**Biblical Wisdom for Responding to Marital Abuse**

*Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered (harsh) against them*

(Colossians 3:19)

*The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, And the one who loves violence His soul hates.*

(Psalm 11:5)

*We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people. 16 Rejoice always; 17 pray without ceasing; 18 in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.*

(1 Thessalonians 5:14-22)

I. General.

* Marital/ domestic abuse is one of the most traumatic issues an individual, couple, family, and church can face.
* Abuse can involve physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, economic, spiritual, or psychological means.
* Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive behavior where one partner in an intimate relationship controls another through force, intimidation, or the threat of violence.
* On average, nearly 24 people per minute are physically abused by a spouse in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men.
* Domestic abuse is a serious problem occuring in church families as well as in society
* 87% percent of pastors say sexual/domestic violence is an issue in their community.
* Two-thirds of pastors say domestic or sexual violence occurs in the lives of people in their congregation.
* Abuse usually occurs in a pattern typically increasing in frequency and intensity.
* Abuse is intentional, though the abuser may not recognize the intentions of their heart. Abuse is never perpetrated on accident.
* Abuse is about the misuse of position or strength to control or manipulate another for selfish gain. It is an act of oppression.
* The goal of abuse is self-gratification to get what one wants at the expense of another.
* Domestic abuse is the desecration of the image of God through a pattern of intentionally misusing power, overtly or covertly, in words or actions, to gratify self.
* Abuse is an assault upon the image of God in another human being. Domestic abuse in all its forms is sinful and incompatible with the Christian faith and life.
* Domestic abuse is not primarily an anger problem, a marriage problem, the victim’s problem, or even a legal problem, but rather a sin problem.

II. Domestic abuse is primarily perpetrated by men, against the very people whom God has given these men to protect and shepherd - women and children.

* At SMCC, we will listen to, minister to, support, and care for those affected by domestic abuse.
* At SMCC, we will urge abused persons to consider their own safety and that of family members initially and to seek help from the church, counseling, and legal resources, to bring healing to the individuals and if possible to the marriage.
* At SMCC, we will discipline abusers and remove them from the church if they are unrepentant
* At SMCC, all that we do in ministry and care for the abused and abusive spouse will be to God’s glory and their sanctification.

III. Marital/ Domestic Abuse

A. Never, under any circumstances, is it appropriate for a husband to use physical force against his wife for the purpose of compelling her submission to his authority.

B. We know this from the biblical principle of triadic authority (Lambert)

- The authority of the state is enforced with sword (Rom 13:1-4)

- The authority of the church is enforced with the keys (Matt 16:19; 18:15-20)

- The authority of the home is enforced with the rod (Prov. 23:13-14)

C. In each of these examples there is a notable absence: *The relationship of a husband with a wife is the only authoritative relationship where those in authority are not given the responsibility to enforce their authority.*

D. This truth will rule out on biblical and theological grounds—*Whenever a man engages in any forceful acts against his wife it is a wrongful use of authority and strength and, therefore, abuse in any and every case.*

IV. How Should God’s People Respond to “Abuse in Marriage”?

A Biblical Response to Domestic Violence

A. Listen and Learn:

Proverbs 18:13 - *He who gives an answer before he hears, It is folly and shame to him.*

Proverbs 18:17 - *The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him.*

Explore lovingly, caringly, and wisely exactly what is occurring.

- How long has the abuse been happening?

  - How often does it happen?

  - When does it tend to happen?

  - How severe is the abuse?

  - Have children been exposed to the abuse?

  - Have they seen it happen or been recipients of it themselves?

- What would your husband’s response be if he knew you were talking about the abuse?

B. Respond with Compassion and Empathy

- In compassion, we weep with her as she weeps. In passion, we express righteous anger over the evil of the abuse she is suffering.

- Guard against abusing the abuse victim. We must show ourselves trustworthy or we will silence a wife’s courageous decision to verbalize her abuse.

- Careful lest we ever convey, “You caused this abuse.” Nothing ever excuses a husband’s abuse of his wife. Nothing ever “causes” a husband to abuse his wife.

C. Intentional Response.

- “Empathy and compassion” without “passion and action” can be like saying to a person in need, “Go your way, I’ll be praying for you.”

- “Passion”—righteous anger wisely responds to the abusive situation with bold love.

- Immediately help the abused wife to establish safeguards against further abuse. It is crucial to involve “others.”

- “Others” should include the Body of Christ. The elders and other church leaders, including men who know the husband, should intervene by lovingly but firmly confronting the abusing husband.

- Others may include the police depending on the current situation.

We must consider:

* Whether the husband is willing to receive counseling.
* Whether the husband shows signs of true remorse and repentance
* Whether or not the husband has shown a history of an inability to control his behavior. Seek to discern whether the husband is simply trying to appease and pacify us.

D. Involve the Church: The church must be mobilized to care for the abused

- Women may need a safe place to stay with their children

- They may need food and clothing for a time

- They may need long-term financial help if restoration proves impossible.

- They may need to provide childcare. They may need help getting kids back and forth to school.

- They will always need to provide the sort of Christian friendship that provides the opportunity for candid and loving counsel, for tears, and even for laughter.

D. The church must be mobilized to care for the abuser

- Church members will need to mobilize to confront an abusive husband.

- If he is repentant, he may need a place to stay for a time so that his wife and children can remain in their home.

- He may need food.

- He will need accountability, as well as Christian friends who can speak into his life as he grows and changes.

- He may need church members to supervise visits he has with his wife and children.

- Ultimately, if he is unrepentant, he will need the church to bear testimony against his sin through a process of church discipline so that his spirit may be saved at the last day (cf. Matt 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 5:5)

E. Intentional Response

- Consider Whether and How to Involve Law Enforcement

- Each situation is unique. Listen well to “both sides” and seek to “weigh the evidence” in a “Solomon-like” way.

- Laws about reporting abuse vary from state to state. In Alabama, it is mandatory to report child abuse and regulatory if a school, medical clinic, church nursery, other public services.

- No mandatory reporting requirement for spouse abuse.

- Several guardrails inform this judgment call

- Integrity and honest dealing should govern interaction with the wife who has come for help

  - Protect the weak

  - Informing the authorities can help prevent further instances of abuse

  - There are no easy one-size-fits-all answers.

V. Biblical Counseling for an Abusive Spouse - A Comprehensive Approach –

A. Can Abusers Change?

- Common belief that abusers cannot change. The common conviction is, “Once an abuser, always an abuser”

- Such thinking is not true for one big reason: A biblical reason (1 Cor. 6:9-12)

- General guidelines in shepherding and counseling an abusive husband:

- You must listen to the abusive husband

- Biblical ministry wants to do ministry to the abused and abuser

- Ministry to abusive persons has risks

- Restoration no stigmatization

- What is he wanting? (Mark 7:14-23)

- Be careful how you listen to the abuser – persuasion, self-victimization

B. Taking behavioral responsibility is a start for the abusive husband, but we work for heart change:

- Taking spiritual responsibility: Sin in the home always begins with sin in the heart. Sin in human relationships always begins with sin in our relationship to God (see James 4:1-8).

- Taking social/relational responsibility: means accepting my role, my sin, regardless of how another person relates to me.

- Taking rational/mental responsibility: involves exposing and confessing sinful beliefs. It means putting off lies of Satan. It means putting on a renewed mind. It means believing/living the God’s Truth (Eph. 4:22-24)

- Taking motivational responsibility: An abusive spouse must come to understand why they do what they do.

- Taking behavioral responsibility: Here is where most counseling seems to start and finish. It is a vital part, but only a part.

- Taking emotional responsibility: Help the spouse to confess unmanaged mood states and uncontrolled emotions. Help the spouse to put on managed moods and biblical emotional expression and responses.

VI. Biblical Counseling for an Abused Spouse - A Comprehensive Approach

A. As with ministry to the abusive spouse, so ministry to the spouse suffering abuse requires a comprehensive approach toward heart change. This could include:

- Where necessary, involve the civil authorities.

- Where necessary, involve godly women and godly couples in housing the abused spouse for the sake of safety.

- Assign spiritual friends, mentors, and encouragement partners to minister to the abused spouse.

- Be sure that the abused spouse is involved in a healthy small group.

- Be sure that the abused spouse is active in Sunday morning worship and adult Sunday School.

- Be sure that the abused spouse is practicing the spiritual disciplines.

- Where there is repentance there should be forgiveness.

- To the extent that the abused spouse has a strong and healthy extended family, involve them in ministry to the abused spouse.

VII. Biblical Counseling for the Couple - A Comprehensive Approach – Restoration is the Goal

- Biblical ministry in the aftermath of abuse should seek to restore couples

- Biblical ministry in the aftermath of abuse should also seek to protect the weak from harm

- Violent men must be separated from their wives and families in order to receive help and establish trust

- In the case of physical abuse, safety is the first priority, and often that requires separation while church and civil authorities address the abusive spouse.

- During early stages a husband may only see his wife during counseling.

- Slowly increase the amounts of supervised time as a couple and with children.

- Slowly add unsupervised visits (dates, etc)

- Slowly move to reestablish the couple in the same house

- Throughout the process we are looking for signs of genuine repentance from the man as well as signs that his wife is comfortable with progress.

VIII. Forgiveness and Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 2:5-11 is vital.

- Satan’s scheme to outwit us by overwhelming us with guilt. We team with Satan when we fail to forgive one another!

- When someone responds to biblical counsel and discipline we ought to forgive and comfort the person, so that he or she will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Paul urges us to reaffirm our love for the repentant person.

- The abused spouse will be angry. He or she is right to express bold love that requires repentance and change. It is normal for the abused spouse to hurt. We need to shepherd the abused spouse through their trial of anger and hurt.

- However, nothing excuses an unforgiving spirit.

- Marriages rocked by abuse will never heal if the abused spouse continually condemns the repentant formerly abusive spouse and continually reminds the formerly abusive spouse of past sins.

IX. Remember the Basic Principles

- “Safety First.” Use the resources of the Body of Christ and the civil authorities to protect the abused spouse in immediate danger or uncertain dangerous circumstances.

- Principles of biblical marriage counseling:

- Infuse Hope

  - Be for the Marriage, their sanctification.

  - Be for God’s Glory

- Confront One Partner, Comfort the Other Partner

  - Help Spouses to Understand Biblical Roles of Husbands and Wives

- Transition to work on the marriage not just the abusive spouse or just with the abused spouse once repentance is demonstrated and ongoing.

X. To the Spouse Experiencing Abuse

- Please, do not suffer in silence. Please, do not suffer alone.

- Sometimes telling others can mean undergoing more suffering because they disbelieve you, minimize, give pat answers, etc.

- Find a safe way to tell a safe person and get help for yourself, your marriage, your family.

- Even if your spouse will not seek help, you need the support of others. Even one person changing—you—may change the dynamics of the situation.

- We think of abuse being from husband to wife. However, many wives are being abusive to their husbands. Husbands—get help.

- Overcome the stigma and be a shepherd in your home by facing the issue.

- We care. I care. The Body of Christ cares. Most importantly, Christ cares.

XI. To the Abusive Spouse

- You can stop. Christ’s resurrection power is available.

- Get help. Go to the Lord. Go to the Word. Go to your pastor. Submit, be accountable, and be responsive.

- Humble yourself before God. Face reality. Deal with your inner heart issues. Change your behavior.

- Renew your heart and renew your home.

XII. To Elders, Pastors, Counselors, and Spiritual Friends

- Always remember: “*I loved you so much that I was delighted to give you not only the Scriptures but my very own soul, because you were dear to me*” (1 Thess. 2:8).

- Listen and learn -

Proverbs 18:13 - *He who gives an answer before he hears, It is folly and shame to him.*

Proverbs 18:17 - *The first to plead his case seems right, Until another comes and examines him.*

- True shepherding begins and ends with love. It is speaking the truth in love - love abounding in depth of insight.

- True shepherding is not impersonal; it is not preaching at, it is intimately engaging others with Christ’s pure love.

- True shepherding involves both truth and love, both Scripture and soul. Engage the abusive marital situation from the context of the Word of God, not where you preach at, but where you converse, dialogue, and trialogue (you the brother/sister, the abused/abuser, and the Divine Counselor).

- Don’t abuse the abused. Love the spouse being abused. Equip him or her to live with bold love.

- Don’t minimize the abuse, confront the abusive spouse in love. Empower the abusive spouse to change by tapping into Christ’s resurrection power.

- Be for the marriage and be for God’s glory.

Class Summary:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_