

## A Survivor's Story - Part II

I forced my husband to go to marriage counseling with our church several times. The biblical advice was clear. I would obey my husband but in turn he would love me and do the best for me. This would have worked except my husband's concept of doing the best for me was to teach me to be obedient (I can't tell you how many times I heard this word) and to do that he had to discipline me. I became more withdrawn. I myself felt trapped and without recourse. The resounding message from church was that I should be obedient and pray and God would answer my prayers.

Finally, after a difficult summer... something clicked inside and I was done. I went to a hotel with the kids, called our two pastors and insisted we start counseling again. My husband was very angry. The counseling session that stands out most is where one of the pastors (a great minister really) was listening to my husband complain about all the lies I had told about his behavior and that he could never trust me again. As my husband described this, Pastor made a drawing on the whiteboard of a lie pit - my stick figure at the bottom of a pit with the word 'lies' filling the pit. He pointed out that I would need to "dig" out of this. I think they just couldn't believe that a church member and church officer could do these things so I must be acting melodramatic. My other Pastor expressed concerns after the restraining order saying "Well, you can't undo this". He also later on advised me to not withhold physical intimacy as men need this. *I think this was one of the lowest moments in my faith because I felt that to reject this view of my situation would be to reject God.*

Well, instead I filed a restraining order after some more scary things happened (guns at all the house entrances to block me from coming in). My lawyer said "you must get help" and I did...

I am happy to say that with lots of prayer and counseling and some medication, my husband and I reconciled (with some significant changes in our marriage). My kids started to improve (my daughter used to routinely hide under the bed because she was so afraid). My husband did not return to church as he felt that the Pastors willingness to give me communion was against God's will.

So, how did a professional empowered Christian woman become afraid, emotionally abused, and allow her children to also be abused? I think a very key component was that the mental health issues we both struggled with could really only partially be addressed spiritually. Until my husband learned anger management and learned emotional intelligence, he did not have the skills and insight to see what the real meaning is behind: Ephesians 5:25: "For **husbands**, this means **love your wives**, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up **his life** for her." I needed to learn how to set boundaries. I think that counseling and mental health require years of training and should be left to professionals... I think church workers need to be very careful to also recommend real psychological therapy in addition to spiritual counseling. I strongly believe that it is dangerous to take a paternalistic approach to counseling that advocates that the wife needs to be obedient and then things will automatically improve.. I think that if you think there is a problem, you should ask in as safe a way as possible and be mindful that there are real physical dangers these families are facing. *Also, I believe that the consequences of minimizing the fear and abuse can easily result in the abused person feeling that the only way to escape is to escape the church (and maybe God) as well.*

But I do want to end on a positive note. My church helped me many ways and my pastors did some amazing things. One of them helped me identify that my role as a parent included my role to make sure that my children were not "embittered" by our parenting. I was reassured that if the line crossed into abuse that it was my responsibility to insist on a healthy marriage. And always, the prayers and support helped us all.

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It takes a long time and a lot of listening to fully grasp what a person is really experiencing within a troubled relationship. And in cases of abuse, most pastors are not trained to identify the issue and respond to it appropriately.

How do the well-intentioned pastors in this story reflect those struggles? What spiritual ramifications can this have - whether on people who are being abused or people who are causing abuse?