

## The Church and the Abuse of Women

by James and Phyllis Alsdurf

*"We received a phone call last night from our 19-year-old daughter, married to a 22-year-old Christian man. She called to tell us that he has been abusing her physically since almost the first week of their marriage. Because the Lord had opened our minds to some of the misconceptions and false teachings which are prevalent in our evangelical churches on the subject, we had the presence of mind to say, 'Pack your bags, we're coming to get you.' I guess I am so concerned and even frightened for the church, because a very short, few weeks or months ago, my own response to this situation might well have been the widely accepted view of the wife submitting under any and all circumstances. I shudder to think of the results for our daughter if this had actually been the case*

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*"In my position (as a social worker) I deal with battered wives and children as well as abusive husbands and fathers. Many of my clients are Christians. One of my cases involved a soft-spoken woman, wife and mother of two small children who has very recently separated from a man who regularly and viciously beat her and her child. She remained in the relationship largely because her pastor and many people in the congregation strongly advised her to forgive him, remain with him, and pray. Unfortunately, this woman's family, also Christians, strongly beseeched her to stay and preserve her marriage. For her, leaving her husband meant going against the advice of the only family and friends she knew."*

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As one might expect, much of the research in the area of wife abuse has been done by feminists, some of whom themselves have been victims of wife beating. They speak with an understandable bitterness and anger toward a society so insensitive that it only publicly acknowledged the plight of battered women decades after having established laws to prohibit the abuse of animals. And often they have given up on the hope that change will come through social institutions such as the church. Rather than seeing the church as part of the solution to the abuse of women, they almost unanimously perceive the church as a big part of the problem. For some, like author Terry Davidson, the animosity toward the church is rooted in memories of deep personal pain. In her book *Conjugal Crime*, Davidson tells how her father, a pastor and pillar in the local community, beat her mother for almost 20 years.

A hypocritical environment prevailed in our household. In his job, my father played the role of the man of God, and we dared not do anything to spoil that image. Yet he also believed that he was right to torture my mother, and that if I were a good daughter, I would agree with him. I never saw any evidence of compassion from him, or sorrow, or guilt, or a sense of responsibility for the horror he was inflicting on his family . . . We were three hapless, cautious hostages.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking with the painful authority of her own experience, as well as summarizing the results of her research, Davidson charges that "with few exceptions, the silence from the churches on this issue (wife abuse) is profound."<sup>2</sup>

In their examination of the legal, literary and religious writings on the subject of wife abuse, Scottish researchers Rebecca and Russell Dobash conclude that throughout history the status of women has been exclusively dependent upon their relationships with men. A woman's singular importance, they found, has on the whole been gained from her role in the family. "The only roles truly allowed women in the real or imaginary world have been those of wife, mother, daughter, lover, whore, and saint," the Dobashes charge, noting that the status of women has been one-dimensional and subordinate in nature.<sup>3</sup> And this subordination, they contend, is strongly evident in church history.

Quoting St. Augustine on marriage ("Woman ought to serve her husband as unto God, affirming that in no thing hath woman equal power with man . . . affirming that woman ought to be repressed"), the Dobashes say the early Christians promoted a patriarchy which was founded upon beliefs in marital hierarchy and inequality. From the adoption of a "moral order" that established the husband as authority, came a state structure which in turn led to a radical inequality between the sexes and inevitably made women victims.

The Dobashes go on to isolate the patriarchal structure of the society upon which the Judeo-Christian heritage was built as perpetuating a "coercive control" of women. It was a society which allowed -even encouraged - husbands to dominate their wives. The Dobashes interpret both the Christian account of creation and the

Abuse (continued from page 9)

biblical statements on women (particularly those made by Paul) as mandating women to a "separate, singular, subordinate position" with a sole purpose of serving both husband and family to the denial of herself.<sup>4</sup>

This view that wife abuse has been accepted and condoned by a patriarchal religious framework is shared by many other researchers. Miriam Hirsch, writing in her book *Women and Violence*, states that out of the Judeo-Christian tradition a patriarchal system developed that made the husband superior and the wife subordinate. This arrangement, she believes, established a framework of inequality between the sexes and encouraged a "tacit acceptance of wife abuse."<sup>5</sup> Katherine Saltzman agrees, charging that the patriarchal structure has set women up to be victimized by perpetuating the belief that women are innately evil and inferior to men.

The dominant Judeo-Christian themes regarding woman are that she was created by God for man's pleasure and entertainment, that woman's sexuality is a source of temptation and evil, and that woman's role is naturally limited and inferior because of her biology. . . . Judeo-Christian doctrine has convinced women as well as men that in the natural order of things women are inferior beings whose major function is the propagation of the species.<sup>6</sup>

Interpreting God's curse on Eve as "the earliest example in our culture of the sexually restrictive ethic, the placing of the 'blame' for sex on women, and the resulting negative definition of women," sociologists Suzanne Steinmetz and Murray Straus conclude that women have become "culturally legitimate objects of antagonism," thanks at least in part to Christian doctrines.<sup>7</sup>

Thus many researchers in the area of wife abuse are extremely critical of the Christian church for its emphasis upon the subjection of women to men. They document the fact that this so-called "biblical principle" often has been applied in a manner which has been harmful, even destructive, to battered wives since it actually promotes helpless behavior in women.

However we must note that suppression of women is of pre-Christian origin. For

example, Aristotle defined the female as "a mutilated male" devoid of a soul.

For just as the young of mutilated parents are sometimes born mutilated and sometimes not, so also the young born of a female are sometimes female and sometimes male instead. For the female is, as it were, a mutilated male, . . . for there is only one thing they have not in them, the principle of soul.<sup>8</sup>

In the first century A.D., the Jewish community severely restricted the activities of women, including restricting their religious education.

Although men were exhorted to pursue actively their religious training, women were not similarly required . . . Women educated in Jewish teachings were unusual, since women were not obligated to study law, nor did they receive any merit in studying the law, nor was anyone obligated to teach them!<sup>9</sup>

Women's sphere was seen to be only in the home (even to the extent that a rabbi considered the term "his home" to be synonymous with "his wife"). It was thought that any wider role for women would lead to promiscuity and immoral practices.<sup>10</sup>

#### New Equality in Christ

In contrast to the view of many pagans that women were "sub-human," and in contrast to the narrow role-related view of women of the Jewish world, Jesus Christ clearly elevated women to a position of equality with men that astounded His audiences.

Jesus defied Jewish custom and spoke to women directly and in public (Lk. 7:12-13; 8:45; 13:10-16). Women were present in the crowds that followed Jesus, and it was to a woman that He first revealed His Messiahship (John 4:26). He disclosed the deep truths about His role in human history and His divine mission to that Samaritan woman in John 4, and it was to women that He first appeared after being resurrected (Jn. 20:11-18; Mt. 28:8-10).

Christ's rebuke of Martha in Luke 10:38-42 while Mary was "seated at the Lord's feet," affirms the discussion of theology as a higher priority for women than a preoccupation with domestic chores, the contemplative life over a life of works. A woman's first obligation was

not to the home! As theologian Aida Spencer states, "to sit at someone's feet for a first-century Jew . . . would be an act to symbolize higher level formal education."<sup>11</sup> Such actions denoted His open acceptance of women and the equal status which He conferred upon them.

It is also apparent that women were part of the new community of believers upon whom the Holy Spirit fell in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). And as the young church grew, women held significant positions of leadership - Phoebe as a deacon (Rom. 16:1-2), Priscilla as a co-laborer with her husband in the tasks of evangelism and training new converts, Phillip's four daughters as prophets (Acts 21:9), Euodia and Syntyche as pioneer evangelists (Phil. 4:2,3) and Junia as an apostle (Rom. 16:7). Women were co-workers with the Apostle Paul and many appear to have been leaders of house churches: Lydia: (Acts 15:40), Chloe (I Cor. 16:19), and Nympha (Col. 4:15).

The characterization of Paul as a misogynist or enemy of women is clearly refuted by the fact that Paul preached his first message to women when in Macedonia (Acts 16:11-15), considered Priscilla a good friend whose teaching he affirmed, and gave his "enthusiastic endorsement"<sup>12</sup> to many women in positions of leadership.

The difficult portions in Paul's letters (specifically Ephesians 5:21-24; I Cor. 11:2-16; I Cor. 14:33-36; I Tim. 2:8-15) must be examined in light of several factors: the sexist bias in modern and ancient translations of the Bible which has been well attested by a number of respected biblical scholars,<sup>13</sup> the cultural context of the first century which may give us important clues to unraveling any ambiguities of meaning, and, finally, "the cleaner passages of Scripture, which speak about what women actually did."<sup>14</sup> With regard to the latter, for instance, Paul's command for women to be silent in the church in I Corinthians 14:34 must be understood in the context of the instructions given earlier in the same epistle (ch. 11) on how women were to pray and prophesy.

Another case in point relates to recent biblical scholarship into the context and meaning of I Timothy 2:8-15, which has resulted in some exciting and liberating alternatives to the traditional interpretations of a passage so often used to "put women in their place."

Aida Spencer rightly notes that the emphasis of verse 11 is on the fact that women *must* learn. Against the grain of a culture which made no provisions for the education of women and saw homemaking and external adornment as women's highest priorities, Paul is commanding

that women be trained in the Christian faith. Not only are they to be educated, says Spencer, but "he also commands them 'in silence' to learn . . . In the United States, 'to learn in silence' has derogatory connotations," but to a devout Pharisaic Jew like Paul, silence was synonymous with "rest" and "a positive attribute for rabbinic students."<sup>15</sup>

Along the same vein, New Testament scholar David M. Scholer observes that *hesuchia* in verses 11 and 12 of this passage is usually translated "silence/silent" when in fact it means "quietness," and that *authentain* in verse 12 should be rendered "to usurp authority" rather than "to have authority." "The context of the Pastoral Epistles suggests that the heresy Paul is opposing here was centered on women in particular," says Scholer. "I conclude that the admonition of I Timothy 2:11-12 is directed against the usurpation by women involved in false teaching."<sup>16</sup>

Research by Richard and Catherine Kroeger into first-century practices has also shed new light on this problematic passage. After examining a brand of gnosticism popular in the first century, which maintained a special revelation given to women, they conclude:

It is tragic to use I Timothy 2:12. to disbar women from orthodox ministries to which they feel called of God. There is a greater likelihood that the structure refers to the heretical doctrines and practice of women and to their assertion that they have been given a special revelation which only they can impart to men.<sup>17</sup>

Because of *our* cultural blinders, we have failed to apprehend the overwhelmingly positive nature of Paul's exhortations to women in passages such as I Timothy 2:8-15. "Paul was treating the women at Ephesus as wise students, persons of superior birth," claims Spencer. "We have missed those connotations because we have an un-biblical view of silence and we expect a negative view of women. We cannot perceive the Bible's radical demands to train men *and* women into the full knowledge of God's truth."<sup>18</sup>

#### The Reaction Against Equality

While women were among the first Christians and were active in the life of the early Church, their new-found standing as equals before Christ posed a considerable threat to the old patriarchal system. As Evelyn Sullerot notes, Abuse (continued from page 11)

"The idea of equality before God which replaced that of inferiority and impurity in the patriarchal system seemed likely to destroy the whole ancient edifice and to herald a revolution for women."<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, she continues, instead of giving way, the old system soon recovered any ground it had lost during the first century.

Thus, by the end of the second century, Tertullian would evidence a demeaning attitude toward women in *De Cultu Feminarum*:

Do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of the tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack: you destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your dessert - that is death - even the Son of God had to die.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, Augustine (354-430 A.D.), championed the view of woman as an incomplete being, needing to be governed by her husband in order to prevent evil and chaos in the world. Despite his important place in the roster of early church fathers, Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin, which he interpreted as sexual lust, "betrays a Hellenistic tendency to think of the physical body as sinful *per se*, an idea alien to scriptural teaching" and a carry-over from Augustine's pre-Christian philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Augustine viewed the *body* as sinful, but it was the female body which was most to be despised. Indeed in *The City of God* he assigns Eve complete "responsibility for the fall."<sup>22</sup>

The outcome of this Augustinian view of lust (or physical passion) was that woman - as the object of lust - was viewed as base and carnal, a temptress and defiler of the pure. "The woman herself alone is not the image of God," Augustine reasoned, "whereas the man alone is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined with him."<sup>23</sup> Because of her evil nature, Augustine taught, woman was to be placed under man's governance, a God-ordained position that fit into the intricate schema called the Divine Order of Things. It was a widely-accepted ordering in which everything had its place - even, as Augustine pointed out, the prostitute who "fills a most vile function under the laws of order."<sup>24</sup>

Centuries later Thomas Aquinas echoes Augustine's view of women, identifying them as "defective and misbegotten," and proposed that

the good of order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discernment or reason predominates.<sup>25</sup>

#### The husband as 'benevolent dictator'

In his homilies on Ephesians, St. John Chrysostom (345-407 A.D.) makes it clear that the husband, as the head, is to "lay down all thy laws," and to carefully "form and mould" his wife. She is a "second authority; let not her then demand equality, for she is under the head."<sup>26</sup> Although he repeatedly admonishes husbands to love their wives and not to mistreat them, the kindness Chrysostom exacts is that of a benevolent dictator, a "supreme authority," toward a lesser being.

Chrysostom insists that there can never be peace where there is equal authority, "neither where a house is a democracy, nor where all are rulers; but the ruling power must of necessity be one."<sup>27</sup> That "necessity" is rooted in the world view which Chrysostom embraced, that of the great chain of being, according to which a married man is "but little inferior to monks; the married but little below the unmarried."<sup>28</sup> The husband, he says, has his authority "of necessity, proceeding from nature."<sup>29</sup>

As Elizabeth A. Clark notes in *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends*, "Chrysostom believed that in all aspects of human life there must be a ruler and a ruled lest anarchy prevail."<sup>30</sup> The first government, he claimed, was that of Adam over Eve and was established by God. Chrysostom viewed the hierarchical chain of command, says Clark, as a structure

which was not to be broken; to do so would violate both the laws of God and the order of nature which that deity had established . . . Christ . . . had been commissioned to found a different *politeia* which though rigorous in its demands promised new freedoms for certain people, such as women willing to embrace sexual abstinence in the name of Christ. But for females not strong enough to

espouse that heroic life, it was patriarchy as usual.<sup>31</sup>

The barriers between the races, so forcefully dismantled by Christ, were being re-erected. "In effect, the priesthood of all believers became the priesthood of males again."<sup>32</sup>

### Woman as Property

When such a demeaning view of women prevailed, it required only a short step to their abuse. While many historical church documents omit discussion of a husband's chastisement of his wife, there is evidence that the subjugation of women - and in several cases their physical abuse - was eagerly endorsed by members of the church. Gratian, a legal writer from Bologna, stated a policy in the *Decretum* (C. 1140) that woman was not made in God's image. His argument was based upon the reasoning that "the image of God is in man and it is one. Women were drawn from the man, who has God's jurisdiction as if he were God's vicar, because he has the image of the one God."<sup>33</sup>

The logical outcome of such a view was that women were regarded as mere property. The *Rules of Marriage*, compiled in the mid-fifteenth century by Friar Cherubino, gave this advice to a husband in dealing with his wife:

Scold her sharply, bully and terrify her. And if this still doesn't work. . . take up a stick and beat her soundly, for it is better to punish the body and correct the soul than to damage the soul and spare the body. . . Then readily beat her, not in rage but out of charity and concern for her soul, so that the beating will redound to your merit and her good.<sup>34</sup>

In the high and later Middle Ages, with the church's promotion of the celibate life, anti-marriage sentiments gained religious sanction, and marriage was viewed as "a debased state in comparison with the life of the cloister."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, canon law was pervaded with sexual prejudices of church fathers like Augustine, "who viewed the taking of pleasure in any creaturely thing [sexual intercourse] as idolatry, the mark of humankind's fallen nature."<sup>36</sup> Such a distorted view of human sexuality became one of the central issues against which the Reformers protested. However, while theologians are now almost universally agreed that sexuality is God's good gift to humanity,

addressing the problem of subordination of women remains "unfinished business."

### Scripture Misapplied?

Even such a cursory look at church history provides ample evidence that the church has failed to support the worth and dignity of women. Rather than proclaiming women's equal standing with men as heirs of Christ, it has perpetuated their victimization through misapplication of Scripture. All too often the church has taught a low view of women, when in fact the "warp and woof of Scripture are imbued with a high sense of the dignity of women."<sup>37</sup> Catherine and Richard Kroeger help us see the serious consequences of misapplying Bible truth:

The pages of Scripture reveal women being used by God in practically every imaginable way - prophets, judge, general negotiator of a siege, leader of the Exodus, to mention just a few! . . . The truth is that God chooses whom. He will, quite apart from considerations of sex. If He is able to raise up from the stones children unto Abraham, He can raise up the right person at the right time. To say that a woman is God's second choice in a given situation is to deny His leading and power.<sup>38</sup>

Yet today the attempt to associate patriarchy with "traditional family values" and to present male leadership and female subordination as the biblical paradigm for all male-female relationships has seemingly reached new heights within the conservative wing of the church. Patriarchy, in one form or another, is evident in the writings of many contemporary Christian authors. Although it can be couched in terms of "affirming women's unique role" or "stabilizing family structure," the end result is to perpetuate a social order that all too easily enslaves women.

Yes, the culture of Bible times was indeed patriarchal; but, as author Gretchen Gaebelen Hull writes, "simply because the Bible tells of an idea or an action does not mean that God approves of it."<sup>39</sup> She makes a parallel with racism and asks, "Is patriarchy a true record of a false idea, a true record of false actions?" Hull argues that just as most Christians today would refuse to defend slavery on the ground that this abuse was practiced in Bible times, so to defend patriarchy solely because it is recorded in Scripture places one on shaky ground indeed.

Theologian W. Ward Gasque notes that 150 years ago to believe that black Africans were

made in God's image just as were white Europeans was "the minority view" - but now perceived to be the correct view. "Is it possible," he asks, "that 150 years from now it will be equally obvious that the denial of full equality of women in the body of Christ was just as wrong (as racism)? I hope so, with all my heart."<sup>40</sup>

Historian Gerda Lerner puts human relationships in the largest possible perspective when she writes: "Men are not the center of the world, but men and women are. This insight will transform consciousness as decisively as did Copernicus' discovery that the earth is not the center of the universe."<sup>41</sup>

For Christians, the liberating message of the Gospel is that a redeemed social order is possible because in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal. 3:28) The good news the church is called to proclaim is that Christ's transforming power ends injustice and oppression, and that within the Body of Christ discrimination and abuse based on sex, race, or class is no longer permitted.

1. Terry Davidson, *Conjugal Crime*, New York, 1978, p. 132.
2. *Ibid.*, 270.
3. R. Emerson Dobash & Russell P. Dobash, *Violence Against Wives*, New York: 1979, p. 32
4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
5. Miriam Hirsch, *Women and Violence*; New York, 1981, p. 170.
6. Katherine Saltzman, "Women and Victimization: The Aftermath," in Jane Chapman and Margaret Gates (eds.), *The Victimization of Women*, Beverly Hills: 1978, p. 270.
7. Suzanne K. Steinmetz and Murray A. Straus, "General Introduction: Social Myth and Social System in the Study of Intra-family Violence," in Suzanne K. Steinmetz & Murray A. Straus (eds.), *Violence in the Family*, New York: 1974, p. 12.
8. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Translated by Martin Ostwald, Indianapolis: 1962, p. 214-72.
9. Aida Besancon Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, Nashville: 1985, p. 47.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 50,52.
11. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, p. 50, 52.
12. Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve*, New Jersey: 1987, p. 118.
13. See Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*; "Does Male Dominance Tarnish our Translations?" by Berkeley and Alvera Mickelson, *Christianity Today*, Oct. 5, 1979.

14. Ward Gasque, "The Role of Women in the Church, in Society, and in the Home," *Priscilla Papers*, Spring, 1988. p. 6
15. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, pp. 74-75.
16. David M. Scholer, "Exegesis: I Timothy 2:8-15," *Daughters of Sarah*, May 1975, pp. 7-8.
17. Richard and Catherine Kroeger, "May Women Teach?" *Reformed Journal*, Oct., 1980, p. 18.
18. Spencer, p. 80.
19. Evelyne Sullerot, *Woman, Society and Change*, New York: 1971, p. 20.
20. As quoted in Dorothy Pape, *In Search of God's Ideal Woman*: Downers Grove:1976, p. 195.
21. William M. Greathouse, *From the Apostles to Wesley*, Kansas City:, 1979, pp. 64,69.
22. As cited by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Battered Women and the Bible: From Subjection to Liberation," *Christianity and Crisis*, vol. 41, no. 17, Nov. 2, 1981.
23. As cited by Patricia Gundry, *Heirs Together*, Grand Rapids: 1980, p. 49.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
25. Thistlethwaite, p. 309.
26. Philip Schaff, ed. *The Commentary and Homilies of St. John Chrysostom XIII*, Grand Rapids, p. 146.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 304.
30. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, New York: 1979, p. 1-2.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.
32. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, p. 63.
33. Julia O'Faolain & Laura Martines, eds. *Not In God's Image*, New York: 1973, p. 130.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
35. Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*, Cambridge, MA: 1983, p. 9.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
37. Ronald & Bervely Allen, *Liberated Traditionalism*, Portland: 1985, p. 163.
38. Catherine & Richard Kroeger, "Why Were There No Women Apostles?" *Equity* 19.10.
39. Hull, *Equal to Serve*, p. 84.
40. Gasque, "Role of Women", p. 10.
41. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford: 1986, p. 207.