

# What would Jesus do? *Abuse and the church's role*

**W**hat a novel idea! Set aside the church's self-prescribed "principles and practices", and search the *living* Word to find out what Jesus would do. Here are some things Jesus would *not* do:

## **Overlook, dismiss, or hide abuse**

When a church or family ignores spousal abuse, it enables the abuser to continue and flourish, and allows the abuser to perpetuate his criminal behavior. For many churches, it is easier to pretend everything is okay than to admit failures and dysfunctions within the congregation.

*"If another believer sins, rebuke him . . ."* (Luke 17:3 NLT) *Jesus would expose the sin, offer grace and forgiveness to the sinner, and allow him to experience the consequences of his sin.*

## **Make blind or unwise assessments**

Even though she had a black eye from the beating by her husband, the pastor told her "your husband isn't a wife beater." He suggested that she submit to the elders of the church as they worked out this problem with her husband—who was the pastor's close friend and largest financial contributor of the church.

*Jesus would say, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." He would show the abuser the truth about his own wickedness, offer him the choice to repent, and then walk with him on the path to restoration and healing.*

## **Place more value on the sanctity of marriage than the safety of women and children and the sanctity of life**

Women who are battered should not have to choose between safety and the support of their church. However, many times they are reprimanded for leaving an abusive husband and coerced into quick forgiveness and reconciliation before the abuser has truly changed his behavior.

Three ministers (each in a different town) withheld information for years about one woman's husband, a church leader, who was accused of sexually molesting young boys. When she finally learned the truth during a custody hearing, she asked the pastors why

they had not told her at the time the incidents took place. Of the two who responded, both said they felt the information would have destroyed the marriage! Their concern for saving the marriage outweighed their concern for the safety of this woman and her son.

*Jesus showed that He was more concerned for people than laws and institutions when He healed a man on the Sabbath (Luke 14:1-6) "Jesus came to save people, not marriages."<sup>1</sup>*

## **Misinterpret scriptures such as Ephesians 5:20-33 to give men the right to control their wives and justify punishment**

Instead of following Christ's model of servant leadership in the home, an abusive man views it as his God-given right to have power and control over his wife, and rewrites the scripture to give himself the right to punish her whenever she falls short of his expectations.

*Jesus would remind us that He, as head of the church, is the role model for the husband. Has he ever been controlling and abusive toward the church? Or does He, as a servant leader, lovingly guide and nurture His church?*

## **Conditional acceptance**

Although churches should offer unconditional love, far too often families are only accepted by the congregation if they seem to fit in with the status quo. One woman who suffered abuse in the home said, "We have five beautiful children, and on Sunday we looked like a perfect family who belonged there, but in reality . . . I was living in hell."

Another woman felt very uncomfortable because she didn't fit in with married couples (they didn't want her to attend social functions alone), and she didn't fit in with single parents (because she was still married, although separated from her abusive husband).

*Jesus offers unconditional love and acceptance, and does not value a person for how he looks or what he owns. He said, "You are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside, but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. You try to look like*

*upright people outwardly, but inside your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Matthew 23:27-28 NLT)*

## **Place blame on the victim and pass judgment on her decision to leave**

*"I never had anyone beating on my door when my husband had an affair, or when I had to be tested for AIDS because of his unfaithfulness. But when I asked my husband to leave, I started getting phone calls from church people telling me I should be more submissive, that I should do what my husband wants, that I should obey him in order to keep the family together."*

These words came from a beautiful, young African-American lady who has been criticized and harshly judged for asking her abusive husband to leave. Instead of confronting the abuser and holding him accountable, many churches and family members place blame on the victim when she decides to take action to protect herself and her children.

Sometimes the first response a woman will hear from her pastor, after telling him about the abuse she suffers at home, is "What did you do to provoke him?"

After hearing a woman's story of abuse, many people ask (sometimes with an air of superiority) "Why did you stay so long? Why didn't you just leave?" However, as soon as the woman takes legal action or presses charges against her abuser, those same people become very judgmental and require her to give up her teaching position or leadership role in the church and submit to church discipline.

*Jesus would say, "Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?" (Matthew 7:1,3 NLT)*

Although some churches are guilty of perpetuating family violence, many other church communities and pastors are actively involved in stopping the cycle of abuse, providing safety for the victim and help for the abuser.

## **Does your church offer hope or perpetuate the pain?**

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*Next issue: Abuse and the Church's Responsibility*