



A Secret Sin

by Deborah J. Myers

I ran quickly, but it was no use—he soon cornered me. Frightened, I dropped to the fetal position, wishing I could hide. His large, muscled form loomed over me. His face void of emotion, he surveyed me a few moments and then slugged my temple with his fist. I cried out in pain and toppled over while the world spun around me nauseatingly.

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Spousal Abuse in Christian Homes

Nearly one in three adult women experience at least one physical assault by a partner during adulthood according to the American Psychology Association. The Bureau of Justice reports that 28 percent of all annual violence against women and five percent

against men is perpetrated by intimates.

Stereotypically, domestic violence occurs only in slums, not in good Christian homes. However, a study released at the 11th General Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance, a group which represents 160 million Christians in 110 countries, indicates that incidents of violence against women are nearly as bad in Christian homes as those of non-Christians.

I believe it is at least as high, if not higher, because abused Christians are not as likely to report violence as their non-Christian counterparts.

Christian spouses don't want to tear apart their homes by separating. They suffer in silence so their children will have two parents, even though the abuser is not a good parent. Most Christians will not report violence to avoid divorce. They believe that marriage is "until death do us part." Sadly, that may happen at the hands of the abusive partner.

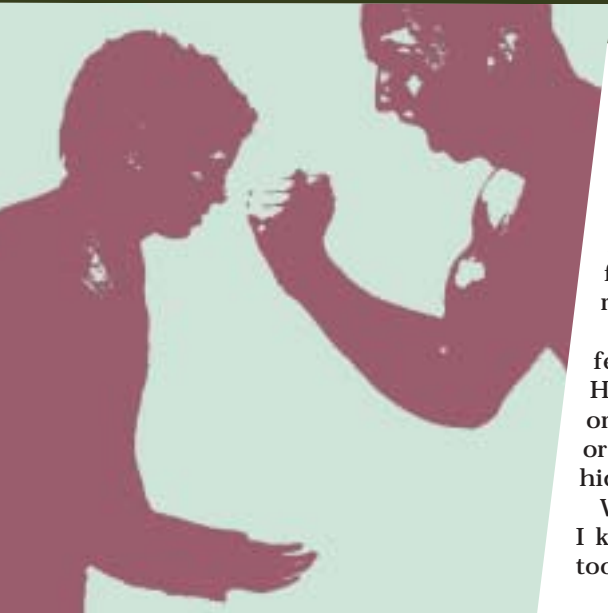
Many abusers usually realize this fact and feel that they can get away with their crimes because their spouses will not leave. Abusers hold their victims captive by their fears of a broken home and the stigma of divorce.

Why I Stayed

This factor was certainly true for me. I stayed in my abusive home for six years because I believed that divorce was wrong under any circumstance. I finally admitted to my minister that I was a victim of abuse. I was terrified that he would not believe me, but he did without question. With the help of the pastor and his wife, I left for my own safety.

Since then, many people have asked me why I married my husband in the first place. No one wants to grow up and marry an abuser. Who would seek a violent, bitter, angry person? But the man I married was a charade.

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Here are a few "don'ts" regarding domestic violence:

- Don't assume anyone is exempt from committing or being the victim of domestic violence.
- Don't immediately believe explanations for bruises. Victims lie for their own safety.
- Don't tell a victim who is seeking help to simply "Pray about it" or "Tell him to get counseling." Numerous studies estimate that only 1-2 percent of abusers who finish counseling quit battering.
- Don't push the victim to go to marriage counseling. This is not a marriage problem.
- Don't blame the victim—it is the abuser's fault.

I had met Mike (not his real name) at Bible college. He professed faith in Christ and enjoyed serving at church with me. As we worked with a children's group, I dreamed of the life we would build together, centered around God, church and the family we would start. I felt blessed to have such a godly man in my life.

We were engaged a year and completed pre-marital counseling with our pastor. With my family's approval, we were married.

On our wedding night his mask fell away and the abuse began. He usually slugged my upper arm or thigh and occasionally my ribs or above my hairline, all sites that hide telltale bruises.

When Mike blackened my eye, I knew I had to leave. The risk he took—hitting me where it showed—indicated that the violence was escalating and would not stop until I died.

A common misunderstanding people have about spousal abuse is that the victim simply does not have the gumption to leave and is thereby "asking for it." People often ask why I stayed so long when I knew I was in danger, including an instance when he threatened me with a weapon.

It happened towards the end of yet another argument. He was calling me foul names and cursing.

I replied, "Mike, I refuse to let anything you say upset me. You are not going to make me unhappy."

He immediately fetched his handgun, loaded it to capacity and stood behind me while I washed dishes.

"I'm going to do it," he said, thumping my head with the barrel. "I'm going to kill you."

I prayed for wisdom.

"Oh, don't do that," I said casually. "It would make a big mess and we'd lose the security deposit."

He repeated his threat, and I ignored him. He eventually gave up to go drinking.

Will God Change Abusers?

After this incident, like all the others, I pretended that my marriage was fine while praying that God would change him. Victims usually love their spouse and hope beyond reason that the abuse will end. In the meantime, victims become very good at hiding their injuries. They "cover" for their abusers, who are good at presenting a wholesome-looking front publicly while they batter their spouses in private. No one suspected that he filled our home with violence.

For so long, I had believed, like many Christian wives, that if I just submitted to my husband as the Bible said, he would also fulfill his role.

Abusing husbands don't lead in humility; they dominate with aggression. Mike even tried using Scripture to excuse his behavior. He claimed that Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" (KJV) gave him not only the right but the duty to strike me. He had to "discipline" me because "Christ disciplined the church," he said.

The Bible says otherwise. "And you husbands must love your wives and never treat them harshly" (Colossians 3:19 NLT).

Why Are Pulpits Silent?

A dearth of preaching on abuse may be another reason that Christians stay with abusive partners. Pastors preach against drunkenness and adultery, but is spousal battering any less a sin? Abuse seems as likely in a given congregation as drunkenness and adultery because it is much easier to hide and still appear to be a "good Christian." No one is automatically exempt.

While I attended college, a group of us students helped out at an inner city church one afternoon. The pastor enthusiastically welcomed us into his home. I assumed he was

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unmarried until he hollered, "Hey, Mary, get out here!"

We laughed nervously at his joke, but something did not seem right. Mary slumped in the doorway with down-cast eyes. Her hair desperately needed styling, her clothing was ill-fitting, and her whole appearance, although clean, seemed to lack a certain sparkle.

The pastor jerked his thumb towards her and said, "Well, there's the wife!" as if he were pointing out some inanimate object, not the precious treasure that she was.

Years later, I learned that indeed something was wrong in their home, but as the pastor's wife, she had nowhere to escape.

Perhaps this is the biggest reason Christians stay in abusive marriages: No Christian resources are available to help them.

Most communities offer battered women shelters; however, many Christian women would not want to expose their "family problems" to unbelievers.

Even fewer resources are available for battered men, who comprise a small percentage of abuse victims. Admitting that their wives hit them is even more shameful for them because the notion that they are a victim attacks their manliness. Many men think that no one will believe them or, worse yet, that the abuse is caused by them and not their wives.

In addition to shelter, money is another resource abused women lack. In many Christian homes, the husband is in control of the finances. In a violent home, the wife

may have absolutely no financial access, making escape nearly impossible. Abused women know that they will have to take their children into whatever unstable circumstance they will find themselves after leaving.

Many abusers do not allow their wives to work so that even if they had the money to escape, they would have no means of supporting themselves and their children.

To prevent discovery, abusers usually try to emotionally and/or physically distance their spouses from their families and keep victims from forming close friendships.

Spousal abuse carries much more emotional weight than assault committed by a stranger. It needs to be taken more seriously than a simple spat between quarreling partners. Domestic violence is a crime and a sin. Only with compassion and understanding can we help the innocent people who bear the consequence of this sin. □

Freelance writer Deborah J. Myers is a domestic abuse survivor. She now lives in Wolcott, New York.

Ten warning signs of an abuser:

1. Controls all aspects of the spouse's life, including spending money, activities and personal habits.
2. Blames other people (especially the spouse) for the abuser's own problems, mistakes and feelings.
3. Displays cruelty to animals and/or vulnerable people such as children, elderly and those who are ill.
4. Views most other people with contempt, especially members of the opposite gender.
5. Talks about or commits violence towards the spouse but later excuses it.
6. Obsessed with weapons and violence.
7. Unexplained, extreme moodiness and jealousy.
8. Withdraws necessities of life from spouse, such as sleep, food, exercise, meaningful activity, adequate clothing, etc., especially while satisfying his/her own needs.
9. Excessive roughhousing, especially during sex.
10. Isolates spouse from potentially supportive friends and family.