

The Use and Misuse of Scripture with Regard to Domestic Abuse

A Report by the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission
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Some people use Bible verses as an excuse to abuse their wife, husband, or children. This is always wrong. Others think that the Bible tells them to put up with abuse. This is also wrong. Here are some important Bible verses that are sometimes used in this way. For each verse, there are wrong meanings and correct meanings. There are many more things to say about these verses, but these are the most important points for domestic abuse. These points do not explain the verses fully. To understand them more fully, we must do three things together:

- a) Read the whole chapter or section in which the verse or verses are found.
- b) Understand how the verse or verses fits into the chapter or section.
- c) Think about how the Bible's teaching applies to your situation.

Please note: If you think you might be a victim of domestic abuse, we suggest you read this document with a supportive friend or counsellor.

Key Words and their Meanings

Helper

Bible verses: Genesis 2:18, 21

¹⁸ The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him." ... ²¹ So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man was sleeping, the LORD God took out one of the man's ribs. He closed up the opening that was in his side.

Wrong meaning: The woman is below the man.



A "helper" is a servant. God made the woman to be the servant of the man. The woman is less important than the man.

Correct meaning: The woman and the man are equal.



The word "helper" does not mean below or less. This word is mostly used in the Bible to describe God. God is Israel's "helper" when he comes to rescue them (e.g. Deuteronomy 33:26; Psalm 22:19; Psalm 121:1-2). The words "just right for him" mean that the woman and the man are a perfect match. Each one needs the other.

In Genesis 2:21 God made the woman out of the man's rib. She was not taken from his head, to be over him, or from his foot, to be under him. She came from his side to be his equal partner.

Submit

Bible verses: Ephesians 5:22-23

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands as you submit to the Lord. ²³ The husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church. The church is Christ's body. He is its Saviour.

Wrong meaning (verse 22): The wife must always submit to her husband no matter what.	
	A wife must not ask questions or think for herself. She must always do what her husband tells her to do, even if he asks her to sin or submit to abuse. If she does not submit to him, then he is allowed to punish her.
Correct meaning (verse 22): A wife chooses to submit. Her husband must not force, pressure or punish her.	
	The Bible teaches that a wife should freely choose to submit to her husband. It is a gift she gives. A husband must never force or pressure his wife to submit. He must never punish her if she does not submit. If a wife cannot say no, then her submission cannot be free. Sometimes a wife should not submit. She must be free to say no to sin. She should not submit to abuse.
Wrong meaning (verse 23): The husband may do anything he likes.	
	The husband has all the power, because he is the head. He can do what he wants. He can make all the decisions. He can tell his wife what to do, but she can never tell him what to do. For example, he may demand sex whenever he wants, and she has no right to refuse.
Correct meaning (verse 23): The husband's responsibility is to serve his wife.	
	"Christ is the head of the Church." This means that he loved us and sacrificed himself for us. A husband must be the head of his wife in the same way. He must do all he can to love and protect her. He must encourage and care for his wife like his own body (Ephesians 5:28-29). Loving and caring means putting his wife's needs first.

Bible verses: 1 Peter 3:1, 5-6

¹Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands in the same way. Suppose some of them don't believe God's word. Then let them be won to Christ without words by seeing how their wives behave... ⁵This is how the holy women of the past used to make themselves beautiful. They put their hope in God. And they submitted themselves to their own husbands. ⁶Sarah was like that. She obeyed Abraham. She called him her master. Do you want to be like her? Then do what is right. And don't give in to fear.

Wrong meaning: Endure abuse to show your husband what Jesus is like.	
	In the same way that Christ endured suffering (1 Peter 2:21-23), and slaves are to endure mistreatment from unjust masters (2:20), a wife should also endure abuse at the hands of her husband. A wife should be like Jesus. If her husband beats her, she should suffer the beating quietly. She should not be afraid. This will show her husband what Jesus is like.
Correct meaning: Respect your husband, even if he is hostile to your faith.	
	1 Peter 3 continues the argument of 1 Peter 2. "In the same way" (3:1) means that Peter is continuing his discussion of respect. Out of respect, slaves should submit to their masters (2:18). Out of respect, wives should submit to their husbands (3:1). Out of respect, husbands should be considerate of their wives (3:7). However, it is important to understand the difference between the examples given in 1 Peter 2 and 1 Peter 3. Peter told slaves to suffer beatings patiently, like Jesus did. But he does not tell wives to suffer beatings. Wives are not slaves. Even the laws of the Romans did not permit wives to be beaten. The hardship the wife must endure in 1 Peter 3 is the hardship of being married to an unbelieving husband, not to an abusive husband. The passage does not teach wives to submit to domestic abuse.

Sex

Bible verses: 1 Corinthians 7:3-5

³A husband should satisfy his wife's sexual needs. And a wife should satisfy her husband's sexual needs. ⁴The wife's body does not belong only to her. It also belongs to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong only to him. It also belongs to his wife. ⁵You shouldn't stop giving yourselves to each other except when you both agree to do so. And that should be only to give yourselves time to pray for a while. Then you should come together again. In that way, Satan will not tempt you when you can't control yourselves.

Wrong meaning: You must always have sex when your spouse wants to.	
	It is always wrong to say no to your spouse. If you say no to your spouse, they will fall into sexual temptation. This will be your fault.
Correct meaning: Sex is a gift which a husband and a wife freely give to each other.	
	<p>Sex is a gift your spouse gives to you. You do not take it from them. It is their free gift. It is a normal part of married life. It helps to avoid temptation. When you are free to give sex, then you should give sex, unless you both agree to stop for some time, so you can pray (verse 5).</p> <p>But your spouse is not always free to give and receive sex. They may be sick, or in pain, or tired, or sad, or bearing a child, or having sexual problems. The bodies of husbands and wives belong to each other (verse 4). This means you must care for each other's bodies. You should wait until they are ready to give and receive sex. You must not pressure them. A gift that you demand is not a true gift, and a gift you force upon someone is not a true gift. You must be patient and kind with each other.</p>

Forgive

Bible verse: Matthew 6:15

But if you do not forgive the sins of other people, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Wrong meaning: Forget the sin and start again.	
	If you forgive someone, then you must forget what they did. Everything can be the same as it was before. The other person does not need to change their behaviour.
Correct meaning: Forgive others as God has forgiven you.	
	<p>This passage does not say everything that the Bible teaches about forgiveness. The basic point of Matthew 6:15 is that we should forgive as we have been forgiven. If we genuinely repent and turn from our sin, then God forgives us. In the same way, when an abuser genuinely repents and tries to change, we also should forgive them. This may be a difficult and long process. Sometimes we will come back together with a person we have forgiven. Sometimes this will not be possible. Separation may be necessary and may even become permanent.</p> <p>Forgiveness does not mean that we take sin lightly. If an abuser continues to abuse, they must be stopped. You do not need to endure abuse in the name of forgiveness.</p>

Trust

Bible verse: Deuteronomy 19:15

Every matter must be proved by the words of two or three witnesses.

Wrong meaning: Doubt the victim's testimony.	
	When someone says, "I was abused!", you should not believe them. You should only believe them if other people saw the abuse and agree to be witnesses.
Correct meaning: Trust the victim's testimony.	
	Moses gave this law for crimes that other people witnessed. When nobody saw a crime, Moses did not expect witnesses. Deuteronomy 22:25-27 shows that we may believe the word of an abused person when there are no witnesses.

Conclusion

The Bible is the good Word of a good God. Sadly, we can twist and misuse this good gift. So it is very important that the Bible is rightly understood and rightly applied to our lives. When it is wrongly understood and wrongly applied, it can damage people, destroy relationships and dishonour God. Rightly understood, the Bible condemns all forms of domestic abuse.

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On behalf of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission