

THE BIG PROBLEM WITH CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE COUNSELING

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 123 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have Cindy Burrell with me. Hello, Cindy.

CINDY: Hello, Natalie.

NATALIE: She did a podcast with me way back when we first started this podcast in 2019. The name of that podcast episode was What Does the Bible Say About Divorce and Remarriage. It was a really good one. If you are interested in going back and listening to that one, you can do that by going to flyingfreenow.com/9—that's the number of the episode. By the way, that's how you can find any of the episodes—by their number. Cindy is a survivor of a twenty-year marriage to a verbal and emotional abuser. She is also the co-owner of a web-based ministry to women in abusive relationships called Hurtbylove.com. She's written several books including: *Why Is He so Mean to Me?*, *God is My Witness: Making a Case for Biblical Divorce* (which is kind of what we talked about in episode 9), *An Extraordinary Ordinary Life: A Testimony of God's Faithfulness*, and brand-new, she has just published a book for counselors called *Reformulating the Christian Marriage Counseling Model Where Abuse Is Involved*. That's what we're going to be talking about. Did I get that right? Is it written specifically for counselors, or who is your audience in this particular book?

CINDY: I'm glad you asked that because I think it's written for victims so they can analyze both the counselor and the process and identify whether the counselor they are working with is someone that is going to respect the process, see the victim, and be able to work with her in a way that doesn't just squish her back into a toxic marriage.

NATALIE: I love that. It's empowering victims to figure out if they are getting the kind of help that they actually need.

CINDY: For starters. I'm hoping and praying... I've already been sending it out to some pastors. I'd love to get it into the hands of lay counselors and licensed counselors. Ultimately, I'd love to get it into the hands of people in Christian colleges and seminaries to take a broader look at the entire process and why it so often fails when there's abuse.

NATALIE: I think this is such a critical topic because I know hundreds of women including myself who have been deeply wounded by ill-informed and unequipped Christian counselors who don't understand emotional and spiritual abuse. They don't handle those kinds of situations the way they need to be handled to protect and empower victims. So I'm excited you are here to talk about it. Why don't we dig in? Tell us where you think Christian counseling has gone wrong.

CINDY: Oh! That's a loaded question. It's almost universal. I just did a Meetup online last week with Dale and Faith Ingraham. I don't know if you know them. They did a book called Tear Down This Wall of Silence that relates to sexual abuse within the church and how it's covered up and hidden. In the Christian marriage counseling world, the priority is always, always, always to save the marriage based on the notion that God hates divorce, which we've talked about. In that the abuser enters the arena with an advantage right off the bat.

NATALIE: Because they both have the same agenda, right? Usually?

CINDY: Isn't it kinda? It's a little backwards. It's a bit unfair to go into this. The whole process is directed in that vein, so automatically the victim will almost universally be the one who is called upon to be patient, loving, caring, and forgiving while the attention is paid to the abuser. The general sense from the outside is the man has issues. He has anger issues. He must be struggling with some things. He has a background he needs to work through. In the meantime, the victim is essentially set aside. She has no voice. They try to squeeze her into this mold of making it work, being the godly, patient, loving, forgiving, kind, gentle, wife—who is being abused. But that becomes not even a secondary issue. It's almost a non-issue a lot of times.

NATALIE: Here's the other fascinating thing about this. That woman is already programmed, possibly for decades, to be that and play that role, anyway. Her own brain is telling her, "Just go back; play the role. Just go back; play the role." When she has people she respects or are in authority over her telling her the same thing, she automatically goes and does it. She buys into that thinking because that is what she is already thinking in the first place. It completely sets her up for continued spinning around in the same circle.

CINDY: Yes. It's abuse at the hands of her abuser and then it's a secondary abuse—a kind of trauma—to be unheard, unseen. Your experiences are not worthy of even acknowledged. As you know, the confusion that overrides the abusive relationship—like you said, it just flows right over into counseling. It's debilitating.

NATALIE: Yep. They are cutting her off at the knees. What do you see as evidence to support this? There are probably Christian counselors who would get defensive about this and say, "That's not true. That's not what we're trying to do." How would you counteract that argument?

CINDY: I have so many stories. I've heard so many people share their stories about what they've experienced in the counseling arena. I share some of them in the book. I think the biggest key is do they focus on couples counseling or individual counseling. To me, that is a yellow flag if not a red flag because as soon as you put the victim in the same room with the abuser and the counselor, the counselor must choose whom they are going to advocate for. Almost automatically, the victim takes the back seat. It gives the abuser power he should not possess. Again, not only does it silence her, but there is such a fear factor of even saying what needs to be said. There's no safety for a victim in sharing her genuine experience in the counseling office because as soon as she walks out that door, he's going to throw that right back in her face.

NATALIE: That's right.

CINDY: It becomes sort of a very unsafe game that they are playing.

NATALIE: Even if the counselor... I can just hear what counselors would say. They'd say, "No. We take a neutral stand. We don't take a side." But even that right there is problematic when you have an abusive situation. I sat in counseling sessions where I felt the counselor was trying to be neutral, but in being neutral they were not supporting me in what my husband had been doing to me for so many decades. They were mutualizing the problem and making it something we both had to work on. Equal guilt on all sides. Obviously, that is not the case when you have an abusive situation.

CINDY: Exactly. I talk about that in the book. Generally, the Christian counseling process requires the perception of fairness. But the scale is already completely out of whack, so how do you create fairness out of that? They have to try to even out blame and responsibility, but it's not accurate. To create the perception, you have to ignore the truth and you have to refuse to validate the victim's reality. In my experience, it's essential that the victim be counseled separate from the abuser. That's the only way she is going to be heard. In fact, a woman on one of the Facebook pages I follow said she does counseling, and she had a husband and wife in a room, and she posted the basic scenario she was looking at. She said, "I'm trying to figure out who I should believe." So she was asking people to vote...

NATALIE: What in the world?!

CINDY: ... on whom she should support because she was confused herself. She felt like she had to judge them and pick a side, which left someone out to dry.

NATALIE: That is absolutely crazy.

CINDY: The only way to do that is... Not only does it give the victim a voice, but it shields her from the abuser's input and knowledge. An abuser with a counselor feels a bit powerless because he doesn't have the audience he wants. He loses control over what she says when she meets with someone who will actually hear her.

NATALIE: Yeah. The other component of all this—because this is Christian counseling we are talking about and not just secular counseling. When you have Christians, Christian women think if they are going to get counseling, they should get Christian counseling because that is "superior" and has a biblical worldview rather than secular counseling, which could be the slippery slope to hell. (I'm exaggerating a bit.) They will look for a Christian counselor. The problem with that is Christian counselors or even a pastor or lay counselors in a church are going to use... Because it is Christian counseling, they are going to use the Bible to promote whatever agenda they have. Their agenda could be problematic on a spectrum. They will typically use the Bible to get the victim and the perpetrator to buy into their agenda. What are some of those verses that are typically used? Can you think of any off the top of your head that are used to keep women stuck or keep them thinking, "Yeah, I really should get back in my place because the Bible says, or God says"?

CINDY: The ultimate trump card is "God hates divorce." They pull that one right out of the chute. That automatically puts the pressure on the victim to figure out a way to make it work. Of course, if you want to understand that, listen to the other podcast and see God's heart for marriage and divorce. They are going to hear, "Love never fails", "forgive seventy times seven", "love your enemies", "pray for those who persecute you", "love keeps no record of wrongs", and on and on it goes. But we must see those from a true biblical perspective. My favorite one is the one that says, "Love keeps no record of wrongs." It's from 1 Corinthians 13. That is a terrible interpretation. In the literal translation it actually says, "Love does not impute evil." What that means is that love does not assign blame or attribute for evil that doesn't exist. You don't ascribe evil where it doesn't really exist. It doesn't mean you ignore evil when it is present.

NATALIE: That's huge.

CINDY: That's one we hear.

NATALIE: It is. I remember I had finally started to write some things down because I thought, "I have to record this stuff," because I couldn't remember. We would have an altercation (I've heard this from many people also), and then my brain would literally... Three or four minutes later I couldn't remember what the argument was about or what just happened. I was so numbed out and so stunned. I decided I would start writing things down. I'd run up to my room and quickly write as many things as I could remember about what just happened. Later the next day, when he was being nice again—you know, the cycle—I would tear it out because I would think, "I don't want to look at this again. I don't want my kids to see it. Plus, I don't want to keep a record of wrongs." In my mind that was the quintessential keeping a record of wrongs—literally keeping a record of the wrongs he was doing. Yet, in my program (and I'm sure you tell this to women too) in order to recognize the patterns of behavior that are happening in your relationship, you have to write things down so you can track the patterns.

CINDY: Yes, absolutely. That was where my first book, *Why Is He so Mean to Me?*, came from. It came from reading my journals. I went back and started reading all the things he had been doing, and suddenly I could see all the strategies, word games, and crazy making. I thought, "Oh my gosh! It's all right here." So I wrote the book and thought, "I have to believe someone else out there somewhere is dealing with the same insanity." It is universal.

NATALIE: Yes, it is.

CINDY: The other one that kills me is when people say, "Well, I've been called to love my enemies." On what planet should the person who swore to love, honor, and cherish you be someone... An enemy is someone who is out to destroy us. That doesn't add up. But you hear that one all the time too. The burden of spiritual obligation is so thick. The priority is always to get back to truth.

NATALIE: The idea of love is... People don't understand what that looks like. Love doesn't always have to look like... Love doesn't mean be a doormat or be someone's sex toy or whatever. That's not what love is, anyway. Let's talk about the abuser for a minute. I get asked this question a lot, "Can he change?" Obviously, a Christian counselor believes he can because "God can do anything." You'll hear that. "God can do miracles. God is more powerful than people are. Greater is He..." They will use all that spiritual jargon to get the woman hooked into this wishful thinking that someday, even though it has already been forty years for some of them, but someday he might still change. So I'm curious, do you

address this in your book? Are abusers out of reach? Can they change? How does a Christian counselor approach that? Or what should a woman be thinking when she goes to counseling with her husband?

CINDY: Anyone can change. When God comes into our life, He says, "The old things pass away; all new things have come." We all know that from our own personal experiences. The question is not "Can he change?" The question is "Does he want to change?" It requires a forfeiture of your will to God. More often than not, the answer is a flat out, "No!" Abusers like to figure out how to play the game to get you back into his life by any means possible. Empty promises—they will lie. They will tell you you're the only person he's ever loved. He promises it will never happen again. We can work this out. We just need to get back together. There is this undercurrent of pressure that comes. Honestly, I tell people the easiest way to see if an abuser has changed is to tell him, "No."

NATALIE: Yes. Perfect.

CINDY: It's the easiest way. When they pour out all the stuff and are following you around and telling you how wonderful you are, you ignore them or tell them, "No." Then give them five minutes.

NATALIE: It's so true.

CINDY: I had a woman email me last week, God bless her, and she said her estranged spouse had been texting her. "We really need to talk." He would call her and leave her voicemails and say, "I just think if we could spend some time together talking and working through these things that we can do this." She emailed me the following day and said, "He's been going behind my back gossiping about lying about me to my daughters. He's told them he's sure I'm in an illicit relationship on the side." It's like, oh, there it is. That's the man who's changed.

NATALIE: Exactly. I get that question a lot. People will come into the forum (this happens almost every day) they will set a boundary and say, "It's so bizarre. Suddenly he's being really nice. He's bending over backwards to do things he never used to do before. He's making promises. Is this normal?" I'll say, "It's not only normal, but that's also to be expected. That is what they do. It's part of the whole game for them." So look for that. As soon as you set a boundary, like you threaten to separate or to divorce, they will come back and try that tactic first, most of them, before they go to the smear campaign. If you say, "No," you are going to get smeared, and they will try a different tactic.

CINDY: I tell them, "The reality is that time always reveals truth." That's the thing. We feel so pressured to get back in and figure out a way to make it work. It may be coming from the counselor. It may be coming from church people who, like I said, will tell you, "You just need to believe that God wants to heal your marriage. Have faith and be strong." It's a trap. People don't realize it. They lay it out there. They have the support of pastors and counselors, so we step back in way too soon. The waiting time reveals truth. Distance is the other thing. Keep that distance because they will try to penetrate that distance if you try to keep it. Like you said, you set a boundary and they will find a way to break it, and then you know.

NATALIE: Right. You also find out where the counselors, pastors, and religious leaders stand too. If you say, "No," to them, you will get the same kickback.

CINDY: Oh, that's the hard... That's painful. You think these people are going to support you and encourage you and really take care of you. The odds are not good.

NATALIE: No. I hear once in a while, "My church is really supportive of me," but it is exceedingly rare. If you have a church like that, great. But most churches don't because of all this religious programming that everyone has gone through, even in the seminaries. I'm glad that... We need to get more books like this into the hands of people coming out of those seminaries. That's where it starts. By encouraging these dramatic changes in the counseling process... I wish badly that we could just wave a magic wand and it could all be fixed. But it will probably not be fixed in our lifetimes. A lot of the groundwork we are making in even working with victims and empowering them to change, stand up, and have a voice, we are sowing seeds right now. All of it will start bearing a great harvest down the road, probably after you and I are dead. But what I'm wondering is if these are huge changes that probably won't happen overnight, but do you ever wonder, because other people wonder, are we diminishing the sanctity of marriage in making some of these changes?

CINDY: My view is this. The sanctity of marriage is not based on your status but on substance. What is the substance of the marriage? Keeping two people in a toxic, ungodly marriage doesn't make it any less toxic or ungodly. What are we teaching our kids? What are we showing them? Kids who come out of abusive homes generally become either abusers themselves or victims. It's up to us to break that cycle and saying, "No. This is God's sacred institution. It is designed to reflect the love relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. I'm not encouraging willy-nilly divorce. That's a whole different animal. We're talking about wicked people in God's holy, sacred institution of marriage and trying to mesh that together and somehow pretend that it's

a good thing. You'll hear a lot from the pulpit that the high divorce rate in the church is a shame. It's shameful that we have the statistic that makes the church look bad. I come at that from a completely opposite position and say that maybe there are a lot of wolves in sheep's clothing who have been identified and people in the body of Christ are saying, "No more!"

NATALIE: Right!

CINDY: That's nothing to be ashamed of! If that's the truth, then the reality of getting those wolves out of a home that should be the safest place on earth needs to happen to honor God and to respect that institution. I've never told anyone, "Eh, just go out and get a divorce." No! We're talking about saving our children—literally—saving lives. It may not be physical. You know, and I do, the depth of harm of emotional abuse and to know that our kids are watching. They are seeing these exchanges. They are seeing the hostility and the emotional cruelty. They live in a home where there is fear. There is a constant tension and an undercurrent of fear and unpredictability. You never know what you are going to get on a given day. Does that sound like the heart of God for our homes? Absolutely not.

NATALIE: No. Unfortunately, I know lots of kids who don't even want anything to do with the church anymore because the church appears to be supportive of those kinds of abusive relationships. A lot of the younger people are finally standing up and saying, "I don't want to have anything to do with this. If that's what the church is all about and if that's what God is all about, then that sounds abusive to me. I'm not interested in being part of it." If the church really wants to make a difference in this world, I think they are going to have to set aside their abusive theology.

CINDY: Correct. In fact, when you say that, a woman shared with me that her teenage son came to her and said, "Mom, why won't you divorce our dad?" She said, "Because I feel like God would be disappointed in me if I did." Her son said to her, "I don't think I want to believe in a God who would make us live this way."

NATALIE: Boom!

CINDY: Yeah. That was her wake-up call, and she ended up divorcing her husband and rescuing her children.

NATALIE: Yes. Where can people find you if they want to learn more about...? They can find your book on Amazon, correct? I'll hold it up for people watching on YouTube. The

book is called Reformulating the Christian Marriage Counseling Model Where Abuse is Involved. It's on Amazon by Cindy Burrell. I'll also put links in the show notes. This is episode 123. You can find the links and the show notes if you go to flyingfreenow.com/123. I'll have a link to her website and to some other things she offers. But do you want to tell us where they can find you besides your website, which is hurtbylove.com?

CINDY: That's the best place to find me. I want to mention that I also do personal coaching. I don't call it counseling because I'm not a licensed counselor. But it's been amazingly successful. Not for me, but for the people who come to me. It's so beautiful to be able to help people to identify the truth about where they are, wherever it is, and to be able to come alongside them and comfort them, validate them, and then watch them find their truth and go back to God. I love that part of my job.

NATALIE: You don't use Bible verses to beat people over the head either I bet.

CINDY: Oh, all the time. No! That's not God's heart, is it?

NATALIE: No. How can they get hooked up with you that way? Where would they go?

CINDY: There's a tab on my website, [hurtbylove](http://hurtbylove.com). You can contact me or email me, and we can schedule a time. I've had some women literally figure it out in one session. They are good. It's walking through it and they are like, "I've got it. I get it. I'm good to go." I'm like, "Thank you, Lord."

NATALIE: That's fabulous.

CINDY: God's truth is everything. Truth is everything.

NATALIE: I want to thank our listeners for listening to this episode of the Flying Free Podcast. If you'd be willing to do our team a favor and head over to Apple Podcasts and leave a rating and review, we would so appreciate it. Those reviews play such an important role in helping other women of faith find this podcast and get the help they also need to navigate their own destructive relationships. Thank you in advance for supporting our podcast in that way. Don't forget we've got 123 episodes as well as a lot of articles on the flyingfreenow.com website. They are specifically written to encourage support and educate Christian women in emotionally and spiritually abusive relationships. Check those out if you haven't already. Thank you again, Cindy, for being on the podcast. It's been almost exactly two years. It's been a while, but it's great to

have you back. I'm excited about your new book. I hope and pray it makes a huge difference in the world. I hope it changes the world.

CINDY: Thank you. We're in this together, girlfriend!

NATALIE: That's right! All of us. Even the listeners. The people whose lives are changing—we are making a difference. It's very exciting.

CINDY: Yeah.

NATALIE: Until next time, fly free!