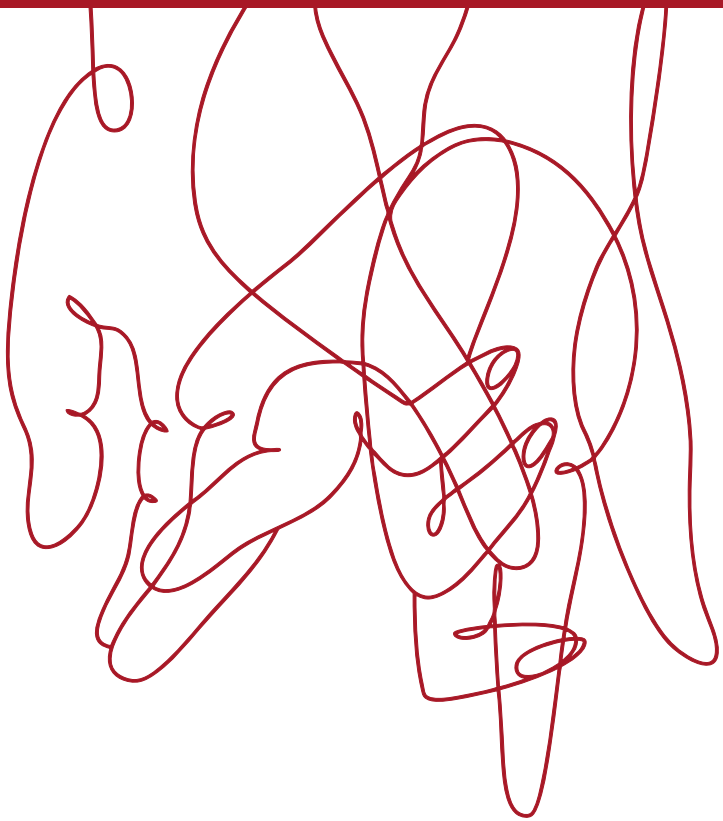
Christian Network
TO END DOMESTIC ABUSE

A Biblical View of Relationships to Prevent Domestic Abuse





This booklet has been produced by the World Evangelical Alliance Women's Commission and the Christian Network to End Domestic Abuse (CNEDA).

This is an updated and revised edition of a Biblical framework produced in 2000 by a global taskforce of the World Evangelical Fellowship, now the World Evangelical Alliance. Twenty women contributed to the framing of the document as a first priority in understanding and dealing with the "immense and sinful problem" of abuse.

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Introduction

One tragic consequence of the Covid19 pandemic in 2020 was the dramatic rise in domestic abuse cases across the world. Lockdown meant that perpetrators had 24 hour a day access to their victims; and the victims – mainly women and children – had no way out.

But the surge in cases and reporting on the topic has opened discussion in churches and wider communities as never before.

Unfortunately, the end of lockdowns did not halt the rise of domestic abuse. Other factors, especially resistance to feminism, online pornography and the popularity of male influencers who promote violent and demeaning behaviour towards women, mean that domestic abuse is still at very high levels. Police and legal services are overwhelmed – tragically two or three women are killed every week by a partner or close relative.

How should Christians respond to abuse and pain in families? How should they counsel women and men caught in abusive relationships?

This booklet wants to help us all understand what the Bible says about healthy relationships and how to prevent abuse. It aims to equip local church leaders to identify the issues, to affirm loving relationships and to respond with care to cases of abuse.

We are called to acknowledge the prevalence and severity of abuse, to respond compassionately to those who suffer, and to aid in their healing through practical and spiritual support.

We must be praying for those who are being abused and for the specialist services working tirelessly to get people to safety. We must also be petitioning governments to give specialist services adequate financial support. And let us be vigilant to help those who might be in need, even the abusers.

God's view of the value of all human beings

The Bible affirms in its opening chapter that all human beings are made in the image of God, and have the same dignity and value in God's sight.

Then God said, "*Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness so that they may rule….So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female He created them.*" Genesis 1:26-27[1].

It is the obligation of all believers to respect and honour one another and to promote each other's well-being.

Paul tells the Romans, "*Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.*" 12:10[2]

In Christ, there must be no partiality or discrimination based on social class, wealth, gender or race. Paul makes that clear in the much quoted verse – "*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" Galatians 3:28[3]

We are called to "*submit to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (Ephesians 5:21); and because we have the power of the Holy Spirit, these high standards of relationship are possible.[4] Included in the things we must exclude are anger, rage, filthy language and malice: instead we aim to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:5-10).

The Scriptures tell us that God's intention for the family is peace and security from oppression. Isaiah spoke of a city where "*children will be taught by the Lord and great will be their peace. In righteousness*

[1] *See also, Gen 5:2-3: Acts 17:25-26; James 3:9*

[2] *See also Romans 15:1-2; Galatians 6:2; Colossians 3:12-13*

[3] *See also James 2:1-9*

[4] *Galatians 5:22-26, Colossians 3:8*

you will be established; tyranny will be far from you; you will have nothing to fear." Isaiah 54:13-14

The passage so often used at weddings to proclaim the ideal love we seek, "*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*" 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

It is clear that God wants us to live in peaceful and compassionate relationships. Faith should make us loving, not violent; and gentle, not abusive.

"*So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*" Romans 12:5

Healthy marriages

Harmony in the home is everyone's responsibility. While the Greek word, *'hupotasso'* is often translated *'submit'* when it refers to wives, it has various meanings in the New Testament and in other contemporary literature.

The term can mean to comply with, to be loyal to, to associate or identify with, to commit oneself to, to behave responsibly toward, to fulfil one's obligations toward another, or to make a meaningful relationship. These values can do much to enrich a marriage.

In whatever sense persons choose to understand *'submit'*, it is important to note that every time the Scriptures speak of wifely submission, there is a specific directive to prevent spousal abuse: In Ephesians, Paul tells husbands, "*to love their wives, as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.*" (5:28-29)[5]

[5]*Likewise, Colossians 3:18-19 and 1 Peter 3:7*

The statement that the husband is head of the wife is intended as a picture of intimate relationship and tenderness rather than as the basis for control or abuse. The Greeks did not ordinarily use the metaphor "*head*" to imply control or power over another. It was more frequently an image of interdependence (1 Corinthians 12:21) and mutual support and growth in the body. (Ephesians 4:15-26; Colossians 2:19).

The theme is taken up in a different way when Christ as head and heavenly bridegroom enables the development of the full potential of the Church as bride. The truly loving husband enables his wife to be a complete person fully equipped to serve Christ.[6]

An abusive spousal relationship cannot possibly be a picture of Christ's love for the Church. God calls Himself the Husband of Zion and as such promises that she shall not know oppression or terror. God's description of His care contrasts with broken human relationships where the woman has been rejected.

"Your Maker is your husband - the Lord Almighty is His name – the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a deserted wife and distressed in spirit, a wife who married young only to be rejected." (Isaiah 54:5-6)

Scripture enjoins husbands and wives to accord each other honour rather than insult, injury, and degradation.

The fruit of the Holy Spirit offers a direct antithesis to abuse: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

[6] *Ephesians 5:25-27*

Preventing abuse against women

The Bible's prophets listened to God's Word and boldly proclaimed it. They were led by God to lament the evil in the world around them and to make specific issues a matter of deep prayer and reflection. They exhorted men and women to assess their attitudes and challenged them to alter their behaviour. Even though they were often unpopular, they were faithful in their task of proclamation.

The same pattern applies for today's Christian leaders. We must perceive the condition, acknowledge its sinfulness, and invest ourselves in prayer and study of the Scriptures as we look to God for prophetic voice and action.

An evil of which we would prefer not to speak is abuse and violence against women. We would like to think that it cannot happen among Christians, and surely not in a Christian home or church. Yet research in Ecuador and Peru in 2013 showed that 70% of evangelical adults had suffered some kind of domestic violence in the last three years.[7] The hard facts compel us to acknowledge that sinful practices are being ignored, tolerated, sometimes even perpetuated in the Church as well as society at large.[8]

Physical, sexual, emotional, and verbal abuse are abhorrent to God.

Women worldwide continue to report that domestic violence is a major problem.

We must also acknowledge that childhood incest and abuse, and parents allowing their children to be trafficked for sexual or labour servitude are issues that are so abhorrent, churches fail to talk

[7] *The research was conducted by Paz y Esperanza, Communidad and Restored among 2027 evangelicals. 60% of evangelical women and 40% of evangelical men in Peru said they were victims of sexual abuse as children. In Ecuador, the figures were 40% and 20%. In Argentina, it was 30% and 20%*

[8] *Julia Baird, an award-winning Australian journalist, has researched abuse inside the Church and reports that many church leaders seriously underestimate the extent and impact of domestic violence and abuse. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/opinion/churches-can-no-longer-hide-domestic-violence.html*

about the dangers.[9]

Frequently, the church and its leaders have not fully realized the enormity of the problem or the long-lasting physical, social, psychological, and spiritual harm that is done to victims and their families. The Church community is not heartless, but frequently Christians do not know how to address a situation when a woman has been abused.[10]

Yet, the call to Christian compassion and action is very clear in prophets like Jeremiah. *"Administer justice every morning; rescue from the hands of their oppressors those who have been robbed"* 21:12.[11]

This is a point at which we must examine carefully what the Scriptures have to say. Just as alcohol may fuel abuse of a wife, so distortions of Scripture have been used to fuel similar abuse. Many abused women have been revictimized by manipulations of Christian truth. We need to clarify the misconceptions about what the Bible says regarding violence against women. We must come to the Scriptures and ask questions both old and new.

How Church culture can enable abuse

We are well aware that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God; and we know too that even born-again believers sin. The Holy Spirit who indwells us is grieved, but nevertheless Christians can make their own choices, for good or for evil.

We must be very clear about the Bible's condemnation of violence and abuse. There are more than one hundred Biblical passages addressing battering, violence, rape, incest, stalking, lying in wait,

[9] *See Joy Wilson, 'Ministering to Victims of Incest', 2017*

[10] *We want to acknowledge that men who are the victims of abuse may face a different set of barriers to being believed and helped. About 85-90% of abuse victims are women but men can suffer abuse – often it takes the form of emotional and psychological manipulation rather than physical violence*

[11] *See also Jeremiah 22:3, 15-18*

twisting the words of another, threats, and intimidation.

Since the Word of God condemns violence and abuse, the Church must be faithful in teaching this truth, but how often do we hear preaching about the horrors of violence and the consequences for women?

The Bible tells us that there are serious consequences for abusive behaviour – God will not tolerate outwardly pious actions that hide quarrelling or strife; and will not listen to the prayers of those with *'wicked fists'*.[12]

Paul warns young Timothy and Titus that an elder or bishop should not be abusive.[13] The King James Version declared that the individual should not be a *'striker'* while more modern translations often use the word *'violent'*. The original Greek quite literally means *'one who hits'*.

If Paul is warning against such behaviour, it must have been an issue – one he is willing to tackle. And so should we.

Another specification for leadership is having a family with good relationships. Paul uses words like *"temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle"*. (1 Timothy 3:3-4). Verbal or sexual abuse in the home does not qualify anyone to take responsibilities in the family of God.

Paul declares that no one should abuse or exploit another in sexual relations, whether in or outside of marriage. *"avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control your own body, in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust like the pagans who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister."* I Thessalonians 4:3-6

Although husband and wife are to share their bodies with each other (1 Corinthians 7:3-5), this must be done not with cruelty and coercion but in love, honour, and in holiness.

[12] *See Isaiah 58:4; 1 Peter 3:7*

[13] *1 Timothy3:3 and Titus 1:7*

The Church's response to abuse

Scriptures tell us that it is the obligation of the people of God to *"deliver the needy who cry out one, the afflicted who has no-one to help."* (Psalm 72:12).

Why do we so often ignore abuse even when we know that it is going on in a church home? Our duty is to secure the safety of the victims and to offer them whatever aid we can: intervention, emotional and spiritual support, housing, food, child care, counselling, prayer, and love.[14]

A major misconception is that a woman[15] ought to suffer in imitation of Christ so that her husband will be converted through her suffering. It is true that the Bible commends those who suffer as Christians and refuse to deny the faith. Yet the well-known passage on suffering in 1 Peter is addressed to those who are suffering as Christians during a time of persecution.[16]

It does not endorse believers allowing themselves to be abused. Although Christ was willing to lay down his life to procure our salvation, in other situations He defended himself against violence, slander, deception, verbal and emotional abuse.[17]

The kindly and gracious attitude of a wife may turn a husband to Christ; however, continuing to endure his abuse is damaging to everyone's spiritual life.

Another damaging teaching is that a woman in an abusive relationship should pray more earnestly to *'solve'* the violence because it would be wrong for her to end her one flesh

[14] *Among many verses, see Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Isaiah 58:6-10; Ezekiel 18:5-9; Matthew 25: 31-46*

[15] *As stated earlier, in this article we are generally referring to woman as victims of abuse, rather than as perpetrators as up to 90% of victims are female*

[16] *1 Peter 2:18-19 and 4:14-16*

[17] *See Luke 4:28-30; Mark 3:22-30; John 8:48-59, 10:39*

union.[18] Pastors seem to value the bonds of marriage over the safety of victims. This attitude also implies that the woman may be contributing to the violence.

All of us earnestly desire that troubled marriages should be healed, but when an abuser refuses to change, the abused must protect her life and that of her children. The favoured option in abusive relationships is for the abuse to stop. However, if repeated attempts by the pastor and care-giving community to assist in stopping the abuse fail, other options need to be explored including separation, intervention and legal action.

It is all too common for a husband to use the Bible verse about submission to justify violence or to think that a woman may have contributed to the violence by doing something wrong.[19] This wrong teaching is allowed to continue, perhaps with a shrug or perhaps with open endorsement from pastors.[20]

[18] *Marriage was given to bind together a man and a woman as one flesh in perfect union (Genesis 2:24; Ephesians 5:31)*

[19] *The 2013 research (see Footnote on P5) found that 30% of respondents said that a wife is battered because she doesn't submit to her husband. 20% of evangelicals in Ecuador and 30% in Peru and Argentina thought the domestic abuse victim must have done something wrong to incite violence*

[20] *In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus tells his disciples what to do if someone sins against you. Victims have usually more than fulfilled the first step of this, so then the church should step in; but if the abuse does not stop, then Jesus is clear the 'abuser' should be removed*

How do we deal with abusers?

Another sort of help must be provided to the offender, who must be held accountable for his deeds. Often the perpetrator is more eloquent and more persuasive than the victim, and so the church supports him in harsh judgement and disbelief of the victim.

The New Testament teaches that the believing community must correct an individual who sins: violence against one's own family is indeed a grievous sin.

"Those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning." (1 Timothy 5:20).[21] The Bible is specific that an offender needs to stand under the censure of the church body.[22]

Those who know of the abuse should not continue to act as though nothing is amiss. Silence can be misinterpreted as tacit approval.[23] For too long, churches have wanted to protect their reputation or the reputation of a church pastor, and have chosen to ignore or cover up abuse. Silence, secrecy, or concealment are not God's way of dealing with abuse.

An abuser may be mentored, monitored, and ministered to; but he must be made to understand that such behaviour is not acceptable among believers. There must be no tolerance for the offence. When abuse problems arise, Christians must respond in obedience to God's Word.

We must let an abuser face the consequences of his behaviour.[24] There must be no effort to obtain a lighter sentence, to be excused from an abusers' group, or from court ordered counselling. We need to make sure that we let just and legal consequences do their work.[25]

[21] *Matthew 18:15-17; James 5:19-20*

[22] *See 1 Corinthians5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; Proverbs 3:31, 24:1-2*

[23] *Paul himself had given quiet approval to the killing of Christians - see Acts 7:58*

[24] *Psalm 7:16 says, 'The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads.'*

[25] *See 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20)*

What about repentance?

The Church must be aware that an abuser may appear very repentant. Indeed, he may be very sorry for the harm he has caused to another, but even more sorry that his sinful behaviour has been disclosed. Remorse is not the same as repentance (Hebrew 12:17).

A period of contrition often follows an outburst of violence and is not to be confused with genuine repentance. Abuse often occurs in cycles: first, the abuse, then a honeymoon period (during which the offender seeks forgiveness) and then rising tension until there is another episode of abuse.

True repentance means taking the steps, doing whatever is necessary to be done so that the abuse does not happen again. This may mean finding an accountability group, joining an abusers' group, having individual counselling, or going through a period of isolation and reflection. True repentance involves transformed behaviour, which is possible in Jesus Christ. Just as Saul, the murderer, became the Apostle Paul, so by God's grace the violent can develop changed attitudes and reformed behaviour. The path to recovery is often a painful one that calls for the prayerful support of God's saints.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Much is written in the Bible about forgiveness, and often a pastor is very quick to demand that a wife must forgive the husband who says that he is sorry. Forgiveness is the work of the Holy Spirit. For the abuser, it must be preceded by true repentance. For the abused, forgiveness is part of the healing process and will take time and perhaps distance.

The victim has every right to be concerned for her own safety as well as that of her children. To insist upon a precipitous forgiveness may be to send a woman and her children to continued abuse or even death.[26] A victim may well need a protracted period of time before forgiveness is possible. This must not be forced or rushed. It may be a very long while before members of the family can feel safe around one who has betrayed their trust and endangered their lives. God can bring forgiveness at the right time and in an appropriate way. It does not necessarily follow that the family can always be reunited even when there has been forgiveness.

The Bible has a lot to say about healing of heart and body. It also speaks of appropriate times and seasons, of a broken and a contrite spirit, and of renewal. God is abundantly able to heal all victims even those of vile atrocities. Women who have been raped and those who have been victims of sex trafficking or war crimes need special care, compassion and practical support from the Church. Wounded persons need to recognize their need of a divine touch, as abusers need to recognize their need of repentance.

If reconciliation between an abused woman and the perpetrator is to occur, the groundwork should be laid carefully. No matter how much those who support her wish to augment the healing journey, they cannot control its timetable. Caregivers need to realize that abuse

[26] *To talk of death may seem overly dramatic but statistics across the world show that thousands of women die each year at the hands of their partner or ex-partner*

which has occurred over many years cannot normally be eradicated in a few months. Though God's touch of healing and recovery can bring instantaneous spiritual renewal, the scars of abuse often remain for many years.

It also takes time for an abuser to repent of his behaviour, to seek help and to begin to alter his abusive ways. If there is too hasty a reunion, the abuser may conclude that the offence was not actually a serious one. The victim needs time to pray and think through many aspects and implications of the next step in her journey towards wholeness of body and spirit. Both parties must carefully consider how to prevent a recurrence of the abuse and re-victimization.

In effecting a reunion, the faith community may be helpful, though members must be very careful not to rush or force the process, even if the woman is willing. Pastors and friends must realize that an abused woman and her children may put themselves at risk and the church needs to be on its guard to monitor issues of safety as well as of healing.

We must recognize that the abuser too has been wounded, often by childhood trauma, and certainly by his or her own behaviour. This too calls for healing, for loving Christian support in the offenders' efforts to make amends for the harm that has been caused to those nearest and dearest to them and to the faith community as well. While often God's ways of working are beyond human expectation and control, the church has an obligation to denounce the sin. The faith community is an integral part of the process by surrounding both victim and perpetrator with prayer, love, and practical support. As the love of God is manifested in acts of kindness and encouragement, the healing journey including the possibility of restoration – is augmented.



Hope for families

Christians sometimes idealize the family. The Bible tells of God's work through families even though they were deeply troubled. One need only think of the families of Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David to understand that no effort is made in the Biblical texts to deny or conceal the sad realities. As in Bible times, abuse knows no faith boundaries; it occurs both within and beyond the faith community.

The pretence of being a happy Christian family only confuses and compounds the tragedy of abuse against women. To deny, minimize or ignore the problem obstructs the work of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures offer the hope of healing for troubled families, but it requires honesty, faith, hard work, and the support of the believing community.

Healthy Christian responses to physical and emotional domestic abuse

We call on all church leaders to acknowledge the extent of domestic abuse in the communities they seek to serve and in their church families.

We call on all Christians to understand that we should support victims of abuse in whatever ways we can - through prayer, practical help and professional advice.

We call on church leaders to acknowledge that some church teaching about abuse has been unhelpful and could in fact protect perpetrators.

We call on church leaders to speak up and preach about domestic abuse to make it clear that it is not acceptable in God's kingdom and to model healthy, Godly relationships of mutual submission and respectful of each other's God-given talents.

We call for churches to speak out about abuse and do not seek to hide cases to protect the church's reputation or the reputation of the leaders.

We call for all churches to treat all their flock equally, not preferring powerful male voices over children, the elderly or women.

We call for pastors to collaborate with professional and legal services in the community as well as pastoral ones, to stop domestic abuse.

It grieves the authors of this booklet that twenty years after its original publication, the prevalence of domestic abuse is unabated.

We pray that there would be a stirring in the hearts of churches in all situations and nations to say No to the lies and cover-ups, to confess that women and children are still victims of horrific abuse, and to stand with those who through no fault of their own have had their self-worth destroyed by violence.

This booklet is available in several languages – see https://women.worldea.org/resources/



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