

## Understanding Domestic Violence

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Several years ago, at a new student orientation, I met an engaging young woman named Susan who had just moved to our city from the Midwest. Our faculty soon discovered that Susan was one of the most gifted students in her class, having a very keen mind and excellent writing skills. But we also discovered a very dark side to Susan's past. Her husband Bill had recently divorced her after she separated from him two years earlier due to his physical abuse and affairs. Susan had pleaded with Bill for them to get counseling but Bill was convinced that he didn't have a problem and their marriage was no one else's business. Bill and Susan had met at church shortly after Susan had become a Christian. Since Bill was a seminary student preparing for pastoral ministry, Susan trusted him. After all, she didn't grow up in a Christian home so she didn't trust her own instincts. When Bill began hitting her two months after they began dating, Susan felt she must have somehow deserved it. Several months later Bill insisted they start having sex and assured her that God approved it, she ignored her conscience and assumed Bill knew God's will much better than she did. Months later they married and the violence continued. Bill wasn't always abusive; sometimes he was fun and charming. But the violent rages were like ferocious storms that could appear without warning. Susan did her best to be the perfect Christian wife so she would never make Bill mad. But she couldn't be perfect enough. His violent rages were terrifying. Sometimes he would hit or slap her, sometimes he threw her around, other times he would choke her. Often he would hold her down and put his hand over her mouth and nose so that she couldn't breathe or speak. That way she couldn't argue with him. Susan would wear long-sleeved shirts and turtle neck sweaters to cover up the bruises. She accepted Bill's explanation that his violent behavior was her fault—he was commanded by God to get her to be submissive and respectful. Eventually, Susan disclosed the abuse to a leader at church, though the church did nothing. Bill was furious Susan had told someone else their family business but he rarely hit her after this. Unfortunately he continued to rage, threaten her, hold her down, and verbally assault her. Bill would sometimes bring her small gifts, after one of the

violent episodes, and would say he was sorry they had fought. But he never really owned his abusive behavior. And the patterns never changed until some family members finally convinced Susan she was being destroyed by an unrepentant abuser and helped her escape.

I have known Susan for several years now, and even though it has been several years since she left this abusive marriage, Susan still evidences tremendous spiritual and emotional damage. While I have clearly witnessed God's healing work in her life over several years, I have also been amazed at the depth of wounding she has experienced from domestic violence. Susan's story is like so many other women and children who live with an abuser.

### What is Domestic Violence?

Domestic violence (DV) is the use or threat of physical violence to control a family member or intimate partner. In other words, it is the use of force to control someone who should be treated with great love and respect. This dynamic helps to explain why domestic violence is so damaging to its victims. Domestic violence covers a broad range of behaviors, from extreme physical violence such as punching, choking, kicking or assaulting with weapons to less violent acts such as slapping, holding someone down, punching the wall, throwing objects at someone, or deliberately injuring someone's property or pets. It is important to understand that while many victims of domestic violence experience significant, and in some cases, severe physical injuries, domestic violence involves much more than just acts which cause physical injury. It involves both the use of physical force and the *threat* of physical force to control another. So if someone (most often a child or a woman) feels threatened by a husband, father, or boyfriend raging, punching the wall, destroying their personal possessions, threatening to injure them or their other family members, etc., they have suffered domestic violence. And domestic violence - which does not cause actual physical injury - does cause emotional/psychological injury. This is a very important point because often victims of DV as well as their family members and friends believe they have not experienced DV unless they have suffered visible physical injuries. This leads to the minimization of physical abuse and of the seriousness of the abuser's behavior.

Research with abusers has shown that many physical abusers do not cause physical injury on a regular basis. John Gottman and Neil Jacobson, in particular, have done very extensive and ground breaking research with violent couples (most of the physical abusers were men). They found that many of the abusive men did not generally continue to be physically violent after a few initial episodes. They did not need to because the initial assaults were quite sufficient to create long term fear, intimidation, and even terror. Often abusive men will remind their partners what could happen if they disobey or are disrespectful. Sometimes they will act like they are going to hit them but stop short at the last second, or they will hit the wall instead. Thus, we can see that DV involves patterns of control through fear and intimidation; often it will involve physical injury but not necessarily. It will always involve intimidation and the fear or threat of injury. There are many biblical examples of physical abusers using threats to intimidate, whether or not they actually carried out an actual assault. For instance, the wicked and abusive Queen Jezebel threatened to have the prophet Elijah killed within twenty-four hours for his victory over the prophets of Baal (1 Ki 19:1-2). Wicked King Ahab threw the prophet Micaiah into prison and ordered him to receive a sparse diet of bread and water “until I return” (1 Ki 22:27). Most likely this was an oblique threat of impending physical harm designed to terrorize the prophet while he sat in the dark prison not knowing when the king would come back. Abusers thrive on creating fear and intimidation to control.

### How Common is DV?

In terms of prevalence, various studies show that 1/4 to 1/3 of North American women will be assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Partner violence rates among young women are equally disturbing. A study commissioned by Liz Claiborne and released in 2005 found that: 13% of teen girls in a relationship admit to being physically hit or injured; nearly one in five teenage girls, who have been in a relationship, said a boyfriend threatened violence or self harm if they broke up; one in three teens report knowing a friend or a peer who has been hit, punched, kicked, slapped, or physically injured by their partner. Physical abuse of children is also a tremendous problem in our country. Approximately three million children are reported abused every year in the United States, and about 1/3 of the reports involve physical abuse. While not

all reports of abuse are accurate, most abuse reports are substantiated upon investigation. What is even more disturbing is the fact that a high percentage of child abuse is not reported. It is hidden, covered up, and not deal with.

## What Does the Bible Have to Say About DV?

Some mistakenly believe that since the phrases “domestic violence” or “child abuse” do not appear in the Bible that God has little to say about this subject. This is a great misunderstanding of Scripture. In fact, physical violence (which certainly includes domestic violence) is a major theme of Scripture. Hundreds of different passages (particularly in Psalms and the Major and Minor prophets) condemn physical abuse, call the believing community to protect the abused and confront abusers, and announce God’s judgment on the powerful (usually males) who physically prey on and abuse the weak.

**Note for instance the following verses which condemn physical abuse and abusers:**

"The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence His soul hates." (Ps 11:5)

"These are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty yes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood." (Prov 6:16-17)

"Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood, and who does any of these things to a brother...he defiles his neighbor's wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery...He will not live! He has committed all these abominations, he will surely be put to death." (Ez 18:10-13)

"Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have no known. There is no fear of God in their eyes." (Rom 3:14-17)

**Note God’s promise of divine judgment on all unrepentant physical abusers:**

"The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is very great, and the land is filled with blood, and the city is full of perversion; for they say, 'The Lord has forsaken the land, and

the Lord does not see.' But as for Me [God], My eye will have no pity [on abusers] nor shall I spare, but I shall bring their conduct on their heads." (Ez 9:9-10)

"And whoever receives one such child in my name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matt 18:5-6)<sup>2</sup>

**Finally, note how God calls us, especially those who are leaders, to protect the abused and confront abusers:**

"Deliver those who are being taken away to death, and those who are staggering to slaughter, oh hold them back. If you say, 'See, we did not know this,' does He not consider it who weighs the hearts? And does He not know it who keeps your soul?" (Prov 24:11-12)

"Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow." (Is 1:17)

"O house of David, thus says the Lord: 'Administer justice every morning; and deliver the person who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. And do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood.'" (Jer 21:12)

### What Is the Impact of DV?

Domestic violence creates long term physical, emotional, and psychological damage.

This includes:

- Physical injury  
Approximately 40-50% of female victims are physically injured when assaulted by their intimate partner, but only 1 in 5 victims of domestic violence who are injured seek professional medical attention. Common physical injuries from DV include broken bones (particularly in the face and hands), bruises, chipped or broken teeth, and concussions.
- Sense of Shame

Victims of DV often feel a profound sense of shame—that is, they feel they are somehow permanently defective and unlovable. They try to hide their true self from others, feeling that if people really knew who they were they would reject them. Similarly they believe that God can't really love them.

- Feelings of worthlessness

Worthlessness is closely related to shame. Victims of DV often feel they are largely responsible for the abuse and they have little or no real worth. Victims of DV also have absorbed repeated messages from their perpetrator that the abuse was their fault, that they are disgusting, etc. Perpetrators of DV are almost always verbally abusive to their victims. They often mock them, tell them they are stupid and worthless, and proclaim no one else would love them.

- Sense of powerlessness

Victims of DV have experienced a horrible loss of power and an inability to protect themselves. So they often struggle with deep seated feelings of powerlessness. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't prevent the abuse from happening. They may feel they have no way out. These experiences often result in a pervasive sense of powerlessness. This dynamic (coupled with a sense of worthlessness) helps to explain why abused women often stay in abusive relationships.

- Emotional shut down, depression

Victims of domestic violence live with so much emotional pain they often shut down emotionally. This is an understandable, but damaging, defense mechanism. Often victims of DV have a flat, expressionless appearance. They feel little or nothing, which can in turn set them up for more abuse. Over the course of time, this can lead to clinical depression.

- Psychological trauma symptoms

Traumatic events such as DV can alter our bodies, particularly our brain, nervous system, and hormones. This can result in nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks

(similar to nightmares but they take place when one is awake), insomnia, and chronic fatigue. Many victims of DV, particularly those who experience chronic abuse, experience these trauma symptoms over a long term period of time and develop PTSD (post traumatic stress syndrome).

### What Should You do if They are a Victim of DV?

- Realize you are not alone

Survivors of DV often feel very isolated and alienated. They feel their situation is unlike any one else's. They feel that no one else would understand what they are going through and would reject them, or mock them, if they knew. In fact, there are thousands of men and women who understand DV, care about victims, and would like to help.

- Reach out to someone who will help

God never intended for us to carry heavy burdens alone. We don't have the ability. That's why the Apostle Paul tells believers "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). Thus, when we are suffering from DV we need to reach out to someone who will help us. This might be a DV hot line counselor (see the resources at the end of this booklet), a trusted relative or neighbor, a professional counselor, or a minister. The key is to find someone safe, that is, someone who will not minimize the abuse or blame us for it, but who will support us and help us find the resources we need for safety and healing.

- Report assaults to the police

Perpetrators of DV, their families, and sometimes even churches will ferociously resist reporting abuse to the authorities. They may say "this is a family problem and it must be taken care of in the family." Or they may say "this isn't really a problem. You are just exaggerating." Or they will blame the victim by saying "if you wouldn't make him mad he wouldn't do this. You can't call the police; that will only get him in trouble." But the Bible tells us that God establishes all human governments to inhibit evil. We are commanded to cooperate with the governing

authorities (Rom 13:1-7). DV is a crime in every state and city in America. Thus, it should be reported. In doing so, the authorities can then seek to provide protection for family members and the perpetrator can be held accountable for his or her actions. Often this is the most powerful tool to get the abuser to come to grips with his or her sin and truly repent.

- Get medical help for injuries

Victims of DV often have untreated injuries which need to be treated. If in doubt, seek medical attention (none of us are able to accurately self-diagnose our physical health). Tell the doctor, or nurse, how you received the injuries. Though this may feel like an act of betrayal, it is important for establishing the truth about your abuse. This may be a critically important piece of evidence for police or for a judge.

- Develop a safety plan

If you choose to stay with your abuser, develop a safety plan in case you feel threatened in the future. This should include: placing important papers such as your passport and social security card in a secure place you can quickly access; placing important phone numbers, bank account and health insurance information, a check card, and some cash in this same secure place; establishing a place you can go in case of emergency (a friend's home, shelter, etc.). Establish a detailed plan ahead of time for exactly what you would do if you feel your partner becomes unsafe.

- Gather and save all the evidence you can

It is important to gather evidence which documents the nature of the abuse you have suffered. This can include photographs of your injuries, threatening or demeaning letters or emails from your abuser, voice machine recordings of threats or rages, possessions broken by the abuser, etc. This evidence can help you stop doubting yourself, can be critical in validating the abuse to a judge or probation officer, and can be very helpful for your counselor.



- Ask God to provide you a wise counselor  
Scripture tells us we need wise counselors to guide us (Prov 11:14; 15:22). This is particularly true in times of crisis when fear and confusion cloud our mind. God also tells us if we lack wisdom to ask him for it (Jas 1:5). So it is very fitting for victims of DV to ask God to provide a mature counselor who can give them encouragement and wise insights. This person may, or may not be a professional therapist but it should be someone who is mature, cares about you as an abuse victim, and who understands the nature of DV.

### How Should the Church Respond to DV?<sup>3</sup>

- Churches should prioritize the protection of abuse victims and their children.  
Scripture makes it very clear that God hates violence and calls his people, particularly spiritual leaders, to assertively protect the abused and the vulnerable (Prov 24:11-12; Is 1:17; Jer 22:3). Thus, churches must take seriously all reports of domestic violence, must never minimize abuse victims' concerns and must be willing to boldly confront abusers and offer practical assistance to victims.

Prioritizing protection certainly includes encouraging and supporting women to separate from abusive husbands. While an abused woman with no children has strong biblical warrant to flee an abusive husband, she has additional warrant (even a mandate) to do so if she has children. Jesus pronounced the most severe judgments on those who cause one of the little ones (children) to stumble (Matt 18:1-10). Abusive husbands cause tremendous long term physical, emotional, and spiritual damage to children, even if they only physically abuse the mother (and roughly half of men who physically abuse their wives also abuse their children). Separation from an abusive husband is also ethically important for the well-being of the woman. Scripture does not commend enduring avoidable suffering. Christ repeatedly fled from physical assault (Matt 12:14-15; John 8:59; 11:53-54) as did other godly individuals in Scripture such as Paul and David (1 Sam 19:12; 27:1; Acts 9:22-25; 14:5-6).

- Church leaders should humbly recognize their own limits, as well as, the complexities of domestic violence and begin gathering various church, community, and professional resources to address domestic violence and assist abuse victims and perpetrators.

One of the most common mistakes church leaders make when confronted with abuse is to try to “take care of everything in house.” Domestic violence is an astoundingly complex problem which defies quick, simple solutions. Abusers have deep seated wounds and pathologies which have existed for many years, as do battered wives. The dynamics of abusive families are complex and well hidden, making it very difficult for outsiders to know the truth, let alone offer a wise response. Hence, working with violent families calls for a partnership with various agencies, wise spiritual leaders, and other professionals.

- Refuse to be deceived by perpetrators of domestic violence and work with other church and legal authorities to hold batterers fully responsible for their actions. It is important to recognize the seriousness of church leaders overlooking violence or absolving abusers of their sin. Scripture declares: “acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the Lord detests them both” (Prov 17:15). God severely judged the prophet Eli because he refused to stop his sons from abusing men and women in the temple (1 Sam 2:16, 22; 3:13).

Holding abusers fully responsible, means refusing to accept any excuses or minimizations for violence whatsoever. If churches and church leaders accept abusers’ blame shifting or minimizations, this serves to strongly reinforce the abuser’s false and destructive beliefs. It is also profoundly harmful to battered wives and children.

- Condemn abuse from the pulpit and broadly educate the congregation on abuse. This is one of the most significant ways churches can encourage abuse victims, lay the foundation for parishioners to get help, and create a climate for healing. It is very empowering and encouraging for abuse survivors to hear their minister declare from the pulpit: “God hates abuse”; “God promises to harshly judge all

unrepentant physical abusers”; “There is never any excuse for touching your girlfriend or wife in anger.” These statements are solidly biblical and need to be proclaimed from the pulpit (see Deut 24:5; Ps 11:5; Prov 1:8-19; Joel 3:19; Micah 3:1-7; Nahum 3:1-7; Eph 5:25-33). Churches can also provide broad education on domestic violence through Sunday School, the youth group, men and women’s groups, and premarital counseling.

## Where Can I Get Help?

### **(1.) Local (Phoenix) abuse resources--**

Arizona Coalition against Domestic Violence-- [www.azcadv.org](http://www.azcadv.org).

CASA (Center for the Prevention of Abuse and Violence)--[www.casacares.org](http://www.casacares.org); 602-254-6400. They provide education, counseling referrals, and other resources.

Contacts--1-800-799-7739; 602-263-8900. They provide information on local shelter access for domestic violence victims.

Empact Crisis Counseling--480-784-1500. They provide emergency counseling services for local abuse victims.

Family Advocacy Center--602-534-2120; <http://phoenix.gov/citzasst/fac.html>. This is an amazing community resource for adult victims of physical or sexual abuse. They offer a full range of assistance, including counseling, forensic exams, and police department services. All services are free of charge.

### **(2). National abuse resources**

National Child Abuse Hotline--1-800-222-4453.

National Domestic Violence hotline--1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

## Where can I get more information about DV?

### **(1). Helpful Christian books on domestic violence:**

Hegstrom, Paul, *Angry Men and the Women Who Love Them*, Beacon Hill Press, 1999.

Kroeger, Catherine Clark and Nancy Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence*, InterVarsity, 2001.

Nancy Nason-Clark and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *Refuge from Abuse: Healing and Hope for Abused Christian Women*, InterVarsity, 2004.

Miles, Al, *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know*, Fortress, 2000.

Nason-Clark, Nancy, *The Battered Wife: How Christians Confront Family Violence*, Westminster/John Knox, 1997.

Tracy, Steven, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse*, Zondervan, 2005.

**(2) Helpful secular books on domestic violence:**

Bancroft, Lundy, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2002.

Dutton, Donald G. *The Batterer: A Psychological Profile*, Basic Books, 1995.

Herman, Judith Lewis, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence--from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Basic Books, 1997.

Jacobson, Neil and John Gottman, *When Men Batter Women: New Insights into Ending Abusive Relationships*, Simon & Shuster, 1998.

Walker, Lenore, *The Battered Woman*, Harper & Row, 1979.

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<sup>2</sup> While this passage is not specifically about child abusers, since child physical abuse can be extremely damaging to children physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually, it surely comes under the category of behavior which "causes one of the little ones to stumble."

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed biblical and research-based discussion of how ministers and churches should respond to domestic violence, see Steve Tracy, "A Clergy Response to Domestic Violence," *Priscilla Papers* 21 (2007): 6-16.