

Questions and Answers concerning Spousal Abuse

after the Speech on the Subject

on October 5, 2017

by Prof. David J. Engelsma

Answers by Prof. Engelsma

1. If divorce is allowed only on the ground of continuing adultery, are we saying that this sin is greater in God's eyes than ongoing abuse? I would personally choose neither, of course. But if I had to live with one or the other, I would almost certainly choose occasional acts of adultery. I know that this is a terrible thing to admit. Would you comment?

The question makes plain how dreadful to a woman is abuse. Ordinarily, the worst sin against a wife in her own judgment is the adultery of her husband. But abuse is worse in the judgment of this woman. God permits divorce on the sole ground of the fornication of one's mate, not because sexual sin is a worse sin than abuse, but because sexual sin, by its nature, violates the unique intimacy that is of the essence of marriage. Such is the painful nature of abuse, such is the havoc it wreaks on marriage, and such is the ruin it accomplishes of the abused woman that I do not at all regard her preference of occasional acts of adultery on the part of a husband as "a terrible thing to admit." What is "terrible" is the husband's abuse.

2. Is legal separation permitted for the Christian? Could it not be understood effectively to be the same as divorce?

Legal separation is permitted for the Christian woman who is abused by her husband. Often it is advisable. Legal separation is the prohibition of the abusive husband from having contact with his wife, while compelling him to provide financially for her and probably the children. This only recognizes his sin of driving her away from himself, forbids him to continue to abuse her, and requires him to carry out his husbandly duty of supporting her and the children financially. The Christian may use the civil magistrate for her protection from an evildoer (Romans 13). For this, the magistracy was ordained of God.

Separation is not the same as divorce. Neither the state nor the church regards the two realities as one and the same. Although the two are physically separated—by the sin of the husband!—they are not divorced. There is still the possibility of reconciliation and the renewal of the life together that the abusive husband has troubled. Legal separation is often necessary for the abused woman. Otherwise the

abusive husband continues to threaten and harm her. Often he adds to his already grievous wickedness by refusing to support her and the children as is his duty. Abused women ought to be aware of the legitimacy of legal separation; family, friends, and consistories ought to help her obtain it. This answer bears also on the following question.

3. The suggestion that I seek separation from my spouse would not give “true” separation in my case. There would still be his meddling in our children’s activities. I would not be comfortable with his ongoing apologies and with his friends’ telling us to get back together. My first desire would be to proceed with something that the church prohibits. I feel “stuck.”

Legal separation would give “true” separation from your meddling, abusive husband. It would prohibit him from abusing you and from much meddling in your children’s activities. Legal separation is the state’s forbidding a husband to have any contact with his wife. Should he disobey, he will find himself in jail. There, he will be forced to keep from meddling. As for an abusive husband’s easy apologies when finally he has driven his wife away from himself, this is usual on the part of the abusive husband when his wife is separated from him, by his own fault. Neither wife nor church should pay any attention to these apologies. They are invariably false and self-serving. An abusive husband needs intensive, lengthy, firm counseling and help from his pastor and consistory and usually from a professional counselor. If the church does not conclude that abuse is a sin that cannot be overcome, neither does it underestimate the difficulty of overcoming it. When the woman judges it right and possible for her to take up living with him again, by virtue of his heartfelt confession of his sin against her and against God, the consistory must maintain a careful watch over him and the marriage. At the first sign of his relapse into his old, abusive ways, they must deliver the woman from living with him, and discipline him.

Friends of the abusive husband who tell the abused woman to get back with the abusive husband, regardless of the repentance of the husband, which will include a change of behavior, are no friends of you. Pay them no mind. In reality, they are not genuine friends of your husband either. They encourage his going on in his abusive ways, which end in hell. Some friends!

I understand your reference to “something that the church prohibits” to be divorce. It is not the church that prohibits divorce on the ground of abuse, but God in His Word. No one should desire what God abominates.

You are not “stuck.” No Christian walking in the ways of God is ever “stuck,” regardless how distressing her circumstances. Doing the will of God out of thankfulness for gracious salvation, you are freely on the way to heaven and everlasting life, peace, and glory. Stay on this way. It is not long in comparison with eternity.

4. From your days in seminary as a student and then as a professor, do you feel that students are being well equipped to address cases of abuse (whether great or small) when they go into their full-time ministry? Should ministers consult with one another

for advice in extreme cases? I know that ministers have had conflicting views regarding how a certain situation should be addressed.

With regard to the courses devoted to pastoral counseling, in my own seminary training I had only a course of one semester. I now regard this as insufficient for training a future minister concerning his work as a pastor of distressed church members. Nevertheless, I was taught throughout my seminary training to love the people of God to whom I would minister; to offer compassionate help from house to house as well as from the pulpit; and to be firm with impenitent sinners among the congregation. These are basics of good pastoral work. In addition, it was bound upon me that I should continue my studies, including the sphere of pastoral labor, after graduation from seminary. Wherever I felt that I was lacking, and this for me was definitely the sphere of pastoral work, I knew that I should learn on my own while in the ministry.

Ministers should certainly consult with each other regarding difficult cases in their own ministry. It is a characteristic fault of ministers that we fail to do this, perhaps because we think that this would indicate our weakness. But the welfare of the people of God is at stake! In Calvin's Geneva, the body of ministers met regularly for the purpose in part to lay their difficulties before each other and to obtain help from each other. We are not "Lone Rangers." We are a company of fellow servants of our Lord Jesus.

5. Must a wife in an abusive situation be submissive? If so, how?

A Christian wife must be submissive always and unconditionally. This is the calling from Christ in Ephesians 5 and in 1 Peter 3. Submission is the attitude of the heart that recognizes the husband as her head and therefore his authority to give her direction and her responsibility to be a help to him. Submission is not unconditional obedience. The calling to obey is qualified by the righteousness of the command. She does not obey the will of the husband when his will is the requirement that she sin, including the sin of subjecting herself to the murder of herself by the abusive husband. Submission does not unconditionally require her to live with him. On the contrary, she yields to his forcing her away from himself by his abuse of her. When his abusive behavior towards her is the cause of her living apart from him, the sin is not her refusal to submit, but his failure to love his wife as Christ loves the church. She does not "leave" the abusive husband. He drives her away. For the abusive husband, ignorant friends, or even a consistory to charge the abused woman with failure to submit is as wrong and foolish (and hurtful) as it would be for a church historian to charge Christians who were fleeing Nero's persecuting soldiers with the sin of not being submissive to the state. Submission for an abused wife is her often pathetic cry to him, "As my husband still, love me as Christ loves the church."

6. What is a woman to do if she is not getting help from her consistory?

It is my intention with my speeches on the subject, and with these answers to questions about abuse, that such women, of whom apparently there are a number in the PRC, will now be able to suggest to consistories who are not helping abused women as

they are called by Christ to do that they listen to the speeches and read these answers to questions. These women then ought to look for the desperately needed help elsewhere, whether Christian counselors or non-Christian counselors. Abused women in the PRC have informed me of counselors who have proved helpful to them. If ministers and consistories are critical of their members seeking help from trained counselors in this field, they ought to ask themselves why women are looking to these counselors in the first place.

7. Some have left the church as a result of mismanagement of abuse. They blame the denomination and maintain anger. How do we minister to those who view the church this way?

The failure of officebearers in the PRC and in other denominations to give to abused wives the wise, compassionate, and often time-consuming help that they need and ask for, including firm dealing with the abusive husbands, is in fact the occasion for some women's leaving the PRC. I do not say "justified reason," but occasion. And the delinquent officebearers are responsible for the leaving. We ought to have ministered to these oppressed members of the body of Christ in the compassionate love of Christ. The anger of these women is understandable. After these abused women have left the church, it is virtually impossible to minister to them. The time to minister to them was before they left. After they have left, there is little to do but confess our sinful failure to help them. And learn from our failure. And learn from our failure!

8. Could you speak on the connection between alcohol abuse and drug use and spousal abuse?

All the books on spousal abuse of wives by their husbands warn that abuse of wives often occurs in an environment of the husband's drunkenness or use of drugs. My limited experience with abused wives in the PRC bears this out. This sorry fact certainly emphasizes that the condition of the abusive husband is dreadfully wicked. The connection between drunkenness, whether induced by alcohol or by drugs, and the despicable abuse of one's wife is that expressed by Ephesians 5:18: "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." Drunkenness is to be avoided by the Christian because in it is "excess." The word translated "excess" in the Authorized Version is literally 'an abandoned, dissolute life,' or 'the life of an unsaved person.' The drunk, or druggie, opens himself up to the direct influence of the devil, so that he behaves in such a dissolute, demonic way that he even abuses his own Christian wife, one of the precious daughters of God. "Come in," he says to the devil, "take over my marital life." And Satan is more than glad to accept the invitation. As everyone recognizes, it is very difficult for an abuser to change. Once in, Satan is hard to evict.

9. Could you speak on the connection between alcohol and marijuana abuse and spousal abuse?

See the answer to question 8 above. The number of such questions indicates that there is awareness, probably from experience and likely on the part of abused wives, that the abuse of wives is often related to drunkenness and the use of drugs on the part

of husbands. Were I an active pastor today, I would respond to these questions by preaching Ephesians 5:18 with some urgency and making specific application to the behavior of husbands in marriage.

I may add one warning to those given in the preceding answer. That is that when the stupid world of the ungodly legitimizes the use of drugs, as it is now in the process of doing, speaking foolishly about “recreational marijuana” (which is the same as speaking of “recreational drunkenness”), the church will go her own way. She will condemn the use of drugs as a form of intoxication, and discipline according to her own judgment of sin, which is God’s judgment.

10. Other than the obvious answer of sin, what are the main causes of abuse: alcohol? temper? You did not say anything [in the lecture—DJE] about alcohol being a contributing factor in abuse. Is this not so? What place does drinking too much play into abuse?

These are three independent questions by three individuals. I combine them because of their obvious similarity, indeed oneness of subject. Drunkenness is not the cause of abuse. The cause of abuse is the wickedness of the abuser, often with psychological weaknesses as a contributing factor. Liquor only facilitates the expression, the carrying out, of the wickedness of the abuser, which is his hatred of his wife (regardless of the abuser’s protestations to the contrary, abuse is hatred of the marital neighbor, nothing less).

As for temper, it is unrestrained anger with the wife. It is not a carefully controlled, holy anger due to the wife’s sin and purposing her repentance and salvation. On the contrary, the flaring of temper that frightens and emotionally destroys the woman is another expression of the husband’s hatred of the wife, by which he controls her. A husband’s attempt to excuse his abuse by appealing to his “temper” is in fact the admission of abuse. It is similar to a man’s defense of his physical murder of his wife by appealing to his natural love of shooting guns. Temper, particularly as permitted to rage against one’s wife, is disobedience to the command of Ephesians 4:26, 27. As this passage teaches, temper is another opening up of the marriage to the devil.

11. Will you please speak a few words on the signs of abuse, such as a gradual control, open mockery, and the isolation of the wife from friends and family? This isolation even extends to the wife’s use of computer, telephone, and the like. Just a note on your family visitation idea. As children we were experts of keeping a fake “all is well” face to everyone, because the very safety of our dear mother was at stake.

For the benefit of those who may not have heard the speech that occasioned the remark about children’s guarding their facial expressions in protection of their dear mother, I note that in the speech I exhorted pastors and elders to use family visitation to discover and root out abuse. As the pastor asks the husband and father about his treatment of his wife, he ought to observe carefully the facial expression of the man as he answers the question. The elder ought at the same time to be observing the face of the wife. I confess that the admission of the one asking this question, that as children

she (or he) and their brothers and sisters deliberately controlled their faces on behalf of their dear mother, moves me deeply. Such is the effect of an abusive husband upon children who are all too well aware of the goings-on in the household, specifically the destruction of the mother whom they love. Among other evils, the abusive husband makes little hypocrites of his children in the presence of Christ Jesus, who comes to the home in the offices of minister and elder at family visitation.

As for the question, the questioner has herself answered her own question concerning the signs of abuse: absolute, dictatorial control of the woman and isolation of her from all other influences than himself. The woman is no longer his companion, one flesh with him, a helper alongside him, with whom the most intimate, delightful fellowship is possible. She is now a possession, whom he owns, and in such a way that he may do with her as he pleases. Such a perverted estimation of the wife invariably takes form also in the demeaning of her with mockery and put-downs, often in the presence of others, so that she and the others will acknowledge his tyrannical supremacy and her slavish servitude. The experts in the field sum all this up as the abuser's sense of "entitlement." Family, friends, and fellow church members must make an issue of this public sin when they observe it, just as they would if a man was engaged in murdering his wife in some other way, say, with a gun or a knife. Confrontation of an abusive husband by family or fellow members of the church is not meddling in matters that are "none of your business." It is the carrying out of one's calling to love both the abused woman in the family of God by helping her, the abusive husband by admonishing him to repent that he may be saved, and God by purifying the congregation in purging a vile sin.

12. Who confronts the minister who doesn't believe the wife? My minister and elders believed my husband when he said, "sorry," even though I said I didn't see true repentance. The main thing my consistory wanted from me is that I agreed to stay with my husband in our marriage and home. I am PR.

It is my fervent desire and ardent prayer to God that the attitude of ministers and elders evident in this question will change, and change radically. What compelled me to agree to give the lectures that occasion these questions is as much that ministers and elders reexamine their attitude and conduct regarding the plight of abused woman as it is help itself to the abused wives. The thinking and conduct described in this question are all too common. They are also dereliction of the duty of pastors of Jesus Christ. The wife must be believed. Her plight is far worse than she lets on at first. Otherwise she would never have disclosed it and asked for help. Her husband is a liar when he quickly says, "Sorry." He is not sorry for his sin against his wife and against God. He is sorry that she said something about him that puts him in a bad light. She will pay for it when the minister and elders leave. She must not stay in close contact with her husband in one house. His abuse is responsible for their living separately until he repents in a heartfelt way, which includes that he begins to treat her as Christ treats the church. He is responsible for the physical separation. The concern of the consistory that the two live together in peace must motivate the consistory, not to put pressure on the abuser so

that he expresses a quick, easy, meaningless “sorry,” but to work with the couple so that the husband truly repents and so that the abused wife is comforted and supported in her misery. A consistory’s immediate satisfaction with an abuser’s statement, “sorry,” so that they can require the abused woman to live in the same house with the abuser, thus avoiding the embarrassment for the consistory that a marriage is in serious trouble in their congregation and the duty of difficult, messy work with a troubled marriage, is a form of the evil that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees of His day: “Ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess” (Matthew 23:25). One might explain, “Ye make the outward appearance of the marriage respectable, but in reality, behind closed doors, away from the presence of the consistory, it is a marriage of abuse.” It is the calling of pastors and elders, and certainly of married persons themselves, that we “cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also” (Matthew 23:26).

To the question, “who confronts the pastor who shoves an abusive marriage under the rug, because it is an embarrassment or because he dislikes to become involved in a messy, time-consuming case?” the answer is: “Jesus Christ confronts such a pastor, already in this life, in such a pastor’s own troubled conscience, and decisively at the Final Judgment. If He asks us all, ‘Did you feed me in my hungry people?’ He will certainly ask us pastors, ‘Did you deliver me in my abused female saints?’” (see Matthew 25)

13. In my work as an elder in the church, I have often learned that it is important to hear both sides of any disagreement. You state that we must always believe the wife. Does it ever happen that a wife exaggerates the behavior of the husband?

There certainly can be instances of marital strife and discord that require a consistory to meet with both husband and wife together in order to judge between the two and in order to restore the peace of the marriage. This may even be the usual way to work with instances of marital strife. If the two are at loggerheads regarding the rearing or discipline of their children, or even if one or the other has committed adultery, the consistory will ordinarily and wisely meet with both together.

Abuse is different, at least at the very beginning of a pastor’s or an elder’s working with an abused wife. The woman does not dare to call on the pastor to hear her lament in the presence of her husband in the justified fear that he will intensify his abuse of her after the pastor has left. In the case of abuse, the pastor must not insist on receiving her and her cry of distress only in the presence of her husband: “Go home, and bring your abusive husband with you; I will not listen to you until you return with your husband.” Usually, this response will shut her up, turn her away from the pastor and the help Christ calls him to give her, and either direct her to another counselor or consign her to continuing abuse without recourse to help. The pastor must receive her in a private meeting and listen compassionately to her tale of woe. After he has heard her out, perhaps at several meetings over the course of some weeks, he will call on the husband, to confront him with his sin. Before the pastor does this, he will inform the woman that he is about to confront the husband. Often this will require that, with the counsel of the

elders, a safe place be arranged for the wife, so that she is not subjected to the wrath of the abusive husband upon his discovering that the woman has brought his sin to the attention of the pastor. At this juncture in the proceedings, the pastor will meet with the husband. The husband has the opportunity to respond to the pastor concerning his wife's lament about his abusive behavior. Usually, he will deny the wife's description of his behavior in marriage. Having lied grievously in the vow he made at his wedding, that he would live with his wife as Christ lives with the church, he will lie also concerning his abusive behavior. At this stage, a committee of the consistory can meet with both of the parties, hearing the wife's complaint and the husband's response in the presence of both. This meeting, or a subsequent meeting or two, will almost always prove the husband's guilt to the complete satisfaction of the consistory.

It is certainly possible that a wife exaggerates this or that act or word of her husband, even this or that weakness of the man. It is virtually impossible, and so rare as to be negligible, that a wife invents her account of a husband's abuse of her as a lengthy, deliberate, continuous program of her destruction, whether physically, or verbally, or both.

14. What are the practical steps a consistory should take in the initial confrontation with an alleged abuser?

The preceding answer has spelled out the practical steps, or procedure, that a consistory should take in the beginning stages of its work with an abuser and with the abused wife. Very briefly, the procedure is as follows. The pastor receives the abused wife and her cry for help. He assures her of his and the church's help and shows her the compassion of Christ. If this is necessary, as often it is, he assists her to find a safe place to live, on account of the danger that her husband, upon finding out that the wife has sought help from the church, will harm her, or even kill her. This is not a matter of the wife's "leaving" her husband, but a matter of the husband's having wickedly driven the wife away from himself. Then the pastor will meet with the husband concerning the woman's lament over the husband's abuse of her. Soon thereafter, the matter having become public by the woman's living apart from the husband (for which the husband, not the wife, is responsible), a committee of elders and pastor meets with the woman and the man together, to confront the husband with his wife's implied charges of the sin of abuse. This meeting enables the consistory to determine with certainty that the woman has been abused and that the husband is an abuser. Continuing help of the woman and discipline of the abusive husband follow in due course.

The discipline of the husband by the elders, which, of course, includes biblical admonition concerning godly behavior in marriage, ought also to be accompanied by capable counseling on the part of one who has been trained in the psychological aspects of abuse.

15. If the husband has convinced his abused wife to ask for her membership papers and both of them have left the church for a different Reformed church, can we still help the abused woman?

Probably, the abusive husband has virtually forced his wife to leave the church that is admonishing, or even disciplining, him for his sin of abuse. His leaving a true church to escape discipline does not effect his escape from the judgment of God. This judgment of God upon his abuse, and now upon his flight from the discipline of Christ in a true church, contrary to his vow at his confession of faith that he would submit to church discipline, follows him wherever he goes, so that he will be damned, if he does not repent. The true church from which he has fled to escape its discipline can no longer work with him. But his family and former friends can, and must, continue to admonish him. This includes that they no longer have fellowship with him in obedience to the Word of God in I Corinthians 5:9-13. This passage applies in a striking way to an abuser. It mentions "a railer" (v. 11). A "railer" is one who demeans or otherwise destroys his wife with his words. Invariably, this is a sin of an abusive husband.

Incidentally, the church that welcomes such a man into its membership, thus helping him escape from the discipline of his former church, makes itself responsible for the judgment of God upon him.

16. What is our responsibility as loved ones when an abuser leaves the church, taking his wife and family with himself, when it is apparent that this is a way to "escape" discipline and the consequences of his sin?

I have answered this question in my response to the previous question. The family of the abuser continues to admonish the sinner. An aspect of the admonition is the exclusion of him from the fellowship of the family in obedience to I Corinthians 5. Family plays an important role in the matter of abuse. Family members are usually able to detect the abuse, and to detect it early. Family members make an issue of the abuse, admonishing the evildoer and assisting the victim. Family members bring the sin to the attention of the pastor and elders, when this becomes necessary. Family members certainly do not cover up the sin, and even defend the abuser, because he is blood, whereas the victim is not. This is cruelty. What is worse, this is a choice for blood over Jesus Christ. One who defends an abusive husband because he is a son or other close relative makes himself or herself guilty of the sin that Jesus warned against in Matthew 10: "...he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (v. 37).

17. How do you realistically get your friend who is being abused to get help, when she does not dare [to acknowledge her distress and to seek help]?

This situation is often the case. The abused woman is afraid of her husband. In her fear, even terror, she does not dare to make her frightful condition known to others and to ask for help. A friend, seeing her plight, will speak privately to the abused woman about her abuse and about the friend's willingness to help. She will encourage the woman to seek help, assuring her that the friend and other friends will provide shelter and safety. It is to be hoped that the friend can assure the woman also of the help of the church. I am aware of this kind of help offered and then given by friends in the PRC, when such help was sorely needed.

If the abused woman refuses help, there is little that a friend can do, other than to pray for the abused woman and to assure her that the friend stands ready to help at all times and with all necessary assistance. "A friend loveth at all times" (Proverbs 17:17).

[This is the first installment of questions and answers concerning abuse, occasioned by the speech on abuse by Prof. Engelsma on October 5, 2017. A second installment will follow.]