

Identifying Oppression in Marriages



by DARBY STRICKLAND

When I think about the problems in troubled marriages, this quotation comes to mind.

Things are not always what they seem;
the first appearance deceives many;
the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden.¹

So often what we see before us belies what is concealed beneath.

Counseling Denise and Dan seemed like it was going to be sorting through typical marital issues. Denise identified her anxiety as the presenting problem. She expressed concern with her own anger and being snappy with their three young children. Dan reported that he was unhappy with Denise because she nagged him all the time, stating, “She always has a list of chores for me to do!”

But as I pressed in deeper, underlying complexities began to emerge. When I asked Dan how he feels about Denise bringing up her concerns he said, “I don’t bother to listen to her. She is always anxious about something.” This answer caused me to probe further into how they resolve conflict. It quickly became clear that issues don’t get resolved or talked about. Dis-

¹ Gaius Julius Phaedrus, *Fables*, trans. Henry Thomas Riley and Christopher Smart (London: George Bell and Sons, 1887), 411.

Darby Strickland (MDiv) counsels and teaches at CCEF. She is especially interested in issues pertaining to marriage and abuse.

agreements end with Dan going to sleep or playing on his phone. It seemed that Dan had a pattern of neglecting Denise's concerns and wellbeing. When I asked what a typical evening together looks like, it became clear that while Denise is tending to the children and the house, Dan remains disengaged from her. But then at bedtime, he desires physical intimacy.

In the next session, I met with Denise alone. She told me she is worried that she is hurting her husband by not meeting his sexual needs. Dan desires sex every night and Denise simply does not have the interest or energy to comply, so she wants help with improving her desire for physical intimacy. Again, this does not sound overly concerning. But while exploring the guilt she feels about it, she discloses that Dan accuses her of making him vulnerable to the use of pornography. This concerned me, so I probed further.

Wondering how Dan communicates his desire for sex, I learn that he will often wake her up in the middle of the night imploring her to perform her "wifely duty." When I asked, "What does Dan do when you do not give in?" Denise revealed that he will spend the next few days ignoring her and verbally attacking the children. Sensing that Dan's response is punitive, I asked, "Has he ever hurt you physically when he is upset?" Denise responded that when he gets really frustrated he punches her in the back while she is lying next to him in bed. But she does not blame him for hitting her. She feels responsible for his frustration because she turned him down yet again.

My closer and careful examination had exposed troubling dynamics. This was not a straightforward marriage problem, as it first seemed to be. When Denise does not meet Dan's desires, he becomes punishing and harsh. Even more disconcerting is that they are on their fourth marriage counselor and no one has previously unearthed Dan's punitive behaviors. Unfortunately, it is common for counselors, pastors, and other helpers to fail to identify abusive behaviors in a marriage. One reason for this is that the prevalence of such abuses² is

² An important side note about terminology: *Abuse* can be a tricky, loaded word. Depending on whom you speak with, it will carry different meanings and interpretations. The word *abuse* can describe so many different acts that it ultimately lacks clarity. Just like anxiety or depression, we need to become experts in describing and capturing each individual's experience of abuse if we are to speak wisely and biblically into people's lives. The same is true for the term *domestic violence*. The justice system and mental health field define it to include a spectrum of violating acts, including—but not limited to—physical violence.

vastly underestimated. We do not ask questions about things we do not think are happening.

It helps to know the statistics.

- 25% of marriages are considered abusive.³
- 24% of women and 13% of men report experiencing severe physical violence from an intimate partner.⁴
- 50% of the men who frequently assault their wives also frequently abuse their children.⁵
- Forced sex or sexual assault occurs in 40-45% of battering relationships.⁶

Shockingly, the prevalence of abuse is the same within the church, and, yes, even within the evangelical church. Justin and Lindsey Holcomb highlight the pervasiveness with this illustration:

In a church of 400 people (with 160 adult women and 20 teenage girls) 20 women would be currently experiencing physical abuse. And if you factor in emotional or verbal abuse, 80 women would be currently suffering. 60 men would have assaulted their partner at one time or another.⁷

These statistics should change our thinking about the prevalence of abuse in our communities.

Because it is likely that there are active abusers in our pews and counseling offices, we need to be able to look beyond appearances and know

³ “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey,” Center for Disease Control, accessed May 21, 2016, http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf.

⁴ Ibid. This number is lower if male on male violence is removed from the statistic.

⁵ “Violence by Intimates: Analysis of Data on Crimes by Current or Former Spouses, Boyfriends, and Girlfriends,” U.S. Department of Justice, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/vi.pdf>.

⁶ “Nature and Scope of Violence Against Women,” National Institute of Justice, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/violence-against-women/pages/selected-results.aspx>

⁷ Justin Holcomb and Lindsey Holcomb, *Is It My Fault?: Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 59-60. For another resource from the Holcombs, see “Does the Bible Say Women Should Suffer Abuse and Violence?” in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:2 (2014), 9-21.

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