

HOW CHURCHES CAN HELP ABUSE VICTIMS (AND HOW THEY OFTEN HURT THEM INSTEAD)

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 166 of the Flying Free Podcast. I'm calling this episode "A Little Something for the Church's Suggestion Box," because I always get a little annoyed when people point out a problem but don't give any potential solution. It's like, "Whine, whine, whine, complain, complain, complain," but then, "Okay, so what's your solution? What's your idea for how to solve this problem?" I don't like that.

I have called out the church in different places on my blog and on my podcast, but this episode is going to be about offering some suggestions for how they could do things differently. And as I go through this podcast episode, you'll notice that the suggestions I'm making are basically just, well, since we're the church, we're the body of Jesus Christ, they're basically just acting like the real body of Jesus, how He acted when He was on earth. So we're going to get to all of that in just a minute.

Based on all my experiences in my own personal life as well as having listened to thousands of stories of survivors and worked very closely with hundreds of survivors over the past few years, many of whom have been vilified by their churches, here's what I perceive to be the main problems when a woman comes to the church and asks for help for her marriage. And then soon after that, the man comes to the church and says the problem is actually his wife.

So the first problem is, "Who do we believe? Two people are saying the same thing. That means that one of them is telling the truth and the other one isn't." Well, some church leadership teams will believe that they're both telling a little bit of truth and a little bit of lie, making them both basically liars or bad communicators or ungodly or whatever. They are both problem-children is the bottom line there.

Here's the second problem: "Who do we help and how do we help? Do we help the woman who came to us in the first place or the man who could be being maligned and slandered, and how do we help? Clearly we need to help them stay married. That's the number one priority. But the way to do that is to get them to do certain things, fulfill certain commands or rules for godly living that they clearly are not doing or fulfilling, or they wouldn't be in this mess in the first place. So let's identify their sins, get them to repent, and problem solved."

Problem three: “Who do we love and how do we love them?”

Problem four: “Who do we kick out? If the wife obeys us and the husband doesn’t, we’ll kick him out. If the husband obeys us and the wife doesn’t, we’ll kick her out. Those who follow our rules are in, and those who don’t are out. Because that’s what Jesus did, right?” Actually, that’s what the Pharisees did, but who’s reading their Bible?

Okay, so here’s the scenario: the wife comes to the church to get help for her marriage. This is the flashing red light. Now, I’m going to give you all an expert tip here, free of charge. You can take this to the bank, because it is one hundred percent legit. Are you guys ready for the profundity? The person who comes forward first is most often the one being injured in some way. Generally speaking, abusers are not interested in drawing attention to their issues, so they are not going to initiate the first exposure. There you go. You’re welcome.

Now, there are rare exceptions to this rule. I’ll give you an example. When I was a kid, I was framed in the lunch room by some bullies. They told the mean, skinny lunch lady that I said a swear word, something I had never done in my life. I do swear now, but I didn’t back then when I was in the third grade. She believed them even though these were naughty little boys. They did say swear words, but she believed them. I don’t know why — because she was a mean, skinny lunch lady, I guess. And she sent me to the wall with my lunch and told me to stay there until lunch was over. It was very humiliating. I was devastated.

Now, she did not know me, but everyone else in my class did. My teacher knew me; my friends knew me; even the little bullies all knew that I was an “A” student who never made any trouble. But my friends were scared of the skinny lunch lady, and my teacher wasn’t around during lunch time, and the bullies were having their fun.

I wanted to throw that out there, because it can happen. But I have actually never heard, not yet, but I’ve never heard of an abuser taking the initiative, being the first one to go get help from church for his relationship with his wife. Of the thousands of stories I’ve heard, none of these women have ever told me that their abusive husband was the one to go get help first. By the way, it’s not always the male who is abusive either, okay? I just want to give that caveat.

Now, my ex-husband never saw the need to go get help from me. I wasn’t hurting him. Yes, I would argue back for sure. Sometimes I would get so angry at his treatment of me that a couple of times I threw a teacup. It’s true. I had a beautiful teacup collection and I wanted him to know in that crazed moment... I mean, I was feeling really insanely

out of control in that moment, but I know what was driving me: it was very important to me in that moment for him to hear and see me as his wife, and he just was unable to do that. He just had never been able to do that. And that was so important to me.

It's like I wanted him to know, "This is more important to me than my precious teacup collection." Now, I did not throw those two cups... It was two totally different times in our marriage. I didn't throw them at him. I threw them at a wall knowing that they were going to break in a million pieces. But you know what, when I reached out for help, that was one of many things that he used against me to prove that I was the abusive one. But he never initiated, ever once, initiated getting help from me, his supposedly "terrible" wife, because I wasn't a terrible wife. All I was doing was reacting to his abuse, to his neglect, to his lies, to his jabs, to his refusal to take responsibility for his chronic abusive behavior.

By the way, if you are in a relationship and you are reacting in that relationship the way I did, I can help you with that in the Flying Free Program. I didn't have any help. I had nobody helping me figure out how to deal with this. But what I know now that I didn't know then is that I actually did have choices. I didn't need him to understand and believe me. I needed me to understand and believe me. I didn't need him to give me credibility. I needed to give me credibility. I didn't know that I had choices. I didn't know I could leave someone like that if I wanted to. If I had known, I would have left so much sooner. But I didn't, so I tried to get help, as many Christian women do, from whatever church we were members of at the time. There were two of them during the course of our marriage.

The reason I initiated help multiple times from both of these churches is because I was being slowly destroyed, small razor cut by small razor cut. And divorce wasn't an option. That meant the only solution was to fix him. So there you go. There are two options when someone is hurting you.

I talked about this in one of my other podcast episodes where I talk about if someone is sitting there kicking your shin. It's the shin-kicking episode, and I will link to that in the show notes if you want to go listen to that. You have two options: you can either get away from the shin-kicker – you stand up and walk away – or you can try to make him stop. So divorce is kind of like walking away and the other option, making him stop, is not possible.

It's impossible to control another human being. And it is not what God designed. God actually allowed for divorce, you can listen to some other podcast episodes about that or read "The Life-Saving Divorce" by Gretchen Baskerville or you can read "Divorce and

Remarriage in the Church” by David Instone-Brewer if you want more information about that. But God allowed divorce in the Bible because He knew that people could not be controlled. People were going to make bad choices. People were going to be abusive. But the church chooses to ignore God’s allowance of divorce and instead chooses to control people, the opposite of what God does. It’s a fascinating, satanic twist on the truth.

So if a woman comes and asks for help, my suggestion in the suggestion box is that you believe her. Just let that be your first response. Believe her and validate her experience and her pain. She is a human being, and likely an intelligent one. What in the world is the rationale behind choosing to believe that she’s just a frickin’ liar? What would her motivation be to lie about her husband? For kicks and giggles? Do you think that it’s a walk in the park to come forward and air dirty, private laundry? Dear God! It’s an awful, horrible decision to make! And then doubly-horrible to execute it. I remember the times that I had to tell someone. I was shaking, I felt nauseated. All I wanted to do was crawl in a hole and die. It was humiliating and heart-breaking every single time.

But so many churches will just casually look at the woman and think, “Well, is she really telling the truth? She could just be a Jezebel trying to slander the good name of her husband for no reason.” Yeah, that’s just not rooted in reality. But it is the default conclusion or assumption that people who are enmeshed in misogynistic theology jump to in these cases.

So what should the church do instead? Just my suggestion: what if you just asked them what they needed? Do they need respite? Do they need counseling? Do they need someone to talk to? Do they need education? Do they need strategies and skills to deal with the dysfunctional behaviors of their partner? Do they need to be separated? Do they need a divorce? And then whatever they tell you they need, how about if we come up with creative ways to help them get what they need?

This is coming alongside someone and supporting them. Do you see how this puts the victim back in the driver’s seat of her life? She is asking for help and the church is providing that help. Do you see how so many people would be flocking to the church if it actually cared that way? But the church as it is now does not care that way. They’re just looking for people to control, not care for.

And here’s how we know: The next thing that happens is that the church will tell the victim what she has to do. “Here’s what you have to do. We know. You need to go back and be better. If you’re a good Christian, bad things won’t happen to you. So if bad things are happening to you in your home, you must not be a very good Christian. You

must be a problem wife. A bad communicator. Maybe you're not reading your Bible enough. Maybe you're annoying your husband by being a dripping faucet. Dripping faucets are annoying, you know. Go back and be better, and maybe the problem will go away." But since that's not actually the problem, of course it does not go away.

You know, abusers love churches. They love churches. Many churches are an abuser's best friend, and that's why so many pastors are abusers. So many churches are just like little Petri dishes for abusive people. Abusive people are protected, coddled, and even trained in how to control other people, how to be narcissistic through this controlling, misogynistic theology that so many churches teach. You've heard of scorpion nests? Well, some churches are little abuser nests or little narcissist nests. Narcissist nests. I like that.

So what comes next after the wife comes forward? Well, of course the abuser comes forward to defend himself, and since abusers almost always look really good on the outside, people believe them and then turn on the victim.

Now, abusers will use the exact same language that the victim uses because, of course, he's been hearing this language over the course of time every time she has tried to tell him (which, by the way, never works, ladies) what he's doing that's hurting her. He will take all of these things, all of this language and this rhetoric that he's learned about what is hurting her, and then he'll tell the church that she's just doing those things to poor little him. He's the victim. Can't they see that? "Just like Eve deceived poor little Adam so my wife has used and abused me, and now she's even being more vile by pretending that she's the victim." They might even shed a crocodile tear or two.

Now the church is really confused. They wring their hands in despair at this point. "Who to believe? It is such a conundrum." Because many churches are full of marriages like this, they tend to be misogynistic. That's exactly why marriages like this are so prevalent in these churches. And so, because they are misogynistic, their underpinnings are misogynistic, they will tend to believe the men, just as they have throughout history. So nothing really new to see here. It's just the same old story that started in the garden.

So problem one, "Who to believe?" My suggestion is that you just believe the one who came forward in the first place. Now, let's say that you find out that this particular situation is the extremely rare exception to the rule and the actual abuser really is the one who came forward. How will you know? Well, usually victims are panicked. They have complex post traumatic stress disorder. They're reading a lot of books and articles and doing a lot of freaking out. They're going to counseling. By the way, on their own, not because someone told them to. They're desperate for counseling, okay? They're

joining support groups right and left. They're taking all the responsibility for the kids, they are shouldering the bulk of the responsibility for everything in the household and the family and the marriage.

The abuser is typically sitting back and blaming, dragging his or her feet about counseling, largely unaware of his or her own issues, is not taking initiative with the family or household responsibilities, is not taking personal responsibility for anything and is, most of the time, often calm, cool, and collected, almost emotionally detached in some ways. So just a few little clues to help you figure it out.

Alright. So the next problem is, "Who to help and how to help them?" My suggestion is this: why not help both people? And how you help each one is going to look different. For the victim who comes forward, they've had their adult autonomy, choices, and voice taken away. So how we help them is by giving these things back to them.

When a new woman joins my group, I will often get a question like this: "I'm wondering if I should do this or that? Can someone tell me which one I should do?" They've learned how to be helpless, how to depend on someone else for what to do. They don't trust themselves. They don't trust their own credibility. They don't trust their own inner wisdom. They don't trust their bodies. They don't trust their own brains. They've been told for so long that they're stupid and they don't know anything that they can't even make a decision. They are no longer driving the car of their own life. They're so used to someone else driving it.

Do you know what I do when I hear questions like this? I always just put it back on them. I say, "Hey, you get to decide. And I believe that you will make a great choice for yourself. And if you make a mistake, guess what? You can change your mind and do the other thing, then. That is the adventure of life." I don't tell them what to do. I teach them how to take back their own life and drive their own car to their own destination. I have my own car to drive. It isn't my responsibility to drive theirs.

And you know what? They love this. It's always this big revelation for them. It's so much fun. And you know what else? They step right into their new role as steward of their own life. They have been waiting for this their whole lives. "When do I get permission to actually live my own life?" And by the way, God gives them this permission. Natalie gives them "permission" to live their own life, but He gives them responsibility to live their own life. He has assigned a role to them and that is "steward of their own life."

So when someone comes and says, "Help me! My husband is hurting me," usually the church says, "Okay, here's what you need to do: A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. And we will go

after your husband and get him to change, and all will be well unless he decides to disobey us, in which case you can still obey and be in good standing." I actually heard this from two different churches myself. One even had this extensive program for rehabilitating marriages, which included all these steps for both the husband and wife to obey and do. And the husband and the wife were rated based on their cooperation with the church's protocols. It was ridiculous and set up by people who had no clue what was going on in these relationships. Totally unhelpful, and ended up with me "rebellious" when I decided not to cooperate with their "A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P," and therefore, I was excommunicated.

So what I would offer as a suggestion instead, based on the life of Jesus Christ, is that the church ask the victim questions like this: "Tell me more. What do you want to do about this? We can't control him and his behavior, but we want to support you and get you the help that you need to do whatever it is that you want to do in light of the fact that your husband is choosing to treat you this way," and then come alongside her. Equip her to be an adult and to make her own adult choices. Does she want a divorce? Help her get one. Go to court with her. Hold her hand in mediation. Raise funds so that she can afford the attorney fees.

But what about the abuser? How can the church help him? Usually abusers don't want help. Why do they need help? They're good, thank you very much. "Yeah, sure, I'll take some help. Make my little wifey more sexy and obedient and I'll be good to go, thank you very much!"

Alright. What do abusers need? How do we love abusers? Here's what my suggestion is. I believe that abusers need to be told the truth. So here's an example of Jesus doing this in the gospel of Matthew. Here's what Jesus told abusers: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are! Woe to you blind guides! You blind fools! Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they're full of greed and self-indulgence. You are like white-washed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but on the inside are full of dead man's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. You are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. You snakes. You brood of vipers."

Yeah. So Jesus just told them the truth, and then what? Did He then sit down with them

and give them a program for what they needed to do? Nope. Now, a couple of them followed Him: Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. I'm sure more did, but the Bible says that Nicodemus did and so did Joseph of Arimathea, who buried Him in his own tomb. But Jesus never told them what to do. They actually came and followed Him. The vast majority of the Pharisees heard Jesus say those things, and then they just continued to use and abuse the people around them as they always had.

Jesus spent His time teaching truth to the people who were being hurt, the victims, so that they could be set free internally. As usual, it was the victims and the oppressed who were coming and asking for help and hope. Why? Because that requires humility, something that abusers don't have. Sort of like the humility of the victim putting her whole life on the line and coming to church and begging for help.

But churches today are more interested in saving marriages, even if that means lying, pretending, covering up, and faking it. So they'll give the abuser a checklist of holy and godly things to do, hoops to jump through, so that they can appear to be fixed. Jesus didn't do that, but churches do that. As long as everything looks good on the outside, just like those whitewashed tombs.

I suggest that instead of giving the abuser more extensive training on how to be a fraud, churches allow the abuser to be exactly who he wants to be. Let the abuser show his true colors and make his own choices.

And that brings us to problem four: "Who to kick out of the church if we're going to kick anyone out?" You see, churches think they have to control all the people, and that means they decide who stays and who goes. But if they're doing what I suggest for problems two and three and calling out abusers, abusers aren't going to want to stay. I mean, would you want to stay in a church that was calling you out on your crappy behavior every Sunday morning?

"Those of you men who are sitting out there in your pew raising your hands in worship when you know you're going to go home and jerk off to porn tonight, you are a whitewashed tomb. You are full of dead man's bones. You are a fraud. Quit being a fake. Have some intellectual integrity and don't come here and pretend to be someone you're not. Those of you smiling and shaking hands with your brother when you heard your wife crying last night and rolled over and went to sleep, on the outside you appear to people as righteous, but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

Yeah, I don't think abusers would feel as comfortable in churches that called out pretenders. I'm convinced that one of the main reasons many churches don't call out

pretenders is because the leaders of those churches are the master pretenders. Churches don't need to tell abusers what to do from the pulpit. They don't need to tell the victim how to help their abusive partner change. That doesn't work. Controlling people doesn't work, and Jesus never did it. Churches need to let people be who they are and tell the truth about that. And the rest just falls into place naturally.

Let's just say every single church followed these suggestions. These aren't my suggestions by the way—they're just how Jesus lived His life, and the church is supposedly the body of Jesus Christ, right? So let's just say that the church really acted like the body of Jesus Christ. Here's what would happen: abusers would hate church. Victims would be empowered to get out of abusive marriages and then they would marry healthy partners, thereby creating healthy marriages. And the church, the body of Christ, would be known on the face of the planet Earth as the group of people who tell the truth and love. Authenticity, honesty, love. Hey, just like Jesus. What a novel idea!

Now, whenever I write a blog post or do a podcast episode and I'm talking about churches and their strange behaviors, I almost always get feedback from people who say, "Well, MY church isn't like that! I don't know why you're so critical of churches. Our church is amazeballs. My church would never do that." And you know what, I believe you. I believe that you go to an absolutely incredible church. I believe that your church is just like the body of Jesus Christ.

But you know what, we need more churches just like yours. And I'm not talking about churches that are already behaving like the body of Christ. I'm talking about and to churches that aren't. So please, you don't need to send me emails or private message me or make comments on my blog about how your church is not like this. This message isn't for your church.

Thanks for listening and until next time, fly free.