

# My Abusive Christian Marriage

I couldn't believe this was my reality. And I couldn't see a way out.

Gwyneth Nelson

**"Did Daddy do that?"** my daughter asked. Lying on the floor in the doorway of her room, I was stunned as I realized my daughter had just witnessed undeniable physical abuse. Tom's\* anger had escalated into unrestrained rage, and he'd thrown me into our daughter's bedroom. Confused, I began to question my situation: Was I really experiencing domestic violence in my Christian home?

I'd denied the truth so long I was unable to recognize what was really happening. The abuse had started subtly and grown insidiously. My husband and I claimed to be Christians, so how could our marriage be abusive? Unable to give my four-year-old daughter any more excuses, I said, "Yes, Daddy did that." Then I locked us in her room and crawled in bed with her until she fell asleep. That night I resolved to stop the impact of domestic abuse in my daughter's life—a difficult decision that finally pointed me in the direction of healing.

## *Control Issues*

It was inconceivable to me that I'd ever be in such circumstances. Born and raised in a loving pastor's family, I was steeped in conservative evangelical culture. As a "good girl," I got good grades, participated in extra-curricular school activities, and was a leader in the church youth group. I lived to please others, worked hard to offend no one, and had an internal drive to create a wonderful life. Though I had a relationship with Christ, I lived as if the good life depended on my good performance.

I met Tom at the Christian liberal arts college we both attended. He was handsome, intelligent, and interesting—always looking for adventure and fun. His father was a pastor, so we'd been raised in similar Christian cultures. Tom often discussed theology and doctrine, and he cared genuinely about people's salvation. Our wedding was a large, elaborate, God-centered event. I envisioned our marriage to be a shared life of service and impact for God's kingdom. I also believed that if I performed well, my marriage would go well and we'd have a good life together.

Though, looking back, I realized Tom was very self-centered while we were dating, I hadn't seen any red flags about the abuse that was to come. But early on I saw signs that life was going to be very different from what I'd envisioned. After returning from our honeymoon, Tom expected to use the entire closet in our bedroom while I used a closet in another room. He said this was because he'd moved into the apartment first. We went to the bank to put his name on my checks, but he didn't want my name on his. He monitored my purchases, even though I was working full-time and we weren't struggling financially. He was more concerned about controlling what I bought than how much money I spent. If I didn't comply with Tom's expectations or get his permission, he'd become angry and yell. For example, when I purchased drinking glasses and a shower curtain, he raged at me because he'd expected to choose those items himself. I'd eagerly

anticipated freely organizing and decorating our home. Instead, I began to adjust to the practice of gaining approval for things such as hanging a picture on the wall.

Six months into our marriage, Tom began to come home from work late—often into the next morning—without telling me his plans. More than once I called the police and hospitals, concerned he was hurt or in trouble. Upon returning home, he'd ridicule me for worrying. He insisted that if I inquired about where he was or when he'd return, I was controlling him. He chided me for what he called my lack of trust in him. More than once, he yelled so loudly at me that the neighbors knocked at the door and asked if everything was all right. Embarrassed and ashamed, I said everything was fine. But as I began to internalize Tom's accusations and criticisms, both my confidence and my self-worth began to crumble. I couldn't confidently discard old food from our refrigerator without fearing a blow up because I'd mistakenly tossed something Tom wanted to eat. When he said I was addicted to worship music, I spent less time listening to praise songs. As my self-worth eroded, I questioned my ability to be a loving wife and mother, and whether I was truly a woman of faith.

### *Keeping Up Appearances*

On the outside we looked put-together, especially in our Christian circles. Tom appeared spiritually mature. He prayed eloquent prayers, participated in deep theological discussions, and often referenced Scripture to support his insights. We hosted small group meetings, led Sunday school classes, and hosted fun parties for our Christian friends. I did everything I could to establish the appearance of the godly partnership I desired.

But behind closed doors, things weren't fine. Unable to predict when the switch would flip on Tom's anger, I walked on eggshells. Without warning, I'd suddenly become the object of Tom's uncontrolled, frightening rage. Sometimes as I tried to back away, he'd corner me. He'd grab me by the shoulders and yell in my face. Sometimes he'd shake me and drop me to the floor. Before leaving for work one day, he screamed, "You're insolent, impudent, and intransigent!" He punctuated this rant by punching and cracking the closet door as he stormed out of the house. Episodes like this were common.

Because our situation was so intense, I was in constant conversation with God. I pored through Scripture to find direction and connection to my Savior. I took to heart Tom's accusations that I was ungodly, unsubmitive, and prideful, and constantly confessed my sin. I also took seriously the scriptural reference to forgive 70 times 7, so as Tom's rages continued, I focused on forgiveness and mercy.

Though I rarely received bruises, the ever-present threat of physical harm was devastating and, at times, immobilizing. By far, the most harm I received was emotional. He'd call me a self-righteous b\*\*\*\* or a f\*\*\*ing "good-girl" and end a tirade with a Scripture reference: "I'm just speaking the truth in love." He repeatedly told me what was "true" about me: I was controlling, disrespectful, unsubmitive, and self-important. I lost confidence in my ability to identify reality. "Truth" had been verbally twisted and used against me. The fear and constant threat of attack rendered me an emotional weakling.

My natural response was to work harder on myself. As a college-educated woman with a corporate career and a deep desire to serve God, I thought I must be capable of turning things around. *Surely, I reasoned, Tom loves me. I just have to respect him more. Sometimes I am self-righteous and controlling. If I could be more humble, then things would be better.* But nothing made a difference. As a result, I retreated into a quiet shell. I became smaller and Tom became bigger, louder, and more domineering. All the while, I was tenacious about hanging on to allow every opportunity for God to work a miracle and heal our relationship.

### ***Going Public***

Things became worse after our daughter was born. Tom continued a chaotic schedule. When he was home, his anger often erupted unprovoked. My daughter witnessed many verbal rages. Although directed at me, she was clearly affected by them. She began to respond as I did—trying not to disturb Tom and doing her best to please him.

When a situation involving Tom's family members caused him great pain, I suggested we go to counseling to consider how to respond. He was open to this as it gave him a chance to talk about the shortcomings and dysfunction of others in his family. Eventually his focus shifted from his family, and he began to blame and accuse me. Driving to appointments, he'd warn that I shouldn't disrespect him in front of the counselor. And then during our sessions, Tom did most of the talking, attempting to convince the counselor I was controlling and disrespectful.

Our counselor made recommendations, and Tom's participation was marginal. For example, Tom was asked to call an accountability partner when he felt he was going to rage. But when the rage occurred, he'd tell me that because he hadn't truly raged he didn't need to call the friend. During counseling sessions, if I said something Tom disliked, he'd rage in the car on the way home and drive dangerously as he blustered.

But even with counseling, our situation didn't seem to get better. Typically the worst of Tom's rage was limited to our home, with only the three of us present. However, I was stunned and ashamed when my mom spent several days with us and witnessed Tom's manipulation, control, and chaotic schedule. Erratically driving the four of us to an event, Tom raged in the car. Mom confronted him, saying that if he was going to continue to drive that way he needed to stop and let the rest of us get out of the car. He simply grew silent and continued his dangerous driving. She became so uncomfortable with the hostility that she called my father to arrange an earlier flight home.

After my mom witnessed the abuse, I felt ready to speak up. I called our counselor and asked if I could talk to him without Tom in the room. I wrote what I intended to say to help ensure I'd actually say it. Choking through tears and shaking fearfully, I read my notes—and opened another door to truth and healing.

The counselor listened intently and acknowledged that what I revealed clarified things for him. His next recommendation was for both of us to bring support partners into our sessions. We were to go to others in the body of Christ we could trust, those who would hold us accountable to truth and compassionate action, and ask them for support. Through this I learned to accept one of the

most important truths about the healing process: God uses the community of believers to facilitate his healing. Tom used this opportunity differently. He redirected his accounts of my perceived shortcomings and provocations to his support partners and was unwilling to accept their pleas for him to take responsibility for his anger.

At the insistence of the counselor, I shared the messy truth about my marriage with my family and four close girlfriends. I wasn't afraid of telling them, but I was terrified to actually face the abuse. No one was surprised to hear what was happening. Rather, they expressed relief as my story finally reconciled the inconsistencies they'd witnessed in my marriage. They began the long journey with me toward healing and resolution. My support partners sat in counseling sessions with me and cried and shook in anguish while listening to Tom's hostile accusations. As a result, they feared for my physical and emotional safety and checked in with me often. Family and friends wanted me to separate, and they faithfully and respectfully stood by me until I was ready.

Through this extremely difficult time, they educated themselves about domestic violence, which was a vital blessing to me. Together, we learned there were no easy answers. They prayed, searched Scripture with me, and listened as I processed my confusion and fear. They gave their time and emotional energy and experienced their own pain as they helped me.

Counselors and pastors made many appeals for Tom to be accountable to other men for handling his rage. These attempts to stop the abuse were unsuccessful, and, nearly two years after Tom threw me into our daughter's room, I made the decision to separate. I wanted restoration, and I knew that if Tom and I separated, divorce was possible—but I needed to do what was best for my daughter's and my health and safety. I wondered how divorce would affect my daughter. I also knew how the church viewed divorce and wondered if my church would accept my decision. And worse, I wondered how God would respond to me.

### *Finding God Faithful*

After several years of separation, Tom and I divorced. I'm now a single mom with the daunting responsibility of providing financially for my daughter and me. Our new life isn't easy, but I feel grateful every day. My daughter is healthy and thriving. Due to the abuse, she's in my full legal custody. However, she sees her dad regularly. This requires me to communicate with Tom, and he's often abusive in phone conversations and e-mails. So I continue to wade through the wake of domestic violence. However, from experience I know it's possible to put victimization behind and find renewed direction, passion, and purpose.

The grief I experienced over the failure of my marriage was overwhelming, and the recovery process has been grueling. But God hasn't abandoned me. Rather, he's drawn me closer to him. I learned God's grace is completely reliable, and he can handle the messy truths in our lives. And the most awesome realization is that God wants to use me. As God now regularly opens doors of ministry to me, I'm charged with telling my story and sharing his message of grace. Throughout my recovery, I clung to Psalm 18 from *The Message* as a source of comfort:

But me he caught—reached all the way  
from sky to sea; he pulled me out

Of that ocean of hate, that enemy chaos,  
the void in which I was drowning.  
They hit me when I was down,  
but God stuck by me.  
He stood me up on a wide-open field;  
I stood there saved—surprised to be loved!

Gwyneth Nelson is a pseudonym.

***Resources:***

**Hotlines:**

National 24-hour Women of Substance Crisis Intervention Hotline: 1-866-862-2873

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233

**Ministries:**

Peace and Safety in the Christian Home: [www.peaceandsafety.com](http://www.peaceandsafety.com)

FaithTrust Institute: [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org)

**Books:**

*[The Battered Wife](#)* by Nancy Nason-Clark

*[Violence in Families: What Every Christian Needs to Know](#)* by Al Miles

*[Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men](#)* by Lundy Bancroft