conclusion:

Scripture calls us to judge a matter by its fruit. I believe this applies to the assessment of theology. A biblical way to assess a theology is to ask “does this belief system lead to greater evidence of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, gentleness....”

As one invited to share a pastoral perspective on abuse today I conclude:

- God is deeply grieved by abuse! Working against abuse is partnering in God’s redemptive purposes; it helps “His kingdom to come, His will to be done....”
- Although abuse will leave scars, healing and restoration is possible! Don’t underestimate the power of your presence; being alongside to validate, value, etc. In biblical context this is incarnation! We can be God’s presence with another through the work of Christ! And that can be transformative!
- Implications for leaders:
 - Respect law now requiring that if we have reason to suspect a child has been abused WE MUST call social services
 - Respect the light of the gospel ---- don’t hide darkness
 - Respect your Shepherding responsibilities to protect the one sheep hurting or lost – even leaving the flock behind (vulnerable) to go after the one
 - Tell every couple in premarital counseling to separate after one incident of abuse till a counselor verifies the abuser has gotten to the root of anger, otherwise the abuse will not stop, it will escalate
 - Tell your congregation that if leaders discover abuse going on we will defend the one abused, even moving the abuser out if needed
 - Do child protection safety training and only use volunteers trained
 - Put policy in place for an accountability team to be with at all times any convicted offender who wants to in your fellowship

You are the Shepherd charged to protect your sheep. If you need motivation to address abuse read Ezekiel 34 to see God’s opinion of Shepherds who fail to look after their sheep.

- Support of Still Waters ministry is a fully worthy investment of your intercession, your financial commitments, and your advocacy. As Sam and Jill’s Pastor I testify they are fully persons of integrity. Partnership in their ministry literally and truly saves lives!!