



A Pastoral Response to Physical Abuse in the Family

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The statistics are staggering. Anywhere from one-fourth to one-third of women in the United States of America will be physically attacked by a man with whom they have a close relationship.¹ As shocking as this is, however, those

numbers are nearly worthless because many women will never report the abuse that they suffer. This means the scandal of abuse is much worse than these percentages. Furthermore, the real impact of physical abuse is seen in the stories of pain and brokenness from the people who experience it: Sue has been married for ten years and last night—for the very first time—her husband shoved her into the wall; Bridget lives in fear of her husband's periodic explosions which have on occasion resulted in him slapping her repeatedly; Linda has quietly endured violent beatings from her husband every week for five years.²

These stories could be multiplied to include hundreds, thousands, millions of women who are experiencing the physical and spiritual pain of

abuse from men who are called by God to protect them. These are situations that pastors, biblical counselors, and other Christian ministers will confront. The only question is whether there will be wisdom to engage both the abused and the abusers in ways that offer help and hope centered in Christ and based on his Word. The purpose of this article is to attempt to add to the wisdom of the church by answering three important questions about the nature of physical abuse in the home. First, what is abuse? Second, can abusers change? Third, how should ministers respond to issues of physical violence?

It may be helpful to observe at the beginning that I have experienced childhood physical abuse at the hands of my mother; she was addicted to alcohol until I was a teenager. I have also counseled many people in the aftermath of physical abuse at the hands of those to whom they are closest. Though my experience as both an abused person and a minister helping the abused has shaped my thinking, this article is not anchored in my experience. Instead, it is anchored in the pages of God's Word which wisely, sufficiently, and relevantly addresses the theme of abuse and offers counsel both to attackers and to the attacked.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH PHYSICAL ABUSE?

Physical abuse of a wife is clearly wrong, but why? Does this sound like a question that's too basic? It shouldn't. The answer to this question is important for two reasons. First, we want to establish every matter not upon our own thoughts and opinions but according to the standards of God's Word. Second, as a complementarian, I am concerned about the connection that many make between the authority of a husband in the context of the home and physical abuse.³ The argument is made from time to time that the authority structure in complementarian homes can lead husbands to abuse their wives and children. It is important to demonstrate that there is no such necessary link. To the contrary, a full embrace of biblical complementarianism should result in husbands who would die to protect their families.

In the simplest terms, abuse is the wrong use ("ab" + "use") of power by force, sex, or manipulation to coerce persons under authority to do what those in authority desire them to do. With regard to authority, the Bible is clear that a husband does possess authority over his wife (Eph 5:22-33, Col 3:18-19). This authority, however, is qualified by the authority of Christ and thus has limits. It is crucial to affirm that whenever a husband uses any form of physical force against his wife, it is a wrong use of his authority. It is never, under any circumstances, appropriate for a husband to use physical force against his wife for the purpose of compelling her submission to his authority. A husband abuses his wife whenever he uses physical force against her. To understand why this is the case, it is necessary to understand several important principles of authority in Scripture.

The Bible teaches triadic authority. This principle teaches that God mediates his sovereign authority over human beings through three institutions—the family, the church, and the state. God imposes a structure of authority in each of these institutions for the purpose of ordering society, restraining sin, and advancing the cause of the gospel in the world. A person operating in any of these spheres tangibly submits to the authority of God by submitting to the authority in each of these areas. Furthermore, God implements his authority in each

institution by authorizing the use of some kind of force against those who violate the structure of authority in that particular institution. For example, in Romans 13:1-4 the apostle Paul says,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer (NASB).

In this passage, Paul says that God has placed the state in a position of authority and that whoever resists that authority resists God and will rightfully receive the penalty of the sword. The sword here is an expression used to indicate that the government has divine sanction to use force against citizens who violate God's sovereignty as mediated through the state. The state can engage in a wrongful use of this authority, but that is not the point here. For now, it is enough to see that the state does have divine sanction to use force to impose its will.

The church also has power to enforce its authority, though this looks a bit different. In Matthew 18:15-18, Jesus says,

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witness. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound

in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

In Matthew, Jesus teaches that the church has the power of the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19) with the authority to bind unrepentant members for the purpose of discipline. Jesus gives the church his authority to enforce indictments against the sin of its members by removing them from the fellowship of the church. It is possible for the church to engage in a wrongful use of this authority, but the point here is that it does possess the power to enforce its will against its members.

Finally, the Bible teaches that there is inherent and enforceable authority in the context of the home.

Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with the rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol (Prov 23:13-14).

These and other passages provide biblical sanction for parents to enforce their authority with the use of corporal discipline. There are many tragic cases of parents who abuse this authority and abuse their children, but the Bible is clear that parents do have enforceable authority.

God has granted authority, and corollary enforcements of his authority are warranted in all three institutions ordained by him. Authority inherent in the state is enforceable by the sword. Authority in the church is enforceable by removal from the church. Authority in the home is enforceable by the use of the rod. Reading these examples, there is a notable absence. God has granted men authority to lovingly lead their wives and children. However, God allows men to enforce their authority with their children alone. That is to say that, though husbands possess authority over their wives, God never grants them the prerogative to enforce that authority.

This teaching is seen every time the Bible discusses the complementary roles of husbands and wives. When the Bible discusses the responsibilities of a wife to submit, it always places the responsibility for submission on the wife, never on the husband. Whether a wife submits or not is her responsibility. It is never the responsibility

of a husband to bring his wife into submission through force. Instead, men are called to lead their wives in a loving way. This will often mean (among many other things) challenging, exhorting, and encouraging wives to be submissive to their authority. It will never mean enforcing that authority. In marriage, the only “coercion” a husband may use to motivate his wife to submit is his kind, humble, and sacrificial treatment of his wife.

This means that the relationship between a husband and a wife is unique among all other relationships of authority in God’s world. Though the husband exists in a state of authority, the husband does not have biblical sanction to enforce this authority. For the purposes this article, it is enough to observe that this truth will rule out—on biblical and theological grounds—any forceful acts by a man against his wife. Whenever a man engages in any such behavior, it is a wrongful use of power and, therefore, abuse in any and every case.

Excursus: Corporal Discipline of Children

Though this article principally is about a husband’s abuse of a wife, a brief excursus into fatherly physical abuse is essential because of the close proximity of the issues in the home, and because force against children must be regulated. As was demonstrated above, parents may use force against their children to correct disobedience. The use of such force is sometimes summarized in Scripture as “the rod.” Instruction about the rod in Scripture is not, however, a blank check for fathers or mothers to use any forceful means to impose their authority. Though parents may use some measure of force against their children, it is still possible to abuse them. Because that is true, it is important to examine some biblical themes that regulate and control parental use of force against their children. There are at least five principles to consider briefly.

First, the biblical encouragement for the use of the rod is balanced by the biblical teaching that the rod should be used in a controlled way. In the passage from Proverbs quoted above, the text says, “If you strike him with the rod, he will not die.” There is a clear and unmistakable implication in this passage that the parent using the rod against his child is not doing so with dangerous or murderous force. The inspired author is not con-

cerned that the use of the rod will kill the child, because his assumption is that the parent is spanking his child in a controlled way.

Second, the biblical encouragement for the use of the rod is balanced by the biblical teaching that parents (especially fathers) must not provoke their children to wrath. Ephesians 6:4 commands, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath.” In context, the clearest way to avoid provoking one’s children to wrath is to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. This principle does not exclude, however, avoiding other acts that exasperate children such as cruel, violent, and harsh treatment.

Third, the biblical encouragement for the use of the rod is balanced by the biblical call to love. Jesus says “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39). Jesus Christ summarizes the entire law into a command to love both God and neighbor. For fathers, some of their closest neighbors are their children. An unloving father who does not know how to nurture and care for his children within his home cannot hope to progress in the call to love his neighbors beyond his home.

Fourth, the biblical encouragement for the use of the rod is balanced by the biblical teaching to avoid sinful anger. In Ephesians 4:31, Paul says, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” No Christian—fathers included—has biblical permission to give full vent to anger even with their children. When this biblical truth is paired with the biblical call to grow in the spiritual fruit of gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:23), a picture comes into focus of a man who disciplines his children with a hand that is firm yet gentle and controlled.

Finally, the biblical encouragement for the use of the rod is balanced by the biblical teaching that discipline—though punitive—is restorative in nature.⁴ The writer of Hebrews draws a parallel between divine discipline and earthly, paternal discipline. The motivation behind the discipline of both divine and human fathers is the same. Hebrews 12:11 says, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” This passage points to a motivation of discipline that is restorative leading to good, peaceful,

and righteous fruit. When this is the motivation behind discipline, the method of the rod should correspond and itself be good, peaceful, and righteous.

So though fathers are commanded to enforce their authority in a tangible way, there are a number of principles that regulate that physical force. When such principles are understood, it is possible to say that a father abuses his child when physical force not employed for the purpose of restoring the child but is employed for the purpose of venting the father’s sinful and uncontrolled anger. This is a wrongful use of paternal or maternal power even if there are no physical marks and even if it is done with the approval of the surrounding culture.

At a fundamental level, abuse is just one manifestation of sinful rage that God forbids, and wants to be transformed. When a man uses any force against his wife or improper force against his children, he does so out of a heart that has been denied its lust for power, comfort, sex, or any number of other things (Jas 4:1-2). It is sinful and should be repented of before God and those whom he has wronged. It is to this topic that we must now turn.

CAN ABUSERS CHANGE?

Persons on the giving and receiving end of abuse can feel overwhelmed by despair, believing that things can never be different than the way they are. It is common for many to believe that once a person is an abuser, he will always be an abuser. The purpose here is to examine whether this is true.

Two items will be mentioned by way of response. The first response is anecdotal. I have counseled a number of couples for whom abuse has been a difficulty. The couples who have experienced brokenness before God over their sin, and have earnestly pursued counsel, accountability, and a grace-motivated plan for change have seen true and lasting change take place. All of the couples I know who have done this are, as far as I know, now living in homes that are free from abuse. The reason this is the case is not because I am such a wonderful counselor or because these couples have been so incredible. The reason this is true has to do with the second response, which is biblical.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul is dealing with people who

are struggling with serious patterns of sinfulness and he says,

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:9-12).

This passage does not mention abuse specifically but rather mentions the hope that persons struggling with enslaving sins can have for change. Paul runs through a list of sins regarding which many believe change is impossible (such as homosexual activity). After giving these exemplary cases of difficult sins, Paul admits how serious they are, declaring that people who do those things cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Then, Paul gives hope. He says, ‘and such were some of you.’ Paul’s point is that even though these sins may be a source of struggle for believers, they do not define the believer. Believers do not live and die by the label of their particular sin. Instead they are under the new label of being *in Christ*. Because Jesus has washed, sanctified, and justified believers, they are set free from sin. This does not mean that believers never sin, but there is a power to change for even the most difficult and enslaving sins.

This is true of abuse as well. By the power of the resurrected Christ, abusers can change. Persons who say that abusers can never change are attempting to make a sobering declaration about abuse. I understand that. Abuse *is* sobering. In this passage, however, Paul makes a sobering statement about the gospel of Jesus. To say that an abuser (or a homosexual, or a thief, or an adulterer) cannot change is to deny this text of Scripture and thus to slander the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus loves to take revilers and turn them into givers of honor. Jesus loves to take the angry heart of an abuser and turn it in to the peaceful heart of a servant. Jesus loves to take an abused person’s fearful heart of despair and, by his grace, give her a heart full of strong and courageous hope.

This biblical teaching is certainly not a reason for an abuser or an abused person to sit around and wait, with fingers crossed and wishing for change. It is a call to cry out for help to Jesus and others. It is a call to repent deeply and to fight for change in the context of a wise and loving community of believers. Precisely how this community should offer counsel is the object of the next question.

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS RESPOND TO INSTANCES OF PHYSICAL ABUSE?

Most of the space in this article will be devoted to very practical considerations about how to respond when a husband physically abuses his wife.⁵ As such a response is examined, it is important to keep a few things in mind. First, I am writing as a pastor and, therefore, am thinking pastorally. If you are a Christian friend of someone who is being abused, you should seek counsel from those in spiritual authority over you, and you should implore your friend to get help.

Second, ministry is always situational and case-specific. I am going to provide some guidelines to keep in mind when doing ministry in the aftermath of physical abuse, but such generalities may not be appropriate for every situation. Because interpersonal ministry is always tailor-made, seek the wisdom of God in prayer and hear the wisdom of others in conversation. That said, I wish to propose a fivefold strategy for ministry after you learn that a man has physically abused his wife.

Listen

Do not underestimate the importance of listening for your ministry. Listening to a woman who has been abused is the first way you can show care to her. She has endured a terrifying betrayal of trust and—in all likelihood—will find it difficult to share her experience. It is possible that the woman addressing you has told others who have not believed her, or who have been unwilling or unable to offer an appropriate response. A wife in such a situation may be more grateful than you can imagine simply to speak with someone who listens, understands, and is willing to offer help.

As you listen to an abused wife, it will be particularly important for you to find out answers to questions

like: How long has the abuse been happening? How often does it happen? When does it tend to happen? How severe is the abuse? Have children been exposed to the abuse? Have they seen it happen or been recipients of it themselves? What would your husband's response be if he knew you were talking about the abuse?

You need to listen to the wife, but you also need to develop a plan to listen to the husband. Wise ministry will always seek to minister to both sides of the equation: both the abused and abuser. As Christians who are called to love and minister even to our enemies, and who are aware of the devastating effects of human sinfulness, we believe that even the abuser is a victim of his abuse in some sense.⁶ Such a man needs help to pursue change. Ministry to the abused and abuser will look different. Yet both will begin in the same place: listening. It is important to mention a few things to keep in mind as you seek to listen to the abuser.

As you seek to listen to an abusive husband, one phrase to keep in mind is restoration not stigmatization. Abusers are guilty of egregious sin against their wives and against God. They must be confronted with this sin and urged to confess their sin and pursue change vigorously. As true as that is, we never want abusers to sense that we are against them. The goal in ministry to an abuser—as long as he will receive such ministry—is to see him be restored to his family, and ultimately to Christ. A minister must communicate a fierce willingness to protect the abused. Yet this need must not be placed at odds with ministry to the husband. It should be understood and communicated to the husband and wife that each one needs ministry for the good of their marriage.

As you seek to listen to an abusive husband, it is also helpful to try and figure out what he was wanting when he hurt his wife. One of the most profound things the Bible teaches about our behavior is that it always springs from motives that are seated deep within our hearts (Mark 7:14-23). Abusive anger spews out of a heart that has been denied its lusts and wants to punish someone. When you can understand from an abuser what desires led to the abuse, you will understand the twisted logic of his sin. You will be equipped to offer wise, relevant, case-specific wisdom about how to pursue Christ-centered change in the situation.

As you listen to an abusive husband, be wise in when and how you do so. It is not necessarily wise for you to talk to the husband with his wife present. Furthermore, it is not necessarily wise for you to speak to an abusive husband immediately after you have spoken to his wife. Finally, it is not necessarily wise for you to speak to an abuser alone. In a situation where you are dealing with a man who is murderously violent you should, in fact, do none of these things. In such cases it is better to wait, be sure the wife is safe, involve the authorities, and not meet alone with a dangerous man. We will unpack these issues more in a bit. The point here is to be willing to listen. Because ministry, as was noted above, is case-specific, if you listen well, it will keep you from trying to solve a problem that does not exist.

Consider Whether and How to Involve Law Enforcement⁷

Laws about reporting abuse vary from state to state, so it is always wise to check on the requirements for your area, but Kentucky is similar to many other states. In Kentucky, most people are required to report abuse to the authorities when they become aware of it. This requirement stands unless the abused person requests that the offense not be reported. If a minister receives such a request he still may report the abuse, but is no longer required to report it. This stipulation will often make it necessary for ministers to make a judgment call about how to involve the authorities. There are several guardrails that will govern this decision.

First, integrity and honest dealing should govern your interaction with the woman who has come for help. Inform the wife that you are required to report abuse unless she asks that you not do so. If she asks you not to report, but you believe that reporting is necessary, explain this and try to persuade her. If you disagree, you must inform her of your intention to report against her wishes. You should do this in love and with great care, taking time to explain your concerns and your belief that this will be the most helpful action. You should also understand that she will likely be quite upset with you. Finally, you should be aware that for the most part, the authorities are powerless to help if the victim will not corroborate your claim. This means that your report

may not amount to much. The point advanced here is that you should be honest. If you are dishonest or less than forthcoming, you will add your betrayal to her husband's betrayal and make your work more difficult.

Second, you must protect the weak. The civil authorities are a God-ordained instrument to protect the weak as Romans 13 teaches. Furthermore, they have specific means at their disposal to help them in this work. As true as this is, there are limitations to the protection they offer. As noted above, if a wife will not corroborate the abuse, there is little the authorities can do. Even if she does, the protection they offer in the form of limited periods in jail, emergency protective orders, and restraining orders are not full-proof. The harsh reality that everyone admits is that if a man desires to hurt his wife badly enough, there is little anyone can do to stop him. Having said that, Christians should use all means at their disposal to help abused women. The civil authorities are one way to do this.

A third issue to consider with regard to involving the authorities in an instance of physical abuse is that informing the authorities can help prevent further instances of abuse. One research study found that calling the police after an episode of domestic violence created a strong deterrent against repeat offenses of domestic violence.⁸ This study showed that the deterrent is effective even if there is no arrest made. This, of course, makes eminent biblical sense as sin loves to hide in the darkness and so flees when exposed to the light (Eph 5:7-14). This one is a powerful principle that urges us to make a report of violence.

Ultimately, there are not easy, one-size-fits-all answers on this issue. If a man hit his wife for the first time in fifteen years, if you find out two weeks after it happened, and if he seems humble and repentant while she seems safe and unafraid, you might submit to the wife's request that you not report the incident. If a woman comes to you covered in bruises saying that her husband has been regularly hitting her for months, you certainly should not submit to her request. Things get more difficult as we move away from these extremes and toward the center. The rules of thumb are to err on the side of keeping women safe and to obey the law. After that, be humble, be honest, express genuine and long-

term care for your counselee, pray, and seek wisdom from others you trust.

Involve the Church

When all is said and done, the civil authorities may or may not be involved. One group that must necessarily be involved is the body of believers. Ministers of the gospel called by Christ to equip the saints for ministry should be concerned that we live in a culture that does not see it as the responsibility of the church to meet the spiritual and physical needs of its hurting members. This is what ministry is, and it is repeatedly commanded in Scripture. I have had too many conversations with too many ministers whose only idea about ministry in the aftermath of abuse is to call the authorities and pray. There is much, much more to be done.

The church must be mobilized to care for the abused. Women may need a safe place to stay with their children. They may need food and clothing for a time. They may need long-term financial help if restoration proves impossible. (A church in such a situation should consider helping a woman pay for her children's school or for her own education as she tries to get a job to support her family). They may need to provide childcare. They may need to help getting kids back and forth to school. They will always need to provide the sort of Christian friendship that provides the opportunity for candid and loving counsel, for tears, and even for laughter. We live in a church culture that desperately needs to rediscover that it is not the responsibility of government agencies and social workers to provide these services. God calls his church to fulfill these responsibilities.

The church needs to be mobilized to care for the abusive husband. It is not the abused wife alone that needs help. The husband needs ministry too, and it is the responsibility of the church to provide it. Church members will need to be mobilized to go and confront an abusive husband. If such a man is repentant, he may need a place to stay for a time so that his wife and children can remain in their home. He may need food. He will certainly need accountability, as well as Christian friends who can speak into his life as he grows and changes. Furthermore, for a time, he may need church members to supervise visits he has with his wife and

children. Ultimately, if he is unrepentant, he will need the church to bear testimony against his sin through a process of church discipline so that his spirit may be saved at the last day (cf. 1 Cor 5:5).

The above are a dozen examples of the many different ways that the church can be called upon to minister in the fog of post-abuse ministry. One thing is certain: no minister can do all of this by himself. In fact, I am persuaded that the reason many Christian ministers throw up their hands and send people exclusively to the civil authorities is that they are made weary by all that needs to be done. The load can and should be shared by a body of believers instead of just one person.

If at all possible, restore the couple to each another in a wise way

The goal of ministry in the aftermath of abuse should be the effort to restore couples to each another in a way that reflects biblical wisdom. Obviously a couple should not be restored to the same house and a normal relationship if the abuser is unrepentant or still a threat. There should never be any action taken that would expose a woman to that kind of danger. Instead, if a husband is repentant and vigorously pursuing change, then—in light of the power of Christ to change abusers—couples can have hope that God can restore their relationship.

In order to do this, the church must work closely with the couple so that the wife is always protected and safe. A man who has been consistently violent towards his wife will need to be separated from her for a time to receive counseling and to re-establish trust. As ministry toward the couple begins, it may be that the only time he sees his wife is during the periods of counseling. The goal should be to increase these times together slowly and then add other times for them to be together in a supervised way (both as a pair and with their children). From here, the couple should move to spending time together in an unsupervised way with the ultimate goal of living together under the same roof. As ministry proceeds with the couple, pastors and other Christians, we look for signs of genuine repentance from the man. We want to balance this repentance with deliberate and steady progress in the restoration of the couple. As such progress happens, it is essential to ensure that the

wife is safe and that she feels comfortable with the speed of progress.

Involve the Couple in Intensive Counseling

We live in a church culture that most often refers church members struggling with abuse to counselors outside of the church. This is unfortunate, given that the Bible is rich in wisdom concerning the relevant issues. As an abused person and as a minister who helps the abused, I have not encountered an issue that God does not address somehow in the pages of his Word.

This reality does not mean that a person with a seminary degree or a person in vocational ministry necessarily possesses wisdom about these biblical principles. This reality, instead, is an encouragement to get knowledge. Ministers should study the Scriptures, seeking wisdom about responding to abuse. Ministers should also read good books and articles about abuse (which are often hard to find). Above all, when you become aware that abuse is happening in your church (as it likely is), seek the wisdom of others who have walked the road before so you can be of most help. The following are a few things to keep in mind as you minister to a couple.

First, emphasize the nature of abuse. James 4:1-2 says, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” Abuse is an angry, violent fit of rage. In his Word, God tells us that anger grows in a heart that desires something it has not received. The logic of anger says, “I want this thing (it could be sex, submission, dinner, peace and quiet, or a million other things), and if you do not give it to me I will punish you.” Fundamentally, abuse is about controlling another person to get what one wants.

This is a significant problem because Christians in general (Phil 2:1-11) and husbands in particular (Eph 5:25-33) are supposed to exemplify sacrificial service. Husbands are not called to fight for their own desires with physical punishment. Instead, they are called to lay down their lives for the well-being of their wives. Nothing is further from this biblical vision than physical abuse against women.

Such a biblical understanding of abuse is very sobering. Mere behavior modification will not be enough to transform an abusive husband. Resolving to change is not enough. Taking deep breaths will not ultimately help. Counting to ten will not work either. The Bible teaches that change for the abuser must happen at a deep level in his heart. All the strategies in the world to delay, manage, or relocate anger to another source cannot change an abuser. An abusive husband needs a change of heart. A man who hits his wife needs to exchange his selfish heart for a selfless heart that desires to serve others. This is impossible for anyone to do on their own; this explains why so many men have trouble changing their abusive behavior.

Second, emphasize the gospel of God's grace. It is truly impossible for an abusive man to change his heart on his own. This reality does not mean, however, that change is impossible. As Jesus said in a different context, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:26). The glorious reality of the gospel of grace, as was noted above, is that God can change the heart of an abuser. In Romans 6:1-4 Paul says,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Because believers have been united to Christ in his life, death, and resurrection, they should take no part in sin. "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14). This verse plainly teaches that grace includes power to defeat sin. Grace is the only power strong enough to break the hold of abuse in the heart of a selfish believer.

Third, emphasize the necessity of repentance and forgiveness. Martin Luther began his Ninety-Five Theses with the words, "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' he called for the entire life of

believers to be one of repentance." The apostle John said,

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8-9).

This means that the way Christians lay hold of the gospel of grace is by confessing their sins and receiving Christ's forgiveness and power for change. Because this is true, counseling abusive husbands requires guiding them toward an encounter with God where they confess their sinful actions and heart attitudes, begging Christ for forgiveness and for the power to change. They must do so with confidence that, in Christ, they will receive what they seek.

Abusive husbands also must be required humbly to repent of their sin to their wives. Repentance is not just vertical, but is also horizontal. Proverbs 28:13 says, "Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy." Abusive husbands must expose their sins not only to God, but also to the wives and others whom they have harmed. Those who obtain mercy need not only to confess but also to forsake their sin. This is very important. There must be fruit in keeping with repentance (Matt 3:8). This is why restoration of a couple in the aftermath of abuse must be steady, but slow. There must be time to see fruit and to demonstrate that repentance is genuine. Pastors must be incredibly wary of tears and statements about a commitment to change. Godly sorrow and worldly sorrow can look alike on the outside, but only godly sorrow leads to repentance (2 Cor 7:8-11).

An abused wife also may need to repent of her own sin. Let me be very clear about this as it will be easy to misunderstand: *I am not saying that a wife is ever responsible for the abuse she receives at the hands of her husband.* If the Bible teaches anything about sin, it is that the responsibility rests on the person who committed it. Whenever a man physically abuses his wife, he may never shift the blame for his sin onto his wife with statements like, "If she had been more submissive I would not have hit her." Statements like this are a wicked

attempt to shift the responsibility for sin onto another.

Having said that, the Bible also teaches that no person should ever overlook one's own sin in favor of focusing on the sin of others. This is the point of Matthew 7:1-5. Ministers who want to help couples change in a way that most honors Christ will urge both husband and wife to consider their sins against God and one another. For a wife, this will mean making it clear that abuse is an egregious sin for which she is not responsible, while still asking what sins she might have committed that need to be confessed. Has she been rebellious toward her husband? Was she violent towards him? Has she been guilty of any cruel or unloving treatment toward him? Such issues are not the first items that a wise minister will pursue, but they should be addressed at some point.

Finally, couples (especially wives) must be confronted with the biblical command to forgive. This will often be very challenging and so ministers must proceed slowly here, but very deliberately. Women who have been abused must be confronted with the command of Jesus that because we are forgiven sinners we must forgive our fellow Christians from the heart (Matt 18:21-35). Jesus' words in this regard changed my own life. After enduring years of physical abuse from my mother, I hated her. After a few years of being a Christian, however, I realized that the call of Christ on my life was to forgive and show love to my assailant. Such forgiveness will never mean that a woman should be restored to a violent situation. It will also not mean that an abusive man pays no consequences. It will mean abused persons are free to let go of bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice and are empowered to exercise kind, tender-hearted forgiveness (Eph 4:31-32).

Fourth, emphasize instruction on God's use of suffering in the Christian life. In the aftermath of any difficult marital issue, couples can be left wondering why such horrible things would happen. This is certainly the case in the wake of abuse. Couples get married hoping for the fairy-tale and now a black eye and shattered dreams have them reeling with questions like, "Why did this happen?" The Bible's answer to this is as shocking as it is clear,

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials

of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (Jas 1:2-4).

This passage explains a biblical response to suffering and provides a rationale for it.

The response to trials of various kinds—like abuse—is to count it all joy. I tremble as I write that sentence. Many who read this will be outraged, and I understand that. It is an outrageous statement. It is also the truth of God. How are we to count it all joy when we meet trials? Isn't that absurd? The mist begins to lift, however, when the object of rejoicing in the passage is understood. Christians do not rejoice at the suffering. No woman should be happy that she is being abused. Christians look at what God is doing and rejoice in that.

Christians do not rejoice at the suffering, but Christians do look at what God is doing and rejoice in his purposes. According to the inspired words of James, the goal of all suffering is to make the Christian steadfast, lacking in nothing. This truth means that God is able to accomplish through suffering that which he could not do apart from suffering. Jesus Christ chooses to work within our pain to make us more like himself. Embracing this truth requires giving attention to two important matters.

The biblical teaching is not an argument for women to remain in an abusive situation. There are too many passages teaching that abuse is something from which persons should flee for any responsible Bible interpreter to conclude such a thing (1 Sam 19:10; Prov 22:3; Luke 4:29-30; John 8:59; 1 Cor 6:19-20). James 1 is not a chain that shackles women to abuse. Instead, it is a key that frees them from believing that the pain they have experienced is purposeless. It gives them hope to believe that even in abuse—as in all the pain we experience in a sinful world—God is able to work to overrule the sinful purposes of wicked people so that what they intended for evil, he intends for good (Gen 50:20).

This teaching in James is also one that requires wisdom (Jas 1:5-8). Ministers need to arrive here slowly and carefully. Ministers must pray with and for the women to whom this teaching comes that the Lord

would impart it by his grace.

Fifth, emphasize the importance of intimate communion in marriage. The goal of ministry in the aftermath of abuse is not merely to stop the hitting. Post-abuse ministry is a long, slow road down which the cessation of violence is merely a portion of the journey. The violence has to be replaced with a tender, peaceful, and self-sacrificial relationship. Couples need to learn how to pursue repentance and reconciliation in other areas as well because violence is never the only problem they face. Couples need to learn how to pursue the Lord and abide in Christ both as individuals and together.⁹ Couples need to learn how to engage in constructive, humble, honest conversations where they express their joys, frustrations, concerns, dreams, and questions. Couples need to learn how to die to self, and serve their partner in a God-glorifying sexual relationship. These are just a few examples that encourage ministers that their job of counseling is not finished when the violence ends.

Sixth, emphasize the importance of discipleship and mutual accountability. All sin happens in the dark. God teaches us by his grace to expose the darkness and live in the light (Eph 5:8-12). Couples need to learn to walk in community with other godly couples who can confront them, help them, remind them of the gospel, and stir them up towards love and good deeds. None of us can change alone, and sin cannot thrive in community. One tool for long-term change therefore is to connect couples with other mature Christians who can walk with them in Christ-centered, intentional relationships.

PHYSICAL ABUSE AND THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST

Physical abuse is a horrific problem. Ministers can have confidence, however, that Scripture equips them to understand what abuse is and how to minister to abused people. Ministers can know that the gospel of our mighty Christ is sufficient to empower abusive men and abused women to change so that they become more like him.

ENDNOTES

¹Helen M. Eigengert, *Women Battering in the United*

States: Till Death Do Us Part (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 62-85; P. Tjaden and N. Thoennes, *Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1998); R. M. Siegel, et al., "Screening for Domestic Violence in a Community Pediatric Setting," *Pediatrics* 104 (1999): 874-77.

²This is an article about responding to husbands who physically abuse their wives so the examples here reflect that. Of course there are many kinds of violence like verbal and sexual abuse. There are also fathers who abuse their children, women who abuse their kids and husbands and even children who abuse their parents. Those are simply not being considered here, though the principles unpacked will have implications for them.

³Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: A Comprehensive Guide* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 405; Carolyn Holderraeed Heggen, "Religious Beliefs and Abuse," in *Women, Abuse, and the Bible* eds. Catherine Kroeger and James Beck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 15-17; Steven R. Tracy, "What Does 'Submit in Everything' Really Mean? The Nature and Scope of Marital Submission," *The Trinity Journal*, 29 (2008): 285-312.

⁴Spanking is a punishment, but the punishment is not restorative rather than retributive in nature. The logic of retribution says, "I am spanking you to pay you back." The logic of restoration says, "I am spanking you out of love to restore you to the love and blessing of our home."

⁵Space does not allow for the consideration of the more complex response involved in the physical abuse of children.

⁶For example, Paul teaches in Romans 2:5 that the sin of sinners serves to store up wrath against them.

⁷It is worth noting that in states like Kentucky domestic violence is not, strictly speaking, a law enforcement matter. When abuse is reported, it is generally handed over to Adult Protective Services (APS) who performs the investigation. Because I am not an attorney, and because laws are not exactly the same in every state this and all of the other information in this section should be compared against local laws.

⁸R. B. Felson, J. M. Ackerman, & C. A. Gallagher, "Police Intervention and the Repeat of Domestic Assault," *Criminology*, 43, (2005), 563-579.

⁹This theme of learning how to commune with Christ in the aftermath of abuse is a significant one that I have intentionally overlooked because it has been dealt with very well in another place. See, David Powelson, Paul David Tripp, and Edward T. Welch, "Pastoral Responses to Domestic Violence" in *Pastoral Leadership for Manhood and Womanhood* eds. Wayne Grudem and Dennis Rainey (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 265-276.