

When Should A Spouse Flee?

A woman came for counseling complaining that her husband was emotionally abusive. She had scoliosis. That is, her back was slightly curved and when her husband looked upon her he regarded this “flaw” as a serious defect. He wanted his wife to have a perfect body - without defect. She had suffered her husband’s criticisms for years, and the constant criticism had finally wounded her severely. She felt abused and now she wanted a divorce - relief. When she was asked to give the biblical basis for her divorce, she referred to 1 Corinthians 7:15. Then she added that the passage says divorce is okay if your spouse leaves you. She believed that her husband had left her emotionally. So divorce was okay. Sadly, she had missed the meaning of the passage. She was seeking escape and understandably she was in emotional pain. But this raises an important question. When should a wife flee her husband or a husband flee his wife? It is a fiction that only husbands abuse wives. There are many stories of wives abusing their husbands, even murdering some. It is the battle of the sexes, and it started in Genesis 3. It came with the curse. The question we will explore in this study is when should a spouse flee? What are the biblical grounds for separation or divorce, if any?

HOME - A BATTLE GROUND. When Adam ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6-7), he brought sin into the universe (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22). We can wonder if he understood the power of his single act, but we do not have the answer. As a result of his disobedience, the creation was changed negatively, damaged by sin. The foundational human relationship of marriage was also effaced. By his single act of sin, warfare entered into the relationship between Adam and his wife Eve. This fact is revealed in Genesis 3:16.

To the woman He said,
“I will greatly multiply
Your pain in childbirth,
In pain you will bring forth children;
Yet your desire will be for your husband,
And he will rule over you.” Genesis 3:16 (NASB)

Our English Bibles translate the Hebrew word, **טוֹשֶׁקָה**, as “desire” in Genesis 3:16. While the basic meaning of **טוֹשֶׁקָה** is “desire,”^{1,2} the English word “desire” leaves us with a positive concept of the Hebrew **טוֹשֶׁקָה**. It sounds wonderful. But **טוֹשֶׁקָה** actually has a negative meaning. This becomes

clear when we realize that God pronounced a curse upon Eve in Genesis 3:15-16. He was not saying that wives would have a loving, positive desire for their husbands, such as Adam. Think about it, a loving desire for one’s spouse is hardly a curse. In fact, that is what God wants in marriage (Eph. 5:22-31). Therefore, it is important to realize that God is pronouncing a curse in Genesis 3:16, and this gives us a clue that **טוֹשֶׁקָה** must have a negative connotation. So, what was God saying? The answer is found in Genesis 4:7, where **טוֹשֶׁקָה** is also translated as “desire.”

If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Genesis 4:7 (NASB)

טוֹשֶׁקָה occurs in the statement “sin is crouching at the door; and its *desire* is for you, but you must master it.” Here the meaning of the word is clearer. God said that sin wanted to control Cain - “its desire is for you.” Consequently, God warned Cain to fight against it - “but you must master it.” God described conflict. Sin wanted to control Cain, but Cain had to fight back. This reveals the meaning of **טוֹשֶׁקָה** - translated as “desire.” **טוֹשֶׁקָה** describes warfare. The desire is negative. So in marriage, the effect of the fall on wives was that they would try to control their husbands. In the next verse, Genesis 3:17, God told Adam that he would not love his wife as he should and that he would seek to dominate

1. Swanson, James A. Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains. 9592.

2. Harris, R. Laird, et al. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. Moody Press. 1980. # 2352a

her. That is the meaning of God's statement, "And he will rule over you." The Hebrew word translated as "rule" has the idea of an unloving rule. This means that warfare in marriage flows down to human marriages from the curse. Each spouse will try to control the other. Now that is a curse. Little do couples realize that when they stand before the marriage altar and say, "I do!" that it is two warriors getting married. The truth of this statement becomes clear in the months and years that follow.

When we come to Ephesians 5:22-33, we find God telling us how to "undo" the curse. He calls Christian wives to submit to their husbands and for Christian husbands to love their wives. That is God's desire for every marriage, but it can only be achieved by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. Then, a Christian couple can have a marriage that is godly and filled with joy (Eph. 5:17-18).

Why did we start with this truth? Because scripture helps every husband and wife understand why conflict or warfare exists in their marriage. It gives us the principles for a meaningful and fulfilling marriage. Unless husbands and wives are filled with the Spirit of God, they will try to control one another through various manipulative techniques. Wives often employ abusive language, nag, cry, or scream in order to win. Husbands often use physical force, abusive or offensive language, and silence. Unfortunately, some ungodly counsel is often given that only creates more conflict and frustration. Unbiblical counsel commonly focuses on assertiveness training and/or conflict resolution rather than a simple adherence to the biblical principles in Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Peter 3:1-7.

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE. Separation and divorce is a sad method that men and women use to "solve" marital conflicts between spouses. In some cases separation and divorce

are viewed as the "win" - one spouse "sticking it" to the other one. It is surprising how many husbands and wives claim that Jesus is their Savior and Lord, but then are disobedient to the fundamental principles outlined in scripture for a successful marriage. Consequently, God's solution is not employed, and they continue employing their own methods of coping. Ironically, some folks love to imagine that they obey Jesus, but they do not actually obey Him. The world's solution of separation is often proposed by the "followers" of Jesus because they know that God does not approve of divorce. They think they will live separate lives, never seek divorce and thus please God. Unfortunately, couples who separate eventually divorce. But where in the pages of scripture

is there support for the concept of marital separation? One cannot find a verse in the pages of scripture supporting the concept of separation, nor can one find scripture condemning it. We will explore the option of separation later, but for now we will examine the biblical grounds for divorce.

It is clear that scripture does not allow divorce for just any reason. Jesus and Paul have given two grounds for divorce. In Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:3-9, Jesus gives us the

first of the two grounds for divorce that God recognizes. We will call it *biblical divorce*. The first reason is adultery.

... but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Matt. 5:32 (NASB)

When Jesus said this to the crowd He emphasized the fact that He was teaching when He said "I." In the Greek Jesus actually repeated the word "I." He said, "I, I say." He was



emphatic, “I say that everyone who divorces, except for “ He was speaking! The Greek word that Jesus used for “unchastity” is **πορνεία**. This Greek word has a broader meaning than just sexual relations with someone of the opposite sex. The word can refer to heterosexual and homosexual activity as well as incest and sex with an animal. That is, **πορνεία** included any sexual activity outside of the marital relationship. In this passage, Jesus granted divorce only when the sexual, physical relationship of marriage is violated. In Matthew 19:8 Jesus added that divorce is permitted because of the hardness of man’s heart.

He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. Matt. 19:8 (NASB)

In Malachi 2:16 we are told that God hates divorce. What is the message? God hates divorce, but He allows it only when **πορνεία** occurs due to the hardness of our hearts. When divorce occurs because **πορνεία** was committed by the other spouse it is called a *biblical divorce*, and it is granted by God with His blessing and with the right to remarry.

Divorce for any reason other **πορνεία** does not have His blessing, except for one other than reason - a second reason given 1 Corinthians 7:12-15.

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. (NASB) 1 Cor. 7:12-15

This passage reveals that the second ground for a *biblical divorce* exists when an unbelieving spouse wants out of the relationship. That is, an unbeliever does not want to be married to a believer any longer. That is the second ground for

a *biblical divorce*. It may be initiated by either spouse. It is important to note that scripture does not give any other clear cut grounds for a *biblical divorce*.

THINKING ABOUT SEPARATION. Since marital conflict is part of the curse and we cannot biblically divorce except in two situations, how shall we counsel those in abusive situations? Do we encourage abused spouses to remain together even where danger is present? What do we in abusive situations?

First, it is important to recognize that emotional abuse exists in many marriages. Emotional abuse comes in a variety of flavors, so to speak. However, it is usually inflicted verbally or with silence or absence. This type of abuse is a common complaint by wives. Emotional abuse is more difficult to recognize than physical abuse. What is emotional abuse for one spouse may not be abuse for another. In fact, some wives can dish up a lot of abuse as well as husbands. Further, it is often difficult to recognize the real “inflictors” of the abuse in a marriage. Consider this situation from Proverbs,

A constant dripping on a day of steady rain
And a contentious woman are alike;
He who would restrain her restrains the wind,
And grasps oil with his right hand.

Prov. 27:15–16 (NASB)

Here the emotional abuse is against the husband by a constantly nagging wife (Prov. 19:13). The wife is the perpetrator. In this example, the husband cannot stop her. The Proverb says that restraining her is like restraining the wind and grasping oil in one’s hand. Try to grasp the wind or oil. The message is - he cannot do it. Some men respond with anger, silence and even escape. Some work long hours and on weekends in order to avoid her. Some husbands turn the television on or the computer as a means of escape. Other husbands respond with intimidating words, maybe physical violence, in an attempt to stop her. They are seeking escape. In fact, some believing husbands file for an unbiblical divorce even when there are no biblical grounds for such a divorce. Unfortunately, they can never remarry, unless the other

spouse commits *πορνεία*. Now for the important question. Who is the emotional abuser in this example? The answer is simple - both. She may have started it, but he is complicating the situation. It is not a one sided affair.

Admittedly, physical violence if employed, is the worst possible response. It is the experience of counselors that emotional abuse is often a two-way street, so identifying the instigator can be hard sometimes. But physical violence and life threatening situations are much easier to recognize and are usually inflicted by only one partner.

Whether the abuse is emotional or physical, the first step toward resolution is counseling for the couple. The first solution is not divorce. The biblical advice needed to solve the situation is humility, confession of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation by both spouses. In some cases, temporary separation may be necessary to protect one of the spouses until the abusing partner can adopt a different pattern of behavior. However, separation should not be entered into quickly since separation is often the first step that leads to divorce. Separation from the conflict can be such an emotional relief that the "fleeing" spouse never wants to return. The relief is so welcome that it is difficult to imagine returning. In fact, how will the spouse ever know it is safe to return?

REASONS NOT TO SEPARATE. From a biblical perspective, the separation of one spouse from another may be unbiblical. It depends upon the reason and how it is done. There are three clear biblical reasons that suggest separation can actually be sinful.

The first reason marital separation is potentially unbiblical is given in 1 Peter 3:1-2 where a wife is encouraged to persevere even if she has an unbelieving husband who is disobedient to scripture.

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. 1 Peter 1:1-2 (NASB)

The passage reveals that even if the unbelieving husband is involved in some sin, the wife is to submit, be pure and

be respectful. This may be a surprising statement to some women. How many times have we heard wives explain that they want to leave their husbands because he is so sinful? "I should never have married him. He was not the one God wanted me to marry. I am outside of the Lord's will. I chose the wrong one. "The truth is, a spouse might have married the right one, but if the right one is treated as the wrong one they might just become the wrong one. Further, if a spouse marries the wrong one and treats him/her as the right one, then he/she might just become the right one. That is something to think about.

1 Peter 3 says the wife is to stay and minister to him! God just might use her to bring him to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. If he is a believer, God might use her to convict him of his sin and he might repent and turn to God. Isn't it incredible what we can find in the pages of scripture dealing with marital relationships? This means that wives have a ministry and their ministry is to their unbelieving husband - to help him find Jesus as Savior and Lord. Their ministry even extends to believing husbands - helping to motivate them to walk in holiness.

The second reason marital separation is potentially unbiblical is given in 1 Corinthians 7:1-5. This passage tells us that a husband and wife can abstain from sexual relations for only one reason - to devote themselves to prayer.

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 1 Cor. 7:1-5 (NASB)

Otherwise, they should willingly give themselves sexually to the other partner. That means separation, if it occurs, must be short and should be a time for prayer and Bible study.

The separation should have an end date of weeks rather than months, and the couple should be in serious prayer.

This is a test of how serious the couple is about obeying the Lord Jesus Christ. The truth is most Christian couples do not separate because they want to obey God and give themselves to prayer. Further, usually one or both of them does not want to have sexual relations. Therefore, the concept of a short separation is not only unimportant to them; in some cases it is appalling. If this is the situation, then they are in violation of scripture at the beginning of the separation. Jesus is not Lord of their lives. One or both of them are not serious about following Jesus. But the best test of their obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ is for repentance to occur and the couple to remain together.

The third reason marital separation is potentially unbiblical is if the wife violates the biblical principle of submission while being separated as given in multiple scriptural passages (1 Cor. 11:13; Eph. 5:21-24; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). If separated, they are still married and biblically speaking, the husband is still the leader. The wife should still be in submission. But the usual reason for separation is escape, independence - not submission and a lack of responsibility.

If these three principles were seriously taught and biblical counsel was truly given, many cases of separation might never occur. In the event marital separation does occur, there will be a great tension on the part of the counselor trying to encourage the couple to maintain these three principles while separated.

REASONS FOR SEPARATION. Next, we will examine scripture that supports a biblical principle of separation but not for casual reasons. Some tension will be created since the scriptures clearly state that there are only two principles for a *biblical divorce*. We will start by simply asking how should a believing wife respond to a husband who has Alzheimer's and who does not always understand what he is doing? There are many Christian men who have had Alzheimer's and progressively lose clarity of thought. They may not remember what they did even just a few minutes ago. They cannot make wise decisions because their thinking processes are diminished. In such situations how is the wife supposed to submit to her husband as given in Ephesians 5:21-31? Does

she submit even when he is impaired? We might say, "No!" but scripture never addresses the abnormal situations.

What does a wife do if she has had a hysterectomy, has not healed yet, and the doctor has advised against sexual relations for three months, but her husband assertively demands sexual relations? He says he is in need. Is the wife obligated to biblically submit to him per 1 Corinthians 7:1-5? Should she go ahead and suffer the pain and potential complications of recovery in order to win her unbelieving husband, if he is unbelieving? If she does it once, should she have to submit repeatedly? Scripture never addresses this situation.

What does a wife do if her husband repeatedly commits incest with one of their children? What does he or she do if a spouse is into drugs, alcohol, a sex addict or violates the civil laws? What if the addict, while under the influence, repeatedly assaults his/her spouse? Do these situations justify ignoring some of the clear biblical commands about the roles of husbands and wives, such as wives being in submission to their husbands? Are there scriptures that establish a justification in the rare situation for separation?

PROTECTION OF WIVES. We will examine Old Testament passages where God gives warnings governing the treatment of women, wives, and widows - by men. This is important since some men have a low opinion of the importance of women. We will discover that God is a protector of women. Women are not second class citizens in God's view. We will focus first on the Pentateuch, since Moses communicated many laws governing women that were given by God, and then we will examine the New Testament.

We will start with an important passage offering protection to women, widows in particular, in Exodus 22:22.

You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. Ex 22:22 (NASB)

In this passage the English word "afflict" comes from the Hebrew word **אָפַף**. The word means "afflicted, miserable, or humbled" with a feeling of anxiety or distress.³ In some cases the word can refer to a woman being violated. However in general, the word has the idea of being mistreated. That is, a widow is never to be mistreated by anyone. This

3. Swanson, James A. , I bid., 6700

principle also extends to wives in general since it is unlikely that God means it is okay to mistreat wives but not widows. It is better to understand Exodus 22:22 as God emphasizing the fact that He does not want women, who no longer have a husband to protect them, to be mistreated. God is their defender (Deut. 10:17-18; 14:28-29; 16:9-14; 24:19-21; 26:12-13). This principle extends to all women.

God also provides a warning against denying justice for widows. This warning is given in Deut. 27:19,

Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' Deut. 27:19 (NASB)

This shows God's passion, especially for widows. Once again, God is not saying that it is okay to deny justice to married women. God is emphasizing the fact that widows are not alone and unprotected. He is standing with them (Ps. 68:5; 146:9; Isa. 1:17; Zech. 7:10). Men should be protectors and not inflictors. In the absence of male protection, God will protect.

Numbers 27:1-11 is a unique passage in the Pentateuch. It deals with the right of inheritance for widows. It reveals that daughters and not just widows had the right of inheritance if there were no males to receive the inheritance. This passage reveals that God granted women the right to own property. Widows, wives, and the unmarried had basic rights as people.

In Deut. 21:10-14 God protects wives who were taken captive after an enemy was defeated. God states that if the captive wife is unloved by her husband and she decides to leave, then her husband cannot sell her, nor treat her as a slave but must freely let her go.

In the next few verses, Deut. 21:15-17, God establishes a law protecting the offspring of an unloved wife. If one of two wives is unloved, the husband is required to give to her firstborn son a double portion of inheritance. While the wife does not benefit, she does through her son. For most mothers, this is a great blessing. In truth the husband should love both wives equally.

God also established laws protecting wives from false accusations related to immorality. In Deut 22:13-19, God

provides guidelines for defending a wife who is wrongly accused by her husband of not being a virgin. Then in Deut. 22:22-27, God establishes guidelines for dealing with rape. That is, if an engaged virgin is sexually violated by a man and she protests - screams out for help - the rapist shall be punished by being put to death, but not the woman. But if the woman is not engaged, the man shall be obligated to marry and care for her the rest of his life (v. 28-29). This may not seem fair to the woman, but in that culture a raped woman would have had difficulty getting married and being cared for. Consequently, God provides for the woman.

These passages reveal that God is a protector of women, wives and widows, especially. God desires that wives and widows be protected from physical abuse, denial of legal rights, and protection from sexual assault. Widows are to be cared for financially and by means of provisions. Ultimately, God is their protector and provider. Women are not obligated to suffer abusive behavior.

In the New Testament, God tells husbands that they are to care for their wives just as the husband would care for himself. Check out Eph. 5:21-29,

... be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. Eph 5:21-30 (NASB)

After our short study of the Pentateuch, are you surprised at what you see in this passage? This passage teaches that both husbands and wives are to submit to one another. God has

a high view of women, as well as men. Scripture teaches that men and women are of equal value, even though husbands and wives have different roles. It is important to notice several other things in Ephesians 5:21-29. First, the passage teaches that husbands are to love their wives as Jesus loves the church - all believers. Second, husbands are to love their wives just as they love their own bodies. They are to minister to them spiritually and provide for them - nourishing them! They are to cherish them - no violence allowed.

The same message is also given in 1 Peter 3:7 with stronger words and a warning to husbands.

You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. 1 Pet. 3:7 (NASB)

Husbands are told to treat their wives as fellow heirs of the grace of life. Women are not slaves or second class citizens. They are not to be mistreated or exploited. Wives are to be cherished, valued, care for and protected. It is clear that God has called men to protect wives and widows.

PROTECTION OF HUSBANDS. Men are not the only abusers. On one occasion a wife was caught physically assaulting her husband. She was hitting her husband with her fists. The home was filled with violence and the children saw her beating their dad. He would protect his head and let her beat on him. Physical violence was common place in the home. This wife violated God's command of showing her husband respect and love (Eph. 5:33; Titus 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). There are few scriptures that deal with abuse of husbands since they are usually the stronger partner in the relationship.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE FOR SEPARATION. Now for the serious question of interest. How should the wife or we respond when a wife is physically abused by her husband? When she is in danger? We will discover that there is a biblical principle that says when one sees evil, do something - maybe run! We will call this separation. The first passage we will examine is Proverbs 14:16,

A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is

arrogant and careless. Prov. 14:16 (NASB)

Here we are told that the wise person flees evil, but the fool does not. Arrogantly, the fool ignores the evil and does nothing. The Hebrew word that is translated as "cautious" is אָרַץ. Its root meaning is "to fear, to be frightened, to be afraid, to tremble and to revere."⁴ That is, the wise man is intelligently fearful when he sees evil and runs. But the fool is self-confident and as a result is careless. The Hebrew word that is translated as "careless" is תָּבַר, which means "to pass by."⁵ It leaves us with the picture of one who confidently keeps walking right by the trouble. He passes by the trouble rather than turning away. What's the message? Wise men flee trouble but not the fool. This means that a spouse who is in danger should turn away from evil. Otherwise, she or he is a biblical fool.

Also, consider Proverbs 22:3 where we are told,

The prudent sees the evil and hides himself,

But the naive go on, and are punished for it.

Prov. 22:3 (NASB)

Now we are told that just like the wise man, the prudent sees evil and this time hides rather than turning away or fleeing. The Hebrew word translated as "hides" is סָתַר. It means "covering, hiding-place, or secrecy."⁶ That is the prudent goes into secrecy. It is another form of escape.

Proverbs 27:12 has the same message. Together these three passages reveal that a wise or prudent spouse will escape in some way when they see evil coming.

John MacArthur writes the following,

... while Scripture does not specifically instruct the battered wife, it gives principles that certainly apply to her. Proverbs 14:16 says, "A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil" (NASB). God gives us wisdom to be defensive and cautious. We duck when something flies through the air at our heads. Common sense tells us to avoid situations where we're

4. Ibid. #907

5. Ibid. #1556

6. Ibid. #1551

placed in physical danger. And I believe that is what God expects of us.

A woman whose husband brutalizes her is not only justified if she protects herself--she would be wrong not to. There is no virtue in a wife's willingly submitting to beatings and physical abuse from a cruel or drunken husband. And certainly there is no biblical warrant for a woman knowingly to allow herself to be beaten and even injured in the name of submission to her husband, especially if there are legitimate steps she can take to avoid it.

By way of comparison, the apostle Paul says in Romans 13 that we are to submit to civil government as a God-ordained authority. Yet that "submission" does not necessarily include voluntarily suffering at the hands of an abusive government. Our Lord said, "Whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next" (Matthew 10:23)--certainly giving the persecuted warrant to flee the persecution of wicked governments if a way of escape is open. So the "submission" God calls us to does not include automatic acquiescence to sheer physical brutality.⁷

In John MacArthur's closing statement he contrasts Romans 13 with Matt. 10:23. Romans 13:1-5 and also 1 Peter 2:13-14 tell us to obey civil government, but in Matthew 10:23 Jesus told the disciples to flee when persecution came. The message is simple. When evil comes, run! Our submission or obedience is not blind submission to abuse and violence. Admittedly, there are times when we cannot flee and we will suffer (Matt. 5:10-12; 10:21-22; 2 Tim. 3:12).

The principle is given again when Peter and John, two apostles, told the Sanhedrin Council in Acts 4:18-20 that they were not going to obey them. We are told in Acts 4 that the Sanhedrin Council had summoned them, but notice the apostles' response.

And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John

answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."
Acts 4:18-20 (NASB)

Why did the apostles disobey their national leaders? The answer is given in Matthew 23:1-3, where Jesus told His disciples to obey the words of the religious leaders.

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. Matt 23:1-3 (NASB)

From these scriptures we have two principles. The *first principle* is simple, flee abuse and violence when persecuted, if possible. These scriptures collectively establish a principle that extends to every other human relationship, including marriage. Proverbs establishes the principle in general. The other scriptures establish the principle with specifics. This principle is often overlooked in regard to marriage. Thus when danger occurs in marriage, the endangered spouse is required to display wisdom by protecting himself or herself, if possible. The children are also included in this principle.

The *second principle* is that if we are suffering for Christ's sake, we can disobey civil authority or religious authority. When conflict arises, we are to obey God rather than men. We are to disobey men if necessary in order to please our God. This was Jesus' admonition to the disciples. It is the principle that the apostles followed with Israel's leaders. Yet, many Christian martyrs have suffered for the sake of Christ because they could not escape. So they died for the cause of Christ rather than denying Him.

It is a trustworthy statement:

For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him;

If we endure, we will also reign with Him;

If we deny Him, He also will deny us;

If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself. 2 Timothy 2:11-13 (NASB)

7. John MacArthur. How should a wife respond to a physically abusive husband? (<http://www.gty.org/resources/positions/p00/answering-the-key-questions-about-the-family>)

We should add that committing sin in the process of trying to obey scripture and protecting oneself are not options.

CONCLUSION. God has established guidelines for protecting spouses. God cares about each spouse. The divorce laws that were established by Moses and Jesus were actually for protection for wives from unloving husbands. In ancient days a divorcee or widow was often lonely and in financial trouble. God's laws provide financial support to protect wives and widows. In addition, God established laws that protected wives and widows from legal, sexual and civil abuses. In the New Testament God restated the principle of protection in Ephesians 5:21-33, 1 Timothy 5:3-16 and 1 Peter 3:1-12. Scripture reveals that God is a protector of women.

From God's perspective both the wife and husband have rights and responsibilities - not just the husband. The wife is not a "second class citizen" and the husband is not the king who is served. The marriage relationship should be free from every form of physical violence, including incest of the children, or even disease such as AIDS and STDs. The wife should be provided for - clothes, food and a place to live. The wife should be free from physical violence. The wife is also to love her husband (Titus 2:3-5) and respect him (Eph. 5:31). The husband has the responsibility to be the spiritual leader in the home and to provide for the needs of his wife and the children (Eph. 6:1-4; Col. 3:18-21; 2 Thess. 3:7-10; 1 Tim. 5:8). Likewise, the husband is to love his wife and she is to respond with humility, submission, and meet his sexual needs. Proverbs 31:10-31, 1 Cor. 11:1-10 and Titus 2:3-5 outline other duties of a wife.

Scripture is clear that God has defined the relationship between husbands and wives, and the marriage environment is to be free from physical abuse for both spouses. When physical abuse occurs in marriage, God's commands have been violated and the abusing spouse is clearly in sin. It is

clear that God does not expect a wife's submission or obedience to be blind to abuse and violence and just endure. Scripture advises anyone, including the abused spouses to run! Therefore, in the context of marriage, separation must be considered only when danger is clearly present or when remaining would violate God's commands.

If separation becomes necessary for the safety of either the husband, wife or children, it must be viewed as a temporary situation of short duration. Separation must never be viewed as a long term situation; otherwise, it is nothing more than an undeclared divorce. The goal of separation is not an unstated divorce - divorce by *fate a comple*. The goal is to stop the physical abuse through biblical counseling of both the abuser and the one being abused and have the couple resume living together. Counseling must occur during the period of separation. The goal is to have the two partners live together in the same home once again. Another goal of separation is to stop the developing move toward divorce. Divorce must be avoided unless the physical abuse cannot be stopped.

Therefore, we conclude that separation is permitted by way of principle, rather than by a specific directive from scripture. Separation must be delayed for the sake of the unbelieving partner (1 Cor. 7:14-16; 1 Peter 3:1-2) or for the believing partner (1 Peter 3:1-2). If separation must occur, it must be for a time of prayer and the wife should remain in submission to her husband. If separation occurs, it should only be done under counsel with the goal of the spouses resuming a normal marital relationship as soon as possible. Finally, sinning by violating God's principles will not resolve sin in the marital relationship. God has established protections for both spouses that must be enjoined.

In the event that separation results in the couple not returning to living together after some short period because one spouse refuses to return, the process of church discipline must be followed as described in Matt. 18:15-17. The unwilling spouse has violated God's standard for a biblical divorce.