

THE SUBMISSION OF WOMEN AND DOMESTIC ABUSE:

Some reflections and sources of help

There has been great concern expressed locally about a sermon preached recently at St Nicholas Church, and subsequently reported in the local and national press, advocating the submission of women to their husbands in marriage, based on a passage from 1 Peter 3. While I would not normally comment on the theological opinions of another church, this sermon and the comments supporting it raised such concerns for me, as I know it has done for others, that I felt I needed to let members of the congregation at Seal know my own thoughts on this matter and offer signposts to sources of support for those who might have been personally affected by it. You can hear the sermon for yourself by clicking on the link on the website of the church concerned (<http://www.stnicholas-sevenoaks.org>) I listened to it, in the hopes that I might conclude that the Chronicle had exaggerated or misreported its message. Unfortunately, I felt even more uneasy having heard it than I had before.

Submission and the Bible

The views of the relationship between women and men in marriage expressed in the sermon aren't ones I share, nor, I would think, are they shared by the majority of Christians in the UK, but they are found in the Bible, although they do not represent the whole or only teaching of Biblical writers on the subject.

It is important, however, that we read the words of the Bible in their context. They were written in and for cultures where marriage was thought of in completely different terms to the relationship we now call by the same name - emotionally, practically and legally. Most Biblical writers could not have even conceived of a society in which women and men were given equal power to determine the course of their own lives, or equal responsibility for doing so. For example, the consent of both parties is essential to modern marriage - it isn't legal without it. In Jesus' time the views of the parties concerned were irrelevant and many women were powerless in the matter of who

they married, whether they stayed married and how they were treated within that marriage.

Heads of households in many ancient societies had the literal power of life and death over the women and children in their households, and this was considered perfectly normal and acceptable, just as slavery was. Wives had little option but to submit to their husbands. New Testament guidance given to help them live with this situation should not be taken as meaning that God desires this to be an eternal pattern for relationships between men and women, any more than New Testament guidance to slaves to “obey their masters” in the passage which precedes the one in question (1 Peter 2.18) should be taken as expressing God’s will for the existence of slavery.

We should be extremely cautious, therefore, about superimposing words written about marriage in the context of the first century onto our own twenty-first century relationships. We wouldn't use medical advice we found in the Bible in preference to the insights of modern medical science (I hope!). While it is obviously desirable that marriage partners should work together, listen to one another and respect one another to create a healthy relationship and a good environment for their children to grow up in, this cannot safely be translated into a blanket injunction for one party to submit to the other under every circumstance. Most people would not consider this to be healthy even in marriages that are basically sound, but in some cases it can be positively dangerous advice and this is what has prompted my greatest concern in response to the recent controversy.

Submission and Domestic Abuse

The advice to women to submit to their husbands, even if this felt frightening to them, which was explicitly stated in the sermon, poses real risks to any woman who is experiencing domestic abuse, and real dangers too for the children of such a family. Domestic abuse is alarmingly common. One in four women will experience it in their lifetimes. An average of two women a week are killed by their husbands or partners and a great many others endure pain, fear and humiliation on a daily basis. (*Figures from “Responding to Domestic Abuse” – see below*) It is almost certain, therefore, that there are

women in this situation at St Nicholas, just as there are in any church, workplace or neighbourhood, who may have heard this sermon or picked up the coverage of it later, and taken its message to heart in a way that could put them and their children at serious risk. (Men can also suffer abuse, of course, but this teaching on submission wasn't aimed at them, so I am limiting my comments to abuse suffered by women here.)

Women can find it hard to leave abusive relationships for many reasons, including financial and housing issues, but it can be twice as difficult if they are trying to live up to social or religious expectations that a "good wife" is one who is prepared to suffer, and continue to suffer, at the hands of her husband in the hopes that he will be changed by her love and commitment. She may feel that leaving her husband means she will have broken her marriage vows, and failed herself and God. Sadly, remaining in an abusive relationship very rarely causes the abuser's behaviour to change, and the result can be that women and children are even more damaged physically, emotionally and spiritually. In a recent set of guidelines to clergy on this issue (see below), theology which advocates the submission of wives to husbands was identified as something which can make burdens worse for women, and, in some cases it can even be a form of abuse in itself, since abusers will sometimes use it to justify their behaviour.

For this reason I felt it was important both to express my position as clearly as possible and to point anyone affected by this issue in the direction of sources of help and support. It seems to me that the Chronicle's report may raise concerns for many people, both within and outside the Church. If anyone wants to talk about this more, please feel free to get in contact.

You will find contact details and websites overleaf for organisations working with those who are being or have been abused, as well as one which works with men who are behaving abusively themselves and want help.

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LOCAL SOURCES OF HELP FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC ABUSE

(members of our congregation have links with these organisations – please ask me if you would like more information from them.)

- **THE FREEDOM PROGRAMME** is run in conjunction with West Kent Extra. This is a 12 week rolling programme offering support and help to women experiencing domestic abuse. The programme runs in Swanley, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone, and can be accessed by a phone call to 01732 749451. West Kent Housing also offers housing advice to women needing to leave home or looking for possession orders.
- **FAMILY MATTERS** (www.familymattersuk.org) Counselling service for children and adult survivors of sexual abuse and rape.
- **SEVENOAKS CHRISTIAN COUNSELLING SERVICE** offers counselling to anyone, Christian or not. It asks clients to pay only what they can afford. (www.sevenoakscounselling.org.uk)

NATIONAL SOURCES OF HELP

- **REFUGE** refuge.org.uk Freephone 24 hour helpline 0808 2000 247 (run in conjunction with Women's Aid, see below)
- **WOMEN'S AID** www.womensaid.org.uk (phone as above)
- **RESPECT** an organisation helping men who perpetrate abuse to confront and change their behaviour www.respect.uk.net 0845 122 8609 Monday - Friday 10am-1pm and 2pm-5pm
- **RESPONDING TO DOMESTIC ABUSE**
The C of E's official guidance on Domestic Abuse.
ISBN 139780715141083 (Church House publishing)
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/domesticabuse.pdf>
There is a copy of this document on the red table at the back of church.