

The Care Needs of Women: Tending His Flock

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The purpose of this article is:

1. to facilitate a discussion in the church about caring for women with special emotional and spiritual needs;
2. to describe how Jesus, the Good Shepherd and the Gate, teaches us to respond to women in need of care;
3. to give a brief overview of the underlying causes, dynamics, and symptoms of some conditions that women face: depression, grief and loss, and trauma from verbal, physical, and sexual abuse;
4. to explore how Christian care-givers **love, listen, learn, lead, link and linger** with women in special need of care.

Suggested Use:

This article can be used by church lay leaders and volunteers for individual and group study.

Theological Foundation:

Once when I was in Germany, I stood in knee-deep snow on the crest of a

hill and peered through fog and thick flakes at the valley below. The heavens and earth appeared wrapped in heavy gauze. At first I thought the shimmering dark dots at the far end of the valley were trees, but when they traversed the hillside like a small army of ants, I stared harder. Eventually, I made out the silhouette of a tall, thin man walking about ten feet in front of undulating dots. Why, they're sheep and that's a shepherd! Dressed in dark pants and coat with a scarf draped around his neck, he

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walked erect and held a spindly staff that curved above his cap. Every other step, he sank his staff in the snow. The shepherd arched around snow-laden bushes and rocks as he led his flock down the valley's plumb line. Whenever he turned, the woolly, short-legged creatures shifted en masse and plowed through belly-high snow to follow their shepherd. Eventually, they were shimmering dots at the far end of the valley and disappeared into a swirling cloud of snow and fog.

This scene comes to mind as I ponder our Lord Jesus' declaration: "I am the Good Shepherd" (Jn. 10:11). The name is rich in OT cultural and theological significance. Shepherds were commonplace in the agrarian society, and the shepherd metaphor was frequently associated with God's faithful care and protection of His people (Ps. 23). Theologically, when Jesus refers to himself as the "I am," He declares His divinity, as God did when He answered Moses on the mountain: "I AM WHO I AM. . . . say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you" (Ex. 3:14). In Biblical times, a name reflected a person's essence, and by calling himself I AM, God is telling Moses and the Israelites that He has and will always exist and that He created and rules over the heavens and earth. His messenger, Moses, was speaking for God of the universe, who had delivered them from Egyptian bondage. He is the One who saves, and the One who provides

someone to lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people would not be like sheep without a shepherd (Num. 27:17).

In the NT, we learn that Jesus was with God the Father in the beginning (Jn. 1:1) and that through Jesus all creation came into being and holds together (Col. 1:16-17). During His incarnation, Jesus calls himself I AM. In fact, He uses seven I AM or *ego eimi* statements with predicates to reveal His divinity: I Am the Bread of Life; Light of the World; before Abraham, I am; Gate; Good Shepherd; Resurrection and the Life; and true Vine (Jn. 6:35, 8:12, 8:58, 10:9, 10:11, 11:25, 15:1). Jesus is the Word who became flesh to reveal the glory of God (1:14). Two of His seven I AM statements—I am the Gate and I am the Good Shepherd (10:9, 11)—particularly pertain to caring for women in need.

I AM The Gate

“I AM the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture” (Jn. 10:9). Jesus has just healed a man born blind by putting mud in his eyes and sending him to wash in the pool. When the Pharisees interrogate the man, he defends Jesus. They insult and throw him out of the synagogue. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, looks for the man and reveals to him that He is the Son of Man. The man believes and worships Jesus. The miracle-sign points to Jesus as the one who has come to bring sight to the blind and to blind those who think they see. Then Jesus contrasts the Good Shepherd with thieves and robbers. The Good Shepherd comes in by the gate, but robbers and thieves climb in some other way (9-10:1). Jesus Christ is the Gate—the door to salvation.

In Biblical times, a shepherd built a makeshift pen of rocks and trees and brought his sheep into it at night. He lay down and slept at the opening to serve as the gate through which the sheep went in and out of the pen. Sheep and predators would literally have to go through or over him, and in this way he prevented the sheep from wandering and kept predators out. In the morning, the shepherd stood up and called his sheep by name. They knew his voice and followed him as he led them to pasture. By using the metaphor, Jesus is saying that He is the door through which people enter His fold and receive life to the full. They must go through Him for salvation, now and eternally. He protects and sustains them, and they are content for they have life to the full! Thus, Jesus addresses deep

fears associated with safety and sustenance that humans naturally have and offers freedom from the fear of harm and hunger. Spiritually, **Jesus is the way or gate through which one receives truth and life. Jesus is the door to God's heart, through which His people receive protection and nurturing.** Such revelations jar the Pharisees. Their hearts hardened, for His grace seemed too radical.

What does this scripture tell us about caring for women in need?

- Jesus is vitally interested in our safety and sustenance, and we reflect His heart when we are similarly concerned for others.
- Jesus is the author of salvation and healing, in this life and the one to come. God's power exceeds anything we know. As gatekeepers, we prayerfully bring women in need to Him for nurturance, sustenance, protection, and healing. Our Good Shepherd is the One who provides these things.
- Jesus knows His sheep by name and seeks them out. They hear His voice. As gate-keepers, we seek and befriend women in need in the grace and love of Christ.
- Jesus met people in the context of everyday life, and as Jesus' gatekeepers, we engage women in whatever situations they find themselves.
- Jesus led His sheep to the pasture, and as Christian gate-keepers, we lend a hand to women with special needs—the widowed, sick, oppressed, alienated, and abandoned.
- We lead them to nourishment offered by the church where they can hear the Word, partake of the sacraments, serve others, and participate in Christian fellowship.
- We help them with physical needs.
- When the church lacks resources, gate-keepers link women with appropriate community resources.
- Jesus protects His sheep from predators, and Christian gate-keepers provide protection by linking women with those who have expertise to help.
- What other ways do gate-keepers reflect Jesus the Gate?

Group Participation

What does John 10 teach us about Jesus Christ, the Gate? In what

ways should we reflect him? From the previous teachings, give examples of what gate-keepers do when caring for women in need.

I Am The Good Shepherd

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11). Jesus’ proclamation comes after healing the man born blind, and He discusses it further at the Feast of Dedication or Hanukah (vv. 25-30). The annual festival commemorated God’s deliverance and victory of Judas Maccabaeus over Antiochus, who had erected a pagan altar in the Jerusalem Temple. In 164 BC, the Jews rededicated the Temple and thereafter commemorated the victory for eight days with joyous

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celebration and lighting candles. At this festival, Jesus says that He is the One who does what only God can do—he nurtures and protects His sheep, His people. Jesus is essentially saying that He is the Messiah, the anointed One, who brings deliverance and salvation to the Jews and Gentiles. He will lead His people into right relationship with God (10:28-30). Because He is sovereign and all-powerful, no one can snatch His sheep out of His hands.

In Biblical days, genuine shepherds protected their sheep. They would not recklessly put themselves in harm’s way, but they were prepared to risk their lives to defend them. For example, when King David was a shepherd, he fought bears and lions while guarding his sheep (1 Sam. 17:34). Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, died a physical death for His sheep. He humbled himself on the cross where He became obedient to death (Phil. 2:8). His humility is linked with meekness or gentleness, which Biblically is restrained power and disciplined strength. It is the gentleness of the strong. Jesus, the Lamb of God, gave up His life and took it up again in order to bring salvation to the world. Jesus expects Christian

care-takers to reflect His humble, meek strength and to cultivate Christian virtues, the sum of which is love.

Jesus' comments divides the Jews, and some call Him demon-possessed and raving mad (John. 10:20). Jesus had already accused them of serving the devil, the father of lies (8:42-44), and now He tells them that they cannot believe because they are not His sheep (10:26). Jesus promises to protect His people from spiritual and earthly predators. He warns that hired hands desert the flock when danger comes (vv. 12-13). Jesus Christ is the genuine Good Shepherd.

In Biblical times, shepherds spent a great deal of time with their flocks and knew their sheep. The metaphor speaks of intimacy. In fact, **the intimacy that the Good Shepherd has with His sheep mirrors what Jesus has with the Father.** Jesus hears the Father's voice, and His sheep hear Him (vv. 14-16). As His people listen and follow, the Good Shepherd promises to lead them through the drifts and swirls of life.

What does this scripture tell us about caring for women in need?

- As the Good Shepherd has intimacy with the Father, so Christian caregivers are grounded in intimacy with God. Nurtured and protected by the Good Shepherd, they can sacrificially respond to women in need.
- Our Good Shepherd is humble, gentle and strong, and Christian caregivers reflect His character when they seek Christian virtues, the sum of which is love.
- The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name, and Christian caregivers know their flock, individually and collectively. They endeavor to understand the physical, emotional, cognitive, relational, and spiritual needs of the women who struggle.
- The Good Shepherd responds to individuals within the context of the flock, and Christian caregivers do not serve alone, but alongside members of His flock, the church.
- The Good Shepherd was misunderstood and persecuted, and Christian caregivers might suffer misunderstandings, criticisms, and persecution when defending and caring for those who struggle and are marginalized.
- What other ways do caregivers reflect Jesus the Good Shepherd?

Group Participation

What does John 10 teach us about Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd? In what ways should we reflect him? From the teachings on page five, give examples of what good shepherds do when caring for women in need.

Cultural Pressures on Christian Women

Women today face unique challenges, ones unfathomable to women a couple generations ago. Western culture has rejected Christian values in favor of those based on human reasoning and desires. The change is deeply rooted, and **Christian women experience subtle and strong pressures to conform.** Two challenges are particularly worth noting.

First, our culture is now based on belief in and acceptance of the philosophical system of cultural and moral relativism. Cultural relativism is based on the premise that values evolve from and reflect the culture in which they are practiced. Proponents claim that there are neither valid objective truth claims nor standards for behavior beyond what a culture determines. This means that all values and norms emanate from and evolve within a closed, human system. A close cousin is moral relativism. Morality relates to ethics or right and wrong, and moral relativism teaches that moral values are formed as people reflect on personal life experiences. People decide for themselves what is right and wrong. Effectively, this means that no moral authority exists separate from the natural order—no God, no Law-giver, and no Judge. Philosophical systems based on relativism assess Biblical truth claims and standards as ridiculous and illogical. The adoption of this belief system has profoundly influenced our culture. Cultural and moral relativism have jettisoned belief in a gracious, merciful, righteous, just, loving, law-giving God. The Bible is no longer deemed God's revelation of himself and the source of truth. Tolerance is esteemed at the expense of truth; pursuing self interests and asserting one's rights is valued more than respect for authority and concern for others; and physical attractiveness and political correctness is deemed more important than the pursuit of Christian virtues and character. The impact on American culture has been disastrous. The exultation of self and culture as sources of truth has had a devastating impact on the institutions

that sustain American culture, particularly the family. For example, high divorce rates have fractured family units and resulted in an increase in single parent households. Sexual promiscuity is rampant.

Second, technological developments are transforming the culture. The film industry, television, and Internet saturate the culture with graphic, gratuitous violent and sexual imagery and content. Our cultural icons are celebrities and the entertainment industry dominates the culture. The deluge of information is mind-numbing and sophisticated marketing techniques attempt to convince us that we must have the best, biggest, and most updated possessions. Successful women are depicted as thin, beautiful, physically fit, sensual, sexually promiscuous; smart, aggressive, and accomplished; and financially secure, free, and responsive when it suits them. The message is that if women work hard, set high goals, keep physically fit and attractive, and not let people walk over them – they can “have it all.”

Can any woman measure up? Should they? Surely the answer is no, but many do try. In addition to everyday issues that women experience, such as, deaths, births, and illnesses; women suffer the consequences of trying to meet the demands of the culture. Many women, especially in urban settings, languish without the support of family or a stable social system. The following list of issues will not surprise you, for most of us have ourselves or know women who have experienced the following:

- Grief from the death of a family member, friend, or significant person
- Grief from a failed pregnancy, such as a miscarriage or abortion
- Stress from working as a single parent with children
- Betrayal of discovering that her husband has had or is having an affair. Guilt of coming to terms with her own affair.
- Suffering due to debilitating disease or terminal illness
- Trauma from a violent event, such as rape, stranger-assault, or a car accident
- Incapacitation from a debilitating mental illness, such as depression, eating disorder, panic attacks, and other serious disorders.
- Victimization of sexual, physical, or verbal abuse from family members or loved ones.

However horrific, painful, and debilitating the condition, **Christian**

women have the opportunity to show the love and care of the Good Shepherd to women in need. We can do so because we know Jesus Christ, who is our Lord and the One who guides, provides for, and protects us as we traverse the hillsides of life. We know that He is faithful and sovereign and that He knows His sheep. He is present in the most desperate situations, and as care-givers, we know by faith that we are never alone. We serve Him in a community of faith with Jesus Christ as the head. This allows us to better grasp the extent as well as the limits of our involvement. As we stay close to the Good Shepherd and to His flock, our community of faith, we walk alongside and lead women with special needs to better pasture. We set aside preconceptions, stereotypes, and formulaic solutions and metaphorically put ourselves in their shoes and see their world through their eyes. We walk with them in His radical grace and love that covers sin, knowing that Jesus Christ is the healer.

Love-Listen-Learn-Lead-Link-Linger

Life-skills for Christian Care-givers

Christian care-givers respond to basic human needs of love, sustenance, and protection. **We may not fully know the cause of her suffering, nor do we have all the answers, but we know the Good Shepherd who gives us His wisdom and provision.** The skills of Christian care-giving include the willingness to: Love, Listen, Learn, Lead, Link, and Linger. Consider the following situation.

Anne, a thirty-five year old Christian woman and an acquaintance, initiates a conversation about her husband's death from ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). "It's a neuromuscular disease and he lived five years after receiving the diagnosis. He literally wasted away." She speaks in a detached manner, like someone in shock after witnessing a terrible accident. "I have two children, ages seven and five. Because I wanted them to have as much time as possible with their father, I put his hospital bed in the front room. A visiting nurse came in twice a week, and I provided the majority of the care. My husband didn't want me to leave the house, but I did manage to get groceries. He died at home." She stops talking and waits expectantly for your response.

How would you respond?

Love: Our Good Shepherd and Gate is deeply concerned about our welfare. He is humble, gentle, and strong. As we walk with him, who He is becomes part of who we are. His heart in us allows us to take in what she is saying and to know how difficult her life has been. As we do, His love flows from our inner being.

Listen: Jesus, our Good Shepherd and Gate, knows His sheep and calls each one by name. In order to know a person, we must listen to her. She needs to talk and to be heard, for she has denied herself expression for many years. Perhaps she needs to tell her story or simply recount a situation that sticks in her mind. We listen without judgment in grace and love.

Learn: Our Good Shepherd knows us inside out. As caregivers, we grow in our understanding of her. We might ask: What personal strengths helped you endure for five years? How did you logistically care for your husband and children, and run the household? Who supported you, emotionally, physically, and spiritually? Did you ever take time for yourself? What did you find most challenging? Did your faith in God strengthen or weaken? How are your children coping with the loss of their father? How are you?

Lead: Jesus, the Good Shepherd and Gate, leads His sheep to sustenance and keeps predators out. As His servants, we lead her to Jesus by talking about him, reading the Word, praying, inviting her to church, and bringing her into fellowship with others. We are aware of her other needs—physical, relational, and psychological—and take the initiative to provide as we are able. We work in concert with other volunteers.

Link: As Christ's gate-keeper, we encourage her to solicit the help of professionals and agencies as needed, such as the law, mental health, finances, and social service agencies. People with special needs often need more than we can individually provide. We understand the importance of establishing boundaries for ourselves and put limits on the time and energy expended. We remind ourselves that we serve alongside professionals and other volunteers.

Linger: Jesus the Good Shepherd spends time with His sheep. Perhaps you and others could linger with her—simply hang out for an afternoon or so, as she establishes routines for her new life. Perhaps someone could care for her children for an afternoon and give her the freedom to

choose what she wanted to do. What she shares is confidential, and we do not betray her trust. But if she slips into a depression and confides intent to harm herself or another or to take her own life, we inform ministry staff and pastors.

We love, listen, learn, lead, link, and linger with women who struggle with a variety of issues. We serve the Lord and give, not as slaves in involuntary servitude to a demanding master, but as free persons sharing the love of Christ.

Group Participation

Consider Anne's situation and give examples of how you might love, listen, learn, lead, link and linger with her.

The following is an overview of some issues that Christian women face: grief and loss; trauma from verbal, physical, and sexual abuse; and depression. The list is not all-inclusive, for women also struggle with physical illnesses and other psychological disorders. The following are simply examples of how women struggle, what they need, and how we might care for them. The principles are applicable to other situations as well.

Women Suffering Grief and Loss

Grief is a normal and healthy response to loss, and it is a process that cannot be denied or rushed. It occurs following the death or separation from a spouse, parent, child or fetus, sibling, friend, roommate, and any significant relationship. Though I focus on loss of people, grief can also occur when losing a job, leaving a community, becoming physically or mentally ill, or experiencing severe financial loss.

Much has been written about the stages of grieving. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was the first of many to suggest stages of grief, and she described the process as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Perhaps for our purposes, it is better to consider common experiences of grief, such as the following. The woman does not feel quite like herself and is somewhat disoriented and disconnected from those around her. She finds it difficult to problem-solve, concentrate, and complete tasks. She senses a void within her and heaviness, as if a burden weighs on her heart, which can lead to despair and hopelessness. Waves of sadness wash over her, followed by numbness and more waves of sadness. She

sleeps fitfully and intermittently feels anxious, fearful, and angry. She may resent that her loved one has abandoned her and has difficulty envisioning life without him or her.

Though these experiences are common, people grieve uniquely and not all losses affect us in the same way. Internet sources such as Wikipedia, the Mental Health Information Center, university sites, and centers such as the Mayo Clinic give excellent overviews of factors influencing the grief process:

The **suddenness of the loss** affects the grieving process. A loss such as Anne's, though difficult, was expected. She had time to prepare for it and undoubtedly began grieving long before her husband died. Unexpected losses are more traumatic.

Violent deaths affect the grieving process. Trauma from loss due to suicide, murder, and vehicular homicide compound the grieving process. Complex and conflicting emotions erupt such as anger, remorse, regrets, shock, revenge, and betrayal. Violent deaths often leave a trail of unfinished business with the deceased.

The **degree of interdependency, attachment, and quality of intimacy** influence the grieving process. Grief is more profound following the loss of person you dearly loved and/or who played a significant role in your daily life. The loss of a child and fetus is generally more difficult to bear than say, an elderly parent. However, the loss of a loved one, whether near or far, can cause grief.

Ability to cope influences a woman's response to grief. Some women are resourceful and resilient when facing adversity. Others collapse. Women are likely to manage grief as they have coped with challenges throughout their lives. The number and ages of her children, financial concerns, and physical and mental health influence her ability to cope.

Age, personal maturity, and season of life influence the grieving process. Life experience counts. Intuitively, we understand that the loss of a beloved father and mother profoundly influences a fifteen year-old, whereas the same loss at twenty-five, thirty-five, or sixty-five affects her differently. Generally, older women have developed ways to cope with loss.

The number and quality of her **support system** influence the grieving process. People with established relationships weather loss better than those who are isolated. Support systems that take the loss seriously are

more helpful than those who do not.

Faith influences the grieving process. Strong faith in our Good Shepherd enables us to strengthen through grief. Grieving women, whose faith has not been tested in this way, may distance from or question God's goodness. They may accuse him of being hard-hearted and/or turn from him altogether.

Jesus understands our need to grieve. He comforted His disciples as He prepared to leave them by reassuring them that the Father would send the Counselor, the Spirit of truth, to be with them forever. They would never be alone. Jesus said, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (Jn. 14:16-18). This means that in the depths of despair, we know by faith that our Good Shepherd is nearby—tending, protecting, sustaining, and nurturing us as we grieve. When fractured and shattered by loss, we are secure in His arms. Christians grieve with hope (1 Thess. 4:13). As we grieve, we may be more malleable in His hands as He molds us according to His purposes for our lives. We understand that loss and suffering are not God's desire for His good creation, and that one day, when He comes again, He will make all things new (Rev. 21:5). Until that glorious day, He commands us to love Him and one another.

I offer two cautions. First, you may find it difficult to show compassion when the loss involves sins you strongly oppose, such as suicide, abortion, and divorce. You may be tempted to judge and condemn the woman, which our Good Shepherd commands us not to do (Mt. 7:1, Lk. 6:37). For example, if a woman's son commits suicide, we understand that it is not kind to press her to explore how she contributed to his death. Or if a woman is devastated after having an abortion, we know not to press her to admit that she killed a human being, made in the image of God. Or if a woman has left her husband and struggles to raise two children as a single parent, we do not tell her that she brought this on herself. **Care-givers are called to show the love and radical grace of Jesus Christ.** As prompted by the Holy Spirit, we speak the truth in love, as she comes to terms with God, herself, and those adversely affected by her decision. The Bible tells us that His deep love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8) and that the Holy Spirit convicts of sin (Jn. 16:8). As she confesses sin; we listen, pray with her, and assure her of God's forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9).

Second, **care-givers need to respect their own personal limita-**

tions. When women struggle, their needs can be all-consuming, and we must establish boundaries, lest we abandon ourselves, families, and other responsibilities. We serve alongside others and resist taking on more than we can realistically handle. We guard against “getting in over our heads.” Grief is compounded and becomes more complicated when women suffer from other stressors, such as, mental or physical illness, poverty, traumatic and/or abusive situations. Professionals may be involved as we love, listen, learn, lead, link, and linger with women in need of His care.

Group Participation

Give examples of caring for women who grieve the loss of a loved one.

How do we:

Love:

Listen:

Learn:

Lead:

Link:

Linger:

Please share an experience with grief, either your own or someone else'. Drawing from Scripture and material presented on the Good Shepherd and Gate, give examples of how Christian caregivers **love, listen, learn, lead, link and linger** as servants of our Lord Jesus. What personal boundaries should you maintain?

Women Suffering From Abusive Relationships

In recent years, public awareness has heightened in regard to the prevalence and psychological and emotional damage of domestic verbal, physical, and sexual abuse of women. Consequently, women are more apt to share the subtle and dramatic ways that men threaten them. Unrelenting verbal abuse, such as blaming, accusing, attacking, criticizing, belittling, and demeaning, can be as psychologically debilitating as physical assaults. The abuser may call it love, but verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, including rape, is meant to terrorize, dominate, and humiliate the victim, in order to render her powerless so that he can dominate her. Abusers lack personal power and gain power at other's expense. His own sense of enti-

tlement permits him to minimize and forget the abuse, and he expects her to keep quiet and to forget what has and is happening to her. Men and women can be abusive, but here I focus on men's abuse of women.

Studies of returning Viet Nam veterans alerted mental health professionals to a condition known as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. It manifested in some men surviving combat, and soon professionals discovered that the same syndrome appeared in women suffering from rape, violent assaults, and long-standing abusive relationships, including survivors of childhood incest. Like returning veterans, abused women tend to have recurring memories or dreams of the abuse and abuser. They are easily overwhelmed and tend to be disorganized and agitated. Inwardly, they lack confidence, feel unworthy, and have irrational and disproportionate feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame. They passively comply to avoid further injury or violation, and eventually, they are fearful of asserting themselves at all. This is true of verbal, physical and sexual abuse, such as rape and less violent forms of forced intimacy in marriage.

Abused women tend to depersonalize themselves, as if playing a role in some else's play. Hyper-vigilant, they fixate on their abuser and detach from other relationships and everyday activities. Isolated, women put their lives on hold and irrationally believe that if they "just get it right" that the abuse will stop. They generally underestimate, are naïve to, and in denial about the depth of evil in the abuser. They believe that he is basically a good person who occasionally loses control and is mean, when actually he is mean-spirited, intent on control, and can occasionally be nice. Inevitably, abused women feel shame, defiled, and stigmatized.

Curiously, people tend to blame the victim for the abuse. Perhaps it is because we tend to deny human evil. We can't believe that civilized people dominate, humiliate, and hurt others simply because they like the feeling it gives them and because they can. Or perhaps it's because as women we want to believe that if we do everything right, people will treat us well. Surely, if we love him better, he will change. Whatever the reasons, questions surface: What did she do to bring this on? Why didn't she just stand up to him and tell him to stop? Why didn't she leave?

Abuse of any kind is an offense to God. He made each of us uniquely in His image, wrote His laws on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34, Rom. 2:14-15), and gave us free will. The abuser attempts to eradicate the

imago Dei and the woman's uniqueness in order to re-create her in His image. But he can't. Though he can disable her, he cannot erase what God has made, for the imago Dei is deeply embedded in her spiritual DNA. As she walks with her Good Shepherd within His flock, He heals and restores her. As members of His flock, Christian caregivers play a significant role, alongside mental health professionals and protective social service agencies. Abused women face several challenges.

First, a woman coming out of a domineering and/or abusive relationship struggles to develop a concept of self (self-concept) independent of her abuser. She has difficulty individuating because he has dominated, controlled and/or assaulted her in the most intimate aspects of her life. To survive, she abdicated her will to him. Even once free of her abuser, she instinctively believes that she will be punished for independent thoughts and actions. The Good Shepherd wants her to exercise her will and to believe and to know that becoming a person is not sin. This means that Christian care-givers should encourage her to experience her autonomy and the right to explore who she is without fear of reprisal. Independent expressions and activities, such as, going for a bike ride, driving to the store, or attending an event with a friend can help her heal. We encourage her to seek counsel from trained professionals who specialize in domestic abuse.

Second, she tends to confuse Biblical submission with the servitude of a slave to a master. She confuses submitting "to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21) with passively complying and accommodating to others, no matter how irrational, self-denying, and abusive the request. She hears that Christians must give up their lives in order to find life in Christ and assumes that having a sense of self is unloving and wrong. She confuses giving to others with giving up who she is and becoming the person someone wants her to be. Care-givers explain that Biblical submission is based on our relationship with the Good Shepherd. Jesus gives us a renewed sense of self and purpose for life. We love others because He loves us, and we have union with him. God the Holy Spirit is transforming us from the inside out, and we are to honor what He is doing in us. We believe God who promises to make us new—not an abuser who intends to destroy us. Whereas it is prideful to believe that we are better than others and to withhold love and provisions from those in

need, God encourages us to be the person that He created and to use our talents and gifts in His service. Caregivers affirm her right to become an autonomous person, who willingly and sacrificially gives to others. They encourage her to talk with a pastor about how Biblical submission differs from obeying a tyrant.

Third, because we are made in the image of God, we have a moral compass and know right from wrong. We recognize unjust and unfair treatment. Women who have been traumatized by abuse need Christian caregivers to come alongside and share the burden of pain. What happened to them was unjust. There is no justification for abuse, and caregivers affirm the injustice. This does not mean that the victim never does anything wrong, only that what happened to her was undeserved and wrong. We side with her and avoid judgments of her. We lavish God's grace on her and bring her into a community of believers. If appropriate, we encourage her to join a support group or seek protection in an established shelter. We avoid being the "Lone Ranger," and seek pastoral counsel, as we serve alongside others.

Group Participation

Give examples of caring for women who are in relationships with verbal, physical, or sexual abuse.

How do we:

Love:

Listen:

Learn:

Lead:

Link:

Linger:

Please share an experience with verbal or physical abuse that you or someone you know has endured. Drawing from Scripture and material presented on the Good Shepherd and Gate, give examples of how Christian caregivers **love, listen, learn, lead, link, and linger** as servants of our Lord Jesus. What personal boundaries should you maintain?

Women Suffering from Depression

Forty-three year old Kimberly looks dully at flowers on the table and thinks, “They look like weeds!” They could have sent nice ones. Immediately, she castigates herself, “You are one ungrateful, wretched woman!” She moves to the sink of dirty dishes and glances at the family room that is cluttered with her children’s shoes, dirty socks, toys, an old t-shirt that looks like a rag, and stacks of papers and books under and around the tables and chair. The dog dances by the door because he wants out. I can’t believe I let those kids keep that mutt! Ignoring the dishes, she lets the dog out, retreats to her bed, and pulls the covers over her head. Kimberly is depressed.

Many women suffer from mild to severe depression at some point in their lives. In some respects, depression is a “normal” response to stress that is significant, enduring, and severe. Mental health professionals have identified four causes of depression. First, it can manifest following a particularly stressful situation, such as severe losses or enduring trauma. For example, a woman may cope well when she first learns that her husband has had an affair, but months later she suffers a severe depression. Or a woman rallies to meet the challenge of a life-threatening disease, but months later is depressed and loses her will to live. Second, the cause may be due to an emotional deprivation during childhood, such as neglect, abuse, or abandonment. Depression is part of her personality, and she struggles to see the good in people and situations. Third, depression can be genetically inherited and a biological disorder or medical condition. This means that there is a depletion of neurotransmitters, such as, serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine, which are required for effective communication within the brain. As a result, a woman feels sad, tired, and unhappy. A drop in neurotransmitters can also occur following situational stresses and childhood deprivation. Additionally, following births, miscarriages, and abortions; hormonal changes and alterations in brain chemistry can cause postpartum depression. Anti-depressants and other medications are the treatment of choice for biologically-based depressions. They restore chemical balance within the brain and are often prescribed in conjunction with psychotherapy. Fourth, depression can be spiritual. Examples are unconfessed sin, disbelief in God’s love and forgiveness and that He hears; false guilt; thoughts of unworthiness; and hating oneself for failing to measure up to God’s expectations.

Most of us understand that depression is more than having a bad day, for at some point in life, we have awakened to find that our lives are painted in hues of pale to dark grey. Women with an enduring depression tend to withdraw into themselves and isolate from relationships and activities. They experience deep sadness and heaviness, as if carrying a burden, which makes it difficult to muster the motivation to accomplish simple tasks. They tend to be irritable and resentful; to harbor deep feeling of unworthiness; to have difficulty concentrating and thinking deeply about issues; and to interact superficially with others. Others describe their mood as dark and in conversations the glass is consistently “half empty.” They look at a beautiful sunset and dread the coming dark. They frequently suffer from physical problems, such as trouble sleeping, eating, digesting food, and various aches and pains

Christian caretakers can help debunk the lies that the depressed woman believes about God and herself, and encourage her to accomplish tasks and to associate with others. First, **Christians know by faith that the Good Shepherd walks alongside us and tends to us in our darkest days**, even when we cannot sense His presence. The psalmist assures us, “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there . . . even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (Ps. 139:8, 10). With this assurance, we know by faith that our sovereign, transcendent God is near. We trust Him to lead and guide us through our valley of the shadow of death (Ps. 23:4). The irony is that often we must reach the end of ourselves before we comprehend the sufficiency of God’s grace and provision, and this can occur when depressed, grieving, or traumatized. Caregivers have the opportunity to bear witness to God’s amazing care and protection for those who cannot fend for themselves. We affirm that we are made in the image of God and that He gives our life dignity and worth—we are children of God (1 Jn. 3:1)—daughters of the King! We belong to the family of God. We remind her of His truth.

Second, God designed us as relational beings and caregivers invite women who are depressed into Christian fellowship to receive emotional and spiritual support through prayer, reading Scripture, attending Worship services on the Lord’s Day, and serving others. Caregivers encourage the women to accomplish simple tasks and to help those less fortunate

than she. Caregivers treat what women share in strict confidence, except if they confide plans to harm themselves or others. Then we are obligated to inform ministry staff and/or pastors.

Group Participation

Give examples of caring for women who are depressed.

How do we:

Love:

Listen:

Learn:

Lead:

Link:

Linger:

Please share an experience with depression that you or someone you know has endured. Drawing from Scripture and material presented on the Good Shepherd and Gate, give examples of how Christian caregivers **love, listen, learn, lead, link, and linger** as servants of our Lord Jesus. What personal boundaries should you maintain?

Summary

Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd and Gate, calls His sheep by name and brings them into His fold. As the Gate, He protects them from predators and is the door to salvation and sustenance. Our Good Shepherd lay down His life and took it up again to bring salvation to the world. **As Christian care-givers spend time with him, who He is becomes part of who we are.** His love fortifies our souls, as we sacrificially love and care for women with special needs. We love, listen, learn, lead, link and linger with women in special need of care. We know by faith that as we care for the least in God's Kingdom, we reflect the heart of God, who revealed His love through our Lord Jesus Christ, the healer of our soul.

Group Participation

Give examples of caring for women with other situations and conditions.

What has been particularly important to you in this study?

In what ways is your church caring for women with special

needs?

In what ways could you help strengthen this ministry?

Get To Know The Writer

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Endnotes:

David B. Beibel, D.Min. & Harold G. Koenig, M.D., *New Light on Depression: Help, Hope, and Answers for the Depressed & Those Who Love Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 36-42, 172-17.

For Further Reading: Care Needs of Women

I have reviewed or read excerpts of the following books. They provide helpful insights and suggestions. Some of the books are not written from a Christian perspective, and not all that they have to say may be helpful to you. But you may find a nugget or two.

Abuse

The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult victims of Childhood Sexual

Abuse by Dr. Dan B. Allender

The Verbally Abusive Relationship by Patricia Evans

We Weep for Ourselves and Our Children: A Christian Guide for Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse by J.R. Feldmeth & M. Finley

Helping Victims of Sexual Abuse: A Sensitive Biblical Guide for Counselors, Victims, and Families by Lynn Heitritter & Jeanette

Vought

Scapegoating in Families: Intergenerational Patterns of Physical and

Emotional Abuse by V. Pillari

Christian Caregiving

How To Be a People Helper by Gary R. Collins

Christian Caregiving by Kenneth C. Haugk

Depression

New Light on Depression: Help, Hope, and Answers for the Depressed & Those Who Love Them by David B. Biebel, D. Min. & Harold G. Koenig, M.D..

When the Saints Sing the Blues: Understanding Depression through the Lives of Job, Naomi, Paul, and Others by Brenda Poinsett

Divorce

Grace and Divorce by Les Carter, Ph.D.

Growing Through Divorce by Jim Smoke

Eating Disorders

Love Hunger: Recovery from Food Addiction by Dr. Frank Minirth, Dr. Paul Meier, Dr. Robert Hemfelt, Dr. Sharon Sneed, and Don Hawkins.

Thin Disguise: Understanding and Overcoming Anorexia & Bulimia by Pam Vredevelt, Dr. Deborah Newman, Harry Beverly & Dr. Frank Minirth.

Grief and Loss

Abiding Hope: Encouragement in the Shadow of Death
by Ann Hagmann

When Grief Comes: Finding Strength for Today and Hope for Tomorrow
by Kirk H. Neely

Sexual Addictions (On Men's Pornography addiction)

Don't Call It Love by Patrick Carnes, Ph.D.

Additional Women's Reading List

Codependent No More: How To Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself by Melody Beattie

Non-Christian classic book on co-dependency.

Changes That Heal: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future by Dr. Henry Cloud

Christian perspective on developmental issues of maturation.

Boundaries: When to Say Yes; When to Say No to Take Control of Your Life Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend.

Christian perspective on developing healthy boundaries.

Safe People: How to Find Relationships that are Good for You by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend.

Christian perspective on safe and unsafe people (has a workbook).

Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman's Soul by John Eldredge and Stasi Eldredge

Christian perspective on being a woman.

Healing the Scars of Emotional Abuse by Gregory L. Ph.D. Jantz

Christian perspective on emotional abuse.

Hold Me Tight: Conversations for a Lifetime of Love by Dr. Sue Johnson

Non-Christian book on communicating deeper needs in relationships.

The Dance of Anger: A Woman's Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships by Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

Non-Christian classic on expressing anger in relationships.

The Dance of Connection: How to Talk to Someone When You're Mad, Hurt, Scared, Frustrated, Insulted, Betrayed, or Desperate by Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.

Non-Christian perspective on expressing yourself in relationships.

Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Connection by Brennan Manning

Christian perspective on exploring your false self and finding God.

Codependency: Breaking Free From the Hurt and Manipulation of Dysfunctional Relationships by Pat Springle

The Wounded Woman: Hope and Healing for Those Who Hurt by Dr. Steve Stephens and Pam Vredevelt

Christian perspective on healing from abusive relationships.

The Heartache No One Sees: Christ's Promise of Healing for a

Woman's Wounded Heart by Sheila Walsh

Christian perspective on healing brokenness within a community of believers.

Where is God When It hurts? A Comforting, Healing Guide for Coping with Hard Times by Philip Yancey

Christian perspective on faith and pain.