

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE CHURCH AND REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING IN 1 PETER

Steven Tracy

Domestic violence is an enormous world wide social problem which warrants serious attention by biblical scholars and ethicists. The etiology of domestic violence is complex, and many different social, familial, interpersonal, and religious influences have been put forth as causal factors of domestic violence.¹ One of the more common assertions made by feminist scholars is that Christian theology contributes to the physical abuse of women. Texts in 1 Peter that deal with redemptive suffering (esp. 2:23–24) and submission of slaves and females (2:18, 3:1) are frequently used to bolster this assertion. The misuse of these same texts by conservatives has also given credence to the feminist assertion that evangelical theology contributes to the abuse of women. In this article I contend that liberal feminists and evangelical traditionalists have both failed to read these texts in their proper social context. Instead of contributing to the abuse of women in Christian homes, these texts give very helpful principles to correct the abuse of Christian women by their spouses.

I. THE REALITY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence is such an ugly concept to modern westerners that it is typically minimized and under reported.² It is particularly difficult for evangelicals, who view marriage as sacred, and place great emphasis on the significance and beauty of the family, to acknowledge and address domestic violence. To put it more starkly, “Denial of abuse in the family is widespread; people prefer to cling to the image of the family as an institution representing the

best of human interaction: nurturance, love, support, protection, and comfort among family members. It is painful to admit that the home is a dangerous place.”³

Like many blessed to grow up in a loving home, I have had a very difficult time accepting the reality of domestic violence in Christian homes. Years ago when I was a young pastor in a vibrant church, I was deeply offended when I heard the women’s ministry was having a special speaker address the topic of domestic violence. Little did I (or anyone else) realize that one of our elders had been beating his wife for years, having put her in the hospital several times. At this same time, one of our ministers was facing arrest for felony child abuse. Pastoral ministry as well as academic research have forcefully shown me the evangelical church must be much more zealous in addressing domestic violence.

Domestic violence is an enormous problem world-wide. The World Health Organization notes that research results from every country where reliable, large-scale studies have been conducted reveal that 16-52% of women have been assaulted by an intimate partner, and violence against women (which often takes place in the home) is as serious a cause of death and incapacity among women of reproductive age as cancer.⁴ In the United States, the Surgeon General has reported that domestic violence perpetrated by males accounts for more adult female emergency room visits than traffic accidents, muggings, and rapes combined, and is the greatest single cause of injury to American women.⁵ The U.S. Department of Justice reports that approximately 1/3 of murdered women are killed by an intimate (husband, ex-husband, or boyfriend), and most victims of intimate partner homicide are killed by their husbands.⁶ In 1998 women experienced about 900,000 violent offenses at the hands of an intimate partner, a rate five times higher than the violence men experience from women.⁷ Various studies show that 22%-33% of North American women will be assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime.⁸

Tragically, domestic violence in Christian homes appears to mirror the high rates of the general society. For example, Lee Bowker's survey of 1000 battered women from all sections of the United States revealed that most of the battered women and their husbands were part of "mainstream American religious bodies," and denominational preference did not significantly differ between the violent and the non-violent families.⁹ Abused women were shown to be quite active in the local church (much more so than their abusive husbands), with 26% of battered wives attending church weekly, and 24% of battered wives attending one to three times a month.¹⁰

II. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

1. *Feminist assertions*

Since the 1970s feminists have vigorously addressed the issue of domestic violence and have provided a very helpful expose of this entrenched evil.¹¹ Most explicitly attribute domestic violence to patriarchy, and often assert that the church is ultimately responsible for much domestic violence due to its long-standing insistence on female submissiveness. For example, E. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash in their seminal work on domestic violence argue "the seeds of wife beating lie in the subordination of females and in their subjection to male authority and control."¹² They furthermore explain that female subjugation and male control has been institutionalized in the patriarchal family through Roman political and Christian religious institutions. Carolyn Holderread Heggen argues that a specific aspect of patriarchy, namely the "control-over component," makes it particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse.¹³ Other feminists such as Rosemary Radford Reuther and Mary Potter Engel argue that the church has long been complicit in wife beating by teaching the inequality of women.¹⁴ In a similar vein,

Pamela Cooper White argues that in cultures such as those reflected in Scripture (and many modern churches) in which women are regarded as property, physical and sexual abuse of women will be a commonplace occurrence.¹⁵

Feminists also blame the church for domestic violence through its teaching on the redemptive value of suffering. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker make this bold indictment:

Women are acculturated to accept abuse. We come to believe that it is our place to suffer...Christianity has been a primary—in many women’s lives the primary—force in shaping our acceptance of abuse. The central image of Christ on the cross as the savior of the world communicates the message that suffering is redemptive. If the best person who ever lived gave his life for others, then, to be of value we should likewise sacrifice ourselves. Any sense that we have a right to care for our own needs is in conflict with being a faithful follower of Jesus...Divine child abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers ‘without even raising a voice’ is lauded as the hope of the world.¹⁶

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker illustrate the way Christianity can foster abuse by teaching women to accept suffering as “redemptive.” They tell the story of a battered wife named Anola who believed God expected her to risk being battered like Jesus. Anola’s husband eventually beat her to death. They also recount the experience of Lucia, a repeatedly battered wife who finally went to her priest after her husband had severely beaten her and broken her arm. Her priest said she should rejoice in her sufferings because they would bring her closer to Jesus. He admonished her “if you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.”¹⁷

This brings us to the relevance of 1 Peter to the issue of domestic violence. Since 1 Peter does admonish believers to be submissive to abusive authority (2:18–20), to follow Christ’s example of quiet suffering (2:21–22), and joyfully to share in Christ’s suffering (4:13), feminist scholars might appear to have a solid point—Christianity in general and 1 Peter in particular may indeed contribute to the physical and emotional abuse of women.

2. *Conservative teaching*

A typical conservative response to these feminist accusations is that feminists have simply misunderstood Christian doctrine, which does not promote the abuse of women. But a survey of some conservative literature on marriage strengthens these feminists’ accusations. Dorothy McGuire, Carol Lewis, and Alvena Blatchley argue that a husband’s physical and verbal abuse, even that which causes physical injury, is God’s “chastising sandpaper” and should always be endured. They support this point by citing 1 Peter 2:21–22.¹⁸ To illustrate, they tell the story of Lila whose philanderous husband attempted to murder her, and yet because Lila was, in their opinion, obedient to Scripture, she kept submitting to her husband, and refused to leave him.¹⁹ John MacArthur also argues that 1 Peter teaches wives to submit, even to abusive husbands. In the context of women fearing to submit because the husband might take advantage of her, he argues that the godly woman, like Sarah, should simply trust God. “If there was an abuse, they knew God would take care of the results.”²⁰ Ed Wheat states that in a “severely troubled marriage” in which the husband comes and goes to his mistress, the wife should quietly accept the sinful husband the way he is. Furthermore, the wife is apparently responsible to mollify an abusive husband: “you have to be perfect in your behavior toward your partner...and you must be very sensitive to avoid anything that will set your partner off.” He also cites 1 Peter

to support his model.²¹ Bill Gothard responds to the question of how a wife should respond if she is the victim of her husband's hostility. He replies, "There is no 'victim' if we understand that we are called to suffer for righteousness." He then cites 1 Pet 2:21 and 3:1 in exhorting abused wives to suffer like to Jesus.²²

Elizabeth Rice Handford similarly places great emphasis on female submission, stating repeatedly that wives are to obey their husbands in absolutely everything, without qualification, even if a woman believes her husband's command goes against the will of God.²³ She states that women are to submit passively to harsh and mean [abusive] husbands based on the example of Christ's suffering given in 1 Pet 2:21-23. She furthermore argues that a wife must submit to an abusive husband even when the husband is beating her child, orders her to get an abortion, or demands that she participate in sex orgies.²⁴ The point here is not that these conservative authors believe that domestic violence is acceptable male behavior.²⁵ Rather, the problem is that these authors explain female submission in such a manner that for the woman it functionally legitimizes and perpetuates abuse.

III. HERMENEUTICAL DIFFICULTIES: THE UNIQUE NATURE OF PERSECUTION IN 1 PETER

Both liberal feminists and conservative traditionalists often base their arguments on an unsupported assertion, namely, that if the biblical text is accepted as authoritative, then Peter's advice to abused slaves must be applied in a straightforward manner to abused women in the modern western world. Yet discussion of how to apply 1 Peter to modern abused women rarely addresses the specific social setting of Peter's audience. Thus, an extended analysis of the precise

social context of 1 Peter is in order. In particular, we need to assess what, if anything lies behind the passive response Peter recommends to the particular abuse victims in his audience.

The present consensus among those who affirm Petrine authorship of 1 Peter is that the letter was written in A.D. 62–64, shortly before the Neronian persecution.²⁶ Several solid arguments can be made for this date, particularly the strong ancient tradition that Peter died in Rome under Neronian persecution.²⁷ Internal evidence also suggests that the recipients of 1 Peter were experiencing local persecution shortly before the intense persecution initiated by Nero in the summer of A.D. 64. First of all, the technical term for religious persecution, *persecutio*, is absent from 1 Peter, as are any clear references to formal accusations (*accusatio*) or imprisonments.²⁸ Further, it appears that while some Christians were actually suffering painful persecution (1:6; 4:12), others had not yet experienced it, but faced the real threat of it (3:14, 17). Thus, the persecution appears to have been limited in scope, but had the potential for rapid expansion, particularly through slander and misunderstandings by the pagans (2:12; 3:16; 4:4, 14). Cranfield argues that the martyrdom of the Apostle James in A.D. 62 set the stage for this persecution, and marked a major transition in Roman Christian relations.²⁹ Up to this point, the Romans considered the Christians a Jewish sect, and granted them special privileges such as exemption from sacrifice to the Emperor.³⁰ With the death of James at the hands of the Jewish authorities, the termination of this exemption was imminent. Peter's Christian readers stood at the verge of dangerous persecution, because popular prejudice and malice was liable to erupt at any time into more wide spread violence.³¹

The specific offense of these early Christians that provoked Roman persecution is reflected in pagan writings of this period. For instance, when Tacitus recounts Nero's reign he acknowledges that Nero made the Christians scapegoats, and persecuted them savagely for the

fire in Rome they probably did not set. Yet he still believed they were worthy of torture and execution, albeit deserving a measure of pity. He states, “despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied.”³² Earlier in this passage Tacitus reveals the nature of the Christians’ guilt. Large numbers of Christians were condemned and executed “not so much for their incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies” (*odio humani generis*). For the Romans, religious life and social/community life were inextricably linked. Hence, new religions that did not honor the old traditions and social practices were seen as a threat to the social order and as such were deserving of hatred and punishment.³³

Pliny’s letter to the Emperor Trajan is also relevant to the persecution experienced by the recipients of 1 Peter is, since Pliny is describing his problem with Christians in Pontus and Bithynia, the region in which the recipients of 1 Peter lived. While this correspondence takes place in A.D. 112, it appears to reflect conditions similar to those faced by Christians in the early 60s. Much like the situation reflected in 1 Peter, the cause of hostility against Christians was not known, but apparently some of the locals had lodged complaints against the Christians (cp. 1 Pet 2:12). Pliny determined not to seek out Christians, but to question those accused and to execute immediately those who refused to make an offering to the gods and revile the name of Christ. Upon investigation, Pliny discovered no specific Christian crimes and found the Christian religious rites innocuous. Pliny recounts the Christians he interrogated:

They declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves by oath, not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft, robbery, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust and not to deny a deposit

when called upon to restore it. After this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind.³⁴

What was the basis for executing people with such innocuous beliefs? Pliny states that whatever the nature of the Christians' confession "their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy ought not to go unpunished." Of even greater threat was the fact that Pliny considered the Christian meetings to be "political societies" (*hetaeria*).³⁵ Pliny's response indicates again that the Romans were deeply threatened by the Christians' failure to follow the social order, and such failure was seen as deeply treasonous to the Rome Empire.

It appears that a similar occasional setting (pagan authorities being threatened by the Christians' failure to follow the social order) is the background to Peter's admonitions regarding passive submission to "the authorities" (2:13–3:1–7). Specifically, this setting is suggested by Peter's affirmation that even pagan civil authorities are ordained of God (2:13-14) and that by doing good, including showing proper respect to everyone and honoring the king, one can sometimes silence the slander of unbelievers (2:15, 17).

In other words, in 1 Peter the Christians' failure to observe the pagan social practices was highly offensive and considered treacherous. In this context, then, Peter urges these believers to let their upright behavior answer the pagan slander. They were not to resist abusive authorities, for such resistance would have confirmed Roman fears that Christianity harmed the social order.³⁶ This could easily have led to large scale, immediate persecution. Given this very specific occasional setting, we must be extremely careful when applying Peter's statements regarding submission to abusive authorities to a modern situation of domestic violence. *Peter's audience faced a completely different context for abuse than that faced by most modern western women, and hence Peter's admonitions simply cannot be taken as a straightforward response paradigm*

*for abuse victims.*³⁷ For example, just because Peter does not instruct those abused by their fathers or husbands to flee and call the civil authorities does not mean that abuse victims today should not do so. Peter was addressing a very culturally specific type of violence in the context of a household code.³⁸

IV. 1 PETER AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: RELEVANT PRINCIPLES

We now come to the crux of this study. If Christianity in general and 1 Peter in particular does not contribute to the abuse of women, then how is 1 Peter relevant to domestic violence? More specifically, what principles can be drawn from 1 Peter (with its emphasis on suffering, submission, and unjust authority) and applied to contemporary domestic violence? I have arranged these principles in textual, not necessarily logical order.

1. The manner in which victims respond to abuse

In 2:20 Peter admonishes slaves who are beaten by their morally corrupt masters simply to endure passively their unjust treatment (“patiently endure it”). The NASV somewhat euphemistically renders □□□□□□□□ in v. 20 as “harshly treated.” This verb can be used figuratively of being buffeted (2 Cor 12:7), but is most often used of literal physical mistreatment, i.e., of striking with the fist or beating (Matt 26:67; Mark 14:65). In 2:18 these masters are labeled □□□□□□□□, which applied literally means “crooked” (Luke 3:5), and metaphorically (as here) morally evil or corrupt (Acts 2:40; Phil 2:15). Thus, slaves who were being beaten by evil masters are admonished by Peter to submit passively to the abuse.

If we analyze the legal status of first century slaves, the following principle emerges from this passage: *the assertiveness or passivity of abuse victims’ response to sinful violence is largely*

governed by the social order of their culture. Scripture emphatically indicts abusive physical violence as a great evil (Prov 6:17; Is 10:1–2; Ezek 45:8–9; Mic 2:1–2) which should be confronted (Is 1:17; Jer 22:3–4; Ezek 22:2),³⁹ but the first century Roman social order prevented slaves from challenging abuse they (or anyone else) received from their masters.⁴⁰ The fact that in verse eighteen Peter addresses household slaves (□□□□□□□□□□ instead of □□□□□□□□) is significant, for household slaves by virtue of their proximity to their masters were often more susceptible to physical and sexual abuse by the master and other family members.⁴¹

Under the rule of *patria potestas* the master had almost unlimited, even tyrannical power over his slaves.⁴² Masters had every legal right to sexually abuse their slaves, either personally or by selling them into prostitution.⁴³ Furthermore, masters had the power of life and death over their slaves, and crucifixion was the typical punishment for slaves.⁴⁴ The Romans considered fear a necessary element in maintaining control over their slaves, so severe physical punishment, even for accidents, was essential to maintain the social order.⁴⁵ Masters often employed professional torturers who were particularly adept at inducing pain and creating fear. Pliny warned of the constant danger of slave revolt that created a need to keep slaves in constant fear, for “no master can feel safe because he is kind and considerate.”⁴⁶ Bradley summarizes the slaves’ plight:

The point is that there was no real restraint on the slave-owner, other than his own temperament or conscience, to prevent outrage or extremity if circumstances led to it: any slave who offended his owner could expect not only punishment but severe punishment, the penalty often exceeding the transgression, especially in cases of sheer accidents. The threat of punishment always overhung servile activities... While it should not be thought that all slaves in Roman society were being physically violated all the time, it is nevertheless true that all slaves were under the constant

visitation brings condemnation (Is 10:3; Jer 11:23) or blessing (Wis 3:7; Luke 1:68; 19:44). The vast majority of commentators rightly assert that Peter is referring to unbelievers converted by witnessing the good works of slandered believers.⁴⁹

This radical, counter-intuitive response to what modern individuals might call "verbal abuse" is ultimately based on Jesus' command for believers to love their enemies and bless those who curse them (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27–28).⁵⁰ In 3:8–9 Peter strongly reiterates this theme of mistreated believers seeking to be a source of blessing upon those who mistreat them. In 3:8, summing up the paraenesis he has just given (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□), Peter specifically reminds these believers that they should not return evil for evil or insult for insult but rather should give a blessing. The irony here is that God has called believers to inherit a blessing, but this blessing in part comes by believers being a blessing to the very ones who want to harm them (3:9).

Abuse victims can be a blessing by not personally seeking revenge against their abuser (1 Pet 3:9; Rom 12:14, 17–21) and by praying for the abuser (Matt 5:44). But if the social order permits it, there are other ways to bless one's abuser which are often overlooked. Boldly confronting the sin of abuse (Luke 17:3), physically separating from an abuser (1 Sam 19:12–30:31), and notifying ecclesiastical (1 Cor 5:1–13; 1 Tim 5:19–20) and civic (Acts 23:12–22; Rom 13:1–4) authorities of the abuse are all biblically sanctioned safeguards for wives. Each of these responses can contribute to the abuser being convicted of his sin, repenting, and receiving divine blessing instead of divine judgment.⁵¹ Similarly, Carol J. Adams argues that ministers as well as wives should not allow abusive husbands to escape negative consequences for their behavior. Her rationale is that "men batter because it works, producing the desired results without penalty."⁵² Hence, abused wives as well as their ministers can extend grace to abusive

husbands by implementing negative consequences for the abuse, and thus not allow the abuse to work. It is notable that secular social science literature on the treatment of abusive men strongly notes the need for abused wives as well as the broader community to confront abusive behavior and create costly consequences if abusive men are ever going to recognize the destructive nature of their of abuse and change.⁵³

3. The abuse victim's example—2:21–25

In view of the feminist assertion that the theology of 1 Peter contributes to domestic violence, 2:21 is the most problematic verse of the entire letter. In the context of unjust physical abuse, Peter says believers have been called “for this purpose.” For Peter to posit suffering as the believers’ “call” is particularly problematic, since $\kappa\lambda\epsilon\iota\sigma\iota\varsigma$ has special significance in the NT and may be an early Christian technical term indicating the sovereign, elective summons of God to eschatological salvation.⁵⁴ Thus, a facile reading of this text might suggest that Peter is sanctifying all abuse suffered by a believer. If the believer is called for the purpose of abusive suffering, and Christ our example suffered the most extreme abuse with quiet resignation, then does it not follow that an abused wife should passively accept all abuse, knowing that it will ultimately be redemptive?

First of all, we should note that the manner in which Christ serves as an example for abuse victims must be carefully nuanced. Believers cannot follow Christ's example in every way, since his suffering was unique.⁵⁵ He suffered for sin, whereas abuse victims suffer because of sin. Furthermore, Peter does not teach that all abuse is redemptive. The only kind of abuse Peter recognizes as redemptive (having transforming spiritual value) is that which (1) is unavoidable and (2) is based on the victim's godly character. We will first look at the latter.

Peter explicitly states that redemptive suffering is based on the victim's godly character. The use of the pronoun *we* in 1 Pet 2:21 to indicate that believers were called for *this* purpose (*we*) is best understood retrospectively, pointing back to the two uses of *we* in 2:19a and 2:20b, where God is said to bless (*we*) godly believers who experience unjust suffering.⁵⁶ *While abuse can never be justified, and God will harshly judge abusers, Peter argues that the personal redemptive nature of suffering is seriously compromised when one's own sinfulness precipitates the abuse.* For example, when a belligerent verbally obnoxious drunk is physically beaten by three large police officers, we would consider the officer's behavior reprehensively abusive. But by virtue of the abused drunk's sinful behavior, one cannot consider this "redemptive suffering." Without in any manner softening our commitment to hold abusive men fully responsible for their evil behavior, this section of 1 Peter suggests that we also need to help abused wives follow the example of Christ in terms by cultivating godly moral character.

This leads us to clarify the manner in which Christ serves as an example for abused believers. Peter uses the example of Christ (*we*) to strengthen his argument that believers are called to endure unjust suffering in a godly manner, for he quotes from Is 53:9 ("who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth") to highlight the fact that when Christ suffered, he was innocent and pleasing to God, in spite of the condemnation and injury he received from his abusers. The basis for Christ's suffering being redemptive was not actually his silence, but his innocence and his godliness. In this case, the former evidenced the latter. Silence in and of itself can make even a fool appear virtuous (Prov 17:28). What made Christ's silence virtuous and imitable for abused believers was his refusal to use his speech to revile or threaten his abusers, something the Maccabean and early Christian martyrs at times struggled with.⁵⁷ A

threatening response to one's abusers could certainly undermine the goal of being a blessing. Peter may be drawing upon other Jewish tradition that viewed silence in the face of persecution as an act of mercy.⁵⁸ *Again, the point here for abused wives is not that they must accept their abuse with passive silence, but that they must follow Christ's example of responding to abuse in a godly manner.*

An additional aspect of Christ's example needs to be noted. Christ's suffering was redemptive because it was unavoidable. Peter strongly infers the necessity of Christ's suffering by stating that Christ bore our sins in his body (2:24). This language, drawn from Is 53:5, 12 pictures the suffering servant as the sacrificial sin bearer. Thus, Christ accepted abuse with godly resignation because it was the only way he could secure human salvation. He was necessarily wounded that sinners might be healed.⁵⁹ If there had been a way to save humans other than the abuse of the cross, he would surely have taken it (Luke 22:42). Scripture does not sanctify avoidable suffering. Christ repeatedly avoided physical assault, most often from the Jewish leaders (his authorities) by hiding (John 8:59), by maintaining physical separation from his abusers (Matt 12:14–15; John 11:53–54), and by eluding them (John 10:31, 39). Other godly individuals in Scripture, such as Paul and David, also repeatedly fled physically abusive authorities (1 Sam 19:12; 27:1; Acts 9:22–25; 14:5–6; 17:8–10, 14). Jesus did not teach his disciples simply to accept abuse (evil); instead he taught them to pray that God would deliver them from it (Matt 6:13). Conversely, seeking avoidable suffering and expecting it to be a means of gaining favor with God lay behind the proto-gnostic heresy of Paul's opponents in Colossae (Col 2:20–23).⁶⁰ *Thus, modern abused wives should follow Christ's example by fleeing their abusive husbands, and escape avoidable suffering.*⁶¹

At this juncture we can note an ancillary principle related to abuse which flows from 1 Pet 2:23. This verse states that Christ “kept entrusting himself to Him who judges righteously.” By way of application, this text suggests that *godly victims of domestic violence must come to accept God’s view of their worth and character, not that of their abuser*. Husbands who repeatedly beat their wives typically have a pathological need to belittle and control their wives to establish their wives’ inferiority and ultimately their worthiness of being beaten.⁶² Victims of domestic violence must come to realize that their abusive husbands’ declaration of their worthlessness is no more reliable than were the judgments of Christ’s accusers regarding his character. Christ looked to the Father, not to his abusers to assess and vindicate him (1 Pet 2:23).

This leads to a final point regarding the nature of Christ’s example. Peter emphasizes the importance of abuse victims focusing on God and maintaining godly character when experiencing evil. Peter notes that while Christ was being abused, he did not revile or utter threats (2:23). In other words, *abuse victims must not allow the abuser’s evil to infect them, so that they begin to give birth to the very malevolence they have suffered*. The internalization of an abuser’s sin can happen in many different ways. It is particularly tempting for many victims of violence to in turn become perpetrators of verbal abuse or physical violence. For instance, Edward Gondolf in a detailed survey of the female partners of men in batterer intervention programs discovered that the majority of women admitted being physically aggressive toward their partner prior to his arrest, and 15% of the women had been arrested for domestic violence before their partner was initially arrested.⁶³ Other studies support Gondolf’s findings that the female partners of violent men often initiate violence themselves.⁶⁴ In fact, Murray A. Straus marshals considerable evidence to show that women initiate violence against their partners almost as frequently as men do.⁶⁵ Admittedly the contributory factors in female initiated

domestic violence are very complex and male violence against women is a much greater problem than female violence against women.⁶⁶ But it is still important to highlight the danger abused women face—they must not allow the abusers' sinful violence to germinate violence in their own heart.

IV. CONCLUSION

Many liberal feminist scholars assert that evangelical theology contributes to the abuse of women. Some evangelical literature sadly appears to confirm these accusations. Although the act of domestic violence can never be justified, the evangelical church has at times rationalized it in terms of redemptive suffering. Often texts in 1 Peter are appealed to in this context. However, a close examination of the social context in which 1 Peter was written reveals principles to preclude and correct the abuse of Christian women by their spouses. In particular, it teaches that abused Christians should seek to bless their abusers. But due to the occasional setting of 1 Peter, this principle does not preclude modern abuse victims from assertively responding to their abusers and seeking to stop the abuse. Furthermore, abused wives should not simply accept their abuse with passive silence, but they should follow Christ's example of responding to abuse in a godly manner. This includes fleeing from abusive husbands and escaping avoidable suffering. Finally, victims of domestic violence must follow Christ's example of allowing God, not their abuser, to define them and establish their worth.

¹ Two of the most thorough discussions of the complex factors behind domestic violence are *What Causes Men's Violence against Women?* ed. Michele Harway and James M. O'Neil (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999) and Kurst-Swanger and Petcosky, *Violence in the Home: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30-53.

² Pamela Cooper-White notes that everyone has a reason, conscious or unconscious, to minimize domestic violence. Abuse victims are often tempted to minimize as a defense mechanism to deal with their own painful past. Women who have not experienced abuse minimize to ease the painful reality that they live in a violent world. Men (abusers, and non-abusers) also have powerful reasons for minimizing the reality of domestic violence, Pamela Cooper-White, "An Emperor without Clothes: The Church's Views about Treatment of Domestic Violence," *Pastoral Psychology* 45 (1996): 4. Even trained professionals often minimize domestic violence. In one study physicians correctly identified domestic violence in only 0.3% of instances, B. D. Kerker, S. M. Horwitz et al., "Identification of Violence in the Home: Pediatric and Parental Reports," *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 154 (2000): 457–62.

³ Mildred D. Pagelow and Pamela Johnson, "Abuse in the American Family: The Role of Religion," in *Abuse and Religion: When Praying Isn't Enough*, eds. Anne L. Horton and Judith A. Williamson, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988), 2.

⁴ *WHO Violence against Women Information Pack*, 1997, available from www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/vaw/infopack.htm.

⁵ C. Everett Koop, "From the Surgeon General, U.S. Public Health Service," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 267 (1992): 3132.

⁶ Callie Marie Rennison and Sarah Welchans, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence*, a special report prepared at the request of the U.S. Department of Justice. May 2000, rev. 1/31/02.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Helen M. Eigengerg, *Women Battering in the United States: Till Death Do Us Part* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 2001), 62-85. One of the largest and most cited surveys of domestic violence is the Violence against Women Survey, which was a joint effort by the National Institute for Justice and the Centers for Disease Control. It involved a random sample survey of 8,000 men and 8,000 women. This survey found a lifetime intimate assault rate for American women of 22% (25% if sexual assaults are included), P. Tjaden and N. Thoennes, *Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence against Women: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1998). This report is available at: <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/183781.pdf>. Similarly, research in Canada indicates that that roughly 1/3 of Canadian women will experience an intimate partner assault in their lifetime, Statistics Canada, "The Violence against Women Survey," 1994.

⁹ "Religious Victims and Their Religious Leaders: Services Delivered to One Thousand Battered Women by the Clergy," in *Abuse and Religion*, 230–31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 231. Lenore Walker, in her classic work on domestic violence also notes that women with highly religious backgrounds frequently experience abuse, but very conservative religious groups typically exert the most pressure by on battered women to simply accept the abuse as the price for preserving the marriage, *The Battered Woman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) 22-23, 163-164.

¹¹ The first epidemiological study of battered women was conducted by Murray Straus, Richard Gelles, and Susan Steinmetz in the mid to late 1970s, and reported in their book *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* (Garden City, NJ: Anchor/Doubleday, 1980).

¹² E. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, *Violence Against Wives: A Case against the Patriarchy* (New York: Free Press, 1979) 33–34.

¹³ Carolyn Holderread Heggen, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 85. Cindy Schaap, a pastor's wife and daughter of Jack Hyles, seems to confirm Holderread Heggen's thesis when she argues that "submission is a husband's God designed need...it is normal for a man to desire leadership and to feel emasculated when his leadership is threatened. I would worry if my husband did not feel **enraged** when bossed by me" (emphasis mine), *A Wife's Purpose* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1992), 80.

¹⁴ Rosemary Radford Reuther, "The Western Religious Tradition and Violence against Women in the Home," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*; eds. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1989), 31–41; Mary Potter Engel, "Historical Theology and Violence against Women: Unearthing a Popular Tradition of Just Battery," in *Violence against Women and Children*; eds. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 242–61.

¹⁵ Pamela Cooper White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 8.

¹⁶ Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, 1–2. Marie Fortune is not so sweeping in her indictment of the church, but also argues that Jesus' crucifixion

is mistakenly used as a model for passive redemptive suffering, thereby justifying and increasing abuse, “The Transformation of Suffering: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, 145.

¹⁷ *Proverbs to Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon, 2001), 18, 21.

¹⁸ *Submission: Are There Limits?* (Denver: TRI-R Ministries, 1984), 91, 93–94.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36–43.

²⁰ *The Family* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 31. This is an admittedly older work and more recently MacArthur has acknowledged the reality of abuse and even states that abused wives can and should flee from abusive husbands (see “Answering Question about the Family” on the Grace to You web site, accessed at <http://www.gty.org/resources.php?section=positions&aid=192>). At the same time, MacArthur’s views on the family have been very influential in the conservative Protestant church and this has been one of his more influential books on the family. Furthermore, he continues to place an overwhelming emphasis in his writings on female submission.

²¹ *How to Save Your Marriage Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 24–25, 29, 31. While this book is now out of print, for many years Ed Wheat’s books on marriage were best sellers in the evangelical community.

²² Bill Gothard, *Supplementary Alumni Book*, vol. 5 (Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1979), 10, cited by James and Alsdurf and Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 88.

²³ *Me? Obey Him?*, rev. ed. (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord, rev. 1994), 31, 35. Unlike the previous three books cited, this volume is still in print. Its influence in the Christian community is seen by the fact that over 600,000 copies of this book have been sold.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60, 90. In extreme cases of abuse or sexual perversion, Handford clearly states that the wife must always submit, but she can appeal her husband’s command, and if she has the right attitude, God will always miraculously change an abusive husband’s mind (99). Based on her interpretation of 1 Pet 3:1, she states that female submission is unqualified, for a woman will never “have to choose between conflicting authority” (32). Amazingly, she ignores the massive amount of biblical (Exod 1:15-22; Josh 2:1-7; 1 Sam 2:22; 25:18-35; 2 Sam 11:4; 2 Kgs 11:1-3; Heb 11:35) historical, and clinical data refuting her dictum that God will always miraculously intervene so that a woman will never have to disobey an evil authority to obey God.

²⁵ MacArthur, for instance, states that a man “has no right to use his authority tyrannically or selfishly. Male chauvinism is no more biblical than feminism,” *Different by Design* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994), 43. The problem here is not primarily what MacArthur and other conservative writers say to men, but what they say to women.

²⁶ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 424; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London: SCM, 1950), 10; Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 37; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 787; J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 28; E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London: Macmillan, 1946), 56–60. Leonhard Goppelt does not favor Petrine authorship, but acknowledges that if Peter did write the letter, it must have been written in A.D. 62–64, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 14.

²⁷ On evidence for Peter dying in Rome under Nero, see Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 10–14.

²⁸ Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter*, 10. On the use of □□□□□□□□ for religious persecution by the authorities, cf. Matt 23:34; John 5:16; Acts 8:1; Phil 3:6; Rev 12:13.

²⁹ *The First Epistle of Peter*, 10.

³⁰ Note the letter sent by Claudius to the Alexandrians in A.D. 41 in which he admonishes the Alexandrians regarding the Jews in their community: “dishonour none of the rites observed by them” but rather “allow them to observe their customs,” *Select Papyri: Official Documents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 87.

³¹ Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter*, 7.

³² *Ann.* 15.44.

³³ Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1984), 62–67; Cicero argues that new gods who were not recognized by the forefathers should not be worshipped because this creates social and religious confusion, *Laws* 2.19, 26; cf. Cassius Dio 52.36.2. Wilken notes that later pagan critics such as Minucius Felix criticized the Christians for failure to observe the civic practices, but this was as much a religious criticism as it was social, “You do not go to our shows, you take no part in our processions, you are not present at our public banquets, you shrink in horror from our sacred games” (*Octavius* 12).

³⁴ Pliny the Younger, *Let.* 10.96.

³⁵ The seriousness of this charge is seen by noting that earlier Trajan had denied Pliny's request to form a society of fire fighters in Nicomedia, arguing that it might turn into a *hetaeria*: "if people assemble for a common purpose, whatever name we give them and for whatever reason, they soon turn it into a political club. It is a better policy then to provide the equipment necessary for dealing with fires, and to instruct property owners to make use of it" (*Let.* 10.24).

³⁶ David L. Balch argues that a primary apologetic function of the household code in 1 Peter was to reduce the social-political tension between society and the churches by urging Christians to conform to the expectations of Greco-Roman society, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 87–88. Balch's thesis is convincing in terms of explaining the tension between pagan culture and the churches, and explaining Peter's failure to encourage these believers to actively resist abusive authorities. Unfortunately, Balch sees the Petrine household code as so utterly occasionally conditioned, that it appears to have little or no contemporary relevance.

³⁷ Grant Osborne notes that in the contextualization process of moving from the biblical text to the modern context, the most difficult of the six stages he outlines is accurately determining the original situation. This is foundational to establishing parallel situations in the modern context, and ultimately to applying the biblical text to modern situations, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 338. Thankfully, 1 Peter gives us considerable data on the original situation, but it has received scant attention in the evangelical literature which applies 1 Peter to the modern family.

³⁸ On the structure and content of the New Testament Household codes, see David Balch, "Household Codes," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres*; ed. David Aune (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 25–50; J. E. Crouch, *The Origin and Intention of the Colossian Haustafel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972); Robert Nash, "The Role of the *Haustafeln* in Colossians and Ephesians" (Ph.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982).

³⁹ For a survey of Scripture passages relevant to abuse, see Catherine Clark Kroeger and James Beck, eds., *Women, Abuse and the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt or Heal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 237–45.

⁴⁰ K. R. Bradley notes that in the early Empire slaves were given some legal recourse to file a complaint regarding abusive treatment, but it was exceedingly difficult for them to access this protection, and there is little evidence that it was frequently given, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 123–37.

⁴¹ Juvenal criticizes the woman who, because her husband turns his back on her at night, has the household slave stripped and beaten by a professional torturer while she puts on her make up, gossips with friends, and reads the Gazette, *Sat.* 6.474–85.

⁴² Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 102; see also K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters*; M. I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking, 1980) 93–122; Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 205–31; Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken, 1975), 190–204.

⁴³ Horace comments on the expected sexual availability of his household slaves, male and female: "I like my sex easy and ready at hand," *Sat.* 1.2.116–19; see also Petronius, *Sat.* 75.11. Pomeroy notes that Cato, an authority on Roman virtue, had a slave girl come to him nightly, and emperors Augustus and Claudius had sexual relations with various slave girls with their wives' express consent, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives*, 192.

⁴⁴ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 51–63. Martial criticizes Roman culture for this practice: "Why did you cut out your slave's tongue, Ponticus, and then have him hung crucified? Don't you realize, man, though he can't speak, the rest of us can?" *Ep.* 2.82; see also Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.219.

⁴⁵ Ammianus Marcellinus notes that slaves might be beaten three hundred times simply for bringing hot water too slowly, Varro, *RR.* 1.17.5. Seneca tells about a cruel master named Vedius Pollio who was going to feed a slave to man-eating lampreys simply for breaking a crystal cup, *On Anger* 3.40. While Seneca condemned this action, he still argued that slaves are human chattel and should receive only moderate mercy amidst physical chastisement, *On Mercy* 1.18.

⁴⁶ *Let.* 3.14. Pliny says this after recounting the fact that Larcus Macedo was killed by his own slaves. Pliny admits that Macedo was "a cruel and overbearing master" but apparently he considered this irrelevant.

⁴⁷ *Slaves and Masters*, 122–123.

⁴⁸ See especially Jer 11:23; Wisd 3:7; Luke 1:68.

⁴⁹ F. W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 138; Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 160; ; Grudem, *1 Peter*, 117; Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter*, 106; J. R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 118–120;

Selwyn, *First Epistle of Peter*, 171; contra Peter H. Davids, who weakly argues that this is a forced recognition of believers' good works, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 97–98. Grudem notes that of the sixty-one times □□□□□□ is used in the NT, it is never used of unbelievers blessing God, even by force.

⁵⁰ John Piper gives a thorough defense of the thesis that the command of enemy love (especially giving a blessing) found in the paraenesis of the NT epistles and the synoptic commands of enemy love have the same source, viz., the teaching of Jesus, “*Love Your Enemies*”: *Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and the Early Christian Paraenesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁵¹ One conservative who affirms this concept is James Dobson in *Love Must Be Tough: New Hope for Families in Crisis* (Dallas: Word, 1996). Dan Allender and Tremper Longman argue for the propriety of confrontation and separation designed to lead an abusive person to repentance in *Bold Love* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992).

⁵² *Woman-Battering* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 88.

⁵³ R. Emerson Dobash, Russell P. Dobash, Kate Cavanagh, and Ruth Lewis analyzed various criminal justice responses and treatment programs for abusive men and concluded that the key to changing violence against women in a given society is for there to be low tolerance for such behavior coupled with various forms of control and costs for perpetrators of domestic violence, *Changing Violent Men* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 183–184. Edward Gondolf did a four-year follow up analysis of batterer treatment programs and found they were substantially effective in reducing domestic violence (for 80% of the participants), but the key to improvement lies in the entire community doing a better job of holding men accountable for violent behavior, *Batterer Intervention Systems: Issues, Outcomes, and Recommendations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 217–18; see also Mary Nomme Russell, *Confronting Abusive Beliefs: Group Treatment for Abusive Men* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995); Richard Stordeur and Richard Stille, *Ending Men’s Violence against Their Partners: One Road to Peace* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1989).

⁵⁴ Goppelt, *1 Peter*, 201; Schmidt, “□□□□□□,” *TDNT* 3.487–91. Peter himself uses □□□□□□ this way elsewhere (1:15; 2:9; 3:9; 5:10) as do other NT writers (Matt 9:13; John 10:3; Rom 8:30; Gal 1:6; Eph 4:1; 1 Thess 2:12). This technical use of □□□□□□ is probably best traced back to the LXX (Is 41:4, 9; 42:6; 43:1; 50:2).

⁵⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, “Suffering Servant and Suffering Christ in 1 Peter,” in *The Future of Christianity*; eds. Abraham J. Malherbe and Wayne A. Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993), 177. In commenting on 1 Pet 2:21, Calvin notes the importance of clarifying the exact manner in which Christ is our example. He warns that unless we make this clarification, we will end up imitating Christ in an absurd manner, seeking to imitate his activities which were inimitable, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 89. Carol Adams also emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ’s suffering: “Did not Jesus suffer once for all so that no one else would ever have to suffer as he did?” *Woman-Battering*, 109. Unfortunately, Adams does not seem to accept Christ’s suffering as soteriologically necessary.

⁵⁶ John H. Elliott, *1 Peter* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 523; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 142.

⁵⁷ 2 Macc. 7:17, 19; 4 Macc. 9:5–9 “but you, for the wicked and despotic slaughter of us, shall from the divine vengeance, endure eternal tortures by fire”; see also 4 Macc. 10:11; *Mart. Pol.* 11.2. Eusebius, on the other hand, gives a powerful example of a martyr named Sanctus whose only verbal response to his torturers was “I am a Christian” in spite of their efforts to force him to “utter something improper” (*Hist. eccl.*, 5.1.20).

⁵⁸ “The pious man shows mercy to the one who abused him, and maintains silence,” *Test. Benj.* 5.4; Davids, *First Peter*, 111.

⁵⁹ Joel Green and Mark Baker reject historic orthodox soteriology when they assert that Christ’s death was not necessary as a substitutionary sacrifice to appease God, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000). On Christ’s death as a sacrifice and as the necessary propitiation of the wrath of God, see H. D. McDonald, *New Testament Concept of Atonement*, 79–86, 95–102 and Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 129–250.

⁶⁰ See Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Steven Tracy, “Living Under the Lordship of Christ: The Ground and Shape of Paraenesis in the Colossian Epistle,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1995). While the Colossian opponents were promoting self abuse, not abuse from other people, the principle remains the same—suffering is not to be sought out; avoidable suffering is not redemptive.

⁶¹ On the need for abuse victims to establish personal safety to begin the process of healing, see Steven R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 143–145.

⁶² Paul Hegstrom, *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1999), 43–57; Eva Lundgren, “I Am Endowed with All the Power in Heaven and on Earth: When Men Become Men through

‘Christian’ Abuse,” *Studia Theologica* 48 (1994): 33–47; Margaret J. Rinck, *Christian Men Who Hate Women* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 43–70; Russell, *Confronting Abusive Beliefs*, 36–46.

⁶³Multi-Site Evaluation of Batterer Intervention Systems, rev. April 9, 1997, available from <http://www.mincava.umn.edu/papers/gondolf/sumofcdc.htm>.

⁶⁴Gordon E. Barnes, Robert P. Murray, and Reena Sommer found that approximately 40% of the females in their study initiated domestic violence on their male partner, “Alcohol Consumption, Alcohol Abuse, Personality, and Female Perpetrated Spouse Abuse,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 13 (1992): 1315–23.

⁶⁵Murray A. Straus, “Women’s Violence toward Men Is a Serious Social Problem,” in *Current Controversies on Family Violence*, 2nd. ed., eds. Donileen R. Loseke, Richard J. Gelles, and Mary M. Cavanaugh (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 55-77.

⁶⁶I recognize that there is no gender parity when it comes to violence, because men kill and severely injure women at a rate several times higher than women kill or injure men, see Donileen R. Loseke and Demie Kurz, “Men’s Violence toward Women Is the Serious Social Problem,” in *Current Controversies on Family Violence*, 82-89. Furthermore, women are much more likely to resort to violence as a mean of self defense, S. D. Dasgupta, “A Framework for Understanding Women’s Use of Nonlethal Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships,” *Violence against Women* 9 (2002): 1364-1389.