

Response to Rick Warren's Church's Position of No Divorce for Abusive Marriages

by Diane Stelling

Rev. Rick Warren is the founder and leader of Saddleback Church, one of the largest mega churches in America. He is a powerful spiritual leader and was invited to deliver the invocation at President Obama's inauguration on January 20, 2009. He has been compared to Billy Graham, and without a doubt he has influenced millions of people with his books and sermons. It is specifically because of this that I must speak out in response to his church's latest position regarding "no divorce" even in the case of abuse in a marriage.

On the Saddleback website, under the section "Bible Questions and Answers," there are forty questions posted and audio clips that respond to these questions. Question #32 is: "What should I do when abuse is happening in my marriage?" The person responding is Tom Holladay, a teaching pastor at Saddleback Church. His response is clear, that the Bible only gives two cases where divorce is acceptable: abandonment and adultery. About abuse, he says, "I wish there were a third in Scripture having been involved as a pastor with situations of abuse. There is something in me that wishes there were a Bible verse that says, 'If they abuse you in this-and-such kind of way, then you have a right to leave them.'" The point being made is that there is no specific literal reference in the Bible relating to abuse and divorce.

Since when, as Christians, have we abandoned common sense? Jesus himself understood that strict interpretation of the Law was not always appropriate. When confronted by the Pharisees after healing a man's hand on the Sabbath, which was against religious tradition, Jesus said, "*I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?*" (Luke 6:9 NIV). Just because there is no literal phrase in the Bible delineating what to do in cases of abuse in a marriage does not mean that we cannot deal with these situations sensibly and compassionately. Jesus would want people to choose life over death, and safety for the victims in these situations should be our paramount concern.

Marriage is a bond, a covenant between two people that is based upon trust. Abandonment and adultery are specific situations where that trust is broken. Abuse is a third situation. Anyone who physically, sexually, emotionally, or spiritually harms their partner is breaking that bond of trust – if you cannot trust that your partner is not going to hit you, or tear you down and belittle you, or rape you in your marital bed, then the person committing these acts is breaking the marriage covenant, just the same as the covenant is broken with infidelity or abandonment.

Holladay goes on to simplistically define abuse. He says physical abuse is "literally somebody beating you regularly. I don't mean they grab you once. I mean they've made a habit of beating you regularly. You need to separate in that situation, because that's the only thing that's going to solve that." His definition is a slippery slope, because then who decides when abuse is really occurring? Is one black eye or broken bone or being thrown down the stairs once insufficient? Is one rape not enough? How much is enough to qualify as abuse? Two

hospital visits? Five? Ten? It is the same concept as trying to quantify and qualify sins. The bottom line is that abuse, in all forms, is a sin, no matter how little or how much. Abuse in all forms shows a total disregard for the sanctity of the human body and spirit.

In describing the choice between abuse or divorce, Holladay states that divorce is a short term solution, and that, "I'd always rather choose a short term pain and find God's solution for a long term gain than try to find a short term solution that's going to involve a long term pain." He makes the judgment that those who opt for divorce are trying to escape all pain, and that, "It's not like you can escape the pain," and by implication, that divorce is the one true long term pain. These statements show a complete lack of understanding of the pain involved in abuse. Abuse is not a short term pain. Its effects last a life time, not only for the victim, but for all of those people who are in relationship with that victim.

Unfortunately, many women stay in abusive situations and relationships much longer than they should. That is one of the difficulties – convincing women to leave for their own and their children's physical, emotional, and spiritual safety. Oftentimes women feel the abuse is their fault and if they were just better Christians, the abuse would stop. Or, if they were just better Christians, the Holy Spirit would work in their partners and transform them and they would stop abusing. Holladay does admit that there is nothing in the Bible that says a spouse must tolerate abuse. "There's nowhere in the Bible that says it is an attitude of submission to let someone abuse you. That is not submission. So we recommend very strongly separation." He then goes on to say that during the separation the couple should undergo counseling and try to mend the marriage, "Separation combined with counseling has been proven to provide healing in people's lives."

The reality is that when abuse is present in a marriage, couples counseling is not recommended because it is ineffective. The woman may be afraid to bring up the abuse and therefore will not receive help, and the abuser may try to blame the victim for being the cause of the abuse and therefore will also not receive help. Individual counseling needs to be provided with an emphasis on holding the abuser accountable for the abuse and encouraging the abuser to seek help so that he can stop the abusive behaviors. It is dangerous for a victim to reconcile unless this occurs. God does not want anyone to live in abuse, nor to be yoked to it for a lifetime.

The society we live in and its problems are not black and white. The Bible is our guide through this sinful world, but we need to use the mindset and common sense of Jesus to appropriately apply its teachings to our everyday circumstances. Jesus understood the Law, but tried to show people that it needed to be applied with liberal doses of merciful and compassionate Gospel. We need to be inflexible with God's truths, but also practical in their application.