

# Domestic Violence and the Church

By Barrington H. Brennen, MA, NCP

*A Speech given at the Regional Conference on Sexual and Domestic Violence November 4-7, 1998, Nassau Beach Hotel, Bahamas Updated October 7, 2001 Afghan Women*



One hundred-and-fifty years ago, on July 19, 1848, a political and social movement was born. Three hundred persons, including 40 men traveled by horse-drawn wagons and by foot, from up to 50 miles away, to Seneca Falls, New York, to protest the legal bondage of American women and to demand full equality. It was the first women's right convention to demand greater civil liberties for women, including the right to vote and to get an education. They came together to rewrite the United States constitution and to sign the Declaration of Sentiments which proclaimed that all men and women were created equal. During this occasion the Declaration of Sentiments presented a list of evils against women. It said:

"The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world."

The photo is Elizabeth Cady Stanton a leader for the women's convention in 1848.

Here are a few of the facts stated in the Declaration of Sentiments 150 years ago, the last one of which I want you to note carefully.

- He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.
- He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men – both native and foreigners.
- He has made her, if married, in the eyes of the law, civilly dead.
- He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education – all colleges being closed to her.
- He allows her in church as well as state, but in a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic Authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the church.

Domestic violence and the Church are two terms that should not be linked. Unfortunately, today we know that there is an undeniable correlation between the teachings of the church and the prevalence of violence in our homes. As the Cross is the center of Christianity--bringing hope, peace, and certainty of salvation, ironically (in my opinion) religion has always been and is more than ever the core fueling agent to the development and perpetuation of violence in our families today. Violence in the community then is a direct result of violence in families.

Could it be so that in fact we are facing a painful formula for violence?

**Family + Church = Violence**

**Or is it more realistic to say**

**Family + Religion = Violence**

In reality, it is the false teachings of the church or false religion which I am suggesting is one of the fundamental causes for family violence.

**Family + False Religion = Violence**

The very agent that was designed to bring healing and comfort--the church--must then reexamine its teachings, traditions, and practices that support the baser passions and drives for greed of power and control. The church can be and should be the most reliable agent for healing and restoration. The church must be a loud voice against family violence.

Dr. James Alsdurf in his book *Battered Into Submission* states:

"As long as the church is quiet in a world which resonates with the cries of abused women, it is failing in its ministry of reconciliation. It is simply functioning as a sounding brass, and a clanging cymbal . . . The church is called to bind up the bruises of women who have suffered not only from the violence of their spouses, but all from the passive violence of a church which has failed to recognize their situation and intervene on their behalf." (Alsdurf)

I want to highlight the words **PASSIVE VIOLENCE**. This is the type of violence that has created pain in our families and which has divided them, weakening them to the core. There must be an unlearning and reeducating about family values and relationships.

Haki Madhubuti states:

"There must be. . . "a liberation of the male psyche from preoccupation with domination, power hunger, control of patriarchal culture. This requires commitment to deep study, combined with a willingness for painful, uncomfortable, and often shocking change." (Madhubuti)

Why has violence over the years burst the walls of our homes? Is it because the church has been reluctant to take sides? Or is it because it has taken sides with the perpetrator and not the victim? Telling her, she must stay. Not believing that her "loving" husband could be doing those things she claims he is doing.

"If the problem of wife abuse is one of evil, the church can no longer avoid taking sides. "A love which intends to be effective in terms of God's kingdom cannot avoid taking sides," says theologian Jose Bonino. In fact the church will be in collusion with evil if it does not stand on the side of the victim. Only when it becomes an advocate for the oppressed can it fulfill its prophetic role." (Alsdurf)

Where did this idea of wife abuse come from in the first place? How did it get all started? Remember, I believe that religion or the misuse of religion is the core reason for family violence today.

Let us look briefly at the etiology of abuse.

POWER AND CONTROL First, all Christendom agrees that greed for power and control began in heaven with Lucifer. He began the first political campaign and persuaded one third of the angels to come on his side. He was then thrown out of heaven. He wanted to be like God. He wanted more power and control. He knew that the only way he could reach Adam and Eve would be to try and appeal to the idea of more knowledge and power, thus they would have greater control over their lives. And he was successful. We know the rest of the story. At the centre of the reason for all of the painful atrocities in the world today are two words - POWER AND CONTROL. The GREED for power and control is very contagious. It has revealed itself over the millenniums through:

SLAVERY  
RACISM  
RAPE  
SPOUSE ABUSE  
INCEST  
TOTALITARIANISM  
COMMUNISM  
SEXUAL ABUSE  
PATRIARCHY  
MATRIARCHY

All of these atrocities or forms of abuse have two things in common:

1. The use and misuse of power and control.
2. Someone or a group of people takes advantage of someone or a group of individuals they feel are weaker or less important than themselves.

This greed for power and control comes directly out of the curse of sin as mentioned in Genesis 3:14-16 "And He Shall Rule Over You." This text is at the heart of the reason for the abuse. It is taught as "thus saith the Lord" rather than a curse of sin.

This has developed over the millenniums the idea that WOMEN ARE NO MORE THAN SEXUAL PROPERTY. No where in history you can find a school of thought or any institution developed to teach that men are sexual property or inferior to women. However, every effort has been made these past 6000 years to teach us that women are to be servants and in reality inferior to men. Where did it all begin? I want to go back before the first Bahamian. Let us go to the ancient world. Let us look at the county where the western world gathered its wisdom and philosophy, Athens. Athens was named after the lovely goddess of wisdom. However it is ironic that a system of philosophy that maintained that females are in all ways inferior to males should originate in a city named after a female who embodied wisdom! Yet here in the capital of ancient Greece, in the brilliant minds of her philosophers and teachers, lies the source of the Western world's formalized conviction that women are inferior to men. First it was SOCRATES (470-399 BC) who immortalized the Athenian disdain toward women. He was the first to refer to women as the weaker sex. He taught that:

"Being born a woman is a divine punishment, since a woman is halfway between a man and an animal"

(Bristow) (Plato, Timaeus, Baltimore: Penguin, 1965)

Socrates' star pupil was Plato and Plato's most distinguished disciple was Aristotle (384-322). Aristotle, when observing a single bee was certain that the single bee leading the swarm of bees was a male. Therefore he called the leader bee the King Bee. It was not until centuries later it was discovered that the leader bee was female. Then the name was changed to QUEEN BEE. You see it was Aristotle who taught that

"The courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying." (Bristow)

He also taught that:

"The difference between a husband and wife is like that of a man's soul and his body. The man is to his wife as a soul to the physical body, meant to command and guide arms and legs with wisdom and intelligence." (Bristow)

In the ancient Greek world, women could not own property. In fact they were only as valuable as property. They could not sue or be sued. They did not appear in public with their husbands. A man's property included:

**His house**  
**His garden**  
**His WIFE**

Let us compare this to a contemporary situation. Note carefully a CNN news clip:



"Several prominent women's rights activists came together Wednesday, October 20, 1998, to call attention to alleged human rights abuses against women under Afghanistan's ruling Islamic Taliban regime. We are told that when the Taliban swept into power two years ago they quickly imposed Islamic sharia laws that confined women largely to their homes unless they wear the traditional head-to-toe shroud, called the burqa. Women are also required to be accompanied by a close male relative when they go out and are not permitted to make noise."

#### **New Information added October 7, 2001:**

Loma Linda University engaged in a medical teaching/learning exchange with Kabul University, Afghanistan, in July 2000, to help Kabul University in the training of medical doctors. Kabul University has an enrollment of 5,000 to 6,000 student -- only men. (Loma Linda University began the program in August of 2001 but had to postpone it after the bombing in New York.) The women were banded from the university and education when the Taliban took over a few years ago.

In Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, you can find many women with mental disorder, who are always wandering around in the streets. Most of them are prostitutes who became pregnant since they don't know how to prevent pregnancy. What drove them mad?

The Taliban, a Muslim fundamentalist force has enacted many kinds of prohibitions and imposed them

on the population in the name of Islam since they captured Kabul in 1996. For example, women are forbidden to work outside the home, and girls are banned from schools and universities.

The law prohibiting women from working creates a flood of unemployed women in Kabul. These unemployed women, especially, wid-ows who don't have male members to work for them face serious financial problems and as a natural consequence their children suffer from hunger. Most of them have sold most of their possession to buy food. And these women make up the bulk of beggars in their country. A large number of these beggars include women who had worked as teachers and civil servants. But it is very difficult for women to earn their living by begging since female beggars are forbidden to enter shops, inns and other trading premises. And what is worse, the bad state of economy especially in Kabul has hit hard the pity-alms given to these beggars. Therefore, a number of women are forced to enter into prostitution regarded as filthy job in Afghan society for their survival, and survival of their children.

Declaration of Rights for the Afghan Woman Douchanbé, Tadjikistan, June 28, 2000

The fundamental right of Afghan women, as for all human beings, is life with dignity, which includes the following rights :

- 1- The right to equality between men and women and the right to the elimination of all forms of discrimination and segregation, based on gender, race or religion.
- 2- The right to personal safety and to freedom from torture or inhumane or degrading treatment.
- 3- The right to physical and mental health for women and their children.
- 4- The right to equal protection under the law.
- 5- The right to institutional education in all the intellectual and physical disciplines.
- 6- The right to just and favorable conditions of work.
- 7- The right to move about freely and independently.
- 8- The right to freedom of thought, speech, assembly and political participation.
- 9- The right to wear or not to wear the veil or the chadri.
- 10- The right to participate in cultural activities including theatre, music and sports.

### **Women's Plight in Afghanistan**

This is an email published on August 29, 1999 about the plight of women in Afghanistan.

"The government of Afghanistan is waging a war upon women. The situation is getting so bad that one person in an editorial of the Times compared the treatment of women there to the treatment of Jews in pre-Holocaust Poland.

Since the Taliban took power in 1996, women have had to wear burqa and have been beaten and stoned in public for not having the proper attire, even if this means simply not having the mesh covering in front of their eyes. One woman was beaten to DEATH by an angry mob of fundamentalists for accidentally exposing her arm while she was driving.



Another was stoned to death for trying to leave the country with a man that was not a relative. Women are not allowed to work or even go out in public without a male relative; professional women such as

professors ,translators, doctors, lawyers, artists and writers have been forced from their jobs and stuffed into their homes, so that depression is becoming so widespread that it has reached emergency levels.

There is no way in such an extreme Islamic society to know the suicide rate with certainty, but relief workers are estimating that the suicide rate among women, who cannot find proper medication and treatment for severe depression and would rather take their lives than live in such conditions, has increased significantly. Homes where a woman is present must have their windows painted so that she can never be seen by outsiders. They must wear silent shoes so that they are never heard.

Women live in fear of their lives for the slightest misbehavior. Because they cannot work, those without male relatives or husbands are either starving to death or begging on the street, even if they hold PhD's. There are almost no medical facilities available for women, and relief workers have mostly left the country. At one of the rare hospitals for women, a reporter found still, nearly lifeless bodies lying motionless on top of beds, wrapped in their burqa, unwilling to speak, eat, or do anything, but slowly wasting away.

Others have gone mad and were seen crouched in corners, rocking or crying, most of them in fear. One doctor is considering, when what little medication that is left finally runs out, leaving these women in front of the president's residence as a form of peaceful protest. It is at the point where the term 'human rights violations' has become an understatement. Husbands have the power of life and death over their women relatives, especially their wives, but an angry mob has just as much right to stone or beat a woman, often to death, for exposing an inch of flesh or offending them in the slightest way. David Cornwell has said that those in the West should not judge the Afghan people for such treatment because it is a 'cultural thing', but this is not even true.

Women enjoyed relative freedom, to work, dress generally as they wanted, and drive and appear in public alone until only 1996 -- the rapidity of this transition is the main reason for the depression and suicide; women who were once educators or doctors or simply used to basic human freedoms are now severely restricted and treated as sub-human in the name of right-wing fundamentalist Islam.

It is not their tradition or 'culture', but is alien to them, and it is extreme even for those cultures where fundamentalism is the rule. Besides, if we could excuse everything on cultural grounds, then we should not be appalled that the Carthaginians sacrificed their infant children, that little girls are circumcised in parts of Africa, that blacks in the US deep south in the 1930's were lynched, prohibited from voting, and forced to submit to unjust Jim Crow laws. Everyone has a right to a tolerable human existence, even if they are women in a Muslim country in a part of the world that Westerners may not understand. If we can threaten military force in Kosovo in the name of human rights for the sake of ethnic Albanians, then NATO and the West can certainly express peaceful outrage at the oppression, murder and injustice committed against women by the Taliban."

February 27, 1998 --Thirty-thousand men and boys poured into the dilapidated Olympic sports stadium in Kabul, capital of Afghanistan. Street hawkers peddled nuts, biscuits and tea to the waiting crowd. The scheduled entertainment? They were there to see a young woman, Sohaila, receive 100 lashes, and to watch two thieves have their right hands amputated. Sohaila had been arrested walking with a man who was not a relative, a sufficient crime for her to be found guilty of adultery. Since she was single, it was punishable by flogging; had she been married, she would have been publicly stoned to death. See more

## Rape and Torture of Afghan Women Human Rights Catastrophe

Is it still shamefully shocking that around that world, overtly or covertly, women in general are still considered just as SEXUAL PROPERTY or a HOUSEWIFE. To be a housewife means to be a

Maid - to wash his clothes and keep the house clean

Cook - to keep his belly happy

Sex Partner - to keep his passion and drives at bay.

Let us look at a few more examples how women were treated in ancient Bible times.

ADULTERY WAS A VIOLATION OF PROPERTY RIGHTS since women were no more than sexual property (Numbers 5:27, 31)

Dr. John Temple Bristow in his book "What the Bible Really Says About Love, Marriage and Family" describes this practice with these words:

"Although a wife might violate her husband's marital rights, he could not violate her marital rights — since she did not possess any such rights."

**RAPE WAS NOT A CRIME AGAINST THE PERSONHOOD, EMOTIONS, OR FEELINGS OF A WOMAN. IT WAS INSTEAD A CRIME AGAINST PROPERTY RIGHTS Exodus 22:16-17**

Contrary to popular teachings, a man was not stoned to death for having sex with someone he was not married to. However, a woman was stoned to death if she had sex with a man who was not her husband. Isn't this the same today? It is all right if a man has sex before marriage, but it is not if a woman does. Or it is all right if he plays around, but it is not if she does.

Here are few more current traditions and laws that affect our women. A current Algerian law against women states:

"The law, giving men wide power over women, includes an obligation for a woman to obey her husband's parents and says she'll lose her home if the couple divorces." CNN

In the early 1800s when there were only 23 states in the Union of the USA, a common law stated:

"Husband and wife are one, and the ONE is the husband."

In our country, a woman could not vote until 1962. Although great women leaders such as Dame Dr. Doris Johnson led the trail for women's rights since the 1950s, yet our women were kept under subjugation for a long time. That was only 36 years ago, eight years after I was born.

Tony Evans, a leading motivational speaker and minister of the gospel made this statement:

"I believe that feminists of the more aggressive persuasion are frustrated women unable to find the proper male leadership. If a woman were receiving the right kind of love and attention and LEADERSHIP, she would not want to be liberated from that."

In a PROMISE KEEPERS rally Tony Evans instructed the men this way:

' "Men, sit down with your wife and say something like this, "Honey, I've made a terrible mistake . . . I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim the role." I'm not suggesting, Tony Evans says, that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to take it back . . . there can be no compromise here. If you're going to lead, you must lead . . . Treat the lady gently and lovingly, But lead!" '

Reverend Marvin De Hann in the Good News Broadcaster states

"The primary responsibility for a good relationship in marriage lies with the wife. If the wife is submissive to her husband, they'll have a good relationship." (Alsdurf)

Reverend John MacArthur states:

"Submission should be the welcome response of Christian women, to their husbands. If a husband doesn't obey the Word, the wife should submit—submit any way." (Alsdurf) **These are only examples of what the church is teaching.**

## **What can the church do to break its tradition of passive violence against the powerless and to bring healing instead of pain?**

1. **ADMIT THAT WIFE ABUSE EXISTS - AWARENESS.** Wife abuse is no respecter of persons. It is not only in the community, it is in the church. By not acknowledging the problem, the church continues to suffer from a festering internal wound. And when it goes unchallenged, marital conflicts of this magnitude prevents healthy family relationships and block effective ministries on every level.

"The church's silence on the subject—when it has been so vocal on issues such as prayer in the schools, homosexuality and abortion—is tacit permission for abuse to continue."

2. **DEVELOP COMPASSION** to look for the telltale signs of abuse among church goers. As professionals we must find ways of educating church leaders and members on the signs of abuse. Sometime when a couple is "too good to be true," it is often a strong sign that all is not well and true. Often the inappropriate outburst of anger, the frequent "sicknesses" and extremely private, and/or isolated couple, are indicators of abusive relationships. The church can help in providing limited treatment or support groups for the abused. They can also help by providing safe places for those who need it in time of crisis.

3. **ACKNOWLEDGE ABUSE AS A SIN.** This is perhaps the greatest thing a church can do for battered women. Especially since in past years, the church has done all it can to make her feel that she is the problem and not her husband. Wife abuse is a sin. This would mean that the church must have a good discipline program. An abuser should not serve as a leader.

4. **DEVELOP A PROPER THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION.** Dr. James Alsdurf states: "Pressing assault charges, leaving and refusing to consider a return until the abuser has completed a counseling program for offenders, or "going public" with the abuse to employers and relatives may in fact be the first step toward reconciliation, a step which the woman will take as a means of offering her husband an opportunity to acknowledge the illegality and immorality of what he has done."

5. **BE WILLING TO CHANGE THE CHURCH'S PERSPECTIVE OF MARRIAGE**

## **Here are a few statements the church makes about the marriage relationship and messages women receive when hearing them:**

1. "Marriage is a private affair."  
Message: Whatever happens in marriage, no matter how life-threatening, keep it a secret.
2. "A woman should obey her man."  
Message: A woman should be submissive to her partner. The man is not to be submissive.
3. "Keep the family together at all cost."  
Message: I must keep the family together even if it costs my life.
4. "Do not air your dirty linen."  
Message: I should talk about the good, positive aspects of my relationship. I should not discuss the negative even if I need help.
5. "Pray about it. God will give you strength to endure."  
Message: If I cannot endure the abuse, then God has not heard my prayers. I am not a good Christian.
6. "Women are the weaker vessel."  
Message: Because a woman is not as physically strong as a man, he should be the one in control. Therefore the weaker a woman, the stronger the man should be.
7. "If you change, he will change."  
Message: I am responsible for my husband's actions and behavior. I can change him if I change myself.
8. "What did you do to make him act that way?"  
Message: My behavior is directly related to how my husband acts. If I act appropriately, I can stop the abuse.

# Be Willing to Examine the Bible for the True Meaning of a Loving Relationship.

With a deep study of the Bible, it is clear that there is no scriptural justification for any form of abuse:

**Physical Abuse:** Ephesians 5:28

"So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hateth his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church."

**Emotional Abuse:** 1 Peter 3:7

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

James 1:16

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

During the times of Christ and Paul, the Greeks already had long established gymnasiums where men gathered to be taught the philosophies of Aristotle. In these gyms the idea of female inferiority was continually being taught. Men were taught that they did not need women. Paul knew all about this. He would pass these buildings as he went to the Synagogue to present Christ's teachings on family life.

When we understand the background and reason why Paul wrote the way he did, we no longer find any support for abuse or gender hierarchy in scripture.

Let us look at Paul verses concerning certain teachings and attitudes:

Aristotle taught: "A female is a deformed male."

Paul declared: "Male and female are one in Christ - Galatians 3:28

Jewish custom: Men and women are to be separated during worship. Only men count in determining a quorum for worship.

Paul declared: Women as well as men are to lead in worship – 1 Corinthians 11:4

Aristotle argued: Women are inferior to men in their ability to reason.

Paul insisted: Women are to learn - 1 Timothy 2:11

Stoics taught: Sexual intercourse is harmful and marriage distracts a man from the study of philosophy.

Paul declared: Marriage and sexual intimacy are gifts from God. – 1 Corinthians 7:11; Ephesians 5:31

Aristotle asserted: A man's courage is in commanding, a woman's in obeying.

Paul instructed: Husbands and wives are to be responsive to the needs of each other. – 1 Corinthians 7:3-5; Ephesians 5:22-33.

# My Observation

I have worked as a director of a treatment program for abusive men in Benton Harbor, Michigan, for a few years. During that time I made note of something quite frightening. Out of the 600 men I worked with, about 180 stated they were active Christians. In my interview with these "Christian" men it was clear that for all of them abuse began or seriously escalated when they became Christian or when their parents became Christian. This brings me to the DEADLY FORMULA. When rigid traditional family values are combined with rigid traditional religious beliefs, there is always abuse.

## THE DEADLY FORMULA

### **Rigid Traditional Family Values**

Plus

### **Rigid Traditional Religious Beliefs**

Always Equals

### **Abuse**

Is there hope for change? YES THERE IS! Although the Southern Baptist Church in the USA did something out of the ordinary on June 10th of this year by voting that "A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ," Yet a positive light has come from Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois. They voted at the influential church to have an egalitarian ministry. In November of 1997, they changed their views concerning women in ministry. "The church is committed to provide opportunity for ministry based on giftedness and character, without regard to gender."

As ministers of the gospel, we must be willing to change first so our churches can change. In an article I published in March of this year in an international paper, "I challenged pastors to preach about being a "servant husband" instead of "head," to preach mutual submission, not wifely submission. If we do, these concepts will create a new dimension in our pastoral ministry and bring healing to many hurting hearts in our congregation." (Brennen)

God himself said with a clear and loud voice his hatred for violence in Malachi 2:16:

"I hate divorce says the Lord God of Israel, and a man who COVERETH HIMSELF WITH VIOLENCE as well as with his garment says the Lord Almighty."

I want to end with this cry from the victim: *Barrington Brennen's Adaptation*

## **I Was Hungry**

I was abused by my partner, and you told me to stay because it was the Lord's will.

I became hungry because I could not work and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. Thank you.

My clothes became worn and torn, exposing my naked body and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.

At times I became seriously ill because of my lack of nutrients and you knelt and thanked God for your health.

I was thrown out of my house and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.

I was abandoned and became lonely and you left me alone to pray for me.

You seem so holy, so close to God. But I'm still being abused. I'm still hungry, lonely and cold.