

Questions and Answers concerning Spousal Abuse

after the Speech on the Subject

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Answers by Prof. Engelsma

(Part 2)

18. If someone has been emotionally and verbally abused, and it hasn't stopped for years, at what point do I go to the church for help, if she refuses to seek help from the church? Mostly, she is scared. He is not physically abusive, but is destroying his wife and their children. How do you realistically get your friend who is abused to get help, when she does not dare to seek help?

I combine these two questions, which are essentially one and the same in content. If an abused woman refuses to seek help, there is little that a friend can do. But if the reason for the refusal to seek help is fear of her abusive husband, which is the case in both of the questions, a friend can assure the abused woman that she (the friend) and others will protect her. Then they must also do so, providing her with a safe house, getting a protection order from the civil authorities, if necessary, and helping her in her appeal to the pastor and consistory of the church. When the frightened and abused woman finally does appeal to her pastor and consistory, they must show the compassion of Jesus and take up her cause.

19. You have spoken of abuse as an overt practice of attack by words or deeds. But can abuse be more subtle? Can abuse be perpetrated by withdrawal, abdication, distance, and disdain? Can cold indifference not cause as much damage as overt abuse?

There are as many ways for a wicked husband to mistreat his wife, or for a wicked wife to mistreat her husband, as there are motions of corrupt, cruel human nature. Cold indifference is one such way. It is a form of hatred. It cruelly injures the oppressed mate. It is gross violation of the marriage vow and sin against the bond—the bond!—of marriage. Such sin ought to be exposed by good, searching preaching; discovered at family visitation by elders who have a sense of their authority and who exercise their calling faithfully; and dealt with by the kind of pastoral care of the people of God that ought to characterize every minister of the gospel worthy of this office of the Chief Shepherd. If this kind of behavior on the part of a husband is a deliberate policy of injuring and destroying his wife, and not only the (still admittedly sinful)

behavior of a man with emotional weakness that he himself abhors and attempts to overcome—in frank conversation with his wife, the behavior of “indifference” is indeed a form of abuse. Christ could as well destroy us by “cold indifference” as by unrestrained rage or destructive “beatings.”

20. Communication is central to a healthy relationship. Could it be considered abuse if a husband, although he does not physically beat nor verbally degrade his wife, yet consistently does not build up his wife in a loving way as he ought?

See the answer to question 19 above.

21. God at times would withdraw expression of love to the Israelites if the Israelites lived in unrepentant sin. Does this give a basis for the husband to give “silent treatment” to his wife? Is the “silent treatment” a proper way to get the wife to submit?

I answered this question in my response to Question 33 in my list of answers to the questions raised after my speech on abuse to officebearers, and refer the questioner to that answer, which I suppose is still available on the Byron Center website. The very description of this abusive behavior on the part of the husband as “silent treatment” indicates that such behavior is intended as punishment of the wife, who has displeased his majesty in some way. God’s first and fundamental means of bringing His wife to repentance is not silence, but speaking—speaking of His love which the church has offended, and calling her to repentance by the gospel of the cross. Characteristic of God’s husbandly dealings with the church and her members is not silence, but the Word. Even regarding gross sinners in the congregation, who stubbornly refuse to repent, the congregation does not deepen the divide between them and the congregation by falling into “silent treatment.” Rather, the members of the congregation speak—speak of their sorrow, of their love, and of the calling of the impenitent to repent, that he may be restored and saved.

22. Is there a connection between the doctrine of a conditional covenant and spousal abuse (the husband will show love if and when the wife is submissive enough)?

Scripture itself teaches the relation between Christ’s unconditional love for His sinful bride and a godly husband’s unconditional love for his sinfully weak wife (whose sinfulness, it lives in his soul, he shares with her). It does this in Ephesians 5, where the husband is called to love his wife as Christ loves the church, that is, unconditionally. The implication is that a doctrine of the conditionality of the love of Christ for His church would express itself in a husband’s regarding his love for his wife as conditional. This would inevitably take form in abuse of some kind. This being said, rather theoretically in light of the circumstances that occasion my lecture, the sad fact is that it is exactly husbands whose theology is that of the unconditionality of the covenant, that is, husbands in the Protestant Reformed Churches, who do nevertheless treat their wives shamefully conditionally: “If you do not conform to my will, which is often arbitrary and dictatorial, and thus please me, I will withhold my love, and abuse you.”

23. When would or should you involve law enforcement due to the illegality of domestic violence? Why would law enforcement not be involved? What about the involvement of the authorities (police)?

I combine these questions, which were two separate questions after the speech. It is my understanding the civil law does not require a pastor or anyone else to report cases of spousal abuse to the police. A pastor or another who is aware of a case of spousal abuse, for example, a member of the family, would inform the police and call for their help if the abuse threatened physical harm, even death, to the abused woman and the children. The civil authorities would also be involved if the abused woman had to obtain a restraining order forbidding the husband to have any contact with her. The Reformed Christian, in this case an abused woman, may call upon the civil authorities for protection. God has instituted government for this very purpose (see Romans 13:1ff.). Pastors and consistories ought not to hesitate to advise the abused wife to seek this help, if she is in danger, as is certainly the case if the husband threatens his wife and children with bodily harm. Law enforcement would not be called upon if there is no danger of physical harm to the woman, simply because the sin itself of abuse is a spiritual matter, with which police have neither the calling nor the ability to deal.

24. If the situation is supposed to be confidential, how can the congregation give support and compassion?

As long as the marital evil is confidential, the congregation cannot give support and compassion. Like all sins in the church, this one ought to be kept confidential, or private, as long as possible, not only for the sake of the sinned against wife, but also for the sake of the sinning husband. As I emphasized strongly in my lecture, help of the abused woman and treatment of the case are severely compromised if the pastor and elders to whom the abused woman first turns “leak” the information about the matter outside the pastoral office or the consistory room, as the case may be. In the nature of the case, matters of spousal abuse are especially sensitive to the persons involved. A gossipy minister or elder will inevitably spoil their work with the case and destroy the trust of the members of the congregation, certainly the trust of the abused woman, which is vital to their work. A good pastor carries a host of deep, dark secrets with him to the grave. Secrets that even his wife knows nothing about! If a minister is not always smiling, and even has a sober appearance, the reason may very well not be that he is an unfriendly fellow, but that he is burdened with the cares and sorrows of the people of God. We never read of Jesus’ laughing, or even smiling, in the Bible. But when the case of marital abuse becomes public, either by consistorial announcement, or by the husband’s driving his abused wife away from himself, the congregation must carry the distressed, and usually broken, woman, whose earthly life has been shattered, in their prayers and arms. Assure her that she does still have a “family,” that loves her and will support and help her. And then help!

25. Does the PR Seminary teach the minister’s duty as a mandatory reporter?

As the preceding answer makes clear, it is my judgment that a minister is not required to report all he knows about the members of the congregation, or all the work he is doing as a pastor, to the consistory. In fact, it would be harmful to his pastoral labors were it to become known that he reports all his work as a pastor to the consistory. I doubt that the seminary teaches that pastors are “mandatory reporters.” I certainly never taught such a thing when I was at the seminary.

26. Can there be divorce if the man does not repent or stop? You did not refer to it tonight, but I know it was a point you made before: that abuse is not a ground for divorce. Cannot abuse also be argued to violate the 7th commandment? For just as words are not literal murder, abuse is not literal unfaithfulness to the marriage vows. But cannot the same principle apply?

Again I combine two questions handed in after the lecture. Obviously, they are one and the same in content. The only ground for divorce in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, is fornication, or sexual unfaithfulness, on the part of one of the married couple (see Matthew 5:31, 32; Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18; Romans 7:1-3; and I Corinthians 7). The Bible addresses the matter of divorce often; it repeatedly limits divorce to the sexual unfaithfulness of one’s mate; and in teaching that divorce is permissible on the ground of fornication it is clearly restrictive—only fornication is the ground for divorce. In addition, if abuse is by implication a violation of one of the commandments, it is not the breaking of the seventh commandment, but the violation of the sixth commandment, namely, “thou shalt not kill,” or murder.

26. 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?

It is always important for elders to hear both sides of any disagreement. The Bible requires judges to hear both parties in a dispute. Even in the case of a wife’s cry for help as an abused woman, a pastor and the elders must eventually give a hearing to the abusive husband. My advice was that a pastor must begin by believing the woman when first she approaches him with her cry for help. He must not indicate to her that he is suspicious of her cry, so that he withholds the help she needs. It is the special character of this evil in the church that in the vast majority of instances, if not in every instance, the woman is telling the truth, or as much of it as she dares at first to relate. If she is lying, which will almost never, if ever, be the case, her deceit will eventually be found out. And no damage from the pastor’s reception of the woman will result. A woman may exaggerate some weakness of her husband. She can hardly exaggerate what she alleges to be a longtime, ongoing, determined policy on the part of her husband to destroy her, with compelling detail of the abuse. Nevertheless, upon hearing the woman with sympathy, the pastor will certainly meet with the husband to confront him with his wife’s distress on account of his abuse. Before this meeting takes place, the woman must be provided with safety. Whether the husband admits or denies his sin, the pastor and likely a committee of elders will meet with the husband and wife together, either to establish the guilt of the husband,

to expose the false report of the wife (which will be unlikely), or to begin the hard work of reconciliation, in the way, almost certainly, of the husband's repentance.

27. As Protestant Reformed Churches, we have always been on our guard against false doctrine. This was and still is necessary. But could it be that Satan is attacking us on a new battlefield, namely, our daily life and living? As elders, we deal with more worldly sins and problems found in the church. We have often assumed these sins were not present in the church. What suggestions do you have regarding fighting these battles?

Satan has many tactics to attack the church of Christ. False doctrine is one of them. As the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2, 3 make plain, corruption of the Christian life is certainly another. If consistories are convinced that worldliness and unholiness of life are a grave threat to the congregations, they must instruct their ministers to combat these evils—vigorously, and forthwith, in the preaching and teaching, just as the apostle John did in Revelation 2, 3. And the elders themselves must address these evils in their oversight of the congregation and by the exercise of firm, uncompromising discipline. Concern for godliness of life is not strange to the Protestant Reformed Churches, as though we have ignored this aspect of Reformed Christianity in favor of sound doctrine. From the very beginning of our history, we have emphasized the antithesis. In our special concern for godliness of life, we may not, however, ignore sound doctrine, much less compromise it. A godly life flows out of the gospel of grace. Only the gospel of grace produces and maintains a holy life. Behavior that outwardly conforms to the law, but is not the fruit of the gospel of grace, is mere morality.

28. Please comment on the cultural influences that may influence how husbands and wives in the church view each other, particularly, the influences of feminism and pornography. Is repeated pornography, known to the wife, a form of abuse? Pornography leads to sexual abuse! What are the personality traits of an abuser? Abusers will keep the wife from confiding in family and the church. An abuser will be on his best behavior before marriage and only show abuse after marriage. Dating might not reveal an abuser. Many abusers have affairs. There is a need in the church for Protestant Reformed counselors who are trained in psychiatry—counselors above and beyond ministers and elders.

These questions and assertions are the content of three different cards handed in after the lecture. The questions are related. I retain the assertions, as the one who made them intended I would for the benefit of the audience. The subject of pornography is common to all three sets of questions. This introduces the matter of sexual abuse, which, important aspect of abuse though it usually is, was not the subject of my speech. A speech devoted to this aspect of abuse might be in order among us, to our further shame. Pornography is indeed often an aspect and expression of abuse. The abusive husband sees himself as "entitled" to his wife. He owns her and may do with her as he pleases. His sin is that he has rejected the biblical teaching that marriage is a bond of communion in love. His wife is not his bosom (I use the adjective advisedly) friend, but a breathing thing, merely a thing. Pornography stimulates the monster to use this convenient thing for his sexual gratification. How a pornographic estimation and

enjoyment of sex in an abusive marriage differs from the sexual relation in a Christian marriage defies description. The difference is not that of more pleasure in the former than in the latter. It is the difference of the far greater pleasure in giving as well as receiving (Christian sex in marriage) than in taking, and then a perverse taking (unholy, pornographic sex). There is a biblical, Christian sexual theory, theology, if you will, as well as a distinctively Christian activity of sex. Paul describes it, and commands it, in I Corinthians 7:1-5: the wife owes her body in the sexual act to her husband, and ought to be concerned to please him—not herself only, but him; likewise the husband owes his body to the wife, and ought to be concerned to please her—not himself only, but her. Neither, therefore, ignores the sexual pleasure and need of the other as is the case with the man under the influence of pornography, who selfishly satisfies himself by the use, and at the expense, of the woman. Pornography is not only ethical, moral filth. Determining and controlling sex in marriage, it is also perversion of the uniquely Christian nature of the sexual relation that is so important to marriage. Pornography is, indeed, often an aspect of abuse. It is not, however, the cause of abuse, but one particular expression of abuse. The cause of abuse is the husband's wicked view of his "entitlement" to his wife as virtually a thing and his perversion of the nature of marriage as the shared life of fellows (intimate friends). No doubt, the filthy world influences the members of the church. But if the members give themselves over to such filth as pornography, and wallow in it impenitently, they are not Christians. They are rather unsaved, unholy hypocrites within the visible church. The world has always tempted the members of the church with sexual filth. The Spirit of Christ has always empowered the saints to resist the temptation, or to overcome the sin if for a time they fell into it. The clear command to the members of the church at Ephesus is that fornication and all uncleanness be not even be named among them—not even once (Ephesians 5:3) and that they have no fellowship with such unfruitful works of darkness such as the black darkness of pornography (v. 11). Watching pornography is having fellowship with it (one could more safely have fellowship with a rattlesnake). The warning is that no unclean person, which an addict of pornography is, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ (v. 5). Such is the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost in every saved child of God that no one in whom the Spirit dwells will give himself or herself over to pornography, or remain in this sin if he or she falls into the evil.

As for the characteristics of an abusive male, which the girl should notice in dating, the main one is his insistence on controlling her. He insists on controlling her and her every relationship and movement. Already in dating, he takes her away from her parents and from all her friends. He shows the notion that she belongs to him, and in such a way that he "calls all the shots" in her life. The female should break off such a relationship (bondage, really) immediately.

I agree that there are important aspects of an abusive marriage that even concerned and devoted pastors are not competent to detect and treat. This is no reflection on the pastor or on the Christian religion. The pastor has ability and calling with regard to spiritual weaknesses and sins. These are part of the evil of abuse. But abuse also involves psychological and emotional weaknesses and disorders of the abusive husband. For these, a trained specialist in these fields, preferably a Christian, is necessary and helpful. There is such a Christian specialist in the field of

abusive marriages in the Grand Rapids area, I am informed. Abused women and their abusive husbands have been greatly helped by such trained, competent, sympathetic counselors in other areas where there are Protestant Reformed churches. Consistories should make themselves aware of such counselors in their area, and then recommend them to those in an abusive marriage as the need arises.

29. Please comment on how a wife who has been sinned against by her husband, or a husband who has sinned against his wife, or especially elders and pastors who are working with either or both, can distinguish between sins that fall short of “abuse” and sins of abuse, particularly when the husband confesses the former, but the wife accuses him of the latter.

This question recognizes that consistories are called upon to make crucially important judgments regarding the lives of the members of their congregation, judgments of a life-and-death nature. Abuse threatens the life of the abused woman, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. This calling, particularly now of the eldership, reminds the congregation that voting for elders may not degenerate into a popularity contest. The church must choose men who are notably wise, sound, compassionate, and courageous. As I have stated more than once before, when a wife finally comes to the pastor and elders for help with abuse, the officebearers should believe her and give help accordingly. If the husband denies abuse, as the abusive husband will usually do, a wise pastor and wise elders, hearing both of them out, will be able to determine whether the husband has been mistreating his wife and whether the mistreatment amounts to abuse. It is one thing that a husband, who loves his wife as Christ loves the church, lost his temper on one occasion, or forgot their anniversary. It is quite another thing that over a long period of time a husband, who hates his wife, habitually or continually berates and belittles the woman, and even threatens to harm her physically.

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

It is my considered judgment that the Protestant Reformed Churches suffer today far more from pastors and elders failing to take hold of known cases of abuse, to the suffering of wives and children, than from their interfering in marriages in which there is, in fact, no abuse. It is also my judgment that the evil of the former is far greater than the occasional evil of the latter. First, pastors and consistories must be, or make themselves, aware of abuse in their congregations. This awareness comes in various ways, including the unburdening herself to the pastor by a woman; the report to the pastor or elders by family members, including distressed children; a husband’s having been beaten to a bloody pulp by the father of the abused woman; and the proper exercise of family visitation, which has not degenerated into a mere Bible study. Having provided the abused woman with a safe place to live for the time being, either the pastor or a committee of elders will confront the husband, in a private meeting, with the charge of his abuse of his wife. If he denies the charge, as will almost always be the case, the consistory will meet again with him, this time with his wife present. Almost always, this meeting with both husband and wife together, at which meeting the wife unburdens herself of her husband’s

abuse of her in specific ways over a long period of time, will serve to bring the husband to acknowledge his wrong, if not to confess his sin, or otherwise to convince the elders of the truth of the wife's lament and of the gross sin of the husband. Then the hard work of the consistory to comfort the wife, to admonish the husband, and to reconcile the two begins. At this point also, the consistory will likely insist that the abusive husband begin receiving counseling regarding his psychological and emotional weaknesses. If as often is the case, the abused woman must live apart from her abusive and dangerous husband, the sin of the husband that drives the woman away from himself is public, and discipline of the husband for his public sin commences.