

Appendix K

Biblical Perspectives on Abuse and Divorce

The sections below contain excerpts from several reliable sources. See the credit lines following each for more information.

The Biblical Option of Divorce

Often Malachi 2:16 is quoted as validation that divorce is not permissible: “I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel.” But the entire verse says:

“I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering his wife with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty. “So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.”

When victims are told that the Lord hates divorce, they are most often not told that the same verse declares that God hates violence.

Why do we not tell victims and abusers that Proverb 6:17–19 lists seven things that the Lord hates: “haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family”? Why do we compel a victim to remain in a marriage characterized by these seven evils that the Lord hates? All too often the preservation of marriage has been exalted as the highest good, even when human life is at stake. This is not what the Bible says.

God’s covenant with Israel was likened to a marriage union, one that was betrayed by an idolatrous wife. At three points in Scripture we are told that Yahweh has divorced His people (Isa. 50:1; 54:6–7; Jer. 3:8). Divorce was given not as a desirable option but as the least undesirable one in certain cases. The evangelical church cannot wholly condemn an action adopted by the Lord of heaven and earth in response to willful and persistent human sin.

The above material was taken from Catherine Clark Kroger and Nancy Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity press, 2001), chap. 12.

The Bible Does Allow Divorce for Domestic Abuse

One of the problems when dealing with domestic abuse in a Christian context is, “What does the Bible say about divorce for domestic abuse?” I believe the Bible allows divorce for domestic abuse, and the key text for this is 1 Corinthians 7:15: “*But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. For God has called us to peace.*” This verse has been generally assumed to relate to desertion: when an unbelieving spouse walks out, abandoning a marriage with a Christian spouse, but not legally divorcing them. However, in the Greek text the word

depart (*chorizo*) means “to place space between, to separate,” and it was one of the standard terms for legal divorce in the first century. Typically, perpetrators of abuse do not walk out of their marriages—they want to stay in the relationship because they enjoy the power, privilege, and control they obtain therein. So the victim of abuse thinks this verse does not apply to her. However, when correctly understood, it is the verse that gives her freedom.

In my book *Not Under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery, and Desertion*, I define domestic abuse as a pattern of conduct by one spouse that is designed to obtain and maintain power and control over the other spouse. It always includes emotional and verbal abuse and may also include financial abuse, social abuse (restricting the victim’s contact with family and friends), sexual abuse, physical violence, and spiritual abuse such as twisting scriptures to justify the abuse. Abusers who never use physical violence (and there are many) are still very frightening and controlling to their victims. Post-separation, many of these abuses may continue, with the added element of legal abuse leading to protective mothers sometimes losing custody of their children to the abuser.

The perpetration of domestic abuse effectively pushes away the other spouse and divides the marriage. The fact that many victims eventually leave abusive relationships testifies to this pushing away. Perpetrators usually protest that they want the marriage to continue, but their evil conduct conveys the exact opposite—it effectually pushes the opposite spouse away.

When applying 1 Corinthians 7:15, the key question is not “Who walked out?” but “Who caused the separation?” Would it be sensible to say that David was the sinful, rebellious one when he left Saul’s court? No, he left because of Saul’s abuse. David left, but Saul was the cause of his leaving. If we translate the word *chorizo* as “separate,” we see this more clearly: if the unbeliever separates, let him separate. The unbeliever is doing the separating; the believer

is commanded to let it be done. This tells the believing spouse (and the church) to allow the marriage to be over, because the unbeliever has destroyed the covenant. It permits the victim of abuse to take out a legal divorce. Let there be *chorizo* = let there be separation = let there be legal divorce, because the word *chorizo* means both separation and divorce.

In *Not Under Bondage*, I also show that since the brother or sister is not under bondage, the victim of abuse is free to remarry a new partner (unlike the instance in 1 Corinthians 7:10–11 where marriage to a new partner was forbidden).

The above material was taken from: <http://www.restoredrelationships.org/news/2016/01/11/domestic-abuse-divorce/>. Guest blog by Barbara Roberts. Barbara leads the blog “A Cry For Justice,” <http://cryingoutforjustice.com/faq>, which is seeking to awaken the evangelical church to domestic violence and abuse in its midst. Her book *Not Under Bondage* can be purchased at <https://notunderbondage.com/> or at any book retailer.

What God Has Joined

Divorce is only allowed for a limited number of grounds that are found in the Old Testament and affirmed in the New Testament:

- *Adultery* (in Deuteronomy 24:1, affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19)
- *Emotional and physical neglect* (in Exodus 21:10–11, affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7)
- *Abandonment and abuse* (included in neglect, as affirmed in 1 Corinthians 7)

Jewish couples listed these biblical grounds for divorce in their marriage vows. We reiterate them as love, honor, and keep and be faithful to each other. When these vows were broken, it threatened

to break up the marriage. As in any broken contract, the wronged party had the right to say, “I forgive you; let’s carry on” or, “I can’t go on, because this marriage is broken.”

Therefore, while divorce *should* never happen, God allows it (and subsequent remarriage) when your partner breaks the marriage vows.

The above material was taken from David Instone-Brewer, “What God Has Joined,” *Christianity Today*, October 5, 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/october/20.26.html>.

The Catholic Church Responds to Domestic Violence

Abused women often say, “I can’t leave this relationship. The Bible says it would be wrong.” Abusive men often say, “The Bible says my wife should be submissive to me.” They take the biblical text and distort it to support their right to batter.

As bishops, we condemn the use of the Bible to support abusive behavior in any form. A correct reading of Scripture leads people to an understanding of the equal dignity of men and women and to relationships based on mutuality and love. Beginning with Genesis, Scripture teaches that women and men are created in God’s image. Jesus himself always respected the human dignity of women. Pope John Paul II reminds us that “Christ’s way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women.”

Men who abuse often use Ephesians 5:22, taken out of context, to justify their behavior, but the passage (vv. 21–33) refers to the mutual submission of husband and wife out of love for Christ. Husbands should love their wives as they love their own body, as Christ loves the Church.

Men who batter also cite Scripture to insist that their victims forgive them (see, for example, Matthew 6:9–15). A victim then

feels guilty if she cannot do so. Forgiveness, however, does not mean forgetting the abuse or pretending that it did not happen. Neither is possible. Forgiveness is not permission to repeat the abuse. Rather, forgiveness means that the victim decides to let go of the experience and move on with greater insight and conviction not to tolerate abuse of any kind again.

An abused woman may see her suffering as just punishment for a past deed for which she feels guilty. She may try to explain suffering by saying that it is “God’s will” or “part of God’s plan for my life” or “God’s way of teaching me a lesson.” This image of a harsh, cruel God runs contrary to the biblical image of a kind, merciful, and loving God. Jesus went out of his way to help suffering women. Think of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34) or the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11). God promises to be present to us in our suffering, even when it is unjust.

Finally, we emphasize that no person is expected to stay in an abusive marriage. Some abused women believe that church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. They may hesitate to seek a separation or divorce. They may fear that they cannot re-marry in the Church. Violence and abuse, not divorce, break up a marriage. We encourage abused persons who have divorced to investigate the possibility of seeking an annulment. An annulment, which determines that the marriage bond is not valid, can frequently open the door to healing.

The above material was taken from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women,” 2018, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/domestic-violence/when-i-call-for-help.cfm>.