



Safety Decisions in Troubled Times

By Catherine Clark Kroeger

There had not yet been the first glimmer of dawn in the Jerusalem sky when the drowsy guard thought he detected movement at the entrance leading from the royal palace to the Temple. Who could be trying to gain entrance so early while the portals were still locked?

As he roused himself, the guard recognized the shadowy figure of the king. Well, that was not surprising. King Zedekiah did a lot of pacing around at night. He had plenty of reason to worry with the threat of another Babylonian invasion imminent. That mighty war machine had rolled into Jerusalem once already, and the military takeover had left Zedekiah on the throne in place of the rebellious Jehoiachin. The deposed king and many others were marched away into exile, but for the rest life still went on in Jerusalem.

In 588 B.C. Zedekiah too had rebelled against the obnoxious overlords, only to become a target of swift retribution. Now all the land of Judah lay within the grip of Babylon, except for the cities of Azekah, Lachish, and

Jerusalem. The king had good reason to come to the Temple to pray.

But the guard could detect another figure moving toward the king—recognizable as that of the arch traitor Jeremiah. The would-be prophet was forever preaching a demoralizing message of Babylonian conquest and the need to negotiate a diplomatic surrender.

Take your choice of life or death! Everyone who stays in Jerusalem will die from war, famine, or disease, but those who go out and surrender to the Babylonians will live.
(Jer. 21:8–9)

His defeatist attitude was insupportable! A more unpopular man could not be found in all of Jerusalem. In order to silence him, it had been necessary to put him under arrest and consign him to a dungeon. Undeterred by his first prison term, he had continued to damage morale with his preaching until right-minded folk had him placed in the bottom of a cistern. How senseless to have released him again!

There were other prophets who were far more popular in Jerusalem. They spoke of God's sure deliverance of the beloved city, of peace that was soon to come, and of the power of the Temple's sanctity to preserve things as they had always been. These were the voices that brought sorely needed encouragement to a beleaguered people.

Fully awake now and incensed that the king would consult this wretched doomsayer, the guard left his sentry station and crept forward to overhear the conversation. What sort of treachery or treason were the two of them hatching? But the king had chosen the location well, in an open space so that no one could hear what was said between the two.

In point of fact, this encounter was the continuation of an earlier discussion between Zedekiah and Jeremiah. They had met once before privately at the palace. Jeremiah's message, though gloomy, was not unrealistic. Judah had lost its way long before, and God would no longer protect her from invasion. The approach of the Babylonians, he warned, was now

continued

inevitable. But there was still a way to preserve the city, the Temple and the continued reign of her king. The solution lay in suing for peace rather than offering armed resistance.

The Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel says: If you but surrender to Babylon, you and your family will live. And the city will not be burned. But if you refuse to surrender, you will not escape! The city will be handed over to the Babylonians, and they will burn it to the ground. (Jer. 38:17–18)

In point of fact, Jeremiah's politically astute advice was filled with realism. The rebellion had been a bad mistake. Capitulation would allow Judah's continued existence as a vassal state, under the people's own law, their own religious and public health system, their own language and culture.

This prospect was not nearly as rosy as that offered by Jerusalem's other prophets. They promised an independent state, safety from war, and Jewish sovereignty in their land. "Don't worry! The Lord says you will have peace... No harm will come your way" (Jer. 23:17).

But who was to be believed? Was it not more spiritual to trust solely in God's provision and protection? How could the nation's king seek refuge away from the Temple's protective shadow, among aliens with no knowledge of God? Should not trust be reposed in those who promised God's miraculous deliverance despite a seemingly impossible situation—rather than in the craggy old prophet who advocated a compromise that could bring safety?

Jeremiah insisted that it was essential to come to terms with the reality of human sin, and to recognize the obstinacy of those who refused to change their sinful conduct. The rival prophets were quite right that

God had promised peace and security for his obedient people, but they failed to call for changed conduct where there had been spiritual and moral failure. Jeremiah countered:

Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then will I let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers forever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. Will you steal and murder and commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! Declares the Lord. (Jer. 7:3–11)

Thus Jeremiah insisted that the Lord would no longer provide protection to a city and a temple that disobeyed and dishonored God at every turn. The Babylonian conquest was inevitable, but those who would listen could still find safety.

How often we talk with victims of domestic abuse who must face the same sort of decision. What are they to do in the face of rising danger? There will be some advisors who tell them simply to trust the Lord, to pray harder, to be more submissive, and all will be well. Is not this the

voice of God, and are not those who give this advice speaking from the Scriptures? Would it not be lack of faith to leave an unsafe situation?

There are others who encourage a more realistic view. Human sin may have made the home a very unsafe place in which to live. Is there a consistent pattern of abuse? Is there any evidence of repentance in the life of the offender? Even though abusers often promise to change, this is seldom the case without a lot of very hard work. God gives us free will and often abusers do not wish to change. How hard it is to recognize that!

Other voices may encourage a woman to seek counseling from a community shelter where thousands are guided into patterns of safety. Some view this as worldly wisdom, but it can save lives. It is not lack of faith to acknowledge the devastation that abuse can create in a marriage and to seek positive solutions.

God does indeed work miracles, but faithful believers must also do their part. There are many tragic instances in which a wife returns to a dangerous situation, having been given assurance that God will protect her. Often she brings her family and thereby increases the danger to all of them. There are options that can bring safety and help for a troubled relationship.


King Zedekiah also wrestled between the options that had been offered him. One path seemed more gloriously patriotic, more confident in God's power to give victory, more worthy of the leadership of a king. How could he engage in a compromise that would concede the overpowering might of the invading enemy?

The other option was more pragmatic: it required acknowledging the results of apostasy and sin. In the case of Judah, it meant understanding the consequences of her unfaith-

fulness to God and taking appropriate steps to avoid destruction.

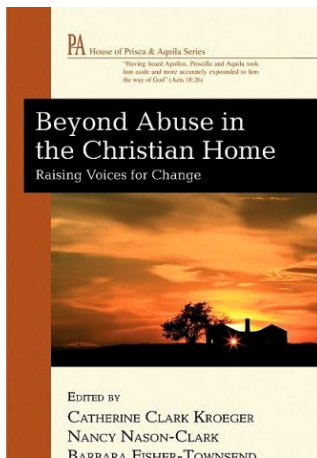
Human sin does not leave us with a rosy picture, but we can make wiser choices when we acknowledge its presence. When a victim of abuse is confronted with a need to make a choice, can she look at her circumstances realistically and assess the danger? Is she willing to seek help and shelter from those who do not

share her faith? Can she understand that a facility outside her own faith community may be best equipped to provide her with safety, help for her basic needs, care for her children and experienced counseling? Is not this too a provision of God? She may need to decide between believing against all odds—or recognizing the effects of human sin and prayerfully taking appropriate precautions.

Tragically, King Zedekiah decided not to surrender out of fear of his own countrymen. Yet the lives and well-being of so many others hung upon his decision. The refusal to capitulate ended as prophesied, with the burning of the city and the Temple and the deportation into exile of a large part of the population. The message of Jeremiah had been rejected and with it the path to safety. 

Beyond Abuse in the Christian Home: Raising Voices for Change

Reviewed by William David Spencer



***Edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger, Nancy Nason-Clark, Barbara Fisher-Townsend
Wipf & Stock, House of Prisca and Aquila Series, 2008***

B*eyond Abuse in the Christian Home* is a landmark book/manual/resource directory whose mission is the complete equipping of counselors, caretakers, clergy, church workers, family members, and friends working with or concerned about those who are being abused.

The topic is one not normally discussed in Christian circles. Consequently, the manuscript made the

rounds of several publishers who declined it as too much to handle before it was wisely published by Wipf & Stock and, after publication, enthusiastically embraced by its House of Prisca and Aquila line, whose mission is to produce egalitarian books with a high view of Scripture. The result is an important book that is only too much to handle for evangelical Christians who wish to act as though abuse is not a reality in conservative circles.

As a book, this multi-author volume includes a wide range of helpful, thought-provoking chapters, including first-person accounts by veterans of abuse who have personally overcome their situations, batterers who have altered their behavior, analyses of the roles of regret, forgiveness, hope, faith-based empowerment, empathy letters and other consciousness-raising techniques, theological reflections, and many other helpful sections.

As a manual, the book contains hands-on discussions detailing what domestic violence is and is not, advice on how to identify abusers and how to detect, counsel, rescue, and empower those in abusive situations, statistics profiling the age, ethnicity,

education level, alcohol use, etc., of abusers, the differences in perception between victims and abusers (particularly in one excellent section of chapter 7, “Understanding Male Batterers Accounts of their Behavior”), how ignorance in child-rearing can lead to abuse, what to expect in court, in batterers’ groups, in therapy, and an illuminating chapter entitled, “What I Wish Pastors had Known When I was Looking for Help,” that contains advice eye-opening to anyone in a position of power.

As a resource, the book contains extensive bibliographic references and discusses various organizations addressing domestic abuse and other related issues inside and outside the United States (e.g., Faithlink, the Rave Project, COSA, COSLAA, S-Anon, Al Anon, Faithful and True Ministries [which addresses sexual addictions], United States Agency One Program, and many others).

One of the most attractive aspects is how uniformly this volume is well-written, fluid, and accessible. The editors, being both professors and journal editors, have drawn from years of experience to do the hard work of polishing the text. The result is a treasury from which a wealth of

fresh and unexpected insights emerges. For example, chapter 10 targets the acronym J.O.Y. (“Jesus, Others, and You”), counseling, “I maintain that this song and other teachings like it has created generations of Christians who have difficulty with self-care and end up in abusive or addictive relationships” (143). Chapter 1 objects, “Domestic violence is not an anger problem. Therefore the commonly prescribed ‘anger management’ classes for the abuser will not help. In fact, longitudinal research shows that abusers can be just as violent (or even more violent!) when they are calm” (17). As one can see, this book is well thought out and grounded on professional research and experience.

Does this valuable resource lack anything? Yes, an index is sorely needed to sift through and locate so

much helpful information. Hopefully, it will be added in a future edition.

The book has one more dimension that sets it apart. It is a *festschrift*; that is, a tribute volume to the “life and work” (vii) of Dr. Catherine Kroeger, principal founder of both Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) and Peace and Safety in the Christian Home (PASCH). Cathie’s legacy through research, such as books as this one, the continuing contribution of her organizations, and her individual impact on countless lives has revealed her to be one of the outstanding evangelical statespersons of the mid-twentieth to early twenty-first centuries. Appropriately, her tribute volume is powerful, deeply moving, and enormously helpful to anyone who cares for those who may be struggling with the silent terror—domestic abuse. This book should be available in

every Christian home, church, and parachurch organization. ✂

Rev. Dr. William David Spencer is editor of Priscilla Papers, the academic journal of Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), the author/editor of ten books, including Global Voices in Biblical Equality: Women and Men Serving Together in the Church (Wipf & Stock, House of Prisca and Aquila Series, 2008) and the forthcoming Marriage at the Crossroad (IVP, 2009), founding pastor of encouragement at Pilgrim Church, Beverly, MA, and an adjunct associate professor of theology and director of the Athanasian Scholars program and co-director of the Africanus Ph.D. Research Guild for Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s Center for Urban Ministerial Education (CUME) on its Boston campus.

Beyond Abuse in the Christian Home is available from PASCH for a donation of any amount.

Divorce, Domestic Violence and Saddleback Church

By Catherine Clark Kroeger

There has been a great outcry over an entry entitled “Abuse is no excuse for divorce” that appeared in the “Bible Questions and Answers” section of the website (www.saddlebackfamily.com) of Saddleback Church, where Rick Warren is senior pastor. The ensuing widespread dismay brings home to all of us the need for an appropriate response of churches to a horrifying social problem: the rising incidence of domestic abuse in both Christian and non-Christian homes. Some fifteen hundred women a year are slain in America by their domestic partners, and many more sustain permanent injuries. Men as well as women sometimes become victims of intimate partner abuse. Often the

emotional wounding delivers a yet more profound injury to the human spirit. A fact that churches must bear in mind is that 35 to 40 percent of battered women attempt suicide.



Wife abuse accounts for 25 percent of suicides by all U.S. women, and 50 percent of suicides by African-American women.

What are the options of women caught in unbearable situations?

Let me illustrate with two stories that are known to me personally. The first is of Melissa, a devoted Christian married to a man who had delved deeply into Scripture and loved the Word of God. In time, that husband became verbally and emotionally abusive, using Scripture to reproach, demean and humiliate her. With the birth of each successive child, the attacks became more intense until she could bear it no longer. Like many another desperate victim, she made an attempt on her own life. In the aftermath, her husband refused her request to be taken to an emergency room; but her own family discovered her plight and secured medical treatment. When they realized the extent of what Melissa had suffered, the family

removed her to their own home in another city. The husband promptly pulled up stakes and pursued her relentlessly, always quoting Scripture but never showing signs of genuine repentance. Melissa was torn as she wanted above all things to be faithful to Christ, but in time she came to see that the best hope for herself and the children's survival lay in cutting off all ties. She initiated a divorce and moved to yet another community so that her whereabouts would not be known. There she built a life that glorified Christ as she cared for her children and engaged in Christian outreach.

My second story concerns a woman whom I shall call Helen. After her marriage many years ago, the man of her dreams turned out to be a cruel abuser. He showered her with hostile criticism, insults, reproaches and name-calling. Finally, her spirit collapsed and she suffered a severe breakdown. After her recovery, she was returned to the marriage and the home, where things had become no better. In despair, she appealed to her family for help as she felt herself again overcome with the vicious invective that rained upon her daily. Her parents responded that she had made her own choice of a husband and must live with the consequences. In their thinking, there was no room for divorce. With nowhere to turn, Helen did indeed fall into a worse condition than she had already experienced. During her rehospitalization, the staff resorted to a solution that is no longer used: they performed a lobotomy to remove surgically that part of her brain in which she could feel emotion, whether of joy or of sorrow or anguish. For the next thirty years Helen continued to live with her husband, surviving the unrelenting oppression because she could no longer experience the pain. She had also been robbed of the ability to feel love, pride, excitement and happiness. There are situations where a divorce may be the best resource to

secure safety and sanity.

More vulnerable yet are the children caught in situations of domestic violence. According to the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services, children who witness violence in their home are six times more likely to commit suicide, twenty-four times more likely to commit sexual assault, 50 percent more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and 74 percent more likely to commit crimes against others.

Over 60 percent of murderers between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one are incarcerated for having killed their mother's abuser. Many beg their mothers to leave, and some become embittered if they feel that the church is entrapping them in years of oppression and suffering.

Issues of Pastoral Care

Victims are more likely to approach their pastor than any other one source. Clearly the matter requires great sensitivity as the issues can be so enormously complex and carry a high risk to every member of the family. It is not always easy to recognize attendant factors such as overwhelming depression, emotional trauma, bitterness or lethality. In their seminary and Bible college training, pastors are seldom given adequate preparation for understanding the dynamics of domestic abuse or the inherent dangers. The matter of securing safety through divorce is a delicate one: none of us wish to see a marriage dissolved, but sometimes we have put more emphasis upon saving that marriage than upon saving a life.

For this reason, it is usually best to refer the congregant to specialized safety counseling and for the pastoral staff to concentrate on the spiritual and theological issues. Blessedly, our society offers many helps for securing the safety of endangered members of a family. It is important to create bridges when they are needed "from the steeple to the shelter."

The Old Testament Scriptures

The Bible gives strong directives for the strengthening of marital and family ties, but it also contains affirmations of God's promise and provision for peace within the home. Often, sincere pastors focus on Malachi's statement that God hates divorce and fail to observe the alternate reading supplied by the New International Version:

"I hate divorce" says the Lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering his wife with violence as well as with his garment" says the Lord Almighty. "So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith." (Mal. 2:16)

We also fail to note that,

God hates seven things: haughty eyes, a lying tongue and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that advises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family. (Prov. 6:17-19)

These very characteristics show up all too frequently in abusive marriages.

Actually, the Bible pictures Israel as the faithless wife of God, and three times the Lord announces his divorce from his erring spouse (Isa. 50:1; 54:6-7; Jer. 3:8). The repeated abuses of Israel had left no meaning in the marriage between God and His people. In ancient Hebrew law, the option of divorce had been established (Deut. 24:1). While divorce was usually initiated by a male, a concubine might divorce a husband who failed to supply her with food, clothing or marital rights (Exod. 21:10-11); and she might leave if he caused her bodily injury (Exod. 21:26-27).

During the return from the Babylonian exile, a number of priests and

Levites abandoned their first wives and married the daughters of rich landowners. These returning priests had forgotten their hereditary calling to perpetuate the faith of Israel, to raise up a new generation who could instruct the community in the law of the Lord, lead in the understanding and worship of the true and living God, and oversee the public health practices of the people (see Neh. 13:29). By discarding their original wives, the religious leaders had lost the mothers who could have instilled a knowledge of God and patterns of faith and obedience into the lives of the next generation.

The Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did not God make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.” (Mal. 2:14–15)

Indeed, half of the children could not even speak Hebrew and had no way of understanding the prayers or Psalms or Scriptures (Neh. 13:23–25). Malachi decried the violation of the original marriage covenant and pointed out that God hated violence inflicted upon women.

For the man who hates and divorces, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless. (Mal. 2:16)

Ultimately many came to realize that their lapse had made a travesty of God’s purposes not only for their own family life but also for the faith

and practice of God’s people. There had been a violation of a fundamental covenant (Ezra 9:2, 10–15). Challenged by Ezra, the priestly penitents entered into a covenant with God to dissolve their inappropriate and destructive marriages in order to preserve and protect the health and spiritual integrity of the entire community. According to the particular needs of each family, an arrangement was made to provide carefully for the women and children (Ezra 10:1–17). Yes, the covenant was sealed with divorces on the part of those who had failed God.

Jesus and St. Paul

Jesus asked, “Is it lawful...to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). He pointed out that sometimes conventional legalism needed to be set aside (Matt. 12:10–13; Mark 2:23–27; Luke 6:1–11; 14:1–6). This is still a question for Jesus’ followers to address. His sayings about divorce must be carefully examined within their contest.

The Gospel records tell us that He was speaking to those trying to trap him in a rabbinic debate about two forms of divorce available in Jewish courts (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:1–9; Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18). In the first, substantive charges must be made against a woman, while she and her relatives were given the opportunity to respond in her own defense. The second form was the “any reason at all” format in which a man could bring forward a thoroughly frivolous reason and gain a divorce while the wife had no opportunity to defend herself. She then might be married off to another or be forced to sell her own body in order to survive. Jesus argued that it was wrong to condone such a practice or even to consider this a legitimate divorce. Marriage after an irregular divorce only heightened the evil.

The apostle Paul discusses marital situations in the context of a believing spouse married to an individual

who is not prepared to accept the values of the Christian faith. The believer is not encouraged to seek a divorce but to be ready to release the other from the marriage bond if that is their desire. Tellingly, he terminates the discussion by saying, “A brother or sister is not held in bondage in such circumstances. God has called you to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). We would do well to remember the apostle’s other injunctions to peace: Rom. 14:19; 2 Cor. 13:11; Col 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:13.

Our Challenge


Evangelical leaders have been caught in a dilemma that leaves them with a high degree of discomfort, even to acknowledge the existence of the problem. Quite correctly, they maintain a high view of the Christian home and seek to build strong families, but there must be a deeper understanding of the issues when things go awry. As the people of God, we need to be diligent in informing ourselves and our clergy of the grave dangers inherent in domestic abuse.

It has always been the role of the prophet to perceive evils in society, to make them a matter of serious prayer and reflection, and then to take action. All too often clergy avoid the ugly issue, but the danger is too grave to be ignored any longer. We need seminary courses, training programs, books, videos, tapes providing essential information about the manifold problems and the types of help available. Pastors must be equipped to speak forth from the pulpit, to minister to the wounded and oppressed, and to hold abusers accountable. All of us can be involved in the learning process.

By far, the best immediate source of information for pastors on this subject may be found at the Religion And Violence E-learning website (www.theraveproject.org). A visit to the website will provide a wealth of enormously helpful resources in ministering to this enormous social

problem. Many pieces of instruction can be found on our own website (www.peaceandsafety.com). The Scriptures encourage us to teach

“line upon line and precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.” This is just how the people of God can little by little build an

awareness of the reality of domestic abuse and what can be done to stop it. 



Beware the marvels of electronic technology

Useful as electronic devices may be, they carry particular hazards for victims seeking to flee a perpetrator.

ATMs. If a bank account is registered in the name of both victim and perpetrator, any action on the account can be accessed by the offender. If the victim tries to withdraw money in another city, that information is readily provided at the request of anyone whose name is also on the account. Any transfer of funds can also help to identify the location of the victim. It is far safer to have a separate bank account.

E-mail accounts. They can be traced. If the offender knows the e-mail address, it is not safe to use that account, even at an Internet café.

Computers. Even information that has been deleted is still available on the hard drive. The history is still there. If travel reservations have been made on the computer, they can be recovered as well as any other information the victim may wish to conceal. Remember too that some laptop computers have Global Positioning System devices on them that can be traced.

Cell phones. An absolute “no no” as they easily give away the location. Some cell phones are equipped with Global Positioning Systems. Use a cheap disposable phone if you do not want to be traced. Remember that children should also be supplied with a disposable cell phone if they want to contact their father.

Global Positioning Systems. These can be installed secretly either inside or outside of the victim’s car. They are so small that they can also be placed in the victim’s suitcase or hand bag.



1095 Stony Brook Road
Brewster, MA 02631
508-896-3518
www.peaceandsafety.com



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el. 508-896-3518 ☎ Fax 508-896-6864

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