

PASTOR'S GUIDE TO DOMESTIC ABUSE

*Scriptural references
to address the issue*



ANANIAS
FOUNDATION

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...out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." ²¹So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Christ Has Set Us Free

5 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

²Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is intended to help pastors and church leaders work with couples to address the issue of domestic abuse from a Biblical perspective. We start with a discussion of the different forms of domestic violence and abuse. Then, we zero in on hyper-headship, a type of domestic abuse that results from a gross misinterpretation of the Bible.

The rest of the booklet looks at what Scripture says—not only about hyper-headship, but about what God wants for married couples in general. Some may interpret certain passages as justifying abusive male leadership. We look deeper into what these passages are really telling us about God's word and the role of leaders, with the hope of equipping pastors to guide abusive partners toward accountability and healing.

We hope the guidance in this booklet will help move those causing harm in their relationships onto a different and more positive path. We also hope it will empower and illuminate a way forward for those being abused, by helping them understand that this kind of relationship is not what God envisions and is, in fact, harmful to them.

FORMS OF DOMESTIC ABUSE

Abuse, simply stated, is the mistreatment of something or someone that results in harm.

Domestic abuse is when one person mistreats another in their household, family, or dating relationship. The abuse we're focusing on here is specifically related to dating and marital relationships—otherwise known as intimate partner abuse.

Abuse comes in different forms. It can include bodily injury or the threat of injury (physical abuse), as well as words or actions that damage a person's sense of well-being and independence (emotional abuse). Physical abuse and domestic violence are two terms for the same thing.

The following actions are legally considered domestic violence:

- Pushing or shoving
- Grabbing to restrict movement (e.g. to stop a partner from leaving)
- Slapping
- Kicking
- Biting
- Hitting with a fist or object
- Beating up (striking more than once)
- Using a knife or gun

There's a progression of violence from top to bottom, but the presence of any of these is considered domestic violence and battery. Threatening to do any of these, even if they are not carried out, is classified as domestic violence and assault.

Abuse can also occur even if no one is touched. Emotional abuse includes:

- Controlling or monitoring a partner's time, space, money, or choices
- Isolating a partner by not letting them see or talk to others
- Making all of the decisions without considering a partner's needs or input
- Accusing a partner of flirting, having an affair, or being unfaithful when there is little or no evidence they have done so
- Getting angry or resentful when a partner is successful in a job or hobby
- Intimidating a partner, such as by breaking or throwing things
- Threatening to hurt a partner, their children, or their pets, or threatening to damage their property, even if this threat isn't carried out
- Threatening self-harm, especially when things are not going their way
- Threatening to leave or divorce a partner
- Demeaning a partner with put-downs, name calling, blame, or humiliation
- Saying things designed to make a partner feel "crazy" or "stupid"
- Always being right, never apologizing
- Punishing a partner by refusing to talk to them or withholding affection
- Withholding essential resources like food or money (economic abuse)
- Frequent mood swings or escalation into rage
- Blaming others for bad behavior, especially parents, a partner, or children
- Blaming alcohol, drugs, stress, or other life events for bad behavior
- Using sex, money, privileges, or other favors to "make up" after conflict
- Minimizing, denying, or shifting the blame for bad behavior
- Attempting to force a partner to keep quiet or drop criminal charges
- Using religious beliefs to justify holding a dominant, authoritarian position over a partner (also called spiritual abuse). One of the common forms of this for Christians is hyper-headship (see discussion on p.7)

Of course, everyone slips up sometimes and says something they regret in the heat of an argument or refuses to talk to their spouse for an afternoon. Neither of these actions is good or helpful, but they are not necessarily abuse either. What makes them abusive is the frequency: such as if someone calls their spouse demeaning names on a regular basis.

It's unlikely that all individuals who commit domestic abuse are doing it deliberately and out of evil. Many, if not most cases of abuse stem from deep, unhealed emotional wounds sustained early in life. These wounds manifest in adulthood as low self-esteem and unhealthy coping methods, which can develop into abusive behavior. It is likely that those who commit abuse are confused and hurting on the inside. In other words, the problem stems from psychological trauma, rather than a deliberate, calculated sense of entitlement or desire to cause harm to another.

WHICH PERSON IS CAUSING HARM?

Individuals who cause harm to their partners may not be easy to identify. Anyone can be abusive and anyone can be a victim of abuse. It happens regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, race, or economic background.

Men abuse women—this is true, and of course, is the stereotype. However, women abuse men at rates nearly equal to (physical abuse) or equal to (emotional abuse) as the other way around. And in 40% of abusive relationships, both parties are acting abusively toward each other.

Realize it will be difficult to fully understand the dynamics of the relationship, especially in a short amount of time or by talking to just one party. Avoid making assumptions or jumping to conclusions. Remember that both abuser and abused are God's children—and it is the job of the church to guide both toward healing and restoration. Even if there is a clear case of one partner perpetrating the abuse, both parties deserve support, guidance, and encouragement.

Source: "Partner Abuse State of Knowledge Project, Findings At-a-Glance" in *Partner Abuse*, November 2012. Available at: <https://domesticviolenceresearch.org/pdf/FindingsAt-a-Glance.Nov.23.pdf>

HYPER-HEADSHIP

Hyper-headship is a term used to describe a specific kind of domestic abuse that is perpetrated by Christian (and other religious) men. In this situation, the man uses harsh, oppressive, and authoritative behavior with his partner or wife, and justifies those actions by distorting the Biblical definition of a man's role as leader and head of the household. Hyper-headship is a form of controlling behavior: a common kind of emotional abuse. This is not strong male leadership, but rather a gross misinterpretation of the Bible.

Hyper-headship, like other forms of abuse, is usually not done out of evil intent. Often, men exhibiting hyper-headship have misinformed and misguided expectations about gender roles, and their bad behavior flows from a lack of good emotional regulation, causing confusion and disappointment when their expectations are not met. In looking for "answers" and relief from those painful feelings, these individuals find Biblical scripture that appears to justify their beliefs.

RELATIONSHIPS AS DESIGNED BY GOD

In contrast with the abusive, controlling dynamics of hyper-headship, God's order is one designed in peace, love, unity, and abundance in all good things. Everything under the sun, including relationships, circles around love; for God is love (John 1:3, 1 John 4:8). True love is not self-seeking and self-serving, but rather, humbles itself to show compassion to another (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

It is not difficult to tell when a household is not operating under the covenant of love, for we shall know a tree by its fruit (Matthew 7:16-20). When love, joy, peace, and the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are present, the relationship is functioning according to the will of God. When hate, anger, strife, jealousy, rage, bitterness, resentment, offense, hurt, pain, and fear are present, the marriage is not operating under the covenant of love as designed by God.

God created all, and all for specific purposes. When it comes to the home and family relationships, the Bible lays out a clear outline in Ephesians 5:21-33 and 1 Corinthians 11:3 as to how a husband should love his wife and a wife should love her husband. Each is called to submit to the other in love.

Ephesians 5:21-33 (NIV)

21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body.

31 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”

32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

33 However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Note that wives are called to submit to their husbands, but this does not mean blindly or slavishly following their spouse’s will. Like their husbands, wives have free will and choice. They are called to make the choices that will best serve their husbands, just as husbands are called to “give themselves up” for their wives. Each spouse is asked to serve, cherish, and be prepared to lay down their life for the other, as Christ did for his church.

Corinthians 11:3: But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

All authority and power is under God ([Romans 13:1](#)), and those under authority are called to obey, honor, and submit to this authority. Man is head of the household because that is God’s design. However, this does not mean he is the master of his wife. It means he is a Christian leader, as Christ was leader of the church.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN LEADER?

A leader, or head, is simply one who serves others. For Jesus came to serve, not to be served. He came to heal, not to be healed. He came and washed others' feet ([John 13:1-17](#)). This humility and servitude is the definition of true leadership.

Those who are in a position of headship are also held to a higher judgement, due to the fact that they are leading others along with them. They are accountable for those they are called to lead ([Ephesians 5:27](#), [Luke 17:1](#), [James 3:1](#)).

Proverbs 8:13

To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.

Numbers

The Census

I The LORD spoke to Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came

together on the first day of the second month. The people indicated their ancestry by their clans and the men of each clan came

...all the men in Israel twenty years of age or more who are able to carry a spear.

From the census of the Israelites...

To whom much is granted, much is required (Luke 12:48)

Matthew 20:28 (also Mark 10:45): Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

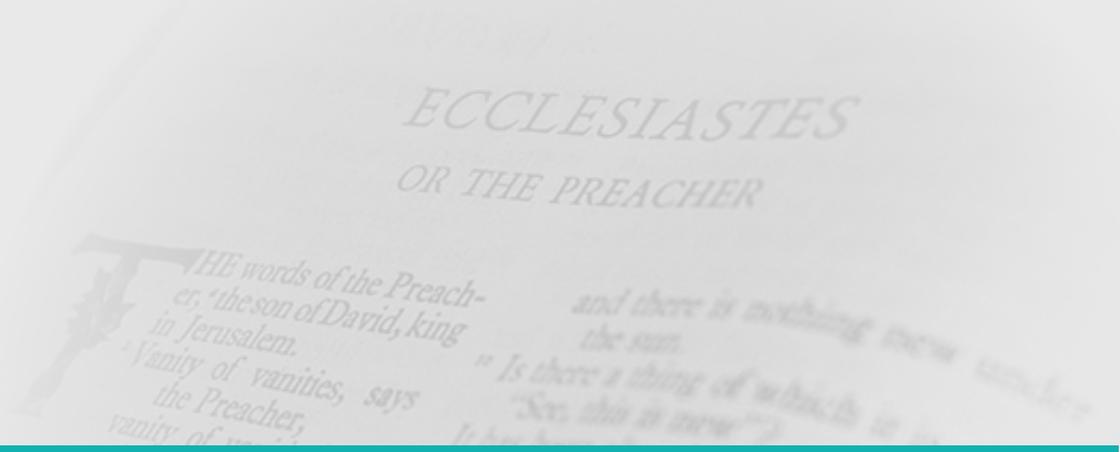
For a leader to be in God's order, they must first submit to God and honor, cherish, love, and serve those whom God has placed under their authority. A leader is called to serve in devotion and humility, not to rule in selfishness, pride, or dominion. Any authority or leadership based on self and pride, rather than service to Jesus, creates a power imbalance and enables abuse (Matthew 20:16).

Ephesians 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her.

Just as Christ is the head of the Christian believers, so should the husband be head of his household. This headship is one of compassion, submission, love, humble servitude, and accountability—as was Christ's headship for us.

EQUALITY IN CHRIST



2 Corinthians 5:10

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Equality is central to the Christian faith. We know that inevitably, we shall all answer to only One God. The apostle Paul makes it clear in his letter to the Galatians that dividing lines have been erased in Christ:

Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Scripture recognizes that men and women are created as spiritual equals before God. Eve was created from the ribs of Adam—not from his feet (as in beneath him), not from his head (as in above him), but taken from his side, beside his heart (Genesis 2:22).

However, “equal” does not mean “identical.” Each gender has unique features and strengths that balance the other’s out. God designed men to be natural leaders—typically strong, brave, and seeking justice. Jesus demonstrated masculine traits by leading humbly and serving in love. His headship role meant he died sacrificially for his bride, the church. Similarly, God calls men to love, honor, and cherish their wives without limits.

1 Peter 3.7:

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Women are created to nurture, usually possessing an abundance of tenderness, mercy, and patience. Jesus also demonstrated these characteristics as the healing, compassionate sustainer of life. Combining these male and female roles results in safety, peace, comfort, harmony, and joy in the home.

When a man and a woman are married, they are said to be as one under God ([Mark 10:7-8](#); [Genesis 2:24](#); [1 Corinthians 6:16](#)). They balance each other out and reflect Jesus’ example, but only when they both operate in their own roles as designed by God, and do so under his authority.

MARRIAGE: A PARTNERSHIP

Genesis 2:18: The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

God created Eve as Adam's mate. They were to walk in unity with God, as an equal partnership. Like a 3-legged race, each spouse has one foot tied to the other's while another foot remains independent (as each spouse is a unique individual under God). When a marriage is unified under God, the pair walk together in unison.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. For if one falls down, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to help him up!

This is not easy—being that one might be stronger or have a longer leg. The whole, the team, the unit, cannot get to the finish line if not working cooperatively. Each spouse has to find a way to adjust and help the other. Only by working together, encouraging, uplifting, honoring, and acknowledging the unique gifts one has to assist the other, can a married couple live, thrive, and produce good fruit as intended for the good of the people and the Glory of God.

WHEN SUBMISSION IS NOT OKAY

Marriage calls each spouse to submit to the other in love. It does not mean the wife should slavishly or unwillingly subject herself to her husband's will and force. Even if a husband believes—or wants to believe—he is justified in abusing his wife in the name of God, she should know that this is not the case. This is not the kind of relationship God wants for married couples.

Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Book of Daniel, a wife is justified in standing up to or resisting abusive authority. While it is not her responsibility to change her husband—nor is it often safe or recommended that she try to do so—she should know that abuse is never justified nor Biblical. She deserves to be with someone who loves, cherishes, and serves her. Even if she still loves and wants to serve her husband, she may find that the most loving thing to do, if safe and advisable, is to leave the relationship and thereby motivate him to see the error of his ways (see overleaf.)

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Mark 10:9: Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.

1 Corinthians 7:13: And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.

The above passages lead some to believe that the abused victim should not break the marriage covenant, but instead stay with their spouse to bring him or her to repentance. However, we should remember that God is a God of love, protection, and safety. He ordained the household to live in peace and unity and created the sacrament of marriage to give comfort, protection, love, and companionship. It has never been God's desire for anyone to have to suffer, particularly in the home.

This covenant of marriage is *already* broken when a spouse abuses (i.e. sins against) their partner. When a spouse disobeys God's Word, failing to love their spouse as exemplified in Christ, they become as that of an unbeliever who has left the relationship. A person is therefore justified, if he or she so chooses, in letting such a spouse go.

1 Corinthians 7:15

But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.

Further complicating the matter, children are also often involved in domestic abuse—as witnesses even if not victims. Their emotional and physical health, both now and in the future, are subject to what they see and hear in their home life. Children are to be safe, loved, protected, and cared for. Domestic abuse is sinful and damaging to the family as a whole, not just the victim.

Additionally, not all perpetrators of domestic violence are genuinely motivated for change. Change requires an internal desire based upon the knowledge and awareness that one's current actions are sinful. It also requires an awareness that *change is possible*: that sinners can be forgiven and redeemed. Not all abusers see this as the case, particularly if they have found what appears to be justification of their behavior in the Bible, or suffer from such low self-esteem that attempting to change seems futile.

In actually experiencing the harsh consequences of their sinful actions, the one causing harm may see more clearly how their actions are leading to loss, loneliness, and all things miserable. This can be the strongest motivator to change: the experience of losing a relationship due to one's own actions.

Ultimately, each case of abuse is different and should be managed under the authority, authorship, and guidance of the Holy Spirit, knowing that we each must answer to Christ alone on that Judgement Day. If the victim is in fear of their life and the lives of their children, they are highly advised to separate themselves from the matter and seek safety. God is a God of love, safety, and peace. The home should reflect such.

1 John 2:27 (NLT)

But you have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you, so you don't need anyone to teach you what is true. For the Spirit teaches you everything you need to know, and what he teaches is true—it is not a lie. So just as he has taught you, remain in fellowship with Christ.

SUGGESTIONS

When offering assistance to those in need, there are websites, books, and other resources available to lead men and women to Christ, safety, and restoration. The [Ananias Foundation website](#) provides a variety of resources about this topic, as well as links to other known resources for aid.

It is advised for the victim to seek safety and support. For the one causing harm, repentance must happen before restoration can occur. The church can play a pivotal role in the healing, restoration, and proper guidance toward the truth, and therefore offers a unique and powerful solution that secular sources cannot.

FURTHER READING

<http://www.chrismoles.org/news/2018/2/25/resisting-abuse-and-matthew-chapter-5>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/hyper-headship-and-the-scandal-of-domestic-abuse-in-the-church/>

<https://www.divorceminister.com/hyper-headship-ism/>

<https://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/christian-trends/what-s-causing-the-scandal-of-domestic-abuse-in-the-church.html>

The Ananias Foundation helps individuals who have committed acts of domestic violence or abuse to stop hurting the ones they love.

For more resources, visit ananiastfoundation.org/faith/



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