

Roots of violence in the family

by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht

2 Samuel 11; 13

A pastor gently approaches a woman who has attended church with her family for a few years. He has noticed her crying on several occasions after worship. She does not participate in the women's group and is usually silent. Today she has come to church without her husband. "How is it going?" the pastor asks. The woman cannot speak, but tears fill her eyes. The pastor asks again, this time in a pastoral care manner: "If your tears had words, what would they tell me?" The woman responds in a low voice, "I am hurting . . ."

In looking at ways to help family life be healthier, we need to look at reasons families are unhealthy. Reports on domestic violence in North America inform us that one in three women will be impacted by violence during her lifetime. The state of Pennsylvania in 2005 registered 180 deaths resulting from domestic violence. If home is a safe place, why do the majority of assaults happen in the home of the victim, by the hand of a person she/he knows?

Mennonite therapist D. Pauline Zimmerman, in her book *If I Cry, Will Someone Understand Me?* writes on the importance of churches being educated on domestic violence, so that healing and hope may happen. Why does violence happen, even in Christian homes? I agree with many scholars that violence is a learned behavior. Dysfunctional families that tolerate violence produce children who abuse others as adults.

Violence is about using force—physical, verbal, sexual, or spiritual. We often confuse conflict with violence. As humans, we experience conflict with other people who strongly disagree with us, with family members who offend us in some way, with the school system for not accepting a particular policy. Conflict is normal, but when we choose to resolve the conflict using violence, there is a problem.

Our Christian obligation is to denounce injustice. But churches on many occasions have protected the offender and accused the victim. The vulnerable ones in society—women, the elderly, and children—have been victimized, those whom the Gospel calls

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“these little ones who believe in me” (Matt. 18:6). The individual and social temptation is to dominate the little ones and the most vulnerable. In the “kin-dom” of God we are called to speak up, to bring justice to these victims. Kin-dom living is not about abusing—taking away dignity—but giving life and returning dignity.

We can study and analyze violence to better understand it, but we cannot justify it. When we normalize violence, we keep it going. Violence is not a natural human tendency; it is a learned behavior. It can become so embedded in a person’s way of living that it can be difficult to unlearn. The clue for transformation is to understand that the roots of family violence are attitudes that perpetuate control and abuse of power, the superiority of men over women and adults over children. 📖

Prayer: *God of all creation who loves and forgives us, keep us free from all despair and fear. Amen.*

PONDER

1. *How can women recognize when excessive control is being exerted over them?*
2. *Share your struggles in knowing how to be helpful, while respecting boundaries, when concerned for another’s safety.*
3. *How can we work as families of peace to make our homes and churches safer places?*

Destructive Power and Control Can Include

- Using coercion and threats (to leave, commit suicide, to hurt another)
- Using intimidation (making another afraid through looks or actions, smashing things, hurting pets)
- Using emotional abuse (putting another down, name calling, making someone feel crazy or guilty, playing mind games)
- Using isolation (controlling another’s actions or location, who the other relates with or what the other reads; using jealousy to justify isolating another)
- Minimizing, denying, blaming (making light of or denying controlling behavior, not taking another’s concerns seriously, saying the other caused the controlling behavior)
- Using children (as intermediaries, threatening to take the children, inducing guilt about the children)
- Using gender privilege (treating another like a servant, making all the decisions, being the only one to define gender roles)
- Using economic abuse (by preventing another from getting or keeping a job, taking money, withholding money or information about money)
- Physical or sexual violence

Source: Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, Minnesota.