

5. Victims Begin to Tell Their Story

An important book published in 1989 shocked Christians and churches in America and in the United Kingdom. It was a disturbing read. Was it true? Could these things happen today in Bible teaching churches and Christian homes? Was this something occurring in my church and in the homes of any of my Christian friends? These were questions raised by readers of the book. I am referring to *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home*.¹ The authors of this book, James and Phyllis Alsdurf, were themselves shocked some eight years earlier when they were confronted with the phenomenon unexpectedly.

'STUNNED'

When Phyllis Alsdurf was editor of the magazine *Family Life Today*, she wrote about the abuse of wives in Christian homes. She had listened to the stories of several Christian women who had the courage to relate their experiences. The author was 'stunned' by the existence and extent of the problem in Christian families but just as shocked to discover who the abusers were, including pastors, respected Christian businessmen and other active church members. They talked about God's love while living a lie. Normally, no one in their

1 Alsdurf, James and Phyllis, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1989).

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churches knew what was happening in these homes and battered wives were too afraid to report it. Would they be believed anyway if they reported it? Just as important was the question who could they trust? Also, would that individual keep the information confidential? Phyllis and her husband felt strongly that they ought to research the problem further and they were encouraged by others to do so and pursued the subject for approximately eight years. Phyllis and James Alsdurf were concerned that underlying attitudes to abuse were hardly changing, even in churches. They felt ‘outrage’ that such behaviour occurred and persisted in some Christian homes.

SIGNIFICANT

The book is significant in at least three ways. For example, it was a pioneer in confronting churches regarding the extent of domestic abuse in some Christian homes. The book also touched on various aspects of the problem, such as why an abused wife chooses to stay in an abusive relationship, the kind of men who abuse their wives, and crucial subjects like marriage and divorce and challenging traditional pastoral responses. The book highlighted the poor response of church leaders and the lack of understanding concerning the problem. Often these women were advised by church leaders to stay with an abusive husband or they would be criticised or even rejected for not doing so, however violent the abuser was. Nevertheless, the book’s impact was limited and domestic abuse continues unabated in churches. In the following chapters we are providing a sample of authentic stories of domestic abuse in Christian families. The victims are eager for you to know how they suffered but not in order to draw attention to themselves. Rather they really want to help other

victims and also encourage church leaders to pastor lovingly and wisely those experiencing abuse. Listen to their stories.

EXAMPLE 1: MARY, BRIAN AND ANN

The family belonged to a small pastorless church in a South Wales valley town and were faithful in attendance. The husband had occasionally preached there while the children in the morning service regularly recited Bible verses they had memorised. One Sunday a regular visiting preacher noticed that the family was absent. The preacher assumed the children were ill so decided to visit them after the morning service. As he rang the doorbell, he heard shouting from inside the house then a seven-year-old girl and nine-year-old boy opened the door. They were relieved to see him and invited him inside. The children were upset while Mary, the mother, appeared tense, her face pale and her hair ruffled; there was embarrassment as she tried to cover up what had happened. Unknown to the preacher – then or since – when he rang the doorbell, the husband was strangling her. Screaming, the children struggled to defend her, but their father persistently kicked them away. Only a few more seconds and their mother would have died. That pastoral visit saved her life. The husband fled via the rear door on hearing the doorbell. Despite the couple's church involvement, no one knew the ugly secrets of their family life. The abuse was physical on that and other occasions, but it had also been psychological and manipulative; the children feared their father and his moods. I knew the family well and although living at a distance from them my wife and I soon became involved pastorally. There was a need to listen to, and care for, this vulnerable family; the incident was the culmination of a long process of fear, mood swings, violence, lies and abuse. The wife had kept secret much of what happened over the years, despite her parents' suspicions. The children were profoundly

affected by the abuse and they will be referred to in chapter nine. Although I met with the husband a few times afterwards, there was no happy ending, for his wife and children needed protection from him. This led eventually to divorce but only after the wife had wrestled with the question. For Christians embroiled in domestic abuse this is a major issue and there is confusion concerning the biblical principles regarding divorce.

EXAMPLE 2: LUCILLE AND ROBERT

This example is taken from James and Phyllis Alsdurf's book *Battered into Submission* because I am reminding you that domestic abuse is not an exclusively British problem. This example further underlines the fact that domestic abuse exists within some Christian families. Sometimes the husband may have a prominent church position like pastor or a church officer and be widely respected. And we should not be shocked to learn that victims of abuse, even Christians, can be so desperate and provoked that they may retaliate in self-defence. While their motive may be self-defence and the desire to stop the abuse at least temporarily they may actually hurt or even kill the abuser. It can happen in a Christian home! Only a few victims resort to force as a means of self-defence yet almost all victims of domestic abuse feel the same sense of desperation and despair. This fact needs to be appreciated. This example follows a similar pattern to others we have given. Within ten months of Lucille marrying Robert, the abuse started by the husband hitting her hard repeatedly and, on several occasions, despite her pregnancy. Lucille quickly identified a pattern in the abuse. It was when the husband perceived that she was disobeying him and flouting his authority that he became violent. While Lucille was entirely submissive to her husband, it was impossible to please him. He 'expected perfection from

us', she explains.² The children were also included in the physical beatings, including their seven-year old son who was suffering from the effects of a stroke. When the son died and Lucille went into the bedroom to cry, the husband beat her again and later too on returning from the funeral. Common to other experiences of domestic abuse, psychological, financial, emotional and spiritual abuse accompanied the physical violence. His behaviour was 'coercive' and 'controlling' by means of threats, humiliating words and behaviour towards her with the purpose of isolating her and regulating her daily schedule. Her husband lived a double life. He was a pastor but also director of a Christian school. Then his inappropriate relationship with a young teenage girl leaked out and over those days he was particularly cruel in beating Lucille and their children. He announced he intended to kill her after he had rested and knowing that he always carried out his threats, Lucille froze with fear, but too afraid to tell anyone, she took her husband's gun and shot him. Eventually she was acquitted of murder on the ground of her husband's abusive behaviour towards her and the children. The inevitable question arises again. Why did Lucille and the children fail to report the situation to the police and social agencies? The answer is complex. Certainly, fear was a major factor deterring them from reporting the abuse. The fear factor was reinforced by threats of punishment if they exposed the abuser. 'I was scared of leaving', Lucille explained, 'because he had threatened that if I ever left he would come and find me and the boys, and all that would be left would be pieces.' She knew he meant it so she was protecting her children as well as herself. There was also the way in which she and the children had been made completely dependent on husband Robert. There was a distortion of biblical teaching on the abuser's part. The words

2 Alsdurf, pp. 14-16.

of Scripture the husband highlighted but misinterpreted were Ephesians 5, verses 22-24: *'wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord ... so let the wives be [subject] to their own husbands in everything'*. We will consider this question further in chapter twelve. Strangely, despite all the abuse suffered in the home, Lucille and the children still loved the man who abused them. Some may find this difficult to understand but the complex mixture of fear, desperation and love often co-exist in abusive relationships so this becomes another factor making them reluctant to expose their husband/father abuser.

EXAMPLE 3: GRAHAM AND EDITH

Despite many similarities between cases of domestic abuse, there are also differences – sometimes major differences. This fourth example contrasts with those I have already given for there was no psychological abuse or coercive behaviour; no threats were made either. The major problem was alcohol. Several times a week Graham returned home drunk, either from work or after a night out. On these occasions he could be violent towards his wife. The bruises on her were often visible but she refused to report her husband or share details of the abuse with others. The reason for this refusal was not fear but a deep love and concern for her husband. When he was not drinking, he was a caring, supportive father/husband and a delight to be with. Graham was not a Christian though his wife, Edith, had come to faith in rather unexpected circumstances and with Graham's hearty approval! Spending time pastorally with the man was important. I liked him. He had high principles and loved his wife deeply and their children. Slowly he began to share his feelings. For Graham, alcohol was an escape mechanism in an attempt to cope with a deep-seated guilt complex. For years he had hated himself for what he had done, including his treatment of the wife he loved.

It was difficult living with himself but alcohol was addictive, a proven, attractive option which blotted out his guilt feelings for a few hours yet he hated what he did to his wife. He shared his problem with me. In World War II he was a young sailor serving in a Royal Navy submarine. One incident stood out for him. He was responsible for releasing a torpedo after his officer issued the command. On this particular day, the torpedo he released sank a German ship and he saw many people from the ship struggling and drowning in the sea. The images of those people drowning as the ship sank, stayed with him day and night. The flashbacks were vivid. His conscience accused him of killing the people. It was unbearable. Was there forgiveness? He doubted it and for a long period, he despaired of obtaining divine forgiveness. When he eventually conceded that God in Christ could forgive him, he felt encouraged. There was a problem, however. He was unable to forgive himself. Did he receive grace and forgiveness before dying? I do not know. But all abusers, including Graham, need to hear of God's rich and free grace super-abounding to undeserving sinners. Pastoral support in this situation involved making oneself available when he was ready to talk, encouraging and supporting his wife in different ways. This example of domestic abuse was alcohol related, a common cause of domestic abuse in many households and also in many countries. Not all abusers love their wives like Graham did and they may not have partners who remain in the situation and suffer ongoing violence. For Edith there were many days when she felt distressed and fearful of what may happen and she readily confessed that under such stress her reactions were sometimes far from exemplary.