Spousal Abuse

Part 1 of 2: A Christian Response to Abusive Relationships
with Darrell Bock, Gary Barnes, Debby Wade
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Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues related to God and culture. I'm Darrell Bock, executive director for cultural engagement at the Howard G. Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement, and our topic today is spousal abuse.

And I have two guests with me, and I'm going to let them introduce themselves so that they can lay out their professional credentials and expertise as it relates to this topic. And, Gary, we'll start with you.

Okay. Thank you, Darrell. So I am a faculty member here with you at Dallas Seminary. I'm a professor of the biblical counseling program. I also have a part-time private practice. I'm a licensed psychologist and specialize in marriage and family.

All right.

And I'm Debby Wade, and I am also a marriage and family therapist and a licensed professional counselor. And I specialize in working with intimacy issues and couples, marital work. I work with all ages, children, teens, women and men. I have a private practice that I founded in 1999, called ACTSolutions, which stands for Authentic Christian Therapeutic Solutions.

Oh, wow, okay. Well, that's cool. I mean I think of acts, I think of something else. So that's great. Well, we're going to take a look and talk our way through - as a way of working with the topic - a video that Gary has supplied that talks about spousal abuse.

And I'm going to let Gary introduce the video, and then we're going to take a look at the first clip. And we're going to divide this up into five parts and take a look at the issues that it raises and use that as kind of a launching point for what we're going to do.
Gary Barnes: Yes. We, right at the beginning, would want to say a very special word of thanks to the Faith and Trust Institute in Seattle, Washington, who's given us permission to use their taping. And we really want to commend their work to everyone. And they're a great resource.

Faithtrustinstitute.org would be a great website for them to follow up on. And so one of the things that's really striking about the research on domestic violence is four independent sociological studies, looking at all different subgroups in our country, have identified that conservative Protestant groups are the leading group where this is a problem.

Darrell Bock: Wow. Now, what are - now, you said there are four groups, so what would those others be?

Gary Barnes: No, four different studies.

Darrell Bock: Oh, four different studies. Okay.

Gary Barnes: Looking at other Christian groups, as well as non-Christian groups.

Darrell Bock: I see.

Gary Barnes: Now, at the same time, the other side of the coin is is that conservative Protestant groups would be the people who would be most against domestic violence. And so this is a great secret that is really kept in our circle. And it's one that, of all groups, we need to really pay special attention to.

Darrell Bock: Well, my hope is is to talk our way through this and also give people practical advice if they are in such a situation or, perhaps also, just as importantly, if they know someone who's in such a situation. So we'll do that as we proceed through the video. So we'll take a look here at the first clip which introduces some statistics and also introduces the person who is the focus of the video.

Video

Darrell Bock: All right. Well, that's the opening story. How common is it that people - that people think they can - I would say get away with stuff or be - how common is it that it is kept secret?
Debby Wade: I'm sorry. I'm stumbling a minute in responding to that. I think it's fairly common that, because of the shame and the guilt that's there, that the victim would feel too much fear to share. And I think that when the batterer - or whether it's a physical or psychological abuser - with the control that they have, I think they feel fairly confident that the one that they are battering will not tell the secret.

And I think they come back and use other tactics to control that are nice and loving, or they appear to be nice and loving, but done in a way that's very controlling. And so I think the abuser feels very confident that they control the victim from telling.

Darrell Bock: Now, the key word is the word "control."

Gary Barnes: Yes.

Darrell Bock: So let's talk about that. What exactly is going on when this type of situation takes place?

Gary Barnes: You know a lot of people who are just kind of maybe thinking about this for the first time - it hasn't been a part of their experience - they might think that, "Oh, this is just like out-of-control anger." And this is a very, very different problem than that. That is a problem as well, but this is a distinct - this is actually all about control.

It's not about being out of control. It's very calculated. It even is intermixed with positive things, like bringing flowers home and being nice, kind of a honeymoon period, which then will flip. And then it's about being abusive. But the abuse is about controlling. It's about keeping one subject.

Darrell Bock: Um-hmm. And so the violence by which one manages the relationship.

Gary Barnes: Yes.

Debby Wade: Um-hmm.

Gary Barnes: Yes, totally. And so that's why that 28 percent statistic is most likely a very low number, because so much of this will go unreported.
Okay. So we've got, on the one hand, this theme of - this usually is kept under wraps. And, on the other hand, it also is about control. So this leads us into thinking through how spouse abuse kind of works itself out. So let's go to the next clip and see what is coming at us next.

Okay. That's about the way in which control works. I do have a question that I think should be raised here at the start. And that is when we talk about spousal abuse, how should we actually define it? Does it have to be physical? The reason I raise the question is is that the psychologist in the piece said sometimes it's a look.

Now, I sit there and I go, "Okay, I've done that. Am I an abuser?" So let's talk about defining what it is that we're talking about. What is - what exactly do we mean? And are we dealing with a spectrum? What's going on here?

Certainly, much abuse can just be psychological and emotional. You know I think as she was talking about if she showed anger or showed any sort of emotional response, he controlled it with either a look or maybe his behavior or a certain stance, even maybe without hitting her.

And so I think when we think of psychological and emotional abuse, it is done in such a way that, again, the victim can't have a sense of self, but they have to give up their self to be whoever it is that the abuser is controlling them to be. And so I think many women where - and they come in, and they're crushed and have no idea of their own identity, it's often that they're in a psychologically or emotional abusive situation.

So we shouldn't think of this - even though we can talk about domestic violence or spousal abuse, in some ways spouse abuse may be a better term than domestic violence because we would think, "Well, if it's not violent then it's not abuse."

That would be, yeah, a very misleading way of thinking about it. If it's only physical abuse, then anything else is okay. And that's totally wrong.
Darrell Bock: Yeah. Now, I think the background here - probably a good point to bring in a little bit of the Bible to think about what spousal responsibilities are in marriage. And, of course, the spousal responsibilities that the Scripture lays out is that these are two people who are supposed to love one another and nurture one another. Certainly there's a major responsibility on the part of the husband in the house in Ephesians 5 and texts like this, for the husband to be - to care for the wife as Christ does for the church.

Gary Barnes: Right.

Darrell Bock: So there's a nurturing and a supportive element. So this abuse, obviously, runs smack dab into that kind of modeling. Is that correct?

Gary Barnes: Yeah. This is actually totally contrary to the heart of God on relationships. And I would see that the big theme there would be relationships of those who are followers of Christ, unlike those - the gentiles or those who aren't the followers of Christ.

It's characterized by a oneness that's not based in sameness. See. And what did Paul say about the gentiles? When they bumped into their conflicts and problems, they lorded over one another. There's the use of self-serving power that he says is not to be a part of those relationships for people who are followers of Christ.

And so, there's this sense of mutuality, a submitting one to another out of reverence to Christ - Ephesians 5:21 - that really sets the whole tone before we get into the distinct and separate roles and responsibilities.

Darrell Bock: So rather than having a model that's highlighting power and control, where one person's controlling the other, we really have a mutuality in service that's supposed to be going on that's helping people grow as people in the context of their marriage relationship. I mean we tend to view marriage sometimes as a social context or something like that, or maybe, in a utilitarian kind of way, of meeting my needs. But actually marriage is much more profound than that, isn't it?
Debby Wade: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. You know what I find is interesting is that passage that you all were just speaking of, Ephesians 5. I think 21 through about 33 is where he's talking about marriage. But that's, I think, often the most misused Scripture on man being the headship of the wife and that it being interpreted in a very wrong way.

Darrell Bock: Because the term, "submission," is in the text.

Debby Wade: Because the - yes, and that the husband should be the headship. And so I believe often, maybe even churches unknowingly support a woman staying in an abusive marriage based on that passage. And the husband often feels justified, not recognizing the distortion that has - they've taken the message and distorted it in such a way.

Darrell Bock: You know I have students do an exercise when I teach Ephesians. And what I do is I have them take a sheet of paper, and on one side I have them put a column for power, and on the other side I have them put a column for service. And I have them list all the times power is evoked in that passage and all the times images of service are evoked in that passage.

And I give them about five minutes to read through the passage and make the list. And when it's all done, it's interesting because the best you can do on the power side, the best you can do is to put the term, "head." And that's it.

Everything else is on the service or nurturing or caring side of the equation, to which my point becomes, well, if head is the only thing that goes on the power side, but everything else is defining service and care and nurturing, then maybe the headship is about service and care and nurturing as well. And so we shouldn't read it as a power - as a power play at all. And so the way the entire passage is framed helps us to understand what's going on in the passage.

Gary Barnes: Yeah, I'd say the two big correctives on that is head shouldn't be on the power side in terms of negative power. It should be on the power side in terms of positive power.

Darrell Bock: Right.

Gary Barnes: And that's the other corrective is that there's nothing more powerful than love, see. But it's not a self-serving power.
Darrell Bock: Right, which is why the image of Jesus' sacrifice that's written in the passage because that is the door through which you're walking.

Gary Barnes: I think we're talking about the main reason why the Protestant has the greatest frequency of occurrence of spousal abuse, and that's because this becomes ammo. This use of the term, "head," becomes ammo for living like the gentiles do. This is my ticket for having you be controlled by me.

Debby Wade: Right.

Gary Barnes: And, therefore, your role is to let me control you.

Darrell Bock: So it's not only spousal abuse - I might have a little fun here - it's not only spousal abuse, but it's abuse of the concept of headship -

Gary Barnes: That's right.

Debby Wade: Yes.

Darrell Bock: -in a serious kind of way. And it is a complete, as we said, distortion of what that passage is striving for. If the picture is Christ sacrificing himself, being our Savior, nurturing and caring, that's one element of it. Another picture I like to use, since we're still talking biblically, is the picture of oneness.

And I like to say to couples - I do this in what little premarital counseling I do - I'll say to them, "You know God has made you into one. Well, what that means is is that when you're a famous marital discussion where there's not unity about what's to be done, that when you're spouse is speaking to you, you should hear it like it's your own voice talking, that they're a part of you and you're a part of them.

And so even though it's coming at you from an angle you may not expect, the respect and the attention that you give to is if you were speaking as a part of yourself. Because, in God's eyes, you are a unit and you need to think of yourself that way." Is that a helpful way to think about this?
Gary Barnes: Yeah, I think that in terms of there is a us, that's the one, the us. It's not like the joke during the wedding when the minister says, "And the two shall be one." And then the one guys leans over to the other guy, a buddy sitting in the audience, and says, "Yeah, but which one."

Darrell Bock: Yeah.

Gary Barnes: See it's not where one disappears -

Darrell Bock: That's right.

Gary Barnes: - for the other so that they can be one. So that's - it's two whole people, two separate identities, distinct, making choices together that cultivate the third identity of the us. And in spousal abuse situations, that's not the working model.

Darrell Bock: Okay. One person's being completely suppressed.

Gary Barnes: That's exactly right.

Darrell Bock: Now, Debby, let me ask you, from the female point of view, because it said 95 percent of these situations are males against females, unless we're dealing with an Amazon marriage, we really aren't - we aren't dealing with a woman, generally speaking, doing this to a man. What do you tend to see when someone comes in in this kind of situation from the female perspective? What do you -

Debby Wade: When the female's the victim.

Darrell Bock: Right.
Debby Wade: Yeah. Typically, like I said, worn out, exhausted, feeling that they have no sense of worth, no sense of self, questions whether they have anything to offer or of value. And then scared to death to even, in my office, to be sharing for fear that if anything were to come out that then the abuse would get worse. Fear of being able to leave it because they've been made to feel that they cannot make it on their own.

And I think another term that - or statement that often is quoted, the abuse will often say, "No one will love you as good as I love you." And they will believe that. And so then, "If this is me being loved as good as I'm going to loved, then how could I survive out there and be loved any less or any worse?" And so there's that real mental and emotional damage that's done to the soul and to the spirit as well.

Darrell Bock: And so one of the factors that comes into this as the person is wrestling with this is just the fear of the unknown or pulling or getting some distance in the situation just to get their hands around it, which can be very, very difficult because the person could feel like they're going to be isolated and on their own and not able to deal with this.

And in some states where laws very much favor the husband in the relationship - I don't know how else to put it. I have a relative - I've got several relatives who've gone through a divorce, but one in particular I'm thinking of where the spouse was a wife who had opted out of a situation involving alcohol abuse. And the difficulty of being willing to create that distance because of the uncertainty of what's on the other side also becomes a holding - element that creates a holding pattern in the relationship. Is that common?

Gary Barnes: Yeah. And that's all part of the control mechanism, is to lead the other spouse to believe that things would be worse if they tried to move outside of this relationship.

Darrell Bock: Okay, well the next - go ahead -

Debby Wade: Can I say something real quick?

Gary Barnes: Yes, go ahead.
Debby Wade: I have worked with a couple of couples that it has been the man who's been the victim. And, in some ways, that has even been more difficult because how many men stand up and go, "Yeah, I'm being beaten up and raged at by my wife," to be believed in as the victim? It's like, "Yeah, well, what are you causing to - you know, to cause her to do that?" or, "Surely you can stop that." And they've had to resort to calling the police.

Darrell Bock: Wow.

Debby Wade: And it's only when police are willing to put the woman in handcuffs and take them away is when the men are validated or, "Okay, I really was abused."

Darrell Bock: Now, that's raised an interesting situation. When I was a student at FMU, I had to - one of our assignments in one of our classes - it was a counseling class actually - was to ride with the police for a day and see what they go through. And what I saw were police who were really, really hesitant to walk into domestic violence situations and intervene. So even though, in some cases, they knew - I mean it was repeated. I mean they knew this was a house where things were a mess. So I'm sure with a counseling standpoint you all have contact with police on a regular basis in these kinds of situations. What kinda limitations are they operating under?

Gary Barnes: Well, you know I have a buddy who's a career police officer, and he'll say right up front, "That the last thing I ever want to walk into is a domestic violence situation." Because when you get in the middle of that, it's so unpredictable. And you have two enemies coming at you from both directions. And so they really have a difficult task to try to step in and intervene in the middle of that.

Darrell Bock: And it actually does have to be pretty - pretty threatening before they'll even opt to do anything. Is that right?

Gary Barnes: Oh, yeah.

Darrell Bock: Okay well lets look at - we're talking about violence now. I think the next section we're going to look at is going to discuss this.

Video

Gary Barnes: Wow.
Darrell Bock: Well, this raises a whole series of questions. We've got the issue of violence on the one hand. We've got, "What do you do when you hear about this situation?" And then we've got the movement towards a kind of separation to create, at best, a cooling-off situation where you can deal with this. So let's deal with them in order.

We talked already a little bit about the violence. But the idea of the right that some people feel to control, is it one of the more difficult things unraveling why a person wants to have so much control in a relationship and to the extent of suppressing the personhood or the person that they're - that they supposedly care about?

Debby Wade: Right. I don't know what you find, Dr. Barnes, but I know that, typically, for most of the ones that I've worked with, there's fear and insecurity that are there, and so the male feels so threatened. Although he's the intimidating - the mean, this grouchy one, on the inside, he's really the one that struggles with feeling insecure in fear, and that motivates his need to control everything, almost like, "If I'm not controlling it, it won't happen the way I want."

Or, "If I'm not controlling it, she may get closer to other people. If I don't control the people she's around, she may like them better than me." But such a sense of fear that kinda feeds what he was saying, that need that, "I should be able to control this and it's my right to control it."

Darrell Bock: You know the irony here is that the person is - the person who's controlling is really manifesting incredible weakness and incredible insecurity.

Gary Barnes: And I think there's a great sense of being hopeless or helpless themselves, see, that really drives this sense of, "I really need to be in control here, and I'll -" whatever means is necessary is actually justified.

Darrell Bock: So unraveling that, it seems to me, from me from a counseling standpoint has got to be a very complex and long-term operation.

Gary Barnes: Like I say, this is not just negative emotions of anger that are out of control. This is deep-seated important places for them to get awareness of that aren't going to be a quick and easy awareness.
Darrell Bock: Okay. So that's the violence part of and the abusive part of it. Let's take a look at this. What do you - the practical question - what do you do either if you're in a situation, probably that's one scenario, or if you know someone who's in this situation? Let's start first with in the situation. And I suspect that one of the things that you're going to say very, very quickly is, "Don't keep it a secret. Try and get help in one way or another." Is that -

Gary Barnes: Totally. That's the thing that perpetuates the whole problem is the secrecy or the sense of this is normal or this is justified. Or, in many cases, the victim actually is led to believe that, "I am the problem. This is all because of me that this is happening." So that has to be brought out into the open and bright lights shined on that.

Darrell Bock: So that's to - does it make any difference where you go do you think? Or what kind of advice - I mean though -

Gary Barnes: I would imagine the way in which this might start for someone who's timid about coming forward is they don't run to a counselor, they don't run to a pastor, but they might tell a friend. And that may or may not be good enough, depending on how that's enough. Fair enough.

Debby Wade: Right, right. And I think each case my be different. Some people have some really good solid friends that, "I'm going to be heard and trusted," and they - the friend could provide maybe a shelter in their home that they could come and have a place to go.

I think if an abuser, though, has the victim so controlled that they really don't have any close friends, the next best option - if they're associated with a church - is going to someone on staff at the church I would think, to just say, "This is what's happening in my home.

"And I know it doesn't look like it from the outside, but this is what's happening in my home and it's very scary. It doesn't feel like a safe place to be." I think also there's times when absolutely counselors are going to be needed to help with that reconciliation process if it can even be done.
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_Darrell Bock:_ Now, that raises another good practical question, and that is the interface that happens between churches and counselors, because sometimes churches don't have their own internal counseling, and sometimes a pastor may or may not feel qualified when someone walks into their office and shares something likes this, feel comfortable or qualified to deal with this. Or the tricky part of it may be a person may think they're qualified to deal with this, but they may really not be.

_Gary Barnes:_ Right.

_Darrell Bock:_ And so they may bring more harm than good to the situation. So what advice would you give to pastors and pastoral staff for that, how to make the judgment about how involved they should be? Because this looks to me to be - once the situation's emerged there, they are counselor intensive, if I can say it that way. It's not something that you have one or two talks -

_Gary Barnes:_ That's right.

_Darrell Bock:_ - and it's done. This is going to take multiple get togethers to kinda of sort your way through. So what about -
My big encouragement for all those listening who would be in church leadership roles would be that you don't see or hear what we're talking about today and see this as something that you just refer and you don't continue to be a part of it, because that would actually contribute to the problem of a person being isolated from the needed support system.

So they would surely need to have the right professional care, but they really need to have their church communities come around them in a loving way, modeling the opposite kind of submitting one to another out of reverence to Christ. And so I would love for churches to actually take more initiative in this area.

And the way that they can do that is to even have awareness building within their own church community, maybe even a particular Sunday or a month or something, where they're having local shelter leaders come in and help provide information and education and that we can realize that just because we don't see this, visually, as a problem doesn't mean it doesn't exist within our circle.

And so to give people kinda permission to begin to talk about it is very, very important. And then someone who may be very fearful of mentioning it might just have that much encouragement to share it.

Now, how would you create that environment? In other words, the environment in a church that says, "We're willing to talk about that"? What steps, practical steps could someone have to do that?

Well, I think the church should be, of all people or groups, leading the way on correct biblical teaching about submission and headship. So there needs to - that is just like a first step. We've got to do that, okay. And then that can pave the way for, "Okay, so what other things should we also learn related to this?" And then bringing in other mental health professionals or people from local shelters would be great ways of having people just increase the dialog.

So that's going to involve, obviously, the way even you illustrate and talk about the passage, the type of scenarios that you talk about when you talk about headship or abuse of headship.
Darrell Bock: But that also is going to involve maybe a topical study looking at the issues of marriage and family in which this is a component that you talk about. And you let people know who they can contact and where the help is available, that kind of thing.

It seems to me you've got to - I don't know what other word to use. You're almost going to have to push people to walk into this area because of the hesitation of going there without - I mean without shoving them. But there does need to be an acknowledgement and openness that this is something that should be pursued.

Gary Barnes: And the other big thing, Darrell, is - I think the church needs to be stronger on - is the redemptive message of Christ. And this is a real-life situation that Christ can be redemptive in. Think about it. If we have 28 percent of marriages that are experiencing this - and that's most likely underreported - and if Protestant church are the leading group of all of the subgroups where this is characteristic of, within your church you're going to have one out of four to one out of three people who could be experiencing this.

Darrell Bock: In fact, the likelihood is the person's someone on the pew that you sit on.

Gary Barnes: That's right.
Debby Wade: And we're speaking of the spouses, and then that's not including the children that are impacted by this. I did work with one family that the church that they were attending at the time, the woman was abused, mentally and emotionally, and somewhat physically. Never anything broken or blacked or anything, but a lot of roughness. And then she felt the dad was doing sexually inappropriate things with the girls present.

Well, the church that she was attending at the time when she went, the staff really did not support her, did not support - believe that this was going on, and really did not support her moving out of the house and getting the kids' safety. But she had a friend that was willing to let her do that. The friend gave her my name, got the girls into counseling, got her into counseling. And then I made some recommendations of some other churches.

And she got plugged into a women's group, and these women came around and supported her. They knew that she needed - the girls needed clothes, they needed - she needed a vehicle. And among this group of Bible study women, they provided - ended up providing a car for her because they - I mean when she left, because the church did not support her, they encouraged the man, really, to let her leave with nothing, and so she left with nothing.

And so this other church came alongside and really loved them. And so much so, that as these girls grew up, when one of the girls became a teenager, ended up doing an internship with this other - with this church. So some churches really are learning how to come alongside and support and love and bring in the servantship of Christ, being true servants of one another and tending to one another. And to me then, the blessing and the redeeming, everybody gets to experience.