

Calling the Evangelical Church to Truth:

Domestic Violence and the Gospel¹

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If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end;

If you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth

Only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair.

C. S. Lewis

I greatly appreciate the title the editors chose for this chapter—"Calling the Evangelical Church to Truth." It bristles with irony, provocation, and hope. At first blush it might seem strange to "call evangelicals to the truth" regarding the sin of domestic violence (DV). After all, truth and sin, particularly physical abuse, are fundamental to evangelical faith. Evangelicals, by definition, believe in propositional truth and furthermore believe it is found in the trustworthy, authoritative Word of God. We evangelicals should be well-versed in this subject, since the Scriptures we follow have so much to say about abuse—in the world and in the community of faith. Furthermore, we evangelicals, by definition, are characterized by a personal commitment to the "*euangelion*"—the "good news" of the gospel. The gospel affirms that we live in a fallen,

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alienated world in which humans are innately, inexorably inclined to sin. Thus, throughout human history, suffering, evil and violence have reigned. The breath-taking irony and hope of the gospel is that God sent his Son to suffer grotesque physical abuse to redeem us from sin and death. All humans need forgiveness. And all humans, including abusers and their victims, can find redemption in Christ. Therefore, as evangelicals we are well-postured to understand and embrace the ugly reality of physical abuse.

[A]Challenges to Facing the Truth about Abuse

The very nature of evangelical faith should naturally lead us to confront the truth of domestic violence. However, what is straightforward in theory is often messy and vexing in practice. In reality, facing domestic violence in our homes and churches is a daunting challenge for several reasons.

[B]It Forces Us to Confront Dark, Anguishing Realities

Domestic violence is painful for everyone. It is an ugly subject we naturally prefer to avoid. Sappy cheerfulness quickly evaporates when we let the prevalence of domestic violence and resultant human misery sink in. Humanly speaking, I would rather not hear let alone reflect on the fact that over one-third of the adult women in my home city of Phoenix report being physically abused by an intimate partner, that one out of five adolescent girls in America report being physically or sexually assaulted by a dating partner, and that adult men and women suffer over two-and-a-half million physical injuries annually from intimate partner violence (IPV).² The harder one looks at the

² "Domestic Violence Survey," Wirthlin Worldwide, 2000, provided by Phoenix Councilwoman Peggy Bilsten; Jay G. Silverman et al., "Dating Violence against Adolescent Girls and Associated Substance Abuse, Unhealthy Weight Control, Sexual Risk Behavior, Pregnancy, and Suicidality," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 286 (2001): 572–79; "Adverse Health Conditions and Health Risk

reality of violence in the home, the more painful it becomes. Those of us who devote our lives to ministering to the abused are haunted by the stories, the faces, and the pain of those we aid. So the pull to avert our eyes is powerful.

Several months ago I was shipping some boxes to Uganda. We have been ministering to physical and sexual abuse survivors in East Africa for several years. This particular day I was sending supplies to our daughter in Uganda. She lives in the slums of Kampala and ministers to street children. A high percentage of these children are on the streets because they had experienced extreme physical violence in their homes. The clerk who assisted me was quite curious about my boxes. When I explained it was supplies for African children, he immediately began asking me a series of brief questions, primarily wanting to know whether you "see sad things in Africa." I explained that you do witness suffering but you also observe and experience beauty and joy as you share with the needy. He immediately declared that he would never go to Africa because he "just couldn't handle seeing and knowing about people's suffering." While most people aren't as forthright, we can all relate to the temptation to simply close our eyes to others' anguish, to make our distress over their pain disappear by pretending that their distress has disappeared.

There is another dynamic at work—opening our eyes to physical abuse forces us to confront ugly realities in our own lives. Seeing abuse around us has an unnerving way of triggering our own painful personal and family histories. King David is a classic example of this impediment. In Second Samuel thirteen David refuses to acknowledge lucid warnings signs of impending family abuse. He is mute and paralyzed after it strikes.

Behaviors Associated with Intimate Partner Violence—United States, 2005," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 57 (February 8, 2008): 113–17.

While other family members recognized ominous emotional changes in David's son Amnon, who had developed such perverse incestuous lust for his own sister that he became ill, David was so oblivious to the problem that he unwittingly approved a wicked plan which allowed Amnon to rape his sister Tamar. Afterwards, when David heard about the rape "he was furious" yet did absolutely nothing (v. 21). This in turn allowed one of David's other sons, Absalom, to concoct a plan to murder Amnon in revenge for abusing his sister. Tragically, David was again oblivious to his son's homicidal intentions. Yet again, he conceded to a plan that allowed Absalom to commit fatal family violence. Years later David again refused to recognize abusive warning signs, which culminated in Absalom staging a conspiracy, sexually abusing David's concubines, and attempting to murder David himself. David's bizarre, chronic denial of physical and sexual abuse in his own household is best explained by his own physical and sexual abuse surrounding his abusive relationship with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11). Though God had forgiven him, his sons' abuse must have triggered such shame that he simply couldn't open his eyes to the fact that they were following squarely in his wayward steps. Ironically, the foundational truth that initially allowed David to quit hiding his own sin and experience God's forgiveness and healing is this: *the painful truth and God's lovingkindness are inextricably connected*. In Psalm fifty-one, in the context of his confession after being confronted by Nathan the prophet, David's states: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts" (v. 1, 6).³ Closing our eyes to family violence is a tempting way to mute

³ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture citations are from the New International Version. David repeatedly connects God's lovingkindness with his truth: Ps 25:5–6; 26:3; 40:10; 69:5, 13; 138:2. Other Scripture writers also make this connection.

painful truth, but it comes at a very high price—our experience of the redemptive power of God's love.⁴

[B]It Upsets our Desired Vision for the Church and Family

As evangelicals we believe the home and church are two foundational institutions ordained by God. We lament the attacks on the family all around us and are powerfully tempted to identify the "outside secular world" as the enemy of the family, refusing to take a hard look at violence in our homes and churches. Or, when we are forced to deal with family violence in our congregations, we often resort to simplistic, ineffective strategies for "saving" violent marriages. Research repeatedly shows that one of the greatest evangelical impediments to recognizing and responding effectively to domestic violence is an "idealized" view of marriage which fails to account for the destructive realities of DV.⁵ For instance, one abused woman recounted that when she went to her church leaders for help, they didn't prioritize her physical and emotional well-being but offered spiritual platitudes: "'pray, pray more. God can change anyone. God can change him.' It wasn't 'get out of there now.' It was 'God is able to change him. And you just have to pray more and God can work this out for you . . . God's will is that we hang together as a family. So just keep praying. God is going to change him.'"⁶ Surveys of abused Christians reveal that this type of "spiritualization of abuse" often flowing from a simplistic attempt to preserve the family, is one of the greatest obstacles to dealing with

⁴ For a theological development of the importance of facing the truth of abuse, see Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 131–40.

⁵ Nancy Nason-Clark, "Christianity and the Experience of Domestic Violence: What Does Faith Have to Do with It?" *Social Work & Christianity* 36 (2009): 386–87; Heidi M. Levitt and Kimberly N. Ware, "Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Marriage, Divorce, and Intimate Partner Violence," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30 (2006): 212–22. For specific examples from evangelical marriage literature, see Steven R. Tracy, "What Does 'Submit in Everything' Really Mean? The Nature and Scope of Marital Submission," *Trinity Journal* 29 (2008): 285–312.

⁶ N. Knickmeyer, et al., "Responding to Mixed Messages and Double Binds: Religious Oriented Coping Strategies of Christian Battered Women," *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 5 (2004): 38.

abuse in the church.⁷ It is also counter-productive to the well-being of families and abused women, for it minimizes the prevalence and gravity of abuse and the characteristics of unrepentant abusers.

Similarly, in one of the largest surveys of Christian leaders' views on domestic violence over five thousand North American Protestant ministers were queried. In spite of the fact that over eighty percent indicated they had some pastoral ministry experience with family violence, twenty-seven percent said that if a wife would begin to submit to her abusive husband God would honor her obedience and it would stop or God would give her the grace to endure the beatings. Furthermore, almost one-fifth of the church leaders surveyed said no amount of violence from an abusive husband would justify a wife leaving.⁸ Seemingly, marriage is more sacred than life itself. It is important to understand that the vast majority of abused Christian women believe in the sanctity of marriage, in fact, that is why they often endure years of abuse, don't seek help, agonize over leaving a husband they love, and feel great shame that they must have somehow failed and deserve some of the abuse they suffer.⁹ They want the violence to end, not the marriage.

In summary, when we put on a happy "game face," unjustifiably pretending that all is well in our homes or offer glib spiritual platitudes in response to the grave,

⁷ Norman Giesbrecht and Irene Sevcik, "The Process of Recovery and Rebuilding among Abused Women in the Conservative Evangelical Subculture," *Journal of Family Violence* 15 (2000): 235; Nancy Nason-Clark, "Conservative Protestants and Violence against Women: Exploring the Rhetoric and the Response," *Religion and Social Order* 5 (1995): 121.

⁸ James and Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 153–58. More recent surveys of pastors are a bit more encouraging, but continue to reveal a prioritization of marriage over the well-being and physical safety of women and children. See for example Levitt and Ware, "Religious Leaders' Perspectives," 212–22.

⁹ Shoshana Ringel and Juyoung Park, "Intimate Partner Violence in the Evangelical Community: Faith-Based Interventions and Implications for Practice," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 27 (2008): 349; see also Giesbrecht and Sevcik, "The Process of Recovery," 229–48.

devastating sin of domestic violence, this only drives the ugly truth deeper into the darkness, perpetuates the problem, dishonors the gospel, and keeps us from experiencing the beauty and transforming power of Christ. We do well to remember Jeremiah's warning to the religious leaders of his day who were minimizing abuse and oppression, offering superficial responses: "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace. Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all" (Jer 8:11–12).

[B]It Confronts Us with our Limited Knowledge and Power

Research among pastors reveals that the vast majority care about domestic violence and have dealt with it in their congregations, but most feel quite insecure about having the requisite knowledge and skills to help abusive families. One recent study of southern pastors revealed that only a fraction of them (8%) felt "very equipped" to counsel domestic violence victims, and less than one-third felt they possessed adequate knowledge to refer victims to community resources.¹⁰ Domestic violence creates complex, seemingly intractable dynamics in families. When Christian leaders do try to help abused women or their abusive husbands, it often doesn't go well. This creates a terrible "double bind" for pastors—they want to shepherd their flock but often feel impotent to do so. As evangelical leaders who believe in the veracity and power of God's Word, this is a particularly vexing dilemma, tempting us to overlook abuse in our families. It is hard to face a problem when you feel you lack the knowledge and power to deal with it. But this is precisely where we must apply "gospel theology." In a context of

¹⁰ Katie Brennan Homiak and Jon E. Singletary, "Family Violence in Congregations: An exploratory Study of Clergy's Needs," *Social Work & Christianity* 34 (2007): 18–46. Nancy Nason-Clark's clergy research also revealed that only 8% felt well equipped to deal with DV, "When Terror Strikes the Christian Home," in *Beyond Abuse in the Christian Home: Raising Voices for Change* (ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger, Nancy Nason-Clark, and Barbara Fisher-Townsend; Eugene, OR: Wipf & STOCK, 2008), 174.

ministry effectiveness, Paul confesses, "[n]ot that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God" (2 Cor 3:5, NASV). Furthermore, it is essential that we as Christian leaders recognize the foolishness of thinking that we have innate wisdom and power to change lives. At the end of the day, God does not work through our strength, rather, his life changing power is "made perfect in [our human] weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

A recent study of abusive religious men highlights the importance of Pauline "weakness theology." These men had been recruited from court-mandated anger-management groups. Each admitted physically abusing a female intimate partner and almost all said that having a relationship with God was "important in their lives." One of the key findings of this unique study was that these men were trapped in a terrible double bind. On one hand, in the course of the interview they came to recognize that fear, particularly of being perceived as weak or unmanly, triggered their violence, yet at the same time they overwhelmingly believed that to admit fear, inability, or weakness would only invite humiliation and rejection. They were convinced that their female partners would prefer their rage to a confession of vulnerability.¹¹ It is not surprising that these men are isolated and mistrust others, particularly religious leaders who seem to have all the answers. Thus, it is important and powerful for male Christian leaders to acknowledge their own weaknesses and fears, thus modeling reliance not on their abilities but on the sufficiency of Christ.

¹¹ Heidi Levitt, Rebecca Swanger, and Jenny Butler, "Male Perpetrators' Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence, Religion, and Masculinity," *Sex Roles* 58 (2008): 443–45. The role "power oriented" masculinity and gender role insecurity play in the etiology of male perpetuated DV is well established. See Jonathan P. Schwartz, Michael Waldo, & David Daniel, "Gender-Role Conflict and Self-Esteem: Factors Associated with Partner Abuse in Court-Referred Men," *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 6 (2005): 109–113.

Now that we have identified some of the specific challenges to facing the truth, we will identify cardinal truths to accept.

[A] Specific Truths the Evangelical Church Must Embrace

[B] Human Depravity is Universal and Results in Violence in the Home, Including Christian Homes

Scripture gives a shockingly brutal record of human conflict, bloodshed, abuse, and oppression. This is the product of universal human depravity, which results in those with more physical or social power taking advantage of those with less, particularly females, the poor, widows, orphans, and aliens.¹² Most often women have considerably less physical and often less social power than their husbands. The following research data demonstrates that DV is still prevalent and has a particularly virulent impact on women.

- Twenty-two to thirty-three percent of North American women will be assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime.¹³
- Between 2001 and 2005 nonfatal IPV represented 22% of nonfatal violent victimizations against females twelve years of age or older, whereas intimate partner victimization represented only 4% of nonfatal victimizations against males twelve years of age or older.¹⁴

¹² Eccl 4:1–4; Jer 7:6; Ezek 22:6–7, 29; Amos 5:11–12; Zech 7:9–10; Mal 3:5; Jas 5:1–6.

¹³ One of the largest and most cited U.S. surveys of DV is the Violence against Women Survey. It found a female lifetime intimate partner assault rate of 22%, P. Tjaden and N. Thoennes, *Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Washington D.C., U.S. Department of Justice and Centers for Disease Control, 1998). Using a screening tool recommended by the American Medical Association, other researchers found a 31% lifetime prevalence for DV among adult American women, R. M. Siegel, et al., "Screening for Domestic Violence in a Community Pediatric Setting," *Pediatrics* 104 (1999): 874–77.

¹⁴ Shannan Catalano, *Intimate Partner Violence in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, rev. 2007).

- A 2005 Justice Department report revealed that 84% of spouses and 86% of boyfriends/girlfriends who experience IPV are females, and eight in ten murderers who killed a family member are male.¹⁵
- Intimate partner homicides account for 40% to 50% of all murders of women in the United States, and in 70% to 80% of intimate partner homicides, no matter which partner was murdered, the man abused the woman prior to the murder.¹⁶
- Seventy-five percent of the victims of violent family crimes are female.¹⁷

Male perpetuated gender oppression, including domestic violence, is anticipated in Gen 3:16 when God predicted that as a result of the fall the man would "rule" over the woman.¹⁸ The first biblical account of domestic violence is found in the very next chapter of Genesis after Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden, when Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen 4:8–11). The first instance of DV towards a spouse is most likely also in Genesis four, when Lamech emphatically told his two wives, "listen to me...hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me...If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times" (v. 23–24). Domestic violence is widely understood to involve not just the actual use of physical violence against a family member, but also the

¹⁵ Matthew R. Durose, et al., "Family Violence Statistics: Including Statistics on Strangers and Acquaintances," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005), 1.

¹⁶ Jacquelyn C. Campbell, et al., "Assessing Risk Factors for Intimate Partner Homicide," *National Institute of Justice Journal* 250 (2003): 18.

¹⁷ "Special Report: Violence among Family Members and Intimate Partners," (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, revised January 2005), 344.

¹⁸ Most commentators recognize that "He shall rule over you" is no divine proscription but a tragic predication of sin's effects on the human race. The Hebrew verb for "rule" found in Gen 3:16 (*mashal*) is the same term found in Gen 4:7 of Cain's need to harshly dominate that which would harm him, i.e., sin.

threat of force.¹⁹ This appears to be the point of Lamech's haughty, chilling boast to his wives. Physical abuse soon became so widespread that God told Noah "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them" (Gen 6:13). The threat and/or experience of physical abuse occasioned the writing of many of the Psalms.²⁰ Physical violence and oppression is a dominant theme in most of the Major and Minor Prophets.²¹ In addition to idolatry, the perpetration of oppression and physical abuse precipitated the Babylonian Captivity (Jer 7:5–15). Paul apparently believed that the sins of physical and verbal abuse are so predictable and common in our fallen world that he used them to support his assertion of universal human depravity: "[t]heir mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood" (Rom 3:14–15). The "fruit of the flesh" anticipates physical abuse, for left to our own sinful instincts humans exhibit "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage" (Gal 5:20). Furthermore, Scripture anticipates that physical abuse will actually increase in the last days when people will be characterized as "lovers of self," "arrogant," "abusive," "heartless," and "brutal" (2 Tim 3:2–4, ESV).

Believers are certainly not exempt from committing physical violence. There are numerous biblical examples of physical abusers, including domestic abusers, among God's covenant people. Notable examples include Cain, King Saul, David, Absalom, King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, Manasseh, the priests and rulers of Israel, Jewish parents of small children, Herod, the Pharisees, Herodias, and Saul, the religious zealot and fatal abuser who eventually became the greatest evangelist and theologian of the early

¹⁹ Verbal threats of violence are characteristic of physical abusers. See for instance 1 Kgs 19:1–2; 22:27; 2 Kgs 18:27–35; Ps 73:6–8; Acts 4:21, 29; 9:1.

²⁰ For example, Ps 5, 10, 35, 37; 52, 59, 64; 140.

²¹ For example, see: Isa 59:1–5; Jer 7:6–11; Ezek 11:5–12; Hos 4:1–2; Joel 3:19; Amos 5:11–12, 24; Obad 10; Jonah 3:8–9; Mic 3:10; 6:8; 7:2–3; Nah 3:1–3; Hab 1:2–3, 9; Zeph 3:1–4; Zech 7:9–10; Mal 2:16.

church.²² The Apostle Paul was so realistic about the potential for believers, including church leaders, to physically abuse that he listed this as a disqualifier for church eldership in 1 Timothy 3:3—"not violent."

The human heart hasn't changed since Scripture was written millennia ago. Humans continue to be born sinful, and this is often reflected in physical violence perpetuated by believers and unbelievers alike. When my wife Celestia and I first began ministering in East Africa, we were shocked to learn that two of the African countries which have experienced some of the worst indigenous physical and sexual violence, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, are two of the most "Christianized" countries in Africa.²³ Research on American families reveals that violence in Christian homes is roughly at parity with violence rates in secular families. Based on several studies which independently corroborated each others' finding, we can be more specific: conservative Protestant men who attend church regularly are the least likely to engage in domestic violence, while conservative Protestant men who are irregular church attendees are the most likely to batter their wives.²⁴

Given the clear biblical teaching on the prevalence of physical abuse among believers as well as unbelievers it is surprising that evangelicals so frequently assume that family violence rarely if ever happens in their congregations. Denial of abuse in the church is widespread even when abuse is prevalent in the surrounding community. For

²² Gen 4:8; 1 Sam 18:10–11; 20:33; 2 Sam 11, 13; 1 Kgs 21; 2 Kgs 21:16; Mic 3:9–12; 2 Kgs 17:17; Matt 2:16; 23:29–35; Matt 14:8; Acts 26:10–11.

²³ At the time of the 1994 genocide, Rwanda was the most Christianized country in Africa. For a discussion of the role of the Rwandan churches in the genocide, see Carol Rittner, John Roth, and Wendy Whitworth, ed., *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches* (Minneapolis: Paragon House, 2004).

²⁴ Christopher G. Ellison and Kristin L. Anderson, "Religious Involvement and Domestic Violence among U.S. Couples," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40 (2001): 269–86; Christopher G. Ellison, John P. Bartkowski, and Kristin L. Anderson, "Are There Religious Variations in Domestic Violence?" *Journal of Family Issues* 20 (1999): 87–113; W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 181–83.

instance, a survey of forty-four pastors in Texas revealed the vast majority (83%) believe that less than ten percent of the families in their congregation have experienced domestic violence, in spite of the fact that they live in a state where seventy-four percent of the adult population acknowledges having either experienced violence or having a friend or family member who have experienced some form of domestic violence.²⁵ Likewise, two different studies of church leaders in Memphis found that almost all of them believe domestic violence to be exceedingly rare in their congregations, apparently so rare that they need not preach on it or otherwise address it. This is an incredible assumption in a city which has very high domestic violence and domestic homicide rates, and which, at the time of the surveys, was ranked "the second most violent metropolitan area" in the United States.²⁶

Believers can and do continue to sin. We need the transforming power of the gospel until we are glorified. Christians, including church leaders, are not "above" the sin of abuse. There is a sin continuum here and we are all on it. We need to recognize the fact that there are "seeds" of abuse in all of us—harsh words, harmful angry outbursts, inappropriate use of power, etc. Biblical teaching on physical abuse as well as current research on families make it patently clear that the evangelical church, particularly pastors, *must* teach on abuse. Battered Christian women report that the single most important thing their religious leaders can do to help abused women in their

²⁵ Homiak and Singletary, "Family Violence in Congregations," 21.

²⁶ Sharon G. Horne and Heidi M. Levitt, "Shelter from the Raging Wind: Religious Needs of Victims of Intimate Partner Violence and Faith Leaders' Responses," *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 5 (2003): 83–97. Nancy Nason-Clarke's research with Canadian evangelical clergy is identical—they estimate DV in Christian homes as much lower than the general population, "Conservative Protestants and Violence against Women," 119.

congregations is to teach on abuse from the pulpit, and acknowledge that it occurs in Christian families.²⁷

[B]Justice and Mercy, Particularly for the Oppressed and Physically Abused, Is a Cardinal Moral Priority²⁸

From Genesis to Revelation justice and mercy for the oppressed and abused is an overwhelmingly dominant ethical theme. It is not simply one of many biblical imperatives; it is fundamental to biblical morality. More specifically, ministry to the physically abused/oppresed in the form of care, protection, and confrontation of abusers, is a cardinal biblical moral priority for the following reasons:

1. *It reflects God's moral priorities*; he abhors physical abuse and abusers and gives justice/mercy to those they abuse and oppress.

[EXT][B]loodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors. Psalm 5:6 (See also Prov 6:16–18.)

The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates. On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face. Psalm 11:5–7 (See also Isa 5:6–8; 59:1–15.)[/EXT]

²⁷ N. Knickmeyer, et al., "Responding to Mixed Messages," 51.

²⁸ For a development of the biblical primacy of justice and mercy for the vulnerable, oppressed, and abused, see: Gary A. Haugen, *Good News about Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999); Glen H. Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

2. *It summarizes what God desires of his people and what it means to know God.*

[EXT]Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. He [King Josiah] defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. *Is that not what it means to know me?"* declares the LORD. But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppression and extortion. Jeremiah 22:3, 16–17 (See also Job 29:12–17.)

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God...The godly have been swept from the land; not one upright man remains. All men lie in wait to shed blood; each hunts his brother with a net. Micah 6:8, 7:2 (The context of justice and mercy is clearly physical abuse/oppression. Similarly, see Amos 5:11, 21–24.)[/EXT]

3. *It forms the basis for particularly rich divine blessing.*

[EXT]Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?...Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the

LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: 'Here am I.' If you do away with the yoke of oppression. Isaiah 58:6–9 (The context clearly includes physical abuse—59:3. See also the rich blessings promised in Isa 33:14–17.)[/EXT]

4. *It forms the basis for particularly harsh divine judgment.*

[EXT]Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain...The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice...So I will pour out my wrath on them and consume them with my fiery anger, bringing down on their own heads all they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD." Ezekiel 22:27–31 (See also Isa 59:1–4.)[/EXT]

5. *It is foundational to godly leadership. Spiritual and civic leaders have a particular responsibility to care for and protect the abused/oppressed.*

[EXT]Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. Psalm 72:1, 4, 13–14 (See also Ps 82:2–4; Isa 1:15–17; Jer 22:2–3.)[/EXT]

A final piece of evidence that justice and mercy for the oppressed and physically abused is a cardinal biblical priority is seen in one of the most dramatic acts of judgments in all of Scripture—God's punishment on Sodom and Gomorrah. The sin that precipitated God's wrath is one that evangelicals most frequently cite yet least understand. There are solid exegetical reasons for asserting that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were judged for homosexual acts. But this was not the only sin that brought judgment. In fact, Ezekiel 16:49 only highlights one sin—their neglectful apathy toward the needy. And these people were needy because they were being oppressed/abused. Moses says "the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah" is what stimulated divine judgment (Gen 18:20, ESV). The Hebrew word used for "outcry" (*za`áqat*) is "a technical word for the cry of pain or the cry for help from those who are being oppressed or violated."²⁹ Jeremiah 23:10–14 also links the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah with abuse and oppression.³⁰

[B]As Evangelicals, We Have Not Responded Well to Domestic Violence

Historically, we evangelicals have been slow to address domestic violence. Evangelical pastors rarely preach on abuse. Few evangelical seminaries offer courses on abuse in general or domestic violence in particular. Evangelical churches rarely have specific protocols or resources for ministry to violent families. When churches do respond to abuse, they often do so in unsound and harmful ways. Their self-assessments are often inaccurate—they exaggerate the care they provide survivors of family violence,

²⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 359. *za`áqat* is used to refer to the cry of the poor (Prov 21:13), outcry due to famine and destruction (Jer 18:22), and the cries of the oppressed and afflicted (Job 16:18; Isa 15:5; 65:19), including the oppressed Israelites (Neh 5:6; 9:9; Esth 9:31).

³⁰ Condemnation of Judah's oppression/abuse, particularly physical abuse, is a dominant theme throughout Jeremiah's ministry, cf. Jer 2:34–35; 5:25–31; 7:4–6; 19:4–5; 22:1–4, 13–17; 23:2–5, 13–17; 32:32–35.

and minimize actions and teaching which may harm violent families.³¹ It saddens me to issue such a strong negative assessment, but the evidence is overwhelming. We must be willing to face the truth about our collective failures and take corrective action.

Reverend Al Miles surveyed 158 pastors regarding various aspects of domestic violence. Many of those surveyed, particularly the male pastors, asserted that there were no abused women in their congregations. Thirty pastors refused to participate, reasoning that there was no evidence of domestic violence in their church. Not surprisingly, most of the fifty-three abuse survivors he surveyed were disappointed and hurt by the way their pastors responded to them when they reported experiencing DV. Miles' study findings left him both worried and hopeful.

[EXT][The pastors surveyed] were unanimous in condemning domestic abuse and all other forms of violence against women and children. They call domestic abuse criminal, deplorable, and sinful. Some of the ministers are confronting perpetrators with their accountability for the damage they have caused. But sadly, the vast majority of spiritual leaders could not describe any plans for programs in which they are involved to address this pervasive problem.³²[/EXT]

³¹ For instance, in one study of almost two hundred parishioners, including fifty-seven battered women, there was a dramatic difference (over one 100% discrepancy) between the perceptions of battered versus nonabused parishioners regarding whether the church offered financial support to battered women, church teachings contributed to a climate that fostered DV, and whether DV was addressed in sermons, Ameda A. Manetta et al., "The Church-Does it Provide Support for Abused Women? Differences in the Perceptions of Battered Women and Parishioners," *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 5 (2003): 5–21. Similarly, while 31% of clergy surveyed report having preaching a sermon on abuse, 95% of Christian women surveyed report never having heard a sermon on abuse, Nason-Clark, "When Terror Strikes," 174.

³² Al Miles, *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Need to Know* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 50, 93, 153.

I highlight the church's historic unhealthy response to abuse as an evangelical ethicist who loves the church. I have been a pastor for fifteen years and a lay leader for many more. For several years after graduating from seminary and entering the pastorate, I also failed to understand, prioritize, or respond properly to domestic violence. I shutter at recalling some of the abuse situations in my first two pastorates which I ignored or minimized. I have apologized to several of these individuals. By God's grace, I purposed to educate myself on abuse and make justice mercy for survivors and perpetrators a life priority. Our widespread failure to prioritize what God prioritizes and to hate what God hates is no trivial matter; it is grave. Thankfully, it is correctable. Many of us need to repent for our failure to address domestic violence and take corrective action. The good news is that when we do, we will often discover astounding ministry opportunities.

[B]As We Face the Truth of Domestic Violence in our Homes and Churches, the Gospel Will Transform Lives and Give Hope

While family violence is ugly, painful, and complex, it is not insurmountable! Most abuse survivors as well as perpetrators carry deep psychological and spiritual wounds. Satan confuses and misdirects them with entrenched lies and shame. Change comes slowly. Sometimes it doesn't seem to come at all. Drawing on our own resources, we will not have the insight or power to minister effectively to violent families. It is essential that we draw on God's resources, embrace his promises, and develop a true "gospel mindset."

The gospel does miraculously change lives, but this is not a "quick fix" for family violence. The gospel truth sets us free by exposing our sin and by bringing us to the end of ourselves. Thus, the mandate of the church is to proclaim the all sufficiency of Christ

in our weakness and brokenness, not in our beauty and perfection (cp. 2 Cor 4:7–18). Christ came for the sick not for the healthy (Matt 9:9–13). The church is for broken sinners who have the same problems and needs as the rest of the fallen world. We are all in constant need of the grace of God (1 Cor 15:10). Ministry to survivors and perpetrators of DV is living out the truth of the gospel in a pure and beautiful manner. God promises to honor and empower those who engage in ministry to the oppressed and broken. It is a sacred, beautiful, and uplifting privilege to have an abuse survivor entrust us with the most personal and painful parts of their lives, and to walk along side them and witness their amazing courage and sacrifice to grow and heal. Thus, while facing the truth of family violence is painful and difficult, it is among the most strategic, God honoring, and rewarding types of ministry.

Conclusion

We evangelicals showcase the beauty and power of the gospel when we actively face the reality of abuse in all its ugliness. Many of us have, at times, ignored the truth and failed to respond to family violence in a godly and redemptive manner. Thankfully, by God's grace, this can change. And for many evangelical leaders and churches it is changing. I would like to conclude with a testimony from one of my former seminary students.³³ Kim's story highlights the tremendous healing power churches can have in the lives of those shattered by family violence, even when the abuser doesn't appear to repent or allow the church to minister to him or her.

Kim and Bill were missionaries. They returned from the field so Kim could go to seminary, a plan Bill fully supported. Unfortunately, these events intensified areas of insecurity and unhealthiness in Bill, and he became increasingly abusive. The following

³³ I have changed their names to protect their identity.

is a condensed description of events that occurred over five years in which Kim, with the help of seminary and church leaders (in two different congregations) sought to heal their abusive marriage.

[EXT]The abuse continued to intensify and I began to fear for my safety after Bill started using Revelation 2:20–23 ["the spirit of evil Jezebel"] against me, saying that I would not go unpunished from my continued rebellion. Shortly after this I packed a suitcase and left our apartment under the guise of going to a retreat, since he was watching my every move. This would be the first time I would separate from Bill. Unfortunately, some of our friends and ministry supporters turned their back on us and withdrew their assistance after they learned of our marital problems. The support I received from what I would call my “first healing community” included material support along with unconditional love and grace as I tried to find my way through the confusion and devastation. My church mentor allowed me to stay in their home temporarily while I looked for employment so that I could support myself. Feelings of shame and failure seemed insurmountable at times, so my support community's aid was an especially important extension of God’s grace that gave me hope for the future.

I loved my husband and greatly desired to have my marriage restored, so with the help of my mentor I prepared a plan of reconciliation which gave the steps Bill needed to take for us to reconcile. My spiritual advisors recommended Bill get more extensive professional counseling, to which he agreed. He said he was sorry

for all of his abuse and appeared truly committed to personal and marital health. So I moved back into our home. Many times through the next five years Bill would "repent" after being confronted but the abuse would inevitably reappear, often in different forms.

Bill became increasingly unsafe at home and at church. So I went and explained everything to the senior church staff. They extended love and grace to both of us. Unfortunately, Bill would not accept their repeated offers of help. He utterly rejected their spiritual care, insisting they were ungodly and he was being persecuted. His abusive behavior at home intensified. When I was forced to separate from Bill for the second time, the church helped me to move into a new place and provided extra financial assistance. They offered to pay for counseling for both of us. Sadly, Bill's abuse and increasingly bizarre behavior continued. Eventually I was left with no other choice but to file for divorce.

It would have been easier for my church leaders to say I needed to go on to greener pastures but they stood by me, advocated for me, and showed their support in a myriad of ways. Most importantly, they believed me and did not ostracize me or make me feel inferior because I was being abused and having to make difficult decisions for my own safety and health. The leadership was open to learning more about domestic violence. The church and God's people became a place where I could be reassured of God's love, grace and truth.

God used my situation powerfully to say to our church: we are all broken; we are all in need of healing; you can find safety, unconditional love, and encouragement to become a whole and healthy disciple of Jesus Christ here in this church. I continue to be amazed and grateful to God who led me to this community of believers. God is now bringing many abused people to our church because we are ready to receive and minister to them. They are safe with us. This is the ultimate demonstration of God's love and redeeming grace.[/EXT]

Kim's story powerfully illustrates many of the principles discussed in this essay—the challenges as well as the redemptive power of God. Her church and seminary leaders agonized over how to best help her and her husband. They found the situation confusing and vexing. So they wisely and humbly reached out for help. They listened to Kim. They sought the assistance of others with expertise in ministry to violent families. They kept on reaching out to Bill, even though he repeatedly rebuffed their efforts. We can only imagine how difficult it was for Kim and Bill's two churches to face the reality of abuse in their marriage. After all, they were missionaries. She was a seminary student. We can only imagine how frustrating and disheartening it must have been after all the efforts by their church leaders (and Kim) over five years to learn that the abuse still had not stopped, that Bill still wasn't safe, that Kim felt she had no other choice but to file for divorce. But as difficult as this must have been, it reflects post-Eden biblical realities. Scripture simply does not promise that this side of eternity, in a fallen world containing sin, violence, and unrepentant abusers, we will all live "happily ever after." Yet just because real life does not produce care-free fairy tale endings, it need not produce

Shakespearean tragedies. In fact, Scripture assures us that God does some of his most beautiful, powerful work in and through pain, brokenness, and abuse. Our very salvation is the supreme example of this startling truth.

The fact that Kim, in spite of her husband's apparent failure to repent, is healing and thriving spiritually (she will be ordained by her church next week), and that her church has become an oasis for the abused speaks of the miraculous power of God to redeem. This also speaks of the incredible ministry opportunities in local churches that are willing to reach out to those shattered by abuse. Kim's closing words should encourage and motivate us: offering love and safety to the broken in the name of Jesus is "the ultimate demonstration of God's love and redeeming grace." May God give us the courage to face the truth that we might offer his grace to the broken.