



When the silence is broken... marriage... where do you stand?

Reflections for ministers and pastoral workers
in supporting someone living with violence in
marriage

part of the Dignity initiative



Marriage: A Story

Sue and Andy met through the Christian Union at university and married soon after they graduated. They both became teachers and joined the Baptist church near to where they lived. Andy was soon elected on to the diaconate, and they both played a full part in the church's, children's and youth work. The minister and members regarded them as a model Christian couple, although Sue was quite often missing from Sunday services; she was susceptible to migraines, Andy said.

They had been married for twelve years and had two children when, one Sunday afternoon, Sue turned up on the minister's doorstep. Her face was cut and bruised, and she was in tears. The minister thought she must have been in a car crash. It took some time for her to open up and tell her story, but when she did, encouraged by the minister's warm and sympathetic tone, he learnt that it was no accident. The injuries were inflicted by Andy because she'd burnt the vegetables for Sunday lunch. He'd thrown the singed saucepan at her head, beaten and kicked her and pulled her hair, calling her a stupid bitch - and worse. Nor was this the first time it had happened.

Throughout the twelve years of their marriage, he had abused her in different ways; he'd raped her, forced her to perform oral sex in the course of a long car journey, rammed blunt objects up her anus and vagina, and if she resisted he would beat her. She'd never had a migraine in her life, but that was the cover for the times when her injuries were visible. Although he'd never touched the children, they were at the receiving end of his temper, and were frightened of him. He was always telling Sue that he was the head of the household and it was his Christian duty to discipline her, her duty to submit and obey. She couldn't take it any longer, didn't believe God really wanted her to endure such suffering or if he did, he wasn't the kind of God she wanted to believe in. She wanted an end to the marriage.

(A true story, adapted to preserve anonymity)

Take a few minutes to reflect on this story. Imagine yourself as the minister or pastoral worker to whom Sue has turned. Then look at these questions and try to answer them honestly (you may find it helpful to write down your answers).

- ✚ What are your immediate thoughts and feelings as you hear (read) Sue's story - about Sue, about Andy?
- ✚ What questions came into your mind?
- ✚ Sue is looking for help.
As a Christian minister, what would you say to her?
- ✚ What action would you advise?
- ✚ What issues of faith and of theology does it raise for you?
- ✚ What new knowledge do you need to have in order to help her?

Thinking it through

This leaflet encourages ministers to think through their responses to a marriage that has seriously broken down. It offers thoughts about the advice you may give, and then a more detailed reflection on marriage and divorce.

The attitude you adopt will depend on your view of Christian marriage, your theological understanding of the respective roles of men and women in marriage, and your position regarding a number of other theological issues like grace, redemption, forgiveness. It is important that you explore these for yourself specifically in relation to domestic abuse.

You may also need to ask questions about whether certain behaviour is allowable within marriage that would not be countenanced in other relationships. For example, would your approach be different if the perpetrator of the abuse were Sue's brother, or Andy's friend?

In real situations like this, ministers' instinctive responses can head in one of two directions:

- (1) She should leave him
- (2) She should go back home

Why you might choose to encourage her to leave him:

You will be responding to her as a vulnerable individual who needs help, as well as one partner in a marriage. You may readily assess that:

- ✚ She is in danger (as also may be the children)
- ✚ This is not an impulsive gesture; in Sue's case it is a genuine cry of desperation after twelve years of living with it.
- ✚ His behaviour finds no sanction in Christian teaching.
- ✚ Her spiritual health is in danger.

You may help her to seek safety in a refuge, then support her through formal separation and divorce proceedings and the building of a new life, or see that the husband leaves so that she can return to the family home with the children and with adequate financial resources.

Why you might want to encourage her to return home:

In your ministry, you may work hard to uphold the traditional teaching of the church that marriage is sacred and divorce an unacceptable option. As the minister of the church, you may have difficulty adjusting to the reality that things have gone so radically wrong in this marriage. Instinctively as pastor, you may want to help to put things right. Up to now, you have known him as a good Christian man. You might want to offer to go and talk to him, to hear his side of

the story, but at this stage, your pastoral responsibility is to the one who has come to you for help.

Women are often reluctant to turn to the church for advice because they are afraid that they will be told to pray harder to make the marriage work, or to avoid aggravating their partner.

She is also likely to have struggled with her spiritual understanding of what is happening to her:

for example, God is testing her but will never let her bear more than she can handle or God is calling her to save her husband.

Key points to remember when meeting with a victim

- ✚ No act of violence is acceptable.
- ✚ When a woman is abused by her husband, it is vital she is believed and that she has someone she can trust to talk to in confidence.
- ✚ You should not attempt to talk to her husband without her permission, and in any event, he should have a different advocate. You may need to ask him to resign from positions of responsibility in the church.
- ✚ The first leaflet in the series *When the Silence is Broken - prepared to listen* deals with this in more detail. Much of what is written there applies to the marriage relationship.

Brief theological reflections on marriage and divorce

Marriage is essentially a covenant, made between two people seeking 'the deepest, richest and most satisfying relationship of which we have experience'. For a Christian it expresses 'the covenant relationship between God and his people and Christ's relationship with the church. In marriage, the love of God becomes visible in the love of the marriage partners for each other' (*from Making Moral Choices*, p23)

So what about divorce?

In wanting to separate from her violent husband, the woman is not the first to break the marriage vows. Her husband has already done so by abusing her whether physically, psychologically or emotionally. In law, this is 'unreasonable behaviour'. Many people in the church do not see it as such but believe in a 'hierarchy' of laws whereby the 'sanctity of marriage' is an ultimate good to be preserved however 'unreasonable' the behaviour of one partner in relation to the other.

Jesus' teaching on law is quite clear. God's generosity to us is 'unreasonable'. However, as fallen people we fail to respond to one another in like manner, and

fail to live for the common good; some choose to exploit and oppress others. Law can be seen as an interim measure to control the human urge to power and domination.

When two people commit themselves to each other to give and receive love, respect and care in an intimate relationship, which mirrors the intimacy and mutuality within the Trinity, the purpose for God's creation of humankind is fulfilled. Where that mutuality of love, care and respect is broken on either side, a sacred trust has been betrayed. The gospel is the good news of liberation for oppressed people, of release from all that binds them to less than the fullness of life God wills for everyone. If a woman suffers abusive treatment from her husband, then the grace offered in the gospel surely takes precedence over any narrow legalism, and can legitimise the end of the marriage. This is to follow the spirit of Jesus' teaching as, for example, when he condemns the Pharisees for placing the law of Corban above the responsibility to care for parents (Mark 7: 11).

Some people may turn to Matthew's gospel to argue more directly against divorce. However, the word used there, 'porneia', can mean any immorality, including abuse, and not just adultery. It is the sin of the perpetrator which needs to be addressed but too often we focus on some false notion of fault on the victim's part, or try to spiritualise her suffering in a way which exonerates the perpetrator. If a woman chooses a path of suffering as an expression of discipleship whether in the personal, the political or the social realm, she must do so freely. No man has the right to impose it on her.

What of the teaching of Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5? Paul in his own time may have been conforming to contemporary mores, but he still transforms the conventional priority of man over woman. He teaches reciprocity in the marital relationship, the care by the husband of the wife as of his own body. The concept of 'headship' is often used to sanction a man's control of his wife. Such a view contradicts the mutuality of man and woman as pictured in Genesis.

The marital relationship is used in Ephesians 5 as a metaphor for that between Christ and the church; the relationship in which two people find their greatest fulfilment and freedom is the nearest we can attain to a model of the love between Christ and the community. It can no more be used to justify violence than any other biblical teaching.

General discussion about whether divorce is permissible for a Christian can be found in the BUGB booklet: *Making Moral Choices* - now out of print.

What spiritual support will she need?

We have already seen how Sue may be questioning faith in a God who seems to condone the situation. She will begin to think that God sees her and criticises her in the same way as her husband. She may be full of guilt and self-loathing. She has become someone unworthy of love and approval, however hard she tries to earn both. God and her husband are on the same side, and she is left out and alone.

(See also the third leaflet in this series: *Why do Women Stay? - Towards a spiritual understanding. A reflection on why women put up with violence from a partner or find it hard to leave.*)

This is so deep and complex that simply to tell her that God loves her is not enough. She may now mistrust and reject the Bible, and the God she has worshipped for years. Her greatest immediate need will be for friends to accept and care for her, offering a different image of God's opinion of her. It may be a slow process, as trust is built up.

You can help open up opportunities for her to develop friendships, so that this might involve such highly spiritual activities as visits to the hairdresser and shopping for new clothes! If you are a man, she has come to you for help, and so you will be a part of the new image she is building up, but you will also need to find support for her in a trusted woman friend, or elder/deacon.

Do not expect her to come to church as this may be impossible for her. Question whether what you do in worship - the songs and hymns, prayers and preaching, create a climate of love and acceptance. Meanwhile, you may be involved in arranging other professional support eg, Relate counselling.

When her husband is not a Christian

At one level you may feel this simplifies the situation, but the issues are not simple. You may know him, and may well have been praying for him. Continue to do so, but never assume that his becoming a Christian will solve the problems in the marriage. At this point in their relationship, discussion of marriage to a non-Christian, or to one who has left the church, detracts from the real issue - that of abuse. Never forget who the victim is and who the abuser. He cannot be excused or his behaviour condoned in any way just because he is not a Christian. In practical terms, the pastoral guidelines still apply.

Further reading

David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Re-marriage in the 1st and 21st Century*
Biblical series 19, Grove Books Ltd, Cambridge, 2001
www.grovebooks.co.uk

Al Miles, Domestic Violence: what every pastor needs to know
Published by Fortress Press 2000

Making Moral Choices
A Baptist Union publication, now out of print.

Time for Action, Sexual abuse, the churches and a new dawn for survivors
A CTBI book available from **www.ctbi.org.uk**

Other leaflets available include:

For Churches:

- CH1 *It doesn't happen here*
- CH2 *The Dignity Coalition Church Charter*
- CH3 *Notes to accompany the Charter*

For Survivors:

- S1 *Breaking the silence... wanting change*
 - * *Add leaflets from your own locality for appropriate services*

For Ministers:

- P1 *When the silence is broken... what does the law say?*
- P2 *When the silence is broken... prepared to listen*
- P3 *When the silence is broken... marriage... where do you stand?*
- P4 *Why do women stay? Towards a spiritual understanding*
- P5 *What churches need to know about pastoral support for abusers*
- P6 *Agencies which may be able to help*

03/14