

## Promoting healthy relationships in our churches

# A message for the International Day to End Violence Against Women 2022

All Christians like to think that we stand for strong healthy families. But sadly, that is not always true.

Marriage breakdown, emotional abuse and physical violence happen in relationships across churches and cultures.

One important thing we can do today is remind ourselves of how God views healthy, happy marriages and families.

And we can also acknowledge the extent and pain of abuse.

We can commit to responding compassionately to those who suffer, and to aid in their healing through practical and spiritual support.

The Bible does not shy away from stories of exploitation and abuse. And we should not ignore it either.

David abused his power as king, to dishonour Bathsheba.

Judah should have protected his daughter-in-law Tamar, but neglected her rights, and tried to cover up his sexual exploitation of her.

Joseph was trafficked into slavery by his older brothers.

Somehow we have glossed over the violence and abuse of power in these stories.

When cases of abuse of women or children sadly happen in the Church, too often there has been denial or cover up. As people of God, we should be better.

The New Testament sets out a new way for brothers and sisters in Christ to operate.

We know that Jesus honoured women from all backgrounds, and encouraged all of them to learn and flourish.

We know and love the stories of the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus praising Mary as she washed his feet, Jesus healing the crippled woman and woman with bleeding, the women who were patrons of Jesus.

Then in the letters of Paul, we come to the practical family issues facing the early churches.

He starts with the idea that we are equal in Christ – social class, nationality, sex do not matter.

Paul says in Galatians 3 v28. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus... heirs according to the promise.”



## PREACHING NOTES

We are transformed by God's power into brothers and sisters or 'adelphoi', a term Paul uses around 130 times in his letters. As believers together we are family.

Paul actually has some advice on marriage and family that goes completely against social norms. Women in Paul's day were generally viewed as inferior to men, and husbands made all decisions for their wives and children and would expect to have complete control.

Paul transforms such thinking. We are all equal in Christ. Power has no place in our family relationships.

He strongly advises men that their bodies should not be given over to sinful desire.

Instead, he writes in Romans 6 v13 that everyone should "offer all the parts of your body to God to be used as weapons to do right."

Paul tells all men to abstain from sexual immorality, and to love ONLY their wife.

1 Corinthians 7 v3-4 say, "The husband should meet his wife's sexual needs and the wife should do the same for her husband."

Sex should always be loving and mutually agreed. Pornography, forceful sex and violent control have NO place.

Instead, we read in several places that husbands and wives should practise mutual submission.

The word "submission" (*hypotasso*) is an interesting one: it is a military term that means to attach troops to the right unit ready for battle. Troops who are "lined up" in the right unit are said to be "in submission."

Similarly, a husband and wife who mutually submit to each other are properly committed and lined up, ready to function as a family unit.

Ephesians 5 v21 says clearly, "submit to each other out of respect for Christ."

On that foundation of mutual support and respect, Paul tells husbands to love and nurture their wives, and he urges wives to be submissive – that is cooperative and loyal, as well as respectful, to their husbands.

Paul does not tell women to "obey" or "serve".

Paul does not say that women are inferior to men or less capable.

What advice does Paul give to husbands? To love his wife.

Verse 33 of Ephesians 5 says, "one by one, each one of you MUST love his wife as himself." The sort of love that Christ had for the Church, giving up his life, serving in humility.



Power is redefined as love and self-giving, not as being the boss.

Some Christian men complain that their wives are not obedient, and some pastors tell wives who are living with abuse, that they must submit more. Women will tell other women in troubled and violent relationships, that they should pray more, submit more.

But this is not Biblical. It is not Christian.

How we twist the word of God if we say that women should put up with abuse in wifely 'submission'!

And Paul tells men that any power they may have in their household is to be like Christ's – laying down their life to love their family.

In the creation story, woman is born of man's flesh, man's body. But that doesn't mean men are better or superior. Indeed, Paul reminds us in that all men are born of women!

There is no mandate for control or abuse in marriage relationships!

The fruit of the Holy Spirit offer a direct contrast to abuse: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5 v22).

How should we respond then, if we think a women in our church is the victim of abuse?

Our first response is a simple one: we cannot turn away from women and girls who are suffering from abuse.

In the book of Genesis, Chapter 39, Judah ignored the plight of his daughter-in-law Tamar, who was left a widow through no fault of her own and who had to rely on Judah to help her. Judah starts off being lazy in not doing the right thing, then he blames Tamar and pushes her aside. Finally he takes another step of trying to cover up wrongdoing.

When he finally realised how he had abused her through belittling her and sexually exploiting her, he admitted "she is more righteous than I am".

This pattern is familiar today in churches – ignoring, or even blaming women for the abuse they suffer, and even protecting the male leader from criticism.

Judah came to understand what he needed to do. And it's positive that the next time he faced a dilemma over power and abuse he chose to act with integrity to protect his little brother, Benjamin (the story is in Genesis 44).

And we have that opportunity today, to stand up and line up, to defend healthy relationships and protect victims of abuse.



## PREACHING NOTES

Here's some practical steps:

Let's be aware of abuse – it might be physical but it can also be emotional, financial or spiritual power over a woman. Be aware of the signs.

Let us commit to listening to women who say they are being abused and take them seriously. Let us pray with them and offer practical help.

We can teach each other what healthy families look like and we can teach young people what loving equal relationships are like.

We don't have to be experts but we can learn the first steps to protect women and girls, and how to respond to men who are perpetrators, who may be part of our church.

And if there is a case of abuse, seek professional guidance so that the leadership can respond wisely. If you don't have anyone in your church who is responsible for the safety of children and all vulnerable people, and who knows your legal responsibilities, it might be wise to appoint someone.

Let's pray together now using the prayer written by women and men in a Christian network to end abuse:

