



How Much Should a Woman Take?

By David and Carolyn Roper

How much physical and emotional abuse does a Christian woman have to take from her husband? Must she accept beatings in the name of Christian submission? Should she take verbal abuse without rejoinder? Is that what Peter means when he writes that women are to be submissive to their husbands as Christ was to those who reviled and battered Him? (I Peter 2:11-3:6)

We don't think so, and we don't think that's what the biblical writers mean by submission. In fact, we believe that if a woman does not resist her husband's attempts to humiliate her, she is participating in his sins.

John Calvin once wrote to Antoinette Fumee, a woman being harassed by a cruel husband, that she should endure persecution bravely. She responded, "A number of people think your assertions are thoroughly wretched. They accuse you of being merciless and very severe to those who are afflicted; and they say that it is very easy for you to preach and threaten over there, but that if you were her you would perhaps feel differently."

Women like Antoinette do feel differently, particularly if they've been told by their leaders that women must submit meekly to injustice and suffer silently. The real issue, however, is not how one feels but what Scripture says. Does the Bible present a way to suffer that is more successful than merely taking it? We believe it does.

Since I Peter 3:1-6 is the passage most often quoted in defense of passivity, we should try to understand what Peter is saying to us there. The apostle affirms the principle of a husband's headship by instructing women to submit even to their unbelieving husbands. The purpose of such submission is to win their men, if they are to be won at all. The most impelling argument for the truth of the Gospel, Peter argues, is the tranquil, respectful behavior of an unbeliever's wife.

"Each year more abuse victims, perpetrators, and family members seek help from clergy and religious leaders than all other helping professionals combined."

Abuse and Religion
Anne Horton &
Judith Williamson, pg. xi

The text is introduced by the phrase, "Wives, in the same way be submissive", which connects the command to the preceding verses which describe Christ's demeanor when He was abused. The argument is usually made this way: Jesus, like a lamb led to slaughter, did not open His mouth; women in the same way should not open their mouths when their husbands abuse them. But that explanation misunderstands the text. Nothing is said in 2:21-25 about our Lord's suffering in silence. The text's emphasis is not on His silence but rather on the fact that He did nothing wrong when He was unjustly treated. His example lies in the fact that "He committed no sin.... When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats" (vv. 22-23).

It's a matter of record that during His trial, Jesus did in fact speak out against injustice (John 18:22-23; see also Acts 23:3 for an example of the Apostle Paul doing the same thing). He was not servile or utterly silent. Therefore we believe that when Peter says women are to submit to injustice "in the same way," he is not saying that women can say nothing. He is asking them to say nothing wrong, that they not revile or threaten their husbands.

We believe that abused women have a redemptive way to proceed that preserves a man's headship and yet deals with the offense. Suffering in silence seems to be no answer at all; it may, in fact, only make things worse. Some men, as Agatha Christie once pointed out, will be as bad as their women will let them be. To allow cruel behavior is to enable it. Therefore, the way to save both the abusing husband and the abused wife

is for the women to speak out against abuse whenever it occurs. It's a matter of redemptive concern.

Of course, how something is done is often just as important as what is done. One must speak from a quiet spirit, which, it's important to note, is not merely a feminine trait. It is an attitude that ought to characterize men under attack as well as women. Both men and women are taught by Scripture to be tranquil, gentle, and strong.

Whatever one says in response to abuse should be said with respect for the person and without malice. As Paul says, "The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). A gentle spirit is significant; for truth to penetrate, it must be coupled with grace. As the proverb puts it, "Pleasant words promote instruction" (Proverbs 16:21).

But the truth must be declared. One must hold one's ground. No one, not even a husband, has the right to abuse another human being. His right to leadership does not give him the right to do harm. To abuse one's wife either verbally or physically is wrong; therefore, it's proper to put a stop to such treatment. It is very Christian to say to a verbally abusive husband, "It's not right to speak to another person that way." This must be said with dignity and grace but it must be said.

It's right to put a stop to physical abuse also. Though most women are unable to defend themselves against a male assailant, they can and must resist violence, speaking out against it, walking out if possible, and refusing to stay in a house where they are likely to be hurt. In addition, legal ways exist to maintain one's safety until tempers cool and long-term solutions can be implemented. A woman can invoke the law, what Paul calls "God's servant to do you good" (Romans 13:4); she can call the police.

If further help is needed, abused wives may appeal to the elders of their church or other mature men or women for protection and asylum. In extreme cases, a temporary legal separation may be necessary in order to safeguard the family until counseling can be secured. We stress, however, that the goal of that separation is not the dissolution of the marriage but its ultimate healing.

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It should be obvious that these principles apply to child abuse as well as to wife abuse. A mother should not permit her children to be physically or verbally abused by her husband any more than she would permit a stranger to abuse them. Those under our care are entitled to protection from harm. It's wrong for anyone to abuse a child, and it's wrong for anyone to permit it.

What we're saying is that submission does not entail servility or consent to evil and injustice. It is thoroughly Christian to bring such wrong to an end; in fact, it is un-Christian to permit it to continue. Certainly the Bible gives us the right to defend ourselves against assaults, and the mere fact that the assaulter is a family member does not vitiate that right. Jesus' word about turning the other cheek refers to insults for Christ's sake, not assaults by people intent on doing us harm.

We are convinced then, that a woman has the right and the responsibility to protect both herself and her children from verbal and physical attack. At such times, she can and must speak up. The manner in which she speaks is very important. As Peter says, she must do no wrong. She must not retaliate in the same spirit, hurl insults, or make threats, but she must speak up and confront her husband about his evil. It's our experience that when this is done kindly and firmly, it can bring a man to his senses. The alternative is to be responsible for perpetuating another's sin.