Domestic Abuse

Part 2 of 2: The Church’s Response to Domestic Violence
with Darrell Bock, Michelle Woody
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Darrell Bock

Well, okay, so we’ve talked about the victim. We’ve talked about the friend. Now let’s talk about the church. This is a tricky question to ask, because I’m making an assumption. It may be a bad assumption. The assumption is that someone who gets into this situation in many cases probably also has established some distance from the church, so the church is not a natural place for them to go or even think about going. And maybe they’ve walked away from the church—they were involved at one point in their life, but their life circumstances and what they got through their—they’ve distanced themselves from the church, it could be for a variety of reasons. So the idea of going to a church as a part of the solution either doesn’t enter their heads or doesn’t likely enter their heads, which produces a double problem because one person who is the victim may not think, “I can get help at a church,” and so doesn’t go there, but then there’s also the condition of how the church responds to someone who shows up who hasn’t been at their church and hasn’t been associated with their church, so why should they become involved? That kind of thing. So I painted a pretty cloudy picture, so take us through the fog.
Michelle Woody

Okay, it is cloudy, is it? Well, as you stated, we have that person who has distanced themselves from the church, but we have to look at the underlying reasons why they’ve distanced themselves from the church. Number one, their experience is based on either their own mother or family, grandmother, someone they’ve known, their aunt, someone took them to church, and that person who, for whatever reason, either they don’t like them, they’re thinking they never wanna be a part of an institution like that. And that may be a reason why they don’t go. So they now are at the point where they have to make a decision. Their friend has now said, “Come with me to my church, you’ll get help there.” Now, they come and they find out in the bureaucracy of the church, that there are steps. You can come, but we have to register you, that means they have to put their name down, it has to be a commitment on their part and there may be even some type of financial responsibility, a requirement.

Secondly, there will be a requirement even for going to classes or having to take part in whatever program that the church is offering. Again, we have to realize we have people who do not have the skills even necessary to be a part of these environments, and they don’t have the social skills. They may not be dressed appropriately. So we have all of these self-related issues that prevent the person from going in, and they pose as barriers. They’re thinking, “No, I can’t do it.” And so the church has to, first of all, go over that hurdle. “Come as you are.” And although it sounds good, and we say it, well, there are people sitting in the pews who aren’t agreeing with the words that they hear, “Come as you are.” They’re thinking that we have a protocol here and you have to look a certain way, you have to be a certain way and this is what we need. So that’s one challenge. The other side of it is there’s shame. “My mother—especially mothers—my mother didn’t like him in the first place. She already told me this would end badly and this is my mom’s church, so I don’t want to go to my mom’s church with this, because my mom already has told all of her friends that this is the situation.” So, another barrier that we have to overcome. So, again, the underlying issue, if I had to say there was one, we have to help people understand that you can make a mistake, but you can also recover from that mistake. And we as a church body, all things being equal, should be able to help you with that.

Darrell Bock

So the hope is that the church would produce an environment that ends up being helpful, but sometimes that isn’t the case. What are the kinds—you’ve already suggested this a little bit—but what are the kinds of mistakes that a church makes in attempting or in thinking about ministering people who are caught in this situation? What are the common things that you see?
Michelle Woody: The churches, especially large churches, the bureaucracy of the large church sometimes makes it complicated to the point where the person feels, “They’re not hearing me and they’re not seeing me. They’re not caring about me.”

Darrell Bock: You’re being referred down the ladder to someone rather than the head pastor, for example, and as you’re being passed along, the sense is well, this isn’t really helping me.

Michelle Woody: Right. It’s not just the senior pastor who delivered the best teaching message you’re going to hear, but the administrative pastor now passes you on to the next person, next administrator, who gives you to someone else, who sends you to someone, and now finally you get another person who says, “You know, I don’t have time today, can we make another appointment?” But you’re in crisis right now.

Darrell Bock: Wow.

Michelle Woody: So I think we need to understand that, and even when our churches try not to do that, sometimes it still comes across that way because, again, by the time the victim gets the nerve and the courage to say, “I’m a victim,” they want the help right now. It may have taken weeks for them to get to that point, so to hear, “Come back and we can see you in 10 days,” that’s just not the expectation.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, that’s interesting, because you sit there and say it took the person a very, very long time to take the step of deciding, okay, I’m going to opt for a change, I’m going to do something about this, I’m going to tell someone about it, and that person is in a very vulnerable position once they make that decision. And so to put off that vulnerability and to make them deal with the uncertainty of that vulnerability even longer when it took them such a mammoth effort to get to the point of saying, “I’m going to be vulnerable and make the move to change,” it does nothing but make the situation even more dramatic and traumatic for the person.

Michelle Woody: Yes. Think of it as an open wound. And so the wound is opened, but instead of helping that wound to heal, having some type of salve or cream to cover it, you put salt in it. And it burns. And so that really is the effect that it has on that victim.
Darrell Bock  
So let’s assume the best. Let’s assume that the church picks up the ball, the pitch out comes and they take hold of it and they dive in, the key question to ask now is what is going to be asked of the church? If they take this on, what do they need to recognize they are taking on?

Michelle Woody  
They need to recognize that they are taking on an entire system. A family system. Most times, it’s not just that victim that’s there, so if there are children, if there are pets, financial challenges, the church has a responsibility.

Darrell Bock  
I’ve heard you mention the dog or cat twice now. I’m curious. How’s that work? [Laughs]

Michelle Woody  
The alcoholic person, the abuser comes in, the dog either whines, the dog comes under their feet, the cat is right there on the bed, but this is my domain, there’s some type of violence inflicted on that pet and now the children are upset or the victim is upset and tries to defend, and that just makes the situation worse, exacerbates that whole situation, and now there’s more violence. So the abuser at times now is punching holes in the walls or those who are in the room or those who are around are throwing things to exert power. It’s a volatile situation. It’s explosive. And so that’s what happens, and I dare say I can’t tell you the number of times that I’ve had to even work through those situations. But coming back to now the person is at the church, what do we do? A lot of times churches now are starting to put together resources and to collaborate with their local communities. So we don’t want to say that everyone has a crisis management program in a church, but they do know enough resources, so they’re connecting people with utilities. You’d be amazed at the number of people who are in the dark at home, kids who go to school every day and no one knows that there are no lights on in the home. We’re starting to learn there’s no food in the home all the time, but we don’t know there are no lights on or running water, which is against the law in most states, but you don’t hear that.

Darrell Bock  
So that means not only kids probably not going to school, but even if they are going to school, they may not be able to do their homework.
Michelle Woody: Absolutely. And they can’t do their homework because of what they heard last night or what they may have witnessed last night or been a part of last night. And I think that’s probably another discussion to talk about, what happens to the children, but oftentimes we have a lot of our abusers who may turn and say, you know, you—they didn’t say they wouldn’t say you messed up, they say they’d use much more flowery language—but they would say, “And your punishment is to give me the daughter or the son.” Depends on the situation. Now that child becomes a victim.

Darrell Bock: So that’s what you mean by a system, is the fact that you’re dealing not just with the abuser and his victim, but the abuser, the victim, and anyone who’s related to the victim who’s aware of what’s going on. They’re all in play.

Michelle Woody: They’re all a part of this. And then you also have now the victim’s family or others who may wanna come in as the protectors, and they’ll say come with me or they’ll try to come in and change that situation, but now the abuser’s saying basically, “I own.”

Darrell Bock: “This is my space.”

Michelle Woody: “This is my domain. I am the head and you can’t do it.” So there are all these issues and so—

Darrell Bock: Well, we come back down the road and deal with how this impacts kids and how to minister to the kids’ part of this, because this is obviously part of the equation. And one of the things we do with our topics is we do loop back, so we’ll plan to do that. We’ve got a date in the future. Now, let’s talk about how you minister to the person who’s caught in abuse. Obviously, you’re dealing with this system thing, but what are the issues that you can anticipate coming up as you are wrestling with this area from the person who’s the direct victim, if I can say it that way?
Michelle Woody  Sure. As the church counselor, the person comes in, the first thing you want to do is you want to give that person permission to tell their story and listen to the story without interruption. Really patiently, let them know that you care about them more than anyone else right now, and you want to hear the entire story. From there, after they share that story, you wanna check in with them. How do they feel emotionally about sharing it? And most times, you don’t even have to check in, you can see they’re afraid, looking over their shoulders, wondering at any moment something is not going to go well here because of me sharing my story. So they share. After that, a lot of times—and I know I have asked, “What is your plan?” After they’ve shared their story, another question is, “How are you coping? How have you coped?” You want to ask them open-ended questions rather than yes or no related questions, because if we get those, we can’t make progress. And a lot of times, the open-ended questions, the victim gets to hear themselves share what is happening, so that they can now have a stronger experience with what’s happening to them. They’re not detached now. They have to share and take ownership, so that’s what we try to do.

Darrell Bock  And the issues that you see, I mean, we’ve obviously got some notes here that we’re looking at. I see phrases like identity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and those kinds of things. What are you raising when these issues come up? What’s the victim having to deal with?

Michelle Woody  With self-esteem, we want to see just how well that person views themselves. What’s their assessment of their own value and their own self-worth? Do they feel good about themselves? And a lot of times we find they don’t. No one, sadly, no one has shared good things about them. And even if they have, because of mistakes they’ve made in the past, they’ve changed their own assessment of who they are.

Darrell Bock  Which means that sometimes can blame themselves for the situation they’re in rather than seeing that they’ve been—I mean, they sense that they’ve been wronged, but they don’t really in some senses think they’ve been wronged, because they feel like, well, I’m not worthy or worth or I’m getting what I deserve. Can there be that kind of element in the equation?
Michelle Woody

They often blame themselves and often feel that it’s their fault that they’re in the situation. “If I was pretty enough, if I had lost the baby weight from the last baby, he would love me more.” Sadly, I’ve heard comments like that. That’s one view that they have. But with self-efficacy, that’s another part of this equation, and with the self-efficacy, do they even believe in themselves and believe in their abilities to do something well? Do they have what it takes? And a lot of times, again, they’ve been told, “You don’t have what it takes.”

Darrell Bock

And that leads to a hesitation to do anything about it, because if they’re out on their own and they think, well, “I can’t function of my own, I have to have someone who can protect me.” or—

Michelle Woody

“I dropped out of school at 14. I dropped out of school at 16, 17,” and we have so much of that in our public school system today. They’re thinking they don’t have the skills. And, again, the audience may say, well, they can work, they can go to school, they can do this. I did it, my mother did it, we all did it. Well, that may be, but it’s complicated in their environment and with no one supporting them or very few people around them to do that, they’re not thinking they can.

Darrell Bock

So self-efficacy, you have a sentence in here that’s interesting. It says, “Self-efficacy is known to be an excellent predictor of behavior.” So what exactly does that mean?

Michelle Woody

When we think about, “Do I believe I can do something?” If the person doesn’t think they can, if everyone has told them they can’t do anything, they’ll never be anything, they’ll never accomplish anything and, “Oh, by the way, the things that you did you, you didn’t do well,” all of those things become something that adversely affects their decision making and how they view themselves.

Darrell Bock

It’s like added chains on the person.

Michelle Woody

Yes, so weights that really pull them down and so because of that it leads to depression, it leads to other negative emotions and so oftentimes people will self-medicate or if they don’t self-medicate they will go into withdrawal. And so once this happens, it’s just a downward spiral that in fact affects how someone might be able to respond.
Darrell Bock: Now, you used the phrase self-medication and I’m going to press you here. Are you talking about resorting to drugs and that kind of thing?

Michelle Woody: Yes, I am. To numb the effects of my failure, okay, then if we include the alcohol along with that, to numb the pain of what I have to do in order to survive financially. This is where we are—

Darrell Bock: So you’re describing a real cycle that takes place so that wherever there’s domestic abuse, you can be suspicious that there are other issues that also are coming along side of it, and the domestic abuse may—in some senses it doesn’t matter whether it’s the cause or the effect. There’s a big dysfunctional situation that’s happening.

Michelle Woody: Yes, and in some cases, the cycle has been going on for so long, some people don’t even recognize that as abuse. They don’t recognize it as a problem; they think that this is the way it is for everyone.

Darrell Bock: In fact, the side show, which is seen as a means of relief, is actually contributing to making the situation worse, but they think it’s a solution as opposed to being part of the problem.

Michelle Woody: Exactly.

Darrell Bock: Wow, well, so we’ve got churches that are going to deal with this and really, you’re talking about coming alongside and in a significant way it’s going to take time, it’s going to take energy, it’s not something that—it’s going to take—I like to think of counseling sometimes when it’s really in a serious mode from an efficiency standpoint in one sense. This is not form the standpoint of the person you’re ministering to, but just your own timing. It’s going to be a very inconvenient kind of ministry. The person’s not going to tell you at 2:45 tomorrow, I’m going to have a need and we can schedule it.
Michelle Woody

Exactly, okay, or the person may not be willing to share on a particular day. You know, and I often tell the students here the one thing—we do what we do because we’re called to try to help people, face what they’re dealing with and change. But oftentimes when you deal with people, it’s messy. We just have to face it that today the sky is blue, but tomorrow stormy outside and that storm comes right into the counseling room.

Darrell Bock

There are so many dimensions to this. One we haven’t mentioned yet but that also is important is how do you deal with the information that you get? There are sometimes confidentiality commitments and that kind of thing, so what’s that dimension of the equation?

Michelle Woody

I’m glad you brought up confidentiality and our informed consent that we provide to anyone that we counsel by law, we say there are limits to confidentiality. So that means if I feel that there is an intent to harm or you’ve been harmed in some way, that might limit the confidentiality agreement that we’ve talked about. I may have to share because we have to protect you, and safety is the most important thing. We often have to share, but we also have to wrestle with the consequences of that sharing. What will it mean for that particular client if we share? And so in that case instead of just making that decision, if it were me in practice, like now I would consult with other counselors, with supervisors, others would be involved in that decision, possibly even the board if necessary.

Darrell Bock

Wow. Wow.

Michelle Woody

So imagine the pastor. The pastor’s not equipped to do that. Pastoral counseling, certainly, that’s something that most pastors can do. They can talk about Scripture, they can tell you what “Thus says the Lord,” about you, about loving you, and what should be available to you, but now when it comes to helping you who’s sitting there with tears and possibly with visible signs of being harmed, besides turning you over to the authorities, they don’t necessarily know what to do.
Darrell Bock

Well, that’s the next question, then, what should they do? When they realize they’re out of their pay grade and they’re not equipped but they know this person needs help, they can’t just send them back to where they’ve come from. Something’s gotta be done. What advice would you give to churches?

Michelle Woody

I would say today that churches should automatically, given our complex culture in most urban cities, especially, now start to view themselves as institutions that must go outside the walls. We have as a church a bigger responsibility than to just address needs of our members when they come into the church, so there has to be some mechanism in place for follow-up. Go to the home, let’s see the space. Oftentimes we say come into the office at the church, but we’ve got to go to the home. And once you go to the home, you get a better sense of what’s happening there, and I will say that churches are reluctant and oftentimes those elders, deacons, or whatever the leadership structure is in the church, they’re reluctant. We don’t really want to get involved, or those people live in a different section of town that we’re accustomed to. So we have to now start to think differently as the church. We have to go outside.

Darrell Bock

Do there come times—I think I know the answer to this question, but do there come times when a church has to do, in effect, a referral and say, “We’re going to continue to care for you personally, but what you’re dealing with is beyond what any of us are capable of actually managing from a counseling level.” So where do churches go?

Michelle Woody

I think the answer’s yes, churches can go and have that referral—child protective services if there are children involved, a shelter, such as a shelter here in the Dallas area like a woman’s shelter –Genesis is one of our women’s shelters for domestic violence. Nexus. There are a number of them, but I think where we’re missing out as a church is we refer, but we wash our hands of it.

Darrell Bock

We hand off rather than stay involved.
Michelle Woody
Yes, this is not a baton, we’re not in a relay. So I think what we need to do as a church is say, “We’re either going to go with you or we want you to make this initial step—because I do think it’s important that the person make the step, but we’re going to involved with you and we’re going to be supportive with you.” I think a lot of times what victims want is they want big brother to protect them or make the decision for them. And I don’t think that that’s the church’s role. We have to be careful. We don’t want to make decisions for people, there’s a liability issue. Later they’ll say, “But the church said I should do this.” We never want to get involved there. But I do think we need to walk alongside.

Darrell Bock
When I had led spiritual formation groups where there was a period where we could take time to expose them to a variety of ministries, et cetera, and I had them walk—at the time it wasn’t three blocks away from the seminary. There’s a whole stretch of houses, shelters, abuse centers, drug abuse centers, et cetera, because I wanted them as pastors to know what the civic resources were that were available to them to say, “You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. You don’t operate in a vacuum. There are people who are trained to help people who are in these situations, and you need not to be afraid to go there and come alongside them.” And sometimes I think pastors either by accident or some other way come into contact with these groups and recognize eventually that they exist, but I think it’s important as part of a pastor’s training to understand that these groups exist and to get to know a little bit about them, enough about them so that if they need their services in the context of ministry, they know how to work with them and know what to expect from them and know then what they need to supply that they won’t get through these organizations.

Michelle Woody
Absolutely. The relationships have to be fluid. And that’s another part of going outside the walls of the church. Let’s not just go in, and think this is all we have to do.

Darrell Bock
That’s right. There are obviously many dimensions to this and as is often the case, we’ve only just scratched the surface in terms of talking about this, but Michelle, I really do appreciate you coming in and talking with us about this and helping us kind of get our hands around it. I’m going to ask a standard journalistic question to end this podcast and that is there anything that we haven’t said or haven’t mentioned that you think we should say in the context of this conversation that you’d want to say and/or encourage people about as we think about this area?
Michelle Woody

Sure. Two things. For the victim, the victim needs to know: this is not the end. There has to be encouragement and hope that is offered to that victim. And for the abuser, the abuser needs to know that grace can be extended, and that there can be change, but there must be accountability. Finally, both parties need to know that domestic violence is an unacceptable behavior, and that has to be stated in a way that they’re clear that there aren’t excuses, we can’t rationalize it, we can’t blame, we can’t be in denial. It’s just not acceptable behavior, and that it affects more than just the two parties.

Darrell Bock

Now, in your summary you’ve raised an issue that we didn’t cover that we probably should at least mention, and that is we’ve focused completely on the victim and the impact on those around it who are watching the victimization take place, but we really haven’t talked about the one who causes the abuse very much. Obviously, if a church walks into a situation in which there’s domestic violence, there’s more than one player that they’re concerned about. So what advice do you give to churches about how to deal with, approach, begin to broach, however you wanna say it, the situation that the abuser is in?

Michelle Woody

Okay. I think for that person, since we start with the premise that domestic violence is unacceptable, now there has to be training and perhaps no one has never fully explained spiritually what the role of the man is in a marriage. You are the head of household, but Ephesians 5 also says that you are to love your wife as if it were you. And most men don’t know that part of it. So I think—

[Laughs] Okay, I’ll just let that pass. I’ll let that go right by me. [Laughter]

Michelle Woody

Spiritual training is important, but beyond the spiritual training, they have to know too that there has to be a plan for change. And that they need to know that there could be legal ramifications if the behavior continues. A lot of times the abuser will say, “It’s changed. That was just a one shot problem, I lost it, I lost my job that day,” and just go right down the list of why they did it. But instead of just taking that at face value and forgiving that person, you have to check in with the victim periodically and make sure that yes, change has taken—but also if that abuser has come forward, chances are that they do want to change in some way, they just don’t know how. That person also needs to be in treatment and there can’t really be marriage counseling that takes place until that person finishes their treatment.
So and this is a situation in which is important not just simply to say, “Oh, they confessed, and I forgave them,” and walk away. If you’re dealing with a behavior here that is so deeply ingrained, moving towards some form of counseling and/or accountability is really pretty important, isn’t it?

Absolutely, and that really helps to share their level of responsibility that they probably haven’t had in the past.

Well, like I said, you just introduced the area for us at a real practical level. We did a podcast earlier on just kind of the reality of domestic abuse and how sometimes what churches do, they hesitate to get involved because they feel this is coming between a man and his wife and the church should be hesitant to do that, but there are cases where this does happen and where those who are victims of abuse need the support of a larger community to come around them and encourage them and lift them out of the cycle, if you will. And you’ve helped us to think through those steps and those stages and I really appreciate it. So thank you for being with us, Michelle.

Well, thank you, I really enjoyed it.

And thank you for being with us here on The Table Podcast, where we discuss issues of God and Culture.