

There is No Fear in Love

by Diane Stelling

I volunteer at a homeless shelter for teenagers, most of whom have aged out of the foster care system, and most of whom have been abused by someone in their lives. Very often the young women and men are struggling in relationships, not understanding what is healthy and what is abusive.

“He tells me that he loves me and this is why he hits me. He says he’s doing it for my own good, that I deserve it and someone has to discipline me.”

“He has to keep me in line and show me what’s right. That proves he loves me.”

“I feel bad when he calls me names and smacks me around, but he cares. It doesn’t feel good, but nobody else cares about me like he does.”

The young women I work with at the shelter want to know how they can tell if a boyfriend is going to be abusive. They’re looking for some quick measure, a litmus test, to determine whether or not he is “good” or “bad.” They have been told by their abusers, and believe, that they deserve punishment as discipline. Each time we have this discussion, I keep returning to one simple truth, stated quite clearly in Scripture:

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” 1 John 4:18

God is love, and God’s love for us is unconditional. God wants us to love him, but gives us the freedom to make that choice. God does not force us to love him. If someone is afraid in a relationship, then that is not love. Everyone deserves a violence-free life. No one deserves to be beaten and humiliated. If a person in a relationship has to worry that something she said or did might “set him off,” if she is always “walking on eggshells,” or “waiting for the other shoe to drop,” or afraid of how he is going to verbally tear her down, then that is not love. Fear and love cannot coexist. If someone is afraid, it is because they are afraid of punishment and retribution. And that is not love, because there is no fear in love.

To many in abusive situations, love is control, and the relationship is one of a strict adult to a wayward child, rather than an adult to an adult. It is not a relationship based upon mutual respect, but one in which one party dominates the other physically and emotionally. It is difficult to accept a healthy relationship when one comes from a background of abuse.

Freedom is a scary thing, requiring decisions and choices, something an abuse victim may never have been allowed to make, and so is ill-equipped to do so. When control is interpreted as caring, freedom may be interpreted as the opposite – lack of caring, or even abandonment. For someone who may have been neglected in their past, or who fears rejection for making an improper decision, this is an unbearable prospect. Being controlled is much safer than being set adrift in a sea of options without being equipped with the self-confidence to make any choices.

Allowing a partner freedom in a relationship requires trust, and trust is in short supply for both abusers and victims. An abuser interprets the relationship as one based on love when, in reality, it is based on fear. The ultimate fear for the abuser, then, is that the victim may find someone else more desirable than the abuser and leave, or that the victim may have enough money and independence and leave. Abusers ensure that their victims will never abandon them by exerting control over them and by creating a great dependency on the part of the victims for the abuser. There is jealousy for anyone or anything that gets in the way of this “love.” It is not true love, but a love based on fear and control.

The victim also interprets the relationship as one based on love, with control being interpreted as love and caring. But the victim quickly learns, however, that she cannot trust the abuser. She never knows when the abuse will occur and so she becomes afraid. The valuable trust of a committed relationship is broken by an abuser the first time he abuses a victim. Even if both parties think it is love, just calling it that does not make it so. Without trust and without freedom, love cannot exist.

The issues, feelings and interactions involved in abusive relationships are very complex and difficult to understand. Trust, freedom, and control are complicated issues that engender a great deal of discussion and varying opinions. One rule of thumb for determining the health of a relationship, however, remains quite simple – if it is true love, one should not be afraid. We have God’s Word on it.