



**OKAY, NOW YOU  
CAN TURN IT OFF**

DAPHNE MARSDEN

Mary: *The first time that Sam hit me, – he just... I was on the bed and he was slapping my face, side to side like that, you know (moves head)... hurting... and I thought to myself “I’m not going to cry, I’m not going to let him see that this is upsetting me.” And I just lay there and let him do it to me. Where did that come from?! I’ve not a clue. He just slapped, slap, slap – like this – and I didn’t know it was abuse. I just lay there, thinking, “There’s one thing I’m not going to let him do to me – and that is I’m not going to let him break me...” That was so early in our marriage, like, maybe a year into our marriage. I just... something just shifted in my thinking towards him, from then on – and I was married to him for thirteen years. Covenant is something to be taken seriously. I didn’t think God ever broke covenants – so if we made a covenant with God, then we shouldn’t break it either. Which sort of takes my mind down the road to – well, how bad is divorce, then?*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

This comment was recorded as part of a Master of Theology research project in which I sought to explore the issues Christian women face, firstly as they suffer abuse at the hands of their husbands, and then as they seek assistance, counsel and guidance from their church communities. It had been my experience in working in pastoral care within an evangelical church that abused women do not always get the help they need from their churches. Consequently, I set out to explore the relevant literature on the topic and to interview a number of Christian women who had been abused, in order to establish how their experiences and stories matched up with what is presented in the literature. I also wanted to explore how Scripture is used and applied within evangelical churches when abused women present for counselling, and how such teaching not only shapes women’s opinions but, more importantly, constrains their choices.

The main conclusion I reached was that responses to family violence by evangelical Christian communities are, for the most part, limited and inadequate. As a result, responses to, and the prevention of, violence against women within Christian families are not given proper attention. In the face of such inadequacies, a sounder theological and practical base for understanding and responding to domestic violence within the Christian home, needs to be identified, championed and embraced.

1 The names of the interviewees cited in this article have been changed to protect their identity.

There needs to be an alternative to what have been standard responses to date.

According to Christian sociologist Nancy Nason-Clark, family violence includes “all forms of violent or abusive behaviour that occur within intimate relationships.”<sup>2</sup> Nason-Clark insists that while, as might be expected, deliberate acts of physical violence or abuse tend to be most closely identified with family violence, “other abusive behavior can include wilful neglect and sexual, emotional, or financial abuse as well as threats of intended aggressive acts.”<sup>3</sup> Nason-Clark goes on to suggest that violence in the family “always involves the abuse of power and control to hurt, shame, or humiliate another person through intimacy and shared experience.”<sup>4</sup> And while the most common victims of family violence are women, children and the elderly, she acknowledges that men too can be victims of abuse.<sup>5</sup>

The consequences of family violence, she says, “are far-reaching and enduring for its victims: in addition to physical and emotional pain, there is the violation of the trusting relationship which may never be resolved. For religious victims, their spiritual journey may be adversely affected as well.”<sup>6</sup> Nason-Clark also insists that the values, teachings and practices of many evangelical churches sanction, and therefore leave unchecked, domestic violence within the Christian family.<sup>7</sup>

In secular situations, when a woman continues to return to a violent relationship, a question often asked is, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” Within the church, however, the possibility of leaving is frequently denied an abused woman. When seeking help from her faith community it is more than likely that she will be asked a series of faith-related questions which she no doubt has already asked herself:

- Have you prayed about the problem?<sup>8</sup>
- Have you forgiven him?<sup>9</sup>
- How have you contributed to the escalation of conflict?<sup>10</sup>
- Have you been a good witness or example?<sup>11</sup>

2 Nancy Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 3.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 14–15.

8 Ibid., 152.

9 Ibid., 17.

10 Ibid., 16.

11 Ibid.

- Have you been submissive?<sup>12</sup>
- Didn't you promise to stay for better or for worse?
- Doesn't the Bible say we are to suffer for our faith?<sup>13</sup>

Each of these questions is undergirded by, and justified with, traditional understandings of particular Scriptures, such as forgiving seventy times seven (Matt 18:21–22), women remaining silent (1 Cor 14:34–35), and wives submitting to their husbands (Eph 5:22–24; Col 3:18).

### THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

According to the UNIFEM publication *Not a Minute More: Ending Violence against Women*, violence is a major cause of death and disability for women aged between 16 and 44.<sup>14</sup> The report states,

Globally, violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer and a greater cause of ill health than traffic accidents and malaria combined. In a majority of cases, the abuser will be a member of the woman's own family or someone known to her.<sup>15</sup>

New Zealand statistics are equally concerning. Police Statistics tell us:

About half of all homicides in New Zealand are family violence.

There were 41 family violence homicides in New Zealand in 2010/11 (includes murder, manslaughter and attempted murder).

On average 14 women, 7 men and 8 children are killed by a member of their family every year.

From 2002–2008 there were 186 family violence deaths:

- 100 partner homicides; 49 child homicides; 37 other family homicides;

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>14</sup> UNIFEM, *Not a Minute More: Ending Violence Against Women* (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2003), 8. These statistics incorporate results from countries within Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Violence against women in majority world countries could only be referred to in general terms.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., citing the World Health Organization *World Report on Violence and Health* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002). See also L. Heise, M. Ellsberg, and M. Gottemoeller, *Ending Violence against Women*; Population Reports, Series L, No. 11 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, Population Information Program, December 1999).

- most perpetrators of all family violence homicides are male (86% of partner homicides, 60% of child homicides, 73% of other family homicides);
- 39% of victims were Maori, 34% Pakeha, 11% Pacifica, 11% Asian, 1% other.

Police recorded 107,602 family violence incidents and offences in 2010/11.

There were 96,627 children aged 0–16 present or living with the victim when Police attended.

58% of all reported violent crime in New Zealand is family violence. In 2010–2011 this included:

- 45% of abductions, kidnappings and threatening behaviour;
- 75% of serious assaults;
- 64% of all assaults;
- 33% of sexual assaults.

84% of those arrested for family violence are men; 16% are women.

Police attend a family violence situation every 6 minutes, but estimate that only around 20% of incidents are reported.

Partner Abuse:

- 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence from a partner in their lifetime;
- 78% of partner homicides in NZ are men killing their current or ex female partner;
- 9% are men killing their ex-partner's new boyfriend;
- 2% are women killing their male partner;
- 29% of women and 9% of men experience unwanted and distressing sexual contact over their lifetime.
- 85% of sexual violence is committed by someone known to the victim.
- Women's Refuge received 60,565 crisis calls in 2010/11, and provided services to 13,937 women and 11,014 children.<sup>16</sup>

The online news website [stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz) reported in 2011 on the results of research carried out by UN Women, and a local Ministry of Social Development survey:

The Government needs to immediately launch an inquiry into why New Zealand has such high domestic violence and maternal mortality rates compared with other Organisation for Economic Development and

<sup>16</sup> Online: [http://www.areyouok.org.nz/files/statistics/ItsnotOK\\_recent\\_family\\_violence\\_stats.pdf](http://www.areyouok.org.nz/files/statistics/ItsnotOK_recent_family_violence_stats.pdf). Accessed 11 July 2014.

Co-operation (OECD) countries, the head of United Nations Women New Zealand says. A report by UN Women was released in Wellington today and canvassed 22 developed nations about subjects including domestic violence and maternal mortality. New Zealand was ranked either at or near the bottom of the countries in the study in both areas and UN Women New Zealand national president Rae Julian called on the Government to “actively investigate the causes of New Zealand’s high level of maternal mortality and issues of partner violence against women.” Initiatives needed to be implemented to address the issues highlighted by the report, she said. The study found a third of the country’s women had reported experiencing physical violence from a partner during the period 2000 to 2010. That puts New Zealand as the worst affected of the 14 countries which responded to the question. In the past year, New Zealand rated 11th out of the 12 countries that reported violence against women, with only Finland rating lower. Sexual violence from partners showed a similar trend, with New Zealand coming out worst of the 12 countries that responded to the question. The closest ranked to New Zealand’s 14 per cent was Norway, at 9 per cent. In the past year, 2 per cent of women reported experiencing sexual violence from a partner, ranking bottom of the list.

The report follows a Ministry of Social Development study released last month which found more than a quarter of the country’s children had witnessed family violence. The survey was published in the latest social policy journal and interviewed almost 2100 children nationwide, the Sunday News reported. Of those surveyed, 27 per cent had seen physical violence against an adult and most of those incidents had been in the home. When adults children loved were involved in the violence it had more impact on the child and also affected how they coped, and their decisions about telling anyone, with most too scared to speak out, the report found.<sup>17</sup>

17 “NZ Worst for Domestic Violence – UN Report,” <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/5332717/NZ-worst-for-domestic-violence-UN-report>. Accessed 24 July 2014.

**THE EXISTENCE AND PERSISTENCE  
OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
WITHIN CHRISTIAN FAMILIES  
HAS BEEN BROUGHT ABOUT BY  
TRADITIONAL AND INACCURATE  
INTERPRETATIONS OF CERTAIN  
BIBLICAL PASSAGES**

That Christian families are not immune to “intimate partner violence” and that the frequency, extent and consequences of this are not adequately appreciated by the Christian community are views supported and shared by Christian theologians, researchers and practitioners. “The family may be sacred, but sometimes it is not safe.”<sup>18</sup>

Catherine Clark Kroeger has convincingly drawn attention to the fact that Christian families are not exempt from domestic violence. And she argues that the existence and persistence of domestic violence within Christian families has been brought about by traditional and inaccurate interpretations of certain biblical passages, thus contributing to what Nason-Clark has refers to as “the holy hush.”<sup>19</sup> Marie Fortune says that both victim and abuser have misused Scripture and theology to justify family violence and that such misuse has largely resulted from a combination of a lack of understanding of the nature and causes of family violence and a failure to recognise how dangerous it can be. This misuse has resulted from what Fortune takes to be a misappropriation of religious teaching. She comments, “The silence that the religious community has maintained on the subject has contributed to the lack of understanding by failing to correct it.”<sup>20</sup>

In order to provide empirical content for my thesis, I interviewed seven Christian women who had formerly been abused by their husbands. These women were from a variety of evangelical backgrounds and churches. The interviews were structured around four main themes drawn from the relevant literature: forgiveness, divorce, suffering as a reflection of God’s will, and patriarchy. The theme of patriarchy included submission and headship issues. The interviews also focused on asking how their churches helped or hindered their respective journeys in dealing with domestic violence.

My hope was that the combination of literary research, exegesis and the analysis of narratives drawn from the first-hand experiences of these women would provide insights that would be both helpful and challenging for the evangelical Christian

18 Nancy Nason-Clark and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 44.

19 Quoted in Victoria Falburg, “Book Review: Responding to Abuse in Christian Homes,” *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 3 (2011): 13.

20 Marie M. Fortune, *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and other Helpers* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1991), 5.

community in dealing with the domestic abuse in its midst. In what follows I discuss three key issues regarding Christian domestic violence: forgiveness, the permanence of marriage, and spiritual headship within marriage.

## **FORGIVENESS**

New Testament passages relating to forgiveness highlight the dilemma Christian domestic violence victims face when they equate tolerance with forgiveness. Most of the women interviewed referred specifically to the admonition to forgive “seventy times seven” and considered this to be a God-given expectation, even in the circumstances of abuse that they faced. This perspective on forgiveness was derived from church preaching and teaching as well as from direct advice from pastors and church-based counsellors. As a result, all of the women interviewed had, over many years, prioritised the need to forgive over and above their own personal safety and in some cases, over the safety of their children. Reflecting on this, the seven women spoke of receiving unhelpful advice. Their experiences were in line with the expressed view of Steven Tracy that, “a number of theologians and writers in the field of family violence are concerned that commonly used scriptures concerning forgiveness are misunderstood and thus misapplied pastorally to women living with violence.”<sup>21</sup>

Craig Blomberg maintains that for a perpetrator to simply say sorry or offer an apology does not constitute biblical repentance; there must also be a change in behaviour.<sup>22</sup> In discussing Matt 18:21–22, Blomberg warns “When there is not true repentance on the part of the abuser it can be counterproductive or even harmful to forgive.”<sup>23</sup> Carolyn Holderread Heggen cautions that a facile, quick forgiveness which does not demand accountability and responsibility puts the victims and others in danger of on-going violence.<sup>24</sup> This outcome was experienced by all of the interviewees. Consequently, they illustrate a key finding of Lenore Walker’s research, which was that

21 Steven R. Tracy, “Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 27, no. 3 (1999): 219.

22 Craig Blomberg, “On Building and Breaking Barriers: Forgiveness, Salvation and Christian Counseling with Special Reference to Matthew 18:15–35,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 25, no. 2 (2006): 145.

23 *Ibid.*, 146.

24 Carolyn Holderread Heggen, “Religious Beliefs and Abuse,” in *Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture can be used to Hurt or Heal*, eds. Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 27.

women with strong religious backgrounds are often the least likely to believe that violence against them is wrong.<sup>25</sup>

The seven women I interviewed applied the concept of “forgive and forget” as a pattern rather than placing value on remembering previous abuse and acknowledging that they had been sinned against. They did not embrace their own worthiness or their right to live in safety and be respected. In their understanding, their entitlement to safety was of lesser importance than the need to forgive since they understood that forgiving was expected by God and the church. Marie Fortune laments the fact that such interpretations of Scripture are often offered as pastoral responses to Christian women who have been subjected to family violence.<sup>26</sup> Tracy talks of the complexity involved in making sense of the need for forgiveness due to apparent contradictions in biblical treatments and scenarios. In some Scriptures believers seem to be commanded to forgive without

any “qualification while in others, forgiveness is contingent upon repentance.”<sup>27</sup>

And so, for women caught up in a relationship where abuse is operative, biblical misunderstandings in relation to the need for forgiveness can keep them bound and committed to the relationship, even to the point of willingly tolerating on-going abusive behaviour. Such ingrained beliefs as “I must forgive him or God won’t forgive me” or “I must forgive seventy times seven” are adhered to by such women as they consider their role in the abusive situation, the commitment they are meant to have towards their marriage and their perceived obligations when it comes to forgiveness.

## **DIVORCE AND THE PERMANENCE OF MARRIAGE**

The concept of marriage as a covenant is often claimed to be the justification for considering it to be a permanent arrangement, regardless of relationship difficulties or whatever else may be taking place within the marriage. In addition, the Christian family has been elevated as an ideal within some evangelical circles. I considered these two concepts, marriage as covenant and family as an ideal, in

25 Lenore Walker, *The Battered Woman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

26 Marie M. Fortune, “Forgiveness: The Last Step” in *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, eds. Marie M. Fortune and Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1995), 201.

27 Tracy, “Sexual Abuse and Forgiveness,” 220.

relation to the presence of abuse in a marriage, noting the dilemmas that arise when pastoral responses encourage or promote commitment and staying together regardless of the presence of abuse. In attempting to understand the scriptural basis for the concept of marriage as covenant, I examined a number of related issues, including covenant scenarios in the Old Testament, instances and responses when covenants were broken and the issues that affected the permanence of covenants. I also examined both Jesus's and Paul's radical teachings on marriage and divorce. Nowhere in the literature is the suggestion made that that "saving the family", i.e. maintaining the marital relationship no matter what, should be put above concerns about ensuring the safety of a woman and her children.

A number of scholars have worked with the application of Old Testament covenant theology to marriage. These include Mitzi Eilts, Catherine Clark Kroeger, Nancy Ramsay and Ron Clark. Eilts highlights the mutuality of biblical covenants. Covenants were good for people as well as for God.<sup>28</sup> Kroeger reminds us how God promised to bless the faithfulness of his people.<sup>29</sup> Ramsay highlights the fact that a marriage covenant should set the scene for a relationship that is loving, honouring and cherishing,<sup>30</sup> and Clark draws attention to the covenant established as part of creation, concluding that a marriage relationship is similar in that the marriage covenant calls for faithfulness from each partner.<sup>31</sup>

As part of this discussion, Clark also notes the times when covenants were broken by the unfaithfulness of God's people. When covenantal relationships were violated in this way, God withheld compassion and protection. Indeed, on such occasions God applied the concept of divorce (Jer 3:8; Isa 50:1; 54:6-7) in order to maintain the honour of his name (Isa 52:5; Ezek 36:22).<sup>32</sup>

Clark endorses the view that marriage reflects not only God's covenant with Israel but also Jesus' relationship with the church. As such, says Clark,

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Ramsay says, "The scriptures leave no doubt that God's love always intends protection of the vulnerable so that divorce is preferable to continuing life threatening and dehumanising suffering for family members."<sup>35</sup>

the covenant is violated when a spouse chooses not to honour, respect and love the other. In these terms, divorce is not the problem; rather, it is how one treats a spouse. Just as God has the option to call bad behaviour to account, to expect repentance and request holiness, so too does a victim of abuse within a marriage. God promised faithfulness, but he also expects reciprocal faithfulness in order for the covenant to retain its validity.<sup>33</sup>

The New Testament offers two grounds on which women can seek divorce: unfaithfulness and desertion (Matt 5:32; 19:8; 1 Cor 7:10-16). According to Al Miles, however, where there is violence towards a woman within a marriage, then the sacred vow of oneness that is the essence of marriage (i.e., two becoming one flesh – Gen 2:24; Mark 10:8; Eph 5:31), is broken by an abusing husband. In these circumstances, the abuser destroys the covenant when he abuses his wife; in essence he deserts her as a result of his inappropriate abusive behaviour.<sup>34</sup>

In seeking safety through separation or divorce, a female victim of abuse is acknowledging that her marriage covenant is no longer operative. In taking such action, says Kroeger, the woman is not the one breaking the covenant.<sup>36</sup> Kroeger points to the fact that covenants were ended by God when their purposes were ignored and transgressed. A marriage covenant is therefore not more precious than the human being who is being wrongfully treated. The intention of the marriage covenant is to ensure that justice, mercy and God's love are lived out reciprocally and applied in ways consistent with the covenant.<sup>37</sup> When abuse impinges on this and undermines it, a victim must be able to seek safety and peace even if it means separation or divorce.

The women interviewed held dearly to the concept of the marriage as covenant and believed it was they

28 Mitzi N. Eilts, "Saving the Family: When is Covenant Broken?" in *Violence in the Family: A Workshop Curriculum for Clergy and Other Helpers*, ed. Marie M. Fortune (Ohio: Pilgrim, 1991), 236.

29 Nason-Clark and Kroeger, *No Place for Abuse*, 132.

30 Nancy J. Ramsay, "Confronting Family Violence and its Spiritual Damage," *Family Ministry* 20, no. 3 (2006).

31 Ron Clark, *Freeing the Oppressed: A Call to Christians concerning Domestic Violence* (Oregon: Cascade, 2009), 82.

32 Ibid., 83-86.

33 Ibid., 84.

34 Al Miles, "Holding Christian Men Accountable for Abusing Women," in *Men's Work in Preventing Violence against Women*, eds. James Newton Polin and Christie Cozad Neuger (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2002), 20.

35 Ramsay, "Confronting Family Violence," 36.

36 Nancy Nason-Clark and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *Refuge from Abuse: Healing and Hope for Abused Christian Women* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 51.

37 Eilts, "Saving the Family," 241.

themselves who would be breaking the covenant if they were to leave the marriage relationship. They did not perceive that their abusing husbands were the ones who were in the wrong. Somehow, the women did not grasp that God's values in covenant relationship include protection of the vulnerable, and that in these circumstances they were the vulnerable party.

### **SUBMISSION, HEADSHIP AND PATRIARCHY**

A pertinent issue in this discussion is the way Christians understand relationships between men and women in the home and in the church. There are two basic views: the complementarian view and the egalitarian view.

The complementarian view claims that the Bible instructs husbands to lead their families and to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Wives, for their part, are called to respect their husbands' leadership. This is to be done out of reverence for Christ. The husband holds moral accountability for his wife and is to love her sacrificially; the wife is to reciprocate her husband's love and receive his service and leadership.<sup>38</sup> As an extension of this, those who take a complementarian view limit women's roles in the church setting, believing that women should not lead, teach or have authority over men.

The egalitarian view claims that men and women are created equally in God's image, and that any interpretation of Scripture which demeans women within marriage and prohibits women from using their spiritual gifts and abilities in ministry is unjust.

In reflecting on the role of patriarchy within the Christian family, and claims that the tenets of this hierarchical model contribute to family violence, I explored Christian beliefs about headship, submission, authority and their relationship to abuse. I highlighted the egalitarian views which challenge the complementarian view of submission and headship within marriage, and identified four issues that have become central to the debate about gender roles within the Christian family: the meaning of *kephalē* ("head") in 1 Cor 11:2–16 and Eph 5:21–23, whether it means "authority" (as the complementarians would have it), or "source" (as

38 See Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message." Online: <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp#xviii>. Accessed 20 May 2013.

the egalitarians advocate); the meaning of *authentēin* ("to have authority") in 1 Tim 2:8–15; what we can learn from Genesis 1–3 about the relationship between men and women; and the role of patriarchy in contributing towards violence against women.

In my research I found that those who advocate that an abused woman should return to the abusive context and be submissive and forgiving, often reflect a complementarian view of Scripture and gender roles. All the women interviewed described being in a marriage relationship of inequality, where the greater power was held by their husbands. Choices made by their husband left each woman feeling disadvantaged and in some instances led to them being injured. The children within these families also suffered (and continue to suffer) as a result of this misuse of male power. The women remained in positions of vulnerability and danger, guided by beliefs adhered to within their respective faith communities that such submission was biblically expected and directed.

### **THE WOMEN REMAINED IN POSITIONS OF VULNERABILITY AND DANGER, GUIDED BY BELIEFS ADHERED TO WITHIN THEIR RESPECTIVE FAITH COMMUNITIES THAT SUCH SUBMISSION WAS BIBLICALLY EXPECTED AND DIRECTED**

I explored the influence of patriarchy and hierarchy on domestic abuse. Those who hold to complementarian views dispute the role that this plays in abuse. Indeed, the "Danvers Statement" considers that following

complementarian principles will protect the family, and that to neglect such traditional principles will lead to destructive consequences for families, churches and culture.<sup>39</sup> These values, however, are seen to varying degrees by those who hold to egalitarian views as being causative and as contributing to the increasing risk of violence within marriages.<sup>40</sup>

A United Nations report claims, "The pervasiveness of violence against women across the boundaries of culture, race and class points to its roots in patriarchy – the systemic domination of women by men."<sup>41</sup> The report also stresses that intimate partner violence is significantly correlated with rigid gender roles that associate masculinity with dominance, toughness and authority in the

39 The "Danvers Statement" was produced in 1987 by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. It is reproduced in Wayne Grudem and John Piper, eds. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991), 469–71. This claim is in "Affirmation" no. 10. See also online: <http://cbmw.org/core-beliefs/>. Accessed 19 September 2014.

40 R. Emerson and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case Against the Patriarchy* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 34–35.

41 United Nations Secretary General, *Ending Violence Against Women: From Words to Action* (New York: United Nations 2006), 28.

home, and that the roots of violence against women lie in historically unequal power relations between the genders and pervasive discrimination against women in both the public and the private sphere. And while this report comes from a secular source, there is a wide body of Christian literature that supports this conclusion.

Steven R. Fleming refers to Walker's pioneering research (1984–1985) that found that male abusers commonly subscribe to traditional ideas about family and gender roles, especially the notion that the husband is the supreme leader in the home and as such holds power and may control family members in an autocratic manner. Underpinning this is a belief that men are superior and women inferior.<sup>42</sup>

Nason-Clark observes that women in faith communities are particularly vulnerable to abuse, and that religion and religious involvement are linked to specific attitudes regarding women.<sup>43</sup> She refers to Vicky Whipple's research regarding women who are especially vulnerable, pointing out that these are often conservative Christian women who have been abused and who attribute value to such attitudes, especially where submission of the wife is emphasised as an ideal.<sup>44</sup> Nason-Clark also highlights the connection between violence within marriage and the subordinate position of women within marriage, and how the abuse of wives exposes the potential danger of patriarchal systems within the family structure, by setting the scene for control by males.<sup>45</sup>

Nason-Clark also refers to Lori Beaman's view that, "The doctrine of submission and attendant

beliefs about appropriate gender roles"<sup>46</sup> may contribute to a woman remaining in an abusive situation. The women whom I interviewed adhered to these values and claimed them as reasons to remain in their relationships.

In responding to the elevation of traditional views regarding the role of women and submission, Barbara Boone Wooten claims that research reveals that a higher percentage of women in traditional marriage relationships suffer from depression and other mental health issues than either unmarried or working women. Wooten refers to the work of Diana R. Garland, who claims that women in traditional marriage relationships where the husband is considered to be the head are beaten three hundred per cent more often than women in egalitarian marriages.<sup>47</sup>

Nason-Clark refers to the work of Joy Bussert who claims that as long as theological traditions hold up submission as the ideal model for wife and husband

relationships, battering will continue.<sup>48</sup> She also refers to Ron Clark's view that patriarchy supports women being owned by men which allows men to do "whatever they want with their woman."<sup>49</sup> She

cites Pagelow and Johnson, who claim that silence and denial within church communities regarding wife abuse may immobilise women victims, and at the same time inadvertently support the practices of abusive husbands.<sup>50</sup>

Churches are often silent about such abuse. Indeed, Livezey believes church silence about sexual violence has been regarded as an act of complicity.<sup>51</sup> This is what Nason-Clark refers to as "the holy hush."<sup>52</sup> Supporting this view, Shirley Gillett suggests that while there is an increasing awareness of such abuse within Christian evangelical books and magazines, "few are willing to confront the basic inequality of male-female relationships that is

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42 Steven R. Fleming, "Competent Christian Intervention with Men Who Batter," in *Women, Abuse and the Bible. How Scripture can be Used to Hurt or Heal*, eds. James R. Beck and Catherine Clark Kroeger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 176.

43 Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 141, citing Martha J. McMurray, "Religion and Women's Sex Role Traditionalism," *Sociological Focus* 11, no. 2 (1978): 81–95; Tim B. Heaton and Marie Cornwall, "Religious Group Variation in the Socioeconomic Status of Family Behaviour of Women," *JSSR* 28 (1989): 283–99. See also Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Mary Jo Neitz, *Charisma and Community: A Study of Religious Commitment within the Charismatic Renewal*, (Livingston, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1987); Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Wade Clark Roof, eds., *Work, Family, and Religion in Contemporary Society*, (New York: Routledge, 1995).

44 Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 141.

45 *Ibid.*, 4.

46 *Ibid.*, 141. Nason-Clark supervised a thesis by Lori Beaman: "Feminist Practice, Evangelical Worldview: The Response of Conservative Protestant Women to Wife Abuse," PhD Thesis, University of New Brunswick, Department of Sociology, 1996.

47 Barbara Boone Wooten, *Destiny Denied: the Veiling of Women in the Traditional Church* (Florida: Creation House, 2008), 73.

48 Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 4, citing Joy Bussert, *Battered Women: From a Theology of Suffering to an Ethic of Empowerment* (New York: Lutheran Church of America, 1986).

49 *Ibid.*, 4.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*

52 Cited in Falburg, "Book Review," 13.



at the root of all forms of woman abuse.<sup>53</sup> Gillett says a typical response to abuse by men is that these men are abusing their God-ordained roles as leaders within their families.<sup>54</sup> However, says Gillett, it is the actual role which sets up a basic inequality and thus encourages abuse, discourages disclosure and turns victims away from the church which has had a hand in the abuse but rejects their plight.<sup>55</sup>

In Nason-Clark's study, there were varying levels of agreement by clergy that abuse is linked to hierarchical patterns within families. Some clergy accepted that the adoption of hierarchical positions of responsibility may in part be responsible for male aggression and may contribute to excessive control.<sup>56</sup> Others believed the church was at times guilty of exacerbating problems of abuse within families by enthusiastically endorsing female submission and male headship.<sup>57</sup> Nason-Clark says, "[a]busive Christian men offer evidence that male leadership and power can be motivated by a desire to control," and asks whether violent families are an example of the traditional family pattern gone awry.<sup>58</sup>

The evidence seems clear that much of the abuse that takes place in Christian homes has its roots in patriarchy and in reading Scripture from a complementarian perspective. But this is not the only way to read Scripture. In critiquing the complementarian perspective Kroeger emphasises the challenge and value of fully understanding an ancient text and applying it appropriately to contemporary situations.<sup>59</sup> Mimi Haddad echoes Kroeger's view, saying, "The challenge of abuse within the Christian home is often related to matters of biblical interpretation – discerning what is descriptive from what is prescriptive in the Bible."<sup>60</sup>

53 Shirley Gillett, "No Church to Call Home," in *Women, Abuse, and the Bible*, 110. Gillett's chapter draws on her work with abused and incarcerated women in Canada.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 65.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 66.

59 Catherine Clark Kroeger, "Let us Grow up into Him in All Things," in *Responding to Abuse in Christian Homes: A Challenge to Churches and their Leaders*, Barbara Fisher-Townsend, Nancy Nason-Clark, Catherine Clark Kroeger, eds. (Eugene, Ore.: WIPF and Stock 2011), 8–11.

60 Mimi Haddad, "Dr Catherine Clark Kroeger: An Evangelical Legacy," *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 3 (2011): 8.

Along these lines, Bilezikian explains how the first two chapters of Genesis describe God's ideal community on earth. Three structures reflected aspects of God's divine image which God invested into human life. Firstly, the ontological structure of oneness, which makes up the very essence within the Godhead. Secondly, the relational structure that bound the original couple in an arrangement of mutual servanthood. And thirdly, the ministry context where there is serving within a relationship of complementarity of gifts, free from differentiation concerned with rank or gender. Completely absent in the order of creation is a hierarchical structure between men and women. The original created order reflected oneness and mutuality, says Bilezikian.<sup>61</sup>

Until human sin entered the world, harmonious co-operation existed. Then God's ideal was contaminated with qualities that were never part of his original intention. Oneness was lost, mutuality was replaced with hierarchy, complementarity

of function was affected and gender-specific roles emerged. These were consequences of the fall, and domestic violence is one of the outcomes. Yet, according to Nason-Clark, the voice of complementarian writers still claim that "family

unity is achieved most fully and satisfactorily when couples subscribe to the hierarchical model of family living... and hierarchy is considered one of the most defining and differentiating features of couples subscribing to a conservative Christian world view."<sup>62</sup>

Patriarchy and the role that it has played in contributing to domestic violence are the result of the fall, says Heggen,<sup>63</sup> an eventuality which required that Jesus come and model relationships that reflect the values of the new creation. Consequently, the egalitarian view highlights that Eph 5:21–6:9 shows a radical movement from patriarchy back to mutuality, as does Gal 3:28, which exemplifies this revolutionary equality in claiming that, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

These new-creation assertions of mutuality and respect as exemplified in the life, work and teachings

61 Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family*; 3rd edn. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 171.

62 Nason-Clark, *The Battered Wife*, 24.

63 Heggen, "Religious Beliefs and Abuse," 19.

of Jesus and Paul are missing in accounts provided by the seven women. Rather their narratives reflected such statements as: “The husband is the head of the house”; “Everything had to be focused around his life”; “Do I even own my own body?”; “Men are the ones who take charge”; “Women are there to assist, and subservience and suffering are somehow virtuous in their own right”; “I am supposed to be submissive or subservient or obedient”.

## CONCLUSION

I found that within evangelical churches abused women often do not get the help they need. Responses by evangelical communities to women suffering domestic abuse are for the most part limited and inadequate, often as a result of a theological bias in favour of hierarchy and patriarchy, and a misunderstanding of the covenant metaphor as it applies to marriage and of the nature of forgiveness and reconciliation. As a result, the prevention of violence within Christian families is not given the proper attention that it should.

It is fitting to end with a comment that underscores the need for these dishonoured women to be acknowledged and heard:

*Ethel: There was one point, after the divorce, when things just really, really hit me, and I started to weep, and I could not stop weeping. I wept for twenty-four hours, and finally I thought “somehow I need absolution.” And it was Saturday by then, and the Protestants aren’t open on Saturday but the Catholics are, because they have confession. So I went – I think it was partly that I believed that I had done things that were terribly, terribly wrong, but I also believed that it hadn’t just been me. So I went to the Catholic Church, and I asked if I could go to confession – and the priest said “sure”, and he sat down and I sat down – I think it was actually a confessional booth. I’ve never been in one before. “That’s okay” he said. I was really concise, I said in like fifteen minutes what my journey had been, and some anger I had at the church also. When I had finished, he said “You have been heard.” And he said it in a way that got right to the core of me. And then he would’ve given me some benediction that I don’t remember – probably “Go in peace” – and I left and I wasn’t crying anymore. I think it was that he heard me. He really heard me, and I think he probably said “Your sins are forgiven, go in peace” – I don’t know, I just know that he said “You have been heard” and that the benediction he gave me was to go and cause me to go in peace. But it was*

*like... it was like my uncle or someone putting his hand on my shoulder, but I know he wouldn’t have touched me at all because I remember, but he reached me, and I guess I think I want to put that in, for how the church was helpful. It needed to be the church that did that. [Pause]*

*Okay – now you can turn it off!*

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