

WHEN HOMES ARE HEARTLESS

An LCMS Perspective on Domestic Violence



BOTH THE 2007 AND 2010 CONVENTIONS OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD addressed the matter of domestic violence and child abuse (2007 Res. 6-06; 2010 Res. 6-06) asking that, among other things, appropriate materials be developed to aid church workers and congregations in dealing with such circumstances. The following theological statement is intended to be one such resource regarding the topic of domestic violence.

Domestic violence affects many domestic circumstances and settings — between spouses, in dating and unmarried relationships, and against children and older adults. This consideration of domestic violence, however, is written with an all-too-typical marital situation in mind — a husband who is threatening and violent toward his wife. This is not only for the sake of simplicity, but it is also necessary, first, because domestic abuse so blatantly contradicts the character of marriage as biblically understood. Second, as the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) has noted, one cannot ignore the overwhelming tendency of violence in male-female relations involving men as the perpetrators (Creator's Tapestry [2009]). While this is written from that perspective, it is necessary to know that women also may perpetrate domestic violence against men, that domestic violence often occurs outside of marriage in dating or “live-in” relationships, and that children and older adults also are frequent victims of domestic violence.

In 2013 the Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), and the Rev. Dr. Robert Bugbee, president of the Lutheran Church—Canada, an LCMS partner church, joined with Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican Church in North America and Bishop John Bradosky of the North American Lutheran Church in signing “An Affirmation of Marriage.” The initial paragraph of the affirmation states:

The Sacred Scriptures teach that in the beginning the blessed Trinity instituted marriage to be the lifelong union of one man and one woman (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:4-6), to be held in honor by all and kept pure (Heb. 13:4; 1 Thess. 4:2-5). God's Word assures us that each time one man and one woman join themselves together in the union of the marriage commitment and relationship, God himself has joined them as one. It is important to see that marriage is not only a grace-filled institution of the church, but part of the very fabric of God's creation which extends to every time and place on earth and includes every man and woman who are joined together in this “one flesh” commitment and bond. Marriage is created by God and is not simply a social contract or convenience.

This quotation echoes many previous statements about marriage approved by the LCMS in liturgical orders for marriage, in convention resolutions, in CTCR reports, and in numerous presidential statements. The Synod consistently supports this high view of marriage as an institution of our gracious God.

Like all of creation, marriage flows from divine love. In love for humanity, the Triune God joins one man and one woman



into a lifelong union in which He intends countless gracious blessings. In contrast, contemporary society views marriage as grounded primarily in human, romantic love. Romantic attraction ought not be minimized, but it cannot provide a firm foundation for marriage. Rather, it is one aspect and one blessing of marriage. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.” In marriage, the God who is love (1 John 4:8, 16) creates a lifelong committed relationship in which human love can be sustained and flourish.

Divine love, not our human love, creates and sustains marriage. In the blessed Trinity we see the fullness of love; and from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit we learn and receive sustaining love. Our Lord Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love” (John 15:9 ESV). “As the Father has loved me” in the Trinity, each Person loves the other; none is subsumed in the other. As individual people, each loves and is beloved. This is true, personal love, but it is not individualistic. Such love binds the divine Persons in the communion of the one divinity — three Persons in one God.

That personal love overflows for us — “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (John 15:9 ESV). Here too, we are loved as persons, as individuals, but not for *individualistic* purposes. We are loved personally so that we might abide in communion with the Triune God and with all His beloved. “God is love” and so “love is from God” (see 1 John 4:4-12). Love, as it is biblically understood, flows from and reflects God and His love. All genuine love flows from the God who is love, and thus marriage is intended to be sustained in a divine, genuine love. Marriage and the families that — according to God’s loving will — flow from marriage are gifts of divine love in which husband, wife and children are to abide in love. Marriage is created for such good as this abiding love. It is created so that homes would be marked by the loving heart of God.

Such good flourishes as it is protected by the bonds of marital commitment — commitments that are not based on external circumstances, but are defined by the purposes of sustaining godly love. Thus, marriage as God intends, is *for good* also in its temporal sense — marriage is necessarily a lifelong commitment. It is God’s purpose that the homes established by marriage would continue as lifelong havens of His love in which a man and woman reflect the enduring, committed, sacrificial love of Christ for His Church (Eph. 5:22-33).

Sin and the family

Yet, this view of marriage as a rich blessing and good gift of God, intended for temporal permanence, often meets with crushing, human realities that degrade and destroy it. In so doing, they spoil with bad what is meant for good. And the permanent purpose — that it is intended to last for good — is also spoiled.

Where sin enters, every human relationship suffers. Conflict within the home is predicted when the Lord declares that childbirth will be marred with pain, that the relationship of husband and wife will potentially involve struggles over “rule,” and that providing daily bread will be an arduous task against a rebellious creation (Gen. 3:16-17). Cain’s murder of Abel is the first example of “domestic abuse” in Scripture as the first family experiences the murder of one brother by another (Gen. 4).

The fall of humanity affects all things and every relationship. Human life is now marked by what may be called the rule of imperfection. There is no perfect relationship when sinful human beings are the persons in relationship — there is no perfect family, no perfect marriage. Yet, by God’s daily grace and, even more, by his abiding Word and blessed sacraments and the forgiveness they convey, the daily *imperfections* of life in a sinful world are often and even usually kept at bay. Marriages, despite their imperfections, are the setting in which countless men and women love, honor, cherish and keep one another in sickness and in health in a beautiful unity. Families, despite their imperfections, are the settings in which countless children are protected and nurtured and guided to adulthood. They are settings in which the aged are honored and share their maturity with the young.

However, God’s creation of marriage and the family, like other gifts of His creating work, can be not only damaged but destroyed by sin. Just as sin can kill a human person, it can also kill a marriage or permanently damage or destroy a family. So in Cain’s murder of Abel, the first family suffers permanent damage. Such is the vulnerability of God’s good creation of marriage and the family. The final sentence of the marriage affirmation quotation above is noteworthy: “Marriage is created by God and is not simply a social contract or convenience.” Thus the Synod not only states affirmatively its view of marriage, but it also recognizes views of marriage which are not theologically acceptable, including the prevailing societal perspective that marriage is no more than a contract between two persons, which may be ended at any time without fault — a view epitomized by the expression and reality of “no-fault divorce.”

Jesus, in warning that divorce contradicts God’s work in joining a man and woman as one, does so because divorce is also a tragic possibility in a world of sin (Matt. 19:3-9). Hard-hearted sin leads many to refuse to uphold the promises of marriage. They put away the spouse God has given to them and destroy the unity He created. Jesus calls divorce a form of adultery, which He identifies as profoundly destructive to marriage (Matt. 19:8-9) since no marriage can survive one party to the marriage persistently giving himself or herself sexually to someone other than his or her spouse. Jesus’ words indicate that both when a married person violates his or her vows sexually, while still legally married, and when a person ends a marriage in order to (or in the hope of) establishing a new relationship with another person, such adultery destroys marriage.

Paul’s counsel on marriage includes mention of another example of how sin can destroy marriage when he speaks of a spouse who simply leaves the marriage, abandoning the person and the commitment that he or she made (1 Cor. 7:15). Just as is the case in a divorce, one cannot be married to someone who refuses to be married. This, of course, is clearly the case if one party leaves the marriage and divorces his or her spouse, but abandonment does not always involve such legal action. The CTCR recognizes that Scriptures do not specifically define the character of abandonment or desertion (*Divorce and Remarriage: An Exegetical Study [1987]*), noting that this may include not only total departure from the marriage by an unbelieving spouse, but other actions as well that create an enduring separation for the couple. Thus Christians have wrestled with the reality that abandonment or desertion may take other forms, such as a complete refusal to join oneself to the spouse sexually (1 Cor. 7:3-5).

This takes us to the matter of domestic abuse. When violence and its threats occur in a marriage, one party to the marriage actually creates a circumstance in which the other cannot remain without endangering herself, and quite often, her children. Husbands who abuse their wives act in glaring contradiction to the character of the divine love Christians are called to express (1 John 3), to the character of marriage as God created it (Gen. 2:23-25; Matt. 19:3-6), and to the specific admonitions of Scripture for husbands to love their wives in the self-sacrificial manner of Christ, without harshness, much less violence, and without taking advantage of her (relative physical) weakness (Eph. 5:25, 28; Col. 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7). As is the case in adultery or physical desertion, the marriage cannot continue when one person makes it impossible for the two to live as one, effectively forcing his spouse to flee. In domestic abuse, a husband forcibly separates himself from his wife, harming her physically and emotionally, trampling on her vulnerability, treating her as an enemy, attacking her person and driving her away. So the CTCR (*Creator's Tapestry*, 2011) has also said: "Some divorces are unavoidable — for instance, where a spouse abandons the marriage, or persists in stubborn infidelity, or physically drives away the other spouse through abuse."

Domestic violence always includes either threats or realities of physical harm, but its deepest effects are not necessarily physical in nature. The emotional effect of violence and threats is what ultimately destroys the bond of marriage. When one who promised to love and to cherish his wife abuses, threatens, demeans and degrades her instead, the deepest damage is done to her soul and spirit, not her body. For this reason it is important to recognize that sometimes domestic violence or abuse is more verbal and emotional than it is explicitly physical. That does *not mean* that every example of an angry outburst or a cross word constitutes "abuse," but it is necessary to emphasize that obedience to God's laws and expectations is never merely a matter of external conduct. Just as sin flows from the heart (Matt. 15:19), so do genuine obedience and good works. The husband who has abused his wife cannot claim that he is innocent of destroying his marriage since he "never caused permanent physical harm" and, besides that, was a "good provider" or "never cheated."

In a world in which sin has such tragic consequences — where there is such heartlessness and hard-heartedness — Christians must be realistic about sin's destructive power. Divorce is always abhorrent to God; yet equally abhorrent is violence (see Mal. 2:16, comparing various translations). God joins man and woman with only His good intentions and abhors the sin that violates His goodness and frustrates His will. It is necessary to recognize both God's intention and the evil results of human sin. Thus, Christians can and should make use of protections against sin's dangers by accepting the sin-driven fact that divorce cannot be avoided in many circumstances of adultery, abandonment and abuse. And, particularly in cases of domestic violence, individual Christians should seek the protection of police and courts — God's appointed servants for our good as well as His servants in the restraint of wrongdoing (Rom. 13:3-4).

The Church and the heartless home

These truths about sin's effects, though tragic and almost unbearably painful to consider much less experience, are not the final word. By the grace of God in Christ Jesus, healing and hope remain for families and individuals suffering under sin. Our Lord came not to advise a healthy world, but to seek and save a lost and broken one (Luke 5:31, 19:10). Christ Jesus, the heavenly Bridegroom, loves the Church sacrificially — cleansing and beautifying Her (Eph. 5:25 ff). He is at work in the whole of our fallen lives. The high and holy God, in the most profoundly mysterious manner, came to us in our brokenness (1 Tim. 1:15), to be sin for sinners (2 Cor. 5:21), to forego all His divine glory, and to suffer the abuse and violence of human evil for the sake of the very sinners who assaulted Him and for all the world and for all our sins (Is. 53:5, 7; Phil. 2:8; Col. 1:19).

This Lord Christ turned to, not away from, those who were broken by the weight of sin — both their own and others. He comforted and healed the ostracized, the scorned, the sick, the dying and the forgotten. He healed ostracized lepers (Matt. 8:1-4; Luke 17:12-19). He heard the pleas of the demon-possessed (Matt. 8:28-34; Luke 4:33-36). He called despised people to discipleship (Matt. 9:9-13; Luke 19:1-10). He brought peace and forgiveness to a scorned woman from scorned Samaria who let herself be handed from man to man (John 4).

His invitation — "Come to me" — is for weak and overburdened humanity. He does not and will not turn from the pleas and cries of the broken. He embodies God's answer to the cries of the suffering and fulfills Scripture's promises of relief and righted wrongs (Ps. 55:1, 86:1-2, 146:5-9). To be sure, emphasizing Christ's call to the weak and broken is not to deny His love or His call to repentance and new life for all people — including perpetrators of abuse or any other sin. Our gracious Lord has atoned for *all* of humanity and *all* sin (John 3:16; Rom. 3:23). It is, however, necessary to see that Jesus' focused outreach to the weak is a warning that to count oneself among the strong and healthy endangers one's soul (Matt. 23:13-33; Luke 13:1-5; Matt. 23:15).

Christ will not turn away from the abused and neither should the Church. In an understandable concern to uphold the sanctity of marriage, there have been times when Christians, congregations and their pastors have been unable or unwilling to hear the cries of distressed victims of domestic violence. The biblical command to submission (Eph. 5:22) has sometimes been applied falsely, with the expectation that a woman should submit to her husband's sin and suffer his abuse in silence. Where a godly warning, pastoral admonition and even church discipline ought to have been invoked against sins of violence and anger, there too often has been a form of support that enables unrepentant sin (Ez. 33:8-9; 2 Cor. 13:2-3; Gal. 5:19-21).

Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation

The ongoing purpose of God's Law and Gospel is that sinners would come to repentance and receive forgiveness and renewal by faith. We rejoice that Christ's Word absolves sinners, that He freely grants forgiveness and cleansing in Baptism, and that He gives His precious body and blood with the unhampered promise: "given for you for the remission of sins." Yet, the Church's ministry must

also deal with persistence in sin, with half-hearted or patently false confession of sin, with pleas for understanding that are thinly-veiled expectations of permission to “continue in sin that grace may abound” (Rom. 6:1). So Martin Luther says in comments on 1 John 2:12: “The remission of sins has not been instituted in order that we may have permission to sin or that we may sin; it has been instituted in order that we may recognize sin and know that we are in sin, that we may fight against sin.” We need such strong admonition even as we rejoice in Christ’s freely-given grace.

For this reason we must also grieve over times when, after an expression of remorse by her husband, a woman may have been urged to maintain a marriage despite continuing fear of abuse, her sense that repentance is not genuine, and the reality that repeated patterns of abuse have included numerous apologies and promises “never to do it again.” Pastors and other Christian brothers and sisters must not use the Gospel legalistically, seeking to compel a woman to “forgive and forget” while she continues to suffer emotional trauma and a fully understandable mistrust in one who has a pattern of violently violating the sacred promises he made to her.

Therefore, as the pastor cares for one who suffered or is suffering abuse, he must not seek to compel forgiveness on her part. Pressure to extend forgiveness personally where repentance is in question is out of place. But neither should he act as if the command to forgive others including those who hurt and abuse us (Matt. 5:44) is void in the case of domestic violence. There is a place for gentle encouragement to pray for forgiveness for the perpetrator even as our Lord leads us in praying for “us” all to be forgiven our trespasses (Matt. 6:12). To lead the sufferer in prayers for the forgiveness of the perpetrator is not the same, however, as to expect her to “forget” what has happened, to trust someone who has proven himself untrustworthy or to desire someone who has revealed a despicable attitude toward her. Forgiveness may not equal marital reconciliation.

In cases of domestic violence, pastoral care and congregational support is needed for both the perpetrator and the one who has suffered the violence. No one should be spiritually coerced into remaining in dangerous circumstances, including spouses. Love for the wounded neighbor and, in this case, the wounded sister in Christ, means assisting, first, in binding wounds and providing shelter (Luke 10). It means comforting and assuring her traumatized and broken spirit with the comfort we have in Christ (Luke 6:21; 2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Pastoral care for an abuser is also an obvious churchly responsibility. The forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus is for all sinners. The same God who gave up a sinful world to “all manner of unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:28-32) also gave up His Son for us all (Rom. 8:32). The call to repentance and forgiveness is for the abuser as well as the victim.

Pastoral care for the abuser is not the same as care for the abused wife, however. Domestic violence is a threat to human life and, at least potentially, a criminal matter. It is true that, as the CTCR affirmed in 1999, pastoral responsibility is determined not by legal compulsions, but “by the demands of his office.” However,

the commission also notes that a pastor must be aware of the potential for non-repentant individuals seeking to manipulate “the pastoral office through hypocritical means” (*Pastor and Penitent Relationship*) and of those who may attempt to enlist the unwitting pastor as an ally in an abuser’s coercion.

As would be the case with other examples of criminality, love for the brother and the desire for him to know the forgiving love of Christ must not be taken to mean that other consequences, both social and judicial, can or should be avoided. Among those consequences may be such things as criminal trials, restraining orders, mandated counseling and dissolution of marriage. Guidance in the clinical subtleties of abusive personalities and cooperation with those who provide psychotherapeutic treatments for abuse will be helpful. The Church must recognize the validity of such “left-hand kingdom” curbs and protections even as it seeks to help the perpetrator come to experience the true repentance and forgiveness given through God’s “right-hand rule.” The brother may need to lose aspects of life such as his freedom, his marriage and his family to save his spirit (1 Cor. 5:4-5).

So, while the Church can and should continually reach out with the message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins to the abuser, it must do so with the recognition that this does not automatically and, frequently, may not ever result in marital reconciliation and restoration. As noted above, abuse may constitute a circumstance in which the Church acknowledges the tragic necessity of divorce. Christians can and should never glibly accept divorce and, indeed, must oppose our culture’s easy peace with it. Yet, wherever divorce occurs, those who suffer it are not to be driven away, but ever drawn toward Christ and His mercies. That is even more the case when one who has suffered divorce has done so rather than to suffer violence against her life.

Conclusion

Our gracious God created a good and wonderful world that sin has disfigured and despoiled. The number of times that the holy promises of marriage are broken by violence is one of the most tragic proofs of sin’s destructiveness. Nevertheless, in Christ Jesus, God’s final word to us is one of hope, not hopelessness. Every day broken hearts are lifted and broken lives are renewed by the mercies of the blessed Triune God. Wounds are healed. Bruised reeds and smoking flaxes are not cast away (Is. 42:3; Matt. 12:20). By the miracle of Christ, joy comes again (Ps. 30:5) in Christ Jesus. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom. 15:13 ESV).