

Domestic Violence and Christian Ethics

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Domestic violence, also called “intimate partner violence,” is a terrible threat to women around the world. Domestic violence is a felony or misdemeanor crime and is committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner of the victim, a person with whom the victim shares a child in common, or a person who is cohabitating with or has cohabitated with the victim as a spouse or intimate partner. Often as parents we teach our young daughters to be wary of strangers who might try to harm them, and well we should. But in fact, women are more likely to be injured by someone with whom they have a relationship. Sadly, most churches and pastors do not address the subject. As servants of Jesus Christ, Christians should be advocates and champions for abused and battered women, offering hope for a better tomorrow.

In what follows, my goal is to provide my students important information on the tragedy of domestic violence.¹ The focus of my notes is on the most common form of domestic violence: Men abusing women. While most violence is committed by men, women can be violent too. Also, young people can be violent toward parents and siblings.² Here is the outline we will follow:

- I. Definition and Data
- II. Signs of an Abusive Relationship
- III. The Abuser’s Tactics
- IV. Patterns of Domestic Violence
- V. How the Abuser Responds When The Victim Leaves
- VI. Why do women stay in abusive relationships?
- VII. A Safety Plan

¹ Much of the information on patterns of domestic violence and how to escape the perpetrator has been borrowed from various sources. I make no claim to originality.

² Justin Healey, ed. *Domestic and Family Violence* (Thirroul, NSW: The Spinney Press, 2014), 29.

VIII. Biblical Theological Critique of Domestic Violence
IX. Conclusion

I. Definition and Data

What is domestic violence and how often does it occur? It's far more common than most pastors think.

A. Definition

1. Working Definition

To begin, let's have a working definition: Domestic violence / intimate partner violence includes victimization committed by spouses or ex-spouses, boyfriends or girlfriends, and ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends.³ Domestic violence is a comprehensive term used to include physical, verbal and psychological behaviors that violate the well-being of an individual and his or her ability to act.⁴ Christian authors Lindsey and Justin Holcomb define it as follows

A pattern of coercive, controlling or abusive behavior that is used by one individual to gain or maintain power and control over another individual in the context of an intimate relationship. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, exploit, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure or wound an intimate partner.⁵

Keep in mind that the mere *threat* of violence can be as traumatic as actual violence itself.

³ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, "Female Victims of Violence," September 2008, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/ascii/fvv.txt>.

⁴ Lindsey A. Holcomb and Justin S. Holcomb, *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

Although many people think domestic violence is about anger, it really isn't. Batterers do tend to take their anger out on their intimate partner. But it's not really about anger. Domestic violence is about trying to instill fear and wanting to have power and control in the relationship. Pastor Tommy Nelson drives this point home and says, "Abuse is not rooted in love or hate; it is rooted in issues related to power and self-identity within the abusive person."⁶ Abused women are different from other victims of violent crimes in that the assailant is an intimate and previously trusted partner. The psychological repercussions include loss of a sense of trust and safety and intense feelings of helplessness. There is confusion as the woman attempts to absorb the impact of being hurt by someone who was thought to be caring and protective.

2. Domestic Violence is a Crime

Domestic violence is a crime. The Department of Justice says, "The term "domestic violence" includes felony or misdemeanor crimes of violence committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner of the victim."⁷ In my experience, too many pastors don't comprehend this basic fact: When a husband strikes his wife, a crime has occurred.

B. How common is domestic violence?

Domestic violence has been a problem from time *immemorial*. In Augustine's *Confessions*, he discusses the violent tendencies of his father, Patricius, and how his Christian mother, Monica, attempted to navigate his fits of anger. He also described how his mother tried to

⁶ Tommy Nelson, *The Book of Romance: What Solomon Says About Love, Sex, and Intimacy* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 32.

⁷ The United States Department of Justice, "Domestic Violence," <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/domestic-violence>.

counsel other women who appeared with “faces disfigured by bruising” from being beaten by their husbands.⁸

1. In the United States

Getting precise data about how often domestic violence occurs is difficult because many cases go unreported. But in 2005, the Coalition against Domestic Violence reported “one in four women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime,”⁹ and this data seems to be accurate today. A 2008 report from the Department of Justice said, “The rate of intimate partner victimizations [in a year] for females was 4.3 victimizations per 1,000 females age 12 or older. The equivalent rate of intimate partner violence against males was 0.8 victimizations per 1,000 males age 12 or older.”¹⁰ The report also added that black females historically have experienced intimate partner violence at rates higher than white females.

2. Outside the United States

The World Atlas says that the top five countries for the highest rates of domestic violence are The Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Gabon, Cameroon, and Sierra Leone.¹¹ The reasons why domestic violence occurs more frequently in some countries is related to many variables, but it is quite common in many developing countries. Researchers at the University of Bristol used demographic and health surveys conducted between 2005 and 2017 and analyzed data regarding domestic violence from 1.17 million men and women in 49 low- and middle-income countries. They concluded societal

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, vol. 2, Loeb Classical Library, Carolyn J.B. Hammond, ed. and trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 41, IX.ix.

⁹ Joyce Neergaard, et al, “Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence: Effects of Confiding in Religious Leaders.” *Pastoral Psychology* 55.6 (July 2007): 774.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Female Victims of Violence,” September 2008, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/ascii/fvv.txt>.

¹¹ “20 Worst Countries for Spousal Abuse,” *The World Atlas*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/20-worst-countries-for-spousal-abuse.html>.

acceptance of domestic violence against women is widespread in developing countries, with 36% of people believing it is justified in certain situations. Why so? Among many factors, the researchers noted political conflict and limited economic rights for women were associated with higher levels of domestic violence acceptance amongst women and men. Men in more democratic countries were less likely to justify domestic violence. Amongst women, higher national female literacy rates predicted lower levels of justification for an abuser's actions.¹² In other words, as women become more educated, they are less likely to make excuses for an abuser's behavior.

Domestic violence is a world-wide problem. Students who will serve as missionaries or pastors outside of the United States context should keep this in mind. When Jesus says in the Great Commission that we are to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18 – 20), this means teaching men and women mutual respect. Making Christian disciples means we teach the trans-cultural truth that there is never any excuse to be violent towards your spouse.

C. Domestic Violence Among Christians

We don't like to talk about it at church, but domestic violence sometimes occurs in homes where the husband insists he is a Christian. The Coalition Against Domestic Violence also reported "1.7% of female church attendees at religious services have been abused by their husbands" and "a fourth of those have been physically battered."¹³ Here's the point: Domestic violence sometimes occurs in families that attend church on a regular basis.

¹² Lynn Marie Sardinha and Hector E. Najera Catalan, "Attitudes towards domestic violence in 49 low- and middle-income countries: A gendered analysis of prevalence and country level correlates," *PloS One* 13.10 (October 31, 2018): <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6209205/pdf/pone.0206101.pdf>; For a summary, see <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/10/181031141437.htm>.

¹³ Neergaard, 774.

There is some evidence that most pastors may underestimate the amount of domestic violence in their church and community. In 2017, Lifeway Research reported that 89 percent of pastors agree their church regularly communicates that domestic violence is not acceptable. Yet almost half of pastors (47 percent) say they don't know if anyone in their church has been a victim of domestic violence in the last three years. A third (37 percent) say a church member has been a victim of domestic violence. Fifteen percent say no one has experienced domestic violence.¹⁴

II. What Are Signs of an Abusive Relationship?

For pastors, it can be difficult to imagine that a man who presents himself as kind and Godly is actually an abuser. I have found that most pastors are very much pro-romance, and actually enjoy seeing people fall in love and get married. When most pastors think about romance, thoughts of happy vacations and romantic walks on the beach come to mind. The idea that a romance could deteriorate into an atmosphere of abuse is foreign to most of us. So, it is important for pastors to develop some critical observation skills to look for signs of domestic violence.

A. Recurring Bruises and Injuries

If a church member continues to have recurring bruises and injuries and attributes these to falls and accidents over and over again, the person may be the victim of abuse. Of course, the pastor should be careful because some injuries do occur in life because we are clumsy. I once foolishly lopped off a limb right above my head while working in the yard and had a nasty bump for the experience! But if a woman continually has bruises which she has a difficult time

¹⁴ Bob Smietana, "Good Intentions, Lack of Plans Mark Church Response to Domestic Violence," *Lifeway Research*, February 20, 2017, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2017/02/20/good-intentions-lack-of-plans-mark-church-response-to-domestic-violence/>.

explaining or if her explanations are inconsistent, she may be a victim of abuse. Some signs of physical abuse include:

- Black eyes
- Busted lips
- Red or purple marks on the neck
- Sprained wrists
- Bruises on the arms

It's also common for someone to try to cover up the physical signs with clothing. For example, you may notice that someone you care about is wearing long sleeves or scarves in the hot summer. Wearing heavier than normal makeup or donning sunglasses inside are also common signs of domestic abuse.¹⁵

B. The Wife Seems Nervous When Asked About Absences

Because domestic violence is about control and power, the abuser may threaten his victim with violence if she goes somewhere without his permission. If a church member suddenly stops participating in events she used to find enjoyable and fun, and seems uncomfortable discussing the reason why, she may be the victim of abuse. Of course, there are other reasons why people may stop activities, such as being irritated with a fellow church member! But if such excuses occur along with signs of physical abuse, these together can be signs of domestic violence. A woman may be afraid that her abuser will find out she has been discussing her absences and then abuse her some more, so she may seem very anxious in what would otherwise be a normal conversation.

¹⁵ Very Well Mind, "Top Warning Signs of Domestic Abuse," reviewed by Steven Gans, MD, May 21, 2019, <https://www.verywellmind.com/signs-someone-is-being-abused-66535>.

C. Odd Changes in Behavior

Domestic violence changes one's entire approach to life. Everything the victim does is pulled into the strong gravitational pull of the abuser. Her behavior may then change quite dramatically. Some warning signs include:

Someone who was once friendly and outgoing becomes withdrawn.

Someone who was once punctual suddenly is consistently late or misses appointments.¹⁶

Sometimes the abused person will cancel appointments at the last moment in deference to the abuser.

Seems reluctant to discuss her marriage with a pastor or spiritual leader.

Begins cutting off contact with family and friends.

Of course, life has many twists and turns and any of us may go through a season when we turn a bit inward and want to be alone with the Lord, but when all of these signs begin occurring together over long periods, the person could possibly be a victim of abuse.

D. Drug or Alcohol Problems

Drug and alcohol use by a husband is strongly correlated with a higher risk for domestic violence. As a pastor, if a husband acknowledges to you that he has a "drinking problem," you should be aware of the increased risk for violence to his wife and children.

E. Listen to men who say strange things.

¹⁶ To be honest, having children can cause this as well!

I hope that you as pastors will spend time with your church members. I urge you to be good listeners and train yourself to pick up on clues that a man might be an abuser. For example, if a man makes offhand jokes about women or dismisses a popular news story about abuse, your “spiritual ears” should prick up. Also, in Bible study, does a man seem overly obsessed with the male’s role as spiritual leader? I’m not talking about a healthy, loving desire to lead a family in prayer and joyful times together, but I’m referring to Christian men who seem obsessed with Ephesians 5:22 – 24 but seem to spend little time discussing Ephesians 5:25ff!

In my experience, many abusers can’t keep their mouth shut about their abuse. Sometimes they will brag about it and word will get around. My advice here is given with caution because all Christians know what a danger evil gossip can be. But there will be times when Godly people with a good reputation may approach you and say, “Pastor, I think something is going on with the Smith family.” Consider the source. If the person telling you this has a track record of credibility and is held in high regard by the church, it may be an indication there is abuse in the church.

I would also suggest to pastors that if man suddenly tells you for no reason that he “never strikes his wife,” this may be a sign of an abuser. Why? There are of course occasions when Christian men may discuss abuse in our culture, and, in that setting, Godly men may sincerely express confusion that anyone would strike his wife. I’m not talking about these sort of discussions when the topic of the Bible study for that night is the danger of domestic violence. What I mean is when you as a pastor are chatting with a man about topics unrelated to marriage or domestic violence, and suddenly he begins to insist he has never struck his wife. This may be the sign of a guilty conscience. I know in my own ministry this has proven to be true.

I want to stress the importance of listening to comments men may make. Sometimes, victim-blaming or aggressive comments can

be so normal in our society that they go unnoticed even upon well-meaning ears. Confronting such statements is a powerful way to create accountability in general in our congregations and create a culture and environment in our churches so victims feel comfortable and safe disclosing and/or asking for help.

III. The Abuser's Tactics

There are tactics which are common to most abusers, though the specifics will differ from relationship to relationship.

A. Emotional abuse.

Usually, emotional abuse precedes physical abuse, but all physical abuse is a form of emotional abuse. By emotional abuse, we mean an abusive spouse uses put-downs, insults, criticism or name-calling to make the wife feel bad about herself. Abusers often try to humiliate their spouse and make the spouse feel "defective" in some way. Usually, the abuser's goal is something like this: "If she believes she's worthless and that no one else will want her, she's less likely to leave."

B. Physical Injuries

Domestic violence includes striking or hitting, either with one's hands or an object like a burning cigarette or a bat. Evidence of physical abuse includes sprains, fractures, broken bones, burns, abrasions, bruises, and internal injuries. The injuries are often accompanied by conflicting explanations or no explanations by the victim. The injured person may also have a history of similar injuries or multiple hospitalizations. An abuser will often attempt to injure his spouse in a way that will not be immediately visible.

C. Denial and blame.

Abusers are very good at making excuses for the inexcusable. The Abuser denies that the abuse occurs and shifts responsibility for the abusive behavior onto you. This may leave you confused and unsure of yourself. Again, the abuser's goal is to convince the wife that the abuser's bad behavior is somehow her fault! Sometimes, the abuser will attempt to minimize his behavior, by saying it "wasn't that bad" or "I didn't hit her that hard" or "I only hit her once."

D. Intimidation.

Abusers use intimidation to instill fear in a spouse and make the wife timid and compliant. Frequently, threats are used to compel the abused wife to remain in the abusive situation. Abusers use certain looks, actions or gestures to instill fear. In acts of intimidation, the abuser may break things, destroy property, abuse pets or display weapons.

E. Coercion and threats.

The abuser threatens violence in order to coerce his victim. He may threaten to hurt other family members, pets, children or himself.

F. Power.

Often, the abuser makes all major decisions, defines the roles in the relationship, is in charge of the home and social life, and treats his wife like a servant or possession.

G. Isolation.

The Abuser often limits his wife's contact with family and friends, requires her to get permission to leave the house, doesn't allow her to work or attend school, and controls her activities and social events. The abuser may incessantly ask where his wife has

been, track her time and whereabouts, or check the odometer on her car.

H. Children as pawns.

The abuser will accuse the wife of bad parenting, threatens to take the children away, uses the children to relay messages, or threatens to report his wife to children's protective services.

I. Economic abuse.

Abusers will control finances, refuse to share money, makes the spouse account for money spent and doesn't want his wife to work outside the home. The abuser may also try to sabotage his wife's work performance by forcing her to miss work or by calling her frequently at work.

J. Whirlwind Romances

It is not uncommon for abusive men to have very brief engagement periods prior to marriage. After marriage, the abuser may then move his new bride to a city far away from her support network, thus leaving her isolated and vulnerable. In a wicked game of manipulation, he then begins to destroy her self-worth and tell her how ugly or incompetent she is and that no one else would have her. Then, the abuser tells her that he loves her! Isolated and broken, she is now a target for violence.

Dr. Branch is a romantic at heart, so please do not assume every torrid romance that leads to a marriage after a brief period of time is automatically a sign of an abusive relationship. Sometimes, brief romances prior to marriage are just a sign of impatience! However, if several of the previous warning signs are also present in the relationship and the man then insists on a quick wedding, prudence dictates a young woman to be cautious.

K. Abusers Lie

Abusive men are habitual liars. Because pastors are committed to truth, it can be hard for the pastor to process the way in which a pathological liar thinks. The abuser can lie with impunity, even when all the evidence points to his abusive behavior.

L. Other Assorted Tactics

Abusers will sometimes use victim's immigration status against her. If the woman is in the United States illegally, the abuser will use this a way of intimidating her from going to the police. He may say, "If you tell the police what I'm doing, they'll discover your immigration status and make you leave."

I want to address one other tactic used by abusers, and it is specifically related to homosexual relationships. Sometimes, the abuser in a homosexual relationship will threaten the victim with exposing his or her homosexuality to family or the church. The abuser will say something like, "If you tell anyone what I'm doing, I'll tell everyone that you are gay. What will your family and church say then? You know they will disown you." I have encountered something like this once in my ministry.

IV. Cycles of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence frequently occurs in patterns of repeated behavior. There are varying views among experts about the patterns which are followed, but all agree that violence rarely gets better and almost always gets worse. What is also common is that all theories agree that the abuser usually follows bouts of violence with a "hearts and candy" stage in which he promises never to do such things again.

There is wide agreement among experts on domestic violence that certain predictable patterns emerge in abusive relationships. It is

important to understand that these are only models that aid our understanding. There are no rules that can assure a battered woman can depend on these models to predict her safety at any given time. What is certain is that domestic violence increases in frequency and intensity over time. The cycle of violence is sometimes useful to demonstrate for women the pattern of violence. Be aware that the cycle of violence **does not apply to all violent partnerships**. The length of each phase is an individual factor, some couples may experience the entire cycle several times in a day, others may take weeks to complete one cycle.

A. Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence

One of the most common models for cycles of domestic violence was described by psychologist Lenore Walker in her 1979 book, *The Battered Woman*. Based on her interviews with 1,500 battered women, she suggested predictable patterns are observable in abusive relationships.

1. Phase I -- Tension or "The Build-Up" Phase

- **Tension increases;** anger arises; there is blaming and arguing
- Time period may last for hours, days, weeks or months
- There is a growing sense of danger by the victim
- "Minor" violence/abuse occurs
- Family denies and minimizes occurrences hoping things will get better
- Both the wife and the husband may try to rationalize his behavior by attributing it to stress at work or some such factor.

2. Phase II --- Crisis or "The Acute Battering Incident"

- The inevitable result of escalating tension and anger brings out the most abusive violence. He slaps, hits, kicks, or punches her.
- Time period may last a few hours to a few days

- Anxiety extremely high
- Explosive, acute, unpredictable behavior
- Major, uncontrolled violence occurs
- May be serious injuries, death
- The abuser blames the victim
- The victim sometimes leaves, but often returns when the crisis is over
- Victim may isolate herself, collapse emotionally

Ministers should understand that domestic violence is about control. Abusers take control when they batter. They take control of the immediate situation, their partner, their physical space and usually the outcome of the situation. Remember, domestic violence is **a crime** of power and control, not passion out of control.

3. Phase III --- "Honeymoon" / Calm Phase / "Loving and Contrite"

The "Honeymoon Phase" can be called the "hearts and candy" phase. The abuser changes from violence to kindness, and he attempts to romance the abused woman again. There are different motivations for the Honeymoon phase on the part of the abuser, but often he is simply trying another tactic to maintain control. The peaceful Honeymoon phase is intended to give the victim hope that the abuser has really changed. The abuser's apologies and loving gestures between episodes of abuse make it difficult to leave.

- The batterer may deny the violence or make excuses for the behavior, apologize and promise not to do it again and may promise "to get help [counseling]"
- The Abuser will often show remorse.
- Time period may last for days or weeks
- The victim is worn down, tired and accepts the promises for change.

- The abuser may display kind, loving behavior. This stage is often called the “hearts and candy stage” since he will attempt to romance her again.
- The abused woman will engage in survival via denial and negotiation.
- Children attempt to become the peacemakers

The offender often feels ashamed of his behavior, tries to minimize it and blames it on the survivor. For example, he might say, "She knows I get mad when she does that" or "It was only a bit of a shove". The woman may go along with her partner because to do otherwise could mean acknowledging the terror and the danger with which she is living.

4. The Calm Phase

Some authors suggest a fourth stage called a “calm phase,” while others merely consider this a part of the honeymoon phase. In this loving and contrite stage, the increased intimacy and promises to get help or never do it again give the abused wife hope that things might change. After a while, the loving stage fades again and we start around the circle once more. They both may believe that it will never happen again, that it was a one-time occurrence. The couple convinces themselves that each incident is isolated and unrelated to the next. Some counselors contend that this is the most dangerous phase because the victim can be drawn back in by the batterer’s charm and manipulation.

B. Alternate Theory of Domestic Violence Cycle

Some researchers in the area of domestic violence and advocates for battered women have questioned and criticized Walker’s research. They suggest that Walker’s approach places too much blame on the victim and removes guilt from the abuser. Such blaming can include thoughts such as, “If she would just keep the

children quieter or keep the house clean there would be less stress in the household.” Some contend that Walker’s model can lead to the erroneous conclusion that it becomes the victim's responsibility to keep the abuse from happening. In light of this, a different model for domestic violence places more emphasis on the abuser.

A second domestic violence model places emphasis on the abuser. Domestic violence may seem unpredictable, simply an outburst related just to the moment and to the circumstances in the lives of the people involved. In fact, however, domestic violence follows a typical pattern no matter when it occurs or who is involved. The pattern, or cycle, repeats; each time the level of his violence may increase. At every stage in the cycle, the abuser is fully in control of himself and is working to control and further isolate his victim.

Understanding the cycle of violence and the thinking of the abuser helps survivors recognize they truly are not to blame for the violence they have suffered and that the abuser is the one responsible.

Six distinct stages make up this second model of the cycle of violence: the set-up, the abuse, the abuser's feelings of "guilt" and his fear of reprisal, his rationalization, his shift to non-abusive and charming behavior, and his fantasies and plans for the next time he will abuse.

1. Abuse

Abuse can be emotional, physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and social (please refer to the Patterns of Abuse).

2. Guilt

After a round of abuse, an abuser may experience guilt. But keep in mind, a non-abusive person experiences guilt very differently than an abusive person and feels guilty about how they have impacted the life of the person they harmed (victim-directed guilt). In contrast, an abuser experiences self-directed guilt. He does not feel guilty or sorry for hurting his victim; he is sorry for the way his behavior may affect his own reputation. He may apologize for his behavior, but his apology is designed so that he will not face consequences or be held accountable. For the abuser, the goal of the guilt stage is to reassure himself that he will not be caught or face consequences.

3. Rationalization

The abuser makes excuses and blames the victim for his behavior. Common excuses usually revolve around the abuser being intoxicated or abused as a child. However, alcohol use and being abused as a child does not cause the abuser to be violent. Common victim blaming statements usually focus on the victim's behavior. For example, "If you had the house cleaned, I wouldn't have had to hit you," or, "If you had cooked dinner on time, I wouldn't have had to hit you." The goal of this stage is to abdicate responsibility for his behavior.

4. "Normal" Behavior

During the normal behavior stage, the abuser may use different tactics to achieve his goal to regain power over the victim. The abuser may act as though nothing happened - everything is normal. This can be quite disconcerting for victims, as they do not understand how he could pretend nothing happened.

If the victim has visible injuries, she will have to explain to others how she got them in a manner satisfactory to the abuser. This is designed to maintain the appearance of normalcy in the relationship. The goal of this stage is to keep the victim in the relationship and present the relationship as normal.

Another tactic an abuser may use after he has chosen to be violent is to become the thoughtful, charming, loyal, and kind person with whom the victim fell in love. He may take her out to dinner, buy her flowers and convince her he will change. This can be a huge incentive for women to stay or return to the abuser because they believe that this time he really will change. Here again we encounter the Honeymoon phase.

5. Fantasy and Planning

Abuse is planned. In the initial stages, an abuser fantasizes or has a mental picture of the next time he will abuse the victim. During the fantasy and planning stage, the abuser is the actor, producer, director and the star. The abuser experiences his power from activating the fantasy. The planning phase details more specifically what the abuser will need to have and to do in order to abuse his partner.

Abusers may spend minutes, hours or days fantasizing about what the victim has supposedly "done wrong" and how he is going to "make her pay." Most often he will fantasize she is having an affair. Most abused women do not have the time, energy, or interest in having an affair. However, infidelity is the most common accusation by abusive husbands. In the twisted world of an abusive man's mind, the wife can never prove she is not having an affair.

6. Set-up

This is when the abuser puts his plan into action. He sets the victim up. The husband abuses his wife again. All the promises to change prove to be lies.

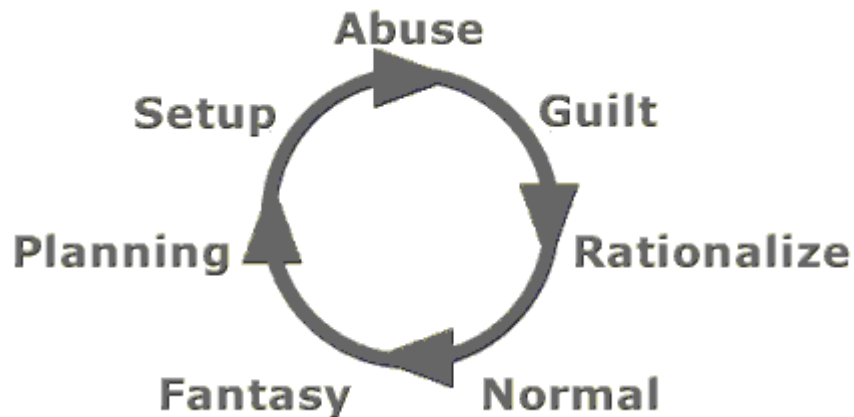
7. The Full Cycle

Here is an example of the cycle of violence through all its phases:

First, a man **abuses** his partner. After he hits her, he experiences self-directed **guilt**. He says, "I'm sorry for hurting you." What he does not say is, "I'm sorry *because I might get caught*."

Next, he **rationalizes** his behavior by saying that his partner is having an affair with someone. He tells her "If you weren't such a worthless person, I wouldn't have to hit you." He then acts **contrite**, reassuring her that he will not hurt her again.

He then **fantasizes** and reflects on past abuse and how he will hurt her again. He **plans** on telling her to go to the store to get some groceries. What he withholds from her is that she has a certain amount of time to do the shopping. When she is held up in traffic and is a few minutes late, he feels completely justified in assaulting her because "you're having an affair with the store clerk." He has just **set her up**.



C. Substance Abuse and Domestic Violence

The use of alcohol and drugs is strongly correlated with an increased likelihood of domestic violence. In 2018, researchers from Ohio University and the University of Tennessee reported that 59.5% of men in court-ordered batterer intervention programs had used marijuana in the previous year.¹⁷ The researchers further noted that marijuana use was positively associated with domestic violence when men drank a high level of alcohol.¹⁸ Furthermore, research strongly indicates domestic violence is more likely to occur on a day when one has been drinking as opposed to a day when one has not been drinking.¹⁹ In an important study from 1991, 70% of alleged intimate homicide perpetrators tested positive for alcohol use.²⁰

In twisted thinking, many abusers attempt to excuse their violence by blaming it on alcohol and drugs. They say, “It wasn’t

¹⁷ Ryan C. Shorey, Ellen Haynes, Meagan Brem, Autumn Rae Florimbio, Hannah Grigorian, and Gregory L. Stuart, “Marijuana Use is Associated With Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration Among Men Arrested for Domestic Violence,” *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 4.1 (March, 2018): 113.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Gregory L. Stuart, Todd M. Moore, Sara R. Elkins, Timothy J. O’Farrell, Jeff R. Temple, Susan E. Ramsey, and Ryan C. Shorey, “The Temporal Association Between Substance Abuse and Intimate Partner Violence Among Women Arrested for Domestic Violence,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 81.4 (August, 2013): 681 – 690.

²⁰ M. Slade, L. J. Daniel, and C. J. Heisler, “Application of forensic toxicology to the problem of Domestic Violence,” *Journal of Forensic Science* 36 (1991): 708–713.

really me, it was the booze! It was the drugs!” But alcohol and drug abuse are no excuse for abusing one’s spouse or children. We are morally accountable for our actions while under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

D. Key Points for the Baptist Pastor

Whichever model one advocates, there are four vitally important things each minister needs to know about domestic violence:

1. Without intervention, the cycle of domestic violence does not get better; it actually becomes more frequent.
2. The violence usually escalates over time. Without intervention, the abuse gets worse, and the loving and contrite stages are less apologetic. Eventually the loving and contrite stage drops out entirely.
3. Drug and alcohol abuse are strongly correlated with domestic violence. When a gun is in the home and drugs or alcohol are added to the mix, the potential for the lethality of domestic violence dramatically increases.
4. There are basically two types of abusive relationships. Some couples have poor communication or problem-solving skills. In these marriages, normal problems escalate into arguing because of the couple’s limited social-skill set. With help, there seems to be promise and hope for these couples to break free from cycles of violence. In complete contrast is the intimate terrorist: An intimate terrorist person who enjoys being violent to women. Such people have sociopathic tendencies. In this second case, change rarely occurs.

When discussing the difference between an argument and domestic violence is an important distinction, but the language pastors are encouraged to use when discussing this is one of the most important parts of being an advocate for survivors of domestic violence in churches. The line between an argument and power and control can be demarcated in a rational way. An argument may go like this: "You didn't tell me you were going to put the purchase of your new running shoes on the debit card. Now we are overdrawn!" Abuse would be something more like this, "You have overdrawn on the debit card and I'm about to make you pay." Physical violence then ensues with degrading comments about the person interspersed. If an argument involves one person degrading the other person then abuse is present.

V. "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do": How the Abuser Responds When the Woman Leaves

Leaving an abuser can be a very dangerous time for a battered woman. When a woman leaves her abuser, the abuser goes through a process of emotions and behaviors that is quite predictable. The most dangerous time for an abused woman is if her abuser suspects she is about to leave. I want to emphasize: The period of time right before a victim leaves is the most dangerous for the woman. Leaving an abuser is generally a long-term protective strategy, and can be dangerous in the short-term.²¹ A separation process is described in the following notes.

²¹ Jacquelyn C. Campbell, "Safety Planning Based on Lethality Assessment for Partners of Batterers in Intervention Programs," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 5.2 (2001): 132.

A. Indifference

At first, the abuser may act indifferent as if he doesn't need the woman. He says such things as, "Go ahead and leave. I don't care. I've got lots of women after me. I don't need you." He pretends he is unconcerned.

B. Manipulative "Anger"

Abusers use anger to manipulate their victims. At some point after the woman leaves, the abuser shows his anger. Anger is a tool abusers use to gain and maintain control. If there are children in the family, for instance, he may claim his outrage is because the survivor is keeping the children from him and say, "I demand the right to see my kids!"

C. Manipulative Courting

As we mentioned in discussing the Honeymoon phase, the abuser tries to hook the victim back into the relationship - and succeeds in more than a few cases. The abuser begins to court the survivor again, perhaps with a trip down memory lane: "Remember when we met?" "Remember when the baby was born?" He also promises to change: "I'll quit drinking." "I'll get counseling." He won't discuss his choice to abuse; he will talk only about past good times and the promise of good times to come. He says he wants her back.

D. Defaming the Survivor

Abusive husbands will defame his wife to friends and family. He tells lies about the survivor to everyone who knows her. His goal is to isolate her socially and to wipe out any support she might have among friends and family. Many times, the woman does not know about the lies he is telling. One of the most common lies is that the

woman was having an affair, a lie that he can use to justify his violent behavior. The goal of all these lies is to isolate her so that she has no option but to return to him.

E. Renewed Manipulative Anger

Once the abuser recognizes the survivor is not coming back to him, he renews his manipulative anger. **The victim may be in danger.** The abuser is more likely to carry out threats he made during the relationship and earlier in the separation cycle. Remember: The most dangerous time in an abusive relationship for the abused woman is when the abuser thinks she is about to leave. The first 7 – 10 days from the time a person leaves their abuser are very dangerous. This is when it's most likely that an abuser will kill their victim or use a weapon to harm family, friends or children or pets.

VI. Why Do Women Stay in Abusive Relationships?

The reasons women stay in abusive relationships are very complicated. There are a wide range of emotional feelings that allow the abuse to continue and prevent the woman from leaving. However, we should note that the more important questions are, "Why isn't the man in jail" or "How can we help make things safer for the woman?" Here are some reasons that women stay in an abusive relationship. Not every one of these is true in each case, but this list can help pastors have some level of understanding concerning why a woman stays in an abusive relationship.

A. Fear

Women fear the physical harm that might come if they attempt to leave. In fact, women who leave abusive relationships are in danger for their lives because, as I note above, for some abusive men, the only way his wife will leave the relationship is via death. Ministers must understand the particularly wicked nature of

domestic violence at this point. The battered woman frequently feels that she only has two options: 1) Live with the abuse or 2) leave and be killed. It is at this point that the Christian community must work to provide safe options for women escaping violence.

B. Love

Women may truly have deep feelings for the abusive partner. This may seem odd, but it happens.

C. Promises

The abuser promises that this abuse will never happen again. The wife often very badly wants to believe this is true.

D. Abuse = Love

The abused woman may be confused about the difference between being loved and being controlled by their partner. This may be a more common problem for women who were abused as children.

E. Guilt

If a wife is made to think that the abuse is her fault, then the marital problems are all hers. She feels guilty that things are so bad and blames herself.

F. Not Being Believed

Many abused women have a strong fear that nobody will believe them if they speak out against the abuse.

G. “I don’t want my husband to get custody of the children.”

Ruth Tucker says one reason some women stay in abusive marriages is fear that the court will grant the husband custody of the children in a separation. In this way, the fear of not being believed is amplified, and women fear their children will be in danger in the custody of an abusive man. Tucker explains, “During the years of abuse, my greatest fear was that my charming husband would be granted joint custody if we were to separate. Once my son reached age thirteen, however, Carlton was permitted to testify before the judge. His testimony clinched the decision to grant me full custody.”²²

H. Thinking She Can Change The Abuser

Many abused women believe that over time they can change the abusive partner. Closely related to this hope is that many women lack the ability adequately to assess the lethality of the relationship. Risk factors associated with a high-degree of lethality include threats of lethality, threats with weapons or use of weapons in previous incidences, presence of a gun in the home, and obsessive jealousy.²³

I. Low Self-Esteem

After being in an abusive relationship, many women feel they can do no better than their current relationship. They begin to believe the lies the abuser tells them. Closely related to low self-esteem is the embarrassment of admitting to others that one was in an abusive relationship. No one wants to think of herself as weak, and admitting abuse means admitting one is a victim. This can be painful.

J. Being Alone

²² Ruth Tucker, “Black and Blue Wife,” *Christianity Today*, August 21, 2016, accessed December 7, 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2016/august/black-and-blue-wife-domestic-violence-abusive-marriage.html>.

²³ Jacquelyn C. Campbell, “Safety Planning Based on Lethality Assessment for Partners of Batterers in Intervention Programs,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 5.2 (2001): 131.

To end the relationship could mean a loss of mutual friends, relatives and others associated with the relationship.

K. Financial Reasons

Money, children and no place to go also hold women in abusive relationships. The women simply see no way to find the money necessary to live except to stay in the abusive relationship.

L. Cultural or Religious Taboos Against Leaving:

A battered woman may have been brought up to believe that it is her duty to keep the family together, no matter what the cost. In Baptist churches in particular, some women may wrongly believe “gracious submission” to her husband means she must endure physical abuse. I encourage all my preachers to teach women and men that Ephesians 5:22 – 24 has *nothing* to do with enduring physical abuse at the hands of a violent man. When addressing Ephesians 5 and the teaching about marriage, pastors must be careful not subtly to imply the wife has caused the abuse by failing to be Biblically submissive in some way. This is called *victim-blaming* and it perpetuates the cycle of violence.

VII. To Exit, Have A Safety Plan

If a woman is going to leave an abusive husband, it is essential that she has a safety plan. I do want to remind pastors again: Domestic Violence is a crime and should be reported to the police. God has ordained the police to provide safety (Romans 13:1 – 7). Let law enforcement do their job in assisting the wife to a safe location. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence offers the following suggestions for women who want to leave or have left an abusive relationship:

A. If you are still in the abusive relationship:

- Think of a safe place to go if an argument occurs - avoid rooms with no exits (bathroom), or rooms with weapons (kitchen). If there is a weapon in the home, particularly a firearm, is there a safe way to remove it from the home?
- Think about and make a list of safe people to contact.
- Keep change with you at all times.
- Memorize all important numbers.
- Establish a "code word" or "sign" so that family, friends, teachers or co-workers know when to call for help.
- Think about what you will say to your partner if he becomes violent.

Remember, you have the right to live without fear and violence.

B. If you have left the abusive relationship:

- Change your phone number.
- Screen calls.
- Save and document all contacts, messages, injuries or other incidents involving the batterer.
- Change locks, if the batterer has a key.
- Avoid staying alone.²⁴
- Plan how to get away if confronted by an abusive partner.
- If you have to meet your partner, do it in a public place.
- Vary your routine.
- Notify school and work contacts.
- Call a shelter for battered women.

²⁴ This advice given here is tricky. Yes, not being alone may be necessary for a while. However, we want to empower the victim-survivor to live an independent and joyful life. The right language for pastors to use is important. The ultimate responsibility here is on the abuser! *He is responsible for the danger in this situation, not the victim-survivor.*

If you leave the relationship or are thinking of leaving, you should take important papers and documents with you to enable you to apply for benefits or take legal action. Important papers you should take include social security cards and birth certificates for you and your children, your marriage license, leases or deeds in your name or both yours and your partner's names, your checkbook, your charge cards, bank statements and charge account statements, insurance policies, proof of income for you and your spouse (pay stubs or W-2's), and any documentation of past incidents of abuse (photos, police reports, medical records, etc.).

Pastors, if a person is undocumented there are legal protections that allow them to call the police, file a restraining order, etc. without being outed for status. A domestic violence agency can help someone navigate this situation in the safest, legal way.

For more information, see the following webpages:

Safe Harbor: <http://www.safeharborshelter.com/index.htm>.

The Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/print/domestic-violence/WO00044/METHOD=print>.

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence:
www.ncadv.org.

The National Council on Child Abuse and Family Violence:
<http://www.nccafv.org>.

VIII. Biblical Critique of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a sin. There is never any excuse for a husband to abuse his wife (nor a wife her husband). No wife who is being physically abused is under any moral requirement to stay in her home. She needs to get to a safe place immediately. A husband

who is beating his wife has sinfully abdicated his God-ordained role to love his wife like Christ loved the church.²⁵ An abusive husband has committed a crime against his victim and a sin against God.

A. Domestic Violence is a Crime

Romans 13:1 – 5 (NASB): Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

Domestic violence is a crime. In my opinion, the most common mistake made by pastors regarding domestic violence is they fail to recognize it is a crime. A crime should be reported to the police and investigated by authorities trained to handle such things.²⁶ Local churches are not called to investigate crimes. As pastors, we function best and serve God with the most effectiveness when we *stay in our*

²⁵ Complementarians like me are often criticized for advocating gender-specific roles in marriage, as if this somehow means a wife should acquiesce to abuse. Nothing is further from the truth. For example, complementarians Strachan and Peacock say, “A wife should never submit to her husband if he is leading her into sin because Christ is her ultimate head and He is holy. She should not passively accept physical or psychological abuse. In case of abuse, she should call the police. She should also call her elders, and get out of there. She is not called to submit to abuse. . . . Abuse is a perversion of authority, not a part of it.” Owen Strachan and Gavin Peacock, *The Grand Design: Male and Female He Made Them* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 88.

²⁶ Writing the second century, Justin Martyr said to the Roman Emperor, “And we ask that you also punish all those who call themselves Christians, but are not living according to His teachings.” Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Thomas B. Falls, ed. and trans. (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1965), 51.

lane! Paul says someone who enforces the law should be an “avenger,” and in a best case scenario, that’s what the law does for the victim of domestic violence.

B. Domestic Violence Violates the Sanctity of Life Principle.

Domestic violence violates the sanctity of life principle since the abuser places an innocent person’s life in danger. Domestic violence violates the dignity of the image of God in the victim. An abuser denies what God says about the inherent value and beauty his or her spouse possesses. By violating the sanctity of life principle, domestic violence brings strife and sorrow to innocent people. Proverbs 29:22 says, “An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression.” Indeed, an angry and violent husband brings strife to a home.

C. David Prayed for Deliverance from the “Violent Man”

Psalm 11:5 (NASB): The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one loves violence His soul hates.

Psalm 18:48: He delivers me from my enemies. You also lift me up above those who rise against me; You have delivered me from the violent man.

In both Psalm 11 and 18, David is a warrior and king praising God for victory over a “violent” man. The idea here is that David has not provoked these people, but violent people are attacking him. This is analogous to a wife who has done nothing to provoke a violent attack from an abusive husband. In the Bible, God is praised for deliverance from violent people. It is right for an abused wife to seek deliverance from violence.

D. God Hates Domestic Violence

Malachi 2:16 NET: “I hate divorce,” says the Lord God of Israel, “and the one who is guilty of violence,” says the Lord who rules over all. “Pay attention to your conscience, and do not be unfaithful.”

God hates domestic violence, a proposition affirmed in Malachi 2:16. In Malachi 2:16, God says, “I hate divorce,” and some abusive husbands abuse this text to manipulate Christian wives into not leaving a violent marriage. These violent men not only abuse women, they abuse the Bible! But the text of Malachi 2:16 also says God hates “the one who is guilty of violence.”²⁷ In context, Malachi 2:16 is the emphatic conclusion to a section of Scripture in which God is criticizing the men in post-exilic Judah for their sloppy practices regarding marriage and divorce. In this passage, God’s hatred of divorce is paralleled with His hatred of domestic violence. Malachi 2:16 *does not mean* an abused woman is required to stay in an abusive marriage.

Notice the terminology within the NET Translation Malachi 2:16: “I hate . . . the one who is guilty of violence.” The phrase translated “one who is guilty of violence” is a colorful Hebrew idiom “him who covers his garment with wrong.” (So the NASB) Noted Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser suggests the phrase is better translated “one who covers his garment with violence” and says this is an allusion to the ancient custom of spreading a garment over a woman as Boaz did over Ruth, thus claiming her as his wife.²⁸

²⁷ I strongly favor the more traditional translation which says something like, “I hate divorce,” as opposed to the ESV / CSV / New NIV which say something like, “If a man hates and divorces his wife, he covers his garment with violence.” I acknowledge the translational difficulties associated with the Hebrew text of Malachi 2:16.

²⁸ Kaiser, *Malachi*, 73.

Kaiser is referring to one of the most tender and romantic scenes in all the Bible from Ruth 3. As a reminder, Ruth was a Moabite widow who was doing all she could to take care of her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi, also a widow. In the process of gleaning in the fields, she meets a very noble and good man named Boaz – a bit older than Ruth – who is obviously struck by her beauty and high character. In a sweet romantic scene, Ruth approaches Boaz one night at a threshing floor and lets him know she very much wants to be his wife, something the older Boaz may have been afraid to discuss with a slightly younger Ruth. Ruth makes her point clear and says to Boaz, “So spread your covering over your maid.” (Ruth 3:9) To come under Boaz’s covering meant to come under his tender protection and loving care.

With the background from Ruth, we can now get some idea of what God is criticizing in Malachi 2:16: A husband should “spread his covering” over his wife as a tender act of protection, but instead in Malachi’s day, men were “covering their garments with violence” – they were covering their homes with violence and strife. Instead of protecting their wives, the men in that era were exploiting them, and *God says He hates it!!* Instead of being a verse which mandates a woman to stay in an abusive relationship, Malachi 2:16 is an indictment against domestic violence and abusive husbands.

E. Divorce for Domestic Violence

Does Scripture make a specific allowance for divorce in cases of domestic violence?²⁹ The Bible does not specifically address the issue of divorce in the case of domestic violence: There is no specific verse which says, “You are permitted to get a divorce if you are being

²⁹ In the past, I simply argued that 1 Corinthians 7:15 is relevant to our discussion and saw spousal abuse as a form of abandonment. This may be true, and I can still argue from this perspective, but I think a more robust argument in favor of divorce in cases of domestic violence comes from looking at several major ideas in the Bible.

physically assaulted by your spouse.” Since scripture doesn’t specifically address the matter, all Christians are trying to identify the relevant moral issues at hand and discover which texts or themes in Scripture are most relevant. Furthermore, since the Bible does talk about divorce in general, in what way do those passages inform our stance on this particular issue? I believe the answer is, “Yes, divorce is permissible in cases of physical violence.” The trajectory of Scripture, I believe, allows if not mandates a divorce in such cases.

First, we begin with the Biblical principle of the sanctity of human life. Innocent human life should be defended and protected. A woman in an abusive marriage is suffering a violation of the sanctity of human life principle. Research indicates the most dangerous time for a woman in an abusive relationship is when the abuser thinks she is about to leave. In the minds of many abusive husbands, the only way his suffering wife will leave the marriage *is through death*. No one is required to stay in a marriage where he or she suffers the indignity of the violation of the sanctity of human life.

Second, a husband who beats his wife is violating the Scriptural teaching to “love his wife as Christ loves the Church.” (Ephesians 5:25) As such, spousal abuse is a grievous violation of the marriage covenant. If the marriage covenant is supposed to reflect Christ’s covenant with the church, then an abusive husband is distorting the picture of Christ’s love for those He has redeemed. Instead of protecting his wife, the abusing husband becomes her greatest threat. Such horrid covenant violations should allow for divorce.

Third, we must be clear that domestic violence is a crime. A man who beats his wife has broken the law and should be prosecuted. In the case of domestic violence, a woman married in good faith only to discover the man whom she married is a criminal, and the criminal’s victim is his own wife. Not one verse of Scripture

suggests someone must maintain a relationship in which one is continually the victim of criminal behavior.

Fourth, the Bible includes prayers for deliverance from violent people. Psalm 18:48 says, “He delivers me from my enemies. You also lift me up above those who rise against me; You have delivered me from the violent man.” In context, David is a warrior and king praising God for victory over a “violent” man. The idea here is that David has not provoked these people, but violent people are attacking him. This is somewhat analogous to a wife who has done nothing to provoke a violent attack from a stronger foe. God is praised for deliverance from violent people. Divorce is a way to be delivered from a violent person.

Finally, while the Bible, and Jesus’ teachings in particular, takes a very negative view of divorce, these teachings should be considered in light of the cultural context Christ was addressing and the rules are always to be applied with mercy. In the social context of First Century Palestine, Christ was primarily addressing men who were abusing Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4 as a reason for easy divorce of their wives, and thus engaging in scandalous and sinful behavior towards women. Christ was not specifically addressing a situation in which a woman is in daily, physical danger.

Christ Himself applied rules with mercy. When religious leaders criticized his disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath, Jesus responded, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27) The rules God gives are always for the good of people and should be applied with appropriate mercy when the sinful effects of living in a sinful world impact innocent people. Of course, some could appeal to mercy for any number of lesser reasons for marital dissolution, such as just getting tired with each other or falling out of love. Such sloppy abuse of the principle should not prohibit its proper use. There are plenty of other Scripture passages

which clearly teach that there are only narrow allowances for divorce and “we just have a hard time getting along” doesn’t cut it. Allowing a Christian to divorce in order to escape a situation where her life is in danger is an act of mercy. In the case of domestic violence, I believe God allows what he hates (divorce) to accomplish what he loves (safety for his battered children).

F. Domestic Violence Contradicts the Command to be a Peacemaker

Matthew 5:9: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.

Abusive husbands are not following Jesus’ challenge to be a peacemaker. The Beatitudes are certainly applicable in the most intimate personal relationship: husband and wife.

G. Domestic Violence is Not Affectionate

Romans 12:10: Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.

An abusive husband is not giving honor or preference to his wife.

H. Domestic Violence is Unkind

I Corinthians 13:4: Love is Kind.

Ephesians 4:32: Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Domestic violence is unkind and treats another person in an unholy way. There is no aspect of domestic violence that is

consistent with the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. Violent husbands who claim to “love” the wives whom they abuse are simply lying.

I. Domestic Violence is Inconsistent with The Fruit of the Spirit

Galatians 5:22 – 23: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (meekness), self control. Against such there is no law.

A violent husband does not demonstrate Biblical love. A violent husband does not bring joy to his home. A violent husband does not bring peace to his home. A violent husband does not demonstrate longsuffering. A violent husband is not kind. A violent husband is not good. A violent husband is not faithful. A violent husband is not gentle or meek. A violent husband demonstrates no self-control but allows himself to be ruled by his rage.

J. Domestic Violence Violates God’s Command for a Husband to Love His Wife

Ephesians 5:25, 28 – 29: Husbands love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her. . . . So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. (NKJV)

A man who abuses his wife is disobeying God’s command to love his wife as Christ loves the Church. Christ never abuses the church. Christ is never violent to the Church. Christ loves and cares for the church.

K. Domestic Violence Violates God’s Command for Men to Respect The Physical Differences Between Men and Women

1 Peter 3:7: Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

The reference in 1 Peter 3:7 to wives as the “weaker” partner is not intended to demean or belittle women as unintelligent or deficient. It is simply an acknowledgement that most men are stronger than most women. The average man has more muscle mass than the average woman, meaning men have access to more raw power. God commands men to use this power for the good of their families and not for evil and domestic violence is evil. In light of these physiological differences, Christian husbands are not to take advantage of their wives. 1 Peter 3:1 – 7 strongly argues against any notion that Scripture condones violence towards women. Instead, this passage is a condemnation of violent husbands.

L. Domestic Violence Is Based on Fear: This is Inconsistent with the Love of God.

1 John 4:18a: There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment.

A violent husband brings fear to his family. This is inconsistent with the love described in the Bible. Again, abusive husbands will often insist that they “love” their wives and family. Love is proved by actions and physical violence is a sign of fear and hatred, not love.

IX. Conclusion

It was all bruises, covered in makeup
Dark sunglasses
And that next morning, sitting in the back pew
Praying with the Baptists
Carrie Underwood, *Church Bells*

Churches, and Baptist churches in particular, have not done a good job addressing domestic violence. Here are some suggestions for a better approach.

A. Summary Statement

Domestic Violence is a grievous, evil sin. God calls violent husbands to repent of their sin and to ask Jesus for forgiveness. Evidence of repentance will include complete cessation from violent threats or physical violence. Domestic violence destroys trust and violates the sacred promise to cherish one's wife. There is no Biblical justification whatsoever for a husband to abuse his wife and attempts to justify violence based on Scripture are clearly a case of twisting Scripture for one's own evil purposes, a tactic used by Satan himself.

Research indicates there are basically two types of abusive relationships. The first type might be called "poor problem solving abuse." In these relationships, either the husband or the wife (or both) lack essential problem solving skills and have practiced poor conflict management. In these cases, a problem escalates into an argument which sometimes involves abuse. There is actually hope in these marriages for the couple to learn better ways to solve problems and experience peace. The second type of abuse is far more dangerous and might be called "intimate terrorist abuse." In these cases, a spouse (usually the wife) is married to someone with somewhat sociopathic tendencies who derives great pleasure from

abusing women. In these cases, the woman is in extreme danger, especially if he thinks she is about to leave.

For my ministerial students: Please remember that physical abuse of a woman by a man almost never gets better, but usually gets worse. Regardless of what you believe about divorce, there is no Biblical mandate for a woman to remain in a situation where she is in physical danger. *Don't tell an abused woman that God requires her to stay with her violent husband!* Get her to a safe place.

Some research indicates a victim-survivor of domestic violence is more likely to disclose and heed the advice of their pastor or religious leaders even before listening to their doctors or police. This really illustrates the importance of advocacy within the church and a call to action to pastors.

B. Domestic Violence is a Crime

Spousal abuse is a crime. The church's first response should, therefore, be to acknowledge it as a crime, encourage the abused woman to get the police involved, and then let the police do their job. God has appointed the state with the role of investigating and punishing crime (Romans 13:1 – 7), and *not the church*. The decision about whether to take legal action by an adult abuse victim is a difficult one that should be made with advisement from a counselor and/or attorney experienced with abuse cases.³⁰

The dynamics of helping a victim-survivor report domestic violence are tricky. In terms of overarching goals within domestic violence advocacy, helping victims to break free from the cycle of violence - not mandating victims to report is key. What I'm trying to

³⁰ Brad Hambrick, ed., *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused Handbook* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2019), 43.

say preacher is this: *It's not a good idea for you to manipulate or force a woman to report.* Now, is it good advice to suggest she report? Yes.

Unfortunately, some victims of domestic violence are quite leery of the criminal justice system. As pastors, we are by nature very supportive of police and courts, and well we should be. As much as we want to believe that law enforcement and court systems are designed to allow best support and serve justice to the victim – there are cases where things haven't worked out in the victim-survivor's favor. Pastors can be most effective in the long term by giving sound advice (like, “tell the police!”), providing options, and encouraging and supporting victims in doing what they feel is best. For example: If a woman discloses to her pastor and he pressures her to report to law enforcement – what happens if she isn't really ready to leave the relationship or can't because of custody or economic barriers? I'm urging pastors to realize the complexity of the situations.

It's of course a tricky dynamic. It is best to report to the crime to the police, but this has to be the victim-survivor's decision. The pastor can give wise counsel and network with domestic violence agencies. Also, keep in mind that any pressure to report from a trusted alliance like a pastor further strips personal power and autonomy away from the victim, which is the opposite of what we want to accomplish! So what is Dr. Branch saying? Domestic violence is a crime and it should be reported, but this advice must be given to the victim-survivor in such a way that she knows we are supportive of her as she figures out how she wants to address the domestic violence. And again, remember – the church should not try to do the police department's job. Stay in your lane!

Arriving a sound decision in important matters takes time for all of us. Pastors should be supportive to the victim-survivor even if she stays. To support her – even when that means she stays – is hard

and can feel unethical. But unhealthy pressuring of a victim to report or leave can create more guilt, shame, fear and danger for victims and their children. Also, if she chooses to stay and then comes back to the pastor after another round of abuse, the last thing she needs is a scolding “I told you to leave him” lecture.

In pastoral counseling, try to think of ways to empower the victim-survivor. I’ve used the term survivor several times here because it implies that a person is surviving, strong and empowered as opposed to someone who has fallen victim and is powerless. If a pastor asks someone who has disclosed how they would like to be referred to and also how they would prefer for the pastor to refer to their partner (partner, ex-partner, abuser, etc.), the pastor is empowering the victim to take ownership of their experience, their feelings and it provides an opportunity for the victim to hold their abuser accountable.

I need to add a critical word about child abuse. A minister is a mandated reporter of child abuse. Missouri law says, “When any individual identified above has reasonable cause to suspect that a child has been or may be subjected to abuse or neglect or observes a child being subjected to conditions or circumstances which would reasonably result in abuse or neglect, that person shall immediately report.”³¹

C. Church Discipline Should Follow Criminal Prosecution

Churches should not investigate crimes. That is the government’s job. After the government has done its job and the facts of the case are clear, then the church should implement church discipline based on the evidence made known. Churches which attempt to handle domestic violence “in house” without involving

³¹ Missouri Department of Social Services, Children’s Division, “Guidelines for Mandated Reporters and of Child Abuse and Neglect,” August 2018, 6.

the authorities are acting foolishly. The only way to know the depth of the sin related to the crime is to let the police do their job first.

Also, pastors should know that premature confrontation of the abuser by church leaders can make the victim(s) less safe.³²

Abusers are often quick to say, “I am sorry.” They then want to shift the focus from their sin to whether or not the abuse survivor will forgive the abuser. This is a wicked game of manipulation by the abuser. Again, he is trying to make his wife the cause of problems, “See, I’ve said I’m sorry, but she won’t forgive me.” But forgiveness and trust are two different issues. Writing in 1894, noted Baptist author Edward Hiscox commented on church members who simply wanted all problems from their bad behavior to disappear by simply saying, “I’m sorry,” as if the phrase were a magical incantation like “abracadabra.” Though not addressing domestic violence in particular, his advice is quite relevant here: “It is not always satisfactory or sufficient evidence of penitence that one says he is sorry. He must “do works meet for repentance,” in order that the Church should be under obligation to restore him to its favor, particularly where the offense has been grievous, or oft-repeated.”³³

But I must emphasize again: Domestic violence is a crime. The church has not been tasked by God to investigate crimes; that is the job of the civil authorities. Do not try to do what God never intended for you to do as a pastor: You are not an amateur detective. My strongest suggestion is to let the police do their job, and then make any decisions about church discipline based on the findings of law enforcement.

³² Brad Hambrick, ed., *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused Handbook* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2019), 43.

³³ Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, The Baptist Distinctives Series, Number 18 (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer Inc., 1894, reprint 2006), 167.

D. Domestic Violence in Cases Outside of Marriage

There will be people who attend our churches who are experiencing domestic violence in situations outside of marriage. Some people will be in live-in relationships and others may even be in homosexual relationships. The abuser will often use the fact such relationships are sinful as a tool of manipulation against the victim. He or she may say, "If you leave me, I'll tell your pastor and church that we are living together / that you are gay." Notice the wicked use of shame by a violent person: He or she is physically beating or threatening someone, but uses the victim's own conscience against them! Certainly such manipulation is of the Devil.

So here's my advice: If someone opens up to you about domestic violence in a relationship that is outside of marriage, address the domestic violence first. Help the person think through how to get out of an unsafe relationship and get to a secure place in life. Once the threat of violence is gone, I think the person will be in a better place to think clearly about Biblical sexual ethics.

E. Domestic Violence and Church Safety

On Sunday, November 5, 2017, Devin Kelley attacked the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, TX, killing 26 innocent people between the ages of 1 and 77. Kelley's evil and murderous rampage was connected to domestic violence: He was estranged from his wife, whose mother and other family members attended the church. Prior to the attack, Kelly sent threatening text messages to his mother-in-law. Kelley's first marriage was also characterized by domestic violence: While in the Air Force, he was convicted of assaulting his wife and fracturing his step-child's skull and received a bad-conduct discharge.

The Church Law & Tax Report said that in 2010⁶, 11 of the 47 murderous attacks at churches and ministries in the US had the same culprit at the root: Domestic Violence.³⁴ As a result, when pastors, deacons, or other church leaders become aware of domestic violence or abusive situations within the church family, they need to be aware of the possible dangers for the entire congregation. If someone has disclosed an abusive relationship to the pastor or deacons, a security team keep watch over them to protect them on church premises. If the pastor is concerned about compromising privacy, he should ask the person who disclosed the abuse for permission to share the concern with the security team, or at least its leader.³⁵

E. A Plan For Ministry in Cases of Domestic Violence

In February 2017, Lifeway Research reported that while most pastors have good intentions and mean to help abused people, only 52% claim to have a specific plan ready.³⁶

Safe House ministries provide a wonderful opportunity for churches to reach out to women who don't know Christ. In 2012, the Missouri Baptist Children's home expanded its ministry to include safe houses for women. At the same time, one should work closely with local law enforcement in organizing such ministries. Oftentimes, the abuser will try to hunt down and harm the woman and anyone he perceives as aiding her in getting to a safe place.

Last Updated May 5, 2021

³⁴ Ruth Moon, "Why Domestic Violence In the Home Endangers Your Church," August, 2017, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.churchlawandtax.com/web/2017/august/why-domestic-violence-in-home-endangers-your-church.html>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Bob Smietana, "Good Intentions, Lack of Plans Mark Church Response to Domestic Violence," *Lifeway Research*, February 20, 2017, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://lifewayresearch.com/2017/02/20/good-intentions-lack-of-plans-mark-church-response-to-domestic-violence/>.