

**REPORT OF THE AD INTERIM COMMITTEE
ON DOMESTIC ABUSE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT
TO THE FORTY-NINTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA
(2019-2022)**

The Ad Interim Committee to study and report on domestic abuse and sexual assault in the church was created at the 47th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America that met in June 2019 in Dallas, Texas, when the following overture was adopted:

1. That the 47th General Assembly create a seven-man Study Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault tasked to accomplish the following:
 - a. The Committee shall prepare an annotated bibliography of resources the Committee endorses on topics related to child abuse and sexual assault, domestic abuse and sexual assault, and domestic oppression. The annotated bibliography should also include pastoral resources for the care of victims of these sins, as well as ministry and counsel for those overtaken by these sins.
 - b. The Committee shall report regarding best practices and guidelines that could be helpful for elders, Sessions, Presbyteries, and agencies for protecting against these sins and for responding to them. However, no practice, policy, or guideline will be proposed for adoption or approval. It is simply information, which shall not be binding or obligatory in any sense.
 - c. The Committee may recommend to the 48th GA any statement(s) it believes would be prudent and warranted for the Assembly to adopt.
2. The 47th GA authorizes the GA Moderator to appoint the seven voting members of this Committee, per *RAO* 9-354 and *RAO* 19-1 (*Robert's Rules, RONR*, 11th ed., pp. 174-175, pp. 495-496, and p. 579).
 - a. These members shall be PCA teaching elders or PCA ruling elders, and the Committee shall include at least three of each. (Anyone may suggest names to the Moderator.)
 - b. The 47th GA authorizes the Moderator to make his appointments after the 47th GA adjourns.
3. The 47th GA authorizes the Moderator to appoint others to serve the Committee as non-voting advisors, regardless of denominational affiliation or gender. The 47th GA recommends the Moderator consider appointing, as advisors, at least two subject-matter experts and at least two women.
4. The budget for the Study Committee shall be \$25,000 and that funds be derived from gifts to the AC designated for that purpose.

The Committee is comprised of the following members and advisors:

Teaching Elders

Rev. Dr. Timothy R. LeCroy, Missouri Presbytery, *Chair*

Rev. Dr. Lloyd Pierson, Rocky Mountain Presbytery

Rev. Shane Michael Waldron, Rocky Mountain Presbytery

Rev. T. Cal Boroughs (Hon. Ret.), Tennessee Valley Presbytery

Ruling Elders

Dr. Kelly H. Dehnert, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Lander, WY, *Secretary*

Dr. David R. Haburchak, MD, East Cobb Presbyterian Church, Marietta, GA

Mr. Robert D Goudzwaard, Christ Covenant PCA, Matthews, NC

Advisory Members

Mrs. Ann Maree Goudzwaard, MDiv Counseling

Executive Director Help(her) Resources

Member, Christ Covenant Presbyterian Church, Matthews, NC

Mrs. Darby A. Strickland, MDiv Counseling

Christian Counseling Educational Foundation Faculty

Member, Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, Center Valley PA

Dr. Barbara W. Shaffer, Ph.D., Psychologist

Member, Faith Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, DE

Dr. M. Diane Langberg, Ph.D., Psychologist

Director, Diane Langberg and Associates

Member, Calvary Presbyterian Church, Willow Grove, PA

Mrs. Rachael J. Denhollander, J.D.

Member, Reformed Baptist Church of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Biographical information for each member and advisor is contained in Attachment 12.

The committee met thirteen times in person and via video conference and has produced the following report for the General Assembly. This report was unanimously adopted by the committee.

Due to the fact that the 47th General Assembly expressly forbade the committee from proposing any “practice, policy, or guideline... for adoption or approval,” the committee will not be bringing any recommendations to the Assembly. Instead, we offer the following *advice* to presbyteries, sessions, and other ministries within the PCA:

1. That all Elders in the Presbyterian Church in America assiduously study this report and consider its advice when shepherding the flock of God;

- 1 2. That Presbyteries and Sessions consider using this report to train their members and
2 those seeking ordination in the PCA in order to be ready for situations that will likely
3 arise during their ministries;
- 4 3. That Sessions consider using this report to inform their congregational members so
5 that they will be better able to protect, identify and respond well to abuse when it
6 arises;
- 7 4. That all Presbyteries, Churches, and other ministries in the PCA develop robust
8 policies for both the prevention of and response to abuse;
- 9 5. That competent third parties be engaged by Presbyteries, Churches, and other PCA
10 ministries when allegations of abuse arise;
- 11 6. That Presbyteries, Churches, and other PCA ministries share information regarding
12 helpful pastoral, sessional and third-party resources, and regularly set aside funds for
13 engaging those that can provide competent assistance and, if necessary, conduct
14 investigation of alleged abuse;
- 15 7. That all Ministers, Elders, Presbyteries, Sessions, Permanent Committees and
16 Agencies, and all other PCA ministries inform themselves as to the particular laws
17 regarding mandatory reporting to the civil magistrate in their civil jurisdictions; and
- 18 8. That a permanent committee or agency of the PCA consider forming an office of abuse
19 prevention and response in order to serve the denomination when needs arise.
20

Table of Contents	
Ad Interim Study Committee Report on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault	
INTRODUCTION.....	2306
1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE AD INTERIM STUDY COMMITTEE REPORT ON DOMESTIC ABUSE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT.....	2306
2. HOW TO READ THIS REPORT.....	2306
3. INTRODUCTION TO TERMINOLOGY.....	2306
SECTION ONE: BIBLICAL AND CONFESSIONAL FOUNDATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING ABUSE.....	2308
CONCLUSION.....	2341
SECTION TWO: DOMESTIC ABUSE.....	2343
1. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF DOMESTIC ABUSE.....	2343
2. EXPRESSING GOD’S HEART.....	2344
3. RECOGNITION.....	2345
4. RESPONDING.....	2354
5. REPORTING.....	2356
6. REDEPTIVE SHEPHERDING.....	2360
7. CASE STUDY.....	2374
SECTION THREE: WOMEN WHO ABUSE.....	2376
1. INTRODUCTION.....	2376
2. BIBLICAL EXAMPLES.....	2380
3. ABUSE? OR A RESPONSE TO ABUSE?.....	2383
4. CASE STUDY.....	2385
SECTION FOUR: ADULT SEXUAL ABUSE.....	2388
1. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF SEXUAL ABUSE.....	2388
2. EXPRESSING GOD’S HEART.....	2388
3. RECOGNITION AND IMPACTS OF SEXUAL ABUSE.....	2389
4. RESPONDING TO AN ADULT SEXUAL ABUSE DISCLOSURE OR DISCOVERY.....	2393
5. REPORTING.....	2399
6. REDEPTIVE SHEPHERDING.....	2401
7. PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ABUSE.....	2407
8. CASE STUDY.....	2408
SECTION FIVE: CHILD ABUSE.....	2411
1. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION – CHILD ABUSE.....	2411
2. EXPRESSING GOD’S HEART.....	2411
3. RECOGNITION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT.....	2411
4. RESPONDING TO A CHILD ABUSE DISCLOSURE OR DISCOVERY.....	2416
5. REPORTING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT.....	2421
6. REDEPTIVE SHEPHERDING.....	2427
7. CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION.....	2431
8. CASE STUDIES.....	2432
SECTION SIX: THE MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY.....	2436
1. SUMMARY DESCRIPTION OF MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY.....	2436

1	2. EXPRESSING GOD’S HEART.....	2436
2	3. RECOGNITION OF THE MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY	2437
3	4. RESPONDING TO REPORTS OF THE MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY	2441
4	5. REPORTING	2444
5	6. REDEMPTIVE SHEPHERDING.....	2448
6	7. PREVENTION OF THE MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY	2450
7	8. CASE STUDIES	2452
8	ATTACHMENTS	2457
9	ATTACHMENT 1: DEFINITIONS	2457
10	ATTACHMENT 2: DSM DEFINITIONS	2466
11	ATTACHMENT 3: CHILD ABUSE DEFINITIONS	2468
12	ATTACHMENT 4: SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE.....	2470
13	ATTACHMENT 5: CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD ABUSE	2475
14	ATTACHMENT 6: COMPREHENSIVE CHILD PROTECTION POLICY.....	2477
15	ATTACHMENT 7: MYTHS ABOUT ABUSE	2480
16	ATTACHMENT 8: SHEPHERDING THE WHISTLEBLOWER.....	2484
17	ATTACHMENT 9: FORGIVENESS	2485
18	ATTACHMENT 10: REPENTANCE	2489
19	ATTACHMENT 11: DIVORCE AND DOMESTIC ABUSE	2492
20	ATTACHMENT 12: COMMITTEE BIOS.....	2502
21	ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	2504
22		
23		

INTRODUCTION

1. The Structure of the Ad Interim Study Committee Report on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault

This report is divided into two main sections:

1. Biblical and theological foundations of understanding abuse (Section One), and
2. Practical pastoral aspects of abuse in the church (Sections Two through Five).

The biblical and theological foundations section articulates a rationale for this topic. This section may also serve as a reference for instances of judicial process. Relevant confessional material further provides an understanding of abuse from our denomination's shared theological commitments.

The practical pastoral sections that follow build on the theology of abuse, providing information for how to understand, prevent, and respond to various forms of abuse. There are sections discussing abuse perpetrated against adults, abuse perpetrated against children, and the misuse of spiritual leadership.

Included in the attachments are material that cover various, important practical matters pertinent to the main body of the report that can serve as as reference material.

Cross references between the sections help aid the reader.

2. How To Read This Report

This report is designed to be utilized in two ways:

- Read straight through as a monograph, and
- Serve as a reference.

Reading the report straight through will help inform the reader of the relevant subjects related to abuse and the church. It will also serve to train officers and leaders on the issue of abuse. Referencing the report will serve the leaders when related questions arise in the life of the church.

3. Introduction to Terminology

Abuse comes from the Latin *abutor*, which means to misuse. In a general sense the word can be used to denote misuse of a thing, as in abuse of privilege, substance abuse, or prosecutorial abuse. In this report the word is used in its more technical sense, referring to *persistent maltreatment that causes lasting damage*. In this sense, abuse is a misuse of power. Misuse of power can take several forms (physical, verbal, positional, etc.), but the essence of abuse is

1 that it is a misuse of power which wounds another person physically, emotionally,
2 psychologically, and spiritually.

3
4 The word abuse appears in the English Standard Version five times, two of which can be
5 interpreted according to the subject matter of this report.¹ However, the most common word
6 Scripture uses for abuse is “oppression,” appearing 116 times in the ESV. The Hebrew word
7 for oppression is עָנָה (*‘anah*) which means “affliction” or “humiliation.” When used in the
8 Piel, oppression often means to afflict by mistreating. (Piel is a verbal form in Hebrew that
9 indicates intensiveness.) Examples of this usage are when Sarah mistreats Hagar, Laban
10 charges Jacob not to oppress his daughters, the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians,
11 and the command in Exodus 22:21-23 not to oppress orphans and widows. The biblical
12 definition, therefore, is “to afflict by mistreatment.” Oppression is also the word that the
13 Larger Catechism uses for abuse, appearing in LC 136 and LC 142. This report will use the
14 terms “abuse” and “oppression” interchangeably to refer to the biblical and confessional
15 understanding outlined below.

16
17 For the purposes of this report, all forms of physical and non-physical (emotional,
18 psychological, spiritual) abuse will be considered equally sinful. Manipulation, physical force,
19 words, finances, authority, religion, position, and inappropriate sexual contact are all tools
20 that might be implemented by those who misuse their power and control. When someone
21 seeks power and control over another for their own gain, the result is harm. Scripture tells us
22 that the fundamental issue is the heart of a person who diminishes another by using any of
23 these tactics rather than the supposed severity of the method (Matt. 15:19).

24
25 For a more comprehensive treatment of definitions, please see the glossary of terms in
26 Attachment 1.²

¹ The two are the crimes of Gibeah who abused the Levite’s concubine (Jud. 19:25), and where Paul says that abusive people will abound in the last days (2 Tim. 3:2).

² See Attachment 1: Definitions.

SECTION ONE: BIBLICAL AND CONFESSIONAL FOUNDATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING ABUSE

Elders in the Presbyterian Church in America take the vow to “sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures,” (*BCO* 21-5, 24-6). Therefore, the Larger Catechism’s teachings (hereafter, *WLC*) on the Ten Commandments are the official ethical teachings of the PCA. As such, the *WLC* serves as the basis for how elders are to engage in church discipline.

BCO 27-1 teaches that discipline has two aspects:

1. the one referring to the whole government, inspection, training, guardianship and control which the church maintains over its members, its officers and its courts;
2. the other a restricted and technical sense, signifying judicial process.

Therefore, the Constitution of the PCA requires elders, as a part of the discipline of the church, to train its members in the ethical teachings of the *WLC*, to inspect the members of the church in their adherence to ethical behavior as taught by the *WLC*, and to govern, guard, and control the church according to the ethical teachings of the *WLC*. When correction necessitates judicial process, the subject matter of the *WLC* serves as the basis for adjudication.³

For these reasons, this report will ground its understanding of abuse in the ethical teachings of the *WLC* found in its exposition of the Ten Commandments.

While the technical terms describing abuse do not appear in the Westminster Standards, the sinful behaviors that these terms describe do. All forms of abuse described in this report are instances of “misuse,” but more specifically they are misuses of power. This includes power that is (but is not limited to):

- *Physical force* that is used to strike, wound, or force someone to do something to which they do not consent;
- *Authority* that forces someone against their consent and wounds;
 - Formally recognized authority,
 - Familial authority, such as parents have over children,
 - Informal relational authority, such as exhibited by Sunday School teachers or other workers who have charge over children, and/or
 - Relational authority, such as that of respected members of the church.

³ *BCO* 29-1, “An offense, the proper object of judicial process, is anything in the doctrines or practice of a Church member professing faith in Christ which is contrary to the Word of God. *The Confession of Faith* and *the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Assembly*, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in America as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture in relation to both faith and practice. Nothing, therefore, ought to be considered by any court as an offense, or admitted as a matter of accusation, which cannot be proved to be such from Scripture,” (emphasis added).

Misuse of power may also be exhibited in differences of age, in those who are developmentally or intellectually more advanced, and/or in numbers or financial influence.⁴

The Westminster Larger Catechism

The *WLC* lays out the sins of misuse of authority very clearly: aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others, failure of superiors in their duty towards inferiors, and sins of superiors against inferiors.⁵ These serve as the theological basis for our understanding of abuse.

In the analysis below we will state the catechism question and answer in full and then work through pertinent clauses from the answer with the scripture verses cited by the Westminster Assembly. While we do not receive and adopt the scripture references as a part of our Constitution, we should give them due consideration as they are the biblical basis that the Assembly adopted for what they wrote. Some of the more pertinent scripture citations will be printed in full, but the reader is encouraged to keep Bible in hand in order to read all the references.

WLC 151 on Aggravations That Make Sins More Heinous

The basic principle gleaned from this catechism answer is *more heinous sins cause more damage*. Because heinous sins cause significant damage, they are to be punished more severely, and victims are to be shown greater care. Many instances are abusive due to the aggravating factors mentioned below. Abuse is not merely one instance by a "hot head," nor is it excusable because of the infrequency of the aggression. Apologizing does not negate abuse. Women do not deserve to be abused because of their actions, wardrobe, or any other factor. Aggravating factors such as power differentials, the presence of covenant relationships, multiform sins, and repeated sins greatly magnify the damage to a victim's soul. Recognizing these factors is key to identifying and responding well.

Q. 151 What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others? [

A. Sins receive their aggravations 1. From the persons offending: if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others. 2. From the parties offended: if immediately against God, his attributes, and worship; against Christ, and his grace; the Holy Spirit, his witness, and

⁴ Please see below under *WLC* 129, 130, and 151 for a fuller theological discussion.

⁵ For those that are unfamiliar with the Westminster Standards, the language of superiors and inferiors may seem jarring. This is because in modern usage, these words imply a value judgment of being of better or poorer in quality or worth. However, in the 17th century the terms *inferior* and *superior* simply referred to a reference of position. For example, the phrase, "the ground is inferior to the sky," means simply that the ground is lower than the sky. In modern American society further questions may be raised by the implication of position or class among peoples. To this we must understand that the Westminster Standards are not advocating for a societal class system. Rather, this language is used to describe relationships of authority and submission, a concept that is thoroughly biblical.

workings; against superiors, men of eminency, and such as we stand especially related and engaged unto; against any of the saints, particularly weak brethren, the souls of them, or any other, and the common good of all or many. 3. From the nature and quality of the offence: if it be against the express letter of the law, break many commandments, contain in it many sins: if not only conceived in the heart, but breaks forth in words and actions, scandalize others, and admit of no reparation: if against means, mercies, judgments, light of nature, conviction of consciousness, publick or private admonition, censures of the church, civil punishments; and our prayers, purposes, promises, vows, covenants, and engagements to God or men: if done deliberately, wilfully, presumptuously, impudently, boastingly, maliciously, frequently, obstinately, with delight, continuance, or relapsing after repentance. 4. From circumstances of time and place: if on the Lord's day, or other times of divine worship; or immediately before or after these, or other helps to prevent or remedy such miscarriages: if in publick, or in the presence of others, who are thereby likely to be provoked or defiled.

“From the persons offending: if they be of riper age, greater experience or grace, eminent for profession, gifts, place, office, guides to others, and whose example is likely to be followed by others.”

(Scriptures cited: Jer. 2:8; Eccl. 4:13; 1 Kings 11:4, 9; 2 Sam. 12:14; 1 Cor. 5:1; James 4:17; Luke 12:47-48; Jer. 5:4-5; 2 Sam. 12:7-9; Ezek. 8:11-12; Rom. 2:17-24; Gal. 2:11-14.)

The *WLC* and supporting Scripture show that the sins of those in authority are more heinous, causing more damage and deserving of greater punishment because of the position of authority. The confession supports the existence of a differential of power in certain relationships. In each of the instances mentioned, summarized as leadership status, age, and knowledge of the faith, we find accompanying power over another. Power can be misused in order to control, oppress, and harm others. When the misuse of power occurs, it may be considered an abuse of authority.

Superiors are not necessarily official, ordained leaders of the church. Superiors can be prominent members who are well-respected due to their knowledge or faith practice. They can be Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, committee chairpersons, or ministry team leaders. They can also be someone more advanced in age. These power differentials should be considered in an abusive situation. The harm done by leaders has a greater impact on the ones they harm. A shepherd that takes advantage of his position to pillage his own flock is not a shepherd (Ezek. 34).

“Particularly weak brethren, the souls of them”

(Scriptures cited: 1 Cor. 8:11-12; Rom. 14:13, 15, 21; Ezek. 13:19 Rev. 18:12-13; Matt. 23:15.)

The power differential is especially true of anyone who is weaker, but especially those who are substantially helpless, such as children, those with mental or physical disabilities, or those otherwise vulnerable due to their condition. Peter also notes that women in marriages are the weaker vessel, acknowledging the power dynamic between the sexes in general (1 Pet. 3:7). Peter's declaration is interpreted as a statement about physical strength, the vessel being a metaphor for the human body.⁶ Therefore husbands, and men in general, are cautioned: men are, in general, physically stronger than women. This power is provided to protect and serve their sisters in Christ, not to harm.

Some persons are vulnerable due to their position in relation to church power, especially in access to church courts. Because the PCA ordains only men to the office of presbyter, officers in the church must take special care to make sure all laypeople, women in particular, have proper access and representation in ecclesiastical courts. Church officers are instructed to ensure all parties in judicial process have access to the rules of discipline and can obtain good representation (BCO 32-3).

In Revelation 18:12-13, souls are equated to precious goods—valuable individuals that ought to be treasured and kept safe. Abuse is a sin that damages the *soul*. The Pauline passages cited above discuss the destruction of those for whom Christ died. Modern scientific discoveries have shown us that abuse trauma causes lasting damage to the psyche.⁷ The biblical word for psyche is *soul*. This confessional clause, “the souls of them,” with its accompanying Scripture citations, therefore, gives the theological basis for abuse-related trauma and speaks to the evil nature of causing damage to another image bearer's soul.⁸

“Break many commandments, contain in it many sins”

(Scriptures cited: Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 6:10; Prov. 5:8-12; 6:32-33; Joshua 7:21.)

The damage of abuse is the result when multiple sins are committed. When a person verbally abuses, they are transgressing the sixth and ninth commandments. If it is a husband of a wife,

⁶ So Matthew Henry, who says that, “she is the weaker vessel by nature and constitution... but in other and higher respects equal to her husband,” Commentary on the Whole Bible, 1 Pet. 3:7. This interpretation is confirmed by other NT uses of the term *σκεῦος* that more clearly refer to the human body (2 Cor. 4:7, Rom. 9:22, 1 Thess. 4:4). John Calvin affirms this in his comments on 1 Thessalonians 4:4, “As for the expression, that every one of you may know to possess his vessel, some explain it as referring to a wife, as though it had been said, ‘Let husbands dwell with their wives in all chastity.’ As, however, he addresses husbands and wives indiscriminately, there can be no doubt that he employs the term vessel to mean body,” John Calvin, Commentaries on The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.

⁷ H. D. Gingrich and F. C. Gingrich. *Treating Trauma in Christian Counseling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 55-77.

⁸ While the Bible does not use the terms “psychological damage” or “trauma,” it does refer to the damage of souls. The Greek word *ψυχή* is the word used in the Bible for “soul.” This word also serves as the etymological root for the word “psychology.” Revelation 18:12-13 shows that the soul has great value, the implication being that great care should be taken not to damage souls. Further, Proverbs 14:30 and Habakkuk 3:16 speak of “bone rot” and Psalm 31:10 speaks of “bones wasting away.” These three references seem to be metaphors for harm being done to the soul.

the fifth and seventh commandments are transgressed as well. All abuse involves deception (a violation of the ninth commandment): the abuser's self-deceit, the deception of the victim, and the deception of the community. The sin of abuse is deemed more heinous because of this multiplicity of transgressions.

"Promises, vows, covenants, and engagements to God or men"

(Scriptures cited: Ps. 78:34-37; Jer. 2:20; Jer. 42:5-6, 20-21; Eccl. 5:4-6; Prov. 20:25; Lev. 26:25; Prov. 2:17; Ezek. 17:18-19.)

The *WLC* considers sin that transgresses vows and promises as base. This includes spouses who make vows to one another, parents who make vows to their children, church officers who make vows to the flock, and congregations who make vows to their pastors, elders, and deacons. Whenever these vows and promises are broken, it causes great damage. Thus, when a parent abuses a child, great damage is done due to not only the transgression of so many commandments, but also due to the breach of the covenant bond between them. When a husband abuses his wife, great damage is done. When a pastor or elder, who swore to feed the sheep for whom Christ died, abuses his own sheep, it is grievous. This is why Jesus says it would be better to have a great millstone hung around their necks and be thrown into the depths of the sea (Matt. 18:6, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:2). The implication is that the dread judge of all will have His vengeance (Rom. 12:19).

"If done... frequently, [or] with... continuance"

(Scriptures cited: Num. 14:22; Isa. 57:17.)

Non-physical forms of abuse are established by the evidence of a pattern of sinful behavior. The catechism validates this framework with the statement that sins committed frequently or with continuance are more heinous.

"Relapsing after repentance"

(Scriptures cited: Jer. 34:8-11; 2 Peter 2:20-22.)

One of the factors for judging if repentance is genuine, and if restoration of an abuser is warranted, is when they demonstrate fruits in keeping with repentance. Paul writes,

For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter" (2 Cor. 7:10–11).⁹

⁹ See Attachment 10: Repentance for an extended exegesis of this passage.

Apologizing is certainly expected when a sin is committed against another. However, simply stating “I’m sorry” is inadequate considering the substance found in Paul’s letter. Is the abuser earnest for God to produce a grief in them that is eager to deal with their sin? Are they grieving how they’ve sinned against God (primarily) and their fellow image-bearer (specifically)? Do they recognize the full impact of their sin on the victim? Are they submitting to the process of repentance? What does restitution look like, and do they desire to do whatever it takes to make the wrong right?

Or, conversely, is the abuser experiencing worldly sorrow? Do they regret their actions, but grieve simply the consequences? Are they upset about what they did or that they got caught? Repentance is a work of the Holy Spirit. A person who diligently deals with their sin positions themselves humbly before their Lord and pleads for Him to work restoration—restoration to a right relationship with Him. Discerning repentance is difficult especially when the presenting sin involves manipulation and deception, which are key features of a heart that oppresses.¹⁰

The WLC on the Ten Commandments

Having discussed the aggravating factors that cause sins to become more heinous, we now move to the Catechism content of the Ten Commandments. While the transgression of any commandment is grievous, the locus of our analysis will be focused on the fifth, sixth, seventh, and ninth commandments as they relate particularly to abuse.

The Fifth Commandment

“Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.” (Ex. 20:12)

Q. 129 What is required of superiors towards their inferiors?

A. It is required of superiors according to that power they receive from God, and that relation wherein they stand, to love, pray for, and bless their inferiors, to instruct, counsel, and admonish them; countenancing, commending, and rewarding such as do well; and discountenancing, reproof, and chastising such as do ill; protecting, and providing for them all things necessary for soul and body: and by grave, wise, holy, and exemplary carriage, to procure glory to God, honour to themselves, and so to preserve that authority which God hath put upon them.

Authority, according to the catechism answer, is the power a “superior” receives from God. God gifts that power to benefit those under authority. This includes (but is not limited to) loving, blessing, praying for, instructing, counseling, and admonishing. Those with positions of authority reward and commend those under their care when they do right, as well as discountenance, reprove, and chastise when they do wrong. Superiors are also to protect and

¹⁰ See Attachment 10 on Repentance. Also see this resource to help you discern if what you are seeing is godly repentance. https://www.ccef.org/jbc_article/how-to-discern-true-repentance-when-serious-sin-has-occurred/

1 provide for all things necessary for soul and body. In accomplishing these goals, those in
2 authority procure glory for God and preserve the authority God gives. Practically, the
3 catechism states this is applied through instruction, counsel, protection, and provision.

4
5 As this relates to abuse, it is the duty of the elders to instruct and counsel their congregations
6 according to God's word (Deut. 6:6-7), the confessional standards, and common grace
7 informed resources. Superiors thereby provide members with the tools necessary to care for
8 one another. Learning what the Bible teaches regarding abuse and those who abuse, helps
9 create a culture in the church that quickly identifies and thereby prevents sinful abusive
10 behaviors.

11
12 It is also the duty of elders to protect and provide. Churches protect their members with
13 policies that take into consideration the most vulnerable in the congregation.¹¹ Leaders—to
14 the best of their ability—provide both children and adults, every age group and gender, with
15 the tools necessary for abuse prevention.

16
17 Two areas in the catechism answer address response to abuse:

- 18
19 • *The duty to deal with those who sin.* The catechism states church leaders are to
20 “discountenance.” Discountenance is defined as to “discourage by evidence of
21 disapproval.”¹² This evidence is not only exhibited toward the offender, but also
22 witnessed by any victims and the church at large. To discountenance is to *call out* and
23 *thwart* those who do wrong. Calling out the evil doer helps prevent the evil from
24 continuing. It also acts as a deterrent, warning others who might do similarly.
25 Discretion and wisdom are necessary in doing this, as instructed in the *BCO* and in
26 Holy Scripture (*BCO* 32-1, Gal. 6:1). Yet elders should not shy away from the duty of
27 discountenancing the evil of abuse in our midst out of the desire to protect reputations.
28 The catechism directly charges us to discountenance such evil.
29 • *The charge for elders to “reprove and chastise.”* This speaks directly to the infliction
30 of censures as found in *BCO* 36. Note, according to the *BCO*, censures may be inflicted
31 on those who are repentant (*BCO* 38-1). Indeed, when a great evil has occurred, it is
32 the duty of the courts of the church to inflict censures in order to operate as a means
33 to reclaim the offender, deliver the church from scandal, and inspire fear by example
34 (*BCO* 30-4). Discretion and wisdom are necessary in making censures known.
35 Protecting any victims is the primary concern.
36
37 • The second duty of superiors is to provide for those under their authority. This instructs

¹¹ Examples might be: Presbyteries and Sessions enacting policies to hire qualified independent parties to investigate claims of abuse, policies detailing appropriate workplace interactions to inform and protect against harassment, Presbyteries enacting policies to require background checks and abuse training for all ordinands and transfers, and policies to protect whistleblowers against retribution. The basic idea is that the job of prevention is not completed once a Sunday morning child protection policy has been adopted.

¹² *Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “discountenance,”

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discountenance>.

- parents to provide for their children. To fail to provide for a child's needs is child neglect. This neglect can also manifest as spousal neglect and/or economic abuse. The standard in the catechism is the duty of familial superiors to provide for the needs of those under their care. Since the catechism notes that provision includes "all things necessary for *soul* and body," spiritual harm by the misuse of power falls under this clause.

The final duty of superiors is to bless inferiors. As it relates to abuse, lack of properly responding to evil when it happens is a failure to bless the vulnerable. Lack of response, and/or a poor response, may lead to spiritual disillusionment and perhaps the inferior departing from the church.¹³

Scripture References for WLC 129

The Scripture references of the *WLC* are a valuable tool to understand the biblical basis of the sin of abuse and further elucidate the thinking of the divines. Below are some of the relevant scriptures.

The Confessional definition of abuse

- Colossians 3:19 – Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.
- Ephesians 6:4 – Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.
- 1 Peter 3:7 – Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

These verses describe behaviors of harshness, provocation, and insensitivity through words and/or actions as sinful behaviors in various relationships (husband to wives, parents to children). All relationships struggle with these sins. What makes the sinful behavior abusive is that it is a *repeated, persistent pattern of sin over a prolonged period that causes significant and lasting damage*. This report understands non-physical forms of abuse in this way. An individual who perpetrates repeated, persistent sins of abuse must not be dismissed as someone who "sometimes loses his cool." All forms of abuse, whether physical or non-physical, negatively impact both the inner and outer man.

¹³ One example of this is a Pew Research study on the religious "nones" that stated, "One-in-five express an opposition to organized religion in general. This share includes some who do not like the hierarchical nature of religious groups, several people who think religion is too much like a business and others who mention clergy sexual abuse scandals as reasons for their stance." <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>. See also this article from The Gospel Coalition, that cites "church hurt" as a reason why many young evangelicals are deconstructing: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-causes-deconstruction/>.

The requirement to report abuse to the civil authorities

- 1 Peter 2:14 – Or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.
- Romans 13:4 – 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.
- 1 Peter 2:14 – Or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

These verses instruct how to deal appropriately with the evil of abuse when it occurs. “Governors” exist in both the state and the church. When it comes to criminal abuse, the governors of the church should submit to the laws and authority of the state (Rom. 13:1-7). When it comes to forms of abuse that the state does not criminalize or does not hold criminally liable, it remains the duty of church governors to discountenance those sins.¹⁴

Oppression as the biblical category for abuse

- Job 29:12-17 – Because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth.
- Isaiah 1:17 – Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

These verses speak generally to the duty of leaders to seek justice and correct oppression. They also direct leaders to pay particular attention to those who have less power. We are to plead the widow's cause because she has no one to help her. In dealing with abuse, the Scriptures call us to carefully attend to those in the situation who have less power.

Protecting the reputation of church leaders

- 1 Timothy 4:12 – Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.
- Titus 2:3-5 – *Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior*, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, *that the word of God may not be reviled*.

¹⁴ It should also be noted that many times the civil authorities will decline to investigate a matter or prosecute the perpetrator. This is not a statement of innocence by the magistrate and thus does not necessarily remove the responsibility of the church courts to deal with sin.

- 1 Kings 3:28 – And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.
- Titus 2:15 – Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

These verses speak to the duty of superiors to accrue glory to God and preserve their reputations *by doing what is right*. One of the qualifications for an elder is to be thought well of by outsiders (1 Tim. 3:7). If outsiders lack respect for the church due to its failures in both preventing and adequately responding to abuse, leaders are those primarily responsible to seek the ways in which the church has failed to obey God (Amos 3:2; 1 Peter 4:17).

The Sins Forbidden in the Fifth Commandment

Q. 130 What are the sins of superiors?

A. The sins of superiors are, besides the neglect of the duties required of them, an inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure, commanding things unlawful, or not in the power of inferiors to perform; counselling, encouraging, or favouring them in that which is evil; dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good; correcting them unduly; careless exposing, or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger; provoking them to wrath; or any way dishonouring themselves, or lessening their authority, by an unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remiss behaviour.

In this question and answer, one instance of these sins may not constitute abuse. It is the *repeated persistent pattern* of sin over a *prolonged period* that causes significant and lasting harm.

“An inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure.”

- Ezekiel 34:2-4 – Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.
- Philippians 2:21 – For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

The sin of “seeking of themselves,” as mentioned in this first phrase, may lead to an incessant pattern of demand, minimization, humiliation, blame-shifting, coercion, denial, threats, and/or treating a person like a servant. Sometimes, this may also include stringent limits on access to financial resources. If the self-centeredness of a husband, parent, or caregiver leads to the harm of the family due to its severity and prolonged persistence, then it could be abuse. This is especially true when it leads to the family’s physical or spiritual neglect.

1 *“Commanding things unlawful, or not in the power of inferiors to perform; counselling [or]*
2 *encouraging them in that which is evil.”¹⁵*

3
4 (Scriptures cited: Dan. 3:4-6; Acts 4:17; Ex. 5:10-18; Matt. 23:4; Matt 14:8; 2 Sam.
5 13:28.)

6
7 This phrase speaks of when an authority figure asks or commands those under their charge to
8 do something illegal or immoral. Church leaders are responsible to know what constitutes
9 illegal behavior in their community, when, how, and to whom to report a crime, and public
10 resources available to both victims and abusers. This is in addition to wise shepherding care,
11 which has a broad, biblical understanding of what constitutes immorality in the body of Christ.
12 Doctrines of suffering, submission, headship, gossip, slander, and intimacy in marriage, are
13 all relevant to helping congregants respond well to the sins of abuse. It is a grievous sin when
14 an authority figure uses his or her authority (by force or coercion) to secure participation in
15 sinful acts. Related to this, there is an erroneous teaching that submission owed to the
16 husband/father is such that wives and children must submit even if he commands something
17 sinful. It has also been taught that a wife or a child cannot report the husband/father’s (or
18 mother’s if applicable) moral failures to the authorities (church or civil). These are false
19 teachings that must be suppressed.

20
21 Further, when a superior “ties up heavy burdens, hard to bear,” through impossible demands
22 and exacting punishments, great soul damage can be done, and thus can be a factor in spiritual
23 abuse or leadership abuse.¹⁶

24
25 *“Favouring them in that which is evil”*

- 26
27 • 1 Samuel 3:13 – And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever,
28 for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did
29 not restrain them.

30
31 The Scripture reference for “favoring them in that which is evil,” is Eli’s inaction in
32 disciplining his sons. Passive forbearance with his son’s great evil is what led to Israel’s
33 downfall. We must not forebear with abusers in the church. This is a sinful favoring of evil.
34 Leaders should instead restrain evil by thoroughly educating themselves and their
35 congregations regarding the dynamics of abuse, carefully constructing robust policies to
36 prevent abuse, and responding adequately when it occurs.

37
38 *“Dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good; correcting them*
39 *unduly”*

40
41 (Scriptures cited: John 7:46-49; Col. 3:21; Ex. 5:17; 1 Peter 2:18-20; Heb. 12:10; Deut.
42 25:3.)

¹⁵ “Favoring” is removed from this section in order to deal with it separately below.

¹⁶ See Attachment 1: Definitions for meanings of these terms and the chapter “Misuse of Spiritual Authority” in this report.

When leaders, either in the home, workplace, or church, berate or belittle those under their care, it diminishes the image of God in man. The body and the mind, heart, will, and emotions are all a reflection of God's image.

Diminishing others is how abusive people manipulate to control. It is an insidious tactic that causes significant (psychological) damage to the inner man. Similarly, an act of discipline or correction that is not reciprocal to the wrong committed can also be weaponized by an abuser. Patterns of devaluing God's image in another over a prolonged period of time results in a victim's inability to reason appropriately, make wise personal decisions, and/or mediate reality. Ultimately, it diminishes their capacity to steward their God-given gifts and glorify their Creator.

"Careless exposing, or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger"

- Genesis 38:11 – Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up" for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house.
- Genesis 38:26 – Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again.
- Acts 18:17 – And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

Exposing children to danger is undeniably abuse and neglect. One instance is sufficient for identifying exposure as abuse, especially when physical harm is involved. Even when there is no physical harm, exposure is sinful. Exposure disrupts the bond of trust between children and their parents and causes lasting damage. "Adverse Child Experiences" or the ACE study, meticulously identified multiple and long-lasting effects of not only physical harm and exposure, but also of the more overt forms of physical and sexual abuse.¹⁷ Exposure occurs also when children live in a home where substance abuse or other dangerous and sinful behavior occur. ACEs demonstrated lasting damage to a child's developing brain, especially in how that person responds to certain stimuli and social interactions. These experiences can lead to PTSD similar to the severity soldiers experience on a battlefield.

Included in these sins of exposure is when authorities, whether civil or ecclesiastical, require abuse victims to stay in abusive relationships. Requiring an abused wife to reconcile with her unrepentant abuser, return to the marriage home and bed, is careless exposing to danger. The abuser's genuine repentance must be observed, confirmed, and proven through the test of time [see Attachment 10: Repentance]. It involves more than (but is not limited to) admitting to being caught, saying "I'm sorry," and/or pledging to work with the Session.

Similarly, forcing children to reconcile relationally with abusive parents may cause great harm. Care, discernment, and wisdom must be taken in these situations.

The rules of discipline are inappropriate tools for forcing compliance of abuse victims.

¹⁷ For a helpful description of adverse child experiences, see: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

Careless exposure to wrong and danger also occurs when authorities in the church fail to properly educate the congregation on issues of abuse and institute appropriate policies for abuse prevention.

As pointed out above in the discussion of Question 129, many people are leaving the church due, in part, to the way the church has responded to abuse. When anyone abandons the bride of Christ for an unbiblical reason, it is sinful. However, if authorities expose “them to temptation,” the greater sin lies with leaders. Judah said in Genesis 38:26, “She is more righteous than I.” Jesus likewise said, “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6).

“Provoking them to wrath”

- Ephesians 6:4 – Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Superiors in the family may provoke those under their care by many of the aforementioned *WLC* prohibitions. They might apply exacting punishments, diminish and belittle, have unrealistic expectations, favor their own desires to the exclusion of everyone else in the family, and/or expose them to dangerous situations. When little ones under the authority of others have been caused to sin, far greater sin has been done by those that have provoked them by their abuse. Shepherds care for victims with kindness while simultaneously (justly) punishing abusers.

This principle applies to other “superior-inferior” type relationships as well. Abuse victims are not without sin. However, there is a significant inequality between their sin issues and the evil of abuse. Wrath is an appropriate response to evil. Victims must not sin in their response to the abuse, yet it is within reason that they are very angry about the sins committed against them. This doesn’t excuse sin. It does mean church leaders and members should patiently shepherd the victim with care and understanding, and to never equate their anger with the sins of their abusers.

“Or any way dishonouring themselves, or lessening their authority, by an unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remiss behaviour”

- Genesis 9:21 – He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent.
- 1 Kings 12:13-16 – And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.” So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat. And when all Israel saw

1 that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, “What portion
2 do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents,
3 O Israel! Look now to your own house, David.” So Israel went to their tents.

- 4 ● 1 Kings 1:6 – His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, “Why
5 have you done thus and so?” He was also a very handsome man, and he was born
6 next after Absalom.

- 7 ● 1 Samuel 2:29-31 – “Why then do you scorn My sacrifices and My offerings that
8 I commanded for My dwelling, and honor your sons above Me by fattening
9 yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?” Therefore
10 the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: “I promised that your house and the house
11 of your father should go in and out before Me forever,” but now the LORD
12 declares: “Far be it from Me, for those who honor Me I will honor, and those who
13 despise Me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days are coming when I will
14 cut off your strength and the strength of your father's house, so that there will not
15 be an old man in your house.”

16
17 When leaders, whether in the home, workplace, church, or civil government, dishonor
18 themselves through sinful behavior, harsh discipline, or lax discipline, they bring dishonor on
19 themselves and to God. Leaders in the church should not be surprised when sheep chafe under
20 such authority. When those under authority are provoked to wrath, or otherwise begin to reject
21 authority because of the leader's sin, the greater fault lies with the leader. The charge from the
22 people of Israel is poignant, “Look now to your own house, David!” Church leaders must
23 first see to their own duties before bemoaning and laying blame on those who are leaving the
24 church and speaking derisively of her. The examples of Eli and his sons, David and his sons,
25 and Solomon in his later reign are poignant. As the Lord promised Samuel, He will judge
26 church leaders for such behavior (1 Peter 4:17). The duty of those in authority is to right the
27 ship.

28 29 ***The Sixth Commandment***

30
31 *You shall not murder* (Ex. 20:13).

32
33 The locus of many sinful behaviors falling under the heading of abuse is found in the sixth
34 commandment. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expands the scope of the commandment
35 from the unjust taking of life, to the inner working of our hearts and to the realm of speech.

36
37 You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder; and whoever
38 murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry
39 with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be
40 liable to the council; and whoever says, you fool! will be liable to the hell of fire
41 (Matt. 5:21-22).

42
43 The Divines follow in this vein to expound upon the sixth commandment in all its facets:

44
45 **Q. 135** What are the duties required in the sixth commandment?

A. The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavours, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defence thereof against violence, patient bearing of the hand of God, quietness of mind, cheerfulness of spirit; a sober use of meat, drink, physick, sleep, labour, and recreations; by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness; peaceable, mild and courteous speeches and behaviour; forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succouring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent.

There is some repetition between *WLC* 135 and 136, thus the overt actions that are related to abuse will be covered below. However, there are several relevant matters in the answer, especially as it relates to the positive duty to preserve life and protect those under threat.

“To preserve the life of ourselves and others.... by just defense thereof against violence”

- 1 Kings 18:4 – And when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifties in a cave and fed them with bread and water.
- Psalm 82:4 – Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.
- Proverbs 24:11-12 – Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter. If you say, “Behold, we did not know this,” does not He who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not He who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will He not repay man according to his work?

(Additional Scriptures cited: Eph. 5:28-29; 1 Sam. 14:45; Jer. 38:7-13.)

Scripture is clear that preserving life includes defending victims of abuse. The first duty is to preserve our own lives. This speaks to the obligation victims have to protect themselves from an abuser. This may include removing herself and her children from an abusive home, resisting living with a spouse that a church court acknowledged has been abusive, and separating as a matter of protection, even as others urge reconciliation with the abuser. This is the duty to preserve life.

The second duty falls under preserving the life of others. This type of preservation removes the victim, and any other potential victims, from the immediate vicinity of the abuser. Any avenue that the abuser uses to further abuse must be removed. The sixth commandment duty also includes fulfilling the Romans 13 obligation to inform the civil authorities when the situation requires mandated reporting (See chapter on “Childhood Sexual Abuse”).

“Patient bearing of the hand of God”

(Scriptures cited: James 5:7-11; Heb. 12:9.)

1 This duty speaks to the nature of repentance. Genuine repentance patiently bears with the
 2 consequences of one's sin. A truly repentant abuser will recognize the gravity of his or her sin
 3 and not force the process of reconciliation. Rather, those truly repentant will wait patiently
 4 until the abused are ready for relational restoration.¹⁸

6 Abusive church leaders should patiently bear under the hand of God and not rush to be restored
 7 to a position of leadership. Damage done by abuse can be severe and long lasting. Protecting
 8 survivors means continuous safeguarding throughout the recovery process.

10 *“Forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and*
 11 *requiting good for evil”*

13 (Scriptures cited: Matt. 5:24; Eph. 4:2; Eph. 4:32; Rom. 12:17; Rom. 12:20; Rom.
 14 12:21.)

16 Because preserving life implies patience with victims, impartiality requires a careful
 17 examination of this seemingly opposite clause. In order to understand how these duties work
 18 together, a biblical understanding of reconciliation and forbearance is needed. Forgiveness is
 19 not reconciliation, and forbearance is not antithetical to preservation.

21 *Forgiveness*

23 These passages show that believers must forgive one another. Forgiveness is required by the
 24 gospel. However, the duty to preserve life requires protecting victims from their abuser. It also
 25 requires protecting those who choose to remain with their abuser. Protection includes trying
 26 to persuade a victim to move to safety.

28 Forgiveness does not always involve relational restoration.¹⁹ When it comes to reconciliation
 29 and forgiveness, this must be also measured against the duty to protect. The duty that follows
 30 below states, “comfort and succor the distressed.” If the abused person is distressed, leaders
 31 are called to continue protecting them while they seek healing.

33 The catechism answer requires, “requiting good for evil.” Insisting on accountability, justice,
 34 and rehabilitation may be the cause of an abuser truly repenting of his or her sins and receiving
 35 eternal reward. What greater good can be requited than salvation?

37 *Forbearance*

39 The duty of forbearance does not negate the duty to preserve one's life from violence. The
 40 duty to preserve is primary and supersedes the duty of forbearance. The Scripture reference
 41 for forbearance is Ephesians 4:2, “bearing with one another in love,” and the Greek word is
 42 ἀνέχω. This word is defined as “endurance.” The context of Ephesians 4 is not intimate
 43 relationships but the unity of the church body. Paul is asking believers to be patient with one

¹⁸ See Attachment 9: Forgiveness and Attachment 10: Repentance.

¹⁹ See Attachment 9: Forgiveness.

another's shortcomings in order to preserve unity and peace in the church. He is not asking abuse victims to endure further abuse. "One another" is plural, implying not an endurance between two persons but an endurance between one person and the larger community. Paul is clear in his writings that patient endurance does not mean allowing grave sins to persist, saying,, "purge the evil person from among you,"²⁰ and, "I have handed [them] over to Satan."²¹ Moreover, the citation for Romans 12 states "repay no one evil for evil." Moving victims out of abusive situations is not repaying evil for evil, but protecting from further harm. Abuse is a grave sin against the image- bearer of God. Biblical forbearance does not include remaining in abusive situations.

Nevertheless, adults should not be moved into protective situations against their will unless there is a grave threat of the loss of life.

"Comforting and succouring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent. "

- Matthew 25:35-36 – For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me.
- Proverbs 31:8-9 – Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

(Additional Scriptures cited: 1 Thess. 5:14; Job 31:19-20; Is. 58:7.)

To give comfort and succor to those distressed by abuse is to protect. This includes the provision of qualified medical care for both the wounds of the body and the wounds of the mind. According to our own Reformed distinctives, man consists of two parts: a body and a soul.²² Though delineated into two, the inner and outer "designate the one spiritual substance of man... (Rom. 8:10; 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:34; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 2:3; Col. 2:5)."²³ Both body and soul constitute the whole man, therefore when someone experiences abuse, the whole man is in need of care. The human mind is a mysterious example of this. What we call the mind can in some ways be attributed to the soul. However, we also know that the mind has a physical component.²⁴

For many forms of abuse, including child abuse, sexual abuse, physical assault, sexual assault, and any other abuse that causes severe psychological distress, damage to the brain and central nervous system is significant.²⁵ This damage can manifest itself as PTSD, OCD, depression,

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 5:5.

²¹ 1 Timothy 1:20.

²² See WLC 29 and 37 and Matt. 6:25; 10:28; Eccl. 12:7; and 1 Cor 5:3, 5.

²³ L. Berkhof. *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1933), 121-123.

²⁴ See Matthew 22:37 where Jesus substitutes mind for might, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with your soul and with your mind."

²⁵ H. D. Gingrich and F. C. Gingrich. *Treating Trauma in Christian Counseling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 67.

1 anxiety, and a variety of other disorders. Shepherds are called to care for the soul; however,
 2 wisdom directs church leaders to partner with trained individuals with experience working
 3 with these conditions for the purpose of comprehensive caregiving.²⁶

4
 5 Financial provision for counseling and medical treatment is considered an appropriate
 6 restitution from the abuser to the abused (see Exodus 22). It can also be an act of mercy for
 7 the church to assist victims with the cost of their care. Due to privacy issues as it relates to
 8 medical and mental healthcare, consider hiring a third-party administrator to handle
 9 reimbursements. Due to the intimate nature of the care, the choice of a counselor belongs to
 10 the victim. Stipulations should not be placed on the usage of funds by those granting.

11 12 *The Sins Forbidden in the Sixth Commandment*

13
14 The sixth commandment contains overtly sinful behaviors that can be abusive.

15
16 **Q. 136** What are the sins forbidden in the sixth commandment?

17 **A.** The sins forbidden in the sixth commandment are, all taking away the life of
 18 ourselves, or of others, except in case of publick justice, lawful war, or necessary
 19 defence; the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation
 20 of life; sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions, distracting
 21 cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labour, and recreations; provoking words,
 22 oppression, quarrelling, striking, wounding, and whatsoever else tends to the
 23 destruction of the life of any.

24
25 *“All taking away the life of ourselves, or of others”*

- 26
27 ● Acts 16:28 – But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we
 28 are all here.”
 29 ● Genesis 9:6 – Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed,
 30 for God made man in His own image.

31
32 The foundational principle found in this commandment is that all abuse is a taking away of
 33 life. This is why abuse is so damaging. Genesis 9:6 states that the severity of the sin is due to
 34 the fact that great damage has been done to an image-bearer of God. Since all human beings
 35 are made in God’s image, any attempt to take away life is a grave sin with grave consequences.

36

²⁶ Does a psychologist need to be a Reformed Christian in order to partner with in providing care for victims? While the issue is complex, the short answer is no. Certainly, treatment providers who are not antagonistic to Reformed beliefs, or seek to undermine them, can be engaged. A non-Christian provider can work with a patient’s religious beliefs and still care for them well. The key factor in identifying a treatment provider is that the person is qualified to treat disorders related to abuse trauma.

“Withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life”

- Matthew 25:42-43 – For I was hungry and you gave Me no food, I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.
- James 2:15-16 – If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

As seen in the duties of the fifth commandment, the sin of neglect is a form of abuse. Here, in the sixth commandment, the sin of neglect is the taking away of the necessary means for life. The sin of neglect applies to those in authority, but it also applies generally to all human beings. However, only those who have immediate responsibility for the one who is suffering are accountable.

Churches have the duty to care and provide for those who have need due to abuse. If such persons need food, clothing, and shelter because they have fled for their own safety, the church should attempt to provide. This seems to be the very least that the Scriptures cited above require.

“Sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge; all excessive passions”

- Matthew 5:22 – But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire.
- 1 John 3:15 – Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.
- Leviticus 19:17 – You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.
- Proverbs 14:30 – A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.
- Romans 12:19 – Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.
- Ephesians 4:31 – Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.

The sins covered under the sixth commandment do not all lead to the literal loss of life. The catechism does not begin with the sin of physical wounding with an intent to kill and then move to sins of lesser severity. Instead, like the Sermon on the Mount, the Divines begin with the sins of the heart and move outward. Special note is taken of the citation of Matthew 5:22 and 1 John 3:15. Matthew 5:22 moves from the sin of the heart to verbal abuse. Jesus says that the one who insults his brother should be subject to church discipline. Verbal abuse is evidence of the status of the heart. John writes that the one who hates his brother in his heart is a murderer and will not inherit eternal life. The sins of the tongue reveal the heart. Scripture considers verbal abuse a very serious sin. The church is called to respond to the same extent.

These sins, along with some of those that follow, serve as the confessional basis for the existence of non-physical forms of abuse. Many people struggle to define verbal, emotional, and/or psychological abuse because they are difficult to prove. Indeed, victims of these forms of abuse recognize the difficulty, often wishing their abusers would wound them physically so that there would be evidence. Yet, because of what is shown in this catechism answer, non-physical forms of abuse should be taken as seriously as if there were visible bruises. These sins are a form of the taking away of life. By them the life of an image-bearer is devalued, and great damage is done to the mind and the soul.

Proverbs 14:30, cited here for envy, states that these non-physical sins have an effect on the body, “rotting the bones.” This metaphorical language by Solomon seems to acknowledge that non-physical forms of abuse can be manifested physically in the nervous and immune systems. Our Reformed distinctives affirm that a human being is not in essence only a soul, but a soul-body union, so it should not be surprising that scientists have discovered that damage to the soul affects the body.

Finally, the reference for “sinful passions” in Ephesians 4:31 demonstrates that passions are not only sexual in nature. They include bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice. “Sinful passions,” biblically, include verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse.

“Distracting cares; immoderate use of meat, drink, labour, and recreations”

- Matthew 6:31, 34 – Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.
- Isaiah 5:12 – They have lyre and harp, tambourine and flute and wine at their feasts, but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD, or see the work of His hands.

(Additional Scriptures cited: Luke 21:34; Rom. 13:13; Eccl. 2:22-23; 12:12)

The primary relationship of the sins mentioned in these passages is of the sinner to himself. These sins can be classified as either contributing factors to abuse, or tools the abuser implements. Self-harm, or the threat of self-harm, is the ultimate form of controlling behavior. It is used to manipulate others to speak or act a certain way. This causes grave damage to those under their authority. Children in particular suffer severe trauma when a parent self-harms, having no categories for how to mediate what happened, how (if) they contributed, and/or what they could have done to prevent the circumstances.

The catechism begins with anxiety as a root cause. Anxiety is often a reason why an abuser does what he does. Many abusers were abused themselves. Abuse can lead to disordered desires which cause people to sin and subjugate others. Not all abusers are evil psychopaths. Many of them abuse others out of a need to regulate their own fears, anxieties, and other negative feelings. There may not even be a strong volitional intent to harm others, but they continue to do harm in pursuit of their own self regardless of the harm that this self-pursuit does to others. Addictive behaviors such as substance abuse, workaholism, and an immoderate lifestyle, can be factors that compound the effects of abuse.

“Provoking words”

- Proverbs 15:1 – A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
- Proverbs 12:18 – There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

Another confessional basis for verbal abuse is causing a person to sin by using provoking words. In the first reference from Proverbs 15, harsh words stir up anger in the one sinned against, moving them to wrath. Under the fifth commandment, causing someone to sin is a sin. In *WLC* 151, the multiplication of sins makes a sin more heinous. Thus when sinful speech causes another person to sin, the sin is compounded. Also in *WLC* 151, power differentials cause a sin to be even more heinous as when a superior uses provoking words with an inferior. In Proverbs 12, verbal abuse is likened to stabbing with a sword, a deadly weapon. Deadly weapons do grave damage. This is why Jesus warns repeatedly: woe to those who cause “little ones” to sin (Matt. 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2).

“Oppression”

- Ezekiel 18:18 – As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.
- Exodus 1:14 – And made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

Oppression is the biblical word for abuse, cited here by the Divines and appearing 116 times in the English Standard Version. The Divines cite Exodus 1:14, which states that the Egyptians made the lives of the Israelites bitter. Verse 12 tells us that this bitterness is due to the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians. The word used for oppression in verse 12 is עָנָה (‘anah), which means “affliction.”²⁷ When used in the Hebrew Piel, the word often means to afflict by mistreating, as it does here. Examples of this usage are when Sarah mistreats Hagar, Laban charges Jacob not to oppress his daughters, and the command in Exodus 22:21-23 not to oppress orphans and widows. In studying these usages of the verb, we can define oppression as it is used in the Bible as “to afflict by mistreatment.” *Anah* (עָנָה) literally means, “to humble.” To oppress is to cause someone to be humbled by ill-treatment. Humiliation in this sense speaks to lasting damage: a person is brought low by mistreatment.

“Quarrelling”

- Galatians 5:15 – But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.
- Proverbs 23:29 – Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes?

²⁷ This is the standard Hebrew word used for oppression in the Old Testament, appearing some 57 times in the Piel.

Abusive relationships can be difficult to discern. Often, church leaders feel trapped between the “he said, she said” dilemma and are unsure whom to believe. This catechism question, along with the two verses cited, might even be used as confessional evidence for that claim. Although victims of abuse can be provoked to sinful responses to the oppressive behaviors against them, the greater responsibility rests with the abuser. In the vast majority of cases, one party has greater responsibility and has committed a more heinous sin. This is especially true when the abuser is in authority over the abused. For increased clarity regarding the nature of quarrels, Proverbs 23:29 suggests that asking questions regarding the environment of the home (church, institution) can be helpful.

“Striking, wounding, whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any”

(Scriptures cited: Num. 35:16-18, 21; Ex. 21:18-36.)

The Divines demonstrate in these verses that striking, even when it does not result in death, is sin. Exodus 21:18-19, cited here, sheds light on this:

When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man *does not die* but takes to his bed, then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed.

This passage describes physical assault that results in the incapacitation of the victim (he “takes to his bed”). The assault described also results in long-term damage (walks with a cane). This passage distinguishes between manslaughter and assault. However, the one who assaults remains liable for his sin even if he escapes the death penalty. Other penalties that remain include restitution. The assailant is required to pay restitution to the victim for the loss of his time, as well as pay for whatever care required to make the man whole. Presumably, if the victim is permanently disabled, the assailant would be required to pay more restitution. Physical abuse and assault that causes lasting damage is a grievous sin necessitating disciplinary process. Protecting victims and requiring restitution are appropriate responses by the church to cases of physical assault. The same principle applies to nonphysical forms of abuse that cause lasting damage.

The Divines conclude this answer with a catchall phrase lest implying that the taking away of life is not limited to the examples provided. As biblical evidence they cite an extended passage from Exodus 21. In studying this passage, other forms of sin beyond physical abuse and assault require a weighty response to all abuse. The text says, “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

Consistent application of the principles gleaned from a study of the fifth and sixth commandments exemplifies nonphysical forms of abuse as an unjust taking away of life and is biblically and confessionally warranted.

The Seventh Commandment

You shall not commit adultery (Ex. 20:14).

The Divine's exposition of the seventh commandment includes assault, abuse, and harassment of a sexual nature.

Q. 139 What are the sins forbidden in the seventh commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the seventh commandment, besides the neglect of the duties required, are adultery, fornication, rape, incest, sodomy, and all unnatural lusts; all unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes, and affections; all corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto; wanton looks, impudent or light behaviour, immodest apparel; prohibiting of lawful, and dispensing with unlawful marriages; allowing, tolerating, keeping of stews, and resorting to them; entangling vows of single life, undue delay of marriage; having more wives or husbands than one at the same time; unjust divorce, or desertion; idleness, gluttony, drunkenness, unchaste company, lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others.

“adultery, fornication.... lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others”

(Scriptures cited: Heb. 13:4; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:4; Ezek. 23:14-16; Isa. 23:15-17; Isa. 3:16; Mark 6:22; Rom. 13:13; 1 Peter 4:3; 2 Kings 9:30; Jer. 4:30; Ezek. 23:40.)

The Westminster Standards clearly prohibit sexual activity outside of marriage and participating in and viewing pornography. Illicit sexual behavior is a tactic abusers use. When an abuser coerces a victim to participate in illicit activities, their shame is overwhelming. Shame is then a powerful weapon used to perpetuate abuse and discourage the victim from reporting to authorities. Coercion, or forcing victims to participate in sexual activities, can also fall under the category of sexual assault. These sins are not simply sexual immorality but may be considered forms of abuse.

“rape”

- 2 Samuel 13:14 – But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he forced [oppressed] her and lay with her.

The goal of the biblical and theological introduction has been to ground an understanding of abuse in the teachings of the Westminster Standards, the adopted interpretation of Scripture by the Presbyterian Church in America.²⁸ The Westminster Standards do not have a separate category for sexual abuse outside the sin of rape.²⁹ Rape has a technical, legal definition that

²⁸ See Introduction: Biblical and Confessional Foundations for Understanding Abuse in this report.

²⁹ There are some sins forbidden in LC 139 that may contribute to sexual abuse, but they do not constitute an overarching category.

excludes many additional forms of sexual abuse. In addition, some victims of sexual abuse may not describe what happened to them as rape. However, in terms of our Confessional Standards and the judicial basis for prosecution of ecclesiastical cases of sexual abuse in the PCA, other forms of sexual abuse fall under the prohibition of rape. In other words, the Standards' prohibition of rape is broader than what we would commonly call rape. Without the inclusion of sexual abuse under the confessional category for rape, there is no other clear prohibition of sexual abuse in our confessional standards. Therefore it is necessary to include all forms of sexual assault and abuse under the confessional umbrella of rape.

The Scripture reference for rape given by the Divines is the story of Amnon's and his half-sister Tamar.³⁰ The story is very clear. Amnon propositioned his sister. She refused his proposition. Amnon forced Tamar to comply and he raped her. The use of force and vaginal penetration make this story a clear instance of rape.

By analyzing the features of this story we find that not only is rape described, but sexual abuse in general, since many aspects of sexual abuse are present. Amnon and Tamar were close acquaintances. He had a power dynamic over her. He stalked her, groomed her, sexually harassed her, propositioned her, and when she refused, he used force to initiate illicit sexual contact.³¹ After the abuse occurred, he shunned her. The word used for rape here is the same Hebrew word mentioned above for "oppression," which is the general biblical word for abuse. In fact, some older translations say that he "forced" her or "humbled" her. The point is, while this is rape, it is not only rape. If there was any other form of sexual contact in this story it would still be considered sexual abuse.

Consent is a major part of the story of Amnon and Tamar. In verse 12, Tamar pleads with her brother, "Do not oppress me, for such a thing is not done in Israel." The verb is in the Piel, thus a forceful affliction by mistreatment is signified. In both the 1611 King James Version and the 1599 Geneva Bible, the translations the Divines used, this verb is translated "to force."

³⁰ While this biblical story contains many of the aspects of sexual abuse, there is one feature that may not occur in every instance: Tamar's argument with and implied struggle against Amnon. It is not a requirement for abuse to be considered abuse that a victim must argue with and physically struggle against their abuser. Of note here is that the passage does not explicitly record her crying out. The Mosaic Law required betrothed virgins to cry out if they are being raped; however, Tamar was not betrothed so the same stipulations did not strictly apply. Nevertheless, she was in the city and in a house where servants were located, so if she did cry out, someone may have come to her aid. Despite the fact that she did not cry out, the Scriptures do not place any blame on her, laying the fault solely on the evil actions of Amnon. Note also that the Scriptures do not explicitly say that she struggled against him. It implies a struggle when it says, "being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her." The fact that it does not explicitly record a struggle, then makes it a feature of the story but not a factor in consideration of whether or not something is sexual abuse.

³¹ The Hebrew word *chazaq* ("to be strong") can be used in the scriptures in a nonphysical way. In Exodus 12:33 the Egyptians "urge" the Israelites to leave in haste. In 2 Kings 4:8 the Shunammite "urges" Elisha to stay with her. This semantic range opens up our understanding of Deuteronomy 22:25 and 2 Samuel 13:14 to include forceful urging or coercion. See Katie McCoy, "God is not silent: What the Bible teaches about sexual assault," *The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention* (2017), <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/god-is-not-silent-what-the-bible-teaches-about-sexual-assault/>.

1 In those translations Tamar says, “Do not *force* me.” Consent is key. If she had consented to
2 be a willing participant it would have been the sin of incest, not rape.³²

3
4 Since consent is a key factor in the confessional definition of rape, it follows that any sexual
5 activity where consent is not given, can’t be given, or consent is impaired, falls under the
6 umbrella of the confessional prohibition of rape.³³ Impairment of consent exists in a
7 differential of power (boss with subordinates, pastor with parishioners), age, or state of
8 consciousness (including a person impaired by a substance). If two peers attend a party and
9 one of them becomes intoxicated, it is considered sexual assault if the other takes advantage
10 of the impaired person. The requirement for consent also extends to the marriage bed. If an
11 intimate partner does not consent and the other persists and engages in sexual relations, it is
12 considered sexual assault.

13
14 With regard to child sexual abuse, whenever an adult sexually abuses a minor, it falls under
15 the confessional umbrella of rape because children are unable to consent to sexual activity
16 with adults.

17
18 Often, abuse in the church involves young adults and/or teenagers. Young adult or youth
19 leaders possess a power dynamic with younger teens that impairs the ability to consent. This
20 raises the heinousness of the sin beyond sexual immorality to abuse.

21
22 The sins *WLC* 139 includes in rape are recognized as crimes in many legal jurisdictions.
23 Presbyteries and Sessions must understand mandatory reporting laws applicable to their
24 locale. When a crime has been committed, Romans 13 takes precedence over Matthew 18.
25 Adult victims must be consulted before reporting their abuse to authorities. No report should
26 be made against an adult victim’s consent.³⁴ However, if the civil authorities decline to
27 investigate or prosecute, the church is responsible to pursue the matter within the ecclesiastical
28 court. The duties outlined for responding to abuse remain in effect. [See “Reporting” in each
29 section of this report for further information on reporting different forms of abuse.]

30
31 *“All corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto; wanton looks”*

32
33 (Scriptures cited: Eph. 5:3-4; Prov. 7:5, 21-22; Isa. 3:16; 2 Peter 2:14.)

34
35 Scripture forbids all crude or lascivious speech and behavior. This type of speech and/or
36 behavior toward others sinfully diminishes image-bearers. If there is any form of power
37 differential in the relationship, it is classified as sexual harassment. It is also considered
38 harassment in the absence of a power differential if the comments are unwanted and are severe
39 or repeated. If a pattern of such harassment persists over a prolonged period, it can be

³² Note here that we use the phrase, “consenting to be a willing participant.” A person may be berated and coerced into giving in, but that may not be the same as willing consent. Wisdom is required in discerning the difference.

³³ This is not to say that all sexual abuse is the same in degree of severity. *WLC* 151 still applies here.

³⁴ The exception to this is if the adult was a minor when the abuse occurred and there is reason to suspect that ongoing abuse may be occurring involving other minors.

classified as abusive. All forms of sexual harassment are subject to the discipline of the church. (See considerations of *WLC* 151 above for further discussion on power differentials.)

“Impudent or light behaviour, immodest apparel . . . gluttony, drunkenness, unchaste company, lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stage plays; and all other provocations to, or acts of uncleanness, either in ourselves or others”

(Scriptures cited: Prov. 7:10, 13; Ezek. 16:49; Prov. 23:30-33; Gen. 39:10; Eph. 5:4; Ezek. 23:14-16.; Isa. 23:15-17; Isa. 3:16; Mark 6:22; Rom. 13:13; 1 Peter 4:3; 2 Kings 9:30; Jer. 4:30; Ezek. 23:40.)

Do these passages indicate victims contribute to their abuse?

First, no person is without sin. But does sin contribute or lead to abuse or assault? Abuse or assault is never stipulated as a form of punishment in the Scriptures, speaking to the fact that no one deserves abuse or assault. Attributing a victim’s sin, appearance, friends, and/or recreations to an assault minimizes the sin of the abuser. Scripture is clear: we cannot make someone sin; people choose to sin (James 1:14). Predators have been known to intentionally pursue these vulnerabilities because the target is easier prey and society will attribute at least part of the blame on them. In the church, we must judge justly with clear eyes. All sin is not equal. God deals with sin proportionate to the evil that has been committed, and directly with the heart that commits it. A victim’s sin can be addressed outside of the abusive situation, giving adequate time and resources to heal from the effects of the more heinous crime committed against them. However, care must be taken to express that the abuse is not their fault.

Second, these verses regarding the seductress, along with many similar passages, characterize the danger of idolatry in general, or of the people of Israel, the bride of Yahweh. This can be seen in many of the Proverbs, the Prophets (especially Ezekiel), and Revelation. Throughout the Prophets, enemy cities are also personified as women. The use of this analogy is not necessarily meant to emphasize the danger women pose to men. In reality, the majority of instances of sinful seduction recorded in the Bible are of men taking advantage of women (Gen. 19:4-5; Gen. 34, 38; Judges 19:22-25; 2 Sam. 11; 2 Sam. 13).

Blaming the victim is one of the main reasons wounded people don’t come forward. Shepherds help victims report by listening, hearing them, and reserving judgment.

“Unjust divorce, or desertion”

- Malachi 2:16 – “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “covers his garment with violence,” says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.
- Matthew 5:32 – But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

- 1 Corinthians 7:12-13 – To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him

The General Assembly of the PCA produced a study report on divorce.³⁵ The committee concluded that grounds for divorce is *pornea*.³⁶ It also acknowledged the possibility of a believer divorcing an unbelieving spouse because of desertion.³⁷ The report states that in a case when “words and actions on the part of one spouse that threatens the life of the other spouse and/or children, that the one(s) threatened should be counseled by the Session, or representative thereof, to remove themselves from the threatening situation.”³⁸ After those threatened are protected and moved to safety, “the Session should investigate, whether these words and actions are in effect breaking the one-flesh relationship by ‘hating’ the abused spouse and not ‘nourishing and cherishing’ this one (Eph. 5:28-29). When it is determined by the Session that the abuser does not appear to them to be Christian and the abuse continues,”³⁹ the church court should excommunicate the abuser. After this, the believing spouse may seek a divorce in the civil courts.⁴⁰ In response to this report, the 20th General Assembly adopted the following recommendations:

- When an unbeliever separates from the marriage relationship with a believer, the believer is free from that marriage and free to remarry but only in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:15, 39).
- The believer in the aforementioned case is free to make the biblical divorce legal in the eyes of the state.
- Under extreme circumstances, a Session following the *BCO* may properly judge that such desertion (separation) has occurred, even though the deserting spouse is still physically present in the home (“desertion” being viewed in the sense understood in the study report on divorce, Chapter 2, Section II.E.4.).

Section II.E.4 begins by saying:

“...We must be careful not to open the floodgate of excuses. On the other hand, we need to recognize the reality of the ‘separation. We should allow sessions the liberty to discern with much prayer what would be the proper response in particular circumstance.

Several considerations incline us to agree with those of our authorities who have maintained that desertion can occur as well by the imposition of intolerable conditions as by departure itself. We are struck by the fact that, taking

³⁵ That report can be accessed here: <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/studies/divorce-remarriage.pdf>. It is also available, along with other PCA writings on divorce and remarriage.

³⁶ *PCA Digest*, Vol. 2 (1993), p. 291.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 292.

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 together, it appears that the Lord concedes the necessity of the abolition of marriage in certain cases precisely so as to protect a blameless spouse from intolerable conditions. Further, taking into account both the general principles of biblical ethics and the Scripture's characteristic manner of ethical instruction, viz. the statement of commandments in a general form to which is added case law sufficient to indicate the manner of application, it seems to us that those Reformed authorities are correct who have argued that sins which are tantamount in extremity and consequence to actual desertion should be understood to produce similar eventualities (cf. Larger Catechism, Q. 99, A. 6).

What is more, a husband's violence, particularly to the degree that it endangers his wife's safety, if unremedied, seems to us, by any application of Biblical norms, to be as much a ruination of the marriage in fact as adultery or actual departure. This is so precisely because his violence separates them, either by her forced withdrawal from the home or by the profound cleavage between them which the violence produces, as surely as would his own departure, and is thus an expression of his unwillingness—to consent to live with her in marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-13; Eph. 5:28-29). Further, insofar as the “passivity” of the blameless spouse is an important prerequisite in Paul's permission of the dissolution of marriage on account of desertion, it seems right to note that in the case of physical abuse, for example, the blameless spouse is similarly victimized.”⁴¹

In an Appendix 1, pp. 197-220 of the report, an ad hoc committee of Philadelphia Presbytery formed and was chaired by Rev. Dr. William S. Barker.⁴² Rev. Dr. Barker is the former president of Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, Covenant Seminary, and the Moderator of the 22nd General Assembly of the PCA. In the *ad hoc* committee analysis of the Westminster Divines' allowance for divorce due to abuse, the report concluded:

When physical abuse is occurring in a marriage, the church must deal with a situation which, as the Puritans saw, is contrary to God's purpose for marriage. A temporary separation may be necessary for safety, which the church may need to facilitate, and the abusing partner should be disciplined, with helpful counsel but eventually to the point of excommunication if there is no repentance in deed as well as in word. The situation is complicated in our cultural setting when the marriage partner is not a member of a church, or is a member of some other church; nevertheless, discipline must be attempted. Only after a suitable length of time and a sufficient process of church discipline should a divorce be

⁴¹ Ibid., 227-8.

⁴² See <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/studies/2-267.pdf>. In this analysis the committee leaned heavily upon the work of Dr. David C. Jones, erstwhile professor of ethics at Covenant Seminary, and member of several PCA GA study committees. See also David C. Jones, “The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage,” *Presbyterian* XVI, 1 (Spring 1990), 17-40.

“PCA Bookstore - What God Has Joined Together: PCA Papers on Divorce & Remarriage,” n.d., <https://www.pcabookstore.com/p-9871-what-god-has-joined-together.aspx>.

granted for such a desertion of one's marriage partner and the marriage covenant. (This is essentially the conclusion reached by David D. Prescott in *The Problem of Wife Abuse: Wife Abuse and Pastoral Counseling*, Westminster Theological Seminary D.Min. project, 1991; cf. pp. 212-221 on "Divorce: Is It a Possibility?")

In its understanding of the Bible's teaching on divorce as "nothing but adultery or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage,"⁴³ the Westminster Assembly was seeking to steer the Scriptural path between two demonstrable extremes⁴⁴ and in the process uphold God's high ideal for marriage. On the one hand, this ruled out the Roman Catholic concept of no divorce, allowing divorce for adultery and under certain circumstances desertion. On the other hand, it ruled out divorce for incompatibility as some such as Milton were advocating. *Physical abuse of a spouse was seen as contrary to the biblical purpose for marriage and would thus be grounds for church discipline and could, if it led to prolonged separation without remedy, become a cause for dissolution of a marriage.* Such circumstantial details can be handled only by a body of elders cognizant of and close to the situation. Whereas proven adultery would be readily acknowledged as grounds for a divorce, desertion on the basis of physical abuse as a cause for dissolution of a marriage should be determined from the circumstances by the local session or in the case of a minister by the presbytery.⁴⁵

To summarize, the *Westminster Confession* (24:6) allows for divorce in the case of willful desertion, and the 20th General Assembly study committee report on divorce and remarriage allowed divorce in certain circumstances of abuse when a spouse is living under intolerable conditions. Intolerable conditions consist of more than physical violence on the part of the abuser. An abuser can create intolerable living conditions without ever laying a hand on his spouse or children. The Domestic Abuse section of this report will cover nonphysical tactics the abuser might use to create intolerable living conditions.

Secondly, the Divines' citation of Malachi 2:16 included the phrase, "God hates divorce." While this was the former understanding, many scholars understand this to be a mistranslation. Thus, the ESV translates the verse, "When a man hates his wife and divorces..." This translation is supported by both the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate.⁴⁶ Excommunication

⁴³ WCF 24:6.

⁴⁴ These extremes were the Roman Catholic position of no divorce and the Zwinglian position that had six allowable grounds for divorce, "adultery, impotence, willful desertion, grave incompatibility, sexually incapacitating illness, and deception," *Minutes PCA GA 20*, (1992), 269.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 279. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Please see the following essay by Covenant Seminary Old Testament Professor C. John Collins. It is quite thorough: https://www.academia.edu/5304267/Malachi_2_16_again_. Collins argues that the translation, "God hates divorce," relies on changing the vowel pointings of the Masoretic Text. Collins further states that the LXX and Vulgate both testify against the KJV rendering and that Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the 1560 Geneva

should be avoided as a penalty for a wife who has fled her abuser. Even if it is eventually determined she was erroneous for pursuing divorce, the primary duty of a shepherd is a careful and prayerful approach to best address the difficulty of a wife living in a situation that threatens her (and/or her children's) well-being.

This report will deal with the issue of divorce in more depth in Attachment 11: "Divorce and Abuse." The topic of divorce in cases of domestic abuse constitutes more study on desertion and how one should think and adjudicate covenant breaking behavior. It must be asked, at what point is nonphysical abuse intolerable and dangerous?

The Ninth Commandment

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (Ex. 20:16)

The sins of the ninth commandment that contribute to abuse have been covered above (under the sixth commandment). This section will address three additional items in the exposition of the ninth commandment that relate to the investigation of abuse allegations, the response of the church to abuse, proper repentance of an abuser, and the issue of false reports.

Q. 144 What are the duties required in the ninth commandment?

A. The duties required in the ninth commandment are, the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbour, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth, and only the truth, in matters of judgment and justice, and in all other things whatsoever; a charitable esteem of our neighbours; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities; freely acknowledging of their gifts and graces, defending their innocency; a ready receiving of a good report, and unwillingness to admit of an evil report, concerning them; discouraging tale-bearers, flatterers, and slanderers; love and care of our own good name, and defending it when need requireth; keeping of lawful promises; studying and practising of whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report.

"preserving and promoting of truth . . . appearing and standing for the truth . . . in matters of judgment and justice"

- Zec 8:16 These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace;

Bible agree with the Vulgate in their own translations. Therefore, the King James Version's translation of Micah 2:16 as "God hates divorce," was an innovation. The influence of the KJV is evident in many of our modern translations, including the NASB and NKJV, translations used by many PCA elders. Interestingly, as Collins points out, *The Westminster Annotations and Commentary on the Whole Bible* list both translations (God hates divorce and if a man hates his wife and divorces) as potential options and favors neither one. See also the PCA GA AIC on Marriage and Divorce which agrees, in essence, with our exegesis: *Minutes PCA GA 20*, (1992), 207.

- 1 • Pro 31:8-9 Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute.
- 2 Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.
- 3 • Jos 7:19 Then Joshua said to Achan, "My son, give glory to the LORD God of
- 4 Israel and give praise to him. And tell me now what you have done; do not hide
- 5 it from me."
- 6 • Lev 19:15 "You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the
- 7 poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.
- 8 • Pro 14:5, 25 A faithful witness does not lie, but a false witness breathes out lies.
- 9 A truthful witness saves lives, but one who breathes out lies is deceitful.

10
11 The positive duty under the ninth commandment is to preserve and promote truth. Application
12 of this principle results in the duty of church courts, to the best of their ability, to discover the
13 truth in allegations of abuse. This translates to a duty to undertake a thorough, competent, and
14 unbiased investigation as demonstrated in the Scriptures cited above. Zechariah 8:16 says,
15 "Judge with truth." Proverbs 31:9 instructs, "judge righteously, and defend the rights of the
16 afflicted." Leviticus 19:15 implores, "do no injustice in judgment." The key to judging
17 righteously, as Scripture commands, is to discover the truth.

18
19 Joshua 7:19 depicts an investigation. Even after Achan was discovered by lot to be the source
20 of God's judgment in the defeat at Ai, Joshua calls Achan forward and questions him. Joshua
21 follows up in order to fully discover the truth. It was not enough to know Achan was guilty;
22 the truth needed to be discovered and disclosed.

23
24 The perniciousness of false reports is included in the discussion of *WLC* 145 below. While
25 false reports are rare, the best way to protect against them is to undertake an investigation to
26 discover the truth.⁴⁷ The question below also warns against prejudicing the truth. The best
27 way to avoid prejudging a matter is to engage a competent third party to perform an unbiased
28 investigation. The question below further warns against passing unjust sentence. The best way
29 to avoid passing unjust sentence is to perform a competent and thorough investigation.

30
31 The duty to investigate is codified in the *Book of Church Order* (emphasis added):

32
33 31-2. It is *the duty of all church Sessions and Presbyteries* to exercise care over
34 those subject to their authority. They shall with *due diligence* and *great*
35 *discretion demand* from such persons *satisfactory explanations concerning*
36 *reports* affecting their Christian character. This duty is more imperative when
37 those who deem themselves aggrieved by injurious reports shall ask an
38 investigation.

39
40 If such *investigation*, however originating, should result in raising a strong
41 presumption of the guilt of the party involved, *the court shall institute process*,
42 and shall appoint a prosecutor to prepare the indictment and to conduct the case.
43 This prosecutor shall be a member of the court, except that in a case before the
44 Session, he may be any communing member of the same congregation with the
45 accused.

⁴⁷ See Attachment 7: Myths about Abuse for information on the frequency of false reports.

The *BCO* clearly states the court's duty when someone reports abuse: it is to perform a thorough investigation and demand explanations concerning the report. If the investigation raises a strong presumption of guilt, the court must institute process by appointing a prosecutor and preparing an indictment. The *BCO* does not prohibit a Session from enlisting the help of a third party in performing an investigation.

Therefore, the duty of a church court is to perform thorough, competent, and unbiased investigations in order to preserve and promote the truth and to judge righteously. While a direct and explicit duty to engage a competent third party is not found here, it is *advised* by this committee in order to best fulfill the duties required and sins forbidden in the ninth commandment.

Q. 145 What are the sins forbidden in the ninth commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment are, all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbours, as well as our own, especially in public judicature; giving false evidence, suborning false witnesses, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, out-facing and overbearing the truth; passing unjust sentence, calling evil good, and good evil; rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous, and the righteous according to the work of the wicked; forgery, concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others; speaking the truth unseasonably, or maliciously to a wrong end, or perverting it to a wrong meaning, or in doubtful and equivocal expressions, to the prejudice of truth or justice; speaking untruth, lying, slandering, backbiting, detracting, tale-bearing, whispering, scoffing, reviling, rash, harsh, and partial censuring; misconstruing intentions, words, and actions; flattering, vain-glorious boasting, thinking or speaking too highly or too meanly of ourselves or others; denying the gifts and graces of God; aggravating smaller faults; hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession; unnecessary discovering of infirmities; raising false rumours, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears against just defence; evil suspicion; envying or grieving at the deserved credit of any, endeavouring or desiring to impair it, rejoicing in their disgrace and infamy; scornful contempt, fond admiration; breach of lawful promises; neglecting such things as are of good report, and practising, or not avoiding ourselves, or not hindering what we can in others, such things as procure an ill name. (*WLC 1:145 WCS*)

“Concealing the truth, undue silence in a just cause, and holding our peace when iniquity calleth for either a reproof from ourselves, or complaint to others”

- Leviticus 5:1 – If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity;

- 1 Kings 1:6 – His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, “Why have you done thus and so?” He was also a very handsome man, and he was born next after Absalom.

(Additional Scriptures cited: Deut. 13:8; Acts 5:3, 8-9; 2 Tim. 4:6; Lev. 19:17; Isa. 59:4.)

This clause furthers the duties covered under the fifth commandment. Abusers thrive on silence. Evil loves darkness. Thus, leaders should speak generally about the issue of abuse and specifically when abuse occurs in the community. The church or institution’s reputation is secondary to reproving and discountenancing evil. When church leaders are not open about abuse, they discourage members who notice problematic patterns of behavior, as well as corroborating witnesses, from coming forward. Abuse dissipates when brought into the light.

“Hiding, excusing, or extenuating of sins, when called to a free confession”

- Proverbs 28:13 – Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.
- Proverbs 30:20 – This is the way of an adulteress: she eats and wipes her mouth and says, I have done no wrong.
- Genesis 3:12-13 – The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”
- Jeremiah 2:35 – You say, “I am innocent; surely His anger has turned from me.” Behold, I will bring you to judgment for saying, “I have not sinned.”
- 2 Kings 5:25 – He went in and stood before his master, and Elisha said to him, “Where have you been, Gehazi?” And he said, “Your servant went nowhere.”
- Genesis 4:9 – Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?”

The Scripture passages above articulate unrepentant sin. One who is truly repentant will offer a free and full confession without hedging, hiding, or blaming others. They will confess fully, not simply confessing to those sins for which they have been caught. The *WCF* 15.5 reads, “Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man’s duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins particularly (Ps. 19:13; Luke 19:8; 1 Tim. 1:13, 15).”

Struggling with lust, a lack of sex, or a problem with substance abuse is not the foundation nor rationale for abuse. These are excuses. Abuse is a grave sin, magnified by many factors seen in the analysis of *WLC* 151 above. Scripture tells us that leaders call sinners to account. They do not conceal the truth by excusing or lessening sin. Scriptures call shepherds to protect sheep, bring evil out from the dark, and hold offenders accountable.

1 “Raising false rumours, receiving and countenancing evil reports, and stopping our ears
2 against just defence”

- 3
- 4 ● Exodus 23:1 – You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with
5 a wicked man to be a malicious witness.
- 6

7 (Additional Scriptures cited: Prov. 29:12; Acts 7:56-57; Job 31:13-14.)
8

9 These passages affirm that false reports happen. False reporting is pernicious and evil, as the
10 accompanying Scripture shows. Falsely reporting abuses, however, is rare.⁴⁸ Scripture
11 narrates *one* instance of a woman falsely accusing a man of abuse (Gen. 39:14-15), yet
12 multiple instances of men misusing women.⁴⁹ The Bible also tells us God will not be mocked
13 (Gal. 6:7) and He *will* reveal this darkness (Job 12:13-25; Dan. 2:22; 1 Cor. 4:5).
14

15 “Believe victims” is a common slogan today because of #metoo. To believe those who report
16 abuse does not negate exploration of the claims. For leaders in the church, “believe victims”
17 means taking necessary actions to protect *first*. After physical safety is ensured, church courts
18 can then discern the truth in the allegations.
19

20 Deuteronomy 22:25-27 states:
21

22 But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and
23 the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall
24 die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no
25 offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and
26 murdering his neighbor, because he met her in the open country, and though the
27 betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.
28

29 This passage articulates that a woman should be believed when there are no witnesses or
30 evidence (“out in the country”). Abuse rarely happens in the presence of a witness. In this
31 situation, the man is to die and “you shall do nothing to the young woman.” This passage
32 implies false reports of abuse are rare. As mentioned above, the best way to fulfill the duty to
33 defend against false reports is to engage a qualified third party to investigate.
34

35 **Conclusion**

36
37 The purpose of this biblical and confessional introduction has been twofold. First, was to
38 demonstrate that since PCA Elders are bound by oath to the ethical teachings of the
39 Westminster Standards, it follows that they are bound by oath to whatever the Standards teach
40 concerning abuse. Second was to expound what the Westminster Standards teach concerning
41 abuse.
42

⁴⁸ The frequency of false reports for cases of physical and sexual abuse is estimated to be between 2% and 10%. See Attachment 7: Myths about Abuse for information on the frequency of false reports.

⁴⁹ Genesis 19:4-5; 34, 38; Judges 19:22-25; 2 Samuel 11, 13.

1 The Westminster Larger Catechism's exposition of the Ten Commandments is a valuable
2 resource for guiding the ethics of the church. Specifically, the Divines' thorough biblical study
3 provides a powerful set of tools for understanding abuse from a biblical and confessional
4 perspective. This study grounds our understanding of abuse in the Holy Scriptures and God's
5 heart for victims. His desire is that we discountenance evil by bringing it into the light of day.

6
7 The key takeaways from this biblical and confessional study of abuse are:

- 8
9 1. The existence of power differentials is demonstrated by the Standards, factoring in
10 what is considered abuse and increasing the severity of the damage done;
- 11 2. The categories of abuse discussed in this report— physical, sexual, spiritual, and
12 psychological— all have strong biblical support;
- 13 3. Church leaders have a duty to educate their people on the issues of abuse and to
14 develop robust protection and prevention policies;
- 15 4. Church leaders have a duty to respond well to abuse by protecting victims,
16 undertaking a competent, unbiased investigation, discountenancing evil, and
17 providing patient care for those affected; and
- 18 5. Though an explicit duty cannot be located in the Standards, an independent, third
19 party investigation is advisable in order to discover the truth.

20
21 The goal of the Introduction was to present the confessional case for responding to abuse. The
22 remainder of this report will describe what a practical response involves. Sections Two
23 through Five may not read like a typical PCA study report. This is because they will begin
24 with the assumption of the biblical and theological understanding of abuse presented in
25 Section One and proceed to a practical development of the biblical and theological content in
26 implementable ways. To put it another way, the introduction has attempted to establish the
27 “why”; the remaining material will answer the “what” and the “how.”
28

SECTION TWO: DOMESTIC ABUSE

1. Summary Description of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse⁵⁰ can be defined as a form of oppression in which one spouse controls and dominates the other through a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors.⁵¹ In domestic abuse,⁵² power, authority, and strength are used selfishly against another rather than for their flourishing. Abuse comes from a deceitful and desperately wicked heart. Domestic abuse is a violation of the marital covenant that destroys the safety and stability of every member of the family and corrupts the body of Christ.

At least ten million men and women suffer from domestic abuse each day.⁵³ As many as twenty people are assaulted by their partners every minute.⁵⁴ Up to 85% of the victims of domestic abuse are women and/or young girls, while 2% are men.⁵⁵ One hundred thirty-seven women are killed each day by acts of familial violence.⁵⁶ Statistically, there is no difference between the general and Christian population.⁵⁷ Abusers exist in pulpits, pews, seminaries, and on the boards and committees of every denomination, including the Presbyterian Church in America.

⁵⁰ “First, we have to remember that none of our English words are biblical words. That is, none appear in the inspired, original Greek text. We use the words we use because of editorial decisions. “Oppression” is used, “abuse” is not. Why? Because that’s what’s been chosen. Second, we have to remember that being “biblical” is not restricted to word choice. In other words, we want to look on the conceptual level. The definitions of abuse offered by Langberg, Moles, Pierre, and Wilson, Strickland all describe evils mentioned within the Bible. Third, we are very comfortable with extra biblical language being used to describe specific biblical concepts. Trinity as opposed to saying “God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit” each time. Or “covenant of redemption” or “evangelism” or “church membership.” Fourth, extrabiblical words help us by being specific. Many of the actions and attitudes that comprise abuse can also be done in non-abusive ways. There’s a difference between an argument that gets out of hand once and a pattern of marital violence. Using words like “abuse” gives us the ability to distinguish between systemic evil in a marriage or other relationship where there is the exploitation of a spouse versus just the common experience of two sinners living together. The label “biblical” is a powerful label. Biblical wording isn’t just wording found in the Bible. It’s wording that captures the teaching is [of] the Bible. And for that, extra biblical words are often tremendously helpful as we nuance the ways human beings sin against one another.” Dr. Nathanael Brooks, Assistant Professor of Christian Counseling, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina. Co-Author, *Help! Our Sex Life is Troubled by Past Abuse*. <https://twitter.com/natejbrooks/status/1438835573268041729> (Accessed September 2021).

⁵¹ Darby A. Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020): 24.

⁵² In this section terms such as domestic abuse, violence, intimate partner violence, IVP, and oppression may be used interchangeably. Please refer to Attachment 1: Definitions for specific definitions.

⁵³ “20 Alarming Domestic Violence Statistics for 2018,” Social Solutions, <https://www.socialsolutions.com/blog/domestic-violence-statistics-2018/>.

⁵⁴ Rachel L. Snyder, *No Visible Bruises: What We Don’t Know About Domestic Violence Can Kill Us* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019):6.

⁵⁵ Ibid, and Deanna Pan, “BC Suicide Case Puts Focus on Controversial Issue: Intimate Partner Abuse by Women,” *Boston Globe*, 21 November, 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/11/21/suicide-case-puts-focus-on-controversial-issue-intimate-partner-abuse-women/MJG83GJOZCgWslHmn7xIYK/story.html>.

⁵⁶ This number does not include men or children. Ibid, 5.

⁵⁷ Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, 254.

Although men and women experience domestic abuse differently, every abuser misuses their power and control. Because most victims are women, this section will speak of abusers as men. [See Section Three of this report, “Women Who Abuse,” for characteristics of women who abuse.]

2. Expressing God’s Heart

The biblical category for understanding all types of abuse is oppression. The Hebrew word most often translated “oppress” (רָחַץ) means to squeeze, press, or crush.⁵⁸ The English word “oppress” means “to crush or burden by the abuse of power or authority.”⁵⁹ This is the essence of abuse. An abuser uses superior size, strength, and/or authority to crush a victim. A power imbalance exists in all forms of oppression. One person or group dominates and controls the other. Ecclesiastes 4:1 captures this so well: “Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.”

In an oppressive marriage, the husband twists his authority as the head. Instead of serving his wife and promoting her well-being, he uses authority to crush and oppress. In Psalm 55:20, David writes, “My companion stretched out his hand against his friends; he violated his covenant.” Domestic abuse, like the relationship David speaks of, occurs in the context of a covenant—the marriage covenant. This type of abuse is particularly insidious because the victim is oppressed by a partner in life who is supposed to love, cherish, and protect. Psalm 55:12-13 capture this sense of betrayal: *For it is not an enemy who taunts me— then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend.*

God responds decisively to abuse, “The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble” (Ps. 9:9). He provides protection for victims and prioritizes their safety. In surveying the totality of God’s response to oppression, an important pattern emerges. In the Bible, God is always on the side of the oppressed.⁶⁰ He defends the weak against the strong. God hears the cries of the oppressed and acknowledges the terrible evil.

God’s response to oppression is seen most clearly in His two great acts of redemption: the exodus and the life and death of Jesus Christ. In the exodus, the Lord redeemed His people from oppression with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deut. 26:6-8). In Christ’s condescension, He redeemed the entire created order from the effects of the Fall, including oppression. God entered into human suffering and sacrificed Himself to redeem it.

⁵⁸ Francis Brown, et al., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007): 267; Ignatius Swart, “רָחַץ,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 2:792-793.

⁵⁹ “Oppress,” Merriam-Webster.com, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oppress>.

⁶⁰ Brenda Branson and Paula J. Silva, *Violence Among Us: Ministry to Families in Crisis* (Valley Forge, PA, Judson Press, 2007): 106.

3. Recognition

Women in the church tend to consult other Christian women and/or their pastors when they experience difficulty in the home. Therefore, church members and leaders, especially teaching and ruling elders, are wise to educate themselves regarding the dynamics of domestic abuse, the damage it causes, and the necessary interventions.

Abuse is primarily idolatry. Scripture teaches that all behavior flows from the desires of the heart. Jesus says in Mark 7:21-23, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” To understand the actions of an abusive person we must understand the idolatry which fuels the abuse.

There are three idols which fuel domestic abuse.

1. The desire for power and control,
2. The abuser’s sense of entitlement, and
3. The desire to be God.

The Desire for Power and Control

To sinfully dominate another human being is antithetical to God’s original design. In Genesis 1, Adam and Eve are tasked with ruling and subduing the earth and its creatures. They are called to be His representatives on earth and to rule creation as His viceroys.⁶¹ God did not direct them to rule and subdue each other.

God’s original design for marriage was for ruling and subduing to be accomplished by both the man and woman working together as a team. The power God gave Adam and Eve to carry out the creation mandate was designed to bless each other as they enjoyed the fruit of a subdued and nurtured earth. Adam and Eve ignored God and His governance and, instead, put themselves in the place of power. Marriages characterized by power, control, and domination are therefore a clear manifestation of disobedience to God and His ways.

An abuser views the family as a pyramid of power. At the top of the pyramid is the abuser. There is no room for anyone else. His sinful behaviors are intended to control the spouse and to maintain his position. An abusive episode occurs when the abuser perceives a threat to that position. Abuse is a form of conditioning. The abuser maintains power over the victim by punishing behaviors when the victim acts outside his control. Over time victims live in fear, and this is central to the abuser’s dominance.

⁶¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987): 31, 33.

The Abuser's Sense of Entitlement

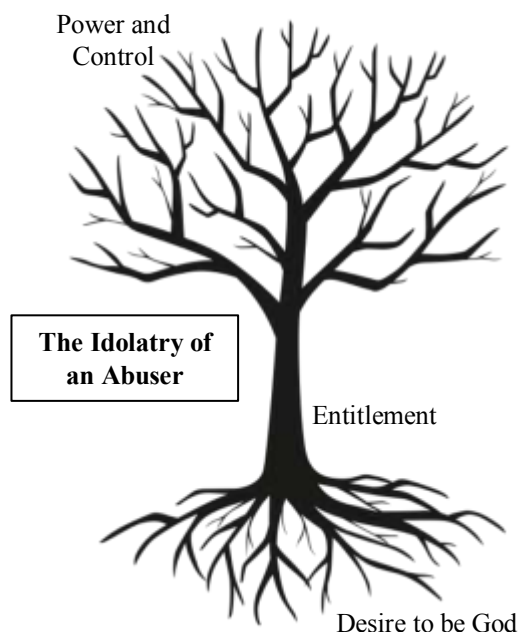
Jesus prescribes the ideal mindset for a leader in Mark 10:43-45: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” God calls husbands to follow Jesus’s pattern of servant leadership by sacrificing their own desires for their wives (cf. Eph. 5:25). All husbands fall short of this standard, but an abuser does the exact opposite and leads from a posture of entitled superiority.

Entitlement can be described as “Selfishness at its most extreme. It is blind, self-focused, utterly wicked at its core, and horribly destructive.”⁶² Abusers believe they have a special status which provides them with exclusive rights and privileges that do not apply to their wives.⁶³ An abusive person feels entitled to be the center of his spouse’s universe. If the household was a solar system, the abuser would be the sun. Abusers expect the victim’s world to revolve around meeting their needs. If the spouse veers off orbit, the abuser feels entitled to exact punishing behaviors.

The Desire To Be God

An abuser’s desire is to replace God as the Lord of his home. This root desire fuels both the idol of power and a sense of entitlement. Regarding power, an abuser desires sovereign control over their spouse, a level of control that is only appropriate for God. Concerning entitlement, an abuser feels entitled to be served in a manner that only befits God. Jesus Christ should be the center of our lives. Instead, the abuser tries to usurp Christ’s central position in the life of his victim.

A tree analogy helps our understanding of the idolatry that leads to domestic abuse.⁶⁴ The roots are a desire to be God, which fuels everything else. The trunk functions as the base of a tree, which is entitlement. The abuser behaves as one who is entitled to always get what he wants. Control forms the branches of the tree as control spreads out into multiple areas of the victim’s life.



⁶² Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 66.

⁶³ Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002): 54.

⁶⁴ Adapted from Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?*, 75.

Categories of Recognition

Spousal abuse occurs in concrete behavioral patterns that can be named and defined. Like a doctor who listens to a patient's symptoms can correctly diagnose disease, church leaders, counselors, and advocates who listen for abuse patterns (symptoms) can accurately diagnose the evil of abuse. There are five tactics employed in domestic abuse, each of which is comprised of several behavior patterns:⁶⁵

- Emotional,
- Spiritual,
- Economic,
- Sexual Abuse, and
- Physical.

A. Emotional Abuse: Any non-physical behavior designed to control someone through degradation, humiliation, and/or fear⁶⁶

Emotional abuse includes more patterns than any other tactic. Powerful and pervasive, emotional abuse underlies every other form of abuse. It is comprised of, but not limited to, the following patterns of behavior:

Verbal abuse involves, but is not limited to, the use of words to manipulate, discourage, humiliate, deceive, frighten, and threaten. It includes constant and unrelenting criticism. This is the most well-known pattern of emotional abuse.

*Intimidation involves, but is not limited to, controlling another person through the threat of physical harm.*⁶⁷ This includes raising the voice or using the body in a threatening manner. An abuser might block a victim from exiting the room or raise his hand as if intending to strike. One significant red flag for intimidation is when an abuser throws objects, punches holes in the wall, or damages personal property. The intended message is, "This could be you." The most terrifying form of intimidation is brandishing a weapon, such as a firearm. During a marriage counseling session, if a pastor hears these behaviors, he should consider it an indication a spouse is emotionally abusive.

*Emotional blackmail involves, but is not limited to, attempts to control a person by playing on their guilt, fear, or compassion.*⁶⁸ This includes exploiting the victim's compassion by the abuser threatening to kill themselves. Threatening suicide is a tactic

⁶⁵ Christiane Sanderson, *Counseling Survivors of Domestic Abuse* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008): 22-26.

⁶⁶ Beverly Engel, *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2002): 10-11.

⁶⁷ Lundy Bancroft, *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004): 34.

⁶⁸ Engel, *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship*, 31-32.

which misuses a victim’s love to keep them under control. The most insidious form of emotional blackmail is when the abuser threatens to hurt the children. Abusers may threaten to hurt or kill the victim’s pets. Another tactic of emotional blackmail includes shifting the blame for the demise of the family to the victim if she acts decisively for her and the children’s safety.

*Isolation involves, but is not limited to, when an abuser attempts to control his wife’s relationships, movements, and/or even goals in life.*⁶⁹ This includes preventing a spouse from working, involvement in church, or other activities. Many abusers strongly discourage outside relationships with family and/or friends. An abusive husband may monitor his wife’s phone calls, texts, and/or emails. Smartphones with tracking devices are a powerful tool used to isolate and/or monitor a victim’s time and activities away from the home. An abuser will often interrogate the victim when she returns.

*Gaslighting involves, but is not limited to, causing a victim to doubt their perception of reality.*⁷⁰ The term, “gaslighting” originated in a 1940s film by the same name. It includes using many subtle but powerful tactics to communicate to the victim that she is crazy. This is accomplished as the abuser repeatedly claims the victim is misinterpreting events or constantly correcting their perception. The abuser generally insists on an alternate interpretation (or “narrative”). It may also involve insinuating the victim is exaggerating or lying. The power of gaslighting resides in its sustained use over time, and its use in concert with other tactics. The cumulative effect is that the victim doubts their mental health and perception of reality. This diminishes confidence in their own agency and creates a vulnerability to be more easily manipulated and/or controlled. The impact of gaslighting cannot be underestimated. It is terrifying to question your sanity.

*Using children as pawns involves but is not limited to the abuser’s misuse of their children to manipulate and control a victim.*⁷¹ This includes manipulating the children into taking the abuser’s side and/or triangulate them between the parents during a conflict. An abuser may force the children to watch arguments and then appeal to them for support. Some abusers require the children to monitor and report on the victim’s behavior in their absence. A particularly vicious tactic is psychological cruelty to or physical abuse of the children for the purpose of upsetting the spouse. Abusers may purposely upset the children and then prevent their spouse from comforting them when they cry. They may shift blame or gaslight and accuse the victim of upsetting the children. Abusers often threaten to take the children from the victim either through legal means or by kidnapping. Abusers can and do kidnap their children.

⁶⁹ Branson and Silva, *Violence Among Us*, 22.

⁷⁰ Engel, *The Emotionally Abusive Relationship*, 36-37.

⁷¹ Bancroft, *When Dad Hurts Mom*, 140.

A marriage is emotionally abusive when one spouse uses multiple behavior patterns on a consistent basis. Regular use of these tactics creates an oppressive environment in the home. The victim and family are trapped in bondage to the abuser's moods and emotions. Although emotional abuse leaves no visible bruises, it is difficult to understate the impact.

B. Spiritual Abuse: Using a person's faith as a tactic for manipulation and control⁷²

Spiritual abuse occurs when Scripture is used to belittle, threaten, or justify unreasonable expectations. An abusive spouse may quote passages such as Proverbs 5:19 to justify sex on demand. First Corinthians 7:1-5 may be used to justify ungodly behavior such as physical or sexual assault or dehumanizing control. Ephesians 5:25-26 may be used to establish an entitled sense of superiority and/or weaponized into a tool of domination. In the hands of an abuser, the Word of God may be a tool to tear down a victim rather than build her up (Rom. 14:19). Abusers may take good and pure truths and twist them into a perverse shadow of what God intended.

Spiritual abuse occurs when an abuser demands submission. In an abusive relationship, there is very little that is open to discussion and compromise. Submission is frequently played as a trump card to get what the abuser wants. Abusers conflate their personal will with the will of God and use the doctrine of submission to maintain a position of control. For more discussion on submission, see the chapter on shepherding the abuser.

C. Economic Abuse: Behavior that dominates a person financially⁷³

There are two tactics in economic abuse:

1. The first, related to the abuser's desire for power, results in maintaining tight control over the finances.
 - An abuser may prohibit their spouse from working outside the home to maintain dominance over the victim through financial dependence.
 - A common tactic is to unilaterally impose a highly restrictive allowance on the victim.
 - At times, the victim's allowance includes the requirement of purchasing the household necessities.
 - An abuser may keep most of the family budget and/or spend as desired.
 - An abuser may demand an account of every cent spent and interrogate the victim regarding their purchases.
 - An abuser usually does not hold himself to the same careful standard as the victim.
 - An abuser may use guilt or accuse of irresponsibility even if the victim purchases only household necessities.
 - An abuser may hide information about finances or threaten to leave the family and withdraw financial support.

⁷² Branson and Silva, *Violence Among Us*, 25-27.

⁷³ Sanderson, *Counseling Survivors of Domestic Abuse*, 26.

2. The second is related to an abuser's sense of entitlement, and it results in financial recklessness.
 - An abuser may feel entitled to spend money without regard for how it impacts the victim or children.
 - An abuser will likely have irresponsible debts.
 - An abuser may force the victim to work and provide for him and/or the family.
 - An abuser may use the victim to finance dreams or pay debts.
 - An abuser may ruin his own credit.
 - An abuser may ruin his victim's credit.
 - An abuser may ruin his young adult children's credit.

D. Sexual Abuse: Any unwanted contact or interaction that occurs for the sexual stimulation of the abuser⁷⁴

Sexual abuse is the most difficult category of abuse to discuss. Sexual assault in the home is well hidden, and the related shame and confusion often prevents victims from disclosing.

It may take much time, carefulness, and wisdom for a counselor or helper to build the trust necessary for a victim to share the horrifying details. Victims may never feel comfortable enough to discuss such personal trauma with their male pastors and elders. This is not a personal insult. From the perspective of victims, sexual abuse is the most degrading and damaging form of abuse.

Sexual abuse encompasses multiple behaviors. The following is not meant to be an all-inclusive list.

- An abuser may manipulate or relentlessly pressure his spouse for sex.
- An abuser may make sexual advances in public that make the victim very uncomfortable.
- An abuser may force the victim to watch pornography.
- An abuser may force the victim to perform sexual acts that she finds unpleasant, painful, and/or humiliating.
- An abuser may force sodomy.
- An abuser may force the victim to take prescription sleep aids.
- An abuser may force the victim to drink too much alcohol.
- An abuser may violently rape the victim.
- An abuser may force their victims to perform sexual acts with other people under the threat of violence.

⁷⁴ Dan Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008): 47.

E. Physical Abuse: Any behavior that dominates a person through physical force or violence⁷⁵

Physical abuse encompasses multiple behaviors. The following is not meant to be an all-inclusive list.

- Hitting with hands or objects
- Kicking
- Punching
- Choking or placing hands around her neck
- Scratching
- Cutting
- Pinning to the ground or any other surface
- Biting
- Pinching
- Squeezing with intent to subdue
- Snapping with fingers or any other object
- Grabbing in anger
- Throwing objects at or in the direction of (despite whether the abuser is successful at hitting the intended target)
- Pushing
- Pulling hair
- Strangulation
- Slapping
- Spanking an adult
- Torture
- Sleep deprivation
- Sexual assault
- Rape
- Assault with a weapon
- Attempted or committed homicide
- Chasing for the purpose of any of the above (despite whether the abuser is successful at catching the intended target)

The impact of physical abuse is multiplied exponentially when combined with emotional abuse. The feeling of terror and helplessness engendered by a previous physical assault might be reproduced in the victim by “the look,” a clearing of the throat, or slamming shut a book for example, even if no future physical assault occurs. (See “Definitions – Trigger and/or PTSD.”)

⁷⁵ Branson and Silva, *Violence Among Us*, 24.

The Spectrum of Abuse



The five forms of domestic abuse exist on a spectrum that builds in intensity. Emotional abuse may be the first tactic to appear in a relationship. As the abuse escalates, the abuser adds other tactics. It is very common for abusers to utilize three or four tactics. However, due to the consequences for visible injuries, many refrain from harming their wives physically.⁷⁶

Abuse escalates. The tactics of abuse between emotional and physical might be added in any order, which is signified by the double-sided arrows on the above diagram. Some tactics may never be utilized by an abuser. For example, a particular abuser may not care much about money, and therefore not control by the misuse of their finances. But the same abuser might engage in sexual abuse. The tactics and severity of abuse will differ from person to person. Emotional abuse tends to be the starting point, moving toward the most serious form of physical.⁷⁷

As the abuse builds in intensity, the victim's experience is very confusing. The intensity tends to rise gradually. If the abuser is not abusing physically, the victim will often not detect the escalation. The physical abuse may be the unmistakable red flag that leads the victim to confide in a friend, family member, and/or pastor. In these situations, the physically abusive episode may appear to be an isolated incident. However, physical abuse was simply the latest tactic in the patterns of abuse building over time. If a man is abusing his wife physically, he is also abusing her emotionally. He is probably abusive in other ways as well. The victim may not be familiar with the definitions and patterns of abuse, and therefore unable to clearly articulate what is happening. But physical abuse is just the tip of the iceberg.

Difficulty in Disclosure

When someone discloses characteristics of abuse, it is important to listen and act in a way that supports the person and keeps them protected. God's desire is that we support those who have been abused (Matt. 19:13-15; Luke 17:2). In the moment of disclosure or discovery, the church must also provide care.

Disclosing domestic abuse is very difficult. Primarily, the victim's safety is the greatest concern. Only a victim has the information necessary to decide if, when, and how to report what is happening in the home. The victim lives with the consequences for reporting; therefore, it is wise to let her set the pace in the process. See *Shepherding the Victim to Safety* below.

⁷⁶ Not including instances of sexual assault, as this type of physical abuse is easily kept secretive.

⁷⁷ Physical abuse is not limited to hitting and kicking. Suicide is also an ultimate form of physical abuse as the abuser "punishes" their victim. She will ask what she did wrong/could have done differently to prevent his demise for the rest of her life.

The power differential in the abusive relationship also makes reporting abuse risky. Consider potential outcomes of disclosing when the abuser has employed tactics of,

- **Gaslighting.** The victim risks not being believed, as the abuser has often told her would be the case.
- **Spiritual abuse.** Unfortunately, many leaders misunderstand domestic abuse, so they might instruct a wife she should be more submissive and/or more sexual. Hearing this from a spiritual leader perpetuates the misuse of Scripture by an authoritative figure.
- **Economic abuse.** An abuser who controls the family finances might hire an aggressive lawyer. Abusers are known to use the court system to perpetuate their power and control.
- **Emotional blackmail.** Threatening to take or hurt the children.
- **Children as pawns.** An abuser may continue to or begin threatening the children and/or mistreating and abusing them.
- **Isolation.** An abuser may increasingly isolate the victim from friends and family.
- **Verbal abuse.** After many years of verbal onslaught, the victim may believe the abuser's narrative. If he has repeatedly treated her harshly and called her stupid, worthless, ugly, fat, or told her no one would want her or that she couldn't make it without him; she may feel silenced. She may blame herself and even defend him because, as he said, she's "disobedient and stupid."

In the absence of disclosure, a clear sign of abuse is the presence of bruises, black eyes, and/or broken bones. Often this evidence is hidden behind sunglasses, high necklines, and long sleeves even during warm weather. The evidence can also be explained away by vague stories of clumsiness. When questioned, a victim will become obviously uncomfortable and brush it off or change the subject.

Evidence of abuse might be determined by a careful observation of a victim's demeanor. This is not to say these characteristics are determinative for abuse. The following descriptions of behavior are also not all-inclusive. However, these questions might be helpful for clarification.

- Is she especially timid and/or fearful?
- Is she overly self-effacing?
- Is she subdued, even fearful, around her husband?
- Does she scurry to do what he says?
- Is he arrogant, rigid, critical, controlling?
- Does he speak and act disrespectfully towards her or about her?
- Does he appear to control her, keep her under his thumb?
- Does he refuse to sacrificially support the use of her gifts in the Body?
- Does she have difficulty making eye contact with the Pastor or elders?
- Is she "not allowed" to attend church meetings or Bible study unless accompanied by her husband?
- Is she anxious about getting home "on time"?

The imbalance of power in an abusive relationship causes a greater disadvantage when a victim reports the abuse. Research shows that the abuser's power within the relationship usually corresponds to a higher level of social and relational power in the community.⁷⁸ Abusers have fewer social restraints and more resources. The abuser's higher social standing tempts many to believe his narrative rather than hers. When domestic abuse is alleged, church leaders may dismiss accusations because they think they know the abuser and, "He wouldn't do anything like that." Such a response ignores scriptures such as John 2:23-25 and Jeremiah 17:9, which teach that every human being is capable of deceitfulness and can hide private sins from the public eye. The abuser is often left unscathed during an investigation while the victim is told to be quiet and/or cease speaking about her experiences.

Conversely, victims experience great social restraint. They have been conditioned to keep their thoughts to themselves, yield to the emotions of the person with greater power, and be more cautious in their behavior. For a victim, the abuser seems more powerful than the systems meant to protect.⁷⁹ In disclosing, the victim may risk accusations of gossip, slander, and/or ruining the abuser's reputation. A victim may also be silenced for the sake of the church's reputation. Church leaders should not put the image of the church above the safety of its congregants. When we wear His name, we should also bear His likeness.

4. Responding

Disclosure of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse is an equal opportunity destroyer impacting generations of men, women, and children. Jesus calls us to proclaim the gospel through evangelism, but He also calls us to minister to those who are oppressed (Isa. 58:6-7). The church must have an unfailing commitment to be governed by what God says about justice, mercy, and defending the vulnerable. Silence does not protect the church or Christ's name.⁸⁰ When we stay silent, we tell the world, victims, and abusers we are okay with violence in the home. We tell children that violence is normal and the church does not care whether they or their family is hurting. Over against this posture, the God of refuge calls His church to be a safe haven for victims of abuse.

Intervention by godly response helps break the chain of perpetual abuse. Intervening is quite costly in terms of time and energy. It requires wisdom, patience, and courage to battle evil and deception. Responding well includes naming the evil of abuse for what it is. We must not ignore, minimize, or passively condone abuse or else the church becomes, "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27).

⁷⁸ Gerben Van Kleef et al., "Power, Distress and Compassion," *Psychological Science* 19:12 (2008): 1315-1322, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02241.x>.

⁷⁹ Snyder, *No Visible Bruises*, 71.

⁸⁰ Diane Langberg, "How To have a Culture of Child Protection," presentation, Grace Baptist Church, CA, 2016.

What to do regarding disclosure of domestic abuse

A godly response to the disclosure or discovery of abusive behaviors in Christian homes includes, but is not limited to, the following.

- Prior to disclosure or discovery, church leadership sets the pace for the congregation in the treatment of women. Leaders honor their wives and speak to and about their wives with respect. Leaders encourage and facilitate the development and use of their spouses' gifts as God directs. Leaders encourage staff and church members to do the same.
- Label abuse as such. To prescribe the appropriate response, abuse must be called by its rightful name. To label otherwise is to minimize sin and treat the things that God hates lightly. Minimizing abuse fails to keep the flock safe and fails to direct the abuser to a path of repentance, redemption, and perhaps reconciliation. If at first you are unsure what you are encountering rises to the level of abuse, start by using the words which describe the behavior that is uncovered: harsh, cruel, manipulative, deceptive, etc. Abuse is comprised of many sins and a good start is to accurately label sin. Eventually a determination needs to be made if the constellations of sin that are uncovered rise to the level of abuse, but that may take time.
- Protect sheep. Resist sending the woman back into a dangerous situation with instructions to pray and/or submit more. Abuse occurs because there is an abuser, not because a victim has not prayed or submitted enough. Specific steps that a shepherd can take to ensure the safety of victims will be discussed in the next section.
- Provide at least one trained, respected, godly woman to accompany the victim to Session meetings, team meetings, court, and other situations when she may be frightened and/or overwhelmed.
- Form and train a team of men and women to function with knowledge and authority in situations involving domestic abuse, as they come alongside the victim, children, and abuser.
- Read widely from both pastoral and clinical sources to become familiar with the dynamics of domestic abuse, its typical effects on the victim and her children, and the characteristics and dynamics of the person who abuses. Mere "conventional wisdom" has been costly in many domestic abuse situations.
- Familiarize yourself with training and resources provided by local domestic abuse organizations. Consider training elders and/or church leaders so they are familiar with the dynamics and process in domestic abuse.
- Establish ongoing oversight of the educational and training measures addressed in "Prevention and Deterrence," p. 2373.'
- Familiarize yourself with state and local laws that might impact the situation and available, accessible resources.
- Familiarize yourself with the names and contact information of emergency departments, shelters, attorneys, advocates, employment-training facilities, food banks, etc.

- Establish connection with specific individuals in the public sector who assist with their skills and resources.
- Host seminars utilizing professionals to educate the staff and perhaps the congregation about domestic abuse and best practices.
- Provide other resources and books on domestic abuse in the church library.

What not to do regarding disclosure of domestic abuse

It is not wise to conduct marriage counseling with both spouses together in cases of alleged, suspected, or disclosed abuse. *Marriage counseling can be dangerous in cases of domestic abuse and may even result in further harm to the victim.* Marriage counseling should not occur until individual counseling with an informed counselor has resulted in long-term evidence of the abuser's repentance, empathy, and genuine godly sorrow for their abusive behavior.

An unbalanced focus on "keeping the marriage together" at any cost may prevent confrontation of the private sin of abuse that happens behind the closed doors of a Christian home. Christian marriages are to reflect Christ and His church; therefore, leaders must "take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret" (Eph. 5:11-12). Addressing abuse in the home is for the sake of the gospel as much as, or even more so, than preserving the marriage. An abusive marriage is a blemish on Christ's body. The church must protect Christ's reputation and eradicate the evil of abuse in Christian marriages.

5. Reporting

Be familiar with the reporting requirements in your state. Typically, these laws are less stringent for adult abuse than they are for child abuse. In the case of domestic abuse, reporting is *not* recommended unless mandated by state law. It violates the victim's freedom, and it may unintentionally jeopardize her safety. It is important to allow the victim to direct adult abuse reporting unless mandated by state law.

It is recommended the following be appointed to respond to the survivor and accused:

1. Church Advocacy Group
2. Session Crisis Intervention Team

Church Advocacy Group

Those who have experienced any form of abuse and/or assault should have an easily accessible, empathetic, reliable, and formal means of reporting. Persons with like experience may help in decreasing the fear of reporting. Appointed and highly visible advocates in the local church might include a small group of well-trained members. The advocacy group should document the concern or complaint in sufficient detail to categorize it as reportable to

public authorities (such as physical abuse, rape, sexual assault, physical assault, battery, kidnapping, etc.) or non-reportable (spiritual, verbal, emotional, financial abuse, doctrinal error, abusive leadership, sexual harassment, adultery, deceit, etc.).

*Crisis Intervention Team*⁸¹

The Crisis Intervention Team should consist of effective, wise, and disciplined elders (other than those assigned to advocacy group) able to intervene promptly, efficiently, and effectively to the complaint.

Major tasks will be to . . .

1. Investigate the matter,
2. Relieve any allegedly abusive leaders from duty, and
3. Provide shepherding counsel and support to victims, abusers, and their families.

In the case that the accused is a Pastor, the Crisis Intervention Team is also responsible as a liaison with the Presbytery and as communication to and with the congregation and general public regarding the matter. Truth, honesty, and accountability should be the hallmarks of the team's interactions with the accused, congregation, presbytery, and with the public.

If the alleged abuser is in leadership, the Crisis Intervention Team (or appointed elder) should inform the accused of the charge and initiate process to relieve him from duty immediately. They should conduct their investigation in such a way as to carefully shepherd the victim and preserve her safety (see "Redemptive Shepherding" below), anonymity, privacy, and welfare.

Reportable complaints should be given to police. The Advocacy Group and/or Crisis Intervention Team should inform the Pastor and/or Session (the latter only if the Pastor is implicated) immediately after submission to authorities and give them their written report. This is to avoid cover-up for serious crimes and offenses at the beginning, the most crucial phase of the process.

Non-reportable complaints should be written in sufficient detail and presented to the Session. It is wise to shield a victim's identity unless given permission to disclose. If the complaint is warranted, the Session might plan a strategy to confront the accused. A complaint considered unwarranted should be documented and provided to the accuser with the reasons for the determination.

⁸¹ In a PCA church, the Pastor, who had read widely about domestic abuse, commissioned a ruling elder to form a team who could walk alongside a woman who had escaped from a heavily armed abusive husband and was living in the home of a person outside the congregation for safety's sake. The team consisted of two elders, a trained woman, and a deacon who could address the financial concerns. The team met with the displaced woman every two to three weeks to encourage her, pray with her, provide for her needs, and serve as a go-between for the woman and her husband so she did not have to endure his abusive, threatening emails and phone calls. The team leader updated the Pastor weekly. Additional care can come in the form of appropriate topical Bible studies and support with parenting issues. Youth leaders can come alongside the children to offer a listening ear and encouragement.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should meet with the accused after the complaint is lodged, as soon as possible if reported to authorities. Prior to this meeting, they should engage in prayer for wisdom, discernment, and the preservation of the honor of Christ and His church, as well as for grace in approach to both parties.

A written complaint should be presented to the accused. The accused's response will be documented verbatim by the advocates, including the responses to appropriate, further clarifying questions. Such questions should provide details of . . .

- Factual occurrence,
- Motives,
- Emotions,
- Prior events pertinent to the investigation as seen fit by the investigators and accused,
- Specific disagreement,
- Regret,
- Remorse, or
- Repentance expressed by the accused.

Each answer should be recorded in as much detail as possible, using direct quotes rather than paraphrases. These questions and statements should be recorded and documented until the meeting has reached a conclusion. Questions refused should also be so recorded.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should meet following a confrontation for prayer and to deliberate upon, analyze, and formulate their findings and conclusion of the preliminary investigation. They should document their findings and recommendations for further pursuit of the complaint in writing and submit them to the accused. At the presentation to the accused, the team should record any rebuttal, clarification, or other response of the accused.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should prayerfully deliberate on the written complaint, response, and rebuttal, and amend or sustain the original findings and recommendation in a final report. This report should be given to both accuser and accused. The following are possible courses of action that may be recommended to the Session:

1. **The issue be resolved with follow-up** by the Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder to both parties separately.
2. **The issue requires further investigation** by session and/or outside investigators or counsel before actions can be recommended.
3. **The abuse report requires immediate action** such as contacting the police or presbytery [if a Pastor] if not already contacted, suspension from duty, or medical/psychiatric intervention.

1 **4. Action requires a formal program** of biblical counseling, spiritual discipline,
2 mentoring, and accountability of progress in conformity to Christ by one or both
3 parties.

4 **5. Formal charges or dissolution of pastoral relationship if warranted** [if a
5 Pastor].

6
7 ***When the Abuser Is a Teaching Elder***

8
9 Besides prayer, confrontation, deliberation, and investigation, it is important that PCA
10 churches avail themselves of the formal system for accountability if a Teaching Elder is
11 exhibiting signs of abuse and refusing to repent.

12
13 The *PCA Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 34 is entitled “Special Rules Pertaining to
14 Process Against a Minister.” A church minister (Teaching Elder) is a “member” of a
15 Presbytery, not the local church. Therefore, when his sin is repetitive following the attempt of
16 members to confront him, it is necessary to pursue accountability through members of the
17 Presbytery (34:4).

18
19 There are three possible ways to proceed by the Session or church members:

- 20
21 1. Discuss the matter with another elder in the Presbytery, of which the Teaching
22 Elder is a member, seeking their personal aid in further confrontation;
23 2. Bring clear, documented proof of unrepentant leadership failure to the committee
24 that handles charges brought against member pastors for their consultation; or
25 3. Bring charges against the minister before this committee. Two witnesses must
26 bring testimony (*BCO* 34:5) or there must be clear “corroborative evidence.”

27
28 Although the first and second options may be less intimidating to church members, bringing
29 an abusive leader to trial may be necessary to provide safety to the greater church. A Teaching
30 Elder who has been found unrepentant will be publicly disallowed from ministry in the PCA
31 as long as evidence of unrepentance remains.

32
33 However, it must be understood that pastoral failure which does not involve “heretical”
34 teaching must clearly evidence damage to Christ’s church for judicial action to be taken
35 against a Pastor.

36
37 *Heresy and schism may be of such a nature as to warrant deposition; but errors ought*
38 *to be carefully considered, whether they strike at the vitals of religion and are*
39 *industriously spread, or whether they arise from the weakness of the human*
40 *understanding and are not likely to do much injury (BCO 34-5).*

41
42 Should the congregation wish to remove a Teaching Elder due to his abuse, they are required
43 to follow these steps:

1. "...there shall always be a meeting of the congregation called and conducted in the same manner as the call of the Pastor (BCO 23-1)."
2. The meeting must be presided over by a Ruling or Teaching Elder of the PCA.
3. The will of the congregation (as voted upon) is presented to the Presbytery for approval for the "dissolution of the pastoral relation."

Independent Assessments or Investigations

After the Session has received the preliminary investigation report of the Advocacy Group/elder, they may wish to investigate further or engage expert outside counsel. Outside independent counsel should be sought for potential felony or any complaint that was reported to police or public agencies. Examples of such outside counsel include legal, certified public accountants, trained counselors, trained advocates, psychological and/or medical personnel, and/or seminary faculty with expertise in the field.

The safety of the victim(s), responsibility of the church, and accountability are foremost in the work of an independent counsel.

6. Redemptive Shepherding

Shepherding the Victim to Safety

*The priority is the victim's safety.*⁸²

- **Confrontation.** When a victim confides abusive behavior, it's tempting to confront the alleged abuser for his perspective of the allegations. If accusations are founded, and the spouse is abusive, he may exact punishing behavior on the victim for reporting. Confronting the accused puts the victim in jeopardy. Before any confrontation can take place, the victim's safety must be assured.
- **Separation.** Safety may include separating the victim and any children from the abuser. Caution is strongly encouraged. The most dangerous time in an abusive relationship happens when a victim tries to leave.⁸³ Abusers often escalate behaviors in order to strengthen control and force the victim to stay.
- **Team.** Most pastors do not have the bandwidth to shepherd a victim alone. It is recommended the Pastor create a team of people to come alongside the victim and her children, as well as the abuser.
- **Agency.** Prioritize the victim's freedom.⁸⁴ Throughout the process, the victim should set the pace. An abuser controls every facet of a victim's world. Her recovery will benefit from relearning how to make wise decisions. Provide the victim with the necessary options (see below) and resources and then come

⁸² Sanderson, *Counseling Survivors of Domestic Abuse*, 110.

⁸³ Brenda Branson and Paula J. Silva, "Options for Victims of Domestic Violence," Focus Ministries, <https://www.focusministries1.org/resources/domestic-violence-articles>.

⁸⁴ Branson and Silva, *Violence Among Us*, 76.

1 alongside to help her navigate solutions. Victims are conditioned to depend on
 2 their abuser's control, so they may look to others to make decisions. Resist this
 3 temptation. Some victims will make choices with which you disagree. For
 4 instance, they may not take steps necessary for protection or may stay in or return
 5 to the abusive situation. The victim must live with her decision, so resist taking
 6 control.

- 7 • **Network.** Enlist the help of other institutions that can help achieve safety. The
 8 church may not have the resources to meet all the victim's needs. Law
 9 enforcement, an attorney, a professional counselor, a victim's advocate, or a
 10 battered women's shelter will be very helpful.⁸⁵ Have the victim be the primary
 11 liaison between these organizations. Victim ownership over their situation will
 12 promote responsibility, decisiveness, and self-sufficiency.
- 13 • **Evaluate.** All options have the potential for greater risk. Calling law enforcement
 14 is an excellent way to provide immediate protection, but afterwards the abuser may
 15 respond violently. An order of protection is somewhat helpful; however, it is only
 16 a piece of paper. Abusers often choose to violate restraining and protection orders.
 17 The wisest course of action will be to work slowly and patiently. The potential
 18 danger to the victim is another reason that she must set the pace for all decisions.
 19 She has the best knowledge of the abuser and situation. Err on the side of safety.

21 *Options for Safety*

22
 23 The following are intended to be thorough, but not exhaustive. All situations are unique and
 24 may require more creative solutions.

25
 26 *Call the Police:* If a victim feels unsafe, their first call is 911. This option can provide a victim
 27 with swift protection when threatened, or when an abuser becomes violent. But abusers may
 28 be adept at manipulating the situation and casting doubt on the victim's story. If the police
 29 leave without making an arrest, the abuser may commit further offences as punishment.

30
 31 *Victim's Advocate:* An advocate can provide professional assistance with safety planning,
 32 perform a lethality assessment that helps determine the threat level of an abuser, and guide
 33 victims in securing an order of protection. Network with the victim advocates in your area and
 34 have up to date contact information available to victims in need.

35
 36 *Order of Protection:* An order of protection may be wise if the victim leaves the home. In
 37 many states, a protection order can also be written to force the abuser to leave the home. A
 38 victim should plan ahead and secure the order without the abuser's knowledge. Contact a
 39 victim's advocate for assistance securing an order.

40
 41 *Find Alternate Housing:* It may be necessary for the victim to leave the home, at least for a
 42 season. It is wise for the victim to leave without the abuser's knowledge. This takes careful
 43 planning.⁸⁶ Arrange to leave at a precise day and time when the husband will be out of the
 44

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Sanderson, *Counseling Survivors of Domestic Abuse*, 121.

1 house. Preschedule an appointment with a victim advocate to procure a protection order within
2 hours of departure from the home.

3
4 Any children should remain with the victim. Those advising or assisting victims who leave
5 should be familiar with local law. In some states, if the victim takes her children for more than
6 five days she can be charged with kidnapping. Victims may also have legal trouble if they
7 prohibit child visitation. In addition, the state may require that victims with children remain
8 within a certain proximity to the home. Contact the local victim's advocate for the most up to
9 date laws governing your specific area.

10
11 Keep living arrangements private when a victim leaves. Use discernment when placing a
12 victim in a "known" location such as with family, friends, or church members. If no suitable
13 options are available, contact a local women's shelter. Network with the victim advocates in
14 your area and have up to date contact information available to victims in need. At times,
15 victims are safer staying in the home. This enables them to monitor the abuser's moods and
16 anger level and take the appropriate measures to keep safe. The living arrangement decision
17 belongs to the victim.

18
19 *Prepare to Live Independently:* A victim will need to prepare before leaving the home by
20 saving money in a private account or keeping funds in an undisclosed location. If this option
21 is not possible, the victim might consider withdrawing funds from accounts immediately after
22 leaving. Timing will be important; the transaction will need to be completed before the abuser
23 is aware of her absence. It is also wise to open a new cell phone account and get a different
24 number prior to or soon after leaving. Make sure to have the victim turn off tracking on their
25 devices ("Find My Friends"). Advise that she create a new email address, change passwords
26 on accounts, and apply for credit cards in her own name. Consult a victim advocate and create
27 a safety plan to identify additional strategies.

28
29 *Provide for Basic Needs:* If the victim does not have the means to support herself and the
30 children, she may need to seek public assistance (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance
31 Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), etc.). Familiarize
32 yourself with the resources available in your community to refer to the proper organizations.
33 The church may also be able to offer financial assistance from its deacon's fund.

34
35 *Find Employment:* For victims who do not work outside the home, assist in finding resources
36 in the community for gaining employment. Potential sources to consider are social media
37 referrals,⁸⁷ job fairs or platforms, staffing or recruitment agencies, searching in industry
38 publications, browsing the internet, and subscribing to job search emails. Neighborhood apps
39 may also list employment opportunities close to home. Church members with businesses may
40 be willing to hire (perhaps even short term) or help network. Assist victims who require further
41 education in finding scholarships and/or resources for returning to school. Connect with
42 members in the congregation for childcare.

⁸⁷ If the victim needs anonymity, help by searching social media for her.

1 *Secure Permanent Housing:* Shelters and hospitable friends and family are options for the
 2 short term. However, if the victim is separated from her husband long term, she will need to
 3 find more permanent housing. Church members with real estate credentials and/or deacons
 4 may be helpful in securing a suitable location.

5
 6 *Structured Separation:*⁸⁸ A structured separation is an alternative to divorce for victims of
 7 domestic abuse who want to save their marriages. To ensure the victim's safety and wellbeing,
 8 she lives apart from her partner for a specific period of time. A document is created that
 9 outlines living arrangements, creates boundaries, and lays out a process of change and healing
 10 for the couple. It is recommended that the abusive partner demonstrate changed behavior for
 11 six to twelve months before cohabitation resumes. It is not wise to create a structured
 12 agreement until the victim is safely located away from the abuser.

13
 14 *Divorce:*⁸⁹ This is the most serious option for securing the victim's safety, but it may be
 15 necessary. In most cases of marriage conflict, we define success as the restoration of the
 16 marriage. But domestic abuse requires us to redefine what constitutes success. In an abuse
 17 case, success is defined as seeing God set the victim free from oppression. This could occur
 18 through the restoration of her marriage or the ending of her marriage. The form freedom takes
 19 will depend on the abuser's repentance, the victim's decisions, and the providence of God.

20
 21 Many victims who pursue a divorce do not have the financial means to hire an attorney. If this
 22 is the case, they can request that an attorney take their case for a reduced fee or pro bono.
 23 Your community may also have a self-help law center that victims can utilize.

24
 25 Sometimes attorneys will recommend that the couple pursue a mediation to resolve the
 26 divorce, instead of litigation. In mediation, a mediator facilitates the couple coming to a
 27 mutually agreed upon settlement regarding the division of assets, child custody, and other
 28 issues involved in a divorce. While the victim makes the final decision, mediation is not
 29 recommended. The vast majority of mediators are not trained to handle cases of domestic
 30 abuse. They do not understand the power imbalance inherent in an abusive marriage and how
 31 that power imbalance impacts the mediation process.

32 33 *Shepherding the Victim Spiritually*

34
 35 Life with an abusive husband is incredibly stressful and confusing. The person a victim loves
 36 the most is hurting them, and they don't necessarily have categories for how to think about
 37 what's happening, how to respond, how to get help, and/or what the children may need. They
 38 juggle these questions, concerns, and emotions all while trying to navigate the moods and
 39 behaviors of the abuser. Often, a victim will say they walk on eggshells. Victims live in a state
 40 of hyper-vigilance, constantly on high alert. Even if, or when, a victim separates physically
 41 from an abuser they may continue to live under the threat of harm.

⁸⁸ Branson and Silva, *Violence Among Us*, 79-80.

⁸⁹ See The Seventh Commandment, Section One, p. 2330, as well as the Attachment 11: Divorce and Domestic Abuse, p. 2492.

Counseling and Support Groups:

Practically, pastors help victims process anger, shame, and fear. The victim needs to hear God's word validate that the abuse committed is heinous sin, and that he grieves with and for them. Pastors and the church family who empathize with victims minister God's comfort (2 Cor. 1:4). As the victim experiences the love of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the Word, they begin to find healing. Throughout this process, trust is built and care expressed. This provides relational capital and an ability to speak into the difficulty effectively.

The result of abuse, whether it be acute or chronic, is often trauma. Trauma is an event that overwhelms and inspires helplessness and terror.⁹⁰ Most pastors are not equipped to counsel trauma, nor do they have the time. In addition to the trauma of the abusive marriage, the victim needs to explore how past trauma and family of origin feeds into the experience of domestic abuse. Nevertheless, the following are spiritual issues a pastor can help explore.

Shame and Honor:⁹¹ Virtually all victims of abuse wrestle with shame, which can be defined as a sense of worthlessness and rejection. A more popular term is low self-esteem, but the biblical terminology of shame contains far more depth. Low self-esteem is one-dimensional, whereas the biblical concept of shame has three dimensions:

1. **The Personal Dimension:** An individual has a low view of their own self-worth. This dimension of shame overlaps with the secular concept of low self-esteem.
2. **The Social Dimension:** People in society reject the individual and ascribe them with little worth. The person wrestling with shame often feels like an outcast.
3. **The Spiritual Dimension:** Apart from the work of Christ, we are all contaminated by sin and therefore separated from God, who is perfectly holy and cannot be in the presence of sin.

These three dimensions describe *the victim's experience* of shame and the facets it contains. In addition, we may delineate three *sources* of shame:

1. **The sins we commit:** Our own sin defiles and renders us unholy and unacceptable in God's sight.
2. **Something that happens to us:** The sins that other people commit against us are especially shame inducing. While every human being's shame is caused by sin, victims experience a much higher degree than the average person because of the sins of their abusers. Victims have been told they are worthless through countless words and actions. After years of being criticized, belittled, demeaned, treated like an object—hearing questions about their sanity—victims eventually believe that narrative.

⁹⁰ Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997): 33-34.

⁹¹ This entire section is indebted to Edward T. Welch, *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness & Rejection* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012). This book is an excellent resource for pastors and victims.

1 **3. The people we are associated with:** Like a disease, shame can spread from person
 2 to person, especially within a family.

3
 4 Scripture provides pastors with tremendous resources for ministering to victims by
 5 counteracting shame. There are approximately ten times more references to shame than guilt
 6 in the Bible.⁹² In Scripture, the opposite of shame is honor. Through His incarnation Jesus
 7 entered our fallen world. At His baptism, He identified with sinful humanity in need of
 8 cleansing from shame (Luke 3:21-4:13). On the cross, Christ took our shame upon Himself
 9 and received the condemnation that we deserve (Heb. 12:2). All of Christ's righteousness has
 10 been imputed to us, and therefore we have a place of honor in God's kingdom (2 Cor. 5:21).
 11 When Jesus returns, the curtain will be pulled back and our true identity will be revealed
 12 (Isa. 61).

13
 14 Victims experience tremendous healing when they encounter the position of honor that God
 15 has provided in His kingdom. The following passages of Scripture can be ministered to
 16 victims because of the work Christ has done to make them part of His covenant people.

17
 18 Zephaniah 3:14-20 speaks to all three dimensions of a victim's shame.

- 19
 20 **1. Personal Dimension:** The condemnation that survivors feel will be taken away
 21 (v. 15), and their shame will be changed into praise and renown in all the earth.
 22 Feelings of worthlessness will be drowned out by the voice of God as He rejoices
 23 over them with singing.
 24 **2. Social Dimension:** God promises to gather survivors who feel like outcasts to
 25 experience the love and acceptance of His kingdom.
 26 **3. Spiritual Dimension:** Victims learn God has bestowed the greatest honor
 27 imaginable: He has made them His children. Because they are sons and daughters
 28 of the King, victims have the status of royalty in the kingdom. Their value and
 29 dignity flows from their relationship to the King.

30
 31 Isaiah 62:1-5 speaks to a core component of identity.

32
 33 In this passage, God communicates identity as determined by what He thinks of His
 34 people. By giving victims a new name, He removes their previous identity as
 35 "forsaken" and replaces it with "delight." Therefore, the accusations and criticisms
 36 that ring in a victim's ears are lies replaced with the truth of what God says. In verses
 37 1-2 God promises to proclaim this identity for all the world to hear. The shame that an
 38 abuser communicates will be drowned out by the voice of God. As God's crown and
 39 diadem, His people are truly priceless. Like the jewels on the crown of a king, we are
 40 a visible sign of God's glory. In many ways, Christ's treatment of victims is the exact
 41 opposite of what they have experienced. They will receive honor instead of shame,
 42 and praise instead of criticism. Whereas earthly husbands reject them, Jesus rejoices
 43 over them.

⁹² Ibid, 11.

Mark 5:24-34 brings victims riddled with shame face to face with their beloved Redeemer.

The woman Mark describes here was unclean. She had suffered from a discharge of blood for over twelve years. Anyone who touched her, or even touched something she had come in contact with, would have been unclean. As a result, people avoided her. When they saw her walking toward them, they fled. Like shame, uncleanness spreads from person to person. Uncleanness significantly impacted her worship as well because she was unable to go to the temple to have her sins atoned. She was effectively separated from people and from God (Lev. 15:25-31).

When this woman encountered Jesus, all the shame she knew was reversed. Instead of her making Jesus unclean, He cleansed her. He removed her social shame and restored her to the Jewish community. Even more importantly, His cleansing reunited her with God. As in the language of Zephaniah 3, Jesus addressed her as “daughter.” God incarnate accepted her unconditionally as a father accepts his child. His acceptance transformed her from an outcast into royalty. Victims of abuse will immediately resonate with these truths. They, too, experience shame caused by something that has happened outside their control.

On the cross, Jesus entered into suffering and shame; therefore, He is intimately aware of the human experience. Jesus, likewise, encountered oppression, abuse, and rejection. He was falsely accused, betrayed by companions, mocked, rejected, humiliated, spit on, beaten, and crucified. His perfect righteousness is imputed to us, which means all victims share in His honor now and throughout eternity. There is incredible healing for victims as they meditate on the reality of this gospel truth.

Fear and Love: In domestic abuse, relationships are governed by the fear of man.⁹³ Natural fear is an appropriate response to the dynamics of an abusive marriage.⁹⁴ The abuser uses intimidation and creates a fearful environment to dominate and control. For protection, the victim must pour all her energy into preventing abusive outbursts. Her attention is entirely focused on reading emotions, navigating anger, and giving in to an abuser’s desires. In the context of an abusive relationship, self-protection is a must. As human beings made in the image of God, victims have value and dignity. Victims are worthy of protection.

For the victim, fear of man is not confined to marriage. The abusive relationship becomes the lens through which they see all other relationships. Fear of man becomes the dominant mode of relating to others. Victims tend to avoid tension in relationships by deferring to other people’s desires. They avoid conflict at all costs, appear to be “people pleasers,” and have difficulty saying “no.” This was not God’s good design for relationships. When victims relate

⁹³ Allender, *The Wounded Heart*, 157; Langberg, *On the Threshold of Hope*, 171.

⁹⁴ John Flavel, in *Triumphing Over Sinful Fear*, articulates “Natural fear” as “the agitation of mind that arises when we perceive approaching evil or impeding danger” (8). “Sinful fear” arises from unbelief (a distrust of God), fearing disproportionately or excessively, fear that causes us to be unfit for duty, and/or fear that inclines escape or brings a snare. John Flavel, *Triumphing Over Sinful Fear*, ED J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Books, 2011), 8-20.

to non-abusive people out of fear, they are robbing themselves and others of the blessings that come from relationships of love, trust, and mutuality.

To heal from the relational damage caused by domestic abuse, victims need a paradigm shift. The victim's relationship with God must become the new lens through which they see other relationships. Foundational for this paradigm shift is 1 John 4:18: *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."*

Our relationship with God is governed by love. In love, God became a man and sacrificed Himself on the cross for our sins. The Redeemer loves us and casts out fear by taking our punishment on Himself. He took away our greatest fear, eternal punishment. The contrast between the victim's abuser and the Redeemer could not be greater. Abusers control through the fear of punishment.

A new paradigm frees us to relate to others out of God's love. Interactions with others can be based on what is best for those involved, rather than seeking to avoid conflict or people please. The person driven by love will be willing to risk tension in the relationship or do something the other person finds unpleasant (such as giving a rebuke), if that is what is best for them. A loving person is willing to say no. Being loving is not simply to give people what they want. People can want wrong things. People may want what is beyond another's capacity to give. Rather than being ruled by the desires of others, victims shift the paradigm as they align with God's desires.

Additionally, 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."

Abusers dominate and take away personal power. In contrast, . . .

- **God gives power.** In the context of 2 Timothy, this means that He gives boldness to do His will in difficult situations. When seen through the lens of relationships, such boldness is the antithesis of fear of man.
- **God gives love.** His sacrificial love liberates us from the fear of punishment. This frees us to love Him and love others.
- **God gives a spirit of self-control.** Some survivors attempt to stop relating to others out of fear which results in anger and ungodliness. But God empowers us to control our behavior and obey Him in how we relate to others, even if emotions tempt them to do otherwise.

Romans 8:15-16: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

Rebellion against God leads to fear of condemnation and wrath. But the Father removed this fear through the sacrifice of His Son. He adopted us as His children. A relationship with an abusive spouse is a stark contrast to this relationship with the Father. Abusers intentionally instill fear in their victims to control them. On the cross God removed all reason to fear. Because of His work, we relate to Him as His children and call Him “Abba,” a term of great tenderness and intimacy. Our relationship with God is the paradigm for all other relationships, characterized by freedom rather than slavery. By ordering their world under this paradigm, victims have the freedom to say no, to make their own decisions, and the freedom to be fully human.

Forgiveness: [See also Attachment 9: Forgiveness] Scripture commands loving and forgiving enemies as God in Christ forgave us (Luke 6:27-28; Col. 3:13). Forgiveness is defined as a decision to release someone from suffering punishment or penalty for sin (Matt. 6:12; 18:21-35).⁹⁵ Forgiveness is incredibly difficult for those who have been oppressed and traumatized by the person who was supposed to care, love, and protect. Forgiveness is both an event and a process.⁹⁶ In devastating circumstances, this will likely take much time, consistent reminders, and patience with the process (1 Thess. 5:14, “Be patient with them all”). The timing of forgiveness will vary from person to person. A wise pastor will recognize this difficulty and gently guide a victim beyond the damage done.

When forgiveness occurs, the abuser is released from suffering punishment for sin. However, there is a distinction between punishment and consequences. Punishment seeks to make the offender pay and even suffer for their actions. Consequence is the result of the offender’s actions, but it is not motivated by a desire to punish. For example, a lender may forgive a person’s debt, but wisdom dictates that he never lend to that person again. Similarly, a victim may genuinely forgive an abusive spouse, but that same wisdom may dictate particular consequences. This may include, but not be limited to the following,

- **A Loss of Trust:** Domestic abuse is an act of betrayal. A spouse who has broken the marriage covenant by an abuse of power, degradation of another image bearer, and repeated questioning regarding their reality, loses trust. Lack of trust is not unforgiveness. Forgiveness is a gift; trust earned is a long and difficult process of rebuilding.
- **Legal Consequences:** Physical abuse is a crime. Any legal consequences the abuser experiences are a result of their actions. Personal forgiveness does not include sheltering a criminal from the consequences of crimes committed. The experience of these consequences may even help lead to repentance.
- **Separation:** A victim may need to separate from the abuser to ensure safety and the safety of any children. Although it is counterintuitive, separation can be a useful tool for restoring an abusive marriage. It keeps the victim safe while giving the abuser an opportunity to receive help, demonstrate changed behavior, and rebuild trust.

⁹⁵ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 207.

⁹⁶ Tim Lane, Pursuing and Granting Forgiveness, CCEF The Journal of Biblical Counseling, Spring 2005.

- 1 • **Divorce:** Divorce and forgiveness may seem mutually exclusive, but they are not.
2 Despite genuine forgiveness, it may not be safe for the victim or their children to
3 remain with the abuser.
- 4 • **Restricted Time with Children:** Due to the atmosphere of an oppressive home it
5 will often be healthier for the children to spend less time with their abusive parent.
6 Abusers will also use a separation and/or divorce as an opportunity to interrogate
7 the children about the other parent. Often they will work toward encouraging the
8 children to take sides. Restricted time lessens the children's exposure to this type
9 of behavior.

11 *Shepherding the Abuser*

13 God designed the spiritual leadership of husbands to reflect the image of Christ. Therefore,
14 Jesus's use of power should be the model husbands follow in their marriages. Jesus could have
15 used His influence and status as God's Son to do whatever He wanted. But He did not. He
16 laid aside His position and privilege, humbling Himself by becoming man, submitting to the
17 Father's will and dying on the cross. He used His power to bless His people.

19 When thinking of the characteristics of a godly husband, who by virtue of his position has
20 relational power in the home, Jesus is the model to be emulated. In those chosen of God, holy
21 and beloved, natural tendencies must be put off diligently as part of the old nature, and a heart
22 of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love must be cultivated. The
23 word of Christ must dwell richly within. A husband is to love his wife and not be harsh and
24 resentful towards her. He needs to learn to use his power sacrificially, like Jesus did, on behalf
25 of his wife (and family) and not diminish and control her. It will take quite some time for these
26 new patterns of behavior to develop, and it will take the prayerful, encouraging support of
27 other godly men to walk the journey with him.

29 The discussion below addresses how to approach many of the problems Sessions encounter
30 when shepherding abusers. The assumption at this point of the process is that the victim is
31 safe from harm. The following are intended to be thorough, but not exhaustive. All situations
32 are unique and may require more specific solutions.

34 *Godly or Worldly Repentance:*⁹⁷ Primary to effective shepherding care of an abuser is to
35 recognize the difficulty. Unfortunately, recidivism in cases of domestic abuse is very high.
36 The type of change which often occurs is simply that the abuser modifies his tactics. Instead
37 of using more overt types of abuse (physical abuse), he employs those tactics which are more
38 difficult to observe (verbal or emotional abuse). A strong emotional outburst of sorrow and
39 regret in the Pastor's office does not always result in change in the home. Domestic Abuse is
40 a particularly heinous besetting sin (*WCF* 150).⁹⁸ Shepherding care may be a long and slow

⁹⁷ See Attachment 10: Repentance for a discussion of Godly and Worldly Repentance.

⁹⁸ *The Westminster Larger Catechism* lists four. Included here are the companion behaviors endemic in domestic abuse *italicized* (1) the persons offending; *a husband commanded to love his wife* (*Eph. 5:28*) (2) the parties offended; *the wife of his youth who he has covenanted to love, cherish, and protect* (*Gen. 2:22-24*) (3)

1 journey of resistance without substantial change. Pray for these men on a regular and
2 consistent basis. [See also Attachment 10: Repentance]

3
4 *Church Discipline:* Church discipline is meant to be restorative, reconciling the sinner to his
5 heavenly Father. The process involved will help to hold the abuser accountable to the Session.
6 Sessions should be trained in understanding patterns of abuse to navigate the inevitable, “he
7 said, she said.” When there are discrepancies between the accounts, look for the patterns. As
8 a physician investigates the correct symptoms for achieving a diagnosis, Sessions must probe
9 beyond what is said. Diagnosis is observable via patterns of behaviors. Years of abusive
10 behavior severely impacts a victim’s ability to effectively communicate. Abusers do not
11 experience this disadvantage and may seem far more believable and articulate. Additionally,
12 experts recognize that deception is extremely hard to detect.⁹⁹

13
14 *Female Advocacy:* Sitting with a Session and speaking of abuse is a frightening and
15 intimidating experience. The acts committed against victims are shameful and private. For
16 women, revealing these acts to male pastors or elders, no matter how kind they are, is still a
17 difficult and often traumatic event. Sessions might consider reducing the number of people
18 present in a meeting. It would be beneficial to have female advocates as part of this process.

19
20 *Community Resources:* Research local community groups trained in working with
21 perpetrators of domestic abuse. Secular organizations may use the Duluth Model, Emerge, or
22 similar training. Many court-mandated programs, referred to as Batterer Intervention
23 Programs (BIPs), follow these models. Most states require convicted offenders of partner
24 abuse to attend a BIP course. These secular models may be helpful; however, they will be
25 deficient in their biblical anthropology and their model for how people change. Churches can
26 augment these classes with their own counseling oversight of the abuser. Group classes are
27 typically more helpful than individual meetings. Other men in the group can help point out
28 patterns as well as challenge beliefs and behaviors for one another.

29
30 *Christian Resources:* There are several Christian resources available. Chris Moles
31 (chrismoles.org) offers an online class for abusive men (Men of Peace) along with other
32 resources for domestic abuse prevention and intervention. Refuge Ministries, established by
33 a PCA church, (refugeministries.com), offers material and some support group locations.
34 “Turning Point” is their men’s program. Called to Peace (calledtopeace.org) provides a
35 compassionate, comprehensive, and Christ-centered response to those impacted by domestic
36 abuse. Their men’s intervention group is “g5.” Help[H]er is a nonprofit founded by a PCA
37 member that offers training and resources for structuring a women-to-women in crisis advocacy
38 ministry in the local church (helperresources.com). An advocate can listen to a victim’s story,
39 accompany her to associated ecclesiastical proceedings, meet, and pray with her.

the nature and quality of the offense; *deliberate and intentional negative behaviors with the goal to harm whether or not he succeeds* (1 Sam. 19:9-10) and (4) the circumstances of time and place; *the home, the place where all—men, women, and children—are to be nurtured, loved, and protected* (Jer. 29:7).

⁹⁹ See Gladwell’s extensive treatment of the research done by Psychologist Tim Levine in “Default to Truth,” Malcolm Gladwell, *Talking to Strangers* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 57.

1 *Involve the Victim:* It is important to get feedback from the victim while shepherding the
 2 abuser. Overstating improvements while minimizing poor gains is common for an abuser.
 3 The victim can help inform the Session of persistent behaviors in the home and help direct
 4 counsel toward unrepentant and/or unchanged abusive patterns. Our proclivity to prefer good
 5 news necessitates consistent communication with the victim to monitor real change.

6
 7 *Separation:* Often, the abuser must be separated from the family. He will need encouragement
 8 and accountability during this time. He must also recognize his need for help as he will not
 9 fully understand his own heart. He will want the process to go much faster. Enlist the care of
 10 the deacons for practical needs.

11
 12 *Minister to the Congregation:* An abuser may be well-respected and have many good
 13 relationships with other members in the church. The accusations against him may be very
 14 confusing to these people. It is hard to fathom that a man who may also be a golfing or fishing
 15 buddy could be abusive in the home. We want to think well of one another. Be prepared to
 16 neutralize an abuser's PR campaign to undermine the church's process. Include any of these
 17 relationships when possible by enlisting their help to walk alongside the abuser for his
 18 encouragement and benefit.

19
 20 *DARVO¹⁰⁰:* As an abuser begins to understand "the what" and "the why" of his abuse, it is
 21 very common for him to use this information against his spouse. Many victims are accused of
 22 abuse by their abusers. Abusers can take the phrases and concepts they learn and turn them
 23 onto the victim. Educate church leaders regarding the difference between patterns of abuse,
 24 or the inconsistent characteristics of a victim who is responding to the weighty injustices of
 25 abuse.

26
 27 *Question Very Specifically:* Abusers minimize behaviors. Victims also minimize their
 28 abuser's behaviors. Follow up on responses to questions and ask for more detail. Become
 29 skilled in asking multiple questions from many angles to comprehend a fuller picture. An
 30 abuser may tell you that he got "a little angry" but not that he choked the victim until she
 31 passed out. The victim may also say "he got a little angry." Good questions will help the
 32 victim provide a more accurate picture of what is happening in the home. Ask questions like,
 33 "Describe what happened when he got angry" rather than simple yes or no questions. It is
 34 unsafe for the victim's abuser to be present when asking these questions. It is also
 35 recommended to have a female advocate present.

36
 37 *Boundaries:* Strictly adhere to any boundaries you set, including meeting times. Abusers push
 38 boundaries (just as they do when coercively controlling in the home) and they always have a
 39 good reason for why. "I'm so sorry I ran late, traffic was heavy." "I know you said I wasn't
 40 to text her, but her aunt really needed to contact her." This is a continuation of the power play
 41 used by an abuser to gain a perceived loss of their control. Control is the issue in the
 42 relationship. Control will be the issue in shepherding as well. Limit when he can call those
 43 who are helping him. The shepherding team and Session are not at his disposal.

¹⁰⁰ "Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender."

1 *Put On (Duties):* Create an action list for the abuser to complete in coordination with the
2 victim. Deeds are far more important than words when shepherding an abuser. Actions might
3 include . . .

- 4
- 5 • put off all abusive behaviors,
- 6 • attend a BIP,
- 7 • meet weekly with an elder for accountability,
- 8 • continue financial support of his family,
- 9 • adhere to communication restrictions.

10

11 *Spiritual Abuse:* Recognize that abusers will use Scripture as a means for justifying their
12 abuse. Teach a biblical view of marriage and family. Help the abuser see how his sin has
13 affected others. Encourage “particular” repentance for “particular” sins (*WCF* XV. 5) and for
14 sinful thinking he has chosen to believe.

15

16 *Genuine Forgiveness:* Abusers may use their apology to block further conversation. “I said I
17 was sorry. You have to forgive me and not bring it up again.” True repentance is seen in a
18 willingness to accept the consequences and to change actions.

19

20 *Beyond the Basics*

- 21
- 22 • Encourage effort; however, abusers will want to be rewarded for good behavior.
23 Remind them we do not deserve special privileges for simply doing the right thing
24 (Luke 17:10).
- 25 • Clearly point out when the abuser has minimized, denied, or justified his actions.
- 26 • Clearly point out when the abuser shifts blame for his actions to the victim or
27 others.
- 28 • Discourage self-pity. He may feel like the victim, especially if his feelings are hurt
29 as a consequence of what he has done.
- 30 • Encourage the abuser to cease his sinful actions immediately and repent.
- 31 • Hold the abuser responsible. People choose to abuse; they are not compelled.
- 32 • Encourage the abuser to take responsibility for his sinful actions.

33

34 *What not to do:*

- 35
- 36 • A classic mistake in shepherding of any kind is to focus on behavior alone, which
37 only addresses the surface of the problem. To address the problem at its root, focus
38 on the heart. This is no less true for abusers than for any other human being.
- 39 • Anger management courses are not very effective for domestic abuse. Anger is a
40 tool the abuser uses, not an underlying cause. Anger is a means to get what he
41 wants.
- 42 • Treating abuse as a marriage problem falsely assumes that one of the reasons he is
43 abusive is because of her behavior.

- Marriage counseling is dangerous for the victim. The Pastor or counselor does not know what happens once the couple leaves the office. The victim will be afraid to disclose what is happening behind closed doors in the home for fear of further abuse.
- Be very cautious in choosing to support the abuser in court.

Prevention and Deterrence

The most effective way to prevent and deter domestic abuse is to create a church culture that names the abuse from the Scriptures and condemns it as evil. Addressing the topic of domestic violence and oppression openly normalizes the discussion and abnormalizes the behavior. The following are meant to be thorough, however, are not exhaustive.

Preach from the pulpit about domestic abuse and oppression.

- Galatians 5:20 – “outbursts of anger” in the marriage relationship
- Ephesians 4:29 – on verbal and emotional abuse
- The “one another” and “each other” passages (Acts 1:14; 2:44)
- The heart of abuse (Matt. 12:34-36; Luke 6:43-46).
- The passages that articulate a culture of grace in relationships (Phil. 2:4-5; Eph. 4:1-16).
- A biblical perspective of power, sacrifice, and servant leadership (Matt. 26:53-54; Prov. 18:12; Eph. 4:1-3).

Periodically study the topic of domestic abuse in small groups:

- Descriptions of what it looks, sounds, and feels like;
- The emotional, physical, and spiritual impact on the spouse, children, and the abuse;
- Study books on marriage and on domestic abuse.

Other Ideas

- Provide opportunities to hear the testimonies of men and women who have been involved in domestic abuse situations.
- Offer instruction on how to handle conflict and build relationship skills
- Connect deacons and/or specific small groups with domestic violence organizations in the community for training and for resources for victims and their children.
- Beginning in middle school, teach respectful ways to treat others in relationship from a biblical framework.
- Train youth leaders to recognize red flags in high school dating relationships. Teach the youth biblical principles for marriage.

- Teach men and women in small groups, men's and women's ministries, and/or discipleship relationships biblical principles for parenting sons and daughters with the goal of respecting how God created them as individual image-bearers.
- Develop a diverse multi-voice church position paper on domestic abuse and oppression supported by the elders and distributed to the congregation, every successive membership class, and staff hires. Clearly state the definitions of the tactics of abuse, the dynamic of such abuse (power and control), and the steps the Session will take in the event of an occurrence of domestic abuse, no matter who the abuser is.
- Develop companion position papers on topics such as separation and divorce and the sanctity¹⁰¹ of human life.

7. Case Study

Liz heard an alarm clock going off somewhere, "WA, WA, WA," why didn't anyone else hear it? The bride at the front of the church (her daughter) must not have heard it because she didn't skip a beat in repeating her vows or exclaiming, "I do!" Her daughter's obvious enthusiasm created a murmur of laughter throughout the sanctuary. The couple at the altar were obviously in love and in a hurry to be married. Every person in the church sensed their excitement. No one in the church heard the alarm.

Liz was so distracted. She felt her heart race, and her palms were wet. For the life of her she couldn't figure out why no one else was bothered by the sound of the annoying alarm clock, "WA, WA, WA." She strained her neck forward in order to hear where the sound was coming from. Suddenly, Liz found it difficult to swallow. She heard the Pastor read, "Love is patient, love is kind..."

The last thing she remembers was the look on her daughter's face as Liz bolted toward the nearest exit, crying hysterically.

The church Liz attends is a small PCA congregation in the southernmost tip of the Bible belt. She's been there for over five years and is a member in good standing. Liz obviously struggles with depression; her physician also diagnosed PTSD. Liz flinches any time a man raises his voice or appears agitated. Her pastor, a compassionate man with a shepherd's heart, tries to help, but he doesn't know how. Liz's "issues" are well-known by fellow church members. No one really knows how to help.

What the little body of believers doesn't know is that one morning ten years ago, Liz's husband threatened to kill her while yelling "GET OUT of *my* house before I hurt you!" He had shoved her out the front door into the cold in her nightgown and told her he was going to kill the pets. The congregation has no clue it was the last day Liz endured her husband's assaults; they don't know she got a restraining order. They didn't know he moved his mistress

¹⁰¹ Consistency in the church culture between defending the unborn against the hand of the abortionist and women and children against the hand of an abuser in the home.

1 into the house after kicking Liz to the curb. They didn't know Liz is actually who paid for the
2 house.

3
4 Liz's brothers and sisters in Christ don't know that years of verbal, emotional, spiritual, and
5 sexual abuse continues to flood her memories, or that she finds it difficult to forget her
6 husband's accusation on their wedding night that she wasn't a virgin (she was). They don't
7 know about the day he got in her face and bellowed allegations that she refused his sexual
8 advances because she didn't want more children (she did), and then he "took what he wanted"
9 anyway. They didn't hear the cruel words he said after they had sex.

10
11 They didn't know how frequently her husband lied about where he was or what he was doing.
12 No one could have comprehended how Liz endured his tickling her mercilessly even when
13 she begged him to stop, or that he regularly threatened suicide.

14
15 Her friends didn't know that, for years, Liz questioned reality. Her constant battle was to
16 discern if she really was mistaken like her husband often told her. They didn't realize he called
17 her "a witch, a [x]itch, and a harlot," and told her she was stubborn, rebellious, and
18 disobedient. No one knew her husband engrained in Liz's mind that, "Marriage and slavery
19 are analogous." Her friends didn't realize the translation of that statement meant that—no
20 matter how her husband treated her or her body—her very life was in his hands. The proof
21 was when he shoved her into the wall before she left for work one morning.

22
23 What no one would have been able to grasp is that Liz was willing to bear it all for the sake
24 of the vow she made before God, and the idea she might one day save her husband. They
25 couldn't have comprehended that, with that kind of marriage, Liz never wanted a divorce.
26 They may have even asked why she didn't leave.

27
28 ***Brainstorming questions for help developing best practices:***

- 29
30 1. How many of the marriages in your church may be struggling due to abuse rather
31 than normal marital conflict?
32 2. How will you discern the difference?
33 3. What are you doing to proactively find women like Liz in your church?
34 4. What structures and/or procedures should your church or ministry already have in
35 place for domestic abuse?
36 5. Do members know how to report abuse at your church and to whom?
37 6. Do victims feel like your church is a safe place to report what's happening
38 privately in their home?
39 7. How can you help victims of abuse or trauma?
40 8. Who in your church is versed in abuse and trauma and compassionate to care for
41 the victim and/or her family?

SECTION THREE: WOMEN WHO ABUSE

1. Introduction

A dominant person exerts power over those who are vulnerable to their care. Anyone can abuse power and control by subjecting those at risk to threatening circumstances. Both men and women may employ tactics for achieving this goal of personal gain; however, studies confirm that women are disproportionately affected.¹⁰² One in three women either have been in, or are currently in, an abusive relationship.

The goal of the abuser is to use persons as objects for self-indulgence and/or personal gain. Both women and men who abuse share multiple common characteristics. Abusers, male and female, cross the line (self-centered sin to self-worship/me over you¹⁰³ sin), when they make another person pay for their entitlements. And while both men and women are victims of abuse— emotional and physical—and both men and women are perpetrators of abuse, it is rare to openly discuss women who abuse.¹⁰⁴ Statistics concerning women who abuse are more likely related to the parent/child relationship rather than abuse between partners.¹⁰⁵

The difference between male and female domination includes a heightened demonstration of physical/verbal/emotional abuse leading to greater fear. As “complementarians” we acknowledge power differentiation between men and women.¹⁰⁶ We therefore must (simultaneously) acknowledge women are at a higher risk of harm than men. “Women can be abusive and violent to their male partners, but this is estimated to happen in less than five percent of cases of domestic abuse.”¹⁰⁷ One difficulty in identifying accurate statistics of women who abuse is that male victims tend to have more shame and do not come forward.

Regardless of gender, abuse is a human issue, but more importantly abuse is a spiritual issue. At the core of abuse is the fact that the abuser has lost sight of their love and faithfulness to God. It is from within this void that evil actions find life. In Hosea 7:6 we read, “For with hearts like an oven they approach their intrigue; all night their anger smolders; in the morning it blazes like a flaming fire.” This is “an image of the heat of anger which burns in their hearts, which, being craftily concealed, does not at first make itself manifest, but which grows only

¹⁰² National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, *National Data on Intimate Partner Violence, Sexual Violence, and Stalking*, (Accessed November 2019), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs-fact-sheet-2014.pdf>.

¹⁰³ Jeremy Pierre, Greg Wilson. *When Home Hurts, A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2021), 70.

¹⁰⁴ Kimberly C. Taylor, *Exposing the Abusive Female*. Kindle Edition, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Child Maltreatment, Facts at a Glance, (Accessed March 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/childmaltreatment-facts-at-a-glance.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ See also page 2309 in the discussion of *WLC 151 on Aggravations That Make Sins More Heinous*.

¹⁰⁷ Joanne Belknap and Heather Melton, *Are Heterosexual Men Also Victims of Intimate Partner Violence?* (Harrisburg, PA: National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2005), <https://vawnet.org/material/are-heterosexual-men-also-victims-intimate-partner-abuse>, as quoted in Darby Strickland, *Is it Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 17.

the more surely, and at last breaks out in deeds of violence.”¹⁰⁸ The heart of the problem is the heart disposition. It is a heart shaped by evil.

Brad Hambrick, in his book *The Self-Centered Spouse*,¹⁰⁹ writes there are two kinds of abusers: passive and/or aggressive. He gets this idea from Matthew 7:6, “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.” Hambrick writes,

The distinction between levels of aggression can be seen in the animals chosen—wild dogs are aggressive animals and pigs are almost universally viewed as passive and lazy. Using the verb *trample* for pigs might not seem to have a connotation of passivity until one considers how trampling would be involved in the normal activity of pigs. Pigs trample many things, but not in the wild stampede of a heard of buffalo; rather, they do so by walking over things as part of their daily routine.¹¹⁰

Aggression isn’t the only type of abuse. In order to have a category for female abusers, it must be recognized and acknowledged that passive abuse is abusive. “One reason among many for the absence of consensus on the relative use of violence by men versus women is that *measurement of violent acts alone* does not adequately characterize violence in intimate partner relationships”¹¹¹ (emphasis provided).

Passive abuse as articulated by Hambrick includes but is not limited to . . .

- Avoids interaction until backed into a corner
- Idiosyncratic (peculiar) interpretations of actions, emotions, or conflict
- Complains that too much is asked of them
- Labels spouse as too demanding
- Makes every request a big deal
- Sees their own area of neglect as normal
- Enjoys being cared for
- Resents feeling parented
- Immature
- Apathetic
- Sense of entitlement
- “I’m sorry I can’t be who you want me to be”

¹⁰⁸ J. P. Lange, P. Schaff, O. Schmoller & J. F. McCurdy, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Hosea* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 68.

¹⁰⁹ Brad Hambrick, *The Self-Centered Spouse, Help for Chronically Broken Marriages* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2014), 10.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Mary Ann Dutton and Lisa A. Goodman, “Coercion in Intimate Partner Violence: Toward a New Conceptualization, Sex Roles,” *ResearchGate*, Vol. 52, Nos. 11/12, June 2005, 744.

- Answers questions with questions (providing hope the target might be heard)
- Returns questions, changes the subject, condemns, blame shifts (“but what about when you...?”)
- Condescension (arrogance) toward those with whom the abuser disagrees

Both male and female abusers coercively control their targets by linking a demand (spoken and/or unspoken, a.k.a., “the look”) with a credible threat of negative consequences for non-compliance.¹¹²

Women and men may differ in their ability to convey a credible threat, but they may differ *less* in their use of verbal insults or statements of humiliation.¹¹³ This is important because, while women may not use physical tactics, they can easily employ power tactics of coercive control.

Abuse of power involves:

- **Coercive power** involves the abuser’s ability to impose on the abused things the abused does not desire or to remove or decrease desired things.
- **Reward power** involves the abuser’s ability to give to the abused things the abused desires or take away or decrease things.
 - EX: Give “permission” (to see friends, family members) or spend money.
 - EX: Take away freedom (isolate), or conversation (using silent treatment).
 - EX: Sex
- **Legitimate power** involves the abuser’s ability to impose on the abused feelings of obligation or responsibility.
 - EX: “You don’t love me if...” or “If you loved me, you would...”
- **Referent power** involves the abuser’s ability to provide feelings of personal acceptance or approval based on the victim’s identification with the agent/ability to influence because of the respect, admiration, and personal identification with the abuser.
 - EX: Wearing hair a certain way, dressing a certain way, socializing, spending free time (all in a way that is desirable to the abuser but not so much to the abused).
- **Expert power** involves the abuser’s ability to provide skill or expertise and arises from the victim’s belief that they have no such expertise.
 - EX: Financial prowess.
- **Informational power** involves the abuser’s ability to provide knowledge or information necessary for the victim’s well-being.
 - EX: Physical/illness/taking (the right) pills on time.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid., 747.

¹¹³ Ibid., 746.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 745.

The victim's response to coercion does involve choice although not *free* choice. The abused has two basic choices:

1. Compliance – the abused can choose to comply and hope to avoid threatened negative consequences. For instance, coercive power is based on the victim's belief that the victim can and will experience negative consequences for noncompliance.
- or
2. Resistance – risk punishment.

Another power tactic is called “setting the stage.”¹¹⁵ It is a type of coercion that softens the abused by setting a stage where the abuser demonstrates to the abused that he or she has the means to exert coercion and is ready and willing to pay any associated costs.

Setting the stage is meant to . . .

- Create the expectancy of negative consequences,
- Create or exploit the partner's vulnerabilities,
- Wear down the partner's resistance, and/or
- Facilitate attachment.

Setting the stage creates the expectancy of negative consequences. It communicates the ability, willingness, and readiness to control one's partner by punishing and withholding. This can be done by way of explicit statements like, “If you don't, I will make sure...” or it can be done with implicit statements, as in “the look.” These tactics might be utilized in an instant or cumulatively over the course of the relationship. The impact is such, however, that one instance is enough to set the stage and control all future instances.

Creating vulnerability is very important especially for female-on-male abuse. It may include (but not be limited to) . . .

- The economic:
 - The woman makes more money and feels entitled to control the finances.
- The physical:
 - Controlling the spouse who has an illness
 - If the male spouse is unable to work
 - With an elderly spouse, the abuser withholds meds or neglects physical needs.
 - Wear down the partner's resistance
 - Deplete resources (economic or emotional support)
 - The most effective physical exploitation is sleep deprivation.¹¹⁶
- Exploitation of mental health problems
 - Same type of exploitation as physical illness
 - The victim may have existing vulnerabilities, such as a history of childhood abuse.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 745.

¹¹⁶ Malcolm Gladwell, *Talking with Strangers* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), 259.

2. Biblical Examples

Delilah – Judges 16:5-22

“And the lords of the Philistines came up to her and said to her, ‘Seduce him, and see where his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to humble him. And we will each give you 1,100 pieces of silver’” (v.5). In this story, the greed that benefits self (self-worship) is a characteristic of those who abuse. Scripture itself shows us the type of abuse Delilah employed:

- “Now she had men lying in ambush in an inner chamber. And she said to him, **‘The Philistines are upon you, Samson!’**” (v.9).
- “So Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them and said to him, **‘The Philistines are upon you, Samson!’**” (v.12).
- “Then Delilah said to Samson, ‘Until now you have mocked me and told me lies. Tell me how you might be bound.’” . . . **“The Philistines are upon you, Samson!”** (v.14).
- “And she said to him, ‘How can you say, “I love you,” when your heart is not with me? You have mocked me these three times, and you have not told me where your great strength lies.’ And when **she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death.** And he told her all his heart” (vv. 15-17).
- “When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the lords of the Philistines, saying, ‘Come up again, for he has told me all his heart.’ Then the lords of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him. And she said, **‘The Philistines are upon you, Samson!’**” (vv. 18-20).
- “She made him sleep on her knees. And she called a man and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to *torment* him, and his strength left him” (v. 19).

Scripture identifies Delilah abused Samson in verse 19: “torment.”

Michal – 1 Samuel 18:17-26; 25:44; 2 Samuel 3:12-16; 6:16-23

- “It pleased Saul to give David his daughter” (1 Sam. 18:17-26).
- Michal then given by Saul to Paltiel (1 Sam. 25:44).
- David sent for Michal, and Paltiel followed weeping after her (2 Sam. 3:12–16).
- Ark comes back to the city of David (2 Sam. 6:16–23).
 - Michal sees David leaping and dancing before the Lord and she despised him in her heart (v. 18).
 - And David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, “How the king of Israel honored himself

today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' female servants, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovers himself!" (v. 20).

Michal showed disgust, was mocking and belittling. Michal was a hurt woman (though, not an excuse). We can see in this story an example of hurting people hurt people. Often, both abusers and their victims are suffering from traumatic events. Yet, while Michal used abusive words and actions to taunt her husband, David's power differential ultimately dictated Michal's demise: "And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death" (2 Sam. 6:23).

Herodias – Matthew 14:1-12

"For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because John had been saying to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her" (vv. 3-4).

This tells us something about characteristics of an abusive wife.

- Herodias had something she wanted (the king, royal life, all the perks).
- She wasn't willing to give up those things.
- She wasn't going to let anyone tell her what to do (i.e., John the Baptist).
- She diminished John as a person. She was the queen. What did she care about a man in the wilderness who "wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey" (Matt. 3:4)?
- This shows how abusers have no categories for disagreement.

This story tells us something about a husband as well (albeit not justification for abuse).

- For the sake of Herodias (v. 3)
 - Vulnerability – he would do anything for the sake of his wife.
- And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet (v. 5).
 - Vulnerability – the king feared "man."
- But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask (vv. 6-7).
 - Vulnerability – the king had a weakness for women.
- And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given (v.9).
 - Vulnerability – the king's fear of man.

Modern Examples/Characteristics

The following represent potential exacting behaviors that women may use to abuse. This is not an all-inclusive, comprehensive list, nor are all of the characteristics always indicative of abuse. In detecting whether or not the relationship is abusive, we look for patterns.

- Blame shifting
 - “But don’t you see how your actions made me do this?”
 - “As a Christian, I would think that you would assume the best of me.”
 - “If you would just man up, I wouldn’t have to tell you what to do!”
- Self-pity
 - “I’m just so misunderstood.”
 - “You’re so mean for making me feel bad about myself.”
 - “You have it easy, you have no right to ask that of me.”
 - “Can’t you appreciate me?”
- Allows for no questioning; cries “abuse” when confronted with a question.
- Has double standards:
 - One standard for herself.
 - EX: Does not need to stay on a budget or keep clothes tidy
 - EX: Explodes when his laundry is not put away or he spends money on himself
 - One standard for everybody else
- Views any suggestion that maybe she is in the wrong as an attack on her person.
 - “You have some nerve telling me how to parent. All you ever do is indulge the kids!”
- Has punishing behaviors
 - Silent treatment prolonged
 - Withholding sex
 - Purposely embarrasses
 - Breaks his things
- Re-writes the narrative so that it features her as the victim, no matter what her actions actually were in the scenario
- Is fond of saying, “We’re ALL sinners” —but not in a sense of sorrow or humility, but more of, “Don’t you dare judge me.”
- Only assigns herself the very best motives, no matter the evidence to the contrary.
- Is truly shocked that others don’t also assign the very best motives to her actions.
- Apologizes in a way that actually finds fault with the other person;
 - “I’m sorry if you thought I was doing that; I wasn’t doing that, I was trying to do something nice for you because you are hard to please and I get anxious,”—however, not much evidence of real anxiety on her part.
- Very concerned about how people view her, less concerned about actual consequences of her actions
- Inability to let go of things in the past for which she supposedly already granted forgiveness

- Brings up past sins committed against her, including those for which she offered forgiveness
- Uses past failures against him
- Shames him for his past
- Holds unforgiveness over someone's head and uses it as a bargaining chip for getting what she wants
- Very manipulative—tries to “sell” you on something she wants by attempting to convince you that it is what YOU want, and she's just doing it for you
- Gets angry or sullen when there is pushback
- Does kind things for others but gets very upset when similar things are not done in return.
- Often communicates her lifelong disappointment that he isn't in the career she wants him to be in, with the level of financial security she wants
- Very unsupportive of his decisions
- A very discontent person in general
- Tendency toward jealousy
- Very controlling
- Micromanages the details of her children and husband's plans
- Speaks to the husband in a condescending way as if he is a child
- Truly believes that she is being gracious toward her husband
- Says she wants her husband to lead in the home, but when he tries, unless it is to her specifications, she communicates her deep disappointment in his attempts through body language, indirect comments, etc.
- She places a burden of “make me happy or else” on her husband
- There is a strong undercurrent of unease in their home, centered around her

Many abusive men can make false claims that their wife is the abuser. One helpful way to discern victims from someone simply claiming they are is to consider the effect of their actions. True male victims present in the same way female victims do. They are afraid and feel the weight of wrongly placed guilt; they under-report, and they appear confused and/or uncertain. Abuse is as confusing for men as it is for women.

A second way to interact with claims of abuse is to seek out details of the relationship. This will help determine if this was a global accusation (but the details don't rise to the level of abuse), an incident of resistance (wife protecting herself from abuse), or part of a long-standing pattern of coercive control.

3. Abuse? Or a Response to Abuse?

Women who abuse may, like men, use aggression and or violence as a tactic to abuse. But often female victims use violence to get the abuse to stop. A woman's use of violence largely involves self-defense or fighting back.¹¹⁷ Often, these women will use weapons in order to

¹¹⁷ Dutton and Goodman, *Coercion*, 744.

1 overcome the power differential. It is very difficult to discern between a woman who abuses
2 and a woman responding to abuse. It is not uncommon for a male abuser to claim he is the
3 victim in these situations. Enlisting help from those who have spent considerable time working
4 with abuse victims and survivors—victim advocates and/or third party, trained investigators—
5 will help rule out false reports.

6
7 Fighting back is a natural response to injustice. Spurgeon writes,

8
9 We do well when we are angry with sin, because of the wrong which it commits
10 against our good and gracious God; or with ourselves because we remain so
11 foolish after so much divine instruction; or with others when the sole cause of
12 anger is the evil which they do. He who is not angry at transgression becomes
13 a partaker in it. Sin is a loathsome and hateful thing, and no renewed heart can
14 patiently endure it. God Himself is angry with the wicked every day, and it is
15 written in His Word, “Ye that love the Lord, hate evil.”¹¹⁸

16
17 What are some symptoms an abused woman will exhibit that can bring a misdiagnosis of her
18 as the abuser? The following list is not exhaustive, and not all characteristics are indicative of
19 abuse. Investigating abuse means looking for patterns.

- 20
21 • Socially isolated/withdrawn
22 • Poor impulse control (yells, screams, throws things)
23 • Low self-worth
24 • Readily takes ownership of her faults
25 • Depressed or even suicidal
26 • Angry and fearful at the same time
27 • Denies the seriousness of problems in marriage; realization may evolve over
28 time.¹¹⁹
29 • May be apathetic, low motivation
30 • May have nervous habits
31 • May have poor hygiene
32 • Talks negatively about self or life in general
33 • Embarrassed about her situation (shame) because it reflects on her worth as a
34 woman/wife
35 • Overly apologetic
36 • Victims enter victim relationships. Previous abuse makes them good targets
37 because vulnerability is built in—susceptible to grooming.

¹¹⁸ Spurgeon, C. H.. Morning and Evening: Daily Readings (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1896)
Morning, July 13.

¹¹⁹ “And Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when He had spit on his
eyes and laid His hands on him, he asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’ And he looked up and said, ‘I see
people, but they look like trees, walking.’ Then Jesus laid His hands on his eyes again; and he opened his eyes,
his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly” (Mark 8:23-25).

- Protects, defends, explains the abuser
- Denies abuse
- Refuses to admit or firmly believes abuse won't continue to happen
- Speaks in terms of "accidents" ("he didn't mean...he doesn't...")
- Changes mind frequently
- Extreme privacy
- Effective liars (shaped by evil). They have to lie to protect (home, self, children) and keep peace
 - Withholds information
 - Rationalization
- Belligerent (especially to other authority figures, i.e., police, church leadership)
- Speaks poorly about, complains, or disrespects her abusive husband
- Or, conversely, submissive
- Considers herself responsible, "over owns"
- High expectations of self/maximizes responsibility
- Minimizes situations
- Guilt
- Untrusting of others
- Feels insane (Asks, "Is this normal?" looks for constant affirmation)
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty articulating
 - Hyper vigilance creates an atmosphere which makes it difficult to concentrate on anything but the abuser and their well being
- Anorexic (or other controlling behaviors)
- Unbalanced (always questioning)
- Nervous/anxious
- May not readily converse with opposite sex
- Protective of home life (Do other kids come over?)
- Fear of "man" and/or fear of men
- Controlling (which makes identifying abuse difficult)
 - Grasping at straws, they feel out of control, so they seek any other way to control.
 - This is most often seen with mothers' relationships to their children or any other authoritative relationship, i.e., younger siblings, employees for instance.

The traumatic responses of a victim to the effects of abuse are not responses to normal marital issues. Their marriage is not normal. It's almost impossible to know a victim's sin issues when her world revolves around protecting herself and her children.

4. Case Study

Natalie backed the minivan out of the driveway. . . a little too fast. She had to swerve to miss the mailbox. Natalie and the kids were late for Sunday school, so she was driving erratically.

1 The kids flinched when the van jerked, but they didn't dare mention it or respond with any
2 show of fear. They knew better. "I'm. SO. Grrrr . . ." the kids heard their mom spew more
3 than speak.

4
5 Moments before they left the house, Natalie and Mike had been fighting. Again. Mike worked
6 the late shift Friday and Saturday night after his day job. At 8:30 am he was still asleep, so
7 Natalie had to get the three kids (ages 2, 4, and 6) bathed, fed, and ready for church by herself.
8 She was not happy. "I. DO. NOT. DESERVE. THIS," she murmured, and turned down the
9 street toward the church.

10
11 The fighting began that morning like usual. It started with Natalie's silence. She wasn't silent
12 because she didn't want to wake Mike—more so because she was seething inside. She had
13 taken care of the kids by herself all weekend and she was *done*! She needed Mike to get up,
14 act like a man, and participate in the family as a father should. But Mike was still sleeping.
15 The kids were watching cartoons in their pajamas, eating bowls of dry Fruit Loops with
16 marshmallows. Natalie had told the oldest to prepare his siblings' breakfast. The cereal and
17 marshmallows were all he could find. Natalie contemplated her next steps.

18
19 When the silent period ended, the kids knew to go to their rooms. Even the two-year-old
20 wanted to be out of hearing distance from the yelling. "YOU JERK!" they heard from the
21 "safety" of their bedrooms. Natalie was standing over Mike as he lay in their bed. She had
22 ripped the sheets and blankets off his body, jerked the shades off the windows to let in the
23 sunlight, and screamed at the top of her lungs. "I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE STILL IN BED
24 WHEN THE KIDS NEED A BATH AND I NEED TO GET TO CHURCH." Natalie was on
25 the nursery schedule; she had told Mike earlier in the week. She never reminded him, but she
26 expected him to remember and be available when called on to help.

27
28 Mike had had a total of four hours of sleep between Thursday night and Sunday. He was
29 definitely sleep deprived. He worked two jobs just to keep up with the bills. Mike had gone
30 to seminary but never found a calling. He drove a UPS truck during the day and cleaned the
31 local middle school building on weekend nights. Natalie constantly complained to Mike she
32 couldn't continue to live with his schedule. She blamed him for not getting the job when he
33 applied for a pastoral position. She told Mike his "humility" (his word—Natalie called it
34 weakness) came off pathetic. Who would hire a man like that for their pastor? She wouldn't
35 forgive him for giving up and settling for random part-time jobs.

36
37 Sometimes Mike would fight back. He would tell Natalie he'd fully support her if she wanted
38 to get a job. Natalie would just sneer and say "Are you kidding? Are YOU going to take care
39 of the kids and get them to school and appointments? I have enough on my plate with Bible
40 study and Life Group and my discipleship relationships! Are you going to tell me that, just
41 because YOU can't get a job in ministry, I have to ignore God's calling for ME? If you loved
42 me, you'd find a better job that would allow you to be the husband and father you were meant
43 to be!"

1 It didn't seem to matter to Natalie that Mike typically stopped at the grocery store on his way
 2 home from work, or that he was the one to start the crockpot with dinner before he left to pick
 3 up his UPS load in the morning. Natalie had fallen asleep watching a movie the night before
 4 this latest blow up, so she didn't see Mike read the kids a story and tucked them into bed.
 5 Nothing Mike did was good enough. The mood in the home was one of general discontent,
 6 and the center of that unhappiness evolved around Natalie.

7
 8 Natalie's demeanor calmed as she pulled into the church parking lot. She put on her "Sunday
 9 face" and delivered each of the older kids to their Sunday school class. By the time she got to
 10 the nursery with her two-year-old in tow, she was late. "I'm *soooo* sorry," she told the
 11 children's director. "I just wanted to make sure my kids' classes didn't need any help because
 12 I know how you hate when they're short-handed. I was so anxious to make sure all was right
 13 according to your meticulous standards!" A toddler climbed up on the small plastic chair next
 14 to Natalie and started to teeter. The director called out to Natalie, "Catch him!" Natalie turned
 15 toward the child and stepped back. The boy hit the floor hard, headfirst. Natalie's version of
 16 rescue was to pick up the crying child by his ankle and deposit him into the lap of another
 17 worker. When confronted, Natalie smiled and said, "I'm sorry! I can't always be perfect! You
 18 know, you were right here too! I'm not as strong as you and besides, if that boy's mom had
 19 taught him better, it would never have happened."

20
 21 ***Brainstorming questions for help developing best practices:***
 22

- 23 1. What are some of the differences between a woman who is abusive, and a woman
 24 responding to abuse?
- 25 2. How will you discern the difference?
- 26 3. Do your church volunteers know how to report "concerning" situations? Do they
 27 know what constitutes something "concerning?"
- 28 4. Are your children's ministry workers trained to identify children at risk? How
 29 often does training take place?
- 30 5. If a man in your church had an abusive wife, who could he feel safe to talk about
 31 it with?
- 32 6. If a woman in your church reports another woman with exacting behaviors toward
 33 her, what would some action steps look like?

SECTION FOUR: ADULT SEXUAL ABUSE¹²⁰

1. Summary Description of Sexual Abuse

There are few more egregious acts of oppressive behavior than abusing another person sexually.

Sexual abuse includes harassment, assault, and/or rape. Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It consists of inappropriate verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's sense of well-being by creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment from the viewpoint of the affected individual.¹²¹ Assault is any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained. It is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority.¹²² Adult rape is, "The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim."¹²³

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8% completed, 2.8% attempted). About 3% of American men—or 1 in 33—have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.¹²⁴

2. Expressing God's Heart

Dr. Langberg writes that knowing and understanding God's response to evil and suffering is necessary to "enter into" the survivor's deep hurt. "The essence of working with trauma survivors is about bearing witness to their story and suffering, entering into their life, and demonstrating in the flesh the heart of our God toward them and the evil they experienced."¹²⁵ In humility, as we recognize our own sinfulness and God's extraordinary grace, we will be

¹²⁰ This section of the report will reference three works (quoted with permission by the publishers).

- Diane Mandt Langberg, *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997).
- Diane Mandt Langberg, *The Spiritual Impact of Sexual Abuse* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2017).
- Andrew J. Schmutzer, ed., *The Long Journey Home: Understanding and Ministering to the Sexually Abused* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

¹²¹ Justin S. Holcomb, "Abuse and the Church: Types of Abuse" (PowerPoint presentation, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2020). Retrieved from RTS Instructure.

¹²² Holcomb, "Abuse and the Church." Retrieved from RTS Instructure.

¹²³ "An Updated Definition of Rape," United States Department of Justice Archives, Office of Public Affairs, accessed September 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/updated-definition-rape>.

¹²⁴ "Statistics," Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), accessed September 16, 2021, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics>.

¹²⁵ Langberg, *Spiritual Impact of Sexual Abuse*.

more careful in encouraging those who have experienced the horrific destruction of sexual abuse. Hope is found for sufferers in God's Word. The Lord desires that His people protect the vulnerable. We will also recognize the depth of depravity of the abuser, so we will form our response carefully to them as well.

Sexual immorality deeply impacts the whole person, spiritually *and* physically.¹²⁶ Sexual abuse destroys both the inner and outer man. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 6:18 that it is harmful to engage in consensual sexual immorality; sexual abuse is a violent physical and spiritual act against another person. It is what is described by God as oppression. In Genesis 34:2, we read Shechem raped Dinah. Moses writes, he “seized” (*נָקַח*) Dinah and “humiliated” (*עָנָה*) her, otherwise interpreted as “oppressing” her.

The church must respond with God's heart for those who suffered from sexual abuse. We are called to proclaim to victims that our Lord is the stronghold for the oppressed, and that He will continue to be a stronghold in times of trouble (Ps. 9:9).

3. Recognition and Impacts of Sexual Abuse

Sexual assault is an exceptionally common experience of women (and many men) in all societies. Victims silently populate the pews and sanctuaries of our churches. Suffering from sexual assault and/or abuse generally creates significant life-long behavioral, emotional, and medical problems, often unrecognized and untreated. Surveys in the United States indicate that up to one-fourth of women have been assaulted, some repeatedly, with 50 to 80% of those assaults committed by a person known by the survivor.¹²⁷

Sexual assault is stigmatizing, and only one-fourth of cases are reported to authorities. Secrecy and shame create self-loathing, often due to the “rape-myths” of the victims provoking the attack. Rape is the most common cause of PTSD in women, and nearly half of men and women exposed to sexual assault meet criteria for lifetime PTSD.¹²⁸

Victims of sexual assault have a high prevalence of serious emotional and physical issues including depression, anxiety, drug, and/or alcohol abuse. Victims and survivors may also be diagnosed with bipolar or personality disorders because of impulsive and self-defeating behaviors. These more severe manifestations are related to the severity and frequency of the experience, use of weapons, the victim's age at the time of the assault, and social and economic resources.¹²⁹

Unfortunately, when sexual abuse is disclosed to friends, family, or authorities, revelation of assault may result in negative social consequences such as blaming and/or shunning. Recovery

¹²⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:18 (ESV) “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.”

¹²⁷ Helen Luce et al., “Sexual Assault of Women,” *American Family Physician* 81, no. 4 (2010): 489-495.

¹²⁸ Emily R. Dworkin et al., “Sexual Assault Victimization and Psychopathology: A Review and Meta-analysis,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 56 (2017): 65-81.

¹²⁹ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 61-74.

and restoration depend upon prompt, effective, empathetic, and sustained, multi-level care similar to the process for the other forms of abuse.

Relationship Spheres

According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, an American is sexually assaulted every nine minutes.¹³⁰ The following are statistics gathered by the Network in 2021 unless otherwise noted.

Marital

“Statistics reveal that sexual assault or forced sex occurs in approximately 40 to 45 percent of marriage relationships that have involved verbal or physical violence. Marital rape occurs in 10 to fourteen percent of all marriages. These numbers should alarm us. And they should also cause us to ask why, if marital sexual abuse is this prevalent, we do not hear more about it.”¹³¹

Authority

In an older survey by the Center for Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Abuse, nearly thirteen percent of clergy said they had sex with a church member.¹³² In another survey, approximately fourteen percent of ministers admitted to engagement in sexual behavior that was considered to be inappropriate for a minister.¹³³

Acquaintance

Eight out of ten sexual assaults are committed by someone known to the victim. Thirty-three percent of assaults are committed by a current or former spouse, boyfriend, or girlfriend.

Caregiver

“People with disabilities are three times as likely to be sexually assaulted as their peers without disabilities.”¹³⁴

¹³⁰ “Statistics,” RAINN.

¹³¹ Darby Strickland, *Is It Abuse?: A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 166.

¹³² James Franklin, “Sex Abuse by Clergy Called Crisis for Church,” *Boston Globe*, July 17, 1991.

¹³³ Jeff T. Seat, James T. Trent, and Jwa K. Kim, “The Prevalence and Contributing Factors of Sexual Misconduct among Southern Baptist Pastors in Six Southern States,” *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 47, no. 4 (December 1993).

¹³⁴ “Domestic Violence and People with Disabilities: What to Know, Why It Matters, and How to Help,” National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV blog), March 13, 2018, <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/domestic-violence-and-people-with-disabilities>.

Stranger

Only nineteen percent of adult sexual assaults are committed by a complete stranger.

Recognizing the Impacts of Sexual Abuse

There are numerous impacts on God’s image-bearers from sexual abuse. According to Dr. Langberg, these after-effects are not decisive; however, they may indicate sexual abuse has occurred.¹³⁵

Emotional After-effects:

- Anxiety attacks
- Phobias
- Depression
- Suicidal ideation
- Despair and hopelessness
- Pervasive dissatisfaction with life
- Emotional paralysis or numbness
- Anger difficulties
- Deep grief
- Self-blame
- Self-loathing
- “They will often use words like worthless, trash, or garbage when referring to themselves.”¹³⁶
- Distorted body image
- Though longing for closeness, they may have a deep fear of intimacy or commitment.
- Adult survivors may “find it very difficult to trust others.”¹³⁷

Physical After-effects:

- Self-destructive tendencies
- Addictions to alcohol, food, spending, drugs, and sex
- Suicide ideation
- Self-mutilation: “burning, cutting, self-bruising, biting, sticking oneself with pins, scratching, and beating oneself about the head”¹³⁸
- Sexual dysfunctions
- Sexual orientation confusion

¹³⁵ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 69-74.

¹³⁶ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 70.

¹³⁷ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 71.

¹³⁸ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*.

Spiritual After-effects:

- Distorted image of God
- “God is often perceived to be punitive, an impossible taskmaster, capricious, impotent, indifferent, or dead.”¹³⁹
- A “death of hope”¹⁴⁰

Difficulty in Disclosure

When someone discloses sexual abuse, it is important to listen and act in a way that supports the person and keeps him or her protected. God’s desire is that we support those who have been abused (Matt. 19:13-5, Luke 17:2). While it is the responsibility of law enforcement to investigate, in the moment of disclosure or discovery the church must also provide care for the victim.

Why Victims of Sexual Abuse Do Not Disclose Abuse

- They may be instructed to keep the abuse a secret.
- They may be afraid to tell anyone.
- The abuser may have threatened them or their family.
- They may not know who is safe to tell.
- They might lack the language needed to capture what is happening to them or to share all the complexities involved.
- They may be made to feel responsible for the abuse.
- The person harming them may have established an emotional connection with them and/or the family to lower inhibitions (“grooming,” see definition in Attachment 1).
- The abuser may have convinced them that abuse is normal.
- They may be convinced no one will believe them.
- They may have dissociated from the events. A victim’s mind may have difficulty reconciling what happened. To survive, abuse victims can involuntarily disconnect from their thoughts, feelings, memories, and surroundings. This makes it even more challenging for victims to accurately remember events, and timelines, or possess an absolute certainty about what occurred.
- They may love their abuser and desire to protect him or her.
- Many victims fear they will not be believed.
- A woman who has been sexually abused by a man may resist speaking with male leadership.
- They may be shocked, frightened, and/or angry.
- They may not know how to approach the problem.
- They may wonder, “Am I right?” “Did that really happen?”

¹³⁹ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 73.

¹⁴⁰ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 74.

- They may be physically, emotionally, and/or financially dependent on the abuser.
- They may question whether it is the right thing to do or if the abuse is really that bad.
- They may fear for what they will have to go through once the abuse is reported.
- They may be concerned about the cost, particularly if the abuser is another family member or a prominent member of the church or community.

Often victims of abuse encounter doubt regarding their credibility. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding is the lack of a solid, biblical understanding of the nature of evil and suffering. It is common for Christians to believe that sexual abuse does not happen in the church. What we think we know about other people, victims, and their families is inadequate when it comes to identifying abuse.

Because of these multiple barriers, when someone discloses abuse, it might be a gradual revelation. Abuse has many complex layers and the information disclosed must be mediated without bias. It is essential for church leaders, workers, staff, and volunteers to be familiar with the clues that signal abuse.

4. Responding to an Adult Sexual Abuse Disclosure or Discovery

The following are recommended for a careful response to the survivor and accused:

1. Church Advocacy Group
2. Session Crisis Intervention Team

Church Advocacy Group

Those who have experienced any form of sexual abuse, assault, or harassment inside of or outside the church should have an easily accessible, empathetic, reliable, and formal means of reporting. Persons with like experience or situation help somewhat in decreasing fear of reporting. Appointed and highly visible advocates in the local church might include a small group of well-trained members such as:

- Mature youth,
- Women,
- Minorities,
- Aged,
- Persons who have survived various forms of abuse.

The advocacy group should document the concern or complaint in sufficient detail to categorize it as reportable to public authorities (such as physical abuse, rape, sexual assault, physical assault, battery, kidnapping, etc.) or non-reportable (spiritual abuse short of the above, sexual harassment, adultery, etc.).

Crisis Intervention Team

The Crisis Intervention Team consists of effective, wise, and disciplined elders (other than those assigned to advocacy group) able to intervene promptly, efficiently, and effectively to the complaint.

Major tasks will be to . . .

1. Investigate the matter with the accused in a timely manner,
2. Immediately relieve any allegedly abusive leaders from duty, and
3. Provide shepherding counsel and support to the families.

The Crisis Intervention Team is also responsible as a liaison with the Presbytery (if the accused is a TE) and communication to and with the congregation and public regarding the matter. Truth, honesty, and accountability should be the hallmarks of the team's interactions with the accused, congregation, Presbytery, and with the public.

The Crisis Intervention Team (or appointed elder) should inform the accused of the charge and relieve him from duty (if a church leader) immediately. They should conduct their investigation in such a way as to carefully shepherd the victim and preserve their safety, anonymity, privacy, and welfare.

Reportable complaints should be given to police with the victim's permission. The Advocacy Group and/or Crisis Intervention Team should inform the Pastor and/or Session (the latter only if the Pastor is implicated) immediately after report submission to authorities. This is to avoid cover up for serious crimes and offenses at the beginning, the most crucial phase of the process.

Non-reportable complaints should be written in sufficient detail and presented to the Session. It is wise to shield a victim's identity unless given permission to disclose. If the complaint is warranted, the Session might plan a strategy to confront the accused. A complaint considered unwarranted should be documented and provided to the accuser with the reasons for the determination.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should meet with the accused after the complaint, or as soon as possible if reported to authorities. Prior to this meeting, they should engage in prayer for wisdom, discernment, and the preservation of the honor of Christ and His church, as well as for grace in approach to both parties.

The accuser should not be present, nor named to the accused to protect against reprisal and/or retribution. A written complaint should be presented to the accused. The accused's response will be documented verbatim by the advocates, including the responses to appropriate further clarifying questions. Such questions should provide details of:

- Factual occurrence,
- Motives,
- Emotions,
- Prior events pertinent to the investigation as seen fit by the investigators and accused,
- Specific disagreement,
- Regret,
- Remorse, and/or
- Repentance expressed by the accused.

Each answer should be recorded in as much detail as possible, using direct quotes rather than paraphrases. These questions and statements should be recorded and documented until the meeting has reached a conclusion. Questions refused should also be so recorded.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should meet following a confrontation for prayer and to deliberate upon, analyze, and formulate their findings and conclusion of the preliminary investigation. They should document their findings and recommendations for further pursuit of the complaint in writing and submit them to the accused. At the presentation to the accused, the team should record any rebuttal, clarification, or other response of the accused.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should prayerfully deliberate on the written complaint, response, and rebuttal, and amend or sustain the original findings and recommendation in a final report. This report should be given to both accuser and accused. The following are possible courses of action that may be recommended to the Session:

1. **The issue be resolved with follow-up** by the Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder to both parties separately.
2. **The issue requires further investigation** by Session and/or outside investigators or counsel before actions can be recommended.
3. **The abuse report requires immediate action** such as contacting the police or Presbytery if not already reported, suspension from duty, or medical/psychiatric intervention.
4. **Action requires a formal program** of biblical counseling, spiritual discipline, mentoring, and accountability of progress in conformity to Christ by one or both parties.
5. **Formal charges or dissolution of pastoral relationship is warranted** if abuser is a Teaching Elder.

Bringing Charges Against a Teaching Elder

Besides prayer, confrontation, deliberation, and investigation, it is important that PCA churches avail themselves of the formal system for accountability if a Teaching Elder is guilty of sexual abuse.

The *PCA Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 34 is entitled “Special Rules Pertaining to Process Against a Minister.” A church minister (Teaching Elder) is a “member” of a Presbytery, not the local church. Therefore, it is necessary to pursue accountability through members of the Presbytery (34:4).

There are three possible ways to proceed by the Session or church members:

1. Discuss the matter with another elder in the Presbytery, of which the Teaching Elder is a member, seeking their personal aid in further confrontation.
2. Bring clear, documented proof of sexual abuse to the committee that handles charges brought against member pastors for their consultation.
3. Bring charges against the minister before this committee. Two witnesses must bring testimony (*BCO* 34:5) or there must be clear “corroborative evidence.”

Although the first and second options may be less intimidating to church members, bringing an abusive leader to trial is necessary to provide safety to the broader church. A Teaching Elder who is guilty of sexual abuse should be publicly disallowed from ministry in the PCA. Should the congregation wish to remove a Teaching Elder due to his sexual sin, they are required to follow these steps:

1. “...there shall always be a meeting of the congregation called and conducted in the same manner as the call of the pastor (*BCO* 23-1).”
2. The meeting must be presided over by a ruling or Teaching Elder of the PCA.
3. The will of the congregation (as voted upon) is presented to the Presbytery for approval for the “dissolution of the pastoral relation.”

Independent Assessments or Investigations

In the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, in a discussion of the sufficiency of Scripture, the divines say,

There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. [*WCF* 1:6]

In circumstances where Scripture does not provide clarity, a society, by common grace, may have come to understand truth that may be observed by the church. The divines carefully note that Scripture is the final authority, but truth may be found in the “common...actions and societies” due to God’s common grace and general revelation.

Regarding abuse in the church, there are times when outside counsel from experts in fields of study to which a particular church has limited access, should be sought for the good and care of church members. Agencies and organizations that are equipped to evaluate and make

recommendations impartially (unhindered by church politics) can be effectively utilized by church courts.

Scripture is clear that judgments by church courts must be impartial (Lev. 19:15). The relational dynamics found within the church must not influence judgments. Seeking outside counsel may provide this objective assessment.

In addition, there may be an abusive culture in which the church is immersed. There are often blind spots making it difficult to see the abuse. Rather than considering outside counsel as a threat or liability, Scripture makes evident that a humble commitment to seeking truth, holiness, justice, and compassion is at the heart of wise leadership (Prov. 1:2-5, 23:23, Heb. 10:34).

Finally, church courts are not bound by outside counsel. In the end, the recommendations of non-church agencies or organizations must be weighed in light of Scripture with wisdom to determine final judgments in each case.

There are three main situations when outside counsel might be invaluable.

1. When a decision needs to be made

Rationale: When a specific step¹⁴¹ is necessary to move the case forward, and certainty is required, an outside expert evaluation of the evidence may provide clarity. Outside investigation also helps confirm initial perceptions in a situation which created any doubt regarding the alleged abuse.

2. When the alleged abuser was a volunteer, staff member or pastor, on church grounds, or in the context of a church event

Rationale: In any of these situations, outside help is critical for providing confidence to move forward with specific action related to an abuser. External, objective analysis is necessary in order to provide a genuine pursuit for truth. This will also provide a safe place for reports from other victims to come forward. Victims must have confidence in the investigation so that they will trust they will be heard and kept safe from further abuse.

3. When there are allegations or reason to believe that warning signs were missed by leaders in the church, or disclosures mishandled

Rationale: Establishing outside counsel is an important step for evaluating whether any warning signs were missed that could have prevented the abuse, or in identifying and correcting any weaknesses in church policies, practices, or culture. It is not

¹⁴¹ For example, supporting a victim who divorces an abusive spouse, bringing charges against an abuser, firing a staff member, or assisting in removing the ordination of an allegedly abusive pastor.

uncommon for God’s people to be “hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” and outside counsel can provide the exhortation necessary to see the organization’s blind spots and make necessary corrections in the culture.

Abuse allegations may arise in a context when the abuser is no longer in the church or perhaps no longer living and new information indicates that former or current staff members were notified of the abuse or had reason to know the abuse was occurring. Even if the abuse or possible mishandling or failure to report occurred years or decades prior, outside counsel is vital for several reasons.

1. Survivors, deeply wounded by the abuse, deserve to know the truth.
2. When multiple errors occur, repentance is a biblical requirement.
3. A church or ministry that displays God’s heart will desire truth and be zealous in righteousness. This includes ensuring any necessary changes to policies, practices, or culture. Often, when abuse is mishandled, there are entrenched beliefs and patterns that contributed. Unless this faulty worldview is clearly identified and corrected, even if it developed unintentionally, abuse will continue.
4. Even if the sin occurred earlier, there is biblical precedent for confessing those sins publicly (2 Chron. 29:3-11).

What To Look for in Seeking Outside Counsel:

Individuals and/or firms should meet the following basic criteria.

1. Substantial training, skill, and experience with abuse, trauma, and related dynamics, as well as experience with investigative techniques, evidence handling, and investigative practices
2. A consistent and trusted reputation in the survivor and advocate community: Enlisting those with a positive standing will help a ministry build trust with abuse survivors.
3. Clearly identify and act as assessors, educators, or investigators, not legal representation, even if they are licensed legal professionals: Retaining someone as an attorney immediately creates an adversarial relationship between the ministry and the survivor, even if unintentional. This is because when an attorney/client relationship is formed it creates obligations and privileges between the hiring entity and the attorney.
4. Attorneys owe a fiduciary obligation to the ministry as a corporation or business, not to the church as God’s people, and certainly not to the survivors and their families. The attorney/client relationship also creates confidentiality and legal privileges designed to protect and hide information. The creation of these privileges is commonly used to obscure information and protect assets against liability. It demonstrates a focused financial priority rather than that of transparency or seeking justice and truth.

5. Reporting

Churches are not qualified to conduct investigations of sexual abuse. Local authorities are specifically trained; therefore, if a victim desires the abuse be reported, it must be reported immediately. Delay can result in loss of evidence, victim tampering, tainting witness memory, or providing the perpetrator an opportunity to threaten or pressure their victims to remain silent or recant their testimony. Conducting an “in house” investigation prior to reporting not only jeopardizes the victim and the chain of evidence, it may also fail at detecting the actual abuser. Abusers often continue offending; therefore, a church that conducts an incompetent investigation may be held responsible. The church has a moral and legal obligation to report suspected abuse.

When

Most states do not mandate reporting of adult sexual abuse. The decision to report should be made by the victim. Though reporting to law enforcement can provide the opportunity to provide protection for the victim, gather evidence, investigate, prosecute, and bring accountability to the perpetrator, the victim must also be prepared for the dangers involved (retaliation) and sometimes difficult investigation and prosecution.

Pressuring the victim to report may discourage them from reporting in the future. The victim should be encouraged to have the medical forensic exam conducted no matter her intention to report to law enforcement or not. The church should walk beside the victim along each step of the process to provide encouragement in Christ and safety.

Reason to Believe

Believing the alleged victim is a care-filled response. There will be time later to verify the details of the report. Professionals and the proper authorities are the entities who will determine the veracity of the claims. When a report is made, a victim needs a safe and empathetic ear. Deuteronomy 22:25-27 makes it clear that a victim of sexual assault, though no witnesses were present, should be trusted and action taken to bring accountability to the offending individual. False reports are rare.¹⁴² Identifying a false report is best determined by a qualified investigator.

How

Reports of adult sexual assault and rape should be made to legal authorities only with victim permission. The victim’s safety is foremost and a report to authorities may create further damage.

¹⁴² See also, Attachment 7: Myths About Abuse for further citations. David Lisak et al., “False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases,” *Violence Against Women* 16, no. 12 (December 2010): 1318-34, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1077801210387747>.

To Whom

- *Law Enforcement*

Sexual assault and rape are crimes and are prosecutable in all fifty states. If the victim is willing, churches can report the abuse to the law enforcement officials who will investigate the assault.

- *Local Advocacy Center*

It can be very helpful to victims to make contact with a local advocacy center. These centers, some faith-based, often provide counseling, support groups, basic essential needs like food, clothing, shelter, and protective care.

- *Additional Agencies*

Child-protective services may help aid in providing safety to children who are impacted by witnessing adult sexual abuse.

- *Pastors, Sessions, or Presbyteries*

Leaders in the church should be apprised of the assault or rape *if the victim allows* and the abuser is a church member. When an allegation of abuse is made against someone in the church, recognize the likelihood there may be other victims. Additional people in the congregation may have other details important to the investigation. Leaders have a responsibility to protect the sheep under their care.

- *Congregations*

When an allegation of abuse is made against someone in the church, recognize the likelihood there may be other victims. Additional people in the congregation may have other details important to the investigation. Notification is not a determination of guilt; it is the necessary means for ensuring a proper investigation. Investigations are incomplete without this wide-ranging information. The intent is not to slander a person, rather it is to announce true statements about a report regarding an individual.

What

What if the victim or their family does not want to report? There are times when the abuse is compounded by the unsupportive response of others, whether church members, leaders, or those outside the church. Many victims have endured unwarranted and aggressive questioning, creating an unsafe atmosphere for reporting. Depending on the length and severity of the abuse, it is common for a victim to lose their confidence in making decisions. They may be paralyzed with fear.

Statistically, 50 out of 310 sexual assaults reported to law enforcement result in criminal charges. Approximately 25 will result in conviction and jail time.¹⁴³ One study concluded that only “1.6% of all complaints ended in a trial.”¹⁴⁴ Of the many studies, it is clear that statistically a sexual assault case is not likely to make it to trial.

6. Redemptive Shepherding

Working with abused victims presents an incredible opportunity to bring redemption and light to circumstances, and to display the gospel to those who hurt. God shows concern for the broken-hearted (Ps. 34:18), He is not silent in the face of evil (Ps. 34:15-16). His people must also lovingly and carefully shepherd those impacted from the evil of abuse. Protecting the weak and vulnerable is the responsibility of all God’s people (Ez. 34:4, Acts 20:35).

All caregiving has potential for error. The possibility of causing additional harm exists. When considering a case, it is common for those involved to benefit the accused rather than the victim with “charitable judgment.” People are generally hesitant to violate the “innocent until proven guilty” standard.¹⁴⁵ This is the standard that guides process in the legal system. The burden of proof is then placed on the victim. When caring for the abused, weigh the difficulty of this process carefully. Rarely does abuse happen in public with witnesses, and a “not guilty” verdict is not necessarily a declaration of innocence. It simply means the accuser failed to provide sufficient evidence of the assault.

Shepherding victims well requires God’s people to love one another and “believe all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). Err on the side of safety when it comes to protecting the vulnerable. Take necessary steps to restrict the alleged abuser’s access, report the allegations (if approved by the victim), and notify the church. Allow the magistrate to investigate and make any legal judgments.

Failure to take these steps of protection leaves people at risk and can potentially suppress evidence. For victims, the failure of those in authority to respond swiftly and concisely implies they are lying. Survivors who sense this resistance will quickly shut down and/or retract allegations out of fear.

Shepherding Adults Who Have Been Sexually Abused

If an adult who had been sexually abused as a child comes forward, see “Child Abuse: Shepherding the Victim and Family” for shepherding and “Child Abuse: Responding to a Child Abuse Disclosure or Discovery” for reporting.

¹⁴³ “The Criminal Justice System: Statistics,” RAINN, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>.

¹⁴⁴ Melissa S. Morabito, Linda M. Williams, and April Pattavina, “Decision Making in Sexual Assault Cases: Replication Research on Sexual Violence Case Attrition in the U.S.,” National Institute of Justice, February 2019, 108, <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/252689.pdf>.

¹⁴⁵ Brad Hambrick, “Why Is It So Hard to Have Constructive Conversations about Abuse?,” Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, February 14, 2022, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-is-it-so-hard-to-have-constructive-conversations-about-abuse/>.

Pastoral Care for the Victim and Family

The church should be a sanctuary for victims, a training ground to prevent assault, and a facilitator of emotional, spiritual, and physical healing. All victims and potential victims of sexual assault need the following from the church:

- An empathetic, well-trained and effective person/persons who will confidentially guide the process of recovery and facilitate obtaining appropriate resources both in and outside the church. This includes but is not limited to emergency medical care (rape crisis intervention), counseling, primary medical care, psychiatric care, and spiritual counseling.
- A small group of survivors who are in the process of recovery and growth to come alongside the victim and demonstrate they are not alone nor at fault.
- Preaching from the word on the impact of assault, pornography, and other idolatry upon the *Imago Dei* of women, men, and children created by God, as well as His grace, mercy, and ever-present love for victims.

Practical Care for the Victim and Family

There are many practical needs which should be met; however, people involved in the situation are hurting deeply. Grieve with them, ask intelligent questions about how they are, pray with them, and provide a connection. Enlist other members in the church to do the same. While care should be taken not to overpromise, or offer false hope, remind the family that God sees and knows all things and has not left them. Listen to their lead as you follow up, but don't simply wait for them to reach out or identify what they need.

When people are abused, the ability to see and clearly comprehend the situation is dramatically hindered. It often requires substantial time and distance from an abusive situation to fully recognize and articulate what happened. If they experienced grooming and/or have been controlled or criticized for any length of time, it may make simple communication of details very difficult for the survivor.

In addition, an abuse victim will struggle to convey their own desires. Church members and leaders help victims by encouraging them to communicate their thoughts and make their own decisions. This may take time. Patient listening, wisdom, understanding, empathy, and compassion are required (1 Thess. 5:14), together with a commitment to walk alongside for however long as is necessary.

Prior to a crisis, leaders and staff should familiarize themselves with typical problems victims and their families encounter and how the church can help with support and/or practical involvement. It is challenging for families to discern what they need amid so much grief or even how to communicate these needs. They likely will not know what options are available. Church leaders who proactively pursue care and help provide practical guidance through the church or community resources can be an incredible gift.

Survivors of sexual abuse need the following from the church.¹⁴⁶

- **A significant sense of belonging.** Sexually abused men and women feel isolated and unwanted. Often, they have no sense of what it means to belong to a family group. Not only can the church provide a place where the survivor experiences the love and affirmation of a family, it often is the only family some survivors have. Many survivors have either homes they cannot return to for safety reasons, or families who do not acknowledge the truth of their lives.
- **To be pursued.** God came to us. When others suffer, we often expect *them* to come to *us* and ask for what they need. Connection requires us to take the initiative to pursue suffering people. Lovingly pursue by calling, sending encouraging notes, and offering help with immediate needs.
- **To have physical and/or financial needs met.** Is the survivor safe from their abuser? Are they safe from their own destructive impulses? Are they suicidal? Do they abuse any substances? Do they need financial help? Are they physically able to care for themselves? Are they able to care for their family? Do they need someone to call in the middle of the night? Do they live alone? Are they safe doing so? Where do they spend the holidays?
- **Hope without condemnation.** In the darkest of times, we struggle to have hope and faith...suffering people often need others to have faith and hope for them. Admonitions to hope or trust only result in despair; if the sufferers were able, they would do so. How much better to come alongside and tell survivors that where they are lacking and/or unable, we will stand in the gap and believe God for them.
- **A balance of ministry and fun.** Often when we do reach out to sufferers, we reduce our relationship to one of pure ministry . . . When we bring fun to sufferers' lives, we provide an oasis that will help them feel loved simply for who they are. It is also important for survivors to feel needed by those who care for them. Although an "I can't do . . ." needs to be honored, very few people want simply to be takers. Give them dignity by allowing them to contribute to your life, even if it means just letting them do the dishes after a meal.
- **Others' willingness to witness great pain and believe the "unbelievable."** Many men and women have lived in terrible isolation, thinking their secrets were too horrible to be told. Calling back memories about such things can cause great denial in the listener. Yet we who believe sin is so hideous as to require the death of God Himself should of all people find evil believable.
- **A listener, not a fixer or a blamer.** To attend to the struggle of another by listening is to bestow honor on that person. You cannot "fix" a history of . . . abuse. You can stand with someone while they courageously face the truth of their life and love them while they struggle to learn to live with it. Learn how to sit and be quiet. When we don't know what to say, it is usually best to say nothing rather than allow our discomfort with silence and pain to drive us to rattle off an answer. One of the ways we cope with horror is by attempting to explain it or find out what

¹⁴⁶ This section is an excerpt from Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 272-276.

made it happen. Searching for such explanations can easily lead to blaming the survivor. Never imply that the survivor is to blame for the abuse. Nothing [anyone] has ever done, no matter how provocative, is justification for abuse (Matt. 7:20-23). The abuser always carries responsibility for the abuse.

- **Resources.** If the survivor needs and wants professional help, assist in finding competent counseling. They may need you to help them know what questions to ask of the counselor. Is the counselor a licensed professional? Does the counselor accept third party payments? Does the counselor have training and experience in the treatment of sexual abuse? What kind of experience and from where? The survivor may need you to go with to the first few appointments and simply wait in the waiting room.
- **Knowledgeable friends.** If you are going to walk alongside someone who is dealing with the issue of sexual abuse, then you need to be knowledgeable about the subject. It would be wise to read several books on the topic. See the [resources section in this report for help]. If you do not understand the problem, you will more than likely make hurtful mistakes.
- **To resolve spiritual issues.** Understand that the spiritual ramifications of [sexual abuse] are complex and powerful. When a "Christian" father, uncle, grandfather, camp counselor, or pastor sexually abuses a child, beliefs and feelings about who God is, His love, and His protection are all shattered and are not easily reassembled. A few verses will not put it all back together.
- **Time.** Healing from the devastating consequences of childhood sexual abuse takes a long time, usually years. Should you choose to walk alongside someone who is struggling in this area, it is important to recognize that you are facing a long process. Survivors will wrestle with powerful urges to resist facing the truth; they will fight hard and long to rid themselves of lies. They may endure months or years of terrifying nightmares that rob them of much needed sleep. A small network of trustworthy people will often work better than one person alone. If the survivor is married, their spouse will also need a support network who will walk with them on the long road. . . . Although our God is a God of redemption, He usually works that redemption out through people and over time.
- **Intercession.** Jesus Himself is at the right hand of the Father interceding for us. The Spirit prays for us when words will not come. . . . Pain silences and isolates. We who come alongside need to pray for and with those who are silenced and isolated.

As you come alongside survivors of sexual abuse, be aware that several dynamics may prevent you from giving effective help.

- **Slow down.** Suffering slows people down, and if we are going to walk with others in their suffering, then we must slow down too.
- **Shoulder their burdens.** We become a hindrance rather than a help when we greet those who suffer with statements such as: "If you would only . . . attend church, read Scripture more, believe more, stop thinking about yourself, put the past behind you." Rather than say, "Here, let me help you carry that heavy load," we

end up putting heavy burdens on already bowed backs. Remember that God our Savior did not greet us with, “If you would only . . .” Instead, He says, “Here, let Me show you how. Let Me shoulder the burden. Let Me be with you.”

- **Keep confidences.** How often confidences are betrayed under the guise of sharing a prayer request! If we are to help those who struggle with things that frighten them, humiliate them, and shame them, then we must be trustworthy people. We must learn that there are things we can share with no one but the Father. To work with survivors is to minister to those who know betrayal well. We want them to learn to trust. . . . Unless a life is threatened, confidences should never be broken.
- **Think long-term.** Like managed care, the church seems to think that short-term [care] is right and should always work. The more spiritual among us get better quickly. We tend to believe that those who struggle long term clearly do not love God enough. And yet we say we believe this to be a dark world where sin is rampant and destructive. We believe that God is long-suffering and merciful. Where do we get our quick-fix model? How fortunate we are that God does not adhere to short-term sanctification!
- **Male leadership.** A woman who spent her childhood being sexually abused by a man will have all kinds of reactions to male leadership. One of those responses may be fear. It is possible that this will prevent her from seeking the help she so desperately needs. Many churches are now training women to work alongside women in crisis so that when a woman is dealing with an issue like abuse, she has some recourse other than male leadership. We need to respond with tenderness and sensitivity to the fear and damage resulting from abuse.
- **Accommodate the suffering:** In many ways, the church seems to be structured to accommodate the whole and the healthy. Often activities are designed for intact couples and families...On one hand there is nothing wrong with that. However, that perspective does not account for sickness, suffering, trauma, dying, terror, and torment. To experience these things is to fail to fit into the structure. When that results in responses of judgment, humiliation, impatience, and denial, we have failed to be the church God has called us to be. According to the apostle Paul, the church should bestow more abundant honor on those members who lack it rather than applaud those who have no need of it (1 Cor. 12:23-24).
- **Human hearts are deceitful.** [Sexual abuse] is kept secret because many fear they will not be believed. Attention to the problem is not a priority, because the problem is believed to be rare. . . . Again, knowing we live in a world ruled by the prince of the power of the air and knowing that human hearts are deceitful above all things, why are we surprised?
- **Venting.** One survivor said that fear of expressions of pain is a hindrance when others cannot distinguish between a “roar of pain” (venting rebellious-sounding verbiage about God) – like a lioness with a thorn in her paw versus genuine rebellion. The Psalms contain much venting (Ps. 22:1, Ps. 35:22-25). Even Jesus said, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46)
- **The agony of redemption.** We often do not understand the nature of evil and suffering, the complexities of human development . . . the fact that [sexual abuse]

1 is a criminal act, and that redemption in a life never comes easily. Yes, the God we
2 worship is capable of redeeming the pain beyond words into something that gives
3 life and brings glory to Him. However, the transfiguring of agony into redemption
4 cost Jesus inestimably. Death . . . does not normally transform into life in this dark
5 world. The beauty of redemption in a life never comes easily.

- 6 • **Be aware.** Be very aware of your vocabulary, your timing, and your body
7 language. A survivor has been repeatedly abused by another's body and words.
8 They will be afraid of yours. At the same time, they may be starved for touch and
9 affection. Do not touch without her permission. Never touch in a sexual way. Learn
10 to read and acknowledge body cues. Often it is through body language, rather than
11 words, that people communicate emotions such as fear or anger.

13 *Shepherding the Guilty Party*

15 *Repentant*

17 The responsibility of the church in the case of sexual abuse is to report to legal authorities
18 whether there are signs of repentance or not. This is done only at the discretion of the victim.
19 The gospel of grace must be given to perpetrators of sexual violence as it is for all who have
20 sinned and fall short of the glory of God. However, due to the egregious violence of sexual
21 assault, a repentant perpetrator must be shepherded carefully within the church community.

23 The guilty party must be disciplined by a church leader or counselor who has been trained in
24 sexual assault. The depth of the sinful psychology of sexual abuse must be carefully and boldly
25 investigated and challenged by the counselor.

27 *It is unwise to allow the guilty party any unsupervised access to those who are vulnerable to*
28 *the perpetrator's behavior.* Though an abusive individual may give a seemingly clear
29 testimony to his repentance, it must be followed with extensive evidence that his words are
30 expressive of a significantly sanctified heart. This may only be confirmed by a counselor
31 trained in this particular sin.

33 *Non-Repentant*

35 If the guilty party does not show clear signs of repentance in words and actions, process should
36 be taken by the Session to remove the offender from fellowship. [See the *PCA Book of Church*
37 *Order*, Part II, beginning with Chapter 27.]

39 *Church Members*

41 As shepherds of the local body of Christ, church leaders have a responsibility to nurture and
42 protect God's people under their care. It is likely that bystanders in the congregation have also
43 been affected by the sexual abuse of the guilty party. They will likewise need help in
44 processing the painful experience.

Members of the congregation may feel guilt and shame for having missed warning signs of the abuse. They may carry anger and fear. These hurting members will need special care by church leaders and members. Their deep emotional hurt may create discomfort for leaders, but shepherding them well will mean laying aside the need for comfort to step into their struggles and encourage them with the gospel.

There may be additional victims of sex crimes in the congregation who will need a safe place to share their experience. Shepherds will need to continually, in word and action, make the church a safe place for sharing:

- In word, by expressing trust in those who willingly expose the violence,
- In action, by believing a report and acting quickly to make sure the victim is safe and cared for.

7. Prevention of Sexual Abuse

Shepherds are responsible to protect congregants to the best of their ability. A leader's failure of "protecting and providing for [members] all things necessary for soul and body" by the diligent watchfulness for wolves in the church is a heinous offense.¹⁴⁷ Reasonable measures should be in place for the prevention of abusive behaviors that cause catastrophic harm to those attending places of worship.

How the Church Can Help Prevent Abuse

- **Train staff, leaders, and volunteers to recognize and report abuse.** If the means for training are unavailable in the church, consider bringing in an outside organization or program.
- **Insist on background checks for staff.**
- **Be known for reporting** suspected abuse or neglect.
- **Communicate to the congregation** which pastoral staff are trained and willing to intervene when abuse is suspected or reported.
- **Clearly articulate abuse as a sin.** Teach that God hates abuse and calls His people to protect the vulnerable.
- **Clarify that abuse is not a private issue.** The church should welcome the exposure of evil and be willing to work with the local government (Rom. 13).
- **Teach your church's theology of abuse.**
- **Require your leaders to model exemplary sexual lives.** Because of their high calling, high visibility, and high influence, pastors and other church leaders should be expected to live godly lives (Titus 1:5-9).¹⁴⁸
- **Address tangential issues** such as pornography and other media which eroticize violence.

¹⁴⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Lawrenceville, GA: CDM, 2007), Question #129.

¹⁴⁸ See also, *WCF Larger Catechism*, Question 129.

- **Extend education to children and teenagers.** Teach how to recognize and report abuse. Children should understand, while the Bible instructs them to obey their parents, the biblical command for obedience to authority is conditional (Eph. 6:1). It is good, godly, and right to expose sin.

8. Case Study

Debby

Debby stared at the light fixture on the hallway ceiling. She remembered doing that same thing forty years prior; stare at a light fixture. “This shouldn’t be so disorienting,” Debby thought to herself. Now, at 58 years old, all the shame, disgust, and fear she had felt that night so long ago came rushing back. The letter she held in her hand prompted those awful feelings. And, although her heart raced, and she felt like it would beat right out of her chest; it was nothing compared to that other time she had stared at a light fixture so intently.

Debby was a senior in high school when her youth director and his wife presented her with the gospel. She was so excited! A Savior? Loved her? The idea of a love like that took her breath away. And the fact that some of the most loving people she’d ever known shared it with her made it even more significant. Debby felt their care and concern. As soon as she heard the gospel and understood, she prayed the sinner’s prayer. Debby was instantly on fire for the Lord. If the church doors were open, she was inside.

Debby loved everything about youth group. She loved the fellowship with friends, adored the praise and worship time, and treasured her youth director’s teachings. Everything he said made sense. He seemed to know the Lord, and his lessons reflected that understanding. She was growing spiritually in leaps and bounds.

While church was going well, school was not. One Wednesday evening the teenagers were all gathered in small groups for prayer, and Debby asked for prayer for her math homework. Everyone laughed aloud, so her youth director came over to find out what was going on. Debby told him about her request, and without hesitation the director offered his help. He bragged that math was his specialty and told Debby to bring her book the next week so they could stay after youth group for lessons.

Debby had no idea what “lessons” her youth director had in mind. She followed him up to the sound booth the following Wednesday after group, but before she knew it, he pinned her on a couch and she couldn’t move. The light fixture in the hallway completely captured Debby’s attention. Through tears, she determined not to let it out of her sight. Such an inanimate object of course couldn’t bring peace (or safety for that matter), but at least it gave Debby something—*anything*—to focus on rather than the heavy man gyrating on top of her. Her goal was to make it out to that hallway.

When it was over, Debby ran. She was too ashamed to tell anyone what had happened and felt no one would believe her anyway. Everyone loved the youth director. She did everything

possible to avoid being in his presence. She quit going to youth group and eventually moved to a relative's home far away. She finished high school remotely and enrolled at a college in another state. A multitude of thoughts constantly tormented Debby. "Was it something I did? Could I have run? Screamed? Would anyone have heard me?"

Debby found another church, stuffed her memories and questions, and focused on getting a degree.

Several years later, Debby received an invitation to a wedding for the daughter of a childhood friend from youth group. She knew it would be difficult entering the old church building again, but she heard the youth director had moved long ago. So, she pulled it together for her friend and responded "yes," she would attend.

Debby entered the building and found her way to a pew near the front of the sanctuary. While she was waiting for the ceremony to begin, she glanced at the pew rack and saw the Sunday bulletin from the week before. Out of curiosity, she picked it up and began to read. To her horror, there was an announcement for the installation services of her old youth director. Upon the upcoming retirement of the church's pastor, her youth director would be ordained as the new Senior Pastor. Debby's insides shook throughout the entire wedding.

The Monday after she returned home, Debby called the retiring pastor. The last thing she wanted to do was reveal that the youth director had sexually abused her when she was a high school student. But she wouldn't have been able to live with herself had she said nothing. The years of grieving and counseling helped embolden her. Unfortunately, the call set her back almost to where she began.

"Mmmm...I see...thank you for telling me." And that was it. So went the phone call with her beloved childhood pastor. Debby was floored. She could tell he didn't believe her. He mumbled something about it being a "done deal" and "there was nothing he could do." Debby thought she had nowhere else to turn. Once again, she put the awful memories behind her. She went back into counseling and moved on with her life.

Debby looked at the letter again. Her mind went back to that phone call all those years prior. She finally forced herself to stop staring at the hallway light fixture with the burned-out light bulb. The letter she'd been holding fell to the floor. She picked it up and her eyes once again skimmed the contents. "Dear Mrs.... First Street Pres has begun an investigation into misconduct....Senior Pastor...multiple victims...if you're willing to participate..." Debby shook her head back and forth, as if she could make the memories dissipate like the snow in a snow globe.

She was unsuccessful.

Brainstorming questions for help developing best practices:

1. What structures and/or procedures should your church or ministry already have in place in case a situation like this occurs?
2. What questions would have been helpful for the Senior Pastor to ask?
3. What should the Senior Pastor have done upon receiving the call from Debby?
4. How does the “reason to believe” standard help with this situation?
5. Upon discovering the circumstances, what will you do first?
6. What will you do next?
7. Who can you call for help navigating all the details?
8. Who in your church is versed in sexual abuse and compassionate to care for a victim and/or family?
9. What action steps will you take against the alleged perpetrator?
10. What will you tell the congregation and how?
11. How will you determine if an outside agency will be helpful for this case?

SECTION FIVE: CHILD ABUSE

1. Summary Description – Child Abuse

Child abuse occurs when an authority figure, whether through action or failing to act, causes injury, death, emotional harm, sexual abuse, exploitation, or risk of serious harm to a child. There are many forms of child maltreatment, neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, spiritual, and emotional abuse. In this section we will help you recognize, respond to, report, and redemptively shepherd when there is a case of suspected child abuse.

2. Expressing God’s Heart

In Scripture, the care of children is very important. God equates “receiving” children with “receiving” Him (Matt. 18:5-6). God's word showcases He has a particular concern for the weak and vulnerable (Mic. 6:8; Isa. 61:1), and children are among the most vulnerable entrusted to our care. Further, Jesus loves the teachable souls of children, and He is not pleased with those who harm them (Prov. 22:6; Matt. 18:6; Luke 18:15-17; Mark 10:13-16, Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21). In James 1:27, it tells us that caring for children in need pleases God. Safeguarding the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of young people and other vulnerable individuals is among the most important responsibilities of the local church (*WCF* Q:138,139).

3. Recognition of Child Abuse and Neglect

Recognition of the abuse or neglect of a child is one important way to protect vulnerable children under the church’s care. According to a study reported by *Christianity Today*, on average there are seventy allegations of child abuse in the United States in churches each week.¹⁴⁹ One in seven children experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year.¹⁵⁰

People tend to view the church as a safe place, especially for children and youth. It is difficult for church members to believe there are those working, volunteering, and attending our churches who abuse children. It is important to acknowledge this potentiality and to properly guard children from abuse in the local church.

Relational Spheres

There is often a false understanding that people who commit child abuse can be easily detected. Often there is also a mistaken belief that abuse is perpetrated by someone the child or community does not know. Statistics point to a different reality and even highlight that many children are abused by other children. Understanding who perpetrates abuse can help the church provide good education and implement wise protection policies.

¹⁴⁹ Olson, Ted. “70 Child Abuse Accusations Against Churches Each Week—and Most Are Protestants.” *ChristianityToday.com*, April 1, 2002, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/aprilweb-only/4-1-51.0.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Preventing Child Abuse* (Atlanta: U.S. Department Health and Human Services, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html>.

1 • Authority

2
3 Child abuse can be perpetrated by a person in a position of authority, such as the child's
4 teacher, guardian, relative, sports coach, youth pastor, or other prominent figure. Because of
5 the person's position over the child, they will experience intimidation. This is very confusing
6 for the child. Children will fail to report, or delay in reporting, abuse by an authority figure.

7
8 • Acquaintance

9
10 Approximately 90% of children who are victims of sexual abuse know their abuser. Only 10%
11 of sexually abused children are abused by a stranger. About 60% of children who are sexually
12 abused are abused by people the family trusts.¹⁵¹

13
14 • Child on child

15
16 Not all perpetrators are adults—an estimated 30-50% of reported cases of child sexual abuse
17 are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18.¹⁵² As many as 40% of children sexually
18 abused are abused by older or more powerful children.¹⁵³ The younger the child victim, the
19 more likely it is that the perpetrator is a juvenile. Juveniles are the offenders in 43% of assaults
20 on children under age six. Of these offenders, 14% are under age 12. Juveniles who commit
21 sex offenses against other children are more likely than adult sex offenders to offend in groups,
22 offend at schools, and have more male and younger victims.¹⁵⁴ A small number of juvenile
23 offenders—one out of eight—are younger than age 12. Females constitute 7% of juveniles
24 who commit sex offenses.¹⁵⁵ Most adolescent sex offenders are not sexual predators and will
25 not become adult offenders. They are more responsive to treatment than offending adults.¹⁵⁶

26
27 This type of abuse will likely intensify the shepherding required by the church, especially if
28 children are members of separate families. While the victim and their family will need to have
29

¹⁵¹ D. Finkelhor, “Characteristics of Crimes against Juveniles” (Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center, 2012), 13. and J. Whealin, “Child Sexual Abuse” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, (2007-05-22).

¹⁵² United States Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website, “Questions and Answers About Sexual Assault and Sexual Offending.” Accessed April 2022, <https://www.nsopw.gov/en/SafetyAndEducation/QuestionsAndAnswers>.

¹⁵³ D. Finkelhor, “Characteristics of Crimes against Juveniles” (Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center, 2012).

¹⁵⁴ L.A. Greenfeld, “Sex Offenses and Offenders: An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault: (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-163392, 1997).

¹⁵⁵ D. Finkelhor, R. Ormrod, M. Chaffin, “Juveniles Who Commit Sex Offenses against Min,” Juvenile Justice Bulletin (Washington, DC: Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2009).

¹⁵⁶ “Adolescents Who Have Engaged in Abusive Sexual Behavior: Effective Policies and Practices,” (Oregon: Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA). 2000). Accessed April 2022, www.atsa.com/ppjuvenile.html.

care focused on protection and safety, the offending child's family will also require care as well as shepherding through the process. Because the needs of child-on-child abuse within your church are significant, after reporting seek outside counsel for how to care well for all parties involved. It is important that leaders be aware that statistically, a juvenile offender is likely to have been first sexually abused themselves. Therefore, the shepherd is likely to have two victims in his care, and quite possibly the predator of the offended is in the victim's home or possibly in their church.

- Parent/caregiver

Approximately 30% of children who are sexually abused are abused by family members. The younger the victim, the more likely it is that the abuser is a family member. Of those molesting a child under six, 50% were family members. Family members also accounted for 23% of those abusing children ages 12 to 17.¹⁵⁷ Approximately 77% percent of perpetrators of child abuse and neglect are the parents of a victim.¹⁵⁸ Family members¹⁵⁹ make up one-third to one-half of the perpetrators against girls, and 10% to 20% of the perpetrators against boys.¹⁶⁰ Men commit 90% of these cases.¹⁶¹

- Stranger

The abuse by a stranger is less common, but its prevalence is still concerning. Children often struggle to know who would be classified as a stranger. Once the stranger tells the child their name, they no longer think of the person as a stranger. Developmentally they do not assign motives to people and do not pick up on someone's evil intentions. This makes children particularly vulnerable to abuse by strangers.

Categories of recognition:

- A child **directly discloses** they are being abused or neglected.

Examples:

"My dad touches my privates when mom's not around."

"Our youth pastor is asking me to send him nude pictures."

"My mom does not feed us dinner."

¹⁵⁷ D. Finkelhor, "Characteristics of Crimes against Juveniles" (Durham, NH: Crimes against Children Research Center, 2012), 13. and J. Whealin, "Child Sexual Abuse" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, (2007-05-22).

¹⁵⁸ "Child Maltreatment 2016," (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2018). Child maltreatment 2016. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2016>.

¹⁵⁹ United States Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website, "Facts and Statistics." Accessed March 8, 2018, www.nsopw.gov/en-US/Education/FactsStatistics.

¹⁶⁰ D. Finkelhor, "Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse," *The Future of Children*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Los Altos, Calif.: The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 1994), 31.

¹⁶¹ D. Finkelhor, "Current Information on the Scope and Nature of Child Sexual Abuse," *The Future of Children*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Los Altos, Calif.: The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, 1994), 31.

- A child **indirectly discloses** information that might suggest they are a victim of abuse or neglect. This is the most common disclosure of abuse. In these cases, it is likely that the child is hinting at current abuse and hoping you will understand.

Examples of a disguised disclosure: “I have a cousin who is being abused.”

Example of a disclosure via hints or gestures: “My friend told me...”

- A child **accidentally discloses** abuse or neglect.

Examples:

The child records written details regarding abuse.

You walk in on abuse taking place.

You overhear a teenager talking about their abuse.

A child exhibits physical signs of abuse.

You notice that a child does not have a doctor listed on their form.

- A child’s **behavior provides clues** they might be a victim of abuse or neglect. (A parent or caregivers’ behavior might also make you alert to the fact that they are abusive.)

Examples:

A teenager consistently lingers after youth group meetings and delays going home.

A toddler flinches when touched.

A child displays sexualized behavior.

A grade schooler is overly physically aggressive with his peers.

A child steals food from others.

Example of parent or caregiver behavior: A parent overtly rejects their child, or another adult makes up excuses to be alone with a child.

- A child **shows physical signs** they may have been abused or neglected.

Examples:

A child has difficulty walking or sitting.

A child shows up in a grungy short sleeved shirt without a jacket in winter.

A child has bodily injuries, and no plausible explanation is offered.

A child has burn marks or bruises that resemble objects such as a hand, fist, belt buckle, or rope.

To further familiarize with the behavioral and physical indicators of abuse, please see Attachment 4: Signs of Child Abuse. This attachment includes a list of general behavioral clues and physical warning signs of child abuse. It also includes specific details highlighting the unique indicators of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect.

When behavioral and physical signs are present, it does not always indicate abuse. For example, a child who self-harms or has panic attacks is in distress but not necessarily abused. Nonetheless, any concerning childhood behaviors should heighten curiosity. It does not matter if it is abuse, these children still need attention and care. Ministry leaders and workers must diligently train staff and volunteers to recognize the signs of abuse; however, it is important to note that up to forty percent of abused children will not exhibit any signs.

Difficulty in Disclosing

Often, children are reluctant to disclose. Inherent to this difficulty is that an abuser may be in an intimate relationship with the child and/or someone the child wants to protect. It is likely that the child has a complex connection with the person perpetrating harm against them. Additionally, a child may remain silent because they are afraid of negative reactions from adults, or of “getting into trouble” with their abuser. This results in a variety of confusing circumstances for those involved, including the question of why someone did not report.

Why Children Do Not Disclose Abuse

- The child may be instructed to keep the abuse a secret.
- The child may be afraid to tell anyone.
- The perpetrator may have threatened the child.
- The child may not know who is safe to tell.
- The child may not know how to tell. For instance, they might lack the language needed to capture what is happening to them or to share all the complexities involved.
- The child may be made to feel responsible for the abuse.
- The person harming the child may have established an emotional connection with them and/or the family to lower inhibitions (“grooming,” see Attachment 1: “Definitions”).
- The perpetrator may have convinced the child that abuse is normal.
- The child may be convinced no one will believe them.
- The child may have dissociated from the events. A victim’s mind may have difficulty reconciling what happened. To survive, abuse victims can involuntarily disconnect from their thoughts, feelings, memories, and surroundings. This makes it even more challenging for victims to accurately remember events, and timelines, or possess an absolute certainty about what occurred.
- The child may love their abuser and desire to protect him or her.
- The parents may categorize the abuse as “discipline” and have told the child it is God’s command.
- The child may not recognize what they are experiencing is abnormal because it has always been their reality.

Why Parents or Other Adults Neglect to Report Abuse

Adults might be aware of the abuse but also fail to address and/or report. The following constitute common reasons.

- **Overwhelming feelings.** They may be shocked, frightened, and/or angry.
- **Uncertainty.** They may not know how to approach the problem.
- **Confusion.** They may wonder, “Am I right?” “Did I really see/hear that?”
- **Trust.** The abuser may seem trustworthy, so it is difficult to believe that this person they know (love, respect) is capable of child abuse.
- **Manipulation.** They may have confronted the abuser, and he/she offered an alternative logical explanation.
- **Dependency.** They may be physically, emotionally, and/or financially dependent on the child's abuser.
- **Self-doubt.** They may question whether it is the right thing to do or if the abuse is really that bad.
- **Fear.** They may fear for the child and what they will have to go through once the abuse is reported.
- **Cost.** They may be concerned about the cost, particularly if the abuser is another family member or a prominent member of the church or community.
- **Community Grooming:** The abuser skillfully presents a wholesome, godly outward persona and skillfully handles Scripture and theology, causing other adults to believe it is not possible that the person in question could be an abuser.

Because of these multiple barriers, when a child discloses abuse, it is typically a gradual revelation. Child abuse has many complex layers, and perpetrators are masterful at deceit and manipulation. What we think we know about other people, victims, and their families is inadequate when it comes to identifying the presence of child abuse. The information disclosed must be mediated without bias. It is essential for church leaders, workers, staff, and volunteers to have familiarity with the clues that signal child abuse and neglect. (See Attachment 4: Signs of Child Abuse.)

4. Responding to a Child Abuse Disclosure or Discovery

Complete confidence of abuse or neglect is not necessary for reporting. Nor is it necessary to indicate which type of abuse has been perpetrated against a child. Reasonable suspicion of child abuse is sufficient for engaging expert investigation. ***Child abuse is both a serious sin and a crime.*** Ministering to those harmed by sin is the responsibility of the church and exploration of crime is the duty of the magistrate.

Disclosure of Child Abuse

Churches are not qualified to conduct investigations of child abuse. Local authorities are specifically trained; therefore, all suspicion of abuse must be reported immediately. Delay can result in loss of evidence, victim tampering, tainting witness memory, or providing the perpetrator an opportunity to threaten or pressure their victims to remain silent or recant their testimony.¹⁶² Conducting an “in-house” investigation prior to reporting not only jeopardizes

¹⁶² Victor Vieth, “Resist and Report: The Temptation to Investigate,” GRACE, accessed December 2020. <https://www.netgrace.org/resources/resisting-the-temptation-to-investigation>.

the child and the chain of evidence, it may also fail at detecting the actual abuser. Abusers often continue offending; therefore, a church that conducts an incompetent investigation may be held responsible. The church has a moral and legal obligation to report suspected abuse.

When a child discloses abuse, it is important to listen and act in a way that supports the child and keeps him or her protected. God's desire is to keep the child safe (Matt. 19:13-5, Luke 17:2). While it is the responsibility of the magistrate to investigate, in the moment of disclosure or discovery the church must also provide care for the victim.

What to do regarding disclosure of child abuse:

- **Compile a short list** of the appropriate local agencies and their phone numbers before an emergency occurs.
- **Listen to the child.** Let the child explain what happened in his or her own words.
- **Limit questioning** to the following:
 - What happened?
 - When did it happen?
 - Where did it happen?
 - Who did it?
 - How do you know them?
- **Take down as many direct quotes** as possible.
- **Be supportive, compassionate, and affirm the child's bravery.**
 - "You did the right thing. I'm glad you told me."
 - "You were very brave to tell me. I'm proud of you."
 - "This was not your fault. You did nothing wrong."
 - "I will help you."
- **Reassure the child by telling them what you are going to do next and what will happen.** The child will be afraid of the consequences of their disclosure, so let them know you will do your best to support and protect him or her. Explain to the child that, for their safety, you will need to report their experience to someone else and include those who will help. If the child is older, you can mention that you will be calling child protective services and/or the police.
- **Acknowledge limitations** as pastors and church leaders.
- **Expect complexity.** It is often difficult to see the situation clearly.
- **Acknowledge prejudice.** Objectivity regarding allegations may be hard when the accused is someone familiar.
- **Make a report.** Reporting is not an accusation, but rather a **request to investigate**. [See section 5: Reporting.]
- **Pray with and for the child. Pray Scripture.** Psalm 46:1 – God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Zephaniah 3:17 – The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. 1 Peter 5:7 (NIV) – Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. Isaiah 41:10-11 – Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.

What not to do regarding disclosure of child abuse:

- **Refrain from making promises** you cannot keep. Do not tell the child you won't tell anyone.
- **Don't stop the child** in the middle of their story.
- **Don't examine the child with questions**, especially leading questions (any question in which you provide a possible answer). This is tampering with testimony, which will make investigation by authorities more difficult later in the process.
- **Don't ask the child for details.** A child might not be comfortable sharing all the details.
- **Don't fear the mess of reporting.** God promises to help with messes.

A survey of victims of abuse discovered that only 10% had a positive experience when they disclosed their experience. In positive experiences, three key features occurred during the disclosure:

1. The recipient of disclosure believed the young person.
2. The recipient of disclosure took some form of action in response.
3. The young person received some form of emotional support to help them through the process.¹⁶³

Beyond the Basics

The following are additional suggestions for providing comfort and care to a child's disclosure of abuse.

- Meet in a suitable environment free from distractions.
- Posture yourself at the child's eye level and remain in an open position.
- Remain calm and patient—allow for prolonged silence and give the child opportunity to be heard.
- Listen supportively. Stay focused on listening to the child rather than on how you will respond.
- Respect that they may reveal only some of the details.
- Reassure them it is OK they have told you.
- Reassure them they are not at fault.
- Reassure them they are not the cause of your distress.
- Respond to urgent needs and notify appropriate authorities if you observe an injury.
- Do not ask to invite someone else into the conversation. They have chosen to trust you.
- Ask if you can pray for God's comfort and help for them. Don't assume they are comfortable with prayer. Keep it short and focused on praying for their immediate needs.
- Ask them how you can help.

¹⁶³ Debbie Allnock and Pam Miller, *No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse*, accessed April 2022. <https://www.norfolklscb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/no-one-noticed-no-one-heard-report.pdf>, p. 52.

In the case of an accidental disclosure of abuse, or the physical and behavioral signs are obvious, make a report based on your observations. If you are not able to follow up with the child, keep notes on what you heard or observed.

If you receive an accusation that child abuse has been committed by someone you know, work with, or is in an authoritative position, resist the temptation to think about your own well-being. Stay present with the child and tend to his or her needs. Focus on their disclosure. After tending to the needs of the victim, consider how you will respond personally to the disclosure.

Independent Assessments or Investigations

Outside perspective is critical because it is so difficult to see clearly when abuse is part of the culture in which we are immersed. Rather than viewing outside help as a threat or liability, seeking wise counsel models the wisdom of Proverbs 1:3, 5 and demonstrates a heart humbly committed to truth, holiness, justice, and compassion. Outside counsel should be welcomed (not feared) as sharpening the church's response.

There are three main situations when outside counsel might be invaluable.

1. When a decision needs to be made

Rationale

When a specific step¹⁶⁴ is necessary to move the case forward, and certainty is required, an outside expert evaluation of the evidence may provide clarity. Outside investigation also helps confirm initial perceptions in a situation which created any doubt regarding the alleged abuse.

2. When the alleged abuser was a volunteer, staff member or pastor, on church grounds, or in the context of a church event

Rationale

In any of these situations, outside help is critical for providing confidence to move forward with specific action related to an abuser. The church needs outside help to guide what steps need to be taken with a volunteer, staff member or pastor. The church cannot keep them on staff, or on hold, waiting for a police investigation that takes two to five years and is not likely to result in charges.

If the abuser is no longer in the church, the disclosure may trigger the question of whether there are things that were missed (or possibly even other victims). See number three below.

¹⁶⁴ For example: supporting a victim who divorces an abusive spouse, bringing charges against an abuser, firing a staff member, or assisting in removing the ordination of an allegedly abusive pastor.

3. *When there are allegations or reason to believe that warning signs were missed by leaders in the church, or disclosures mishandled*

Rationale

Allegations may arise in a context that involve individuals who are no longer at the church, but where there is possibility that there was poor policy that allowed the abuse. Warning signs may have been missed by leaders in the church or allegations that disclosures were mishandled.

Even if the abuse, possible mishandling, or failure to report occurred years or decades prior, outside counsel is vital for several reasons:

- Survivors, deeply wounded by the abuse, deserve to know the truth.
- When multiple errors occur, repentance is a biblical requirement.
- A church or ministry that displays God's heart will desire truth and be zealous in righteousness. This includes ensuring any necessary changes to policies, practices, or culture. Often, when abuse is mishandled, there are entrenched beliefs and patterns that contribute. Unless this faulty worldview or breakdown in policies or practices is clearly identified and corrected, and even if it developed unintentionally, abuse will continue. Where the church has failed, even under past leadership, public confession and repentance is in order as exemplified by the nation of Israel (2 Chron. 29:3-11).

What to look for in seeking outside counsel

Individuals and/or firms should meet the following basic criteria:

- Substantial training, skill, and experience with abuse, trauma, and related dynamics, as well as experience with investigative techniques and handling evidence. A consistent and trusted reputation in the survivor and advocate community. Enlisting those with a positive standing will help a ministry build trust with abuse survivors.
- Clearly identify and act as assessors, educators, or investigators, not legal representation, even if they are licensed legal professionals. Retaining someone as an attorney immediately creates an adversarial relationship between the ministry and the survivor, even if unintentional. This is because when an attorney/client relationship is formed, it creates obligations and privileges between the hiring entity and the attorney. Attorneys owe a fiduciary obligation to the ministry as a corporation or business, not to the church as God's people, and certainly not to the survivors and their families. The attorney/client relationship also creates confidentiality and legal privileges designed to protect and hide information. The creation of these privileges is commonly used to obscure information and protect assets against liability. It demonstrates a focused financial priority rather than that of transparency or seeking justice and truth.

5. Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

Knowing when and to whom to file a report, and what to include may be overwhelming during a crisis. This section will address these questions as well as what to do if victims and/or families hesitate to report.

When does a report need to be filed?

Each state's laws vary and should be consulted prior to a crisis. In general, law and best practices indicate a policy of reporting whenever there is reason to suspect child abuse or neglect. Note the standard is not *knowledge* of abuse or neglect but rather reason to believe. This includes cases with warning signs, indirect disclosures, reason to believe, red flags, and common behaviors of trauma. (See Attachment 4: Signs of Child Abuse for a detailed list of possible warning signs.)

Disclosures are often incomplete or concealed. The likelihood that signs of abuse will be missed also happens. Likewise, misconceptions about abuse and neglect can lead to improperly categorizing behaviors and patterns into benign habits or "struggles." Pastoral counsel, handled inappropriately, can inadvertently become complicit. It is critical for church leaders, staff, and volunteers to be well-versed in the warning signs, indirect disclosures, reason to believe, red flags, and common behaviors of trauma.

While best policy is that a report be made "immediately," or within 24 hours of the events initiating the need to report, risk of danger may also be a concern. If there is any reason to fear the safety of the victims, it is unwise they be in close proximity to their abuser before or after a report is made. This is particularly true in cases where the alleged abuser is the parent of the victim. This danger frequently extends to the wife as well. Moving a wife and children to a secure location may be wise before or contemporaneously when filing a report with law enforcement and CPS. An emergency plan should be established in the church prior to the need. Leadership must be aware of locations where a family can be moved safely, how to make such a move, and what will be done to care for their basic needs during this transition.

Reason to Believe

The standard of "reason to believe" child abuse may be occurring is initiated when an adult reports childhood abuse and the alleged abuser continues to have access to children. An example would be when an adult reported abuse by a previous Sunday school teacher who remains in close proximity to children. Statistics indicate an increased likelihood of ongoing abuse. This is particularly true in cases of sexual abuse. It is counter to research and evidence to assume an abuser ceased abusing, or only abuses in certain contexts.

This mistake is particularly common in situations when an adult survivor discloses childhood sexual abuse by a parent or sibling. The assumption is that abuse within a family will stay in the family and there is little risk if no children remain in the home. Statistically this is not the

case. If the alleged abuser has access to children, there is “reason to believe” child abuse may be ongoing.

For example, “Jane” discloses that her father “John” sexually abused her as a child. All of John’s children are grown and no minors remain in the home. However, John volunteers at an after-school program. “Reason to believe” advises child abuse continues because John has access to children and an alleged history of sexually assaulting a child. Notice, even though John’s access to children isn’t within your ministry or church, the need to report remains. Having possession of this information establishes a reasonable belief.

Finally, it is critical to understand that the “reason to believe” standard does not require that organizational or personal investigation should be attempted to determine the merits of the allegations or warning signs before reporting. Rather, a report should be made immediately.

To Whom to Report

First, it is important to know your state law and ensure you follow all legal requirements for reporting suspected child abuse. Under most circumstances, you will be legally required to file a report either with Child Protective Services, or the police department, or both.

In the rare event you encounter a situation where you are not legally required to report, and the survivor, parent, or caregiver prefers to file the report themselves, agency should be given to make that choice. Note however, that if they are willing, it is always helpful for the person who received the disclosure or observed the potential evidence of abuse to also file a report and offer to make a statement to police and, if relevant, Child Protective Services. This helps ensure that all corroborating information is received by the correct authorities.

The following are agencies to whom you should report, or which may provide helpful assistance in reporting.

- *Law Enforcement Agency*

Reports of any potential criminal activity should be made first and foremost to law enforcement. Criminal activity can include (but not be limited to) neglect, threats, and other actions such as imprisonment, which do not involve physical contact.

- *Child Protective Services (CPS)*

Report to CPS in any context where an abuser may be harming a child under his or her care. CPS and police serve two very different functions in our legal system. A call to CPS alone is insufficient and will not likely result in a criminal investigation. CPS’s jurisdiction is specifically related to protecting children in the custodial care of the abuser. They do not investigate or evaluate crimes, but rather focus specifically on whether an adult is fit to have custodial care of a child. Immediately report every suspected case of abuse to law enforcement and then immediately report to CPS in the case of minor children in the abuser’s custody or

care. This includes situations where the reporting victim is not a family member, but there are children in the care of the abuser. For example, a student may report abuse by her teacher, and the teacher is a parent of minor children.

- *Local Child Advocacy Center*

Child Advocacy Centers are often significantly helpful resources as well, and a call to them may provide insight and guidance for reporting as well. Child advocacy centers are staffed with trauma-trained investigators, medical personnel, and counselors, and are designed to feel as safe and non-threatening as possible for a child.¹⁶⁵ Children's advocates provide guidance and support in the reporting process, investigative help to law enforcement, counseling services to victims and families, and advocacy support through the legal process. Advocates may only take referrals from police departments, but others initiate the investigative process and then refer to law enforcement. When the initial call is made to law enforcement, it is helpful to ask the department if they coordinate with a local children's advocate and, if so, request to connect the child's family. Work with law enforcement through the advocate as much as possible.

- *Guardian Ad Litem*

If a Guardian Ad Litem is already involved in the child's life, it is helpful to reach out to them, if possible, to also report any suspected abuse, as the Guardian is tasked with representing the child's interests in court.

- *Additional Agencies*

It may also be appropriate to contact licensing agencies, such as medical boards for doctors, Title IX investigators for schools, and human resource departments for businesses while a report is made. These reports should be made with the victim or family's consent and *not* made until after law enforcement has been notified *and* the police have notified the alleged perpetrator of the police report to ensure that any criminal investigation is not jeopardized.

- *Pastors, Sessions, and Presbyteries*

Church and ministry leaders should aid in filing the report. This helps give legal weight to the report, and the individual who heard the disclosure may need to serve as a witness in the proceeding as disclosures can become important pieces of evidence.

Relevant agencies such as the police and CPS (if a custodial relationship is involved) should be contacted with a clear statement that the call is being made to report suspected child abuse.

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.nationalcac.org/find-a-cac/>.

1 All information that has been obtained should be given to the detectives, and any physical
2 evidence turned over to investigators.

3
4 When contacting these agencies it is wise to ask the following:

- 5
- 6 • If the department coordinates with a local Child Advocacy Center and, if so, how to
- 7 connect the child and their family with that center;
- 8 • What the process is for bringing the child in to give a statement. (Ideally this will be
- 9 done through the Child Advocacy Center, but that is not always available.)

10
11 This call should not be made in front of the young child, but it is wise to ask the guardian of
12 the child if they would like someone to go with them when they go to file a statement or be
13 interviewed.

14
15 Pastors should clearly document the report in writing, noting the date and time they called,
16 who they spoke with, what they reported, and any instructions they received. Documentation
17 of the report should be kept in church files, and any additional measures taken or interaction
18 with law enforcement or CPS should be routinely documented and filed along with notation
19 of the initial report

20 21 ***How and What to Report***

22
23 Once the need to report has been triggered, a phone call should be made to the relevant police
24 department (and CPS if the child is in the care of the abuser or the abuser has custodial care
25 of minor children), to file a report of suspected child abuse. A preliminary call to the local
26 Child Advocacy Center is also highly recommended as this often yields additional guidance
27 or support when reporting to law enforcement. If the child is a victim of domestic violence or
28 is in the custody of an abuser, a local domestic violence shelter may also provide helpful
29 information on protecting an abused spouse or child, while reporting the abuse.

30
31 If you suspect the child or spouse may be in danger if you report, seek expert help from these
32 sources as well as law enforcement by calling them and letting them know that a report of
33 abuse or suspected abuse needs to be made and that there is reason to believe filing a report
34 will put a child or spouse in danger. Law enforcement may provide some assistance, but you
35 are more likely to receive concrete expert help on safety during reporting, from a domestic
36 violence shelter and/or child advocacy center.

37
38 When reaching out to law enforcement and CPS (if needed), state that the call is to report
39 child abuse or suspected child abuse. Describe the specific events that caused you to report.
40 Report any questionable or concerning behaviors observed in the victim or with the alleged
41 perpetrator and notify the investigators of any known witnesses. All physical evidence must
42 also be turned over to the investigative team. Retain copies where possible. Provide any
43 information which may help complete the picture for investigators without personally filling
44 in the gaps or using conjecture. Reports should be clear, factual, and complete. Include names

1 and contact information for additional witnesses. Maintain a record of to whom, when, and
2 what was reported.

3
4 In the event that a spouse and minor children must be moved to a safe location prior to filing
5 a report, church leadership should seek legal help from a domestic violence shelter or skilled
6 family law attorney who can assist in obtaining the necessary protective orders. If the abused
7 spouse has already retained skilled legal counsel, the church should notify the retained
8 attorney and seek help obtaining protective orders. Emergency removal of an abused spouse
9 and child for their safety can have legal implications in a custody dispute or separation/divorce
10 proceeding. In some cases, the spouse who is protecting the child/children may not be legally
11 allowed to shield them from court-ordered visitations with a parent, even if abuse is alleged
12 and a report made. Violating a court order can result in the protecting parent being in contempt
13 of court or facing criminal charges or allegations of parental alienation. Because these are
14 legally complex issues with potentially significant ramifications, involve an attorney skilled
15 in family law, custody issues, and abuse *prior* to a crisis. Attorneys help guide and advise the
16 process of protecting a spouse and minor children in a way that best protects their legal rights.

17 *Congregations and Others Needing Notification*

18
19
20 Families with children outside the church context who may have been in contact with the
21 alleged abuser should also be notified. Also consider the families with children in the alleged
22 abuser's profession or any other voluntary capacity.

23
24 When an allegation of *sexual* abuse is made against someone in the church, recognize the
25 likelihood there may be other victims. Additional people in the congregation may have other
26 details important to the investigation. Notification is not a determination of guilt; it is the
27 necessary means for ensuring a proper investigation. Investigations are incomplete without
28 this wide-ranging information. The intent is not to slander a person, rather it is to give true
29 statements about a report regarding an individual. A policy of reporting allegations for the
30 purpose of ensuring a fair and just investigation, helps communicate clearly to your
31 congregation that these routine processes are not determinations of guilt, but rather are
32 standard protective and policy measures that are followed for all individuals.

33
34 All families with children who may have been in contact with the abuser must be notified
35 quickly after reporting to law enforcement and CPS. This includes families with children in
36 any church associated community groups. Notification should occur as quickly as possible
37 but should *not* occur before the alleged abuser is aware that a report has been filed. Once the
38 abuser is aware of the report, there is no benefit, and significant detriment, to failing to
39 properly notify relevant communities and individuals.

40
41 If sexual abuse is alleged and the abuser was ever in leadership, a volunteer in the church, or
42 has a circle of connection within the church that is difficult to very clearly identify or notify
43 on an individual basis, the entire congregation must be notified using multiple formats. This
44 includes, but is not limited to, the church email list and an announcement before services. This

is also true for nonsexual criminal child abuse which took place in the alleged offender's role in the church: for example, a childcare worker who allegedly hit a child during Sunday school.

When the report is filed, inform police and CPS you will be notifying anyone whose children were in contact with the alleged abuser. Find out when the alleged abuser will be aware a report has been filed. In some cases, investigators may need to do preliminary work before the abuser is aware that he or she is under investigation. In these instances, investigators may ask you not to notify anyone so as not to compromise the investigation. However, once the alleged abuser is aware of the report, do not postpone or delay notification. There is no benefit from, and indeed great harm in, postponing or delaying notification.

Notifications should:

- Protect the identity of the victim and witnesses. For example, in a case when the victim is the child of the alleged abuser, identify the victim as "a child who has a close relationship with the family."
- Identify the type(s) of abuse alleged without using minimizing language. For example, use terms such as physical sexual abuse, videotaping, photographing, exposure, showing the child pornography, engaging in sexually explicit conversations or communications, etc. Words do not need to be graphic, but they should identify the range of the alleged abuses. This may also help alert others with information or red flags they may not previously have recognized.
- Identify the general context of the abuse as much as possible while continuing to protect the victim. For example, "the allegations relate to events that took place with a minor where X teaches," or "these allegations were brought by a family who attends our church, though the alleged abuse took place in a non-church context," or "these allegations relate to events that took place during our youth retreat," etc.
- Provide clear instructions for anyone else with information. Provide contact information for a detective and CPS worker and/or direct those with relevant information to reach out immediately.
- Clearly identify the boundaries for the alleged abuser.

Notify law enforcement and CPS and describe the specific events that caused you to report. Report any questionable or concerning behaviors observed in the victim or with the alleged perpetrator and notify the investigators of any known witnesses. All physical evidence must also be turned over to the investigative team. Retain copies where possible. Provide any information which may help complete the picture for investigators without personally filling in the gaps or using conjecture. Reports should be clear, factual, and complete. Include names and contact information for additional witnesses. Maintain a record of to whom, when, and what was reported.

What if the victim or their family does not want to report?

The following represent several difficulties in reporting.

- The marriage, close relationship, and/or family will be impacted significantly.
- The non-abusive spouse may fear for their safety.
- The non-abusive spouse may have a desire to protect the abusive spouse from harm.
- The non-abusive spouse may have guilt for “damaging” the abusive spouse.
- There is a risk to children who remain within the abuser’s care or reach.
- Multiple adult victims of childhood abuse come forward while other survivors prefer not to file.

The process of reporting abuse is traumatic. Help victims and their families understand from a positive perspective, carefully explaining why a report needs to be made. Note: *At times law enforcement or CPS will not investigate a report unless the victim is a willing participant. However, a report should nonetheless be made.*

- Assure those involved that reporting prevents further abuse of the child and potentially other children.
- Reassure the victim and their family of your help and support, including a concrete plan or action steps through the process.
- Whenever possible, give the victim and their family choices. Abuse robs a victim of their voice and autonomy. Therefore, provide input that helps them make wise decisions while retaining their agency. The goal is to unite and report quickly, while simultaneously maintaining support of the victims and their families.
- If unity is not possible, a report should still be filed. Notify the victim you will not disclose identifying information. Inform law enforcement and CPS that you remain in contact with the victim and are encouraging them to participate in the investigation. While involving the victim in the process is preferred, an anonymous report provides the authorities with crucial information for additional victims already reporting or who may report in the future.
- Assure those involved you understand their choice and are ready to support and assist if they do choose to speak with investigators.
- In a case when survivors above the age of majority do not wish to report, the report should be made on behalf of the minor children or adults willing to participate. Notify the authorities that there are additional survivors alleging abuse who are not yet prepared to come forward. Do not provide identifying information, simply make law enforcement aware that other survivors are known. Knowledge that the perpetrator has multiple victims may help the investigation be taken seriously and prioritized.
- Support survivors who do report without compromising the choice of an adult survivor who does not want to participate in the process.
- It may be helpful to accompany the survivor and/or parents, but it is not a substitute for actual participation in the reporting process.

6. Redemptive Shepherding

Working with victims and the dynamics of abuse presents an incredible opportunity to bring redemption and light, and to display the gospel to hurting members of the flock. God shows concern for the broken-hearted (Ps. 147:3) and He is not silent in the face of evil (Ps 94:14-

17, 97:10; Eph. 5:11-12). His people must also lovingly and carefully shepherd those impacted from the evil of abuse. Protecting the weak and vulnerable is the responsibility of all God's people (Ps. 82:3-4; Isa. 1:17; Prov. 31:8-9).

All caregiving has potential for error. There is even the possibility of causing additional harm. One example for how this might happen in shepherding victims suffering from abuse is, when they come forward, it is common for those involved to consider the accused with "charitable judgment." People are generally hesitant to violate the "innocent until proven guilty" standard. While God's people are called to love one another and "believe all things" (1 Cor. 13:7), err on the side of safety when it comes to protecting the vulnerable. Research shows children rarely report false abuse, particularly sexual abuse. Therefore, take the steps necessary to restrict the alleged abuser's access to children, report the allegations, and notify the church. Allow law enforcement to investigate and make any legal judgments.

Be aware however, that it is unlikely that law enforcement investigations will provide useful conclusions in any reasonable time frame. While the rate of false reports is incredibly low (only between 2-8% of alleged sexual abuse reports are false), only approximately five to seven out of every 300 rapes reported to police will result in criminal charges and conviction. Additionally, this process is likely to take two or more years on average. Helpful conclusions from CPS are even less likely to be clear and prompt.

It is likely that church leaders will need to take steps or make decisions long before any helpful results from a police report are obtained. For example,

- will the church assist a spouse in separating from an allegedly abusive spouse prior to conviction for abuse?
- will ecclesiastical charges be raised against an abusive elder absent criminal conviction?

Redemptive shepherding may at times require a level of care or support that entails reaching determinations about the parties involved before law enforcement concludes the investigation. Law enforcement should always be notified and supported in the investigative process, but shepherding is not dependent on the result. In these cases, seeking help from outside agencies (child advocacy centers, domestic violence shelters, independent investigative agencies where appropriate) may be helpful.

Failure to take these steps of protection leaves children at risk during the investigation and potentially suppresses evidence. The failure of those in authority to respond swiftly and concisely may suggest to the victim that the authority thinks the victim is lying. Survivors who sense this resistance will quickly shut down or may retract allegations out of fear.

Shepherding the Victim and Family

There are multiple practical needs which need to be met; however, people involved in the situation are hurting deeply and need connection. Grieve with them, ask intelligent questions

about how they are, pray with them, or visit. Enlist other members in the church to do the same. While care should be taken not to overpromise or offer false hope, remind the family that God sees and knows all things and has not left them alone. Listen to their lead as you follow up, but don't simply wait for them to reach out or identify what they need.

When people are abused, the ability to see and clearly comprehend the situation is dramatically hindered. It often requires substantial time and distance from an abusive situation to fully recognize and articulate what happened. Understand that this means that information is likely to flow out in small increments as the survivor begins to feel safe in disclosing and is given enough time and space from the abuse to begin articulating what they have experienced as abnormal and wrong. This does not mean the survivor's story is "made-up" or "changing." This is a normal reality when coming out of trauma.

Practical Care for the Victim and Family

The families of victims are often overwhelmed simply trying to process the abuse, parent their wounded child, and care for their other children. Their life now consists of making police reports, attending multiple court hearings, and dealing with the interpersonal dynamics of the abuser's community. Added to these, they may be overwhelmed with managing life's normal demands.

Prior to a crisis, leaders and staff should familiarize with typical problems victims and their families encounter and how the church can help with support and/or practical involvement. It is difficult for families to discern what they need amid so much grief, or even how to communicate these needs. They likely will not know what options are available. Church leaders who proactively pursue care and help provide practical guidance through the church or community resources can be an incredible gift.

- In cases involving a custodial parent, determine that parent's financial situation.
- Have a plan for how your church will help those without financial resources and/or other necessities if there is an alleged abusive spouse who cannot or refuses to provide support.
- Help with childcare responsibilities so that the children aren't forced into contact with the alleged abusive spouse during school pick-up or drop-off, or if they need transportation to an appointment.
- Care for other children in the home when the victim is required to appear in court, attend investigative meetings, and/or receive counseling.
- Care for the children while the parent/parents/caregivers take time away to regroup or grieve the circumstances.
- Help the children and/or custodial parent find professional counseling if needed.
- Provide a schedule for the delivery of meals.
- Provide emotional support and/or physical support when the victim and/or family is working through judicial process.
- If the abuse occurred on church property or during a church event, or was perpetrated by a staff member or volunteer, insurance funds may be available to help provide

counseling for the victim. Assign someone with expertise in insurance dynamics to proactively work with the church insurance representative and obtain the maximum amount available to assist the family.

- Proactively pursue an insurance claim to help meet the need for trauma care. Trauma therapy is almost always needed for extended periods of time and is often out of reach for most families. Do not wait for the family to ask the church to take this step. The family should not be placed in the position of having to work with the insurance company themselves.
- Have a plan for communication and provide a spokesperson for the family to ensure their needs are met and care is provided.
- Determine how the rest of the pastoral staff and deacons will be notified of needs and kept updated.
- Keep very careful records of all communication.
- Communicate regularly.
- Have a prepared list of resources with which you are familiar in the community that can walk alongside the victim and their family. Children's Advocacy Centers, domestic violence shelters, legal aid clinics, and government resources such as Medicaid and SNAP can all be helpful in providing support on multiple practical levels.
- Have a prepared list of professionals in the community with whom you are familiar such as therapists, trauma counselors, family law attorneys, and intervention groups for abusers.
- Ensure that the alleged offender does not have continued access to children in the church environment. If the alleged offender is a church attendee or volunteer, immediately relieve the alleged offender from all church responsibilities and access to children. This includes all leadership roles, including volunteer leadership roles, until the conclusion of the investigation.

In the family context, this means doing what can be done to separate the alleged abusive parent from the rest of the family. It is usually easier and better to move the alleged abuser to a new location if they will agree to leave, and if the remaining spouse and children will be safe in that location. If the offending spouse is able to be moved, consider that this likely involves practical steps such as changing the door locks on the home. Otherwise, the non-offending spouse and child will need to be moved to an undisclosed and secure location.

Resist fear for how the circumstances will impact the reputation of your ministry or Christ. Christ does not need protection; He wants obedience. Protecting a ministry or institution instead of people fails to recognize that our identity is in Christ alone, and the ministry is His. Failure to demonstrate God's heart for truth, justice, and the vulnerable ultimately destroys our witness and ministry. Jesus laid down His life, and we are called to similarly lay down our lives and reputation for the good of others.

7. Child Abuse Prevention

God's desire is that all children be protected. One of the ways He arranged for their care, nurture, and protection is the family. Parents are the primary caretakers, and they need good resources to help them steward their role well. Leaders should encourage parents who are the primary caretakers of their children in their teaching, protecting discipline, and training (Deut. 6:7; Eph. 6:4). Churches can assist parents by providing resources to teach children about abuse prevention from a Christian worldview.

Since most child abuse occurs inside the victim's home, the church can help parents who may struggle to parent wisely, discipline lovingly, recognize abuse, or provide for their children. The church can play a significant role in addressing potential weaknesses and prevent any abuse and neglect that might happen in the home as part of their Christian discipleship.

How the Church Can Assist Parents in Child Abuse Prevention

- **Teach parents to be present and caring parents.** Children need to know that they are loved and cared for in order to prevent abuse, but also to feel comfortable reporting to their parents.
- **Support the hard work of parenting.** Assist parents when they become overwhelmed. Consider teaching discipline methods and successful parenting strategies. Help parents raise children in a way that reflects Christ's love and care.
- Help disadvantaged families make connections with your benevolence and gain access to medical care or community resources. *This can help prevent issues related to neglect, especially when a family lacks resources.*
- Host seminars for parents who have not had the benefit of learning godly parenting. *Sanctifying their behaviors with their children bears witness to their faith.*
- **Talk to members about monitoring their child's phone, television, video, and internet viewing/usage.** Inform parents of the risk to their children as they interact online. Teach ways they can shepherd their children as they engage with technology.
- Develop a recommended reading list or supply the church library with books that help parents think biblically about parenting and difficult issues that might arise in a child's development.
- **Publish a recommended resource list for abuse prevention materials.** Many parents want to talk to their children about sex abuse prevention but do not know how. Abuse Prevention is most successful when children are taught about body safety and healthy boundaries and are encouraged to openly communicate about sexual matters. Resources are available for parents to read directly with their children. (See Annotated Bibliography.)

How the Church Can Prevent Child Abuse

The protection of children should be a multi-pronged approach that reflects that we cherish and love the children God has gifted us (Ps. 127:3). A church should seek to be a safe environment for children where they can learn about the Lord (Prov. 22:6; Mark 9:42). We

want to model for children how Christians are called to love God and one another (Matt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 11:1) Further, we protect the reputation of Christ when we seek to protect children from abuse as it showcases our desire to live in a manner that is above reproach and in line with our faith (Matt. 18:6; Phil. 4:8-9).

- **Create and implement a child abuse policy.** See section on creating a comprehensive Child Protection Plan.
- **Train staff, leaders, and volunteers to recognize and report child abuse.** If you do not have the means for training, consider bringing in an outside organization or program.
- **Insist on background checks** for staff and members who work with children and teenagers.
- **Be known for reporting** suspected abuse or neglect.
- **Communicate to the congregation** that pastoral staff are trained and willing to intervene when abuse is suspected or reported.
- **Clearly articulate abuse as a sin.** Teach that God hates abuse and calls His people to protect the vulnerable.
- **Clarify that abuse is not a private issue.** The church should welcome the exposure of evil and be willing to work with the local government (Rom. 13).
- **Teach your church's theology of abuse.**
- **Require your leaders to model** exemplary sexual lives. Because of their high calling, high visibility, and high influence among us, pastors and other church leaders should be expected to live godly lives (Titus 1:5-9).
- **Address tangential issues** such as pornography and other media which eroticize violence.
- **Extend education to children and teenagers.**

Teach them how to recognize and report abuse. Children should understand that, while the Bible tells children to obey their parents, the biblical command for obedience is conditional (Eph. 6:1) and it is good and godly to expose sin.

8. Case Studies

Amanda

At first, Amanda was flattered. Peter, the high school varsity soccer coach, made a point of cheering specifically for her at soccer games. Peter also volunteered in the youth ministry at her church, so he came to the underclassmen games to “support” the players who attended youth group. Though she was only a sophomore, Peter was interested in everything she did. He would even send her encouraging text messages during the day. Peter always shared solid biblical wisdom with her when she faced any challenges in school. Peter was good-looking, and his attention kind of felt nice.

In her junior year, Peter was one of Amanda’s soccer coaches. He continued to text tips for how to improve her game and offered to help by setting up a practice session specifically for

1 her before youth group. When Amanda declined because her mom worked during the day and
2 wouldn't be able to drive that early, Peter offered to pick her up. He even said he would bring
3 her home after youth group.

4
5 As time went on, Peter would share personal information with Amanda. During one of their
6 car rides, he told her he was having problems in his marriage. He said his wife just didn't
7 understand him. He told Amanda she was jealous of all his sports and "hobbies." She'd
8 complain about the time he spent volunteering at church. Peter then shared his admiration of
9 Amanda's sports knowledge, finesse, and agility. "You're going to make some guy an
10 amazing wife one day," he encouraged.

11
12 Eventually the topic of their conversations turned to Amanda and her interest in boys. Amanda
13 began confiding in Peter. One day, she was crying about some guy she liked and how he had
14 treated her poorly. Peter offered a hug. To Amanda, his hug felt a little too long and way too
15 tight, but she felt bad for being suspicious of Peter's intent. She was confused though; the
16 relationship was beginning to make her uneasy.

17
18 Peter's attentiveness toward Amanda increased over time. Hugs became routine and lasted
19 longer. Amanda wasn't sure what to do about it. One day, he asked Amanda if she could keep
20 a secret. He confessed he had developed feelings for her and if he even saw her picture on
21 social media, it would lift him from his depression. Amanda told him she was very
22 uncomfortable with the conversation and did not want to hear any more. But Peter said she
23 treated him like a boyfriend. All the time they spent together and all the secrets she shared
24 made Peter want more. He told her it was only right for him to desire physical affection too.
25 He said all he needed was for her to sit on his lap and give him a hug. A hug would help his
26 depression, he said, and the closeness would help him feel so much better. Amanda timidly
27 complied.

28
29 As their relationship grew, Peter assured Amanda she was in the driver's seat. He convinced
30 her *she* had pursued the relationship with *him*. Yet each week, he advanced their contact
31 physically. When Amanda hesitated, he threatened to expose her for manipulating him. He
32 said he would tell everyone she was sexting him. Peter said he really didn't want to do that
33 because he knew her feelings for him were genuine. But he insisted she must continue to keep
34 the relationship secret so that no one could accuse him of having a favorite player. If people
35 were aware they were a "couple," it would jeopardize her chances of getting a college soccer
36 scholarship.

37
38 Amanda was both confused and frightened. She knew what she did was wrong, but she did
39 not recognize Peter's manipulation. Amanda didn't know she was being abused. She believed
40 Peter's lies that she was responsible for the relationship and feared what would happen if
41 anyone knew. In addition, she was afraid of hurting him since she genuinely cared. On top of
42 it, Amanda knew Peter's wife. She couldn't imagine causing her to suffer. Amanda had
43 nowhere to turn.

Brainstorming questions for help developing best practices:

1. What structures and/or procedures should your church or ministry already have in place in case a situation like this occurs?
2. Upon discovering the circumstances, what will you do first?
3. What will you do next?
4. Who can you call for help navigating all the details?
5. Who in your church is versed in abuse and compassionate to care for the victim and/or her family?
6. What action steps will you take against the perpetrator?
7. What will you tell the congregation and how?
8. How will you determine if an outside agency will be helpful for this case?

Jane

Jane is a young mother in your church with three small children. The oldest is 3 years old; there's an 18-month-old, and the baby was born 6 months ago. Jane is disoriented about some of the things that are happening in her home. She doesn't think her husband's behavior is right, but she's unclear how to explain or if she's gossiping if she shares.

Mark, Jane's husband, has always been controlling. Often, he isolates her from friends and family. Sometimes he monitors her whereabouts on "Find My Friends." If she's even the slightest bit late in coming home when she said, Jane knows there will be consequences. She's learned to live with Mark's unrealistic demands, but when it comes to the children, she's a bit more concerned. The little ones just don't quite understand why daddy is always so frustrated and angry. One of the things that disturbs Jane is that Mark disconnects the heat if he thinks they are spending too much money warming the house in the winter. Jane often carries the baby in the Ergo just to keep them both warm.

More disturbing, however, are the discipline practices Mark uses. Before they had kids, Jane didn't know what Mark believed was appropriate for disciplining children. For instance, Mark insisted it was about time the baby was sleep trained. So, if she cries at night, he goes into the nursery, picks her up, and squeezes her little body so tight she cannot cry or make a sound. Mark won't release the infant until she stops struggling or trying to cry. Mark says this teaches the baby Mark is in charge and that she ought not cry at night. When Jane becomes distressed at the scene and expresses concern, Mark demands she submit to his authority and leave the room.

Jane is equally concerned about Mark's behavior with the toddlers. The 18-month-old is "spanked" with a leather strap for even the smallest infraction—everything from not coming down a steep flight of stairs by herself when Mark wanted her to learn to climb down on her own, to spilling her sippy cup at dinner time. Sometimes the leather strap leaves visible welts on her small bottom that last for days. Once, Jane photographed the welts and documented fingerprint bruises on the arms of her three-year-old. Her son told Jane that Daddy grabbed

him after he disobeyed. Mark has even been known to deprive the two older children of dinner or other meals as a punishment.

Jane is scared, but she doesn't know who to tell. So, she approaches one of the elders at your church and reveals only that there's "a problem" in her home. She doesn't share details but describes the problem as Mark being angry all the time. She asks for the elder's discretion in sharing anything with other church leaders. The elder suggests they begin marriage counseling. In their meetings, Jane ambiguously describes Mark's behaviors with the children, but she doesn't call it "abuse." Mark tells the elder he's training the children and leading the home like a godly husband and father. The elder warns Jane to be cautious with the words she uses, reminding her that parents need to discipline their children and won't always do it perfectly.

Jane doesn't know where to turn. She's afraid for her children's safety, but in their counseling sessions the elder continually minimizes what is happening. He seems to believe Mark's version of the circumstances and calls Jane "oversensitive," so she hesitates to reveal further information or to use strong language like "abuse." In private, Mark accuses her of not living in reality.

Three years pass, and Jane can no longer stomach how Mark disciplines the children. The "counseling" failed long ago, so Jane takes the children and leaves her husband and files a report against her husband for child abuse. The elder who was previously involved tells you and child protection services that Jane "never presented evidence of abuse."

Brainstorming questions for help developing best practices:

1. What structures and/or procedures should your church or ministry already have in place in case a situation like this occurs?
2. What questions would have been helpful for discerning what was happening in the home?
3. What might have been some red flags?
4. How does the "reason to believe" standard help with this situation?
5. Upon discovering the circumstances, what will you do first?
6. What will you do next?
7. Whom can you call for help navigating all the details?
8. Who in your church is versed in child abuse and compassionate to care for the victim and/or family?
9. What action steps will you take against the father?
10. What will you tell the congregation and how?
11. How will you determine if an outside agency will be helpful for this case?

SECTION SIX: THE MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

1. Summary Description of Misuse of Spiritual Authority

The reports of abusive spiritual leadership and/or moral failure by called and ordained shepherds is increasing worldwide. Spiritual abuse and its effects are egregiously demonstrated in the stories of Jim Jones and David Koresh but are no less devastating to God's name when performed by ministers of the PCA or any other religious body.

Spiritual abuse may be manifested by any or all the following:

- Emotional or psychological manipulation based on Scripture,
- Physical and sexual assault,
- Financial exploitation,
- Haughty, manipulative, demeaning, humiliating, accusatory, belittling, or shaming speech and/or behavior,
- Intimidation, coercion, and demand for conformity to non-biblical standards.

Spiritual abuse is an attempt to exert power and control over someone using religion, faith, or beliefs. The Salvation Army includes "when spiritual authority is misused to manipulate peoples' emotional responses or loyalty for the benefit of the church, institution, or of another individual."¹⁶⁶

Spiritual abuse aims to solidify the power, prestige, and gratification of the abuser. The means are a misuse of Scripture and of the victim's desire to please God and their leader. Victims suffer shame, confusion, and spiritual doubt, having a negative impact on the victim's perception of God's character. Congregations and the Body of Christ suffer morally and existentially beyond the purely secular and legal definitions of abuse.

2. Expressing God's Heart

In his first letter to Timothy (3:1-7) the apostle Paul provides a list of qualifications for leaders in Christ's church. Paul calls leadership a "noble task." Each character trait proceeds from a heart transformed by the gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit. The picture Paul paints for Timothy is of a leader motivated by the servanthood of Jesus Christ. Leaders are temperate, self-controlled, respectable, gentle, and self-aware of their own failing. They humbly struggle to pursue holiness and are motivated by love for Jesus Christ and their neighbor. Leaders "preserve that authority which God had put upon them."¹⁶⁷ They are not dominating, harsh, or uncaring. Leaders must express the heart of God and bless those under their God-given authority. Their leadership must truly seek the good of each member of the congregation and community.

¹⁶⁶ "Spiritual Abuse," August 20, 2008, <https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-policy/positional-statements/spiritual-abuse>.

¹⁶⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Lawrenceville, GA: PCA CDM, 2007), n.d. Q. 129.

God is the perfect model of leadership; “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11-18). Jesus’s washing of the disciples’ feet, even those of His betrayer, teaches us that to lead is to bend down and serve those under our care. The disciples called Jesus “Teacher” and “Lord,” and He confirmed those titles. Jesus had enormous, yet restrained strength at His disposal. He laid down His heavenly privilege and, instead, performed the duty of the lowest class in society. Jesus intentionally served those He ruled. He is the opposite of an oppressive leader. The type of leadership Christ intended for His kingdom involves abandoning all self-serving motives and authoritarianism (described as “lording it over” in Matthew 20) for the sake of God’s people.

Historically, however, many leaders have been self-serving, motivated by power, authority, and material gain. When confronted, they shift blame. Oppressive leaders wield power and are averse to sacrifice. They are unwilling to relinquish the control that power brings and instead use it to build their own kingdom. God casts the most severe judgment on this abusive type of shepherd. When the Israelite leaders ruled harshly and brutally, Ezekiel told them, “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves!” (Ez. 34:2-10). He then asks the rhetorical question, “Should not shepherds take care of the flock?” The prophet then says the Lord is against them, and they will be held accountable.

3. Recognition of the Misuse of Spiritual Authority

Scripture provides many examples of abusive leadership. Abusive leaders fail to apply the gospel to how they lead. In 1 Kings 12, we read of the foolishness of Solomon’s son, Rehoboam.

And the king answered the people harshly and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him, he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions” (1 Kings 12:13-14).

Rehoboam was authoritarian in his leadership and Israel paid greatly. In Rehoboam’s foolishness, God’s people suffered a “split” in the kingdom. Jeroboam led ten of the Israelite tribes away from the center of worship in Jerusalem.

Micah condemns those “...who have authority, who abhor justice and make crooked all that is right . . . who build with bloodshed and unrighteousness . . . your leaders work for money . . . yet they say, ‘Is not the Lord among us?’” (Mic. 3:9–11).

In addition,

- Eli was taken to task by the Lord for honoring his sons, who were false shepherds of God’s people, over Jehovah (1 Sam. 2:27-29).
- King Ahab was an idolater and “did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him” (1 Kings 16:33).

- 1 • King Jehoram murdered his brothers when he ascended to the throne of Judah (2 Chron. 21:4-6).
- 2
- 3 • The Scribes and Pharisees bound “heavy burdens...on people’s shoulders but they
- 4 themselves [were] not willing to move them with their finger. They [did] all their
- 5 deeds to be seen by others” (Matt. 23:4-5).
- 6

7 The Lord repeatedly calls those who oppress to repentance (Judg. 6:9; 10:12; 1 Sam. 12:8; 2 Kings 13:4; Ps. 9:9; 10:18; 103:6; 146:7). At times, He even consumes them in His wrath (Ezek. 22:29-31). Those who stand against oppressive behavior and on the side of the oppressed reflect the Lord’s heart for His people.

11 The Westminster divines provide a fitting exhortation to those who would seek their own selfish ends over the needs of their subordinates:

15 **Q.130.** What are the sins of superiors?

16 **A.** The sins of superiors are, besides the neglect of the duties required of them, and inordinate seeking of themselves, their own glory, ease, profit, or pleasure; commanding things unlawful, or not in the power of inferiors to perform; counseling, encouraging, or favoring them in that which is evil; dissuading, discouraging, or discountenancing them in that which is good; correcting them unduly; careless exposing, or leaving them to wrong, temptation, and danger; provoking them to wrath; or anyway dishonoring themselves, or lessening their authority, by an unjust, indiscreet, rigorous, or remiss behavior.¹⁶⁸

25 There is a difference between lording over and serving the flock. “Driven people think they own everything...called people, on the other hand, think everything in life is on loan.”¹⁶⁹ Godly leaders see authority as God-given for His glory. Just as a father is commanded to care for his children and not provoke them to wrath (Eph. 6:4), so a leader in the church must not dishonor himself by provoking those under his care. Harsh, authoritarian, and abusive leadership is roundly denounced by God and the Westminster divines. It must likewise be denounced by the modern church.

33 ***The Misuse of Spiritual Authority by an Organization***

35 In April of 2018, the *New York Times* reported, “Bishops and other leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania covered up child sexual abuse by more than 300 priests over a period of 70 years, persuading victims not to report the abuse and law enforcement not to investigate it, according to a searing report issued by a grand jury on Tuesday.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ The Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechism, 271.

¹⁶⁹ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, eds., *Christian Reflections on The Leadership Challenge* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 104.

¹⁷⁰ Laurie Goodstein and Sharon Otterman, “Catholic Priests Abused 1,000 Children in Pennsylvania,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/us/catholic-church-sex-abuse-pennsylvania.html>.

In February of 2019, the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News* reported that, over the last twenty years, 380 Southern Baptist church leaders were either convicted of sexual abuse, credibly accused and successfully sued for abuse, or had confessed and resigned due to abuse. *Christianity Today* noted that these church leaders left behind “more than 700 victims.”¹⁷¹

Baylor University completed a national “clergy sexual abuse” survey in 2015.¹⁷² While only evaluating the effectiveness of the church’s response to predatory sexual sins of clergy, it is helpful to us in understanding the need for better ministry regarding the misuse of spiritual authority. Both the impact of the abuse and mishandling of reports by the church are a grave concern. The results of the survey concluded:

- Only 4% of the perpetrators were prosecuted;
- Only 8% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that their church supported them after the abuse occurred;
- Only 8% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that the perpetrator apologized to them;
- 50% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that their experience with the church after the abuse negatively affected their relationship with God;
- 80% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that their experience with the church after the abuse negatively affected their spiritual life;
- Only 9% Agreed or Strongly Agreed the church was helpful when they reported the abuse;
- Only 15% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that their church/denomination thoroughly investigated the report;
- Only 11% Agreed or Strongly Agreed that their church openly communicated with them during the investigation.

Abuse occurs in a favorable environment. This is sometimes referred to as “institutional,” “organizational,” or “systemic”¹⁷³ abuse, and can be defined as “A system, such as a family, a government entity, a school, a church or religious organization, a political group, or a social service organization, [which] enables the abuse of the people it purports to protect.”¹⁷⁴

The primary leader of an abusive organization may be charismatic, charming, and/or particularly gifted at preaching. This type of leader draws others in and drives the system. People are attracted by magnetic personalities and may voluntarily or even involuntarily become participants in authoritarian and/or abusive leadership. Followers may be driven by

¹⁷¹ David Roach, “SBC Recalls ‘Year of Waking Up’ Since Abuse Investigation,” News & Reporting, Christianity Today, February 10, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/february/sbc-waking-up-houston-chronicle-abuse-investigation.html>.

¹⁷² “Clergy Sexual Abuse Research,” Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, Baylor University, accessed August 31, 2021, <https://socialwork.web.baylor.edu/research-impact/ongoing-research/clergy-sexual-abuse-research>.

¹⁷³ “System” comes from Greek words meaning “to stand” and “together.” When standing together to oppress those under their care, church leaders are systemic in their abuse.

¹⁷⁴ Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2020), 75.

the vision of the leader and will protect his position for the church and/or organization and for their own sense of power in the system.

Non-abusive leaders and/or members may also become complicit in the misuse of spiritual authority if they turn away claims or ignore the occurrence. They may protect the leader because they have not themselves experienced the abuse others have. Complicity likewise occurs when people believe that truthfulness damages Christ's name or the reputation of his church. When leaders practice oppressive behaviors, those who experience the abuse or receive a report have a responsibility to seek healing and justice. Christ's name and reputation are glorified when the church stands against those who damage others.

Signs of the Misuse of Spiritual Authority

Mary Demuth lists ten signs of a spiritual abuser in ministry.¹⁷⁵ These include but are not limited to the following.

- **Distorted view of respect:** A spiritually abusive leader forgets respect is earned, not granted, and demands it without humble servanthood.
- **Demands personal allegiance as proof of allegiance to Christ:** For a spiritually abusive leader, the only acceptable path for followers is obedience. Absolute submission to the leader gives evidence that the follower is "Christ-like."
- **"Exclusivity" language:** A spiritually abusive leader's way is the right and true way; everyone else is wrong or misguided.
- **A culture of fear and shame:** The culture a spiritually abusive leader creates silences critics, searches out failure in others, and humiliates people into compliance.
- **Personality cult:** A spiritually abusive leader encourages a cult of personality consisting of "yes people" isolated from the needs of others in the congregation. Often, a charismatic leader will slip into arrogance, defensiveness, and pride.
- **Dependence:** A spiritually abusive leader will promote himself or a small group of devoted followers for spiritual information. Personal and independent discipleship in this atmosphere is discouraged.
- **Demand blind servitude of followers but live privileged lives:** A spiritually abusive leader takes the first seat and justifies his material extravagance as God's favor and blessing on his ministry.
- **Buffered from criticism:** A spiritually abusive leader does this surrounding himself with only those who commit to absolute allegiance. Those with legitimate concerns are considered enemies, banished, or battered into submission, and/or crushed.
- **Outward performance over authentic spirituality:** A spiritually abusive leader often demands strict behavior and adherence to rules from congregants, but practices licentiousness, greed, and uncontrolled addictions behind closed doors.
- **Unswerving allegiance from the inner circle:** Fear of a spiritually abusive leader prevents anyone from confronting with their concerns.

¹⁷⁵ Mary DeMuth, "10 Ways to Spot Spiritual Abuse," *Mary DeMuth* (blog), September 6, 2016, <https://www.marydemuth.com/spiritual-abuse-10-ways-to-spot-it/>.

These are additional characteristics of systemic misuse of spiritual authority.

- **Pharisaical teaching:** The church tends to be “pharisaical” in their application of biblical teaching. More emphasis is placed on personal piety than on the gospel of Christ’s saving work.
- **Public prestige and undue influence:** The leadership of the church has significant public prestige and has undue influence on their membership. Members have great difficulty disagreeing with their leaders due to the power of spiritual authority they exhibit.
- **Pious image:** Much is made in the church of keeping up an image of piety among members and the church as an organization. The leadership may hide behind passages such as Matthew 18 when members complain openly about the leadership. The leadership may demand Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) from those who leave the employ of the church. Each may be an attempt to maintain a pious image.
- **Denial and damage control:** When responding to criticism, they emphasize denial and damage control. Their first response to criticism is that leadership in the church would “never do such a thing.” The leadership tends to first look for ways to lessen the impact on attendance, giving, and reputation. They may look for “scapegoats” to shift the responsibility of leadership failure.
- **Willfully unresponsive:** Humility is lacking. There appears to be little willingness to hear criticism. Therefore, the church fails to change.

An organizational misuse of spiritual authority is particularly difficult for victims to identify and seek to rectify. Abuse typically involves more than one leader, so there may be little support to confront the abusive leadership. Because the organization (group) has exhibited the above abusive attitudes and actions, and any disagreement is seen as disloyal or rebellious, it is problematic for the victim to find others who can confirm abuse is taking place.

4. Responding to Reports of the Misuse of Spiritual Authority

The unfortunate response of many institutions and churches has been to ignore or cover up abuse. For a victim, this feels as if they have been betrayed twice. Often the second betrayal is worse than the first. It results in shame and ostracism, with further emotional, spiritual, and physical harm. Those who suffer under abusive leadership may struggle in their relationship with both the church and with God. Many “deconstruct.” When abuse occurs, churches and institutions must have established processes for comforting and restoring victims.

Victims

Abuse by a “man of God” is confusing, which creates significant difficulty for reporting. Spiritual abuse causes one to doubt their own perceptions. Victims may be paralyzed as they struggle with how to respond. The problem is further exacerbated as details might not materialize all at once. The consistent questioning of reality by a victim may result in convincing oneself the abuse did not occur. Also, it’s not uncommon for a victim to rationalize

the abuser's behavior. Victims will say they gave the abuser the "full benefit of doubt" and chose to respond to the circumstances with "charitable judgment." In the most twisted scenario, victims may even question whether God ordained the leader's behavior.

At times, seemingly small blemishes are the first sign of a much deeper problem. These flaws in the fabric of an institution become toxic over time. Therefore, both egregious failings and mundane concerns must be reported.

Lack of a recognizable, trustworthy source for reporting leads to inertia, and further compounds damage to the flock. Delayed reporting impedes the following:

- Confrontation of the abusive leader,
- Cessation of abuse,
- Repair, and/or
- Reconciliation.

In the absence of a means for reporting, the victim and/or family may make the mistake of questioning the abuser directly without adequate preparation and/or protection. Because of the power and status of the abuser relative to the victim, it is rare that a "brother to brother" appeal (as described in Matthew 18:15-19) will result in resolution or repentance. There is also significant risk of causing further consternation and damage to the victim (see Matthew 7 discussion below under "shepherding the abusive leader").

The high incidence of abuse of all forms requires a clearly identified, empathetic, formally established, well-trained, and user-friendly means of reporting. When a report is made, the following should be kept in mind.

- **Confidentiality:** Assure the victim their story is safe, and you will only share what they allow. Encourage them to share as much as they are comfortable sharing, keeping in mind the victim may not want to say everything.
- **Put the victim at ease:** The victim may not trust you completely. If you are a leader in the institution, the victim may naturally question if you may be abusive or complicit. Affirm you will care for them above the institution.
- **Listen attentively:** Try not to interrupt, carefully discern when to ask for more detail.
- **Resist critiquing.** Often those who hear stories of abuse criticize how the story is told. This confuses victims. Allow them to share however they choose.
- **Believe the story:** There will be time to sort out the veracity of the victims' claims. In the beginning it is important to give them a trusted place to share. It is important to sit with the ambiguities and resist asking questions about the victim's credibility and motivations.
- **Be patient:** If the abuse has been sexual in nature, the victim may be particularly hesitant to share the full story.

- **Write down as many direct quotes as possible:** It is important to have an accurate account of the report in order to pass along information to those who will bring accountability to the accused.
- **Be supportive, compassionate, and affirm the victim’s bravery in reporting:** Assure the victim this was not their fault. The responsibility of abusive behavior is always the abuser’s. Ensure you will do what you can to help.
- **Give the victim as much information as you can about next steps:** Give the victim options. Let them know that you will do your best to support and protect them and that you are going to talk to people who can help.
- **Follow up.** Let the victim know what steps have been taken or will be taken. This is a very vulnerable time and position, so it is important that they are fully informed.
- **Know your limits.** If you have limited training in abuse, humbly seek expertise. Though you may be well-meaning, be careful to only do what is legal and what provides safety to the victim.

Abuser

Some of the most charming and likeable leaders are also the most adept at hiding evil behavior. Lawyer and psychologist, Dr. Wendy L. Patrick, wrote, “Having spent over two decades prosecuting cases of domestic abuse, I’ve seen that perpetrators can fly under the radar for years because they are able to disarm with charm—clothing themselves with (misplaced) trustworthiness and credibility.”¹⁷⁶

Abusive leaders deny accusations, especially in response to people perceived as weak. This is particularly prevalent in any private conversations with the victim. Solo confrontation of the abuser by the victim is likely to result in one or more of the following:

- Gaslighting,
- Verbal attack,
- Threat, and/or
- Blaming the victim.

An abuser will typically try to silence the victim by . . .

- Appealing to the cause of Christ,
- Appealing to the sanctity and harmony of the church,
- Appealing to the abuser’s authority,
- Appealing to biblical exegesis,
- The deployment of friends or other means at his disposal, and/or
- Evoking a non-disclosure agreement and threaten attached penalties.

¹⁷⁶ Wendy L. Patrick, “Behind the Façade: The Socially Charming Domestic Abuser” Why Bad Looks Good (blog), *Psychology Today*, April 12, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/why-bad-looks-good/201804/behind-the-fa-ade-the-socially-charming-domestic-abuser>.

Without confrontation, abuse continues and escalates. Ending abuse requires challenge by a greater or independent authority. Evidence of this is found in 2 Samuel 12 as Nathan confronts King David. David would not have repented without Nathan's confrontation. Confrontation must be biblical and loving, however powerful enough to produce true repentance. Such greater power comes only from the Holy Spirit.

5. Reporting

Reporting the misuse of spiritual authority depends on the type of abuse committed by a leader in the church.

Be familiar with the reporting requirements in your state. Typically, these laws are less stringent for adult abuse than they are for child abuse. It is recommended the following be appointed to respond to the survivor and accused:

1. Church Advocacy Group and
2. Session Crisis Intervention Team

Church Advocacy Group

Those who have experienced any form of abuse and/or assault should have an easily accessible, empathetic, reliable, and formal means of reporting. Persons with like experience or situation help somewhat in decreasing fear of reporting. Appointed and highly visible advocates in the local church might include a small group of well-trained members.

The advocacy group should document the concern or complaint in sufficient detail to categorize it as reportable to public authorities (such as physical abuse, rape, sexual assault, physical assault, battery, kidnapping, etc.) or non-reportable (spiritual, verbal, emotional, financial abuse short of the above, doctrinal error, abusive leadership, sexual harassment, adultery, deceit, etc.).

Crisis Intervention Team

The Crisis Intervention Team should consist of effective, wise, and disciplined elders (other than those assigned to advocacy group) able to intervene promptly, efficiently, and effectively to the complaint.

Major tasks will be to . . .

1. Investigate the matter,
2. Relieve any allegedly abusive leaders from duty (after confirmed disclosure, family safety, and abused must set the pace), and
3. Provide shepherding counsel and support to victims, abusers, and their families.

The Crisis Intervention Team is also responsible as a liaison with presbytery and communication to and with the congregation and general public regarding the matter. Truth, honesty, and accountability should be the hallmarks of the team's interactions with the accused, congregation, presbytery, and with the public.

The Crisis Intervention Team (or appointed elder) should inform the accused leader of the charge and relieve him from duty immediately (after confirmed disclosure, family safety, and the abused must set the pace). They should conduct their investigation in such a way as to carefully shepherd the victim and preserve their safety (see "Redemptive Shepherding" below), anonymity, privacy, and welfare.

Reportable complaints should be given to police. The Advocacy Group and/or Crisis Intervention Team should inform the Pastor and/or Session (the latter only if the Pastor is implicated) immediately after submission to authorities and give them their written report. This is to avoid cover up for serious crimes and offenses at the beginning, the most crucial phase of the process.

Non-reportable complaints should be written in sufficient detail and presented to the Session. It is wise to shield a victim's identity unless given permission to disclose. If the complaint is warranted, the Session might plan a strategy to confront the accused. A complaint considered unwarranted should be documented and provided to the accuser with the reasons for the determination.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should meet with the accused after the complaint is lodged, as soon as possible if reported to authorities. Prior to this meeting, they should engage in prayer for wisdom, discernment, and the preservation of the honor of Christ and His church, as well as for grace in approach to both parties.

A written complaint should be presented to the accused leader. The accused's response will be documented verbatim by the advocates, including the responses to appropriate further clarifying questions. Such questions should provide details of . . .

- Factual occurrence,
- Motives,
- Emotions,
- Prior events pertinent to the investigation as seen fit by the investigators and accused,
- Specific disagreement,
- Regret,
- Remorse, or
- Repentance expressed by the accused.

Each answer should be recorded in as much detail as possible, using direct quotes rather than paraphrases. These questions and statements should be recorded and documented until the meeting has reached a conclusion. Questions refused should also be so recorded.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should meet following a confrontation for prayer and to deliberate upon, analyze, and formulate their findings and conclusion of the preliminary investigation. They should document their findings and recommendations for further pursuit of the complaint in writing and submit them to the accused. At the presentation to the accused, the team should record any rebuttal, clarification, or other response of the accused.

The Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder should prayerfully deliberate on the written complaint, response, and rebuttal, and amend or sustain the original findings and recommendation in a final report. This report should be given to both accuser and accused. The following are possible courses of action that may be recommended to the Session.

1. **The issue is to be resolved with follow-up** by the Advocacy Group and Crisis Intervention Team or representative elder to both parties separately.
2. **The issue requires further investigation** by Session and/or outside investigators or counsel before actions can be recommended.
3. **The abuse report requires immediate action** such as contacting the police or Presbytery if not already reported, suspension from duty, or medical/psychiatric intervention.
4. **Action requires a formal program** of biblical counseling, spiritual discipline, mentoring, and accountability of progress in conformity to Christ by one or both parties.
5. **Formal charges or dissolution of pastoral relationship is warranted.**

Bringing Charges Against a Teaching Elder

Besides prayer, confrontation, deliberation, and investigation, it is important that PCA churches avail themselves of the formal system for accountability if a Teaching Elder is exhibiting signs of abuse and refusing to repent.

The *PCA Book of Church Order (BCO)* Chapter 34 is entitled “Special Rules Pertaining to Process Against a Minister.” A church minister (teaching elder) is a “member” of a Presbytery, not the local church. Therefore, when his sin is repetitive following the attempt of members to confront him, it is necessary to pursue accountability through members of the Presbytery (34:4).

There are three possible ways to proceed by the Session or church members:

1. Discuss the matter with another elder in the Presbytery, of which the Teaching Elder is a member, seeking their personal aid in further confrontation;
2. Bring clear, documented proof of unrepentant leadership failure to the committee that handles charges brought against member pastors for their consultation;
3. Bring charges against the minister before this committee. Two witnesses must bring testimony (*BCO* 34:5) or there must be clear “corroborative evidence.”

Although the first and second options may be less intimidating to church members, bringing an abusive leader to trial may be necessary to provide safety to the greater church. A Teaching Elder who has been found unrepentant will be publicly disallowed from ministry in the PCA as long as evidence of unrepentance remains.

However, it must be understood that leadership failure that does not involve “heretical” teaching must clearly evidence damage to Christ’s church.

Heresy and schism may be of such a nature as to warrant deposition; but errors ought to be carefully considered, whether they strike at the vitals of religion and are industriously spread, or whether they arise from the weakness of the human understanding and are not likely to do much injury (BCO 34-5).

Should the congregation wish to remove a Teaching Elder due to his spiritual abuse, they are required to follow these steps.

1. “...there shall always be a meeting of the congregation called and conducted in the same manner as the call of the Pastor (BCO 23-1).”
2. The meeting must be presided over by a ruling or teaching elder of the PCA.
3. The will of the congregation (as voted upon) is presented to the Presbytery for approval for the “dissolution of the pastoral relation.”

Independent Investigation and Outside Counsel

After the Session has received the preliminary investigation report of the Advocacy Group/ elder, they may wish to investigate further or engage expert outside counsel. Outside independent counsel should be sought for potential felony, sexual harassment complaints, serious breach of biblical doctrine, evidence of toxic leadership, or any complaint that was reported to police or public agencies. Examples of such outside counsel include legal, certified public accountants, trained counselors, trained advocates, psychological and/or medical personnel, and/or seminary faculty with expertise in the field.

Urgency of outside assistance is warranted if the victim exhibits these signs:

- Agitation,
- Depression, and
- Suicidality.

Or if the following are true:

- Victim has insufficient resources available;
- There is complexity to the complaint;
- The complaint is extensive;
- There is great potential for harm if mishandled.

The safety of the victim(s), responsibility of the church, and the accountability of a guilty leader are foremost in the work of an independent counsel. *The church's image does not take precedence over truthfulness and repentance.*

6. Redemptive Shepherding

Shepherding the Victim

The consequences of abusive leadership are significant for a congregation and will require intensive grace and repair by the Holy Spirit. Sessions are called to shepherd the flock by lovingly and effectively bringing God's comfort and restoration to redeem the horrendous sin of the misuse of spiritual authority. Ministering to the victim of abusive leadership is intended to provide opportunity for healing physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Ministry to the victim involves the following:

- A safe place and person (people) with whom to share their story,
- Counseling with a counselor trained in spiritual abuse and trauma,
- Any medical care necessary (physical or mental),
- Spiritual counsel that affirms the victim's experience and patient and gracious teaching on Jesus's steadfast love for His child,
- Help in bringing accountability to those who have misused their spiritual authority.

This shepherding care should be assigned to well-trained elders and counselors. These caregivers should be capable of demonstrating God's grace in order to improve and heal the traumas specific to the victim(s). Victims have different needs, and to effectively minister, elders and counselors must understand these complexities.

Redemptive shepherding will be costly in time, effort, and tears. Shepherding care must be sustained until significant healing has been accomplished. Shepherding should occur as quickly as possible and be assigned to skilled counselors.

Shepherding the Abusive Leader

Matthew 18 speaks of brother-to-brother exhortation, implying confrontation of leaders from a similar position of rank. A church must make every attempt to obtain the sinful leader's repentance through direct and individual confrontation (*BCO* 34-3). Jesus teaches this process in Matthew 18:15-20. It is a step-by-step means of graciously turning a sinner from his sin. Each step in Jesus's instructions provides a "raising of the stakes" as more people, including those with greater authority, are consulted and involved in the confrontation.

Scripture also provides direction in cases where a subordinate confronting one in authority may be treacherous. "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you (Matt. 7:6)." Throwing the pearls of the truth before abusers may result in further harm to the victim (Prov. 23:9; 26:4). In a case

where the oppressor is in authority over the victim and has a history of unrepentance when confronted, he may be considered dangerous. Confrontation can negatively impact the life of the victim(s) causing further emotional or spiritual trauma. Jesus provides freedom for an accuser to liberate themselves from greater harm by confronting their abuser. Those who have God-given leadership authority must take responsibility for bringing Christ's authority to bear on an errant leader. This provides safety for the victim(s), vindication for those who support them, and accountability for the offender.

Jesus calls those who have been sinned against to confront an offending brother with an attitude of humility. The one who challenges a brother in his sin should humbly prepare himself first by recognizing his own sin. He must take care to remember Jesus suffered on behalf of both his sin and that of the offender's.

The following are difficulties in bringing accountability to leaders who perpetrate abuse.

- **Hesitancy to Report.** Victims are aware they may not be believed, even though an overwhelming number of reports are accurate and true. Reporting is often a great risk for the victim; therefore, many do not come forward.
- **Aggressive Defensiveness:** The abuser, typically a superior in a better, socially integrated position in the institution or organization, becomes aggressively defensive. DARVO articulates three known tactics of this type of defense,
 - Deny the abuse ever took place,
 - Attack the victim for attempting to hold the abuser accountable, and
 - Claim they are the real victim, thus **Reverse Victim and Offender**.

This is considered a specific form of gaslighting, and is usually accompanied by emotional, physical, and/or legal threats against the victim. It creates a very difficult situation for victim to abuser confrontation.

Those who are accused of misusing their spiritual authority should be immediately removed from positions of authority while an investigation takes place in order to protect the congregation from possible further harm.

Finally, those who are found after investigation to have misused their spiritual authority should be encouraged to seek skilled counseling in abuse. Every effort should be made to bring the offender to repentance and healing.

Mishandling Reports

Mishandling of spiritual abuse by a church and/or presbytery produces very serious repercussions for the victims, for the congregation, and for the honor of God's name. The emotional, physical, and spiritual harm done to victims of abusive authority is further compounded when those charged with caring for God's people fail to respond adequately to their cries for help.

Mishandling may occur through failure at multiple levels.

- **Friends:** When sharing their experiences, a victim may seek counsel from friends. These friends may not believe the victim and fail to provide empathetic care. In addition, they may gossip and cause greater shame. Friends may also pass information on to others, including the abusive leader, who will then cause further harm to the victim. Abusive leaders will do anything to protect themselves from unwanted scrutiny.
- **Leaders:** Much like friends, leaders may fail to listen well and take steps to rectify the abuse. If the goal is to protect leadership or a church's image, leaders may fail to both provide a safe place for the reporting of the abuse and accountability for the one misusing their spiritual authority. They may try to cover up the abuse. Other leaders may also pressure the victim to forgive and forget. Finally, they may also pass the information on to the abusive leader creating greater danger for the victim.

Unfortunately, it is more common for a church to create further damage to the victim's spiritual and emotional health through the mishandling of reporting than it is to be a safe place to find justice and healing. Church split or splinters are more likely to occur when church leaders fail to hold abusers accountable.

7. Prevention of the Misuse of Spiritual Authority

Institutions have ethical and legal obligations to lessen the risk of abuse and safeguard members by implementing . . .

- Appropriate policies,
- Reoccurring education,
- Careful hiring practices,
- Safe methods for reporting concerns,
- Prompt unbiased preliminary investigations,
- Referral to expert forensic investigator practices,
- Pastoral and psychological support,
- Procedure for submission to legal authorities, and
- Procedure for removal of suspected perpetrators from the possibility of further harm.

As a denomination, the PCA is committed to scriptural authority and trained, godly leadership. What do we look for in church leaders? Whereas every leader bears the sin of Adam, the shepherding of God's people requires maturity in the progression of sanctification (Titus 1:5-9, BCO 8-2). God has revealed in Scripture the standards for leadership as well as instruction in what it means to be a leader of God's people.

In the *Book of Church Order* [21.5] a candidate for ordination is asked eight questions, two of which are:

6. Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel and the purity and peace and unity of the Church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?
7. Do you engage to be faithful and diligent in the exercise of all your duties as a Christian and a minister of the gospel, whether personal or relational, private or public; and to endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the gospel in your manner of life, and to walk with exemplary piety before the flock of which God shall make you overseer?

A minister of the gospel in the PCA is expected to strive for purity of doctrine and the unity and peace of his congregation. He is to “adorn the profession of the gospel” in his relationships and teaching. Timothy Witmer writes, “In leading the flock, shepherds must be motivated by love for the Lord and for the well-being of the sheep. It must be evident to the congregation that the leadership of the elders is exercised for the good of the people and not for the benefit of the leaders.”¹⁷⁷

Leaders who practice domestic and sexual violence believe they are “entitled.” Leaders who abuse their place of leadership likewise believe they are entitled to their position of authority and control of the congregation. Leaders who neglect to recognize that their authority is *from* Jesus Christ and *under* His ultimate authority fail to lead in Christ-honoring ways.

The Ordination Process

Candidates for the gospel ministry and others employed for spiritual oversight (Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, etc.) should be examined carefully to determine their godly character. Presbyteries and Sessions are encouraged to carefully investigate a candidate for leadership roles including but not limited to the candidate’s knowledge of theology. Background checks, social media checks, and careful reference checks should be used to screen for abusive leadership.

As men apply to come under care by presbyteries, it is imperative these steps be taken to confirm the calling of a man to the gospel ministry.

1. The recommending session must carefully evaluate the applicant’s family, finances, and leadership philosophy and skills before recommending him to come under care of the Presbytery.
2. The presbytery committee responsible for taking a man “under care” should confirm, through interviews of the applicant and his wife (if applicable), application, and recommendation forms, that the man satisfies the requirements found in Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

¹⁷⁷ Timothy Z. Witmer, *Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 156, Kindle.

Careful attention should be given to how the applicant performed in past and present positions of leadership in the workplace and home. Questions should be asked to determine the following:

- Candidate's interactions with his wife,
- Candidate's interactions with and discipline of his children,
- The candidate's work in team settings,
- The candidate's leadership philosophy in the workplace or other settings where he has authority over others,
- The candidate's willingness to acknowledge wrongdoing and repent,
- The candidate's childhood and spiritual development: Persons with significant childhood adversity, including abuse or neglect, or excessively privileged upbringing have much higher risk of being abusive.

Pastoral Ministry

Once employed, many in spiritual leadership lack consistent mentorship, accountability, and external discipleship. In the rush of daily ministry and stress of crisis intervention, it is easy to neglect prayer, Bible meditation, and re-creation in the Lord and His people. A formal accountability program and mentor should be established at the presbytery level for each leader in ministry. This mentor will assist in recognizing early deviations from God's instructions for His leaders in the church.

Finally, success and power, especially in the world's eyes, can easily corrupt. These were the temptations offered to Christ in the desert by Satan. Should success and power be given, it must be used judiciously only for God's glory, not one's own.

8. Case Studies

Jacob

Jacob was still in college when he and his wife joined a new PCA church plant in their town. It was in an affluent area with many wealthy families. These families were the backbone of this small, dedicated congregation. The Pastor was an excellent speaker, effective in ministering to the members from the pulpit. He was the founding pastor of the church plant that was administered by elders. Within six short months, Jacob and the Pastor formed a close bond. His pastor asked Jacob to join the staff in an administrative position and to serve as a ruling elder on the Session.

In time, Jacob began to observe that his pastor was overly focused on gathering people to hear him preach. Jacob said it felt like his pastor had an unhealthy infatuation with the praise and applause of his followers. Jacob believed the purpose of church leadership was to model Christlikeness and train the "saints" for the works of ministry, not simply to gather them to hear one uniquely gifted teacher. Jacob brought the issue to his pastor in the most non-judgmental way he could. Because of his childhood abuse experience, Jacob was also

1 particularly sensitive to “being wrong.” This insecurity made him make sure to take the log
2 out of his own eye before confronting anyone in their sin.

3
4 Jacob was unprepared for the response. The Pastor immediately shifted the blame to Jacob.
5 He walked away from that confrontation with the nagging feeling his pastor was sinfully
6 proud. He noticed that when a young, recently married couple began to have serious marital
7 conflict and asked for an appointment with the Pastor, the Pastor scheduled them two weeks
8 out. However, when a wealthy, attractive woman, the good friend of an influential pastor in
9 the PCA, asked for an appointment to discuss the Pastor’s teaching, she was immediately
10 given a hearing at her home.

11
12 The Pastor’s self-centeredness also became apparent in his handling of the church’s money.
13 He hired a personal assistant, gave himself a significant raise, and signed himself up for a
14 medical plan without session approval. When the church purchased office space, the Pastor
15 spent a large sum on the remodeling—again, without Session approval.

16 *Jim*

17
18
19 Jim, a former college ministry leader, was a dynamic individual who most folks thought of as
20 a people- magnet. Daniel was recruited by Jim, his former college leader, to work for him as
21 an assistant with his church- planting work. Jim, as the church planting pastor, gave Daniel
22 extensive duties, all which Daniel considered helpful for his growth as a young pastor.
23 However, as Jim laid task after task at Daniel’s feet, he would not help him prioritize. So,
24 Daniel carefully considered the needs and prioritized the duties himself.

25
26 One Sunday morning, Daniel and Jim had a disagreement over the observance of the Lord’s
27 Supper, and Jim put Daniel on suspension. The intent was to have the Session discuss his case
28 a week later. Daniel’s church had mostly borrowed elders, friends of Jim, who did not live
29 locally but out of state. As Jim’s friends, the Session did his bidding and did not provide the
30 type of oversight a Session is called to perform.

31
32 Jim did not seek to understand Daniel, nor did he provide an opportunity to discuss any options
33 that might help them both move forward. Daniel said Jim displayed a shocking change of
34 attitude that took him by surprise. Although Daniel was reinstated the next week, he and his
35 wife felt they were walking on eggshells.

36
37 Some months later Daniel was told he needed to maintain a chart of 30-minute increments
38 and record all he did both personally and at work. He was also instructed to report with whom
39 he met during the day. The men in charge of Daniel’s oversight were tasked with discussing
40 the reports with Jim.

41
42 Eventually, the elders voted to dissolve Daniel’s call to the church and ask for his resignation.
43 It was explained to Daniel that if he chose to go to the Presbytery to challenge the decision,
44 he would give up his severance package as a conditional response to a previously signed non-
45 disclosure agreement.

During several months of transition Daniel was given strict instructions not to meet with certain individuals at the church, and he was required to tell Jim what was said if he did meet with anyone. Daniel said, “If I did talk with people at all, my narrative was to be that ‘I fired myself’ by my actions...that I was the only party that acted wrongly. One of Jim’s friends on the Session continued to call and threaten Daniel.

Since Daniel’s departure, the church has particularized. The Session continues to witness conflicts between Jim, his assistants, and members of the congregation.

Mark

Mark, a church planter in the PCA, lived and ministered in a major U.S. city and, over the course of several years, successfully established a thriving church. Mark and his wife were hospitable, regularly welcomed a variety of people into their home, and eagerly shared the love of Christ. Mark had a charismatic personality and extensive business experience. As the church grew and organized, a group of men surrounded him, becoming part of the early leadership structure. These men were fiercely loyal to their pastor and valued his insight and direction.

Mark’s marriage, however, was deeply broken. This came to the attention of those closest to him, so they enfolded the couple in an effort to help. What became obvious to these men throughout the process, however, was Mark’s severe ill-treatment of his wife and patterns of abusive behavior. The team graciously entered into the situation and provided a safe place for Mark and his wife to get counsel and pursue restoration. But what should have been a path toward repentance, forgiveness, and healing instead became a battle for control.

Mark responded to his leaders’ efforts by discrediting each one of them, questioning their motives and actions. Mark’s unrelenting accusations and criticisms wore them down. In the end, two of the four leaders moved on to other churches. One particularly discouraged leader left the PCA altogether.

The Pastor’s abusive behavior continued to wreak havoc on his marriage and in the church. When they particularized, the Session of the church, similar to the early leadership team, witnessed the brokenness of Mark’s marriage. Like the leadership team, they pursued him in order to encourage his marriage relationship.

Again, Mark rejected his fellow leaders. This time, the Presbytery was asked by the Session to step in and help. After countless hours of counsel and investigation with little response from Mark, the Presbytery Committee recommended his removal. Rather than respond humbly, receiving the loving counsel of his brothers, Mark wrote a scathing letter to the Presbytery and asked that they remove his name from the rolls.

As one of the original leadership team members confessed, it was difficult to pursue what appeared to be the censure of a leader when that leader was manipulative and had great

1 relational capital in the church. However, Mark's response to their confrontation should have
2 raised red flags immediately and accountability should have been achieved by the Presbytery.

3
4 ***Ethan***

5
6 Ethan was hired as an Assistant Pastor in a medium-sized PCA church. He and his wife,
7 Amelia, enjoyed and were challenged by the grace-filled messages the Pastor preached.
8 Having left his former pastorate under a cloud of suspicion, Pastor Fredrick told the search
9 committee and his new congregation when he was interviewed that he was the "victim" of the
10 elders of the church he had served prior to coming. They "felt bad for the guy." The Pastor
11 mentioned Ethan as a reason he wanted to serve in that particular church. Ethan was
12 encouraged by the ego-gratifying comments.

13
14 Soon after moving into his new office at the church, Fredrick put black paper over his office
15 window. A few staff members thought it odd, but no action was recommended. Despite the
16 nagging feeling Ethan had about Fredrick's strange behaviors, he worked hard to get along
17 with his pastor. He remembered Fredrick saying that the assistant pastor in his previous church
18 "hacked" him. Ethan did not want to be like Fredrick's former assistant: suspicious or
19 distrusting. He believed Christians are called to grace, so he was determined to show Fredrick
20 the grace the Pastor did not receive in his previous church situation.

21
22 It was within a year of being installed that pornographic videos from Netflix showed up in the
23 church mail. A couple years later, several of Fredrick's hidden moral failures also became
24 apparent. It turned out he was plagiarizing his sermons and Bible studies. However, in
25 response, Fredrick preached that love gives the benefit of the doubt. So, the congregation
26 chose to overlook the offenses.

27
28 It is difficult for Christians to accept that a leader in the church can be so evil as to lie and
29 manipulate with little or no sign of remorse. It is common for a congregation to stand behind
30 the leader. During his years of ministry, it became clear that Fredrick's leadership was deeply
31 flawed. The way he led the church did not reflect a servant and sacrificial leadership that
32 God's shepherds are called to. The elders became convinced that it was important for the
33 witness of Christ to stand at the center of their church leadership and that they, as the
34 gatekeepers, must hold their leader accountable. The Session asked for Fredrick's resignation
35 and the Presbytery voted to depose him from ministry.

36
37 There were many attempts by the congregation and Presbytery to shepherd and help Fredrick.
38 Rather than submit to their oversight and authority, he resigned. He went on to start another
39 church in a different denomination. Looking back, Ethan said there were several red flags he
40 should have seen. To this day, he lives with the guilt that he failed his congregation by not
41 identifying the abusive leadership sooner and taking the steps necessary to bring him to
42 accountability.

Brainstorming questions for help developing best practices:

1. What are some “red flags” in each of these stories that warrant further investigation?
2. What structures might have helped eliminate any of these mistreatments?
3. How would you respond to a report of a leader who misuses his power or authority?
4. What systems do you have in place to identify oppressive leadership?
5. What is the process for reporting in your church?
6. How have you helped your staff and/or congregation identify unhealthy types of leadership?

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Definitions

The following terminology is often used by those who work with abusers and victims. The inclusion of this list is neither an endorsement nor rejection of the terms or authors. The viewpoints included do not necessarily reflect the beliefs or official position of the PCA. This list is included for information and further study.

Abuse

Abuse is the treatment of any person that is callous, often cruel, for selfish reasons, and that has deeply detrimental effects on the person physically and/or sexually, emotionally, and spiritually. The image of God in the victim of such treatment is completely denied.

Accommodation Syndrome

Lacking insight to recognize, describe, and solve the problem of abuse, the victim establishes a habitual pattern of adjustment to the perpetrator characterized by loyalty and support of the perpetrator. The *Stockholm*, *Battered Women's*, and *Patty Hurst Syndromes* are similar.

Antisocial Personality Disorder

A pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others¹⁷⁸

Authoritarianism

The enforcement or advocacy of strict adherence to authority at the expense of personal freedom.

Battered Women's Syndrome

Behaviors and emotions of a woman who has been abused, similar to PTSD¹⁷⁹

Bullying

Targeted intimidation or humiliation by a person of greater physical or social power against a person of perceived lesser status.

Child Advocacy Centers

One of 800 centers worldwide providing standardized, comprehensive, and coordinated multi-disciplinary management for victims and families.

Child (and Adult) Protective Services

Local government service bureau charged with responsibility of protecting those reported to be at risk or suspected of abuse victimization.

¹⁷⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: APA Publishing, 2013), 645.

¹⁷⁹ Lenore Walker, *The Battered Woman* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1980).

1 ***Childhood Sexual Abuse***

2 Involves the traumatic use of a minor child for sexual gratification by a person in a position
3 of power or authority and expected trustworthiness. The sexual abuse has components of
4 emotional, verbal, and spiritual abuse. The status difference between the child and the abuser
5 makes it impossible for the child to give free, informed consent or to say “no” meaningfully.
6

7 ***Clergy Abuse***

8 Clergy abuse is when a Pastor uses his position of spiritual trust to harm. Clergy abuse is
9 always a form of spiritual abuse but it often also takes the form of emotional, financial, or
10 sexual abuse. The impact of abuse by a Pastor who is ministering in the name of Jesus the
11 Good Shepherd is devastating. Clergy sexual abuse is not an “affair” or a “relationship” but a
12 predatory sin against a vulnerable sheep. When a Pastor crosses any sexual boundary with a
13 congregant, whether a child or an adult, it is clergy sexual abuse.¹⁸⁰
14

15 ***Clergy-Perpetuated Sexual Abuse***

16 Sexual abuse occurring within the context of activities, setting, or relationships endorsed or
17 fostered by official or unofficial policies and procedures of a religious institution. Such abuse
18 typically employs spiritually persuasive power exerted by the abuser and produces an
19 enhanced sense of emotional and existential betrayal in the victim.
20

21 ***Coercive Control***

22 An attempt by one individual in a relationship to dominate the other for the purpose of
23 controlling their autonomy, freedom, and individuality as a person. This includes both violent
24 and nonviolent tactics. “Coercive control is used to instill fear and compliance in a partner.
25 This type of mistreatment follows regular patterns of behavior.”¹⁸¹
26

27 ***Cognitive***

28 Refers to intellectual function, such as memory, reasoning, and implementing prudent
29 decisions.
30

31 ***Cognitive Behavioral Therapy***

32 Psychotherapy that seeks to address harmful distortions in thinking, emotions, past
33 experiences, habits, and their effects on current behavior.
34

35 ***Complex PTSD***

36 Unofficial designation of the body of effects of severe or early life trauma affecting
37 development and manifested by combinations of flashbacks, dissociation, emotional
38 dysregulation, personality disorder, and self-defeating or harmful behaviors.
39

¹⁸⁰ Holcomb, J. (2020) *Abuse and the Church: Types of Abuse* [PowerPoint presentation]. Retrieved from
RTS Instructure. See also the Biblical and Theological section of this report for a fuller discussion.

¹⁸¹ Lauren Paige Kennedy, “What Is Coercive Control in a Relationship?,” WebMD,
<https://www.webmd.com/women/features/what-is-coercive-control#1>.

Complex Trauma

Involves stressors that are repetitive and chronic, direct harm or neglect by those who should have been caregivers, and interpersonal violence that is usually repeated and chronic over time. Thus, the individual is shaped over time by the trauma.¹⁸²

DARVO

An aggressive defense used by abusers consisting of denial that the abuse took place, attacking the accuser by claiming they are the real victim, thereby reversing the victim and the offender.

Domestic Violence or Abuse

Domestic violence (also called intimate partner violence [IPV], domestic abuse or relationship abuse) is a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship.¹⁸³

The term “domestic violence” includes felony or misdemeanor crimes of violence committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner of the victim, by a person with whom the victim shares a child in common, by a person who is cohabitating with or has cohabitated with the victim as a spouse or intimate partner, by a person similarly situated to a spouse of the victim under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction receiving grant monies, or by any other person against an adult or youth victim who is protected from that person’s acts under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction.¹⁸⁴

Domination¹⁸⁵

Exerting power over others. This includes both violent and nonviolent tactics.

DSM-5

The current official psychiatric classification and definitions of mental illness.

Elder Abuse

There are several common types of elder abuse:

- **Physical:** Any injury or physical condition that impairs health or welfare. Some signs of physical abuse may include bruises, cuts, wounds, sudden change in behavior, or caregiver's refusal to allow visitors alone with a senior.
- **Emotional:** A pattern of ridiculing or using demeaning remarks or making threats to inflict physical or emotional harm. Some signs of emotional abuse may include intimidating, threatening, humiliating, and the silent treatment.

¹⁸² Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 38.

¹⁸³ “Understand Relationship Abuse,” National Domestic Violence Hotline, <https://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/>.

¹⁸⁴ “What Is Domestic Violence,” United States Department of Justice <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/domestic-violence#dv>.

¹⁸⁵ See also the chapter, “Domestic Abuse” in this report.

- 1 • **Sexual:** Any type of non-consensual sexual contact with an elderly person. Some signs
2 of sexual abuse may include unexplained depression, fear or paranoia, discomfort or
3 anxiety around certain people, or unexplained injuries.
- 4 • **Financial:** The illegal or improper use of a vulnerable adult or his/her financial
5 resources for another's profit or advantage. Some examples of financial abuse may
6 include the taking of money or property; forging a signature; getting a senior to sign a
7 deed, will or power of attorney through deception; coercion or undue influence; or
8 illegally or improperly adding names to bank accounts or safety deposit boxes.
- 9 • **Neglect:** Deprivation of food, water, medication, medical services, shelter, cooling,
10 heating or other services necessary to maintain minimum physical or mental health.
11 Some signs of neglect may include unclean living spaces, lack of hygiene, or no food
12 or water in the house.¹⁸⁶Emotional Abuse [See “Psychological Abuse”]

14 ***Entitlement***

15 A sense of privilege, an insistence on being served, a patronizing mentality, autonomy in
16 decision making, and defining the roles for each person in the relationship (the king of the
17 castle)

19 ***Forgiveness***

20 See Attachment 9: Forgiveness.

22 ***Gaslighting***

23 A psychological ploy used by an abuser to confuse and paralyze his victim by refusing to
24 listen to pleas to change, countering the memory of the victim, blocking the discussion of the
25 subject, trivializing the victims emotions and needs, denying events and prior promises. The
26 goal, as in the Hitchcock movie of the name, is to cause the victim to question her sanity.

- 28 • **Withholding:** the abusive partner pretends not to understand or refuses to listen.
- 29 • **Countering:** the abusive partner questions the victim’s memory of events, even when
30 the victim remembers them accurately.
- 31 • **Blocking/Diverting:** the abusive partner changes the subject and/or questions the
32 victim’s thoughts.
- 33 • **Trivializing:** the abusive partner makes the victim’s needs or feelings seem
34 unimportant.
- 35 • **Forgetting/Denial:** the abusive partner pretends to have forgotten what actually
36 occurred or denies things like promises made to the victim.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Holcomb, “Abuse and the Church.” Retrieved from RTS Instructure.

¹⁸⁷ “What Is Gaslighting?” National Domestic Violence Hotline, <https://www.thehotline.org/what-is-gaslighting/>.

Grooming

“Manipulative behaviors that the abuser uses to gain access to a potential victim, coerce them to agree to the abuse, and reduce the risk of being caught. While these tactics are used most often against younger kids, teens and vulnerable adults are also at risk.

“Grooming can take place online or in-person. It’s usually employed by a family member or someone else in the victim’s circle of trust, such as a coach, teacher, youth group leader or others who naturally have some interaction with the victim.”¹⁸⁸

Idolatry of Abuse

Worshipful thoughts and actions characterized by 1) desire to achieve power or control; 2) strong sense of entitlement, and 3) desire to be as God.

Imago Dei

Recognition that all human beings are created by God in His Image, sharing some of His attributes in lesser amount, always marred by sin, but fully worthy of dignity and human rights because of that Image.

Institutional Abuse (Betrayal)

Wrongdoings perpetuated by an organization upon individuals dependent upon that organization. Includes failure to protect or respond to abuse, neglect, and harassment.

Intimidate

To make timid or fearful; frighten, especially. To compel or deter by threats¹⁸⁹

Intimate Partner Violence [see Domestic Abuse]

Justice

Distributive, retributive, and restorative activities which promote, preserve, or restore moral health of persons and reconcile relationships.

Male privilege

An attitude of entitlement often based on notions of male hierarchy, manifested by insistence upon complete or unquestioned authority, narrowly defined roles, and insistence upon being served by inferiors.

Mandatory Reporting

Laws of most states and countries requiring immediate reporting of known or suspected abuse or neglect of children under 18 or elderly and the mentally or physically infirm by teachers, health care personnel, clergy, and other categories of occupations under good faith amnesty. Failure to report is a felony. Reporting is typically to police, protective services, or child advocacy.

¹⁸⁸ “Grooming: Know the Warning Signs | RAINN,” <https://www.rainn.org/news/grooming-know-warning-signs>

¹⁸⁹ Merriam Webster, s.v. “frighten (v.),” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/frighten>.

1 ***Narcissistic Personality Disorder***

2 A pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy¹⁹⁰

4 ***Neglect***

5 An act that deprives a dependent person of basic, physical or psychological needs¹⁹¹

7 ***Oppression***

8 A biblical category that describes a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors.
9 It occurs in marriage when one spouse seeks to control and dominate the other (Gen. 16:1;
10 Ex. 3:7-9; 1 Sam. 25; Ps. 9:9; 72:4; 103:6; 146:7-9; Isa. 1:17; 14:3-4; 20:12-13; 54:14; Jer.
11 50:33-34; Zech. 7:10; 9:8; Luke 4:18-19).¹⁹²

13 ***Pedophilia***

14 A DSM-5 diagnosis affecting up to 5% of males and 50% of child sexual abusers,
15 characterized by sexual urges and fantasies regarding children. It is thought, like
16 homosexuality, to be due in strong measure to biological mechanisms.

18 ***Personality Disorder***

19 DSM-5 diagnoses wherein patients exhibit core impairments of self and inter-personal
20 functioning that persist over long periods of time. Specifically, defects are exhibited in self-
21 identity, self-appraisal, self-control, goal implementation, empathy, and intimacy.

23 ***Physical Abuse***

24 Physical, spouse or partner violence are “non-accidental acts of physical force that result...in
25 physical harm.”¹⁹³ This includes all acts that invoke significant fear, such as (however, not
26 limited to) shoving, pushing, and/or restraining.¹⁹⁴

28 ***Power***

29 Having control over one’s own and other’s resources; having the capacity to influence
30 someone else and stay uninfluenced by others.

32 ***Power Dynamics***

33 The deleterious exercise of authority of one or more persons in an organization over others to
34 the benefit of the former and the detriment of the latter, typically by limiting the voice or
35 recourse of the latter.

¹⁹⁰ APA, *DSM*, 645.

¹⁹¹ Jess Hill, “‘It’s Like You Go To Abuse School’: How Domestic Violence Always Follows the Same Script,” *The Guardian*, June 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/24/its-like-you-go-to-abuse-school-how-domestic-violence-always-follows-the-same-script>.

¹⁹² Darby Strickland, *Domestic Abuse: Recognize, Respond, Rescue* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 3.

¹⁹³ APA, *DSM*, 720.

¹⁹⁴ Ann Maree Goudzwaard, “Domestic Abuse,” in *Encyclopedia of Biblical Counseling*, ed. Greg Gifford, accessed July 6, 2020, <https://encyclopediaabc.com/2019/12/23/domestic-abuse/>.

Psychological Abuse

Non-accidental verbal or symbolic act that will result in harm to the well-being of another person's mental or emotional state¹⁹⁵

Psychopathic traits

A non-DSM-5 construct characterized by emotions and behaviors that include lack of empathy, shallow emotions, lack of remorse, grandiosity, glibness, and conning, deceptive behaviors.

PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] is an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic [shocking, emotionally distressing] events, such as combat, crime [sexual assault, domestic violence, captivity] an accident, or natural disaster [or observing a traumatic event happening to another person]. People with PTSD may relive the event via intrusive memories, flashbacks, and nightmares; avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma; and have anxious feelings they didn't have before that are so intense their lives are disrupted.¹⁹⁶

Redemption

Salvation from sin and reconciliation from its effects.

Re-victimization

Repeated and higher frequency of new episodes of trauma and abuse experienced by victims of previous abuse due to psychological and social effects of the initial trauma and failure to heal, learn, and grow from the initial trauma.

Self-Control

A gift of the Holy Spirit given through special and common grace in various measure to overcome temptation, practice the virtue of temperance, delay superficial gratification, and operationalize higher and often longer term rewards.

Sexual Assault

Sexual assault is any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained. It is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority.¹⁹⁷

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It consists of inappropriate verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that has

¹⁹⁵ APA, *DSM*, 720.

¹⁹⁶ "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," <https://www.apa.org>, accessed December 9, 2021, <https://www.apa.org/topics/ptsd>.

¹⁹⁷ Holcomb, *Abuse and the Church*. Retrieved from RTS Instructure.

the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's sense of well-being by creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment from the viewpoint of the affected individual.¹⁹⁸

Shepherding

To selflessly, courageously, and lovingly protect, lead, mentor, feed, and heal those providentially and authoritatively brought under care, using the Model of Jesus.

Sin

A violation of God and God's laws.

Spiritual Abuse

Spiritual abuse is an attempt to exert power and control over someone using religion, faith, or beliefs. The Salvation Army includes "when spiritual authority is misused to manipulate people's emotional responses or loyalty for the benefit of the church, institution, or of another individual."¹⁹⁹

Stalking

The act or crime of willfully and repeatedly following or harassing another person in circumstances that would cause a reasonable person to fear injury or death especially because of express or implied threats

Broadly: a crime of engaging in a course of conduct directed at a person that serves no legitimate purpose and seriously alarms, annoys, or intimidates that person

NOTE: Stalking is often considered to be aggravated when the conduct involved also violates a restraining order protecting the victim.²⁰⁰

Trauma

Trauma occurs when suffering overwhelms normal human coping capacities and causes feelings of extreme shock, fear, and powerlessness. "Recurrent, tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed or borne."²⁰¹

Trauma Triggers

Experiencing, without warning or desire, thoughts and memories associated with trauma. These intrusive thoughts and memories can easily trigger strong emotional and behavioral reactions, as if the trauma was recurring in the present. The intrusive thoughts and memories can come rapidly, referred to as flooding, and can be disruptive at the time of their occurrence.

¹⁹⁸ Holcomb, *Abuse and the Church*. Retrieved from RTS Instructure.

¹⁹⁹ "Spiritual Abuse," Salvation Army New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa Territory, approved December 2005, <https://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-policy/positional-statements/spiritual-abuse>.

²⁰⁰ Merriam Webster, s.v. "stalking (n.)," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/stalking>.

²⁰¹ Langberg, *Suffering*, 5.

1 If an individual experiences a trigger, he or she may have an increase in intrusive thoughts
2 and memories for a while. For instance, individuals . . . may have a surge of intrusive thoughts
3 of past trauma, thus making it difficult for them to discern what is happening now versus what
4 happened then.²⁰²

5
6 ***Verbal Abuse***

7 Extremely critical, threatening, or insulting words delivered in oral or written form and
8 intended to demean, belittle, or frighten the recipient²⁰³

²⁰² National Center for Biotechnology Information, *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.* (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US) Rockville, MD, 2014), CH. 3. [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(US\); https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/)

²⁰³ *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. “verbal abuse,” accessed December 9, 2021, <https://dictionary.apa.org/verbal-abuse>.

Attachment 2: DSM Definitions

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition

1. DSM-5 on Child Neglect

Child neglect is defined as any confirmed or suspected egregious act of omission by a child's parent or other caregiver that deprives the child of basic age-appropriate needs and thereby results, or has reasonable potential to result, in physical or psychological harm to the child. Child neglect encompasses abandonment, lack of appropriate supervision, failure to attend to necessary emotional or psychological needs, and failure to provide necessary education, medical care, nourishment, shelter, and/or clothing.

2. DSM-5 on Child Physical Abuse

Child physical abuse is nonaccidental physical injury to a child—ranging from minor bruises to severe fractures or death—occurring as a result of punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap or other object), burning, or another method that is inflicted by a parent, caregiver, or any other individual who has responsibility for the child. Such injury is considered abuse regardless of whether the caregiver intended to hurt the child. Physical discipline, such as spanking or paddling, is not considered abuse as long as it is reasonable and causes no bodily injury to the child.²⁰⁴

3. DSM-5 on Childhood Psychological Abuse

Child psychological abuse is nonaccidental verbal or symbolic acts by a child's parent or caregiver that result, or have reasonable potential to result, in significant psychological harm to the child. (Physical and sexual abusive acts are not included in this category.) Examples of psychological abuse of a child include berating, disparaging, humiliating the child, threatening the child, harming/abandoning—or indicating that the alleged offender will harm/abandon—people or things that the child cares about, confining the child (as by tying a child's arms or legs together or binding a child to furniture or another object, or confining a child to a small enclosed area [e.g., a closet]), egregious scapegoating of the child, coercing the child to inflict pain on himself or herself, and disciplining the child excessively (i.e., at an extremely high frequency or duration, even if not at a level of physical abuse) through physical or nonphysical means.²⁰⁵

4. DSM-5 on Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse encompasses any sexual act involving a child that is intended to provide sexual gratification to a parent, caregiver, or other individual who has responsibility for the child. Sexual abuse includes activities such as fondling a child's genitals, penetration, incest, rape, sodomy, and indecent exposure. Sexual abuse also includes noncontact exploitation of a child by a parent or caregiver—for example, forcing, tricking, enticing, threatening, or pressuring a child to participate in acts for the sexual gratification of others, without direct physical contact between child and abuser.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ APA, *DSM*, 717.

²⁰⁵ APA, *DSM*, 719.

²⁰⁶ APA, *DSM*, 718.

5. *DSM-5 on Domestic Abuse*

The DSM-5 categorizes adult maltreatment into four different manifestations.

Physical, spouse or partner violence are “non-accidental acts of physical force that result...in physical harm.”²⁰⁷ This includes any act that invokes significant fear, such as shoving.

Sexual abuse includes any forced or coerced sexual act against a person’s will.

Neglect is an act that deprives a dependent person of basic, physical or psychological needs.

Psychological abuse is non-accidental verbal or symbolic act that will result in harm to the well-being of another person’s mental or emotional state.

All of these categories describe abuse between spouses, partners, non-spousal, or non-partner adults (such as the elderly).²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ APA, *DSM*, 720.

²⁰⁸ APA, *DSM*, 720.

Attachment 3

Child Abuse Definitions

While the same dynamics of power and control are present when children are the victims of the abuse, the expression can look different—becoming familiar with the specific nature of child abuse is vital as we seek to safeguard children. Child abuse can happen anywhere, and child abusers come from all walks of life.

“Abuse” means to use wrongly; using in a way that violates the original design or intention; using power that comes from size, strength, status, age, development, knowledge, or mobility in such a way that we hurt the vulnerable and exploit their trust.

Children are particularly vulnerable. They are often dependent on others, so we also must consider acts of omission when harm is brought to a child by failure to care or provide for their basic needs. Below you will see definitions and examples of what child abuse looks like.

Emotional abuse is a pattern of behavior that promotes a destructive sense of fear, obligation, shame, or guilt. It may take the form of neglecting, frightening, isolating, belittling, exploiting, blaming, shaming, or threatening a victim, as well as playing mind games or lying. Emotional abuse can also be referred to as verbal and mental abuse.²⁰⁹

Manifestations with children: Emotional abuse is the most common form of child abuse. Emotional abuse occurs when a child is repeatedly made to feel worthless, unloved, alone or scared.

Financial abuse is a way of controlling a person by making them economically dependent or exploiting their resources. Financial abuse may be subtle or overt, and its different forms include concealing financial information, limiting a victim’s access to assets, controlling their ability to acquire money, exploiting their resources, or dictating how funds are spent.²¹⁰

Manifestations with children: Children can be victims of identity and financial fraud. This type of abuse occurs when someone intentionally uses the child’s Social Security Number to benefit themselves financially. Minors who are working can also be exploited or have their earnings stolen.

Physical abuse is the intentional or reckless use of physical force that may result in bodily injury or physical pain. Physical abuse does not need to cause pain or leave a bruise; it also includes actions that lead to harm such as preventing a victim from sleeping or refusing them medical care. Physically abusive actions range from throwing things all the way to choking or beating.²¹¹

Manifestations with children: any non-accidental physical injury to the child and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child. It can also include acts or circumstances that threaten

²⁰⁹ Darby Strickland, *Is it Abuse?: A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 289.

²¹⁰ Strickland, *Is it Abuse?*, 289.

²¹¹ Strickland, *Is it Abuse?*, 289.

the child with harm or create a substantial risk of harm to the child's health or welfare. In fifteen States, the crime of human trafficking, including labor trafficking, involuntary servitude, or trafficking of minors, is included in the definition of child abuse.

Spiritual abuse occurs when an oppressor establishes control and domination by using Scripture, doctrine, or their “leadership role” as weapons. Spiritual abuse may mask itself as religious practice and may be used to shame or punish. For example, using Bible verses to shame or control, demanding unconditional obedience, or using biblical texts or beliefs to minimize or rationalize abusive behaviors.²¹²

Manifestations with children: Spiritual abuse in childhood may be tricky to recognize, as the line between abuse and influence can at times be blurry. However, a child should not be shamed. Children are particularly vulnerable when Scripture is used abusively to control them.

Sexual abuse is any sexual activity when consent is not obtained, is coerced or not freely given. Verbal sexual abuse includes sexual remarks about a person’s body or sexual comments. Visual abuse can include being forced to watch pornography, exhibitionism, voyeurism, intrusion on one’s privacy, and unwanted photography or sexting. Physical sexual abuse includes touching sexual parts of the body, being forced to touch another, putting objects or body parts in another’s orifices. There are also many new ways that the digital medium provides opportunities for sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is exploitive. Sometimes the actual act of abuse may seem inconsequential (rubbing of feet), but when a perpetrator’s behavior is purposeful and he or she is aroused, the action becomes abusive and predatory in nature.

Manifestations with children: Sexual abuse can be defined by any form of sexual contact between a child and an adult, a child and an older youth, or between two minors when one forces it on the other. This could include showing or talking about sexually explicit material, sexual touching, and non-touching acts like exhibitionism, voyeurism, exposure to pornography, possession of child pornography, photography of a child for sexual gratification, or the solicitation of a child for prostitution.

Neglect, while equally harmful to an individual, differs from abuse in that it is typically caused by a lack of action. Neglect is the failure of a parent or caregiver to provide proper care for a child or dependent (elderly or disabled person). Proper care includes providing adequate shelter, clothing, food, medical care, supervision, and education. Neglect is often a result of ongoing mistreatment but can also occur from one unattended instance. Neglect that is caused by poverty can be remediated by providing concrete services for families to protect and provide for their children.

Manifestations with children: Inadequate supervision—leaving children who are unable to care for themselves home alone, failing to protect children from safety hazards, or leaving them with inadequate caregivers. Emotional neglect—exposing a child to domestic abuse or substance abuse, failing to provide affection or parental care. Educational neglect—failing to provide a child with an education, allowing a child to repeatedly skip school, or ignoring a child’s special education needs.²¹³

²¹² Strickland, *Is it Abuse?*, 289.

²¹³ For more information see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/focus/acts/>

Attachment 4

Signs of Child Abuse

Children who have been abused *may* display a range of behavioral cues and physical manifestations. These signs do not mean that abuse has occurred, but they give reason to inquire what is happening with the child. Whether or not it is abuse, these distress signals are important to tend to.

The following are examples from six categories: General Behavioral Clues, General Physical Symptoms, Behavioral Cues of Parent or Caregiver, Specific Symptoms for Physical Abuse, Specific Symptoms for Sexual Abuse, and the Signs of Neglect.

1. General behavioral clues that might signal abuse:

- Infants excessive crying or developmental delay
- Fear, anxiety, clinging
- Phobias
- Nightmares, sleeping problems (regressive)
- Bedwetting (regressive) or defecating in one's pants
- Social withdrawal
- Hyperactivity
- Poor concentration/distractibility
- Decreased school performance
- Speech disorders
- Regressive behavior for age
- Fear of parent
- Exhibits extremes in behavior, such as being overly compliant or demanding, extremely passive, or aggressive
- Is either inappropriately adult (e.g., parenting other children) or inappropriately infantile (e.g., frequently rocking or head-banging)
- An inability to develop emotional bonds with others
- Constant worry about doing something wrong
- Showing little interest in friends and activities
- Eating issues
- Doesn't get medical, dental, or mental health care
- Missing school often
- Poor weight gain and growth
- Depression, passivity
- Increased verbal abuse or physically aggressive behavior with others
- Being the target of bullying
- Destroys or injures objects or pets
- Substance abuse
- Self-harm such as cutting
- Angry outbursts

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Not wanting to be left alone or return to a particular individual(s)
- Fear of going home
- Always on high alert
- Avoiding a certain person for no clear reason
- Symptoms of PTSD
- OCD like behaviors
- Avoidance of undressing
- Withdrawal to touch
- Overly compliant

2. General physical symptoms that might signal abuse:

- Headaches
- Abdominal pain, chronic
- Abdominal pain, acute—blunt trauma may not show external marks—look for distention, tenderness, absent bowel sounds
- Vague somatic complaints, often chronic
- Worsening medical problems, such as asthma
- Frequent, unexplained sore throat
- Abnormal weight gain or loss
- Reluctance to use an extremity
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Genital discomfort or painful urination or defecation
- Unexplained symptoms—vomiting, irritability, or abnormal respiration may represent head trauma²¹⁴

3. Behavioral clues of a parent or caregiver who might be perpetrating abuse:

- Offers conflicting, unconvincing, or no explanation for the child’s injury or provides an explanation that is not consistent with the injury
- Shows little concern for the child or appears indifferent towards them
- Sees the child as entirely bad, burdensome, or worthless
- Behaves irrationally or in a bizarre manner
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs*
- Uses harsh physical discipline with the child
- Tries to be the child’s friend rather than assume an adult role

²¹⁴ This list was compiled from multiple sources:

Rizvi, M. B. (2022, January 19). *Pennsylvania Child Abuse Recognition and Reporting*. StatPearls [Internet]. Retrieved March 20, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565852/>

“Signs and Symptoms of Abuse/Neglect,” Child Abuse, Stanford Medicine (website), <http://childabuse.stanford.edu/screening/signs.html>.

“What Is Child Abuse and Neglect?: Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms,” Child Welfare Information Gateway, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/whatiscan.pdf>.

- Makes up excuses to be alone with a child who is not their own
- Talks with the child about the adult's personal problems or relationships
- Constantly blames, belittles, or berates the child
- Describes the child negatively
- Overtly rejects the child
- Demands a level of physical or academic performance the child cannot achieve
- Looks primarily to the child for care, attention, and satisfaction of the parent's emotional needs
- Denies the existence of—or blames the child for—the child's problems in school or at home
- Asks other caregivers to use harsh physical discipline if the child misbehaves

***Substance abuse by parents:** Keep in mind parental substance use is included in the definition of child abuse or neglect in many states.

- Exposing a child to harm prenatally due to the parent's use of legal or illegal drugs 2. or other substances
- Manufacturing methamphetamine in the presence of a child
- Selling, distributing, or giving illegal drugs or serving alcohol illegally to a child
- Using a controlled substance that impairs the caregiver's ability to adequately care for the child

4. Signs of Physical Abuse

If symptoms and/or signs of physical injury require immediate medical care, call 911 or take the child to a hospital. Doctors will investigate for signs of abuse and provide necessary care. This is a very important first step. Some states have laws mandating reporting when there is a reasonable suspicion of child abuse. It is important to know your state laws.

Some of the signs of physical abuse are as follows:

- Has unexplained injuries, such as burns, bites, bruises, broken bones, dislocations or black eyes
- Has fading bruises or other noticeable marks after an absence from school or church
 - Bite marks – human bites are more superficial than animal, and show up better 2-3 days later
 - Burn marks – cigarette, rope, immersion, or shape of hot object; stun gun burns in pairs and immersion burns with sharp line of demarcation
 - Marks left from restraints on axilla or extremities
- Defensive injuries on forearms
- Trauma to ear
- Lacerations
- Hair loss
- Facial injuries without reasonable explanation

- Oral/dental injuries, such as torn or bruised frenulum, lips, teeth, palate, tongue or oral mucosa
- Head injury, retinal hemorrhage, hematoma
- Vomiting, irritability or abnormal respiration may represent head trauma²¹⁵
- Intra-abdominal trauma
- Seems scared, anxious, depressed, withdrawn, or aggressive
- Seems frightened of his or her parents and protests or cries when it is time to go home
- Shrinks at the approach of adults
 - Assumes protective posture (hands/arms up over face and head, turning away, curling up in a ball) with any aggressive approach
 - Shows changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Directly discloses injury by a parent or another adult caregiver
- The child abuses animals or pets
- The child directly reports the abuse

5. *Signs of Sexual Abuse*

- Has difficulty walking or sitting
- Experiences bleeding, bruising, or swelling in their private parts
- Suddenly refuses to go to school, activity or church
- Reports nightmares or bedwetting
- Experiences a sudden change in appetite
- Attaches very quickly to strangers or new adults in their environment
- Demonstrates bizarre, sophisticated, or unusual sexual knowledge or behavior
- Pregnancy or STDs, especially for boys and girls under 14 years old
- Runs away
- Reports sexual abuse by a parent or another adult caregiver
- Sexual knowledge, language, and/or behaviors that are inappropriate for the child's age
- Bloody, torn, or stained underwear
- Bruising, tearing, bleeding, discharge from genital or rectal area
- Avoidance of undressing
- Withdrawal to touch
- Overly compliant

²¹⁵ This list was compiled from multiple sources:

Rizvi, M. B. (2022, January 19). *Pennsylvania Child Abuse Recognition and Reporting*. StatPearls [Internet]. Retrieved March 20, 2022, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565852/>

“Signs and Symptoms of Abuse/Neglect,” Child Abuse, Stanford Medicine (website), <http://childabuse.stanford.edu/screening/signs.html>.

“What Is Child Abuse and Neglect?: Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms,” Child Welfare Information Gateway, <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/whatiscan.pdf>.

1 **6. *Signs of Neglect***

- 2 • Is frequently absent from school
- 3 • Begs or steals food or money
- 4 • Lacks needed medical care (including immunizations), dental care, glasses wound
- 5 care, or medication
- 6 • Is consistently dirty and has severe body odor
- 7 • Lacks sufficient clothing for the weather
- 8 • Living in an unsuitable home environment, such as having no heat
- 9 • Left alone for extended periods of time
- 10 • Taking on the role of caregiver for other family members
- 11 • Poor language or social skills
- 12 • Regular illness or infections
- 13 • Repeated accidental injuries, often caused by lack of supervision
- 14 • Skin issues, such as sores, rashes, flea bites, scabies or ringworm
- 15 • Thin or swollen tummy
- 16 • Tiredness
- 17 • Abuses alcohol or other drugs
- 18 • Reports there is no one at home to provide care
- 19 • Fails to thrive, poor weight gain, malnutrition

Attachment 5

Consequences of Child Abuse

Since the 1990s, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has conducted studies of Adverse Childhood Experiences which include physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and witnessing trauma or experiencing neglect in the home. The conclusions of these studies are startling in their demonstration of the prevalence of childhood abuse and its powerful impact on the lives of children and adults.

Consequences of child abuse of any type are serious, pervasive, and multi-dimensional. Types of abuse and particulars of the age of victim and relationship to the perpetrator(s) do affect the health, social, and spiritual outcomes, but there are more similarities than differences.

In general, abuse of children between ages of four and twelve is particularly serious because they lack the intellectual and developmental tools not only to defend themselves, but also process the experience in a way that avoids severe disruption of brain/mind emotional, reward, pain, and cognitive pathways. Abused and neglected children of any age have emotional scars that affect current and future perceptions of self, God, the world, and their bodies. These scars are displayed often through maladaptive behaviors, chronic pain, “acting out” with emotional, physical, or sexual control problems. These often lead to academic, interpersonal, social, and occupational stress and failure. Childhood abuse often occurs to the children who are most vulnerable:

- Those with physical or mental challenges,
- Those with atypical interests or behaviors,
- Those in families undergoing stress or whose caregivers have suffered abuse themselves,
- Families with rigid and authoritarian fathers and/or overwhelmed mothers,
- Where there is alcohol or drug abuse, and
- When and where there is social, economic, and/or moral breakdown.

Unrecognized and untreated, childhood abuse causes demonstrable changes in brain architecture and function associated with the frontal lobes (executive and self-representative thinking), amygdala (emotions of fear and anxiety), hippocampus (memory processing), and various networks dealing with emotional regulation, self-control, theory of mind (knowledge of self and others), and especially reward and pain.

Victims often try to treat their emotional distress with food, alcohol, drugs, sex, and other addictive behaviors, or may be attracted to or fall prey to groups of individuals who have had similar experiences. Unfortunately, many childhood victims become repeatedly victimized as adults by placing themselves in risky situations with risky people.

Abuse very frequently has a multi-generational legacy. Abused children become parents more likely to abuse their children and raise them in challenging environments and circumstances, perpetuating suffering.

1 Abused children are much more likely to be unhealthy and obese as adults, have HIV and
2 other sexually transmitted diseases, misuse tobacco, alcohol and drugs, have severe anxiety,
3 depression, cut themselves, and attempt suicide, have academic and work performance
4 problems, and have chronic stress related diseases involving the cardiac, gastrointestinal,
5 endocrine, and nervous systems.

6
7 Maladaptive behaviors not only produce poor health and physical suffering, but also
8 frequently isolate victims from family, social, and spiritual nourishment needed for an
9 abundant life. They are often “difficult” and spiritually injured, held in the shackles of
10 victimhood, self-defeating, ethically and morally challenged, and “hard to love.”

11
12 Nothing is impossible, however, for victims to retain the image of God. Through the body of
13 Christ, the Holy Spirit can redeem anyone, and the church is called to come alongside to offer
14 the hope of the gospel and the love of Jesus Christ.

Attachment 6

Comprehensive Child Protection Policy

Every church should have a Comprehensive Child Protection Policy. This policy should foster the safety of children and youth and be suited specifically to the church's context. It should also cover prevention and how to respond. While the church's primary concern is spiritual, it must not neglect legal responsibilities (Rom. 13). A good policy will also help when allegations of child abuse are unclear, however a violation of the policy has occurred.

1. A child protection policy should include (but not be limited to) . . .

- Definitions of abuse that align with your state (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/defining/>).
- Who the church will train and how often the church will repeat the training
- The content of the church's training (recognition, response, reporting)
- The church's standards for a staff hire (background check, references, compliance with church's policy, abuse training)
- Protocols established prior to engaging volunteers (length of attendance prior to volunteering with children and youth, written application, background check, compliance with church's policy, interview, abuse training)
- How children and youth will be supervised
 - Consider all contexts including but not limited to nursery, Sunday school, youth group (including all overnight activity), VBS, children's church, other sponsored events.
 - Protocols required: for example, glass doors, two adult systems, bathroom usage, guidelines for appropriate touch
- Guidelines for staff and volunteers engaging with youth on social media, texting/messaging, and other communications
- Transportation to and from events and how the church will inform parents of arrangements
- Commitment to make the church buildings safe
 - Consider general safety issues and first aid needs as well as how the church might better monitor the building and those who use it.
- Determination of before the need arises how to respond to an allegation of abuse
 - Determination of how, when, and where the church will make a report
 - Inclusion of your state's requirements for mandatory reporting and your church's desire to cooperate with the law
 - Creation of a plan to notify the parents of a victim (assuming they are not the offender)
 - Plan for how and when to notify the congregation of the allegation.
 - Determination of how to prevent future harm
 - Investigation into the legal risks involved in publicly disclosing a situation
 - Investigation into the legal risks of not disclosing

- Determination of who might be harmed if the information is or is not shared
- Determination of confidentiality for a victim if the victim is a minor
- Consideration of creating a prepared statement²¹⁶
- Creation of a response team or identify persons who can field questions and facilitate other potential victims who come forward
- Determination of how the leaders will engage accused members who attend your church and what will be required of the alleged offender during the investigation
- Instruction to alleged offenders to have no contact with victims or witnesses
 - Determination of how to implement the above
- Determination of how the church will interact with the insurance carrier
 - Consideration as to if the church will initiate and oversee the victim care, shepherding, and protection, or will the church's carrier set the pace? Keep in mind, insurance companies tend toward focusing on the institution's protection. These two approaches are often at odds. Be aware and plan before a crisis.
- Determination of how a victim will receive pastoral care
- Determination of which trained staff member will take the lead in coordination of care²¹⁷
- Creation of a shepherding plan

2. If a known offender seeks to be involved with your congregation, consider the following:

- Church leadership should understand the consequences of having an offender in the congregation.
 - Resource: Victor Vieth, *Ministering to Adult Sex Offenders: Ten Lessons from Henry Gerecke*, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 112, No. 3 (Summer 2015).
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b0a335c45776ee022efd309/t/5bb46d2453450a1e7e6ff954/1538551076662/Ministering%2Bto%2BSex%2BOffenders%2B%28Vieth%29.pdf>.
- If you are willing to receive known offenders into your congregation:
 - Develop a comprehensive plan to protect church members.
 - Determine how to monitor the individual.
 - Obtain a detailed history of the individual and the accusations.

²¹⁶ A carefully prepared statement is often best, one that affirms that the church is aware of the situation and is cooperating fully with any investigation. It is much easier to navigate difficult questions when a response team is already in place and is accustomed to working together.

²¹⁷ Examples:

Child Protection Policy, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, revised April 2019, https://c52d388b85e6c47bef5d-9ff91644b80b1213b3e9d43ad0f0e963.ssl.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/c/0e4009729_1583507111_chbc-cpp.pdf and

Child Protection Policy, Lititz Church of the Brethren, updated May 2017, <https://lititzcob.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Child-Protection-Policy.update.2017-1.pdf>.

- 1 ▪ Determine the type of treatment needed for the offender’s ongoing care.
- 2 ▪ Determine the type of ongoing care for the vulnerable in your church.
- 3 ▪ Set boundaries and terms for the offender.
- 4 • Require the offender’s cooperation.
- 5 ○ Determine if the offender will be monitored.
- 6 ▪ Require they sign an agreement.
- 7 ○ Communicate to the congregation that a known offender is in their presence
- 8 and the church's plan.
- 9 ○ Determine support for the other victims in your community as they navigate
- 10 engaging an offender in their congregation.
- 11 ○ Determine the offender's access to children.
- 12 ○ Determine how to support a known offender’s spiritual growth.
- 13 ○ Provide additional options for them such as attending an adult-only small
- 14 group.
- 15 • Determine if an outside agency will . . .
- 16 ○ help,
- 17 ○ create a plan,
- 18 ○ train,
- 19 ○ commit to reviewing the policy with your church, and
- 20 ○ screen employees and volunteers.
- 21 • Determine when any policy will be adopted and enforced.
- 22 • Determine how any policy will be shared or posted and how often it needs to be
- 23 reviewed.

Attachment 7

Myths About Abuse

Child and adult abuse, rape, and assault, being clandestine and typically unspeakable or unstudied by most, are subject among both lay people and professionals to incorrect beliefs, biases, and stereotypical assumptions. The “myths” of abuse significantly traumatize victims, subvert justice, and impede prevention. Myths of abuse are not congruent to the reality of a fallen, sinful world and thus provide a psychological defense as well as endorsement of status quo.²¹⁸ While some myths are specific to various types of abuse, they generally fall into four categories:²¹⁹

1. Minimization of the prevalence of the problem,
2. Minimization of the extent of the harm,
3. Diffusion of offender responsibility and blaming the victim, and
4. Stereotyping offenders.

1. Abuse is rare.

Abuse is not rare. Over half of murdered women were killed by a current or former partner. Approximately one in four women and one in seven men have been victims of intimate partner abuse.²²⁰ In 2019, the Department for Health and Human Services reported that 656,000 children were confirmed by state agencies as victims of abuse, a national rate of 8.9 per 1,000 children.²²¹ Another study estimates that 37% of children will have a visit from local child protective services by the time they turn 18.²²² By extrapolating these data, we estimate that between 6% and 10% of children will be state-confirmed victims of child abuse by the time they turn 18. Since many instances of abuse go unreported, the actual rate of child abuse is likely far higher.²²³

²¹⁸ Jay Peters, “Measuring Myths about Domestic Violence: Development and Initial Validation of the Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance Scale,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 16, no. 1 (2008): 1-23.

²¹⁹ Lisa DeMarni Cromer, Rachel E. Goldsmith, “Child Sexual Abuse Myths: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Individual Differences,” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 19, no. 6 (2010): 618-47.

²²⁰ “National Statistics,” NCADV (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence), accessed December 24, 2021, <https://ncadv.org/STATISTICS>.

²²¹ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children’s Bureau, *Child Maltreatment 2019* (January 14, 2021): 20, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

²²² Hyunil Kim et al., “Lifetime Prevalence of Investigating Child Maltreatment Among US Children,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 2 (February 1, 2017): 274-280.

²²³ One study noted that prevalence of childhood sexual abuse alone may be as high as 7%, which is about seven times that of instances substantiated by state authorities. Another noted that the percentage of victims who did not report their abuse in a study survey was approximately 50%. Both these figures suggest that actual instances of abuse far exceed official numbers. See Glen A. Kercher and Marilyn McShane, “The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse Victimization in an Adult Sample of Texas Residents,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 8, no. 4 (1984): 495-501; and David M. Fergusson, L. J. Horwood, and L. J. Woodward, “The Stability of Child Abuse Reports: A Longitudinal Study of the Reporting Behaviour of Young Adults,” *Psychological Medicine* 30, no. 3 (May 2000): 529-44.

1 **2. Domestic violence is only physical abuse.**

2 Abuse is the maltreatment of another person that is callous, cruel, for selfish reasons, and that
3 has deeply detrimental effects on the person physically and/or sexually, emotionally, and
4 spiritually. Physical violence is only one tactic of abuse. Domestic violence may also include
5 emotional, sexual, spiritual, and economic abuse. Each of these deeply wound the victim's
6 inner and outer person in ways which are not always clearly evident to others.

8 **3. Abuse is a private matter and has little social effect.**

9 The harms of abuse are immediate, pervasive, longstanding, and multigenerational. Abuse
10 destroys a person's personality, joy, physical, mental, and spiritual health. In so doing, it
11 corrupts the expression of the image of God in the victim. Abuse is not simply a private,
12 personal matter, rather it is a public health disaster.

14 **4. The victim is somehow responsible for the abuse.**

15 The sin of sexual assault is not primarily sexual in nature. What a woman wears or does will
16 not cause sexual assault. Scripture categorizes sexual abuse as an act of violence, not sexual
17 immorality. In Deuteronomy 22:26, the assault is likened to murder, an act of violence. In
18 addition, the passage shows that the victim has no responsibility for the attack and the
19 perpetrator alone must be held accountable (Deut. 22:25). Also, "Abusive behavior is
20 intentional—it is not about anger management and is never the victim's fault. Nothing anyone
21 says or does gives anyone the right to hurt someone."²²⁴

23 **5. Victims have a type of personality that seeks and encourages abuse.**

24 The abuser is responsible for the abuse. There is no research that conclusively suggests there
25 are people with specific personalities that are abused more than others.

27 **6. It's his word against hers.**

28 False reports of abuse are rare.²²⁵ Most abuse happens in secret. Witnesses are also rare. It is
29 not unreasonable to believe one party over the other. In Deuteronomy 22:25-27, the case law

²²⁴ "Myths About Abuse - Hope's Door New Beginning Center," n.d., <https://hdnbc.org/get-educated/learn-about-abuse/myths>.

²²⁵ "In contrast, when more methodologically rigorous research has been conducted, estimates for the percentage of false reports begin to converge around 2-8%." Kimberly A. Lonsway, Joanne Archambault, and David Lisak, "False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute Non-Stranger Sexual Assault," *National Sexual Violence Resource Center*, 2009, accessed March 2022, <https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/articles/false-reports-moving-beyond-issue-successfully-investigate-and-prosecute-non-s>.

"The prevalence of false allegations is between 2% and 10%." David Lisak et al., "False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases," *Violence Against Women* 16, no. 12 (December 2010): 1318-34, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1077801210387747>.

"Reputable studies on this indicate that only between 2-7% of abuse claims are false." Brad Hambrick, Why Is It So Hard to Have Constructive Conversations about Abuse?, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, February 14, 2022, <https://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/why-is-it-so-hard-to-have-constructive-conversations-about-abuse/>.

We must also distinguish between the report of a victim and the report of another person who may suspect abuse. Approximately 80% of reports of child abuse to child protective services end up being unsubstantiated.

explains that a victim of rape (where there are no witnesses) should be believed and the accused held accountable. Educating leaders and congregations, training people to recognize abuse, and utilizing advocates is the solution for avoiding false reports.²²⁶

7. *I know him, and he couldn't be an abuser!*

Even specially trained individuals suggest it can be very difficult to identify an abuser in public settings. Image management is “used every day by abusers throughout the world.”²²⁷ Abusive people are very manipulative in their relationships. Deception is how they maintain power,²²⁸ therefore, they are well versed at how to convince others of their innocence.

8. *In fact, she seems crazy!*

On the other hand, a victim of abuse will have suffered emotional trauma, have difficulty telling her story, downplay and/or rationalize the abuse, and be overwhelmed in talking about it. Power dynamics foster exculpable explanations for the abuser and negative perspectives of the victim's character and behavior. This reinforces inertia for just and remedial action, stigmatizes victims, and perpetuates recurrence of sin in an atmosphere of silence.

9. *Abusers have an anger problem.*

Abusers decide to abuse. Their self-idolatry is deeply ingrained. Anger is only one tool the abuser uses to enforce control through fear.

10. *If the abuse is infrequent, it is not that serious.*

To maintain control of the victim, an abuser will use various threats. These threats may be physical, verbal, economic, or spiritual in nature. Threats need not be ongoing; one instance of expressing the potential for harm is enough to control victims from risking future harm. For example, hurting a beloved pet is an example of what an abuser can and may do to the victim. Though there is no physical violence to the victim, they are made aware of what *might* happen if they step out of line. Once that control is established, the victim will remain constantly vigilant to future threats and bow to the abuser's unbiblical domination.

11. *Abusers are from a particular economic class, religion, ethnicity, etc.*

Abusers are from every socio-economic class, religion, nationality, profession, age, political affiliation, and culture. Recent history demonstrates that well-educated, wealthy, and charismatic abusers are often “respected” members of society and the church.

But this is because many states require mandated reporting based on a reasonable suspicion that abuse is or may occur. False reporting of physical or sexual abuse by victims is rare. One study of college women reporting sexual assault found that the incidence of false reporting was between 2% and 10%; see David Lisak et al., “False Allegations.”

²²⁶ Christine Herrman, “Decreasing the Number of Incorrectly ‘Unfounded’ Sexual Assault Reports” (PowerPoint presentation), April 2012, *Battered Women's Justice Project* (website), <https://www.bwjp.org/resource-center/resource-results/decreasing-the-number-of-incorrectly-unfounded-sexual-assault-reports.html>.

²²⁷ Wade Mullen, *Something's Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2020), 3.

²²⁸ Mullen, *Something's Not Right*, 15.

1 Though some societies (or environments) provide an environment for the flourishing of abuse,
 2 all groups of people experience abuse due to the ravages of sin in the world.

3
 4 **12. Substance abuse creates abusers.**

5 Abuse is caused by a person's desire for control and power over another person. *Alcohol or*
 6 *drug addictions do not create abusers.* However, "when someone is inebriated from drugs or
 7 alcohol, they are likely to lose control of their inhibitions. Being under the influence of any
 8 substance greatly increases the chances of abusive behavior."²²⁹

9
 10 **13. Reporting abuse is a way to get attention.**

11 Reporting abuse comes with great cost. The rarity of reporting is evidence that there is
 12 significant difficulty in bringing an abusive person's behavior into the light. Victims must
 13 take into consideration the likely disbelief of their story, unfounded shame, and the
 14 unlikelihood of restitution from authorities both in the church or government. Prosecution of
 15 abuse is rare. If a victim reports abuse, they are likely desperate to stop the oppressor from
 16 further harming them and/or other victims.

17
 18 **14. The victim can always get out of the relationship.**

19 Often, victims do not believe they have a safe place to go. In addition, there may be financial
 20 difficulty in leaving the relationship. In order to leave the abuser, most victims will need an
 21 advocate or advocacy group to navigate the procurement of safe lodging, meals, a job,
 22 childcare, and the court system.

23
 24 **15. The persistence of abuse myths.**

25 Why do myths persist? Because abuser peer groups foster them, buffering shame.²³⁰ Victims
 26 explain they suffer because of a perceived need to keep quiet²³¹ and because those to whom
 27 they might report are insufficiently educated to adequately believe and act on the truth.²³²
 28 Building a church more likely to be free of abuse is to dispel these myths that perpetuate the
 29 evil.

²²⁹ "Addiction and Domestic Violence," Addiction Center, edited February 1, 2022,
<https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/domestic-violence/>.

²³⁰ Charlene Collibee et al. "The Influence of Peer Support and Peer Acceptance of Rape Myths on Multiple
 Forms of Interpersonal Violence among Youth," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 15-16 (August 2021):
 7185-7201.

²³¹ Eric M. Cooke et al., "Examining the Relationship between Victimization, Psychopathy, and the
 Acceptance of Rape Myths," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (October 18, 2020),
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0886260520966669>.

²³² Marta Ferragut et al., "What Do We Know about Child Sexual Abuse?: Myths and Truths in Spain,"
Journal of Interpersonal Violence 37, no. 1-2 (May 12, 2020),
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0886260520918579>.

Attachment 8

Shepherding the Whistleblower

Unfortunately, organizations in need of a whistleblower are those most likely to suppress, reject, banish, or destroy messengers. Loyalty to an organization tends to supersede truth. Whistleblowers, like prophets, call their audience to recognize evil and purge it. Reliable, confidential, and anonymous reporting systems capable of instituting intervention are critical.

The recognition of the need for safe reporting prompted the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. This provides legal protection to whistleblowers in any organization, including churches. According to the ECFA,²³³ punishing a whistleblower in any way is a criminal offense. Even if claims are unfounded, the informant cannot be reprimanded. A reasonable belief or suspicion that a violation of federal law exists is sufficient to report.

The ECFA suggests the following for leaders in order to protect and appropriately respond to whistleblowers:

- Provide confidential and anonymous, well-known, and easy means of reporting,
- Facilitate reporting of all types of suspected wrongdoing, not just the most serious,
- Focus on getting the full set of facts from the informant,
- Have a systematic process of tracking information and follow up to the informant,
- Put the information into the hands of those who can act,
- Have external and independent options for investigation, and
- Protect the whistleblower by maintaining confidentiality and preventing retaliation of any kind.

Whistleblowers may ultimately be identified either by friends of the accused, or through mismanagement of the investigatory process. Leadership must anticipate this possibility and arrange for and ensure appropriate spiritual and emotional encouragement. Protecting the informant and their family will be necessary. Public statements of endorsement help support the informant.

²³³ “Fraud and Whistleblower Protection for Churches,” Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, accessed August 22, 2021, <https://www.ecfa.church/Content/Fraud-and-Whistleblower-Protection-CHURCH>.

Attachment 9

Forgiveness

1. Introduction

“Forgiveness is one of the foundational acts of Christian practice and theology.”²³⁴ Jesus taught that those unwilling to forgive would face the same fate as the “unforgiving servant” (Matt. 18:21-35). Jesus repeated the same idea when He taught the disciples to pray, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15). John Calvin wrote, “Those who refuse to forget the injuries which have been done to them, devote themselves willingly and deliberately to destruction, and knowingly prevent God from forgiving them.”²³⁵

Forgiveness is clearly important to God. However, forgiveness is not necessarily easily offered. Whether due to a misunderstanding of the Bible’s teaching, or sinful rebellion, forgiveness can be elusive. In addition, when the offense is particularly destructive to a person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual health, the wickedness compounds this difficulty.

Abuse may have traumatic consequences, resulting in a long and difficult process of healing. The abuser may be responsible for injuries that continue to plague the survivor. The emotional trauma caused by verbal abuse may have long-term physical effects. Those who suffer from spiritual abuse may struggle to disassociate the emotional and physical abuse from their understanding of the nature of God.

These effects of abuse must not be minimized. The survivor need not be held responsible, nor rushed to simply forgive and “get over it.” The effects are normal, emotional, physical, and spiritual consequences of abuse. When counseling victims and survivors, an accurate understanding of the meaning, means, and goal of forgiveness is necessary to prevent further harm to the hurting member of the flock. Helping guide victims of evil atrocities committed against their soul and body (inner and outer man) toward biblical forgiveness is a necessary, yet sensitive, *process*.

2. What Does It Mean to Forgive?

A definition of forgiveness is, “A decision to release someone from suffering punishment or penalty for his sin.”²³⁶ Diane Langberg says forgiveness is, “to lay aside, let go, put away,

²³⁴ Bridget Illian, “Church Discipline and Forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37, no. 6 (December 2010): 444–50.

²³⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 1, Christian Classics Ethereal Library (website), <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.ix.lv.html>.

²³⁶ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 207.

yield up, pardon.” She writes the reason there is a need to forgive is that, “something awful has been done” to one of God’s image-bearers.²³⁷ The abusive actions are sin, and sin isolates man from God and from his neighbor. Sin is punishable by death in the heavenly courts (Rom. 6:23). Sin is not something to be minimized or denied, rather brought into the light and confessed before God and the offended party.

Dr. Robert Burns discusses forgiveness in two ways, legal and relational.²³⁸ Regarding the legal aspect, Burns explains that law breaking deserves a penalty. Jesus, the only holy and righteous Son of God, willingly paid that penalty by His death on the cross. His sacrifice made forgiveness possible (Luke 24:47). The process of forgiving includes the lawbreaker confessing, repenting, and receiving God’s forgiveness.

Forgiveness precedes reconciliation and/or restoration (Acts 2:22-41); however, *forgiveness does not always indicate reconciliation and/or restoration*. By forgiving an abuser, a survivor lays aside bitterness, anger, and malice and they depend on the Lord for justice according to His righteousness (Eph. 4:31-32; Ps. 72:2). Yet the consequences of an abuser’s sin remain. When a survivor forgives their oppressor, they do not release the abuser from accountability in the courts of God or man.

3. *How Can a Survivor Forgive Their Abuser?*

Burns explains, “We cannot be ready to deal with the ‘relational’ side of forgiveness until we have come before God and worked through the legal side.”²³⁹ Survivors may struggle to forgive. A great evil has been perpetrated, and the counselor must acknowledge the horrendous damage. Langberg writes, “When you push others to ‘just forgive,’ as if somehow it was something that could be done quickly or easily, without a consideration of the consequences of that sin, we have adopted a superficial view of sin.”²⁴⁰ The fact that forgiveness is necessary is due to the great wickedness that took place. Recognition of the difficulty is required.

The cross is where survivors taste and see God’s goodness and kindness in His forgiving work. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith Larger Catechism* discussion of the Lord’s Prayer, Question 194 asks, “What do we pray for in the fifth petition?” In answer, the *WCF* says,

In the fifth petition, (which is, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,) acknowledging, that we and all others are guilty both of original and actual sin, and thereby become debtors to the justice of God; and that neither we, nor any other creature, can make the least satisfaction for that debt: we pray for ourselves and others, that God of his free grace would, through the obedience

²³⁷ Diane M. Langberg, *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997) 173.

²³⁸ Bob Burns and Brissett, *The Adult Child of Divorce* (Nashville, TN: Oliver-Nelson Books, 1991) 139-140.

²³⁹ Burns and Brissett, *The Adult Child of Divorce*, 139-144.

²⁴⁰ Langberg, *Counseling Survivors*, 172.

1 *and satisfaction of Christ, apprehended and applied by faith, acquit us both*
 2 *from the guilt and punishment of sin, accept us in his Beloved; continue his*
 3 *favor and grace to us; pardon our daily failings, and fill us with peace and joy,*
 4 *in giving us daily more and more assurance of forgiveness; which we are the*
 5 *rather emboldened to ask, and encouraged to expect, when we have this*
 6 *testimony in ourselves, that we from the heart forgive others their offenses.*

7
 8 The Holy Spirit works in the heart of a survivor to apply God’s forgiving work in their own
 9 life. As the *WCF* emphasizes, the ability to forgive others grows out of an appreciation of God
 10 pardoning personal sin. The parable of the “unforgiving servant” (Matt. 18:32) teaches, in
 11 part, that recognizing God’s forgiveness is an important first step toward forgiving. When a
 12 survivor accepts God’s forgiveness, they position themselves to begin the process of
 13 forgiving.

14 **4. What Is the Goal of Forgiveness?**

15
 16
 17 In a non-abusive relationship, it is right to “rebuke” the offender. Luke 17:3 says, “Pay
 18 attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.”
 19 Confrontation is meant to bring the offender to repentance and to restore a damaged
 20 relationship with both the Lord and those offended. Matthew 18:15-20 provides the steps for
 21 this process. Greater pastoral care is required for helping survivors forgive those who have
 22 abused them. Confrontation of an abuser must be understood in the context of Jesus’s teaching
 23 in other passages.²⁴¹

24
 25 If genuine repentance has not occurred, it may be unwise to encourage a survivor to go to their
 26 abuser. It may also be unwise to ever encourage a victim to go to an abuser one-on-one. In
 27 Matthew, Jesus teaches that confronting the unrepentant is like throwing pearls before swine.

28
 29 “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they
 30 trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (Matt. 7:6).

31
 32 Confronting the unrepentant is worthless and may even be dangerous (they will “trample them
 33 underfoot”). Jesus also says the offender may “turn to attack you,” so the survivor may suffer
 34 further trauma at the hands of the abuser.

35
 36 Beach writes, “It is sometimes argued that forgiveness coupled with repentance clears the way
 37 for all or most of the debris caused by the sin or sins in question and full reconciliation (most
 38 of the time) is the requisite step to follow...”²⁴² Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the
 39 same. This simplistic view of the destruction caused by abuse will often result in further abuse
 40 and manipulation.

²⁴¹ See also Section Five: “The Misuse of Spiritual Authority” in this report.

²⁴² J. Mark Beach, “Forgiving like God?: Some Reflections on the Idea of Conditional Forgiveness,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 26 (2015): 151-96.

1 Scripture is clear: the offending party, *not* the offended, is responsible for repentance (Luke
2 17:3). The abuser is responsible to turn from their abuse. Repentance and a renewed
3 relationship with the Lord is the goal. Scripture is also clear regarding reconciliation; it is
4 “conditional” on true repentance (Luke 17:3, Col. 1:21-23). Repentance that is obvious,
5 genuine, and demonstrable over time is necessary for restoration.

6
7 When counseling a survivor of abuse, the process of forgiveness must be handled pastorally.
8 Recognizing the extensive damage done to the target of abuse will encourage the counselor to
9 patiently prepare the survivor to forgive.

10
11 Because of the damage the abuser caused in the relationship, repentance must be evident and
12 long-lasting for trust to be re-established. Counselors should allow survivors to set the pace
13 for reconciliation, having multiple witnesses to significant evidence of a changed heart that
14 has not only put off sinful behavior, but has also been renewed in the mind and put on the
15 opposite, God-glorifying behaviors (Eph. 4:28).

Attachment 10

Repentance

For restored trust and/or the possibility of reconciliation in any broken relationship, an abuser must clearly exhibit genuine repentance over an extended period of time. The following is a summary list of the signs of repentance. This list is not guaranteed. Abusers, by their very nature, manipulate and control in order to manage their image. Abusers are skillful and adept at what they do. Discernment is advised.

1. Ownership of sin without minimization

The victim is not responsible for the abuse [see Myths of Abuse in Attachment 7]. The abuser must fully own their sinful actions and choices.

2. Willingness to fully accept the consequences for sin

Many abusers will be quick to confess sin (minimally) in order to appear repentant. If more is required of them, they tend to protest. Worldly repentance is resistant to accepting consequences. A changed heart will exhibit a willingness to take full responsibility.

3. Patient endurance with the victim's healing

Genuinely repentant persons allow their victims the necessary time to process what happened and heal.

4. Godly repentance recognizes the difference between being forgiven, being trusted, and/or being restored.

The repentant person will not expect to be rewarded with a victim's forgiveness, trust, or reconciliation for doing as God commands. Godly behavior is expected and not necessarily rewarded. (See Attachment 9: Forgiveness for further discussion on trust and reconciliation.)

5. Commitment to stop the abuse and recognize the damage it has caused for the family

A full confession of sin, including specificity regarding the abuse, along with accountability is required. A third party is recommended.

*Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 7 on the nature of repentance*²⁴³

For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death. For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter (2 Cor. 7:10-11).

²⁴³ Rev. Vincent Wood, Providence Presbyterian Church (PCA), York, Pennsylvania.

1 *For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance . . .*

2
3 1. *Without regret, leading to salvation,*

4 a. Does the abuser regret losing control?

5 b. Does the abuser regret the consequences he faces for his sin?

6 c. Does the abuser regret the loss of prestige, respect, influence, etc.?

7
8 2. *For behold what earnestness this very thing,*

9 a. Is the abuser working diligently to see a change?

10 b. Does he faithfully complete all homework?

11 c. Is his attitude serious toward changing his life?

12
13 3. *This godly sorrow,*

14 a. Does he consistently express sadness for the harm he has done to others?

15 b. When reminded of his sin, does the abuser apologize or complain about his sin
16 being “brought up” again?

17 c. Is his sorrow focused on the harm his actions did to others or on the hardship
18 they brought to him?

19
20 4. *What vindication of yourselves,*

21 a. Does the abuser so repent as to promote restitution for his actions?

22 b. Does the abuser now oppose control within himself and others with zeal and
23 passion?

24 c. Are the actions of the abuser establishing a new life pattern in which an
25 accusation of abuse would seem impossible? (For restoration of a minister,
26 BCO 34-8 requires that it only be done when the sentiment of the church
27 “demands it.”)

28
29 5. *What indignation,*

30 a. Does the abuser hate what they have done?

31 b. Is the abuser “beating himself up” for the sins he committed? This indignation
32 will fuel earnest repentance.

33
34 6. *What fear,*

35 a. Is the abuser terrified that they will abuse again? An alcoholic once told me, “I
36 know that I have another drunk in me. I am terrified that I might not have
37 another sober.” This “fear” kept him sober.

38
39 7. *What longing,*

40 a. Does the abuser look to the future with hope?

41 b. Does the abuser imagine what it will be like to be trustworthy and safe?

- 1 8. *What zeal,*
- 2 a. Is repentance the driving factor in the abuser's life?
- 3 b. Is the abuser ever aware of his propensity to control and is he committed to
- 4 "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ?"
- 5
- 6 9. *What avenging of wrong!*
- 7 a. Is the abuser willing to make up for his wrongs to the very people he hurt?
- 8 b. Does the abuser recognize why his victims do not want to be around him? Does
- 9 he willingly honor this desire?

Attachment 11

Divorce and Domestic Abuse

1. Introduction

For Christians, perhaps the most controversial topic involving domestic abuse is the subject of divorce. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* states that adultery and desertion are the only biblical grounds for the dissolution of a marriage.²⁴⁴ Yet some argue that desertion functions as an umbrella category encompassing several ways that a person can abandon his/her spouse. Carl Trueman succinctly summarizes this position when he says that the essence of desertion is a dereliction of duty, rather than an abandonment of space.²⁴⁵ In other words, desertion is about more than geography. This view is shared by the Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage from the twentieth General Assembly of the PCA. It argues that domestic abuse is a form of desertion because the abuser's violence creates a forced separation between spouses that is equivalent to abandonment.²⁴⁶ Our report affirms this position and defends it with biblical and practical arguments.

2. The Biblical Argument

As we examine Scripture, it is important to also examine our own assumptions. In theological inquiry, the answer we produce can be greatly influenced by the way we frame the question. Therefore, this section not only studies Scripture, but also identifies and challenges one of the key assumptions we bring to the interpretive task, especially concerning biblical grounds for divorce.

That assumption has to do with what we expect the Bible to say. Some pastors limit the grounds for divorce to the specific situations mentioned in Scripture, which are sexual immorality and an unbeliever deserting a believer. Doubtless this position is motivated by sincere desires to protect the covenant of marriage and faithfully obey God's Word. But it contains an assumption that usually goes unidentified and unchallenged: why would we expect the Bible to list all of the situations in which divorce is permissible? The answer is because we are interpreting Scripture through the lens of modern law, instead of ancient law.

In determining biblical grounds for divorce, we are operating in the theological category of the law of God. That is, we are asking what the law of God allows and does not allow in regard to ending a marriage. But if we interpret Scripture through the lens of modern law, we will most likely arrive at a very different answer than if we read it as law from the Ancient Near

²⁴⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1978 – 2005), 24.6.

²⁴⁵ Carl Trueman and Todd Pruitt, "What Is the Church to Do?" Mortification of Sin Podcast, <https://www.reformation21.org/mos/podcast/21100>.

²⁴⁶ Paul B. Fowler, et al., "Divorce and Remarriage," in *Position Papers 1973–1998*, PCA Digest Vol. 2, Part V, ed. Paul R. Gilchrist (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America, 2003), 188-189, 229. Also see the section on "unjust divorce, or desertion" in the Biblical and Confessional Foundations for Understanding Abuse in our report.

East.²⁴⁷ Most modern societies use exhaustive law codes. Every practice a society wishes to regulate must be listed in a separate law. As a result, when we investigate the issue of divorce, we assume the Bible will explicitly mention every situation in which the practice is allowed. But ancient law did not work this way. The Ancient Near East used case law, which gives rules that govern a specific situation. From that specific case, we are expected to deduce a general principle that we can apply to other situations. In keeping with its Ancient Near Eastern context, the Pentateuch is filled with case law. Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart writes, "...the Israelites had to learn to see the underlying principles in any law and not let the specifics of the individual [situation] mislead them into applying the law too narrowly."²⁴⁸ This is why it is best to view desertion as an umbrella category that encompasses multiple ways that a person can abandon their spouse. The Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage states:

Further, taking into account both the general principles of Biblical ethics and the Scripture's characteristic manner of ethical instruction, viz. the statement of commandments in a general form to which is added case law sufficient to indicate the manner of application, it seems to us that those Reformed authorities are correct who have argued that sins which are tantamount in extremity and consequence to actual desertion should be understood to produce similar eventualities.²⁴⁹

With the proper understanding of how biblical law functions, it is important to apply this framework to the apostle Paul's teaching on desertion and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7:15. Paul writes, "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace." In this verse, Paul permits a believer to divorce his/her unbelieving spouse if the unbeliever abandons the marriage. An accurate interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:15 depends on its literary context and the entire chapter's flow of thought. In v. 1 Paul writes, "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote..." Everything Paul says about marriage, divorce and remarriage in 1 Corinthians 7 is in response to specific questions posed by the Corinthians in a previous letter. He spends the entire chapter answering questions about marriage regarding different groups of people within the Corinthian church. The following is a brief outline of the questions Paul addresses:

- vv. 1-7 – To those considering a renunciation of marriage: remain married with full conjugal rights.
- vv. 8-9 – To the unmarried and widows: it is good to remain unmarried, but those who cannot exercise self-control should marry.
- vv. 10-11 – To the married (both partners are believers): remain married, but if you divorce you must remain single or be reconciled to your spouse.
- **vv. 12-16 – To the married (one partner is an unbeliever): remain married, unless the unbelieving partner separates.**

²⁴⁷ The difference is explained in Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2, *New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 442-445.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 443.

²⁴⁹ Fowler, et al., "Divorce and Remarriage," 229.

- vv. 17-24 – The general principle: remain as you are.
- vv. 25-38 – To the betrothed: it is good to remain unmarried, but if you marry you have not sinned.
- vv. 39-40 – General precepts for the married and widowed.²⁵⁰

In a New Testament epistle, the subjects an author addresses are largely determined by the situation in the receiving church. This means that Paul did not write a treatise on divorce and list all of the biblical grounds. Rather, Paul received a letter from the Corinthians asking about several situations in their church. He answers those questions in 1 Corinthians 7. The reason Paul addresses an unbeliever deserting a believer is because the Corinthians had asked him about mixed marriages. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate to ask, “Why did Paul allow divorce in this specific situation? And using that same reasoning, might there be other situations in which divorce is permitted?”

Another reason we should ask these questions is because of the nature of ancient case law. As a former Pharisee, Paul was steeped in the Pentateuch. When he thought of ethical issues, case law was in the front of his mind. This means that when Paul gives a command governing a specific situation, such as a Christian being deserted by an unbelieving spouse, we should try to discern the universal principle behind his command.

The principle behind 1 Corinthians 7:15 is that believers are not allowed to actively seek a divorce from their spouses, but if one spouse effectively deserts his/her marriage responsibilities, the other spouse is not obligated to remain married. Based on the Greek grammar, the key element in Paul’s line of reasoning is the passivity of the believing spouse in the action that instigates divorce. In this verse Paul makes a pronounced switch from the active voice to the passive. In the original Greek, verse 15a literally reads, “But if the unbeliever separates, be separated.”²⁵¹ Paul uses a middle indicative form of χωρίζω (separates), immediately followed by a passive imperative form of the same verb (be separated). He uses the same verb twice in a row, but the second time the verb is passive. Paul’s point is that a believer is not allowed to actively instigate divorce. But when one spouse effectively abandons the marriage, the other spouse can let the separation take place.

This interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:15 is strengthened by research from Wayne Grudem, who recently changed his position on this issue. Grudem focuses on the phrase “in such cases” (Greek: ἐν τοῖς τοιούτοις). This phrase is not used anywhere else in the New Testament or the Septuagint. But Grudem studies the use of this phrase in extra-biblical Greek literature, including Philo, Lysias and Euripedes. He concludes that the phrase “in such cases” refers to a broader category of situations other than the example given. According to Grudem, the use of the phrase in 1 Corinthians 7:15 means, “*in this and other similarly destructive situations*

²⁵⁰ Adapted from Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 268.

²⁵¹ To avoid redundancy, the ESV translates v. 15a, “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so.”

(that is, situations that destroy a marriage as much as adultery or desertion).”²⁵² Such a definition fits perfectly within the framework of case law discussed above.

Some pastors and elders maintain that desertion is only grounds for divorce if the deserting spouse is an unbeliever. However, while a mixed marriage is a circumstance of the case, it is not the determining factor in Paul’s permission to dissolve the marriage. The determining factor is the act of abandonment. In the above discussion of case law, Douglas Stuart warned against allowing the specifics of the individual case to lead us into applying the law too narrowly. We fall into this trap if we require an abandoned person to be married to an unbeliever in order to qualify for divorce.

In view of these considerations, domestic abuse clearly qualifies as an act of desertion. It creates an oppressive environment in the home that often forces the victim to leave for her own safety and well-being. A man who abuses his wife or children has abandoned his role as a husband and father, and has therefore broken the marriage covenant. The Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage shares this position:

This is so precisely because his violence separates them, either by her forced withdrawal from the home or by the profound cleavage between them which the violence produces, as surely as would his own departure, and is thus an expression of his unwillingness “to consent” to live with her in marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-13; Eph. 5:28-29).²⁵³

When a victim of abuse must leave her home to protect herself and her children, it is the perpetrator’s abusive actions that have caused the separation, not the victim’s decision to leave. The same can be said of a victim’s choice to file for divorce. Taking such a step does not violate Paul’s prohibition against actively instigating the dissolution of a marriage. Her spouse is the one who has broken the marriage covenant through his abuse, and she is merely seeking the formal recognition of a state of brokenness that already exists. A victim’s decision to divorce does not kill the marriage. Abuse kills the marriage, and divorce is merely seeking the death certificate.

3. The Practical Argument

The purpose of this section is to build on the biblical argument that abuse breaks the marriage covenant. By bringing to light the oppressive effects of abuse on the victim and her children, this section will strengthen the case that domestic abuse creates a forced separation in the marriage that is tantamount to desertion. An abusive marriage damages the physical and psychological health of the victim and forces her to leave the abuser to pursue healing and safety. The following are just some of the ways that domestic abuse can impact the victim:

²⁵² Wayne Grudem, “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There Are More Than Two,” The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, <https://cbmw.org/2020/06/10/grounds-for-divorce-why-i-now-believe-there-are-more-than-two/>.

²⁵³ Fowler, et al., “Divorce and Remarriage,” 229.

- Severe anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Questioning her own sanity
- Intense nightmares
- Insomnia
- Digestion problems
- Depression
- PTSD
- Suicidal ideation
- Physical injuries
- Life threatened (in the most severe cases).²⁵⁴

It is common to think that only physical abuse would be an adequate reason to leave. It is possible to infer this from the above quote from the Report of the Ad-Interim Committee on Divorce and Remarriage, due to its repeated use of the word “violence.” Yet such a position severely underestimates the effects of all types of abuse on the victim. All abuse results in the physical symptoms listed above. Emotional, verbal and spiritual abuse often cause the victim to experience panic attacks, depression, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts, all concurrently. Even in physically abusive relationships, the greatest damage the victim suffers is almost always psychological. Physical damage can heal in a matter of days or weeks, but psychological wounds take years to overcome. In fact, it is common for victims who have experienced both psychological and physical abuse to say that psychological abuse is worse. All types of abuse are absolutely devastating to a victim’s health and well-being. All types of abuse create a forced separation in the marriage, just like physical abuse. And therefore all types of abuse qualify as a form of desertion.

It is also important to consider the sexual dimension of marriage. In many cases, abuse does not stop when the couple enters the bedroom. There are many abusive men who have never hit their wives, but have sexually violated them in ways that are degrading and inhumane. Examples include:

- Forcing her to watch pornography under the threat of violence
- Rape
- Forced sodomy
- Requiring her to engage in sexual acts with other men, also under the threat of violence.

Victims of sexual abuse are on high alert the moment their husbands climb into bed and suffer from intense nightmares and insomnia as a result. Yet the sexual dimension of an abusive marriage is so humiliating that many victims will not disclose it even if they are asked, especially to male pastors and elders. Limiting biblical grounds for divorce to physical abuse fails to account for this destructive yet secretive aspect of the marriage.

²⁵⁴ For a more complete list see Christiane Sanderson, *Counseling Survivors of Domestic Abuse* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 54-55.

Another factor is the impact of domestic abuse on children. Living in an abusive home scars children, even if the abuse is not perpetrated directly against them. Children who grow up in a family where dad abuses mom experience many of the following effects:

- Failure to thrive in infants
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Insecurity
- Self-blame
- Defiance
- Poor grades
- Bed-wetting in children over four
- Intense nightmares
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse
- Teen pregnancy
- Cutting
- Suicidal thoughts
- Boys are more likely to become abusive
- Girls are more likely to marry abusive men.²⁵⁵

It is common for pastors and elders to pressure victims of abuse to remain in their marriages, and one of the primary motives is the impact of divorce on children. This is a mistake. While divorce is always unfortunate, and the effect on children is undeniable, the impact of domestic abuse on children is worse than the impact of divorce.²⁵⁶

Another reality we have to grapple with is that abusers rarely change.²⁵⁷ Unless you are a victim of domestic abuse or an expert in the field, you do not fully appreciate the depth of

²⁵⁵ For a more complete list see Lundy Bancroft, *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2004), 72-74.

²⁵⁶ Brenda Branson and Paula J. Silva, *Violence Among Us: Ministering to Families in Crisis* (Valley Forge, PA, Judson Press, 2007), 44.

²⁵⁷ “‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Isaiah 6:9–10). G.K. Beale writes, “Whenever the organs of spiritual perception were seen to be not functioning, a certain kind of language was used. We might call this sensory-organ-malfunction language. When this language is used in the Old Testament, almost without exception, it refers not just to sinners in general but to only one particular kind of sin—the sin of idol worship” (G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship, A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 41). Isaiah is speaking to this specific type of sin. He later tells us God Himself “smeared over their eyes so that *they cannot see* and their hearts so that they *cannot comprehend*” (Isa. 44:8, emphasis mine). At its root, abuse in marriage is the sin of self-worship. “An abusive person uses his God-like faculties to overpower those same faculties in someone else to get what he wants. Instead of using his powers to arrange the world to God’s glory, he uses his powers to arrange the world for his own” (Jeremy Pierre, Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts, A*

blindness and self-deception that plagues abusive men. It is something you have to experience to fully grasp. This blindness and self-deception make the change process much more challenging than other types of sanctification. We can trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the human heart, but that should not cause us to ignore the fact that counseling programs for abusive men have low success rates. One rigorous study of batterer intervention programs found only a five percent improvement rate in perpetrators ceasing physical abuse.²⁵⁸ Couples counseling and anger management fared even worse.²⁵⁹ Therefore, asking a victim to remain married could be tantamount to asking her to endure a lifetime of abuse. If Scripture permits victims of abuse to divorce, as this report argues, then pastors and sessions should not deny what Scripture allows. They should humbly and compassionately shepherd a victim towards an abuse-free life, be it through the abuser's repentance and the restoration of her marriage, or the ending of her marriage.

Protecting the marriage covenant is a biblical desire, but so is protecting a human being. As people created in the image of God, victims of abuse and their children have inherent value and dignity that should be protected. Pastors and elders who pressure victims to remain in abusive marriages usually do not fully comprehend the damage abuse inflicts on a human being. When ministering to families impacted by domestic abuse, the physical and psychological safety of the victim and her children should take priority over keeping the marriage together.

4. The Question of Remarriage

If a victim of domestic abuse divorces her husband, is she allowed to remarry? Deuteronomy 24:1-4 assumes that divorced people can remarry, and Jesus permits remarriage if the divorce was for sexual immorality (Matt. 19:9). Some strengthen the case for remarriage after desertion by appealing to the second half of 1 Corinthians 7:15, which reads, "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace." When Paul writes that "the brother or sister is not enslaved," many understand him to be saying that the believer is not enslaved to the previous marriage and is therefore free to remarry.²⁶⁰ This interpretation is often referred to as the "Pauline privilege." We agree that Paul is saying that a deserted spouse is not enslaved to the previous marriage, but it is doubtful that Paul addresses remarriage. He goes on to write, "God has

Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2021), 24). God does not share his glory with another, and the judgment for such sin, for those who worship any other, is to be "made spiritually insensitive like the idols they worship." Beale, *Worship*, 47. Beale continues, "the reversal of spiritual blindness and deafness into spiritual 'seeing and hearing' is the gift of God and cannot occur by any independent human determination" Ibid, 270. Only God can reverse this condition. While those contributing to this report believe God can and will change anyone, these passages emphasize both the difficulty and the utter dependence on God that pastors, leaders, and counselors must acknowledge when shepherding those who abuse.

²⁵⁸ National Institute of Justice, *Practical Implications of Current Domestic Violence Research: For Law Enforcement, Prosecutors and Judges* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2009), 65.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 66.

²⁶⁰ For example, see Fowler, et al., "Divorce and Remarriage," 228 and John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia, PA: P&R, 1961), 74-75.

1 called you to peace. For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or
 2 how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" Paul's point is that the
 3 deserting spouse's lack of salvation does not obligate the believer to stay in the marriage for
 4 the sake of evangelism. Doing so produces a state of perpetual marital conflict, which is the
 5 antithesis of the peace and reconciliation that characterizes the gospel. The believing spouse
 6 is not enslaved in that they are free to divorce. However, the freedom to remarry is simply not
 7 addressed.²⁶¹

8
 9 Nevertheless, the language of not being "enslaved" should hold special significance for
 10 victims of abuse. As unfortunate as divorce is, the Lord does not require them to remain in the
 11 oppression that they have suffered. The God who led His people out of slavery in Egypt (Ex.
 12 20:2), and the Savior who came to liberate the oppressed (Luke 4:18), now tells victims of
 13 abuse that they are no longer enslaved (1 Cor. 7:15). Throughout Scripture, the Redeemer of
 14 the oppressed bids His people to run free.

15
 16 Although 1 Corinthians 7:15 does not speak to remarriage, there is another passage in the
 17 same chapter that does address the issue. We read in vv. 10-11, "To the married I give this
 18 charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does,
 19 she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should
 20 not divorce his wife." Some theologians think these verses prohibit remarriage after divorce
 21 in all circumstances.²⁶² They argue that Paul is issuing a strict, over-arching command which
 22 applies to all Christians in all situations. There are two factors which make this interpretation
 23 unlikely.

24
 25 First, we must understand the cultural context of first century Corinth, which had a view of
 26 marriage and divorce that fell far short of the biblical standard. Anthony Thiselton writes, "In
 27 the Roman world of the first century divorce was undertaken both frequently and often for
 28 selfish, trivial reasons."²⁶³ We face a similar situation in our culture today. The difference is
 29 that in ancient Corinth, the Christian view of marriage would not have been seen as
 30 traditionalist dogma, but as a strange and unrealistic novelty. In light of the audience Paul is
 31 addressing, it is best to view vv. 10-11 as a general statement against the prevailing cultural
 32 attitude toward divorce. In general, Christians may not divorce their spouses at will. Those
 33 who do so are not allowed to remarry.

34
 35 Second, the Greek construction εἰ δὲ καὶ (translated "but if") introduces a general condition
 36 that qualifies the preceding prohibition.²⁶⁴ Despite the fact that Paul has prohibited divorce,
 37 he acknowledges the practice will nevertheless continue, and so he regulates it. Paul has given
 38 a general command not to divorce your spouse. If someone disobeys this command, that

²⁶¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 303.

²⁶² Gordon J. Wenham and William E. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, Updated Edition (Carlisle, CA: Paternoster Press, 1984), 144 and Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 296.

²⁶³ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 540.

²⁶⁴ Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 267 and Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 295.

person is not allowed to remarry. But if the divorce is for biblical grounds, that person has not disobeyed God, as v. 15 clearly shows. In other words, Paul only prohibits remarriage for people who have divorced their spouses on unbiblical grounds. In light of the fact that remarriage is assumed in Deuteronomy 4:1-4 and allowed in Matthew 19:9, it is safe to conclude that people who divorce on biblical grounds are free to remarry. This includes victims of abuse.

Some Pastors and Sessions are in the practice of advising victims to remain permanently separated from the abuser, but to refrain from divorce. Such an option may seem like the best of both worlds: the marriage covenant is preserved, and the victim is safe. However, this course of action is not recommended. If the victim has no intention of ever living with the abuser as husband and wife, one should question if they are truly married. They may be married on paper, but they are functionally divorced. This is certainly how the apostle Paul would view such a situation, as there was no category of legal separation in the first century. A couple was either married or divorced; there was no middle ground. Furthermore, without a divorce the victim is not able to remarry. Many victims are in their 20s or 30s when they leave their abusive spouses. It is tragic to rob them of the freedom to remarry when Scripture allows it, especially at such a young age.

Those who argue against remarriage usually believe that the marriage bond is indissoluble, except by death. As appealing as such a view may be, it is hard to square with Deuteronomy 4:1-4 and Matthew 19:9. Scripture teaches that marriage is a covenant (Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14). This means that it is a binding relationship that should ideally never be broken. But despite this ideal, it *can* be broken. Geerhardus Vos illustrates:

We may have on our parlor table a beautiful and costly vase. It ought to be handled carefully. It ought not to be broken. It was not made to be smashed; it was made to exist as a thing of beauty and grace. But it is not impossible to break it. And if a member of the family breaks it through carelessness, or in a fit of temper smashes it deliberately, there is nothing to do but sweep up the broken fragments and dispose of them. We will not say, "This vase was not intended to be broken; therefore it is impossible to break it; the vase is unbreakable; therefore in spite of the fact that it lies in shattered fragments on the floor, we will not throw it away; we will keep it forever." No one would say that about a broken vase; yet that is substantially the argument of those who say that the marriage bond is "indissoluble" and "unbreakable."²⁶⁵

5. Conclusion

In the experience of the authors of this report, most Christian victims of abuse are deeply committed to their marriages. In fact, it would be difficult to find a group of people who have paid a higher price for their commitment to the marriage covenant. Many victims have courageously stayed with their spouses for years and continued exposing themselves to abuse in hopes that their marriages would be saved. They do not want to smash the beautiful and costly vase that Geerhardus Vos describes. Rather, they are sitting on the floor surrounded by

²⁶⁵ Quoted in Loraine Boettner, *Divorce* (Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1960), 13.

1 shattered fragments, desperately trying to put the pieces back together, hopeless and confused
2 as to why nothing they try seems to work. Sometimes God will perform a miracle and bring
3 healing and restoration to the marriage. But many times, He does not, and in such cases victims
4 should not be forced to endure a lifetime of abuse. God has declared that they are no longer
5 enslaved. He declares this because of who He is: the God of the exodus; the God of
6 redemption. If we in the PCA want to respond to oppression the way God does, we will support
7 victims of domestic abuse on their difficult journey to freedom.
8

Attachment 12

Committee Bios

Committee Members

REV. DR. TIMOTHY R. LECROY [Chairman] is a teaching elder in Missouri Presbytery. He is a visiting instructor of historical theology at Covenant Theological Seminary and has served the General Assembly on various committees. Dr. LeCroy brings the perspective of an abuse survivor to the committee.

DR. KELLY DEHNERT [Secretary] is a ruling elder in Rocky Mountain Presbytery and Assistant to the Pastor at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Lander, WY. He researches and teaches on abusive leadership in Christian organizations and is on the national board of Refuge Ministries.

REV. CAL BOROUGHS is a retired teaching elder in Tennessee Valley Presbytery, formerly pastor of St. Elmo Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, TN. He has served as moderator for his presbytery and was part of the working group that brought to the Assembly the overture for a study committee on domestic abuse and sexual assault.

BOB GOUDZWAARD is a ruling elder in Central Carolina Presbytery and helped develop a domestic abuse online training video for the Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship. He serves as director of Care Ministries at Christ Covenant Church in Charlotte, NC.

DR. DAVID HABURCHAK, is a ruling elder in Metro Atlanta Presbytery and a doctor of internal medicine with extensive experience in the effects of childhood abuse on adults. Dr. Haburchak is Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the Medical College of Georgia at Augusta University. He recently authored “Kingdom Work: Redeeming Child Sexual Abuse.”

REV. DR. LLOYD PIERSON is a teaching elder in Rocky Mountain Presbytery and works with abuse survivors and perpetrators through Refuge Ministries, a national domestic abuse ministry founded in Kalispell, MT. He is the senior pastor of Faith Covenant PCA in Kalispell.

REV. SHANE WALDRON is a teaching elder in Rocky Mountain Presbytery and the lead pastor of Rocky Mountain PCA in Westminster, CO. He founded and serves on the national board of Refuge Ministries. He also developed the curriculum the ministry uses.

Advisory Members

RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER became known internationally in 2016 as the first woman to pursue criminal charges and speak publicly against USA Gymnastics’ team doctor Larry

1 Nassar, one of the most prolific sexual abusers in recorded history. She is an attorney, author,
2 advocate, and educator. Rachael is a member of the Reformed Baptist Church of Louisville,
3 KY.

4
5 **ANN MAREE GOUDZWAARD** is a member of Christ Covenant PCA in Matthews, NC
6 and the Executive Director of Help[H]er. In addition, she trains counselors at RTS Charlotte,
7 Eternity Bible College, and PeaceWorks University. Ann Maree is a biblical counselor with
8 an M.Div. with a counseling emphasis and a D.Min. candidate.

9
10 **DR. DIANE LANGBERG** is a member of Calvary PCA in Willow Grove, PA and is a
11 psychologist with over 50 years of experience helping abuse victims. She is a well-known
12 speaker and author of multiple books about abuse and trauma.

13
14 **DR. BARBARA SHAFFER** is a member of Faith PCA in Wilmington, DE and a
15 psychologist with nearly 40 years of experience, much of which involved working with
16 survivors of sexual and domestic abuse.

17
18 **DARBY STRICKLAND** is a member of Cornerstone PCA in Center Valley, PA and on the
19 faculty of Christian Counseling Educational Foundation. She teaches “Counseling Abusive
20 Marriages” at WTS Philadelphia. She is the author of the book “Is It Abuse” and two booklets
21 for churches and survivors of abuse.
22

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography is not intended as an exhaustive list but representative of quality resources from both Christian and non-Christian experts on abuse recommended by the committee. The following are the reference categories.

1. Adult Sexual Assault / Abuse
2. Batterers / Abusers
3. Childhood Sexual Abuse
4. Childhood Adversity
5. Domestic Violence
6. Healing and Recovery: General
7. Healing and Recovery: Sexual Abuse / Assault
8. Spiritual Abuse / Misuse of Spiritual Authority
9. Websites

1. ADULT SEXUAL ASSAULT / ABUSE

Courtright, John and Sid Rogers. *What To Do When You Find Out Your Wife Was Sexually Abused*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994.

Written for husbands whose wives are going through therapy for sexual abuse. Also helpful for couples to read in that situation. Explains emotional reactions and offers suggestions about how to talk to each other constructively.

Hundley, Shelley. *A Cry for Justice: Overcome Anger, Reject Bitterness, and Trust in Jesus Who Will Fight for You*. Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2011.

Hundley was sexually molested (by pastors) as a child of missionaries in Columbia. This is a wonderful book, though some will struggle with her Charismatic doctrine. Her understanding of justice and forgiveness is very helpful to those who seek healing from sexual abuse.

Langberg, Diane. *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Camarillo, CA: Xulon Press; 1st Edition, 2003.

A pioneering and timeless guide to counseling survivors of sexual abuse based on the premise that such therapy must be both incarnational and redemptive. Essential reading for anyone who wants to know how to counsel a survivor in healing ways that reflect the person of Christ.

2. BATTERERS / ABUSERS

Arbinger Institute. *Leadership and Self-Deception, Getting Out of the Box*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2000, 2010, 2018.

Leadership and Self-Deception is not a Christian book, nor even a conventional secular book. It is written as a hypothetical narrative, a pretend story about a leader in an imaginary

organization. What makes this book helpful in shepherding abusers is how it accurately, and often biblically, describes the mind of someone who feels entitled.

Throughout the descriptions of living inside “the box,” the reader will hear echoes of Paul’s challenge in Philippians 2:3-8:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Leadership and Self-Deception shows us that, when we act contrary to what we are called to do for others, we betray our true self. Living in that self-betrayal, our view of the world is distorted. Self-betrayal is how we get ourselves into the box.

Inside the box, we are self-deceived. We inflate others’ faults while justifying our own. In the box, other people do not have the same privilege of thinking, feeling, acting, or wanting as we do. Our thoughts, feelings, desires, and actions take primacy.

The authors suggest that to get out of the box, our perspective must change. Inside the box, the problem is that others need to change. Outside the box, we cease self-justification, honor other people as people (fellow image-bearers), and see them as those who have valid thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Interestingly, the authors also stumble across another biblical principle as seen below in Chalmers’s resource. That is, simply changing behavior is not how to get out of the box. Changing behavior while inside the box is simply a means for more sophisticated ways to blame. “Since the box itself is deeper than behavior, the way out of the box has to be deeper than behavior too” (142). When we experience others as people rather than objects for our own satisfaction we live outside the box.

Chalmers, Thomas, D.D. *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. Minneapolis, MN: Curiosmith, 2012.

Puritan Thomas Chalmers’s little, but powerful sermon challenges both the counselor and the believer to understand that “pulling up our bootstraps,” determining to be better, or even regulating behavior will not succeed in the Christian life. “It is almost never done by the mere force of mental determination” (11). The only possible remedy for love (and therefore obedience) of God is that He replace what is in the seat of our affections. In abuse, the abuser’s affection is self. Only by “substituting another desire, and another line of habit of exertion in its place...” (11) can the love of “the world” (a.k.a., “self”) be expunged and “supplanted by the love of that which is more worthy than itself” (17).

Counselors and Christians will find Chalmers’s wisdom a helpful perspective for how to approach caregiving when working with an abuser. See also Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021.

1 Paymar, Michael, and Anne Ganley. *Violent No More: Helping Men End Domestic Abuse*,
2 3rd Ed. Nashville, TN: Hunter House, 2015.

3 This book is very helpful for counseling batterers. Despite the lack of hopefulness for
4 batterers to change, this book challenges the reader to trust that God can indeed change
5 anyone. It provides many helpful stories of success. Though not a Christian text, it seeks to
6 get to the heart of the abuser for real change to happen.

7
8 Owen, John. *Spiritual-Mindedness*. Edited by R.J.K. Law. Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of
9 Truth Trust, 2009, 2016.

10 Owen wants believers to be drawn to the awe-inspiring, life-giving, eternally blessed
11 Father. In fact, in *Spiritual-Mindedness*, Owens wants our minds drawn to our Savior and
12 spiritual things every moment. Romans 8:6-8 says, “For to set the mind on the flesh is death,
13 but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile
14 to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh
15 cannot please God.” Owens writes, “All actions, good or bad, come from our thoughts” (7)
16 and, “That which you set your heart on is that which you will think about most (238). Owen
17 devotes his entire book to walking us through how to purposely and helpfully focus—daily
18 and regularly—our thoughts upon God.

19 Similar to Chalmers’s claim in *The Expulsive Power*, Owen suggests to think God’s
20 thoughts is to grow to know and love Him more. To think God’s thoughts, therefore, is to
21 eradicate the sin of self-worship. Counselors and pastors can help abusive individuals redirect
22 their thoughts toward the only Source worthy of our praise.

23
24 Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1961.

25 If knowing who God is and thinking His thoughts after Him is one way to replace
26 thoughts of self and entitlement, the attributes of God are the place to begin. Tozer’s classic,
27 *The Knowledge of the Holy* is a grace that introduces us (or reminds us) who God is and why
28 who He is matters in our everyday world. In keeping with spiritual-mindedness, thinking
29 about who God is on a daily basis is refreshment for the soul: the type of deep soul-refreshment
30 that shapes our affections. “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most
31 important thing about us” (1). Rather than our wants, our needs, our desires, our passions
32 defining who and what we are (abusive or not), thoughts about God make us who He intended
33 us to be.

34
35 Welch, Edward T. *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure*,
36 *Codependency, and the Fear of Man*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997.

37 “Fear of man is such a part of our human fabric that we should check for a pulse if
38 someone denies it” (17). Everyone, it seems, struggles to fear God more than we fear fellow
39 man. Fear of man keeps a victim of abuse paralyzed; everything they do revolves around
40 pleasing their abuser. Fear of man keeps abusers relentlessly pursuing, obtaining, and keeping
41 the image they’ve created intact.

42 Fear of man is a significant characteristic of abuse, both of the victims and the abusers.
43 At the heart of this fear is unbelief of a good God. Fear of man fills the vacuum when a holy
44 fear of God is lacking. Only God provides all things necessary for life and godliness. Only
45 God’s love is the answer to the human struggle. All attempts to find satisfaction, or approval,

or recognition outside of pursuing God's love, forgiveness and acceptance will fail. Only a radical fear of God will replace the fear of man. See also, Flavel, John. *Triumphing over Sinful Fear*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011 and Fox, Christina. *A Holy Fear, Trading Lesser Fears for the Fear of the Lord*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020.

3. CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

Allender, Dan. *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2008.

For those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse and those who love and care for them, *The Wounded Heart* offers a tender, compassionate window into the psychological effects of abuse and the theological foundations for healing.

Denhollander, Rachel. *What Is a Girl Worth?* Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2019.

A compelling personal account of sexual abuse at the hands of a trusted physician and the courageous path the author took to expose a powerful figure and a powerful organization in the face of disbelief and efforts to silence her. Saturated with deep faith, biblical support, forgiveness, and a relentless desire to protect other children.

Haburchak, MD, David R.. *Kingdom Work: Redeeming Childhood Sexual Abuse*. Research Triangle, NC: Lulu Publishing, 2019.

Intended as a comprehensive primer on all aspects of the subject from both theological and medical points of view, it is specifically designed for churches to use in small group study with prayer, discussion points, and applications. Recommendation for a child safety policy is in Attachment 6, and it outlines current self-help as well as church-based treatment programs by Mary Demuth and the BECOMERS ministry to both victims and perpetrators by Lynn Heitritter and Jeanette Vought. Haburchak is a Ruling Elder in the PCA.

Langberg, Diane. *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Camarillo, CA: Xulon Press; 1st Edition, 2003.

A pioneering and timeless guide to counseling survivors of sexual abuse based on the premise that such therapy must be both incarnational and redemptive. Essential reading for anyone who wants to know how to counsel a survivor in healing ways that reflect the person of Christ.

Langberg, Diane. *On the Threshold of Hope: Opening the Door to Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1999.

A companion to *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse* that will lead survivors along the path of understanding and healing.

McConnell, Mez. *The Creaking on the Stairs*. Fearn, Ross-shire. UK: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2019.

This book was written for those who have suffered from childhood sexual abuse; however, Mez McConnell maps the truths and promises of God over all the circumstances of

horrific pain and suffering. This book is a helpful perspective for someone who has endured any kind of abuse. The story in the book is raw. Please recommend reading with caution.

4. *CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY*

Jung, J.H. "Childhood Adversity, Religion, and Change in Mental Health." *Research on Aging* no. 40 (2018): 155-79.

Author contends that "religious practice and spirituality buffer the noxious effects of abuse on positive affect ("calm, peaceful, cheerful, happy, satisfied, good spirits") but did not help the downward spiral of negative affect, especially in later times of stress ("hopeless, nervous, restless, sadness, worthlessness, nothing could cheer you up")." He seems to suggest that church and spirituality provide existential hope to maintain some degree of optimism, but reluctance to talk to others, especially in the congregation about their experiences leads to the persistence of strong negative cognition, especially under times of stress. This would fit with the BECOMERS group's strategy noted above and has implications for how churches handle the past trauma of members.

5. *DOMESTIC VIOLENCE*

Bancroft, Lundy. *When Dad Hurts Mom: Helping Your Children Heal the Wounds of Witnessing Abuse*. New York, NY: Hudson, 2004.

Written for mothers who are struggling with how to protect their children from the emotional trauma they experience after witnessing physical and/or emotional abuse in their homes and from the manipulation of the abusive parent. Contains many helpful and practical suggestions.

Bancroft, Lundy. *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. New York, NY: Berkley Books, 2002.

Bancroft is extremely helpful in understanding the minds of abusers. He was an early batterers' intervention support group leader. His current focus is on helping the justice system work together to battle domestic violence and give targets safety. This book has helped countless women over the years. He provides a thorough approach to increasing understanding why some men abuse women, including early warning signs, ten abusive personality types, the process of change, and more.

For a comprehensive understanding of an abusive man, Bancroft's book is essential. While insight from his sociology is important, the reader should know he has no biblical understanding of anthropology or sin, nor does he recommend any biblical solutions. Caution is advised due to foul language and utter lack of hope found throughout the book.

Branson, Brenda and Paula Silva. *Violence Among Us: Ministry to Families in Crisis*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007.

This book offers practical help in identifying abusive situations. It has strategic counseling tips, case studies and models of effective ministry to both the victim and the perpetrator. There are resource lists which include domestic violence hotlines and shelters,

1 faith-based organizations, abuser treatment programs, and information on legal and safety
2 issues.

3
4 Evans, Patricia. *The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond*,
5 3rd ed. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2010.

6 Very helpful in identifying verbal abuse and emphasizes specific themes that are
7 helpful for those in abusive relationships. Excellent advice on how to respond to verbal abuse.
8 Not written by a Christian.

9
10 Hambrick, Brad. *Church Cares | Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*.
11 <https://churchcares.com/>.

12 This is an exceptional resource for churches who desire to care *Well for the Abused*.”
13 Hambrick put together notable experts in the Christian community to speak from various
14 disciplines. From counseling to law enforcement to advocacy, *Becoming a Church That Cares*
15 *Well* provides video training and a free e-book from the website for use by Sessions for the
16 instruction of their congregations.

17
18 Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence –from Domestic Abuse to*
19 *Political Terror*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997.

20 An insightful, groundbreaking book for those who want to understand the impact of
21 trauma and the prerequisites for recovery.

22
23 Holcomb, Lindsey A., Justin S. Holcomb, and Elyse M. Fitzpatrick. *Is It My Fault?: Hope*
24 *and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence*, New edition. Chicago: Moody
25 Publishers, 2014.

26 Written tenderly to victims, this book speaks the gospel of grace into their hearts and
27 situations while helping them to consider steps they can take towards healing.

28
29 Millage, Sydney. *Sanctuary: Hope and Help for Victims of Domestic Abuse*. Bemidji, MN:
30 Focus Publishing, 2018.

31 Sydney Millage suggests that the way to effectively minister to abuse victims is an
32 understanding of domestic abuse and how to apply the good news of Jesus, His Word, and
33 character to what has remained unseen, unknown, and misunderstood. The author “provides
34 comprehensive hope and help for victims of domestic abuse, counselors and friends who come
35 alongside them, and churches striving to shepherd members righteously and compassionately.”

36
37 Miles, Al. *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN:
38 Fortress Press, 2011.

39 Miles provides many helpful insights to caring for survivors of domestic violence
40 within the church. Written to church leaders. (Some pastors will struggle with his quoting of
41 women church leaders.)

1 Moles, Chris. *The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for Men Who Use Control and*
2 *Violence in the Home*. Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2015.

3 A brilliant book by a pastor, biblical counselor, and batterer intervention specialist on
4 how to bring oppressors in the church to repentance.

6 Pierre, Jeremy, Greg Wilson. *When Home Hurts, A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic*
7 *Abuse in Your Church*. Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christina Focus Publications, 2021.

8 Pierre, the Professor of the Biblical Counseling & Department Chair at the Southern
9 Baptist Theological Seminary, and Wilson, a licensed professional counselor have written *the*
10 manual for pastors and church leaders who want to carefully, wisely, and theologically
11 shepherd victims and domestic abusers well. The first part of the book addresses the biblical,
12 theological framework for thinking about this issue, while the second part proposes the wisest
13 practices for helping those involved.

14 The authors acknowledge, the Bible was not written to be a textbook for abuse.
15 However, Scripture does provide a framework for thinking through this kind of oppression.
16 The doctrines of Image of God, Sin, Love, Oppression, Marriage, and the Church all provide
17 an interpretive grid for helping us understand and respond well in cases of domestic abuse.
18 The authors also helpfully articulate what constitutes normal sin in the marital relationship
19 versus what constitutes abuse (“me before you” rather than “me OVER you” pg. 70). Every
20 church leader would benefit from this book.

22 Simon, PhD, George K. *Character Disturbance: The Phenomenon of Our Age*, 1st Edition.
23 Little Rock, AR: Parkhurst Brothers Publishers Inc., 2011.

24 Dr. George Simon, a Christian psychologist, describes individuals with “disturbed
25 characters” as shameless and guiltless. His analysis of abusive individuals involves various
26 DSM defined disorders but concludes that abuse is different from suffering from a personality
27 disorder.

29 Snyder, Rachel Louise. *No Visible Bruises: What We Don’t Know About Domestic Violence*
30 *Can Kill Us*. Bloomsbury Publishing; 1st Edition, 2019.

31 A comprehensive, well-researched report on domestic abuse in America. Snyder’s
32 book has been called a “tour de force” for understanding domestic violence in American
33 culture. One of the things she helps the reader understand is that we need to be asking better
34 questions. It’s not enough to ask, “Why doesn’t she just leave?” At the same time, we must
35 examine why men feel they have permission to resort to violence as a solution to their
36 (perceived) problems. “The Danger Assessment” is a particularly helpful tool.

38 Strickland, Darby A. *Domestic Abuse: For the Sufferer*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing,
39 2018.

40 This mini-book, written to the survivor of abuse, provides clarity and encouragement.
41 It aims to help victims see that God speaks into their situation, and it offers them steps they
42 can take to begin to get help.

1 Strickland, Darby A. *Domestic Abuse: Recognize, Respond, Rescue*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R
2 Publishing, 2018.

3 This mini-book summarizes how to detect abuse, explains the heart of an oppressor,
4 and describes first steps to take to help oppressors and the oppressed. It is a short read and is
5 written with church leadership in mind.

7 Strickland, Darby A. *Is it Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping
8 Victims*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020.

9 From beginning to end, a treasure chest of information about the dynamics and kinds
10 of abuse, their effects on women and children, and practical steps to take to offer apt help.
11 Strickland teaches how to identify the toxic entitlement that drives abusive behavior and to
12 better understand its impact on victims—including children who are raised in a home with
13 domestic abuse. Scripture references and appendices about safety plans, red flags during
14 dating, pre-marital abuse inventory, ten ways to educate the church, and more.

15 It will equip you to provide wise and Christ-centered counsel, empower, and advocate
16 for victims while navigating the complex dynamics of oppression in a marriage. The book has
17 detailed inventory questions to screen for different kinds of abuse—physical, sexual,
18 emotional, spiritual, and financial—as well as case studies, exercises, and comprehensive
19 worksheets. Included is a safety action plan that can be used to train helpers and assist victims.

21 Tucker, Ruth. *Black and White Bible, Black and Blue Wife: My Story of Finding Hope After
22 Domestic Abuse*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016.

23 A story of abuse from her pastor-husband, as well as other women's experiences, and,
24 refreshingly, accounts of husbands who loved their wives as Christ loved the church. Suggests
25 a biblical approach for challenging abuse and presses the church to consider thoughtfully the
26 potential danger in doctrinaire male headship.

28 Vernick, Leslie. *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage: How to Find Your Voice and Reclaim
29 Your Hope*, 2013 Edition. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2013.

30 Based on decades of counseling experience, Vernick's intensely practical, biblical
31 advice helps show victims of abuse how to establish boundaries and break free from emotional
32 abuse. Distinguishes between a disappointing marriage and a destructive marriage and shines
33 a bright light on subtle and blatant emotional abuses and their damage. Biblically-based
34 throughout. Outlines a process that begins within the victim to develop inner spiritual and
35 relational strengths, moves to trying to initiate change in the situation, and then moves to
36 dealing constructively when there is no change. Vernick has helpful online resources and
37 support groups for survivors as well.

39 **6. HEALING / RECOVERY: GENERAL**

41 Card, Michael. *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament (Quiet
42 Times for the Heart)*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005.

43 Not written specifically for abuse survivors but helpful for recovery. God desires for
44 us to pour out our hearts to Him, whether in joy or pain. But many of us don't feel right
45 expressing our anger, frustration, and sadness in prayer. From Job to David to Christ, men and

women of the Bible understood the importance of pouring one's heart out to the Father. Examine their stories and expand your definition of worship. See also Vroegop, Mark, and Joni Eareckson Tada. *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019.

Chalmers, DD, Thomas. *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*. Minneapolis, MN: Curiosmith, 2012.

Puritan Thomas Chalmers's little but powerful sermon challenges both the counselor and the believer to understand that simply "pulling up our bootstraps," determining to be better, or even regulating behavior will not succeed in the Christian life. "It is almost never done by the mere force of mental determination" (11). The only possible remedy for love (and therefore obedience) of God is that He replace what is in the seat of our affections. In abuse, the abuser's affection is self. Only by "substituting another desire, and another line of habit of exertion in its place..." (11) can the love of "the world" (a.k.a., "self") be expunged and "supplanted by the love of that which is more worthy than itself" (17).

The power of this new affection is a "mighty instrument of obedience" (19). The man (or woman) who has been told to "shut out the world from his heart," (26) will find it an impossible task lest they find God as his or her "sure and satisfying portion" (26).

Counselors and Christians will find Chalmers's wisdom a helpful perspective for how to approach care-giving when working with an abuser. See also, Ortlund, Dane C. *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020 and Packer, J. I. *Knowing God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021.

Currid, John. *Why Do I Suffer?: Suffering & the Sovereignty of God*. Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2014.

Why does God allow suffering? John Currid helpfully explains how God works in suffering, not as "a worried observer unwilling or unable to intervene," but rather with a purpose.

Fitzpatrick, Elyse M. *Because He Loves Me: How Christ Transforms Our Daily Life*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

Abuse diminishes the image of God in the victim. Abuse muddies the waters of identity, and instead of living as children of God, victims forget who they are as individuals, hyper focus on their weaknesses, and lose who they are in relationship to their heavenly Father.

Fitzpatrick expands on these thoughts, calling what many of us experience as "spiritual amnesia." For a victim, to restore a God-given identity, similar to what is mentioned by Chalmers in his resource above, is to turn their eyes fully onto the gift and grace of God's love. Gospel shaped living means the truth of God's love informs everyday life; it means the believer is *transformed* by applying that truth to all the circumstances of life. For a victim of abuse, this kind of love is foreign. Elyse's book challenges the reader to be who they are. If a victim heard (frequently) the love of their Father, how might that change their everyday world?

1 Fitzpatrick, Elyse and Eric Schumacher. *Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women*.
 2 Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2020.

3 Women who have suffered from abuse may not recognize that women were always
 4 very important to God. Women have always been important as God works out His redemptive
 5 goals. Fitzpatrick and Schumacher take the reader on a walk through the Bible and
 6 demonstrate the many ways God used women in His plans, encouraged them, and promoted
 7 them as valuable human image-bearers.

8 For those who have been diminished simply because of their gender, *Worthy*
 9 encourages them to see through God's eyes, to know God's acceptance, and to hear God's
 10 call for their life. One of the most important characteristics of hope a victim can rely on is that
 11 God will use *everything for good*. The Christian hope in suffering is that God never wastes
 12 the difficult circumstances of our lives. Schumacher and Fitzpatrick illustrate this beautifully
 13 from the Scriptures, encouraging women to persevere, encouraging them to believe that their
 14 story *will be redeemed*.

15
 16 Forrest, Joy. *Called to Peace: A Survivor's Guide to Finding Peace and Healing After*
 17 *Domestic Abuse*. Raleigh, NC: Blue Ink Press, LLC, 2018.

18 This book is both an autobiography and also a guide for victims of domestic abuse.
 19 With knowledge and compassion, Joy points her readers to Christ—the ultimate source of true
 20 wholeness and healing. Her story is one of physical abuse and will resonate with victims.
 21 See also, Forrest, Joy. *Called to Peace: Companion Workbook*. Raleigh, NC: Blue Ink Press,
 22 LLC, 2019.

23
 24 Gingrich, H.D. and F.C. Gingrich. *Treating Trauma in Christian Counseling*. Downers Grove,
 25 IL: IVP Academic, 2017.

26 Heather Gingrich, one of the authors, teaches a course on trauma at RTS Jackson. The
 27 third chapter, “The Neurobiology of Stress and Trauma,” is worth the price of the book. The
 28 authors meticulously walk the reader through the central nervous system as it relates to the
 29 devastating impacts of trauma. On a positive note, the authors tell us that the brain *can* change.
 30 It isn't easy, but God has designed it perfectly and it is possible to improve what has been
 31 devastated by trauma.

32
 33 Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to*
 34 *Political Terror*, New York: Basic Books, 1997.

35 An insightful, groundbreaking book for those who want to understand the impact of
 36 trauma and the prerequisites for recovery.

37
 38 Holcomb, Lindsey. *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*.
 39 Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.

40 Scripturally- and theologically-based view of sexual assault and restoration by a
 41 counselor of sexual assault survivors. Discusses the psychological, emotional, and spiritual
 42 impact of sexual assault. Clearly offers the hope found in Christ and His redemptive suffering.

1 Kellemen, Bob. *God's Healing for Life's Losses, How to Find Hope When You're Hurting*.
2 Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2010.

3 One of the most helpful things pastors and counselors can do to help victims heal is to
4 encourage them to grieve their losses. All suffering is loss. "Suffering is so dreadful because
5 suffering is death. All suffering is the dying, separating, and severing of relationships" (11).
6 Naming those losses, feeling the pain of losing relationship, identity, and position due to
7 trauma and/or abuse, is a step toward wholeness. Those who suffer great loss do not
8 necessarily stop grieving with the passage of time, rather they remember what's been lost—
9 feel the feels of the loss—and use those emotions to lead them to God. Kellemen's process
10 (albeit not a formula) is so much more helpful than the five steps developed by Elisabeth
11 Kübler-Ross.

12
13 Kolk, MD, Bessel van der. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing*
14 *of Trauma*. 1st ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

15 Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world's foremost experts on trauma, has spent over
16 three decades working with survivors. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, he explains how trauma
17 reshapes the body and brain. Many abuse survivors have found this text very helpful though
18 it is somewhat technically written. Kolk gives a variety of treatment possibilities for trauma
19 in the final chapters. Not a Christian text.

20
21 Langberg, Diane. *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores*.
22 1st edition. Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015.

23 Langberg says the church's greatest mission field in the 21st century is trauma. Trauma
24 is extraordinary, she says, "not because it rarely happens, but because it swallows up and
25 destroys normal human ways of living." We, the church, Langberg says, must become
26 representatives of God to suffering people.

27 Chapters on the psychology of suffering, shame and trauma, domestic violence, sexual
28 abuse and more call the church to view these evils as part of the sufferings of Christ and to
29 face them in fellowship with Him, bringing His restorative power to those who suffer.

30
31 Owen, John. *Spiritual-Mindedness*. Edited by R.J.K. Law. Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of
32 Truth Trust, 2009, 2016.

33 Owen, similar to Chalmers, wants believers to be drawn to the awe-inspiring, life-
34 giving, eternally blessed Father. In fact, in *Spiritual-Mindedness*, Owens wants our minds
35 drawn to our Savior and spiritual things every moment. Romans 8:6-8 says, "For to set the
36 mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that
37 is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.
38 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Owens writes, "All actions, good or bad, come
39 from our thoughts" (7) and "That which you set your heart on is that which you will think
40 about most (238). Owen's devotes his entire book to walking us through how to purposely
41 and helpfully focus—daily and regularly—our thoughts upon God.

42 Like Chalmers's claim in *The Expulsive Power*, to think God's thoughts is to grow to
43 know and love Him more. To think God's thoughts, therefore, is to eradicate the sin of self-
44 worship. Counselors and pastors can help abusive individuals redirect their thoughts toward
45 the only Source worthy of our praise.

Schmutzer, Andrew. *Naming Our Abuse: God's Pathway to Healing for Male Sexual Abuse Survivors*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2016.

Extraordinary among books related to childhood sexual abuse (CSA), this book is written by three men who are survivors of CSA. Using the analogy of an auto accident and its after-effects, the author unfolds a 4-stage process of moving carefully towards healing.

Tozer, A.W. *The Knowledge of the Holy*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1961.

If knowing who God is and thinking His thoughts after Him is one way to replace thoughts of self and entitlement, the attributes of God are the place to begin. Tozer's classic, *The Knowledge of the Holy* is a grace that introduces us (or reminds us) who God is and why who He is matters in our everyday world. In keeping with spiritual-mindedness, thinking about who God is on a daily basis is refreshment for the soul; the type of deep soul refreshment that shapes our affections. "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (1). Rather than our wants, our needs, our desires, our passions defining who and what we are (abusive or not), thoughts about God make us who He intended us to be.

Welch, Edward T. *When People are Big and God is Small, Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997.

"Fear of man is such a part of our human fabric that we should check for a pulse if someone denies it" (17). Everyone, it seems, struggles to fear God more than we fear fellow man. Fear of man keeps a victim of abuse paralyzed; everything they do revolves around pleasing their abuser. Fear of man keeps abusers relentlessly pursuing, obtaining, and keeping the image they've created intact. Fear of man is a significant characteristic of abuse: both of the victims and the abusers.

At the heart of this fear is unbelief of a good God. Fear of man fills the vacuum when a holy fear of God is lacking. Only God provides all things necessary for life and godliness. Only God's love is the answer to the human struggle. All attempts to find satisfaction, or approval, or recognition outside of pursuing God's love, forgiveness and acceptance will fail. Only a radical fear of God will replace the fear of man. See also Flavel, John. *Triumphing over Sinful Fear*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011 and Fox, Christina. *A Holy Fear: Trading Lesser Fears for the Fear of the Lord*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020.

7. HEALING AND RECOVERY: SEXUAL ASSAULT / ABUSE

Kolk, MD, Bessel van der. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. 1st ed. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world's foremost experts on trauma, has spent over three decades working with survivors. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, he explains how trauma reshapes the body and brain. Many abuse survivors have found this text very helpful though it is somewhat technically written. Kolk gives a variety of treatment possibilities for trauma in the final chapters. Not a Christian text.

1 Langberg, Diane. *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Camarillo, CA: Xulon Press; 1st
2 Edition, 2003.

3 A pioneering and timeless guide to counseling survivors of sexual abuse based on the
4 premise that such therapy must be both incarnational and redemptive. Essential reading for
5 anyone who wants to know how to counsel a survivor in healing ways that reflect the person
6 of Christ.

7
8 Schmutzer, Andrew. *The Long Journey Home: Understanding and Ministering to the Sexually*
9 *Abused*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011.

10 *The Long Journey Home* is a rich resource for pastors, therapists, educators, survivors.
11 Over 24 psychologists, theologians, and pastoral care professionals (including Dr. Mark
12 Yarhouse and Dr. Diane Langberg) write from a Christian perspective to cover topics like the
13 nature and dynamics of sexual abuse, its pervasive impact, approaches to growth and healing.
14 Pertinent research and resources are noted.

15 16 **8 SPIRITUAL ABUSE / MISUSE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY**

17
18 Chapman, Gary, Paul E. White, and Harold Myra. *Rising Above a Toxic Workplace: Taking*
19 *Care of Yourself in an Unhealthy Environment*. Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2014.

20 White's book is very readable and practical for those suffering under an abusive leader.
21 From identifying a toxic boss to leaving the organization and seeking healing, White is helpful
22 in providing specific examples and biblical responses to these abusers.

23
24 Chrnalogar, Mary Alice. *Twisted Scriptures: Breaking Free from Churches That Abuse*,
25 Revised. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.

26 Chrnalogar analyzes the various ways spiritual abusers twist the Scriptures to control
27 and manipulate others. Her handling of the nuances of scriptural guidance on authority and
28 submission is enlightening.

29
30 DeGroat, Chuck. *When Narcissism Comes to Church, Healing Your Community from*
31 *Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Publishing, 2020.

32 Since the prevalence of narcissism (think back to Christopher Lasch's 1979 book *The*
33 *Culture of Narcissism*) would suggest that narcissism is easily acquired but not so easily
34 remedied, pastors who lead and who speak with authority and who wield power in the church
35 should take special note of this book by Chuck DeGroat. This is a cautionary tale from a
36 professional counselor who has experience with many narcissists in the church. It is a needed
37 warning since narcissists are capable of inflicting great pain in the pulpit and in the
38 congregation.

39
40 Enroth, Ronald M. *Churches That Abuse*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.

41 Ronald M. Enroth is a leading scholar and national resource on cults and cultism.
42 Enroth provides helpful guidance in determining the nuances of Christian teaching that is
43 manipulative and autocratic.

Johnson, David and Jeff VanVonderen, “The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Authority within the Church.” *African Ecclesial Review* 35, no. 5, 1993.

Johnson and VanVonderen say, “Victims of spiritual abuse struggle with a distorted image of God, relating to spiritual authority, having a hard time with grace, personal boundaries, personal responsibility, lack of living skills, hard time admitting the abuse, trust.” The authors give clear guidance in identifying spiritual abuse and determining whether to stay or leave.

Langberg, Diane. *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2020.

“Power can be a source of blessing, but when it is abused, untold damage to the body and name of Christ, often in the name of Christ, is done.” (3) Langberg is helpful in biblically explaining the dynamics of the use of power both for good and evil. Dr. Langberg speaks with passion and authority, having over 50 years of experience as a psychologist working with trauma victims both in the United States and abroad in war torn countries.

McKnight, Scot, Laura Barringer, and Tish Harrison Warren. *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing*. Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale Momentum, 2020.

Laura Barringer attended Willow Creek Church under the pastorate of Bill Hybels. She heard of his sexual misconduct from the Chicago Tribune and did not believe it at first until she found out one of her friends was one of Hybel’s victims. *A Church Called Tov* can help pastors and elders understand how a toxic culture can develop and live on in the life of a church community. Barringer joined her father, Scot McKnight, a seminary professor, to write this book to help our churches be safe from becoming harbors of abuse.

Mullen, Wade. *Something’s Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2020.

“God is not a God of confusion but of peace,” and God’s people are called to peace. (1 Cor. 14:33; Col. 3:15). The opposite of godly peace is confusion, disorientation, disillusionment, and paralyzing fear. Author, researcher, and advocate Wade Mullen sums up these feelings as something that doesn’t feel right. God describes the cause of those feelings as “abuse” (2 Tim. 3:1). As with any abusive system, there are patterns. In an institution, the patterns emerge as the organization defaults to image management rather than care-filled shepherding.

Mullens helpfully identifies the patterns of secrecy and a tribal environment, flattery that distracts, isolation, intimidation, denial, excuses, justification, comparison, concessions to lesser sins, minimization, and false demonstrations of repentance. In learning how to recognize abuse tactics, the potential victim is equipped to effectively respond in God-glorifying ways and have nothing to do with the abuser (2 Tim. 3:4; 1 Tim. 6:20; Titus 1:14). In his debut book, Mullens helpfully provides the language necessary for identifying and describing sinful behaviors abusers use as a means to harm.

Oakley, Dr. Lisa & Justin Humphreys. *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse, Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*. London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2019.

The term ‘spiritual abuse’ is widely used across the Christian community. Oakley and Humphreys seek to define the term and help churches guard against it. The authors help elders and congregant members recognize spiritual abuse; to lead in ways that are not controlling and manipulative but rather vulnerable and humble; and create safe church cultures where God’s people may be edified.

Simon, George K. *In Sheep’s Clothing: Understanding and Dealing with Manipulative People*. 2nd ed.. Little Rock, AR: Parkhurst Brothers Publishers Inc, 2010.

Simon writes, “Manipulative people have two goals: to win and to look good doing it. Often those they abuse are only vaguely aware of what is happening to them.” Simon’s book is helpful to empower those who have or may be controlled by abusive people.

9. WEBSITES

Called to Peace

<https://www.calledtopeace.org/>

Called to Peace Ministries (CTPM) is a nondenominational, nonprofit, 501 (c)(3) ministry dedicated to offering hope and healing to victims of domestic violence, emotionally destructive relationships, and sexual assault. Our twofold mission is: 1) to provide practical assistance and counsel to individuals affected by domestic abuse and 2) to educate organizations and helpers to better respond to these crises through education and mentoring. Disclaimer: The primary purpose of CTPM is to provide education and resources to survivors of domestic abuse and to educate people who desire to help them.

Called to Peace is a parachurch organization, and in no way seek to be a substitute for the local church. Rather, its stated goal is to come alongside churches to support them as they seek to support victims of abuse. Although it is an Evangelical Christian ministry, from time to time they call on people from many theological backgrounds and professional disciplines to share their knowledge and experience in working with survivors of domestic abuse, particularly when they offer specific expertise and solutions for survivors.

Clergy Sexual Misconduct Information and Resources

<https://clergysexualmisconduct.com/home>

Adult clergy sexual misconduct (CSM), also known as clergy sexual abuse (CSA), is any sexualized behavior by a church leader/spiritual leader toward someone under his/her spiritual care, who by nature is in a position of less power and authority. CSM is an abuse of power and authority, not an “affair,” as it cannot be considered mutual consent due to the unequal power dynamics. When the leader forgoes his ethical obligation to maintain healthy boundaries between himself and those he is ministering to, the leader is misusing his power to violate the sacred trust and safety of the victim, committing a breach of fiduciary duty, and violating professional ethics, often resulting in a traumatic experience for the victim. This website exists to help adult victims (aged 18+) of CSM/CSA identify the abuse they are experiencing and find appropriate help.

Besides providing help for clergy abuse victims, this website is designed to provide information to church leaders and members to help them better understand CSM/CSA, prevent it from occurring, and deal with it appropriately by directing them to relevant resources, organizations, and ministries.

Although this website approaches the subject of CSM/CSA from a Christian perspective, the information provided is useful and applicable to individuals of any religion and spiritual practice.

Additionally, leaders and victims can be either men or women. Information contained in this website applies regardless of gender. Since studies show that most victims are women and most clergy are men, this website is written with language reflecting that reality.

Document the Abuse

<https://documenttheabuse.com/>

In October of 2007, Stacey Peterson disappeared. Her body has never been found. Shortly before her disappearance, Stacey told her pastor (Neil Schori) she provided a false alibi for her husband (Drew Peterson) the night his first wife disappeared. Stacey told Neil she was afraid Drew's ex-wife was dead. As a result of this tragedy, Neil—together with nationally known DA advocate Susan Murphy-Milano —developed an Evidentiary Abuse Affidavit which would allow women to document any abuse, orders of protection, and details of abusive circumstances in their homes. Today, Drew Peterson's sister Norma is the Executive Director of documenttheabuse.com. Working together with Neil, they help victims officially document their abuse and bring awareness to the devastation of domestic violence.

GRACE

www.netgrace.org

Empowering Christian communities to recognize, prevent, and respond to abuse.

Help[H]er

<https://www.helpherresources.com/>

The story of Help[H]er began when we asked the question, "How can we help pastors and church leaders shepherd women well?" The answer was to help the local church build a team of competent, seasoned women who would come alongside their pastors to help women in crisis.

At the core of our mission is the desire to assist the local church as they navigate how to carefully shepherd women.

The idea of men and women caregiving partnerships in the local church grew our Help[H]er vision. Not every church has the resources to develop a Help[H]er ministry. At the same time, leaders find themselves swimming in complicated issues.

Help[H]er is a 501C3 that offers training, resources, and a directory of caregivers. Whether the church's goals include structuring their own Help[H]er ministry, providing rich materials tailored to supplement one-another care, or meeting more immediate caregiving needs; our resources help pastors and leaders further their shepherding ministry to women experiencing crisis.

1 **Peaceworks**

2 <http://www.chrismoles.org/>

3 Chris Moles is a pastor and biblical counselor who helps churches and families
4 confront the evil of domestic violence and promote healthy, God-honoring, relationships.
5 PeaceWorks' primary focus is to educate the Church in domestic abuse prevention and
6 intervention through PeaceWorks University and EQUIP (in cooperation with Leslie Vernick)
7 and to provide periodic coaching and/or educational resources to abusive men through our
8 Men of Peace program.

9
10 **The Refuge**

11 <https://refugeministries.com/about/>

12 Helping survivors of domestic abuse find redemption from oppression, Refuge
13 Ministries began in 2013 when Pastor Shane Waldron (PCA) realized that common
14 approaches to marriage conflict were ineffective in cases of domestic abuse. It all started with
15 a support group for survivors of domestic abuse called The Refuge with four women in
16 attendance. Within a year, it expanded into a thriving ministry that now offers a batterer's
17 intervention program called Turning Point, and a structured program for children called
18 Refuge Kids.

19 Refuge Ministries is one of the only comprehensive programs in the nation that offers
20 ministry to abusers, survivors and their children. There are chapters in the Rocky Mountain
21 region and the East coast and is a 501c3.