



## **Biblical Battered Wife Syndrome: Christian Women and Domestic Violence**

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Posted on February 2, 2009, Printed on February 3, 2009  
<http://www.alternet.org/story/124174/>

What is a good enough reason for divorce? Well, according to Rick Warren's Saddleback church, divorce is only permitted in cases of adultery or abandonment -- as these are the only cases permitted in the Bible -- and never for abuse.

As teaching pastor Tom Holladay explains, spousal abuse should be dealt with by temporary separation and church marriage counseling designed to bring about reconciliation between the couple. But to qualify for that separation, your spouse must be in the "habit of beating you regularly," and not be simply someone who "grabbed you once."

"How many beatings would have to take place in order to qualify as *regularly*?" asks Jocelyn Andersen, a Christian domestic violence survivor and advocate, author of the 2007 book *Woman Submit! Christians and Domestic Violence*, an indictment of church teachings of wifely submission and male headship. As she sees it, by convincing women that leaving their relationships is not an option; these teachings have laid the ground for a domestic violence epidemic within the church.

Andersen writes from personal experience, describing an episode of being held hostage by her husband -- an associate pastor in their Kansas Baptist church -- for close to twenty hours after he'd nearly fractured her skull. Andersen was raised in the Southern Baptist Convention, where she heard an unremitting message of "submission, submission, submission." She saw this continual focus reflected in her ex-husband's denunciations, while he detained her, of women who wanted to "rule over men." Though Andersen was rescued by her church's pastor, who had his assistant pastor arrested himself, she says other churchwomen aren't so lucky, particularly when churches tell couples to attend joint marriage counseling under lay ministry leaders with no specific training for abuse survivors, who instead offer an unswerving prescription of submission and headship, often telling women to learn to submit "better."

Pastor Holladay takes care in the taped sessions to explain that enduring abuse is not a part of a wife's call to submit to her husband -- a principle that Warren

and Saddleback espouse. "There's nowhere in the Bible that says it's an attitude of submission to let someone abuse you," he says in the audio clips. Nonetheless, Andersen finds it telling that the issue of submission always arises in church discussions of domestic violence, "subtly reminding women of their duty to maintain a submissive attitude toward their husbands."

That this occurs even in Warren's church, which is derided by more conservative Southern Baptists for its purported cultural liberalism, Andersen sees this as proof of the centrality of male authority throughout mainstream evangelical culture, "which can still be maintained in a controlled separation but is seriously threatened when a woman is given leeway of any kind, for whatever reason, in ceasing to submit to an abusive husband by divorcing him."

There are more blatant examples of excusing abusive male authority among stricter proponents of complementarity and submission theology. In June 2007, professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Bruce Ware told a Texas church that women often bring abuse on themselves by refusing to submit. And Debi Pearl, half of a husband-and-wife fundamentalist child-training ministry as well as author of the bestselling submission manual, *Created to Be His Help Meet*, writes that submission is so essential to God's plan that it must be followed even to the point of allowing abuse. "When God puts you in subjection to a man whom he knows is going to cause you to suffer," she writes, "it is with the understanding that you are obeying God by enduring the wrongful suffering."

While Saddleback's teachings certainly don't make such an explicit argument for submitting to violence, and Holladay tells abused women they must seek safety before they attempt to reconcile, there is a similar profession of helplessness before biblical mandates. In the audio clips, Holladay protests he could tell women that there was a third biblical justification for divorce, "a Bible verse that says, 'If they abuse you in this-and-such kind of way, then you have a right to leave them.'" But ultimately, he says, there's not, and the question of separation versus divorce comes down to a matter of dealing with the pain of fixing a marriage now or later, almost a matter of discipline.

"It's not like you can escape the pain," Holladay explains. "You think you are -- there's an immediate release when you get the divorce." But the pain abused wives escape through divorce will just be traded for pain down the line as they have to negotiate shared parenting duties with their exes, or encounter "old issues" with a new spouse -- a seeming charge that the abused spouse's "issues" contributed to the abuse. "I'd always rather choose a short-term pain and find God's solution for a long-term gain, than find a short-term solution that's going to involve a long-term pain in my life," Holladay says.

Saddleback's position is "typical evangelical fare on the subject of domestic abuse and domestic violence," responds Andersen. Typical because, like other well-known and extremely influential evangelical leaders, Saddleback is pushing a message of "leave while the heat is on," but only with the intention of returning to the marriage when the violence has cooled. This is the message that Andersen tracks from Christian leaders as prominent as megachurch pastor John MacArthur, Focus on the Family head James Dobson, and established Christian radio psychologists Minirth and Meier on the far-reaching Moody Media empire. "Everyone with a lick of sense knows that, in a violent marriage, the heat is never really off," Andersen tells me. "Everything can be fine one minute, and the next minute you're dead."

In the face of prominent leaders who claim helplessness in the face of biblical tradition, Andersen and a small but growing cadre of like-minded abuse survivors are fighting this established conservative wisdom on domestic violence not with secular or feminist domestic violence tactics, but with new theological arguments arguing for abused wives' rights within a biblically literalist, and in some cases even complementarian, framework.

While Holladay explains that divorcees will not be turned away from Saddleback, and their divorces will be treated as either any old pre-conversion sin if it happened before they were saved, or forgiven as a repented sin if it happened post-salvation, he nonetheless stresses that mature Christians must admit that their divorce "was more for [their] own selfishness than any other reason."

For Danni Moss, a pseudonymous blogger and formerly-Baptist abuse survivor, this offer of forgiveness isn't good enough. "I'm not ok with being accepted because my divorce is in the past, and God accepts and forgives our sins. I didn't sin in getting a divorce. God directed me."

Moss' story of entering and eventually ending an abusive marriage reads like a cautionary tale of the excesses of male headship theology. A daughter of missionaries who followed the popular authoritarian teachings of Bill Gothard, Moss says that her marriage was "arranged" by her father, who believed, as Gothard, that parents know what's best for their children. Following a popular fundamentalist women's teaching that love is a choice rather than an emotion, Moss dutifully complied with her father's choice for her. Hyper-criticism that began on her honeymoon turned into physical abuse when Moss bore the first of her and ex-husband "Gary's" three children. Sexual assaults and marital rape later became commonplace, as did violence towards both Moss and her eldest two children.

Contrary to Holladay's limited definition of dangerous abuse, Moss found Gary's generalized violence, in rages and wall-punching, as damaging as actual

beatings. After a particularly intimidating episode, when Gary punched a glass door panel and had to be hospitalized to stop the bleeding of his lacerated arm, Moss left Gary for the first time. "I felt God had shown me that the end of violence was death. I'd kept thinking he would die, but here [with his survival], was this chance that he might not...I realized it would be me if I didn't get out."

Moss left Gary twice, but twice was convinced to reconcile with him by their Southern Baptist church, which sent both spouses to marriage counseling, seeking to hear "both sides" of the story. In their focus on reuniting estranged spouses, the counselors gave equal credence to "each side," equating Gary's complaints about Moss's "willful" failures in the kitchen with the physical violence that she and the family endured. Moss believes that the teachings that were common in the SBC and independent Baptist churches that they attended underscored this strategy. "We were taught that women were the completers of men, and that therefore God created Danni for the sole purpose of completing Gary. Since my job was to complete him anywhere he was incomplete, I was supposed to already know what he wanted." After their first separation and reconciliation, this attitude led Moss to take her children to an outside counselor, so that they could work on "not pushing Gary's buttons."

These days, Moss doesn't attend church -- not because she's opted out or waned in her faith, but because she hasn't yet found a church where she feels safe to trust the male authority. After Moss finally divorced Gary, a pastor told her she should return to her father's house so that she could be under the proper protection of male authority. Though Moss didn't, she doesn't disagree with the directive on principle: a distinction that is an interesting part of the community of Christian survivors that Moss and Andersen belong to. In this community, which has become more active in the last several years, theologically focused, and often biblically literalist, women are working to reconcile their belief in the literal truth of the Bible with language that has long justified male authority and female subjugation in literalist churches. In their efforts to square biblical literalism with self-preservation, they're crafting liberation theologies of a sort that do not spring from women's lib, at least as it's conventionally understood. (Moss laughingly relates her surprise at being criticized as feminist -- a label she doesn't apply to herself at all.)

In Moss' case, she argues for a distinction between the language of spiritual authority that she can't deny is part of the Bible she believes in, and actual practiced authority between husbands and wives, which should not involve power hierarchies. In the meantime, she says that good complementarian marriages might not look any different from egalitarian partnerships -- though this common standard of "good intentions," an echo of traditional complementarian insistences on husbands' *sacrificial* headship -- leaves little recourse for women who end up the bad sort. In the latter, Moss sees the hand

of the original misogynist, Satan, prophesied to have enmity with woman ever since the Fall, who strikes at women outside of male spiritual "covering" through the violence of abusive husbands: a surprising twist of the complementarian insistence that women be protected under the spiritual covering of a man. Reconciling the seeming contradiction between this literalist biblical command and her championship of women's right to leave abusers, Moss invokes a third way out traditionally reserved for widows. Domestic violence survivors are widows of a sort as well, she says, and so likewise can consider themselves married to God and safe under his protection.

Andersen, who also writes extensively on biblical prophesy, has a different theological explanation, one with a seemingly more feministic bent. The story of the Fall should not be seen as a prescription for marriage roles, she argues, with women charged to follow men as punishment for acting outside the chain of command, but rather as the first chapter in a long history of domestic violence of husband against wife. In Andersen's reading, the story of Adam and Eve is that of Adam's deadly betrayal of his wife: offering her up for punishment -- the wages of eating the apple were death -- rather than owning his blame for sin. Women have been responding in a sort of biblical battered wife syndrome, the "Eve Syndrome," ever since.

Another of Moss and Andersen's contemporaries, Barbara Roberts, Australian author of *Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion*, even calls herself a complementarian. Though Roberts believes that complementarianism too often has "an undue emphasis on female submission and too little emphasis on the husband's duty to protectively lead his wife," she still agrees with large portions of classic complementarian documents, such as the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood's Danvers Statement. She holds this belief even as she lays out a theological case for including abuse as one of biblical grounds for divorce: a counterintuitive confluence of ideas, but one which Roberts says is an essential protection for Christian women.

"We know from small studies in Christian contexts, as well as from a *great deal* of clinical and pastoral experience that domestic abuse is prevalent in Christian contexts," says Roberts, adding that research has found that Christian women often stay in abusive situations several years longer than secular abused women.

While she sees some churches teaching that "wifely insubmission is the cause of domestic abuse," as had Bruce Ware, more common is the approach of churches like Saddleback, which allows separation but never divorce for abuse.

"I think Saddleback's teaching is profoundly and dangerously wrong," says Roberts, who tried to contact Saddleback twice after the teachings were publicized in early January, offering them her book's findings that 1 Corinthians

7:15 -- a verse commonly interpreted as applying solely to an unbeliever deserting a believing spouse -- provides the biblical grounds for abused wives to consider their union nullified. "The key question is not 'who walked out' but 'who caused the separation?' I believe I have provided a thorough and comprehensive refutation of the view held by people like those at Saddleback."

Refuting Saddleback's position on biblical grounds is direly important, says Roberts, to account for the different and additional burdens Christian women experience in weighing whether to leave a marriage. "Devout Christian believers are more intensely bound by their desire to obey God: their very real Savior, who they do not want to displease in any way. Christian victims thus put a positive internal pressure on themselves to 'stay, submit, pray, forgive, and forget the previous abuse because that would be holding unforgiveness.'" Simply put, Roberts says, "A Bible-believing Christian woman needs a biblical argument for leaving a dangerous marriage because she loves God and wants to obey the Bible...Her scriptural dilemma can *only* be solved by applying and properly interpreting *more* scripture to counterbalance and correct her unbalanced emphases and misunderstandings."

It's to that end that Roberts and her fellow travelers are amassing a library of resources -- novels, personal testimonies, and exegetical material -- for women to whom secular reasons for leaving can't appeal. Perhaps what's most compelling about the existence of these seemingly contradictory stances on women's rights, submission, complementarianism, and abuse is the fact that complementarian teachings and domestic violence are both large enough issues within the evangelical church to give birth to such an array of approaches. These including such nascent theological attempts -- neither quite feminist nor complementarian -- to help give biblically literalist women a safe exit.

Kathryn Joyce is working on a book about Christian conservative women, to be published by Beacon Press.