

Q. Is it biblical for a woman to talk to an elder about her husband's sin?

A. Someone speaking to an elder about his or her spouse's sin is a fairly common practice that is rarely questioned. Let's see if the Bible supports it.

Obviously, in real life situations, there would be many variables involved in such a question: Is the husband a Christian? How serious is the sin? Is the sin ongoing? Is the woman in any danger? Therefore, I can only answer the question with an "Is it ever..." in front of it: "Is it ever biblical for a woman to talk to an elder about her husband's sin?" I would then have to make a further qualification about the "talk to an elder" part.

I suppose that what you mean is a wife going to meet with an elder in his home or office to discuss and counsel about her husband's sin. This is commonly done, but there is nothing in the Bible to support it. Jesus never said that if someone (including your husband) sins against you that you are to go and discuss it with an elder. Jesus' instructions have the goal of bringing about reconciliation. But a woman running to an elder may hinder reconciliation by giving the husband the impression that she is tattling about him behind his back. Thus, perhaps the question should be, "Is it ever biblical for a woman to talk to anyone about her husband's sin?"

If we assume that the husband is a Christian, then we find that Jesus has given instructions on how Christians are to handle offenses. They are in Matthew 18:15-17. As I explain in the article, "Authority and Accountability in the Bible," (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/accountable.htm>) these are not instructions on "church discipline," but on how two brothers in the Lord are to handle a situation in which one commits some offense against the other. They would apply in the case of Christian husbands and wives as well.

The first step would be for the wife to speak to her husband alone. (By the way, this is assuming that his problem is not that he is beating

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her. If he is physically abusing her, we must assume that he is not willing to listen to her and that she might endanger herself to bring up the subject alone. In such a case, we would skip this step. If he is beating her, she should go to a safe place.) Remember, the purpose is to reconcile. If at all possible, the couple should work out the problem between them. The wife should want to reconcile. Her motive should not be to expose her husband as a form of revenge.

If they are unable to reconcile privately, and she considers that the sin is too serious for her to overlook, then they are to speak with one or two more witnesses. Again, all parties should realize that the purpose is reconciliation. If this is also unsuccessful, then they are to bring the matter before the assembled brethren (the church).

Notice again that Jesus never said to bring the matter to an elder. An elder is not the church. Certainly, an elder may be one of the witnesses of step two. And, of course, he would be one of the assembled brethren of step three. But Jesus never said to bring the matter to anyone alone. It is always to two or three witnesses or to the entire church. Also, Jesus did not say to bring the matter to anyone without the other party (in this case the husband) being present. If the husband refuses to attend these meetings, then by default, he is refusing to hear and we go to the end of step three.

The purpose for each of these steps is to bring about reconciliation. If these meetings fail to bring about reconciliation (or if the husband refuses to attend), Christ's final statement applies: "but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." "Thee" here is singular and, in this case, means the wife. This does not automatically mean divorce, which is allowable only in cases of sexual infidelity (Matthew 19:9). But she is to treat him as "the Gentile and the publican" (from Matthew 18:17, *American Standard Version*). Jesus' instructions are for the church, but He was speaking to an audience of Jews. We are to understand that, to the Jews, Gentiles were considered unclean and publicans were assumed to be sinners. Seen typologically, Jesus was using them as a type of unconverted people in today's church age. This does not mean that they ARE unconverted. They may or may not be. But someone who refuses all attempts at reconciliation is to be treated as unconverted by the person offended (this is not instruction to the church as a whole).

I personally think that the matter should never have reached this escalation unless the husband's sin was very serious and he has not

repented. This being the case, then, I think that we would then have to apply 1 Corinthians 7:13: "And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him." But, I believe that a husband who will not reconcile in the case of a serious sin is not truly pleased to dwell with his wife. Thus, a separation, at least a temporary one, might be in order. Notice in 1 Corinthians 7:11, that reconciliation is still a hope and divorce with remarriage is not allowed (except as understood in light of Matthew 19:9—that is, one is not guilty of adultery if one remarries after divorcing the spouse for his or her sexual sin).

If the husband is not a Christian, Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18 do not apply. Nevertheless, marital differences should be settled between the two parties if at all possible. If they cannot settle their differences, then we return to 1 Corinthians 7:13.

I want to add that the above instructions apply equally to how a husband is to deal with his wife's sins. In all of this, we must remember that Christian spouses should be forgiving of their partner's sins. They should examine themselves to see if they have somehow pushed, or at least nudged, their partner into sin. And they should not be looking for an excuse for a divorce. Too many men and women, even Christians, are putting more effort into looking at the sins of their mates than in making an effort to build their marriages. We are not to be judgmental of one another, and we are to examine our own sins before we point out the sins of others (Matthew 7:1-5). Ephesians 4:31-32 apply especially to marriage: "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

Peter Ditzel