

# Spousal Abuse

in the Reformed Community

David J. Engelsma



## Foreword

I am indebted to Professor Engelsma for providing for conservative Reformed believers, their families, and congregations a timely presentation on spousal abuse. As much as many of us would like to think that this problem does not exist in our circles, it does, and to have a respected Reformed leader address the issue with the boldness and clarity with which he spoke is commendable and very much appreciated.

There are a number of reasons Professor Engelsma's presentation resonated so well with my soul as the director of a Reformed counseling education institution and counseling center. Please allow me the privilege of quickly sharing a couple of them with you.

First, along with clearly identifying spousal abuse as a spiritual-based problem and defining it from scripture, he brought the time-tested wisdom of the Heidelberg Catechism (L.D. 40) to bear upon it. Truth anchored in insights set forth via the time-tested orthodox summaries of the Christian faith conveyed via the historic Reformed confessions is helpful in both diagnosing spiritually-based problems and formulating practical measures to address them.

Another thing that resonated with my soul was Professor Engelsma's recognition of the value of insights and help that can be provided from those that labor in the field of psychology. To be sure, we must all be concerned about the errors propagated within that field (which is why we need to get more Reformed Christians laboring within it). We must, furthermore, be concerned about the damage that will be done to the soul of a vulnerable loved one who receives and heeds counsel from a psychologist which is antithetical to scripture. Yet, when pastors and elders have properly vetted a Christian psychologist, God's people experiencing severe mental (e.g., PTSD) or emotional (e.g., severe depression) problems, which often accompany severe abuse cases, can move forward to get the help they need.

I trust you will find this work by Professor Engelsma beneficial. *Tolle Lege!*

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## Introduction

This booklet, like my great concern over the sin that is its subject, is occasioned by my recent experiences as a surprised, and not altogether eager, counselor of abused wives in my own Reformed denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches.

I have done my share of pastoral counseling during my 25 years as a pastor, including counseling with women whom I now recognize more clearly than I did at the time to have been victims of abuse; however, my recent experiences have made me keenly aware of abuse—the reality of it and the nature of it.

Although my concern about abuse, and this booklet, are occasioned by recent experiences, I have read much on the subject by both Christian and non-Christian specialists on the abuse of wives by their husbands. I have also re-examined scripture on marriage in the light of the evil of abuse.

I am convinced that Reformed Christians, both the laity and officebearers, must become aware of the evil of abuse; must judge it to be the gross, destructive sin that it is; and must deal with it in the right way. By no means do I claim to have the last word on the evil, whether regarding recognizing it or dealing with it. Indeed, I have had to confess my own failures as a pastor in the past. But I am compelled to open up the subject, and to open up the minds of people in the Reformed community, including the Protestant Reformed Churches, regarding the subject. I can exhort this church community in at least some basics with regard to the right handling of the evil when it appears in the churches.

I am aware that there are also abused husbands. I refer to wives, because women are far more likely to be abused than husbands. Every book that I have read on the subject of abuse lays this down as a law, giving the statistics. The experience of every pastor will bear this out. Besides, what is said about abused wives will apply also, the necessary changes being made, in the case of abused husbands.

Disagreement with some of what I say in this booklet will not offend me. I do not claim to be an expert in this wretched field. I am learning. A few years ago, I myself would have disagreed with some of what I now

say. But there is one thing about which no one should quarrel: Abuse is a real problem in the Reformed community. It is killing some wives and the children in these homes. Also, there are abusive husbands who are under God's wrath now, and who will be damned, if they do not repent.

The evil is not only a concern to other churches, but also to my own.

## The Nature of Abuse

Abuse is a husband's deliberate, ongoing, systematic, relentless destruction of his wife, whether her soul or her body, or both. The injury to the wife may be, and often is, physical. He hits her, even beats her—the coward! Usually he is careful where he hits her, so as to escape detection. This proves that his abuse is not his loss of control of himself, but deliberate. Or, there is pushing and shoving in a rage. Even when the abuse is not physical, or primarily physical, there is the open threat of physical violence, intended to frighten the wife and thus bring her into what the husband considers submission and what is, in fact, abject terror. A woman has told me of her lying in bed with her small children of an evening, shivering in the fear that her husband would return home to shoot them all.

But abuse is not necessarily physical. The destruction of a woman that is abused may be, and often is, injury of her soul—the psychological and emotional destruction of the woman. This takes the form of verbal abuse: a never-ending assault on her by name-calling, criticism, and belittling. The names are foul. I refrain from mentioning the common degrading and filthy names. They are calculated (I use the word deliberately)—*calculated* to make the wife know herself as a worthless, sub-human thing. Such is the unrelenting degradation that it convinces her that she has no redeeming quality, including in the kitchen or in the bedroom.

The demeaning of the wife with regard to sex does not, however, imply that the abuser ignores his wife sexually. On the contrary! Abuse often includes the rape of the wife: an unloving taking and use of the wife for the husband's gratification—a forcible use, apart from and contrary to her will. His is the very opposite of the Christian view and activity of sex in marriage. According to the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 7,

there is a distinctive Christian way of sex in marriage. Sex is a debt that each spouse owes the other. In the sexual act, each is concerned to please the other, not only oneself. In raping his wife, the abuser pleases himself, with complete disregard for his wife. Just as sex expresses the unique intimacy of marriage, so the abuser's rape of his wife expresses his fundamental sin in the marriage bond: he is self-centered and self-seeking. His wife is not the incomparably lovely gift of God with whom he may share his life, and to whom he gives himself, as Christ shares his life with the church and gives himself to her. But she is an object, a thing, to which he is "entitled," which he may use as he pleases and which he keeps under his diabolical control (not to be confused with headship) by his demeaning language.

Verbal abuse destroys the woman, even when there is no physical abuse. The verbal abuse is often more painful to and destructive of the woman than the physical. It is a mistake to restrict abuse, or the truly serious abuse, to the physical. Recently, I asked a woman who had come to me for help, "Does he hit you [expressing my own, and a common, mistake about abuse, as though it were only physical]?" Her response: "Only seldom, but I would rather he hit me than call me the names that he does."

Sometimes, this verbal abuse is part of unrestrained rage, as the husband blows up in anger against the wife, often in the presence of the children. But the verbal abuse can also be soft-spoken, cold-blooded, almost icy, tearing her soul to shreds with cruel words.

The specialists in the field, both Christian and non-Christian, recognize that the verbal abuse is every bit as destructive as the physical, if not more so. Recognized experts in the field of abuse wrote this: "Abusers...often use degrading words that they know particularly hurt a woman. Such terms attack her very person, label her as an animal, a worthless object, or other vile thing."<sup>1</sup>

By abuse, I do not mean, and no one means, the occasional outburst of anger, or other unkind treatment of one's wife. This is sin; it must be

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1 Jeff Crippen and Anna Wood, *A Cry for Justice: How the Evil of Domestic Abuse Hides in Your Church!* (n.p.: Calvary Press, 2012), 130.

confessed, to God and to the wife, but this does not constitute abuse. It goes without saying that no Christian husband may ever, under any circumstances, lay his hand on his wife in anger, to hurt her, to terrify her, or to threaten to hurt her. But the rare outburst of anger, or even rarer instance of name-calling, is not “abuse.” Abuse is a pattern of life. Abuse is on-going. Abuse is a way of life in the marriage. Abuse dominates the husband’s relation to his wife, and her fearful relation to him.

And yet the abuse, whether physical or verbal, is not continuous, without let-up; rather, it is as a rule cyclical. For a while all is well: the man treats the wife decently, even lovingly. But this is merely the first stage of the cycle of abuse. The second stage is the deliberate building of tension in the marriage by the abuser. He lets the wife know that he is ready to explode, or to rip her to emotional shreds by an outburst of cruel and vile speech. During this stage, the wife is fearful, trying everything in her power to avoid the blow-up and to retain the decent relationship. But invariably the explosion comes: verbal, physical, or sexual, but always destructive. The woman cannot prevent it, because she is not the reason for it. He is.

And then there is another period of the expression of love on the part of the abusive husband. The cycle begins anew.

This cycle of love and cruelty is so typical of the abuser that it has acquired a name: “crazy-making.” The cycle tends to drive the abused wife crazy. She cannot figure out what is going on in her marriage. Does he truly love her, or does he hate her? Is she imagining the hatred and cruelty? Is she going crazy?

Whatever the psychological components of the abuse, abuse is sinful behavior and thinking on the part of the husband. Abuse is sin! This is not emphasized as it ought to be, even by Christian, evangelical authors and counselors. Lack of emphasis on the sinfulness of abuse is likely because the counselors want to stress to pastors and elders that there is a powerful psychological defect in the abuser, as is often the case. Abuse may be more than sin, that is, there may be a psychological element in it, but it is not less than sin, or something other than sin. Therefore, the church must take abuse seriously, and this demands that abuse be judged and dealt with as sin.

Abuse of one's wife is a form of murder. It is violation of the sixth commandment of the law of God. This is obviously the case if the husband beats his wife or threatens to harm her, even kill her. But abuse is also murder if it has the form of degrading words that destroy the wife emotionally and spiritually—words that destroy her soul. A woman with whom I have been working said that after years of suffering verbal abuse, "I no longer knew who I was." The specialists in abuse recognize the effect of this kind of murder as "the loss of personhood."

The dreadful reality of this murder of the soul and person does not surprise us Reformed people. Lord's Day 40 of the Heidelberg Catechism, on the sixth commandment—the commandment forbidding murder—explains that "I neither in thought, nor in word or look, much less in deed, revile, hate, insult, or kill my neighbor." The positive is that we "love our neighbor as ourselves, to show patience, peace, meekness, mercy, and kindness towards him, and, so far as we have power, to prevent his hurt."<sup>2</sup>

The biblical basis of the Catechism's inclusion of reviling and insulting words in the sin of murder is 1 Corinthians 5:11 and 6:1. Biblically, the man who murders his wife by verbal abuse is a "railer," or a "reviler." With a "railer," that is, a verbal abuser of his wife, the church is "not to keep company" (1 Cor. 5:11), that is, he is to be excommunicated from the congregation. No "reviler," that is, verbal abuser of his wife, "shall inherit the kingdom of God" (6:10). God excludes the husband who verbally abuses his wife from heaven.

How can a Reformed man hear this Lord's Day preached and go on abusing his nearest neighbor—go on murdering her? But he does!

Abuse is also sin in that it is gross violation of the vow—the sacred, solemn oath—that the Reformed man made to God at his wedding: "I will love her and live holily with her." The abuser is a liar. Indeed, he is worse than an ordinary liar. He violates and breaks a sacred oath, and he does this regarding a relationship especially precious to God, inasmuch as marriage symbolizes the union of Christ and his church.

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2 Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 105, 107, in Phillip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:346.

How can a Reformed man go on abusing his wife—violating his sacred oath? But he does!

A liar towards God, with respect to his oath, the abuser usually proves himself a liar also in his church life and even when he is questioned by the officebearers of the church. Hypocritically, he shows himself a model citizen of the kingdom of God. When his sin finally comes to the attention of the elders, he avows himself a loving husband of his wife and threatens her into lying also.

Then also, abuse destroys the entire family. Usually, there are children. Children see and sense all that goes on, or almost all that goes on, between father and mother. The open rage of a man towards his wife will terrorize the children. The cold-blooded, continuous criticism of the woman will shrivel the children's souls. Someone once said, on behalf of children, "If you would love us, love our mother." The abuser hates and murders his children.

Abuse is destructive of the Christian home and family. It is murder of the family.

How can Reformed men actively and deliberately destroy, not only their own precious family, but a covenant home of God himself? But they do!

It is also a real danger that the man passes along to his sons how to treat a woman, so that abuse continues from generation to generation. The specialists in abuse, both secular and evangelical, assert that this is often the case. We Reformed, who know the power of rearing, both for good and for ill, are not inclined to challenge this assertion. I quickly add, though, that abuse by a son does not always and necessarily result from an abusive father. Nor does abuse by a father always and necessarily carry on to his sons.

What accounts for this sinful, foolish behavior—this abuse? I say "foolish," not to minimize the sin, but to aggravate it. Paul describes abuse as foolish on the part of the man in the great marriage passage in Ephesians 5: "He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church" (vv. 28, 29). The husband who abuses his wife is a fool: He abuses himself; he hates his own flesh. And he realizes this, finally, when

she leaves, and he is alone in the empty house, living half a human life. Then he cries and half-heartedly admits his faults, begging his wife to return, and, if she does, she subjects herself to his abuse all over again.

Why is a husband such a fool as to injure his own flesh—his wife, and often the extension of his own flesh in his children? To be sure, a reason is Satan, who has his malignant eye on marriage in the church, almost as intently as God does. But how does the evil one work in the abuser? What makes the fool tick?

All the experts and specialists give the same answer, at first to me a peculiar answer: “entitlement.” A man thinks himself entitled to his wife, and in such a way that he may treat her as he pleases. She is his so that he owns her with an ownership that allows him to do with her as he pleases. Because abusers who claim to be Christians appeal to biblical headship in support of this entitlement, many who are concerned about abuse deny the headship of the husband and try to explain away that the Bible teaches the headship of the husband in marriage. This is not an appropriate response; the Biblical teachings of headship and marriage must be upheld properly.

The husband is “head,” but headship is not absolute lordship, is not dictatorship. Nor may he regard her as someone inferior to himself, to whom he is entitled. Nor does the Bible teach such things. On the contrary, the wife is a lovely, gracious gift of God to him, as Eve was to Adam. If a man is entitled to anything at all—and he is not; all is gift—least of all is he entitled to a wife, entitled to live intimately with the marvelous female. She is not his inferior. She is also a child of God, God’s daughter, as he is God’s son. The abusive husband who claims to be a Christian does well to bear this in mind: He abuses God’s daughter. If the very thought of a husband abusing his daughter stirs an earthly father to rage, and it does, what must be the wrath of God upon the man who abuses one of his blood-bought, dear daughters?

As head, the Christian husband may not treat his wife as he pleases. He must treat her as Christ, the head of his bride, the church, treats the church. “Headship,” yes. “Entitlement” is not in the marital vocabulary of the Christian husband.

So much for abuse. Now what of the church’s calling with regard to abuse?

# The Calling of the Church

Above all else, the calling of the church is strong, sharp, pointed preaching on marriage. This is preaching that not only describes the positive calling of a husband, but also exposes the sin of abuse. This is preaching that promises the reward of grace to the Christian husband who lives with his wife in love, but also threatens hell and damnation to the impenitent, abusive husband.

This is preaching that properly relates the husband's behavior of loving like Christ and the wife's behavior of submission like the church (Eph. 5:22–33). In this regard, I fear that I myself failed in my own preaching on marriage. I preached marriage, out of necessity, especially in my first charge, as much as any minister. I preached love, and I preached submission. But I fear that I did not do justice to the relation between love and submission. These are not two independent behaviors.

The love of the husband is first and fundamental. The submission of the wife is second and derivative. I do not refer to what comes first and what comes second in the passage. But I refer to what is first and fundamental in the marriage relation itself. First and fundamental in the spiritual reality of marriage—the marriage of Christ and the church, of which our marriages are the earthly symbols—is the headship in love on the part of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 5, a husband's headship of his wife is qualified by the headship of Christ over the church. The husband is head, not as Stalin was head of the Soviet Union, or as Hitler was head of Nazi Germany, or as a brutal Southern slave owner was head over his slaves. But the husband is head as Christ is head of the church. What this headship of Christ is, the passage teaches: He loved the church and gave himself for the church. This giving was the sacrifice of himself for the church in the incarnation and the cross.

The headship of Christ was, and still is, not domineering, but serving; not harsh, but tender; not taking, but giving. Christ's headship was not a selfish self-seeking at our expense—a using of us for his own advantage—but a giving of himself for our benefit.

We do not have to abandon the (biblical) truth of headship, in order to guard against abuse. On the contrary, we should emphasize headship—the

headship of Christ, model for the Christian husband. If only husbands who confess Christ Jesus would live the headship of Jesus Christ with regard to the church, abuse would disappear. God grant it by good preaching!

Where I fear I came short in my own preaching is that the wife's submission to her head is won by the love shown her by her head. In the Christian marriage, the husband does not threaten, much less beat, his wife into submission. Rather, he loves her into submission. This is the right relation of submission and love.

A husband's love and a wife's submission are not two separate, independent activities. But they are intimately related, just as the two spiritual activities are related in the covenantal marriage of Christ and the church. The love of the head is primary and causative. The submission of the body is secondary and responsive.

When we husbands love our wives as Christ loves the church, ordinarily our wives, fellow believers, will gladly and willingly submit. An abused young woman whom I was counseling cried out through her tears in the midst of her tale of woe, "I *want* to submit." Her husband's cruel abuse made Christian submission impossible for her. He did not love her, certainly not as Christ loves the Church. He did not draw her submission by loving her.

In the relation of Christ and the church Christ draws us to himself, not by abusing us, not by beatings, not by harsh criticisms, but by cords of love, by the sweet words of the gospel. This is how Solomon woos his beloved: "Thou art fair, my love...behold, thou art fair...yea, pleasant..." (Song of Sol. 1:15, 16). If I may be permitted this once to use an ungrammatical, slangy colloquialism, verbal abuse "ain't in it."

I do not hesitate to say that if all that I received from Jesus Christ in the preaching were savage, enraged, and degrading criticism, I would leave Christ and his church forthwith. My leaving might be fatal, but I would leave.

Ministers! Preach to the husbands that being Christ-like to their wives means speaking lovingly, speaking love, to them! A believing wife will submit to such a husband and to such speech, as willingly as the church submits to Christ.

The first and chief means by which the church prevents or heals abuse is good preaching. A second is family visitation. Our Reformed institution of annual family visitation is a superb means of discovering abuse in marriages and dealing with the evil. I am afraid that of late some of our consistories have made family visitation an innocuous, hour-long Bible study with the families. This is safe. It avoids what can be messy discoveries of sin in the home, and tense confrontations. But this is not what family visitation is supposed to be. It is also of little or no benefit.

Family visitation is intended to be an examination of the spiritual condition of the family and its members, in order to discover sins and then deal with them, as cannot be done in the public gathering of the congregation. This visitation of the families has been a wise, beneficial practice of the Reformed churches of the past, and should be particularly now for the church's calling with regard to abuse.

The minister should ask the husband and father, in some direct way or other, whether he treats his wife in love, and only in love, as Christ loves the church, particularly, in how he speaks to her. As the minister asks the husband, the elder must be looking at the wife, to observe her reaction to the husband's answer. If the answer, or other elements of the visit, indicate problems, the committee ought to schedule a follow-up visit, with the husband and wife alone, to pursue further the matter of possible abuse.

As the minister and elders care for the sheep of Christ, they must make an issue of the possibility of abuse and treat it. It must live in the souls of the members of the consistory that they have authority in the matter and that they have the heavy responsibility to see to it that no wife in the congregation is abused. A consistory is able to sweep unpleasant instances of abuse under the ecclesiastical rug. Consistories may be sure that on the day of the great judgment Christ will lift the rug.

A third way in which churches are able to carry out their calling to help abused women is the help given by fellow members of the congregation, all of whom occupy and ought to exercise the office of believer. The abused wife will show abuse, physically and mentally. Desperate for help, she will say something to family and friends. Love for each other in the body of Christ permits, indeed demands, that we not

turn a blind eye, but help. We speak with her, we visit her, we give advice how she can find deliverance. Other women in the church often discern the destructive evil being inflicted on their sister in Christ. Probably, the abused woman turns to them first, even before she goes to the minister or an elder. Family notices and, in the love of the close ties of family, comes to her rescue.

The advice of family, friends, and other members of the church will invariably be, “Call on the pastor or an elder.” This raises the vitally important subject of the pastoral calling of the church. Like Christ, whose body she is, the church does not only occupy and exercise a teaching office, but also a pastoral office. This pastoral office the church carries out mainly by her pastor. The abused wife will eventually bring her misery to the pastor.

When the abused woman calls on him, there are certain things that the pastor must *not* do. He ought not to doubt the woman. He ought not to minimize the seriousness of the matter. He ought not quickly to pray with her, read a Bible passage, and send her home to submit more fully. Neither should he at once arrange counseling sessions with her and her husband together. Likely, this will result in yet harsher abuse for the woman when her husband and she return home, or when he discovers that she had the temerity to bring her woe to the attention of the pastor.

The pastor ought to believe the woman. She would not come to him if she were not being abused, and seriously. This is especially the case in the Reformed community where marriage and family are highly esteemed. A woman usually will not disclose abuse until it has become unbearable, because she regards the abuse as her failure as a wife and as the doom of her precious family. A Protestant Reformed woman with some experience in counseling abused women told me the following, and gave me permission to quote her.

If a PR woman goes to her consistory for help, telling them she is being abused, they need to believe her. There is so much shame and embarrassment in doing so, she *will* be telling the truth. The consistory have no idea how much courage it takes for a PR woman to come forward to reveal the abuse. Most PR women feel somehow

responsible if everything is not well in their homes. Also they will in most cases fiercely defend their husbands and are convinced that he “might” change (some men say they will change, but don’t) and so they don’t want to ruin his reputation.

If she (and possibly the children) are being abused, then they need to either remove him from the home or her and the children immediately (and into hiding) before they begin any counseling. Then they should NOT counsel them together as she will be too afraid to be truthful in his presence. In fact, I’ve learned the women will not ever be completely truthful about how bad the abuse really is as they continue to try to protect him even subconsciously.

Show the woman the compassion of Jesus Christ. Do not add to her misery by indicating suspicion of her report of marital woe. If she cannot be in the same house with the husband for the time being, and usually this is the case by the time she knocks on the door of the minister’s study, arrange a safe place for her to live.

The minister would then make a pastoral call on the husband to inform him of his wife’s visit and lament. About the same time, the elders should make a disciplinary call on the husband, to confront him with his wife’s charges and situation. The elders can expect denial at first. All agree that the abusive husband, who often has a good reputation in the church, will lie, will show himself a model of marital piety, or will defend and excuse himself, which defense or excuse is conclusive evidence of abuse (there is no justification or excuse for abuse). When the elders have judged the man guilty of abuse, the consistory will approve the wife’s living separately from her husband. At this point in the development of the case, the consistory will begin discipline of the husband. He is guilty of a public sin by virtue of the fact that the husband and wife are living separately. The ground of the charge of sin against the man is violation of the sixth commandment: murder. This is strong medicine for a sore evil.

The church, beginning with the consistory, must be clear that the abused wife has not “left” her husband in the sense that Bible means with its use of the word “leaving,” for example, 1 Corinthians 7:10:

“Let not the wife depart from her husband.” “Departing,” or “leaving,” in scripture refers to divorce. In fact, the wife has not left, but the husband has forced her out. The blame for the separation is not the wife’s, but the husband’s.

Often, the church fails to help at all. This may be deliberate on the part of the pastor, who wants to avoid the trouble that getting involved will mean for him personally. Involvement in the case of an abusive husband does mean trouble for the pastor of the congregation. It is demanding of his time. It plunges him into ugly marital strife. Often, there are the stresses of the threats of the interests of the broader family relations: the family of the husband versus the family of the wife.

A cold-hearted, self-seeking pastor will have a quick prayer with the abused wife, will read an appropriate scripture, and will send her home to submit more fully—and to be destroyed by her abusive husband. This is the end of such a pastor’s involvement in the case. Christ will judge such a pastor accordingly: “Inasmuch as you refused to help this woman, you refused to help me” (see Matt. 25:31–46).

Cases of abuse require a pastor to plunge into the muck of severe marital discord. These circumstances are messy and unpleasant. Invariably, the pastor will himself get dirty in the course of his pastoral help. This should neither surprise nor dissuade him. If the title of pastor means anything, he shares the pastoral office of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came down from heaven into the muck of our sin and shame. He got “dirty” with the effects of our sin.

It is not impossible that the church adds to the woman’s misery, contributing to her emotional and spiritual destruction. The church may actually side with the abusive husband, who may be prominent in the church. Or, the church may simply command the woman to live with the abuser, as though biblical submission demands that she allow herself to be destroyed by an abusive husband. Thus, the church gives no help, no spiritual, marital salvation, no deliverance.

## Deliverance

Before I speak of deliverance, I must say something about prevention. Here, I speak to the young people of the church, to those who are not yet married but will marry, especially to the young women. Take care that you do not marry an abuser. I am not now referring to young men of the world, where abuse is rampant, where there is no instruction about the Christian behavior of a husband, and where the Holy Spirit does not work in young men to enable them to live rightly in marriage. Those are ungodly unbelievers, whom you are forbidden to date and marry, in any case. But I am now referring to abusive young men in the Reformed community. There are such young men, so that marrying an abuser is a danger.

Take dating seriously. Make dating a time, and make your relationship the kind of relationship, in which you can discover, and are as sure as possible, that this young man will behave towards you as Christ behaves towards the church. He *shows* such love, which is deeper, richer, and more important than romantic love. He *expresses* such love in deeds. He *speaks* lovingly to you and about you. In this love, he is willing to sacrifice himself for you, in contrast to demanding in all kinds of ways that you sacrifice yourself to him and for him.

A young woman with whom I have worked because of the abuse of her by her husband said reflectively (and heart-breakingly) on one occasion, looking pensively into the far-away distance, “I saw it when we were dating, but I ignored it.” Be on the lookout for the signs of abuse. These signs include the attitude that indicates that he owns you and may control every aspect of your life, already when you are dating. There is also the sign of contemptuous words about you to others and cruel speech to you. Or, the young man displays threatening anger towards you when you displease him. He may even hurt you, for example, grabbing you and pinching your arm when you are not attentive enough to him or do not go where he wants you to go quickly enough. Overall, he simply does not show himself loving, as Christ is loving to his church. When you, young woman, see some or all of these signs of abuse in your suitor, you should break off the relationship at once, regardless that he may be handsome, rich, and “cool.”

Parents also must exercise carefulness about the young man who will marry their daughter. They must make it their business to know their daughter's suitor. They have the responsibility to be as certain as possible that he is no abuser.

When we speak of deliverance with regard to the evil of abuse, the abusive husband must not be overlooked. He needs deliverance as well as his abused wife. His deliverance consists of repentance. Repentance for him must be genuine, consisting of sincere sorrow of heart that he has been murdering a dear daughter of God, unqualified confession of his fault to her and to the church, and a change of conduct. Otherwise, he will be damned.

When he finally drives his wife to leave him, usually with the children, the abuser as a rule is quick to admit some fault, and even to cry. Tears will flow readily. Often the sorrow is for himself, not for the wife, and not because he has sinned against God. If his confession of fault blames the wife, and excuses himself whatsoever ("she is equally to blame," or, "she pushed my buttons"), he is not truly repentant, and reconciliation is not a reality. For abuse of one's wife, regardless of her imperfections, there is no good reason or excuse.

The pastor and elders must work with the abuser until he confesses, like David, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:13). David, in repenting of his sin with Bathsheba, did not add, "But she tempted me irresistibly by bathing where I could see her." For the sin of abuse, this heartfelt repentance almost never happens overnight. There ought not, therefore, be an immediate sending home of the wife.

Often, if not in the majority of cases, professional help from outside the church is needed. This is a reality that I myself might have objected to in the past. When I entered the ministry, Jay Adams had just published the book, *Competent to Counsel*. The book helped me greatly in a congregation that had many counseling needs. But I concluded not only that a pastor could counsel, but also that the counseling by a pastor was all that was needed. This was a mistake. Even then, I called on a Christian hospital for difficult cases of depression and on a Christian counseling center for help with a severe case of alcoholism.

A wise, compassionate pastor can and should counsel with regard to the spiritual, sinful causes and other aspects of abuse. But there often are psychological factors contributing to the abuse that are outside the pastor's competency. The church may, and should, avail itself of these specialists. This is no reflection on the church or on the gospel. The church sends members who have suffered a "nervous breakdown" to a special institution for help. The gospel does not require the member suffering from cancer to seek treatment for the cancer in the pastor's study—comfort for the spiritual burden, but not treatment of the cancer. So may church members seek outside help in the case of abuse.

Consistories ought to investigate the availability in their area of a Christian counselor specializing in abusive marriages. While the abuser is being treated by the counselor, the pastor and elders continue their spiritual counsel and admonition regarding the sin. They should be in constant contact with the counselor.

All the while the congregation is praying for the abusive husband's salvation. The experts are gloomy about the deliverance of an abuser, but the church has hope for the salvation of the sinner. This hope is not a minimizing of the evil, but a confidence in Christ Jesus.

Then, there is the deliverance of the abused woman. She needs the support of the church. This support is compassion in her great sorrow and dire straits. Another abused woman gave me the following plea to the congregations, with permission to quote her:

Show genuine compassion [to the abused woman]. She is suffering a long, drawn out, never ending loss. Her hopes, dreams, and plans have been shattered, or are being shattered, and torn away from her. She will be entering slowly into deep grief, yet also fighting to avoid the grief—wanting to return to the cycle [of abuse, seeming relief, and then again the abuse].

Help for the abused woman and her children will often include financial support. Abuse is a call from Christ to the diaconates of the congregations. If ever a recipient of the alms required that the financial assistance be accompanied by "comfortable words from scripture," the abused wife is this recipient.

Members of the congregation, who usually know nothing of the situation with certainty except that the woman is living away from her husband, and who therefore ought to keep quiet, must not add to the woman's pain and grief by cruel comments such as, "Why does she not get back where she belongs?"

Last, but by no means least, the congregation offers deliverance to the suffering member of the body—the abused wife—by means of the office of the pastor. He must meet regularly with her, over the duration of her husband's forcing her away from himself by his abuse of her. In his meetings, he must listen to her, truly listen, taking her lament seriously. Then he must encourage her with the gospel of the Savior, who has compassion for the laboring and heavy laden, as she is, and in that compassion makes her burden his own so that she has rest (Matt. 11:28).

Especially for the sake of the church's help of abused wives, I open up the subject of abuse. It exists among us. Christ calls us to deal with the evil in a Christian manner. Inasmuch as we perform deeds of compassion to one of these suffering, nearly hopeless, abused wives, who belong to Christ, we have done it to Christ himself.

Summing up:

1. Be aware that abuse is found among us.
2. Know it as gross, inexcusable, intolerable evil: murder.
3. Wives—daughters of God, and sisters of Jesus—are suffering.
4. Help the abused wives.
5. Receive those who are abused, believe them, comfort them, and protect them.
6. Condemn the abuser as an impenitent murderer; admonish and discipline him, with a view to his repentance; if there is no repentance, excommunicate him.
7. Insist that the abuser also get appropriate counseling by specialists in the field.
8. And pray God that the Reformed community honor marriage, not only formally, but also materially, particularly, by the godly behavior of husbands.

# Questions and Answers concerning Spousal Abuse after the Speech on the Subject to Officebearers and Potential Officebearers on October 5, 2017 by Prof. David J. Engelsma

**1. Please define abuse. Today we deal with physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse. Some think that any sin against one's wife is "abuse." In America, it is considered abuse if the husband demands anything of his wife that she does not like. When has a husband truly crossed the line from meanness to abuse?**

In the speech, I define abuse as the husband's "deliberate, ongoing, systematic, relentless destruction of his wife, whether her soul or her body, or both." I note that abuse is usually physical, if not beating, angry squeezing, or shoving, then the open threat of physical violence, to frighten her, so that the wife lives in fear of physical abuse. Recently, a woman spoke to me of her terror as she lay in bed that her husband, who only rarely abused her by violence, would return home to shoot her and the children. But abuse is often verbal: the murder of the woman by the never ending, calculated assault on her by name-calling, destructive criticism, and belittling. I distinguish abuse from the occasional outburst of anger, or other unkind treatment of one's wife, which may never include physical violence. The occasional out-burst of anger is sin, which must be confessed both to God and to wife, but it is not abuse in the sense that the speech concerns abuse. The abusive husband purposely *lives* on the wrong side of the line marking abuse off from love.

**2. Is there ever a time when the arm of the law enforcement [is] to be called on if the abuse does not end? What is the calling of the church regarding reporting abuse to local authorities? Are pastors and elders bound to report abuse to civil authorities with or without the consent of the abused wife? When does the council of the church need to alert the authority of the land?**

These four questions are basically the same.

I am informed that the law does not require the church to inform the civil authorities of a husband's abuse of his wife.

The wife certainly may appeal to the civil authorities for protection against an abusive husband. God has appointed civil government exactly for such protection against evil-doers. Article 36 of the Belgic Confession declares that God "hath invested the magistracy with the sword, for the punishment of evil-doers and for the protection of them that do well." Since this protection likely includes the state's prohibition of the husband's living with his wife for a while, thus making the evil of abuse public, the appeal by the wife to the civil authorities implies her informing the church of her plight and her seeking help from the consistory. It reflects badly on the church if the abused woman seeks relief and safety from the state because the church refused to become involved and declined to provide help. It is precisely this weakness of the church that my speech on the subject is intended to address.

**3. Often, the argument is made, maybe she is "sick" of her husband. If abuse is public, should the church treat it as fact?**

When a wife takes action or seeks help alleging abuse, abuse on the part of the husband is almost always, indeed invariably, a reality. A consistory may safely believe the woman. Naturally, the woman desires to maintain her marriage and family intact. Especially in the Protestant Reformed Churches, where marriage and family are highly esteemed, the married woman prizes her marriage and family. She will protect and preserve her marriage and family at great cost to herself. She will put up with abuse for the sake of her marriage and family to extraordinary lengths. In fact, as later questions will recognize, sometimes the wife will heroically decide to sacrifice herself to the abusive husband for the sake of marriage and family. When the abuse becomes public, as it does when the woman is forced to live separately from her husband, the consistory will determine, and judge, the reality of the abuse.

**4. What if the abuser refuses to repent and flees from the church and its discipline? What counseling must be given to the wife now that her husband remains in his sin?**

The wife is now more in need of pastoral counseling than before the husband fled the church and its discipline. By refusing to submit to the discipline of a true church and by forsaking a true church, and Christ, who is head of the true church, the husband gives clear proof that he is unbelieving and that, unless he repents, he will be damned. The wife must be counseled concerning the grievous reality that she is married to an unbeliever. If he is willing to live with her, which includes that he does not abuse her, she is called to live with him, as is exhorted upon such wives in 1 Peter 3:1, 2. If he continues to abuse her, thus driving her away from himself, she must be counseled to continue to show herself willing to dwell with him, if only he is open to this. Otherwise, she is counseled to submit to the will of God for her life, that she live a single life as a married woman. The church will surely show her continuing compassion in her special, grievous situation as both an abused and an abandoned wife.

**5. How does one approach a husband about sin he has denied from day one, but whose wife has left him because of alleged abuse? In a situation in which it is unknown whom to believe, will this cause more harm to young children who are still in the church?**

As a matter of right terminology, if a husband and a wife are living separately because of the husband's abuse, the wife has not left the husband, but the husband has driven the wife away. In the case of the husband's denying the abuse, the consistory must determine guilt. They do this by closely questioning the man, by questioning the man and the woman together, and, if necessary and possible, by questioning the children who may be members of the family. Involving the children in the questioning will be harmful to the children, but the fault lies not with the consistory but with the abusive husband. Even when the husband persists in denying abuse, the consistory will be able to determine that

the wife is telling the truth and that the man is lying. Unless in the extremely rare case the consistory is inclined to doubt the woman and to believe the man, the consistory will then charge the man with both the sin of murder (in abusing his wife) and the sin of lying.

**6. In the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), discipline seems to “drag on” for years, and the steps of discipline move slowly. Is abuse a case in which discipline should be accelerated and there should be demonstration that Christ has no patience with such sins?**

First, no discipline should “drag on.” Nor should the steps of discipline move slowly in any case. Such prolonged discipline is not the sign of the church’s charity. Neither is it advantageous to the impenitent sinner. Mostly, it indicates the indecisiveness of the consistory. Second, the sin of impenitent abuse should be disciplined firmly and without delay. Both the sinner and the church should receive the message that the sin of abuse is intolerable in a professing Christian and in the church of Jesus Christ. The sole reason for “delay” is the sinner’s undergoing the spiritual, medical, or psychological treatment for which his case may call and which may contribute to the radical change of thinking and life that true repentance consists of.

**7. How should the wife go about reporting abuse? Her soul is already dealing with an awful terror of possible repercussions from telling her minister. Is she required to follow the principles of Matthew 18? What should our counsel to her be?**

If the abuse and its effects on the woman are so severe that the woman fears for her health and life and that she must call in the minister or an elder for help, the sin of the abusive husband has become virtually a public sin. The husband has made it public by making life with him impossible on the part of the wife. She should then call on the minister or an elder for pastoral help, with or without the presence of her husband. Having spoken both with her and the husband, the pastor or elder can determine that the wife must temporarily live apart from her husband

because of his abuse. This makes the sin public, and the consistory must work with the husband accordingly. From the time that the minister or elder meets with the abused woman, the church must provide protection for the abused woman. Knowing that his wife has called on the church for help, the abusive husband will likely punish his wife severely, unless she has protection.

**8. If an abused woman leaves her husband, and her husband does not repent, is divorce biblical, especially since the laws of the land almost require divorce to protect the woman? Is there ground for divorce of the abused wife as there is for adultery?**

Scripture does not permit divorce on the ground of abuse. Scripture recognizes one ground for divorce: fornication on the part of one's husband or wife. Scripture also forbids a husband to drive his wife away from him by abusing her. But if the husband does wickedly drive his wife away from himself, there is nothing the woman can do to prevent the physical separation. In this case, even though she does not divorce her husband, who remains her husband, there are remedies at law for her physical and financial distress. The state recognizes legal separation and provides for the protection and financial support of women in such circumstances. The woman who is driven from her home and husband by an abusive husband should seek good legal counsel.

**9. What can be done when an abused woman keeps going back to her husband?**

This is usually the case. Those who have made a study of such things report that on the average an abused wife returns to her abusive husband eleven times before she insists on his genuine change, or gives up on him. The question recognizes that even in the world the rule is that a wife wants to maintain her marriage and family and is willing to risk and put up with abuse in order to do so. All the more is this true of the Protestant Reformed woman. The answer to the question is "nothing." A pastor or other counselor can warn the abused wife not to return her

impenitent husband, but to require his repentance and proof of it. But if she is determined to return, no one can stop her. Family and friends can be prepared to help her once again when she again is forced to leave on account of her husband's repeated abuse.

#### **10. How often are drinking and drugs involved with abuse?**

In most cases of abuse—even within the church—drunkenness, drugs, and pornography (in which filth the wife is usually required to participate, to the destruction of her soul, to say nothing of her body) are often, if not almost always, factors. The abuser is a willing servant of Satan in more wickedness than only the abuse of his wife. Whether the drunkenness, drugs, and pornography are the cause of the abuse, or whether the abuse fosters the drunkenness, drugs, and pornography, or whether all have their common cause in some other, deeper evil, which may well include a powerful emotional element, often a psychologist may be helpful in discovering. In any case, the concerned, devoted pastor will be on the lookout for these additional, contributing evils in his work with an abusive husband.

#### **11. How do you help a woman who willingly returns to her husband and refuses the help and compassion of the church (when the abuse is known and clear)? If you know that there is abuse, but the abused will not admit it, how do you help?**

These two questions are the same.

It is impossible to help an abused wife who neither asks for help nor receives it when help is offered. The most one can do is to make known to the abused wife that you will help when she asks for it.

It is a different matter with regard to her abusive husband. If the abuse is “known and clear,” the elders of the church have the responsibility to admonish the husband for his ungodly behavior towards his wife. The wife can refuse help; the husband may not refuse discipline. By work with the abusive husband, the consistory of the church will be helping the wife.

**12. After confession of sin by the abuser, should the elders do follow up work with the couple? And for how long?**

The elders should be doubtful about a quick confession of sin by an abusive husband. They should question him thoroughly about the sincerity of the confession. When an abusive husband is finally exposed and confronted with his sin by the church, he will often confess, even with tears. But the “confession” is not heartfelt. He does not feel sorry for his sin but for himself. Nor does the “confession” consist of the determination to change. If the “confession” includes blame of the wife for the abuse—such as “She asked for it,” or, “There is no way to live peaceably with that woman”—, the consistory can be sure that the “confession” is insincere. There is no excuse for abuse.

Genuine confession is Davidic: “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam. 12:13). Period! There was nothing about Bathsheba’s complicity in the sin by bathing nude where he could see her. The consistory should ask the woman whether she feels safe in living with the man at the present time, regardless of his “confession.” And the elders must follow up with periodic visits to be certain that the “confession” was genuine and that there is no further abuse. They should impress on the husband that they will be making regular calls on him and his wife to assure the consistory that the repentance was genuine. The follow-up work should continue for at least six month to a year.

**13. Since abusers are so secretive and deceptive and seemingly good people in public, what are some of the signal symptoms of an abused wife that the church can look for?**

Abusers of their wives are all the things that this question suggests. They present an appearance in society and in the church that impresses everyone (except their wives and children). This is a reason why, when a wife finally cries out for help, the response of society and church is that her complaint cannot possibly be true. They blame her rather than the abusive husband, thus adding to her misery. This is why, as the rule, the church ought to accept her complaint as true, and doubt her husband’s denial of the wife’s charge against him.

Because the wife can, and does, put up a good front for a while, it is almost impossible for the church to recognize abuse. Family members may be able to spot suspicious signs, including the man's harsh treatment of the woman, his verbal abuse of her in public, and the woman's otherwise inexplicable breaking down emotionally. Family ought to pursue such signs boldly. For the church to be able to help, the abused wife must make her miserable condition known to the pastor and elders. For an abused wife to make this known to the pastor and elders, the pastor and elders must show themselves sympathetic men, that is, true pastors, on behalf of the Christ who is "not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Heb. 4:15).

**14. If you are called to a home where abuse happened that night, should the police be called? Or is this option left to the abused?**

In a previous answer (see question 2), I have already mentioned that abuse does not *require* the notification of the civil authorities. Whether the involvement of the police is necessary depends on the nature of each case. Severity of the abuse, very much including the threat of more, and more severe, violence to the wife, may make this involvement of the police and the courts necessary at once. The judgment of the abused woman, preferably with the counsel of the consistory, ought to weigh in such an instance. As I remarked in my response to an earlier question, Christians may call upon the state for protection of their safety and life.

When a woman's physical welfare is obviously threatened, a pastor will surely assist in removing the woman from danger at once. An incident from my own ministry comes to mind. Early in my ministry, when I had not yet even heard of abuse, a young wife and mother came white, trembling, and crying to the parsonage. Her husband was drunk. To terrify her, which he accomplished, he fired his 12-gauge shotgun into the ceiling of their living room in her and their child's immediate presence. "Must I return to him?" she asked, knowing the Protestant Reformed insistence on the maintaining of marriage. "Certainly not," I replied. "You must find somewhere else to stay until he sobers up and the elders and I have worked with him, so that it is safe for you to be

with him. I will go with you to get what things are necessary out of the house and help you find a place to stay.” If calling the police had been necessary, I would have done so. Locating an applicable article of the Church Order was not required. Christian common sense was enough.

**15. Will you suggest some good books for reading on the subject of abuse? Are the books by Jay Adams still in print?**

I recommend reading *Unholy Charade*, by Jeff Crippen; *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage*, by Leslie Vernick; *Why Does He Do That*, by Lundy Bancroft; and *Healing the Hurting: Giving Hope & Help to Abused Women*, by Catherine Clark Kroeger & James R. Beck. Recommendation of these books is not indicative of approval of all they contain. Some make no claim to be Christian, and all of them allow for divorce if the abuser does not repent and change his abusive ways. Despite their shortcomings, these books are helpful in exposing the nature of abuse; instructing how a counselor and, in some cases, the church ought to respond to abuse; warning against prevalent errors regarding dealing with abuse, including errors made by the church; and offering advice how the abused wife should recognize and respond to abuse. The Reformed work on abuse has yet to be written.

As for the books by Jay Adams, particularly his *Competent to Counsel*, they are still in print. As I mentioned in the lecture, *Competent to Counsel* was extremely helpful to me in the early years of my own pastoral ministry. Most Christian book stores will obtain Adams’ books, if they do not themselves carry the books.

**16. If one does not hear the truth about abuse in the preaching, is the church guilty of spousal abuse?**

If it should be the case that nothing of the sinfulness of abuse is warned against in the preaching, that preaching would be responsible for aiding and abetting abuse. But it is inconceivable that the preaching of a true church of Christ would lack warning against abuse. The preaching of a true church would proclaim the calling of a husband to love his nearest

neighbor, that is, his wife. Love of the wife prohibits and condemns abuse. Such preaching would warn against hatred of the neighbor/wife, which abuse is. But today, the preacher must become explicit, warning not only against hatred of the neighbor generally, but also against hatred in the form of verbal abuse against his wife specifically. The presence of abuse in our circles demands this explicit admonition. If a minister fails, or refuses, to give this concrete warning in marital counseling and in the preaching, he makes himself guilty of aiding and abetting the sin.

**17. While we forbid divorce (except for adultery), should the consistory ever encourage a temporary separation? Do we forbid legal separation in all cases?**

The consistory should recognize the necessity of an abused woman's temporary separation from her abusive husband, including a legal separation that is recognized and enforced by the state. The church must not forbid legal separation in cases of abuse. What the church must recognize is that the abused woman has not *left* her husband, when she finds it necessary to live apart from him, but that her abusive husband has forced her away from himself. The fault of the temporary separation is not the woman's but the man's. It is injustice, if not cruelty, that the church adds to the misery of the abused woman by viewing her as the one who has left her husband and charging her with the evil of having left him. In the language of 1 Corinthians 7:13, the abusive husband is not "pleased to dwell with her." He is pleased to have her in his house for his use and abuse of her, but he is not pleased to dwell with her.

**18. Shouldn't everyone feel safe in bringing complaints of abuse to her consistory? I have witnessed a lack of confidentiality in my consistory at times. Also, my husband is very close to a couple of elders, and I'm afraid to proceed. If the matter is not kept secret, my life could actually become worse than the emotional abuse than I now suffer on a daily basis.**

This question surprises me, not because of its content, but because it is obviously a question from a woman. The lecture was restricted to men.

I will assume that a woman gave the question to her husband for me to answer.

Lack of confidentiality is a grave weakness of consistories in the matter of abuse as in other serious, sensitive matters. That elders or the pastor divulge consistorial matters—especially those of a sensitive nature involving sin and suffering of members of the congregation—to other members of the church, including their wives, is destructive of the pastoral work of Christ by means of the consistory and harmful to the abused woman. The abused woman will not turn to the minister or to the elders for the help she needs. The gossip of the consistory hinders the work of Christ. Every pastor knows, and every consistory should know, that confidentiality is essential to their work. The gossipy minister and elder disqualify themselves for the work of their office.

**19. Is submission only for women? Are we preaching the Bible’s version of submission or mixing it with the “old world Victorian” version?**

These two questions are related.

Submission is not only for the wife in a marriage. Also the husband is called to submit to his wife. Ephesians 5:21 can be viewed as introducing the grand passage on marriage, verses 22–33: “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” The married man and woman are not only husband and wife. They are also brother and sister in Christ, fellow members of Christ’s church. As brother to his sister, his wife, the man is called to submit to her in many matters and in many ways. The calling of the wife to submit to him does not authorize him to insist on his will in every matter that arises in their life together. If she wants to name a child after her father and he, after his father, he may submit to her will without any compromise of his headship in marriage. If he insists on his will in every aspect and detail of their life together, he is not so much a Christian husband as a dictator.

Even with regard to matters that properly belong to the headship of the husband, he ought to consult her wisdom and will. She is his “help,” not his lackey. Whatever the “old world Victorian” version of

submission may be, which seems to me to be the notion of a woman's weak and absolute submission to the man as though she were a helpless, will-less, clinging, simpering nobody, this version of submission does not describe and prescribe the Christian wife's submission in the church of Christ. It is significant how often in the Song of Solomon, outstanding scripture concerning marriage in the Old Testament, the wife of the king is referred to as "my sister." She is not a dominated woman, nor only object of passionate sexual desire (which is also the message of the Song). She is also spiritual sister, with a mind and will of her own, which mind and will she does not hesitate to express and which her spiritual brother, her husband, does not suppress.

**20. My husband is very materialistic. I work part-time to help make ends meet. But I hate working outside the home. When I suggest that we can do without some luxuries and "boy toys," he accuses me of being lazy. I enjoy some of our luxuries also, but would be willing to go without them. Is this abusive or quite normal?**

This is another question obviously from a woman. It is very difficult to exclude women from meetings that interest them.

Your husband is spiritually weak. The weakness is not only that he puts his wife to work outside the home in order to acquire luxuries. It is also that he rejects the spiritual advice and plea of his wife, something that is always foolish on the part of a husband. If his insistence that you work outside the home is not full-fledged abuse, it borders on abuse. Evidently, you are able to talk with him about the matter. At a suitable time, make plain to him your spiritual thoughts and feelings, as based on the word of God, and plead with him to heed your thoughts and wishes, as a godly husband is called to do with regard to his wife. Ask him with you to seek counsel from your pastor. If the work outside the home is destructive of your spiritual life, or that of your family, inform your husband that you intend to quit the job. Be prepared for the consequences. If you can endure the present circumstances, continue to talk with him about the matter, in the meanwhile conducting yourself in your marriage as Peter instructs godly wives to behave themselves in

a marriage with an unbelieving husband (1 Pet. 3:1, 2), which does not imply that your husband is unbelieving.

**21. I have a close friend who married into our [PR] church. She is being mistreated by her “always a PR” husband. The abuse is not physical or sexual, but he is constantly condescending and often mocks her in public settings. The pastor apparently does not see this as being as serious as she does. If she lived in Western Michigan, they could change churches. Do you have any advice?**

Condescension towards and mockery of one’s wife, especially in public, are sin against the word of God to husbands in Ephesians 5. It is verbal abuse. If the wife is too cowed by her cruel mate to object, those who witness the abuse ought to rebuke him—*publicly*. He publicly shames his wife. Publicly shame him! A pastor who does not judge such behavior as sinful, whether abuse or verbal murder (according to Question 105 of the Heidelberg Catechism) and who does not admonish such sinners both in public preaching and in private counseling, is derelict in his duty. It is a main purpose of my lecture on abuse to change the thinking of such a pastor. The solution to the evil among us is not that abused women change churches, but that there be a change in the thinking of pastors and elders. I am deeply ashamed and grieved that a young woman marries into the PRC to find such mistreatment by her PR mate that you describe.

**22. Can abuse flow out of what began as a lack of emotional investment by the man—a man not able to extend the love for himself to cover the wife as part of himself? In other words, he does not see his wife as part of himself. Does abuse flow from a misunderstanding of leadership? Does abuse originate in the man’s personal, deep-seated fear of being manipulated by his wife, so much so that the wife hesitates to ask even basic things of her husband because he thinks it is a challenge to his authority or an attempt to control him? If so, is it best to instruct this man or the woman to correct the problem?**

I combine these, several related questions. All concern the deep-seated spiritual and psychological causes of abuse in the abusive husband.

Regardless of the causes, all of the evils of a husband referred to in the questions are sins. Pastors and elders must address these sins and call for repentance, which repentance includes radical change of behavior. It is marital sin that a husband does not love his wife, as the first question puts it, failing to extend love for himself to his wife. Such is the intimacy of marriage that the married persons are united in a bond that is comparable to that between my head and my body, according to Ephesians 5. What a sin against the body if my head should care only for itself, ignoring the welfare of my body and, thus, hurting the body. It is marital sin that a husband so understands his leadership as legitimizing abuse of the wife, when God has bestowed male leadership exactly for the benefit of the wife, often at cost to the husband. Such was the leadership of Christ with regard to the church. It was a leadership that gave himself for the church.

It is also marital sin that a husband has so corrupted the marital relation that his wife is afraid to request basic things of her husband, and undoubtedly afraid also to discuss basic matters of their marriage with him, because of his mistaken and selfish conception of his authority. Is the church afraid to request basic things of her Husband, or freely to discuss with him important matters of his life with her? These sins of the husband must be addressed in the preaching and in spiritual counseling by the pastor and elders, or other counselors.

Because there is also likely a strong psychological weakness or component contributing to these sins, such husbands ought to seek, and be encouraged to seek, competent psychological help.

**23. How do we teach female members, especially from outside our [PR] churches, that the church is not a “boys club,” or a place where she believes that men will not believe her cry for help, will defend her man instead of her, or will suggest that she is the problem, and that she should submit more?**

The sad fact is that these impressions have been left in the PRC. Abused wives, who have cried out to the church for help, have suffered this kind of response. In desperation, they have then turned to the state for the help they need, and found it. This sinful weakness of the churches, or some of the churches, must be corrected. It reflects badly on the church and on Christ the Head and compassionate Savior of the church. It sends away God's distressed (female) members of the church without providing the help they desperately need and ask for. The behavior of a pastor or of elders who send away an abused wife after one visit with a prayer, the exhortation to submit more, and the empty wish that all will go better in the marriage, refusing to look into the matter, or even to follow up on the one visit by the abused wife, falls into the category of the sin described in James 2:15, 16: "If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?"

The church is not a "boys club." According to the commandment of the New Testament, only qualified men may hold special office. But females hold the office of believer equally with males. They are God's beloved children as much as are their spiritual brothers. Pastors and elders must care for the sisters as zealously as they do for the brothers. In the matter of abuse, where there is conflict, the consistory must, in fact, be biased in favor of the complaining female.

#### **24. What option does a wife have if the spouse will not turn from his abuse against her?**

By his impenitent abuse, he will have driven her out of the house or otherwise away from himself. In sad recognition of what he has done, and is still doing, she may file for legal separation, including a court order that he may not have contact with her. These legalities, which provide necessary protection for her, will include the sinning husband's financial support of her and any children who are involved in the separation. These civil actions imply the knowledge of the church of the husband's sin necessitating these actions and the church's disciplinary work with the abusive husband.

**25. How can a woman, especially an abused woman, be assured that she can reach out to men (consistory or pastor), when she might already be afraid of men in general?**

The question indicates a grievously ungodly evil in the church: daughters of God are afraid of sons of God, a dreadful disruption of the family of the heavenly Father.

It is the calling of the consistory and pastor to show themselves sympathetic servants of Jesus Christ to all the members of the congregation, particularly the female members of the congregation. It does not take very long, or extraordinary effort, on the part of a pastor to show himself approachable to all the members of the congregation, which includes the knowledge that the man can be trusted to keep every visit and all matters that come to him in the strictest confidence. Female members of the congregation in which the pastor is a true servant of the Great Shepherd are no more afraid of the pastor than they are of Jesus himself.

**26. What if abuse is a result of pornography? The husband is not hitting her, but sexually abusing her or raping her? Would this be grounds for divorce?**

Abuse is often accompanied by pornography, which usually involves the husband's sexual abuse of his wife. Rape and other forms of a husband's forcing of sexual acts upon his wife are egregious violation of the intimate relation between husband and wife that lies close to the very heart of the mystery of marriage. In the sexual activity and act, man and woman, husband and wife, give themselves to each other most fully. For the man to rape or otherwise use the woman for his own satisfaction, regardless of the will of the woman, indeed against her will, is violent assault on marriage itself at its very heart. Pornography is a form of fornication, a form of the *practice* of fornication. Vile as the sin is, because another flesh-and-blood woman is not involved I am hesitant to conclude that pornography is an aspect of the fornication that Christ had in mind when he taught that fornication is ground for divorce. On the other hand, I would seriously consider a wife's contention that her husband's pornography is ground for her divorce of him according to Matthew 19:9.

**27. Should consistories ever encourage a woman to press abuse charges? Can state laws and courts ever “aid” the church in determining the guilt of abuse?**

Yes, and yes.

**28. At what point are the authorities contacted?**

When the abusive husband compels the wife to seek legal recognition of the separation for which he is responsible; to obtain a court order that restrains the husband from contact with her, which would consist only of more abuse; and to obtain the financial support that she and her children need.

**29. The private nature of this sin makes it difficult to confirm. Most husbands accused of abuse will deny it outright. However, most resources today tell us to believe every wife who is bold enough to make the accusation. The elders and pastor now have to sort out the “he said, she said” dilemma, with little evidence and conflicting stories. How does the church proceed?**

All of the assertions that precede the question are accurate. Most of the time, in such cases, the careful questioning of the husband, if need be in the presence of the wife, will establish the truth of the wife’s allegations, that is, the husband’s guilt. In the rare instance of the consistory’s still being doubtful, the questioning of the children who are old enough to testify will confirm the charges of the wife. (A consistory will be hesitant so intimately to involve children, especially small children. But the fault for this lies with the father. By his abuse and denial, he compels the consistory to involve the children. This involvement of the children in the sin is no small part of the wickedness of abuse.) In the very rare case of the consistory’s still remaining uncertain because of a lack of hard evidence, let them decide on the basis of their sanctified inclinations, favoring the woman as much as possible.

**30. Do you have any thoughts or concerns about the IRBC (Institute for Reformed Biblical Counseling) and consistories sending members to it for help?**

I confess ignorance of this counseling institute. In the course of my lecture, I encouraged pastors and consistories to seek special help for abusive husbands concerning psychological problems they might have in addition to their spiritual weaknesses and evils. I recommend that consistories conduct a search for such counselors and counseling centers in their area, preferably Christian counselors and institutions. During my pastorate in Colorado, the church used Bethesda Hospital for certain afflictions of some of its members. During my pastorate in Illinois, the church had occasion to use a Christian institution for a case of alcohol addiction (habitual drunkenness). In these cases, the pastor continued his spiritual work with the members. The Christian institutions were helpful in the specific area of their knowledge.

**31. Often concern for legal (police) consequences may cause the consistory to refrain from contacting professional help. Do you have any insight or words of encouragement here?**

I doubt that there is any reason for a consistory to refrain from seeking professional help for an abusive man because of possible legal consequences. The exception is a wife's being battered half to death, in which case the husband ought to be jailed, with the enthusiastic support of the consistory. Often, there are good reasons for a consistory to approve and even recommend professional help for an abusive husband in addition to the spiritual work that the consistory is doing, as I have urged in previous answers. An abusive husband often is troubled psychologically and emotionally as well as spiritually. A pastor does not necessarily have the ability to locate and address the psychological weakness any more than he has the ability to treat cancer in a church member.

**32. “Leave the church and abandon Jesus Christ” were your words in the lecture describing what you would do if the preaching was always verbal abuse by Jesus. Understandable! How many Protestant Reformed children have left the PRC, not because they are attracted to false teaching, but because they are repulsed by their father’s misconduct?**

The question implies that some have. Having been a pastor for twenty-five years, I can attest that this has happened. Some have rejected the church and its Head altogether. Christ will require the blood of these children at the hands of the abusive fathers in the final judgment. Were I a pastor of a congregation today, I would warn all fathers in the congregation of this reality in blunt language. Husbands are to love their wives for the sake of their children. Worldly wisdom has children saying to their father, “If you would love us, love our mother.” Speaking for myself, I cannot imagine anything worse than that on the day of judgment, one of my children turns to me, as the Lord sentences him or her to eternal damnation, and cries out, “You are responsible!”

**33. Can you speak briefly to the damage of the “silent treatment”?**

I assume that the question refers to the policy and practice of some husbands of punishing their wives for some action or inaction on the part of the wife that displeased the husband. Whereas some husbands abuse their wife by abusive speech, other husbands abuse their wife by abusive silence. Like abusive speech, silence is intended to punish the wife and, thus, coerce the wife into the behavior that pleases the husband. The sixth commandment does not only forbid murder. It also commands us to “love our neighbor as ourselves; to show patience, peace, meekness, mercy, and all kindness towards him, and prevent his hurt as much as in us lies; and that we do good, even to our enemies” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 107).

**34. Could the husband’s high thinking of himself serve or feed this sin? Should a husband’s calling be to serve, to avoid this sin?**

These two related questions show excellent insight into the cause and nature of the sin of abuse of one's wife. Abuse is rooted in the husband's pride. Secular psychology calls it "entitlement." He is so superior to his wife that he may treat her as he pleases, and he pleases that she serve him fully and precisely as he wishes. The truth is that in the Christian marriage the man is to serve his wife as Christ served, and still serves, the church. That the wife may, in truth, not be as smart as the husband fancies himself to be, or as beautiful as the husband desires and supposes himself to deserve, has nothing whatever to do with his service of his wife in marriage. The church is not naturally wise. She is certainly not beautiful by nature. Christ served her, and still serves her, speaking lovely words to her, and calling her honorable names. This wickedness of the abusive husband casts doubt, not alone on his behavior in marriage, but also regarding his salvation. No proud man, going on in his pride, is saved.

**35. Our consistory had a case in which the woman would not leave to live separately from her husband, even when counseled to do so. We had everything arranged, but she would not live separately. What should a consistory do in such a case?**

The consistory is to be commended for its pastoral concern and care. God grant that every consistory in our fellowship possess such concern and exercise such care! A consistory cannot do more than yours has done. The woman's will must be respected. If she chooses to live in circumstances of abuse, rejecting the help that is offered, the church can only pray for her and trust that the grace of God will preserve her in earthly and spiritual strength. Abigail lived with Nabal, of whom she, his wife, said that he was a "man of Belial" (2 Sam. 25:25). How many godly women have not lived all their lives with abusive husbands, endured spiritually, and been rewarded with eternal life! And how many abusive husbands have not suffered the punishment of Nabal!

**36. How do you determine when the home with her husband is a safe place to which a woman should return?**

This must be determined by the woman with the advice of a knowledgeable and sympathetic consistory. Fundamental is the repentance of the husband after intensive work by the church and often a trained counselor. When the husband demonstrates genuine repentance, so that the two can live together again, the consistory must continue its involvement by regular visits for some time. Continuing oversight of the marriage and home is a necessity.

### **37. Is it important to include the wife in matters of her husband?**

I take this to refer to the work being done by church and state with the abusive husband. The wife ought to be informed about the progress or lack of progress of her husband. She is his wife. She loves him still. Her overwhelming desire, as a Christian woman, is to have the marriage relation restored fully. Her grief, even her shame—unwarranted shame, since the fault is not hers, but his, but shame nevertheless—is that in a church that values marriage highly and to her as a female, who naturally desires marriage, her own precious marriage is a broken and miserable thing. Night and day, her overwhelming desire, her prayer, her agonizing cries are that God will restore her marriage and give her back her husband as the man he ought to be and probably as he once was. Information then about the husband's state of mind and, if God grants it, progress in holiness are water to a thirsty person. The husband ought to be informed regularly that his wife loves him still, wants nothing more than the restoration of the marriage relation—a relation in which he is a *Christian* husband, and which needs him as the father of their children. This ought to motivate him to undergo the necessary counseling and to repent with a heartfelt sorrow over his sin of abuse.

### **38. What percent of abuse is connected to alcohol?**

The experts in the field and my own admittedly limited experience agree that often, if not usually, abuse of one's wife is connected to abuse of liquor. Drunkenness loosens the godly restraint against mistreating one's wife, as it also weakens the self-discipline that is necessary for

other aspects of the Christian walk. It is exactly liquor's weakening of all restraints against a dissolute, abandoned life that is the reason why the Bible forbids drunkenness in Ephesians 5:18: "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess." "Excess" is a particularly poor translation of the word in the original Greek. The better translation would be "dissoluteness," referring to unrestrained, undisciplined behavior. Drunkenness loosens restraint. It lets the devil have free play in one's life, including one's marital life. The result is abuse of one's wife. It is also possible that drunkenness is the measure that the abuser deliberately takes to weaken the guilt of the abuse of his wife that he intends to carry out.

### **39. Are there cases of claimed abuse where none exists?**

So rare are such cases that I am tempted to answer, "No." But I suppose that the rare case might exist. The possibility confronts consistories with their calling as judges in God's New Testament Israel to investigate cases of abuse that come to their attention, in order to determine the reality of abuse.

### **40. What questions should elders ask to determine if abuse exists?**

Usually elders will become involved in a case of abuse by the wife's seeking help from the church. She will have spoken of concrete instances in which her husband abused her. The elders will confront the husband with these accusations: Did you hit your wife in a rage on such and such an occasion? Do you regularly swear at your wife? Did you call her these filthy, degrading names? On family visitation, the elders will put such questions to the husband as the following: Do you always treat your wife with love, as Christ behaves toward his church? Do you ever verbally abuse her in a rage, or with the purpose of killing her spirit? Do you think you are ever excused in abusing your wife? Would your wife agree that you never abuse her?

**41. You imply that abuse is increasing. What do you attribute this to?**

Whether abuse in the church is increasing, I cannot say. Nor did I say this in the lecture or intend to imply this. What is increasing is wives' making their abuse known, their refusal to endure abuse as though abuse is an accepted aspect of the Christian life of the believing woman. Surely, in this judgment they are right.

**42. The minister and consistory should not remove the wife from protection of court appointed officials. Nor should they attempt initially to counsel the abuser and his wife together. The abused wife is afraid to speak her mind in the presence of her abusive husband.**

These are not questions, but advice—good advice, obviously based on experience.

**43. What must the children do? Are they to be told to honor their father and mother? What should we be preaching to the children when they witness abuse?**

These questions raise the troubling reality that an abusive husband, by his abuse of his wife, which children observe, abuses his children as well. This is as destructive of the children as if he would beat them, perhaps more so. Murdering their mother, he murders his children as well. He makes it virtually impossible for them to honor him. It calls for amazing grace that the children would not hate their father, for which the greater guilt would be his. With regard to the preaching about this sin, it should bluntly admonish these warnings in proclaiming the fifth and sixth commandments of the law. The spiritual ruin of the children by an abusive husband is all the more reason why pastors and consistories must not close their eyes to the reality of abuse in their congregations but must deal with it thoroughly and firmly. To hear that distressed little children comfort their abused mother with the words, "The church will help you," only to find out that the church offers no help at all, in fact disregards the plea of the mother for help, is at first heart-breaking and then infuriating.

**44. Is it a form of abuse that a husband forbids his wife from having a relationship with her non-Protestant father, mother, or sister?**

One cannot answer a question like this without knowing the circumstances of such a prohibition. It makes a difference whether one's parents are living in gross, public sin, for example, adultery. Even then, to forbid all contact (which differs from fellowship) seems extreme to me, in light of the apostle's concession in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11 that believers may “keep company” with unbelievers outside the church. To forbid all relationship solely because the mate's family is not Protestant Reformed (though they may be confessing Christians in another denomination) is not the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It strikes me as a kind of severe punishment of the wife for the church affiliation of her family, regardless of the close earthly ties and wishes of the woman. Whether or not this is *abuse*, apart from extenuating circumstances of which I am, of course, ignorant, it seems to me to be lordly, harsh, and unfeeling rule in a marriage.

**45. May a consistory accept the testimony of one person, the wife, as the ground of the discipline of the husband, when the husband denies the accusation? Is this consistent with Matthew 18?**

I acknowledge that these circumstances in the matter of a wife's complaint of abuse are the most difficult for the church. The wife calls on the church for help. The husband is often a highly regarded member of the church. No one can believe that he would abuse his wife. And he denies the charge of abuse. In fact, he blames his wife for her complaint. “She is out of her mind. She has always been high-strung. She has emotional problems. I have never touched her abusively.” Etc. Fortunately, it is rare that, once the pastor or consistory is involved, the consistory cannot determine with confidence that the woman is telling the truth and that the husband is lying. In the vast majority of cases, the consistory will determine that the husband is abusing his wife, as she complains. In these cases, they will work with him to bring him to repentance. If his sin makes it necessary for the wife, temporarily, to live separately from

him, the sin is public, and the steps of private sin laid out in Matthew 18 are not necessary. The abusive husband has made the sin public.

If the consistory cannot, in the rare case, determine with certainty that the husband is guilty of abuse, they may not proceed with discipline. They may, and should, however, remain involved in the marriage, as a troubled marriage, a marriage troubled by sin. Either the wife is lying, because she does not love and submit to her husband as she is called to do, or he is, in fact, an abuser, as she charges. The consistory should notify the couple that they will be meeting with them regularly for some time, inquiring into the cause of the trouble and giving good biblical counsel. This procedure would also protect the woman against further abuse by her husband, if indeed he has been abusing her. I would be surprised if these regular meetings did not disclose the truth of the trouble. I would also be surprised if it did not come out that the cause of the trouble is abuse, as the woman alleged from the start.

#### **46. What are some of the outstanding examples in scripture that instruct us how pastorally to treat cases of abuse?**

Scripture does not instruct concerning every form of sin, including every form of sin in marriage, by examples. But its instruction concerning treatment of sin includes treatment of every form of marital sin. The church in the twenty-first century is not in the dark with regard to its treatment of abuse. Pastors and elders must “take heed... to all the flock... to feed the church of God” (Acts 20:28). This heeding and feeding extend to abusive husbands and abused wives in the flock. Acts 20:31 indicates that this oversight and spiritual care include “warn[ing] every one night and day with tears.” The warning of an abusive husband is that his refusal to “dwell with [his wife] according to knowledge, giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7) will cruelly injure the wife and the marriage, indeed destroy them as far as the husband is concerned, and bring down the wrath of God upon the husband.

Disregard of the church’s warning and impenitent continuance in the sin of abuse must be dealt with by excommunication. Paul’s behavior

as described in Acts 20:31 is intended by the apostle to be an example to the elders of the church of Ephesus, and to elders throughout the ages. He warned privately as well as publicly, at night as well as in the daytime. Verse 20 makes even more clear and forceful by the example of the apostle that the work of a pastor and of an elder is to admonish erring members of their churches privately, as well as publicly: he “taught [them] publicly, and from house to house.” “House to house” describes perfectly the private pastoral labor of the consistory with cases of abuse.

In addition, the ministry of Jesus as recorded in the gospels abounded with private, one-on-one admonition, exhortation, and comfort. One gets the impression, in fact, that his ministry consisted more of private pastoral work than it did of public preaching. His example was blunt condemnation of sin (John 4:17, 18) and of tender compassion for the sinned against (John 8:1–11). As for the self-righteous, who despised others, refusing to show compassion to the oppressed and to give help to the needy, adding to their already heavy burden, his rebuke was scathing (Matt. 23). For the outstanding example in scripture, who instructs us how pastorally to treat the cases of abuse, regarding both the abuser and the abused, one may read the gospels concerning Jesus himself.

**47. How could the church leadership become more sensitive to the emotional and psychological results of abuse for both the abused and abuser? Dealing with abuse only from a spiritual perspective, and dealing with it only, leaves the emotional effects on the abused unaddressed, it seems to me.**

I agree that in perhaps a majority of cases of abuse, professional psychological help ought to be obtained for both the abuser and the abused, in addition to the continuing spiritual help provided by pastor and elders. The abuser often has severe emotional or psychological problems that have contributed to his abuse and the abused usually suffers severe emotional or psychological trauma as the effect of the abuse. Pastors and elders are seldom qualified to treat these aspects of abuse, although the good spiritual counsel by the pastor and elders will have a healing influence upon these aspects of the sin too. This speech, a reading of

the recommended books and others on abuse, and conversations of the pastors and elders among themselves should go some way toward making the pastors and elders aware of the psychological damage either contributing to or caused by abuse, making special help necessary.

**48. What can the church leadership do to encourage and even build into their churches' culture a support network/community of those who understand and directly help those being abused? Without at least a few good, supportive, understanding family and/or friends to lean on, it seems to me that the counseling of pastors, elders, and possibly therapists will be less effective for the abused (the abused will have a hard time translating the counseling session to everyday life without supportive family/friends).**

It should go without saying that the family and friends of an abused woman are God-given support for her and her children. They listen to her cries, dry her tears, give her counsel, provide a safe place when necessary, and support with money as needed. But there is something special, even extraordinary, that the church can do, and I believe that it is time for the church to do it. In a chapter in the New Testament that has to do with offices in the church, 1 Timothy 5, there is a passage that recognizes a special group and function of widows in the church. There was a "number," which, although not officebearers, nevertheless had a special, important work in the church. It was a "number" of widows. To "be taken into" this number a woman had to have certain physical and spiritual qualifications (vv. 9, 10).

We are reliably informed that this group of women served not in an office but in the capacity of helpers to the deacons of the church, performing certain deeds of mercy for which women are better qualified than men. Such tasks would have included help of women who were about to give birth or who had just given birth; help with the household affairs of women who were ill; counseling of young women who were about to marry or who had just married; and the like. One can readily imagine the many and various opportunities of such help at the time that medical assistance was primitive and rare, poverty was rampant, and young

women were often without the help of family who remained idolaters. Although Calvin does not fully grasp the thought of the passage, he does express the main idea: “They [the older women] consecrated themselves to the ministry of the Church...They should be employed in ministering to the poor...they were...appointed in order...to minister to the poor and the sick.” Although Calvin does not intend a church office, but a special function on the part of these women, he speaks of “the discharge of their office,” adding that the duties of this unofficial “office” include “bringing up children, hospitality, ministering to the poor, and other charitable works” (John Calvin, commentary on 1 Timothy 5:9–13).

There are some duties on behalf of abused wives, and other needy women in the church, for which the diaconate of the church is responsible but for which they, as males, are themselves ill-suited. The male deacons do not have the time or the ability to assist a needy young mother with the care of herself and her family. With reference particularly to abused women, often the abuse includes sexual abuse. About this, a woman is hesitant to speak to the male pastor or elder.

I propose that the deacons in an area of the Protestant Reformed Churches in which there are several churches appoint a group of older women who have the qualifications laid down in 1 Timothy 5 to assist the diaconates in helping abused wives. These qualifications must include discretion. A church without neighboring churches could appoint several older women from its own membership. These women would help the diaconates with abused women as requested by the deacons. To the deacons they would report. The deacons would learn from these women the financial needs of the abused women. This group would serve the church, the abused women, and Christ Jesus as the “support network/community” for abused women of which this questioner speaks.

Questions and Answers regarding the  
Speech on Spousal (Wife) Abuse, open to  
the public by Prof. David J. Engelsma on  
May 9, 2017 at Byron Center High School

**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 (Rom. 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, the elders 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 the wife. Pay them no mind. In reality, they are not genuine friends of the 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 in 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 her responsibility to be a help to him and his authority to give her direction. 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: 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] 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.**

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 her 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 was as much that ministers and elders reexamine their attitude and conduct regarding the plight of abused woman as it was to help 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 apology, 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” (Matt. 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” (v. 26).

To the question, “who confronts the pastor who doesn’t believe the wife,” 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 Matt. 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 the pastor has heard the woman 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 1 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 1 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 the abuser 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 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" (Prov. 17:17).

**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 the abused wife 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. 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 (which sinfulness he by nature 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 (v. 25). 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 Rom. 13.). 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 his 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 his 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 church 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 7<sup>th</sup> 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 Matt. 5:31, 32; Matt. 19:9; Mark 10:1–12; Luke 16:18; Rom. 7:1–3; and

1 Cor. 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 (Ex. 20:13).

**27. 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.

**28. 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 and 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 and 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.

**29. 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 1 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 (Eph. 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 abusive marriages as the need arises.

**30. 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.

### **31. 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, then in some way 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.

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