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A POWERFUL WORD: ON DEFINING AND
RESPONDING JUSTLY TO ABUSE

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A POWERFUL WORD: ON DEFINING AND
RESPONDING JUSTLY TO ABUSE

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- I Apol.* Justin Martyr, *First Apology*
- ANF* *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325*. 10 vols. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1887. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012
- Cels.* Origen, *Against Celsus*
- DD* Gouge, William. *Domesticall Duties: Eight Treatises*. London: Iohn Haviland for William Bladen, 1622.
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A68107.0001.001?view=toc>
- Laps.* Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*
- NPNF*¹ *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1. 14 vols. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. New York: Christian Literature, 1890. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012
- NPNF*² *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2. 14 vols. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. New York: Christian Literature, 1890. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012
- OED* *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Edited by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989
- Off.* Ambrose, *On the Duties of Clergy*

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PREFACE

The author of Proverbs teaches us that, “Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it completely” (28:5). The evil and injustice of abuse have become increasingly recognized in our time. A disheartening deluge of regular reports from various media sources has confirmed that abuse is a widespread problem that affects us all, whether directly or in the lives of those we love. It is very important that the church understand, recognize, and respond to these developments in a thoroughly biblical manner. This dissertation represents my attempt to think through issues of abuse, including especially how we define, identify, and address it justly, with as much biblical care and clarity as I am able to muster. I pray that it is of service to the church in her mission to disciple the nations in the truly good news of Jesus Christ.

I would like to thank Dr. Robert D. Jones for his supervision of this project and for his unswervingly kind and faithful presence throughout this course of study. I would also like to thank Peter Privitera and Doug Plank for their steadfast faithfulness to me, my family, and most of all, to Christ and his church, through fifteen-plus years of gospel ministry together. Finally, I am most grateful for my family. Much has changed over the past two decades of schooling. To Lori, Joey and Claudia, Morgan, Aaron, Greta, and Josiah—you all are my greatest joy (Prov 31:11; 3 John 4) in this life and I thank God for you all, regularly.

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CHAPTER 1

ON ABUSE

Second Samuel 13:11–15 recounts a harrowing interaction between two children of King David, Amnon and Tamar:

But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, “Come, lie with me, my sister.” She answered him, “No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this outrageous thing. As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you.” But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, “Get up! Go!”¹

Scripture is not silent on abuse. To read through its storyline is to be confronted, time and again, with the very worst behavior of which mankind is capable. Man’s inhumanity to man² is evident throughout the Bible—and though the accounts are never salacious, they are often scandalous. The Bible pulls no punches in its descriptions of sin and no character escapes due censure. This demonstrates the unshakeable justice of our God who “will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl 12:14).

Justice is a primary focus when matters of abuse arise, and rightly so. Those who would abuse others ought to consider the Lord and fear.³ Those who have been

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the English Standard Version.

² Such was the famous assessment of Robert Burns in his 1784 poem, “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge,” in *Complete Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Glasgow: Waverly, 2012), 43.

³ The context of the Lord’s judgment (above) orients us thus: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl 12:13).

abused ought to take comfort in the certainty of ultimate justice on judgment day.⁴ Yet justice is not the only note that Scripture sounds in relation to abuse. “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:18). For those who have suffered abuse the consolations of the Lord are considerable. As Moses taught the Israelites who had endured slavery and oppression in Egypt, “God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Exod 2:25). The Lord witnesses all that transpires in the world he created, knows the trials and sufferings of his people, comforts the afflicted (2 Cor 1:3–4), heals the brokenhearted and binds up the wounded (Ps 147:3), and works his good purposes in the lives of his people through every manner of conceivable evil (Gen 50:20; Rom 8:26–39).

Yet abuse is horrible. It is a pronounced evil in the world God created. Its effects are manifold, impacting the lives of both the abuser and the victim, of those who know and love them, and ultimately, of the society that must deal with the aftermath.⁵ It is no wonder that as awareness of abuse has increased in our day, so too has the number of persons and resources dedicated to addressing it. Christians especially feel compelled

⁴ This is, in fact, the perspective of the martyrs in heaven:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Rev 6:9–11)

⁵ The statistical evidence for the exponential adverse effects of abuse is extensive and sobering. For example, a 1998 study measured seven categories of adverse childhood experience (psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against mother; living with substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or ever imprisoned) in relation to later adult risk behavior, health status, and disease. Those who reported exposure to four or more adverse childhood experiences showed greatly increased incidences of substance abuse, depression, and suicide attempts, as well as sexual promiscuity, severe obesity, and other medical problems. See Vincent J. Felitti et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 245–58;. See also the CDC’s report on child sexual abuse: 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys in the U.S. experience child sexual abuse, 91 percent of abuse is perpetrated by someone known and trusted by the child or their family, and the total lifetime economic burden of child sexual abuse was estimated to be at least \$9.3 billion in 2015. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Fast Facts: Preventing Child Sexual Abuse,” last modified April 6, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childsexualabuse/fastfact.html>.

to help, and the church has a long and distinguished tradition of caring for the hurting and oppressed, even when society overlooks or despises them.⁶

The Question

All the above prompts one important question: what *is* abuse? Most resources on abuse do not give adequate attention to the question of definition.⁷ The term is not only difficult to define but also demotivating—those who have been abused generally do not wish to debate the finer points of definition. Those who are focused on caring for the abused often do not view concerns with a strict definition to be helpful.⁸ In addition, the subjectivity of the term can be problematic, as the debate over spanking and physical

⁶ Rodney Stark has examined the remarkable growth of the early church from a sociological perspective, and concludes, “*Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations.*” Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 21. Please note: this dissertation contains many quotations in which the author has emphasized words or phrases using italics. In lieu of adding “emphasis original” to each of these citations, I will only note when I have added the emphasis to the quotation (“emphasis added”).

Stark points especially to how various doctrinal commitments translated into attractive and effective practices, such as “nursing for the sick during times of plague, to the rejection of abortion and infanticide, to fertility, and to organizational vigor” (210). Those were some of the primary causal factors in the growth of Christianity in the Empire. Rod Dreher has also recently compared contemporary sexual ethics to those faced by the early church in the same age. Among other things, he chronicles how the church opposed the “mass suffering” caused by the wanton and perverted ethos of Rome that saw widespread rape, prostitution, and pederasty as the norm, and how the Christian sexual ethic eventually triumphed over it. Rod Dreher, “Sex and the Final Christian Generation,” *American Conservative*, December 11, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/sex-the-final-christian-generation/>. See also, Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe: How We All Came to Believe in Freedom, Kindness, Progress, and Equality* (Charlotte, NC: Good Book, 2022). See especially chapter 4, “Consent.”

⁷ This is not to say that most resources on the topic do not define abuse—they often do. But most definitions are more a matter of brief and bare assertion than of argument.

⁸ Within the biblical counseling field, the concerns of Brad Hambrick represent a common perspective. He identifies two camps: “One group wants a clear, concise, concrete definition that can be used to definitively determine whether a given event or relationship is or is not abusive. The other group believes the breadth of destructive activities that can be abusive makes it impossible to craft a definition that can be used in this way.” Brad Hambrick, “Towards a Definition of Abuse,” Brad Hambrick, September 11, 2019, <https://bradhambrick.com/towards-a-definition-of-abuse/>. While averring that he is not choosing sides, the post focuses on *unpredictability* as a key factor for helping an abuser to maintain control, which seems to locate him within the second camp. Further, Hambrick focuses on what he believes to be the divergent concerns of pastors (the entire church, broadly considered) and counselors (the singular individual being counseled) as the likely source for disagreement. This latter theme is taken up in a separate post: Brad Hambrick, “Comparing Pastoral Ethics and Counseling Ethics,” Brad Hambrick, June 24, 2016, <https://bradhambrick.com/comparing-pastoral-ethics-and-counseling-ethics/>, as well as in the book he edited: Brad Hambrick, ed., *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused* (Nashville: B & H, 2019). These divergent perspectives are a topic I will consider in chapter 4.

abuse demonstrates.⁹ As we shall see below, across the landscape of those concerned about abuse the current state of its definition is a curious mixture of some shared terminology—especially with the words *power* and *control*—and divergent paradigms. Yet the tools and solutions that are brought to bear on a given problem are largely determined by how one categorizes and names that problem.¹⁰ If one has a loose finish nail in a piece of delicate oak crown molding, a sledgehammer is a poor instrument to remedy the problem, but eight pounds of forged steel-on-a-stick works exceedingly well when one needs to break up concrete. Similarly, if abuse is defined and understood primarily in terms of exercising power and control, then the solution must involve relinquishing those same qualities. But what if other considerations might help us to better understand, respond to, and even prevent abuse? More to the point, what if Scripture offers us a better way to define, understand, and respond to abuse? The need for clear definition and understanding is great.

⁹ The generally accepted definition of physical abuse seems to indicate that spanking is abusive by definition. Darby Strickland defines physical abuse as “intentionally or recklessly using physical force in a way that may result in bodily injury or physical pain. . . . Physical abuse does not need to cause pain or leave a bruise in order to be considered abusive.” Darby Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2020), 127. It is difficult to imagine how biblically-prescribed and -defined corporal punishment (e.g., Prov 13:34; 22:15; 29:15; cf. Heb 12:5ff) would not be considered abusive under such a definition. For a secular perspective on this topic, see Alan E. Kazdin and Corina Benjet, “Spanking Children: Evidence and Issues,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 3 (June 2003): 99–103; Sabrina Fréchette, Michael Zoratti, and Elisa Romano, “What Is the Link between Corporal Punishment and Child Physical Abuse?,” *Journal of Family Violence* 30, no. 2 (February 2015): 135–48. Most recently (September 6, 2023), the California Assembly passed a bill that affirms, “This bill, for the purposes of this provision, would include a parent’s affirmation of the child’s gender identity as part of the health, safety, and welfare of the child.” Therefore, the failure of a parent to affirm a transgender identity would be abusive, by statute. “AB-957 Family Law: Gender Identity,” California Legislative Information, September 8, 2023, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB957.

¹⁰ Robert Jones and Brad Hambrick make a similar point: “In any field, accurate treatment requires accurate diagnosis, and accurate diagnosis requires knowing what to look for and why. Physicians know what tests to order for their patients because they understand how the body malfunctions and deteriorates. Similarly, counselors must understand the nature and origin of human problems to know what questions to ask and what answers to listen for.” Robert Jones and Brad Hambrick, “The Problem of Sin,” in *Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling: Changing Lives with God’s Changeless Truth*, ed. Bob Kellemen and Steve Viars (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2021), 137.

Thesis

As mentioned above, the terms *power* and *control* are nearly universally utilized in definitions of abuse, and specifically as essential and characteristic motivating factors for the abuser. Yet from a biblical perspective, power and control are positive qualities, and their presence does not connote abuse.¹¹ An overly simplistic equation of power and control with abuse has produced injustices in what is labeled as abusive, in how accusations are handled, and in other matters of justice. I will interact with the broader discussion around abuse in order to critique the prevailing paradigm both at the level of conceptual framework and in its resultant application. I will argue that the Bible provides us with better resources both for understanding abuse and for handling accusations justly. More specifically, I will argue that the Bible provides us with a conceptual framework for defining abuse. Abuse is the label we give to the behavior of a person which can be characterized as *selfish compulsion to the pronounced detriment of another*. Each facet of this framework is important. Abuse is *selfish*: it is aimed at achieving the abuser's wrongly desired ends. Abuse is *compulsion*: the abuser uses words, physical force, or other actions in a highly compelling and authoritative manner that overrides the agency of the abused to some extent. Abuse is *pronounced*: it is mistreatment at a high level, whether in its duration, intensity, or both. Abuse is *detrimental*: it causes objective harm or injury to those who endure it. Abuse affects *another*: the abuser seeks to achieve his ends by taking something from others.¹² Others bear the cost of his project of oppression.

¹¹ Ben Dunson argues a similar point with regard to the proper use of power, even in the political realm: *usus non tollit usum*, abuse does not cancel use. Ben Dunson, "Politics and Power," *American Reformer*, July 27, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2023/07/politics-and-power/>.

¹² I utilize the pronoun "his" here because most serious abuse cases involve a man as the abuser. Sometimes the victim is also a man (as in some cases of physical and sexual abuse), sometimes women abuse other women, and sometimes a man is abused by a woman, so the principles I develop will be applicable to both sexes regardless of their roles in a situation, unless otherwise noted. Nonetheless, I will generally utilize masculine referents for the abuser and feminine for the accuser or victim, due to this sad pattern.

My aim in this work is to introduce this new perspective and to critically evaluate existing perspectives within the broader discussion of abuse, with the hope of serving to correct current errors in thinking about and responding to abuse. Further, I hope to help my readers better understand and identify abuse, better care for everyone involved in these tragic situations,¹³ and walk justly before the Lord when allegations are made. Much is at stake, and the Bible is our only infallible guide for thinking and responding righteously to such important matters.

Before proceeding further, it is helpful to lay out the overall progression of this work. Chapter 1 is a brief survey of how abuse has been defined and understood historically and how it is being deployed in contemporary usage. I will highlight the use of power and control as defining characteristics, and then provide a positive, biblical understanding of those concepts. Chapter 2 is my attempt at defining abuse from a biblical perspective. I will define and defend the concepts I have chosen to utilize in offering my definition, appealing to Scripture as the ultimate ground for my perspective, and thereby evaluating their relative strengths and weaknesses as a conceptual framework for understanding abuse. Chapter 3 examines and critiques the prevailing model for understanding abuse, focusing especially on the influences of the Duluth Model (DM) and Critical Theory (CT). Chapter 4 discusses and applies a biblical understanding of justice and due process as regards abuse, from allegations to repercussions. Chapter 5 concludes by offering some brief, practical guidelines that seek to apply the ideas proposed throughout this study. With that in mind, we begin now by examining briefly how the word *abuse* has been utilized over time.

¹³ Strickland agrees, “We must understand the dynamics of abuse in order to minister to its victims effectively.” Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 15.

Historical Usage

The historical roots of the English verb *abuse* date back six centuries, having descended through Old French (*abuse-r*), pointing to the Latin (*abusa-re, abut-i*), with the connotation of improper use (use up, misuse, disuse).¹⁴ One might have anticipated such a definition from considering the constituent parts of the word: the prefix “ab-” meaning “off, away, from” denoting disjunction and separation, and the verb “use” meaning “employ for a purpose.”¹⁵ So, it is relatively simple to understand how the combined form connotes usage disjointed from intended purpose, or improper use.

The specific sense of *mistreatment, ill-use, or violation* that is attached to the word today traces back at least to the mid-fifteenth century. A good example is found in the 1611 KJV, in Judges 19:25: “But the men would not hearken to him: so the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go.” Abuse is also used to describe verbal mistreatment as far back as the early-seventeenth century by Bianca in *Othello*: “I am no strumpet, but of life as honest, as you that thus abuse me.”¹⁶

Of course, abuse is not the only term that has been used to describe severe mistreatment. *Oppression* is a synonym, relating to the improper use of authority, or the “exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, harsh, or wrongful manner; unjust or cruel treatment of subjects, inferiors, etc.; the imposition of unreasonable or unjust burdens.”¹⁷ Chaucer used the term to describe the rape of a woman as far back as 1385:

¹⁴ *OED*, 1:59. The use of *abuse* as a noun is of slightly more recent vintage, with the earliest dates in the sixteenth century. Note that the various meanings of *abuse, oppression, and tyranny* described in this section are all sourced from the *OED*.

¹⁵ *OED*, 1:7.

¹⁶ Act V, Scene I in William Shakespeare, “Othello,” in *The Works of William Shakespeare* (San Diego: Canterbury Classics, 2014), 936.

¹⁷ *OED*, 10:870–71.

“The horrible dede of hir oppressyon.”¹⁸ The idea of *selfish compulsion* is present here, as the oppressor exercises authority or power over another and against her will. While *abuse* is rarely used in most modern English translations of the Bible, various forms of *oppress* and *oppression* are far more common.¹⁹

Another synonym for abuse is *tyranny*, referring especially to the improper use of government authority resulting in oppression or abuse. Tyranny involves “oppressive or unjustly severe government, the arbitrary exercise of power, and harsh or severe rule.”²⁰ All of these are in service of the tyrant or tyranness. Here again, one notices the conceptual connection with selfish compulsion.²¹ The ESV uses *tyrant* only twice, in Isaiah 49:24–25, though the concept is present in many places (e.g., Ezek 22:27). Though tyranny and oppression by government authorities are generally considered as an entirely distinct phenomena, there is certainly conceptual overlap, and the topic is worth examining as part of the current project.

Though not primarily a matter of definition, it is historically noteworthy that one of the distinctive ethical contributions of Christianity to the ancient world was as regards sexual mistreatment. As Glen Scrivener has noted,

¹⁸ Geoffrey Chaucer, “Legend of Good Women,” quoted in *OED*, 10:871. The line is elsewhere rendered as “The horrible deed of her oppressioun.” Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Legend of Lucretia,” in *The Legend of Good Women*, Medieval and Classical Literature Library, December 1996, <http://mcclibrary.org/GoodWomen/lucretia.html>.

¹⁹ Representatively, the use of *abuse* (as both noun and verb) in a sampling of popular versions is as follows: CSB (6x), NIV (14x), ESV (4x), NASB (15x), NLT (11x), and NET (13x). Interestingly, the most prolific version appears to be *The Message*, with 55 occurrences. The use of *oppress* and *oppression* is as follows: CSB (145x), NIV (125x), ESV (125x), NASB (133x), NLT (128x), and NET (170x). However, the least prolific version appears to be *The Message*, with 46 occurrences. All data from searches performed at Bible Gateway, accessed December 16, 2022, <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.

²⁰ *OED*, 18:795.

²¹ Aquinas captures the dynamic succinctly: the tyrant “oppresses by might rather than ruling by justice.” Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan, *Mediaeval Sources in Translation* 2, (1949; repr., Toronto, Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2022), 8. He explains why of all governments, that of the tyrant is worst, focusing especially on the effect of the tyrant’s selfishness on those he rules (13–18). “Those who seek more to use, than to be of use to, their subjects prevent all progress, suspecting all excellence in their subjects to be prejudicial to their own evil domination. For tyrants hold the good in greater suspicion than the wicked, and to them the valour of others is always fraught with danger” (16).

In the ancient world, sex with boys and girls was not merely tolerated; it was celebrated by writers like Juvenal, Petronius, Horace, Strato, Lucian, and Philostratus. The word they used was *pederasty*: love of children. Christians were uniformly disgusted by the practice and called it by a different name—*paidophthoros*: destruction of children. What the classical world called love, Christians called abuse, “thereby construing all sexual contract with the young as an act of corruption.” In the reign of the Christian emperor Justinian (527–565), pederasty was outlawed and could be prosecuted well after the abuse took place.²²

It was the Christian sexual ethic that was primarily responsible for making the sexual abuse of children illegal.²³ Closer to the present, Nancy R. Pearcey has highlighted that it was the Massachusetts Bay Colony that “enacted the first law anywhere in the world against domestic violence.”²⁴ We should also notice that as our country has sought to jettison Christian sexual ethics over the past six decades, the sexualization of children has resurged, whether through Drag Queen Story Hours at the local library or through even more blatant attempts to normalize pedophiles as minor-attracted persons (MAPs).²⁵ Our

²² Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 96–97.

²³ Similarly, Scrivener notes that it was the Christian ethic that was primarily responsible for making slavery illegal, thus overturning the consensus of the ancient world that had normalized that abusive institution. He alludes to the underlying ethic as well expressed by Aristotle: “It is clear that some men are slaves by nature and others free by nature.” Aristotle, *Politics*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.5; Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe*, 162. For Scrivener’s broader argument on how Christianity led to the abolition of slavery, see pp. 149–66.

²⁴ Nancy R. Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 79; Pearcey quotes “feminist historian Mary Ryan, [who] after studying Puritan literature, concludes that ‘every treatise on household organization cautioned against dictatorial male rule.’ I emphasize the word *every*.” Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 62, quoted in Nancy R. Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 79.

²⁵ In the ever-changing world of our current sexual confusion, a new term has been invented for this perversity: “intergenerational sex.” Cosmin Dzsurdza, “In a talk on her biography on pedophile writer Norman Douglas, @uvic professor Rachel Hope Cleves described pederasty as ‘intergenerational sex’ and says she won’t use the discourse of ‘survivors or necessarily abuse.’ Douglas was charged with raping 10-year-old children,” March 21, 2023, <https://twitter.com/cosminDZS/status/1638217303384035328>. For a few, representative records of attempts to normalize pedophilia since the 1960s, see John Rossomando, “Conference Aims to Normalize Pedophilia,” *Daily Caller*, August 15, 2011, <http://dailycaller.com/2011/08/15/conference-aims-to-normalize-pedophilia/>; Jim Kepner, “A Few Words from Gay History Pioneer Jim Kepner,” NAMBLA, 2003, <https://www.nambla.org/kepner1.htm>; Diane Gramley, “1972 Gay Rights Platform,” American Family Association of Pennsylvania, May 22, 2010, <https://afaofpa.org/archives/1972-gay-rights-platform/>; and Theo Sandfort, “Constructive Questions Regarding Paedophilia,” accessed September 18, 2023, https://www.helping-people.info/articles/sandf_constr_quest.htm. Daniel Block notes how the treatment of women in Israel as recorded in Judges reflects what happens as a society turns its back on God. Daniel I. Block, “Unspeakable Crimes: The Abuse of Women in the Book of Judges,” *Southern Baptist Theological Journal* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 46–55.

society is rapidly losing any basis for opposing such abominations on any grounds other than personal preference or aesthetics.²⁶

Abuse and Justice in Church History

Solomon wisely observed that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9), and so, sadly, the scandal of abuse has been present throughout all of human history. Accordingly, abuse has also been present throughout all of church history. While the history of abuse recorded in the inspired Scriptures will be the focus of chapter 2, a survey of post-apostolic times is also instructive. Christians have been dealing with matters of abuse and justice for centuries, and by examining some of their writings, we can gain insight into how saints before us have understood and responded to abuse, and into how they thought of and applied justice in such cases. What follows is not intended to be comprehensive by any means, but representative, covering a variety of eras, geographic locales, and topics. In particular, the early church faced issues of government abuse through persecution, as well as in the tumults of ecclesial politics. More individual, interpersonal occasions of abuse were not as likely to be preserved in the historical record until much later in church history, as will be seen below.

Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–165)

The first author to consider is the great apologist of the second-century church.²⁷ Justin wrote his *First Apology* in defense of Christianity to the Emperor “in

²⁶ Carl Trueman notes that in our age of ‘expressive individualism’ that “modern ethical discourse has broken down because it rests ultimately on incommensurable narratives and that claims to moral truth are really expressions of emotional preference.” Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 26.

²⁷ The earliest Christian apologists were often defending the church against caricatures: “Let no one come to us who has been instructed, or who is wise or prudent (for such qualifications are deemed evil by us); but if there be any ignorant, or unintelligent, or uninstructed, or foolish persons, let them come with confident . . . they desire and are able to gain over only the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women, and children.” Origen, *Cels.* 3.44 (*ANF*, 4:481–82). However, Rodney Stark cautions that the data is insufficient for drawing firm conclusions: “Any claim about the social basis of early Christianity must

behalf of those of all nations who are unjustly hated and wantonly abused, myself being one of them.”²⁸ He sought to stave off government persecution, pleading that Christians were actually the best citizens, and were unfairly receiving mistreatment from their rulers. He welcomed the examination of their character: “Justice requires that you inquire into the life both of him who confesses and of him who denies, that by his deeds it may be apparent what kind of man each is.”²⁹ He also called for the examination of the character of those who accused them:

If, therefore, anyone makes the accusation, and furnishes proof that the said men do anything contrary to the laws, you shall adjudge punishments in proportion to the offences. And this, by Hercules, you shall give special heed to, that if any man shall, through mere calumny, bring an accusation against any of these persons, you shall award to him more severe punishments in proportion to his wickedness.³⁰

Justin appealed to a shared understanding of virtues so that Christians would be treated justly, and so that those who accused them maliciously would receive just penalties for their slander.

Council of Sardica (AD 343–344)

The famous Athanasius, the scourge of Arianism, was present but on the sidelines at Nicea (AD 325). However, after that foundational council, he was active throughout the Empire in Christian ministry. Throughout his lifetime he was subject to many and varied ecclesio-political machinations, going in and out of exile repeatedly.³¹

remain precarious, at least in terms of direct evidence, and it is unlikely that we shall ever have much more than the fragments of historical data we already possess.” Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 32–33.

²⁸ Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 1 (*ANF*, 1:163).

²⁹ Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 4 (*ANF*, 1:164).

³⁰ Justin Martyr, *1 Apol.* 68 (*ANF*, 1:186).

³¹ Athanasius’s famous proclamation that he stood *contra mundum* was given in response to his ever-changing status. “During these decades, Athanasius was banished no fewer than five times, each banishment and return to Alexandria representing either a change in emperors or a shift in the makeup of the ecclesiastical clique that had the emperor’s ear. At times Athanasius was so completely out of imperial favor that he felt deserted by all of his supporters.” Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 133.

He likely arrived in Sardica in the fall of 343 and was present at that council. Therefore, deliberations on justice at this council take on a special poignancy.

Canon XIII affirms the nature of jurisdiction and trans-ecclesial recognition of discipline: “If a deacon or presbyter or any of the clergy be refused communion by his own bishop and go to another bishop, and he with whom he has taken refuge shall know that he has been repelled by his own bishop, then must he not grant him communion. But if he shall do so, let him know that he must give account before an assembly of bishops.”³² Ecclesial power was linked to accountability and due process, which was certainly intended to prevent or ameliorate the abuse of ecclesial authority.

Canon XIV addresses the right of appeal, the presumption of innocence, due process, and the misuse of authority:

If some bishop is perchance quick to anger (which ought not to be the case) and, moved hastily and violently against one of his presbyters or deacons, be decided to cast him out of the Church, provision must be made that an innocent man be not condemned or deprived of communion.

Therefore let him that is cast out be authorized to appeal to the neighbouring bishops and let his case be heard and examined into more diligently. For a hearing ought not to be denied one who asks it.

And let that bishop who cast him out, justly or unjustly, take it patiently that the matter is discussed, so that his sentence may either be approved by a number [of judges] or else revised. Nevertheless, until all the particulars shall be examined with care and fidelity, no one else ought to presume to admit to communion him who was excluded therefrom in advance of the decision of his case.³³

Though these practices ought to be welcome at all times, one can understand why they would be especially useful and necessary when outside pressures might be interfering with local processes. In the case of Athanasius, who lived within sight of the Constantinian settlement, the politics of the Empire certainly influenced the politics of the church, and imperial favor influenced who might, and might not, be considered a heretic at any given time. Similarly, political and cultural pressures today can and do

³² The Council of Sardica, “The Canons of the Council of Sardica” (*NPNF*², 14:427).

³³ The Council of Sardica, “The Canons of the Council of Sardica” (*NPNF*², 14:428).

influence how abuse is—and is not—acknowledged and adjudicated at every level: institutional, civil, and ecclesial.

Augustine (AD 354–430)

The great leader of the early church—and the most influential voice of the church’s first millennium—Augustine of Hippo, was a towering figure who led the church through numerous controversies. In a letter to a “fellow-presbyter, Quintianus,” Augustine wrote of the need to recognize due jurisdiction and authority:

It is, of course, obvious that if you come to us while debarred from communion with the venerable bishop Aurelius, you cannot be admitted to communion with us; but we would act toward you with that same charity which we are assured shall guide his conduct. Your coming to us, however, should not on this account be embarrassing to us, because the duty of submission to this, out of regard to the discipline of the Church, ought to be felt by yourself, especially if you have the approval of your own conscience, which is known to yourself and God.³⁴

Quintianus was apparently enduring a delay in his appeal to be restored to the Table, and Augustine urged him to respect the authorities over him and to engage the process with patience and faith, even while conveying love and due concern for Quintianus’s reputation.

In a letter to “my most beloved brethren, the clergy, elders, and people of the church of Hippo,” Augustine wrote of those who “are troubled concerning the presbyter Boniface.”³⁵ He argued, “If your presbyter is guiltless (which I am the more inclined to believe, because, when he had discovered the immoral and vile proposal of the other, he would neither consent to it nor conceal it), . . . a divine decision may speedily restore him to the exercise of his official duties with his innocence vindicated.”³⁶ The character of the man argued for innocence. But if he is lying and counterattacking, Augustine prays that

³⁴ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* 44.2.1 (NPNF¹, 1:321).

³⁵ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* 78.2.1 (NPNF¹, 1:345).

³⁶ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* 78.2.20 (NPNF¹, 1:346).

“God may not permit him to hide his wickedness, so that the thing which men cannot discover may be revealed by the judgment of God, to the conviction of the one or of the other.” This is an important theme for our study: sometimes human justice does not have access to sufficient data to arrive at an authoritative determination. Christians must then entrust the ultimate administration of justice into the hands of the Almighty.

But entrusting justice to God need not equate to passivity. Boniface’s accuser “was labouring most earnestly to obtain promotion to the rank of the clergy.” Since Augustine could not in good conscience commend him, nor even pass him off to another bishop for consideration, the man “began to act more violently, demanding that if he was not to be promoted to clerical orders, Boniface should not be permitted to retain his status as a presbyter.” Boniface, on the other hand, was willing to resign as “he was ready to suffer the loss of his honor among men rather than vainly persist even to the disquieting of the Church in a contention the very nature of which made it impossible for him to prove his innocence.” Augustine would not remove him, “lest I should seem to insult the Divine Majesty, upon which arbitration the case now depends.”³⁷

All of this argues for the need for the presumption of innocence and deferral to rightful authorities, including the Lord himself:

For even in secular affairs, when a perplexing case is referred to a higher authority, the inferior judges do not presume to make any change while the reference is pending. Moreover, it was decreed in a Council of bishops that no clergyman who has not yet been proved guilty be suspended from communion, unless he fail to present himself for the examination of the charges against him.³⁸

Though the letter does not detail the final resolution of the case, it does show a remarkable reliance on the Lord and his justice amid a very difficult situation with serious charges, much at stake, and limited access to information for those duly

³⁷ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* 78.3.9–78.4.13 (NPNF¹, 1:346).

³⁸ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* 78.4.15 (NPNF¹, 1:346).

authorized to scrutinize it. It also demonstrates another important theme: as the wheels of justice grind, the character of the parties involved is often revealed.

One final note is in order: this division in the church had been a source of great trouble and discouragement for many. Augustine acknowledged that there are both good and bad men in the leadership of the Church (“I have hardly found any men better than those who have done well in monasteries, so I have not found any men worse than monks who have fallen”). He then appealed to Revelation 22:11,

He that is righteous, let him be still more righteous; and he that is filthy, let him be still more filthy. . . . Wherefore, if we be grieved by some foul blemishes, we are comforted by a much larger proportion of examples of an opposite kind. Let not, therefore, the dregs which offend your eyes cause you to hate the oil-presses whence the Lord’s storehouses are supplied to their profit with a more brightly illuminating oil. . . . May the mercy of our Lord keep you in His peace, safe from all the snares of the enemy, my dearly beloved brethren.³⁹

Discord, contention, and injustice are, sadly, to be found in every stage of the church’s history; greater than them all is the grace and mercy of our God who remains faithful to build his church. His greatness is revealed, in part, in the disproportion within her walls between those who act righteously and those who do not.

The First Council of Constantinople (AD 381)

The second ecumenical council at Constantinople is known primarily for the creed adopted there (an expanded form of the Nicene Creed). However, there were also several Canons adopted at that council, and Canon VI is particularly applicable to this study. Among other matters, it dealt with accusations of abuse against ecclesiastical leaders, especially as a strategy to bring them into disrepute amid the doctrinal controversies that were dogging the church. There are three matters of justice to consider from this council.

³⁹ Augustine, *Letters of St. Augustin* 78.9.4–78.9.20 (NPNF¹, 1:348).

First, in determining who can bring charges, the council specifically forbade heretics, the excommunicated, and those already facing accusations themselves from bringing charges.⁴⁰ The concern appears to be both with the character of the witnesses and with the political maneuvering that such charges might accomplish as matters of orthodoxy were being tried. Second, they recognized jurisdiction and due process. If any credible witness had charges against a bishop, he should first bring the “charges before all the Bishops of the Province.”⁴¹ If they cannot settle the charges, “then the parties must betake themselves to a greater synod of the bishops of that diocese called together for this purpose.”⁴² Third, they also required that the penalty for slanderous charges be recognized and agreed to before testifying: “They shall not produce their allegations before they have promised in writing to undergo an equal penalty to be exacted from themselves, if, in the course of the examination, they shall be proved to have slandered the accused bishop.”⁴³ The council likely had in mind the biblical principle that a false accuser should suffer the penalty the accused would have received had he been convicted (Deut 19:18–19).

African Code (AD 419)

In AD 419, “CCXVII Blessed Fathers” of the early church met at Carthage to review and re-sanction the results of the sixteen preceding councils in North Africa.

⁴⁰ The First Council of Constantinople, “Canons of the One Hundred and Fifty Fathers Who Assembled at Constantinople During the Consulate of Those Illustrious Men, Flavius Eucherius and Flavius Evagrius on the VII of the Ides of July” (*NPNF*², 14:183). Those facing charges were permitted to testify once “they shall have proved their own innocence of the accusation brought against them.”

⁴¹ The First Council of Constantinople, “Canons of the One Hundred and Fifty Fathers Who Assembled at Constantinople During the Consulate of Those Illustrious Men, Flavius Eucherius and Flavius Evagrius on the VII of the Ides of July” (*NPNF*², 14:183).

⁴² The First Council of Constantinople, “Canons of the One Hundred and Fifty Fathers Who Assembled at Constantinople During the Consulate of Those Illustrious Men, Flavius Eucherius and Flavius Evagrius on the VII of the Ides of July” (*NPNF*², 14:183).

⁴³ The First Council of Constantinople, “Canons of the One Hundred and Fifty Fathers Who Assembled at Constantinople During the Consulate of Those Illustrious Men, Flavius Eucherius and Flavius Evagrius on the VII of the Ides of July” (*NPNF*², 14:183).

Canon CCXXXI addresses who may be called as a witness: “They who are forbidden to be admitted as accusers are not to be allowed to appear as witnesses, nor any that the accuser may bring from his own household. And none shall be admitted to give witness under fourteen years of age.”⁴⁴ Canon CCXXXII speaks to the need for two or more witnesses, even if one of them is a bishop:

It also seemed good that if on any occasion a bishop said that someone had confessed to him alone a personal crime, and that the man now denies it; let not the bishop think that any slight is laid upon him if he is not believed on his own word alone, although he says he is not willing to communicate with the man so denying through a scruple of his own conscience.⁴⁵

The qualifications of witnesses are a hardy perennial in matters of justice and a key concern for matters of abuse.

Canon CCXXXIII is especially concerned with the nature of fitting punishment, due process, and various layers of accountability—even calling for a kind of ecclesial shunning: “As long as his own bishop will not communicate with one excommunicated, the other bishops should have no communion with that bishop, that the bishop will be careful not to charge anyone with what we cannot prove by documentary evidence to others.”⁴⁶

Martin Luther (AD 1483–1546)

Several incidents relating to abuse and matters of justice can be recounted from the ministry of the great reformer, Martin Luther. His prodigious career included multitudinous writings and ongoing interaction with many issues of pastoral care from his home in the former abbey in Wittenberg. Luther’s wit also meant that his counsel was full

⁴⁴ African Code, “The Canons of the CCXVII Blessed Fathers Who Assembled at Carthage, Commonly Called The Code of Canons of the African Church” (*NPNF²*, 14:505).

⁴⁵ African Code, “The Canons of the CCXVII Blessed Fathers Who Assembled at Carthage, Commonly Called The Code of Canons of the African Church” (*NPNF²*, 14:505).

⁴⁶ African Code, “The Canons of the CCXVII Blessed Fathers Who Assembled at Carthage, Commonly Called The Code of Canons of the African Church” (*NPNF²*, 14:505).

of an earthy sensibility. Consider his description of the marriage of history's very first couple:

Adam and Eve must have scolded each other roundly during their nine hundred years together. Eve would have said, "You ate the apple!" And Adam would have replied, "But why did you give it to me?" There is no doubt that during their long life they encountered numberless evils as they sighed over their Fall. It must have been an extraordinary regime! And so Genesis is a remarkable book of wisdom and reason.⁴⁷

Luther knew well the sorrows and struggles of this life, and he knew the wonderful applicability of God's Word to them all.

The first specific scenario we examine is a letter providing counsel to a minister caring for a woman who had been deserted by her husband:

If the situation is such as you report, namely, that the widow's husband deserted her seven years ago and no one knows where he is, you should first ask the neighbors or the village magistrates, if they have any knowledge of the matter, which of the two is the guilty party. If, according to the testimony of neighbors, it appears that the woman is not to blame, let the pastor in Eisenberg post a public notice on the church door and do the same in your village, citing the man (or somebody else in his behalf) to appear within four weeks. If he does not appear, announce from the pulpit that the deserter has not appeared and that the woman is therefore free to marry again. Thereupon you may unite her in marriage with another man in God's name.⁴⁸

Several principles of justice are noteworthy here. First, Luther acknowledges that he is dealing with a single-party accusation ("If the situation is such as you report"). The need for corroboration is the first matter he addresses. Second is due process: he calls for public action concerning the matter under question. Neighbors and authorized officials are to be called upon to testify. Third is the presumption of innocence: even though the man appears to have been gone for years, there is no assignment of guilt before corroboration has been obtained. Fourth is the role of witnesses: if her neighbors testify that she is blameless, the next step in due process is to be undertaken. A final solicitation is given for the man (or his representative) to come to his defense. Fifth and final is

⁴⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert, Library of Christian Classics (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2003), 283.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 284.

resolution: if the man does not show, his wife is publicly declared to be freed from her husband and therefore free to marry again, in the Lord.⁴⁹

Next, in addressing governmental tyranny, Luther counseled obedience to the governing authorities as pertains to external matters of “taxes, revenue, honor, and respect.” But secular (and ecclesial, “the pope”!) authority is limited:

If your prince or secular ruler commands you to side with the pope, to believe thus and so, or to get rid of certain books, you should say, “It is not fitting that Lucifer should sit at the side of God. Gracious sir, I owe you obedience in body and property; command me within the limits of your authority on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey; for then you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, commanding where you have neither the right nor the authority,” etc. Should he seize your property on account of this and punish such disobedience, then blessed are you; thank God that you are worthy to suffer for the sake of the divine word. Let him rage, fool that he is; he will meet his judge. For I tell you, if you fail to withstand him, if you give into him and let him take away your faith and your books, you have truly denied God.⁵⁰

Luther is clearly speaking to matters of true and false religion and of the need for principled resistance to any tyranny that would seek to override the Christian conscience. Yet the principles deserve consideration and application within any situation of abusive authority. In this situation, Luther argues that the refusal to resist amounts to apostasy in some form. This idea of a *duty of resistance* to abuse will be considered below.

In the same work, he presents a positive vision for that “*seltzam willtprett*” (rare animal), the God-fearing prince. How is his power and authority to be exercised as he rules over others?

First, He must take thought for his subjects, and devote himself wholeheartedly to them. This he does when he directs his every thought to making himself useful and beneficial to them; when instead of thinking, “the land and people belong to me, I will do what best pleases me,” he thinks rather, “I belong to the land and the people, I shall do what is useful and good for them. My concern will be not how to lord it over them and dominate them, but how to protect and maintain them in peace and

⁴⁹ One merely notes here how different such matters were in Luther’s time. Had the internet and social media been available, and had the aggrieved woman been so inclined, the process may have gone very differently—as pastors know well today.

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed, 1523*, ed. James M. Estes, in *Christian Life in the World*, vol. 5 of *The Annotated Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 114.

plenty.” He should picture Christ to himself, and say, “Behold, Christ, the highest prince, came to serve me; he did not seek to gain power, goods, and honor from me, but considered only my need, and directed all things to the end that I should gain power, goods, and honor from him and through him. I will do likewise, seeking from my subjects not my own advantage but theirs. I will use my office to serve and protect them, listen to them and defend them, and govern to the sole end that they, not I, may benefit and profit from my rule.” Thus should a prince in his heart empty himself of his power and authority, and take unto himself the needs of his subjects, dealing with them as though they were his own needs. For this is what Christ did for us [Phil 2:7]; and these are the proper works of Christian love.⁵¹

Luther rightly links the exercise of civil authority by a Christian with the example of our Lord. He recognizes the temptation for those with power to “lord it over” those without and provides the antidote in the gospel. One might expect self-abnegation to be paramount with a former monk, but Luther does not call the prince to renounce his office and wealth altogether (and enter the monastery). Rather, he calls him to use those gifts and graces for the good of those entrusted to his care.⁵² Ultimately, it is a matter of submission to his Lord: “Of this I am certain, that God’s word will not bow down or submit to princes; princes must rather submit themselves to God’s word.”⁵³

Finally, it is noteworthy that in his famous table talks, Luther briefly recounted three incidents from his youth that might be classified as child abuse today. First, his father “once whipped me so severely that I ran away from him, and he was worried that he might not win me back again.”⁵⁴ His mother also mistreated him:

My parents kept me under very strict discipline, even to the point of making me timid. For the sake of a mere nut my mother beat me until the blood flowed. By such strict discipline they finally forced me into the monastery; though they meant it

⁵¹ Luther, “On Secular Authority,” 121.

⁵² Luther, “On Secular Authority,” 122. He also claims, “They would soon find out for themselves that if they gave their subjects the care and attention required by their office, many a fine dance, hunt, race, and game would have to be missed” (122). We see here from Luther’s pen one of the fundamental distinctions between a Christian view of authority, centered on responsibility, and a worldly view, centered on privilege and position. See Paul’s argument in 2 Cor 1:23-24 that he and his co-workers did “not lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy.”

⁵³ Luther, “On Secular Authority,” 122.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, vol. 54 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 157.

heartily well, I was only made timid by it. They weren't able to keep a right balance between temperament and punishment.⁵⁵

He also suffered cruelty at school: he was "once beaten fifteen times before noon, without any fault of mine, because I was expected to decline and conjugate although I had not yet been taught this."⁵⁶ Scholars debate both the factuality of these incidences⁵⁷ and their lasting consequences upon young Luther, but there does appear to be good reason to grant them at least some degree of historicity. If they have a degree of historicity, then we may suppose that they had some level of lasting effect upon him, though the extent is difficult to assess.⁵⁸

Corporal punishment was not unusual in Luther's time. As Steven Ozment notes,

Moderate corporal punishment was a regular and encouraged part of discipline both at home and at school in Reformation Europe, especially during the formative years between six and twelve. Both children and adults, however, viewed harsh and arbitrary discipline as exceptional and condemned it, while outright brutality brought firings and fines and even deep personal remorse.⁵⁹

Luther himself displayed much tenderness toward his children: "I wouldn't like to strike my little Hans very much, lest he should become shy and hate me. I know nothing that would give me greater sorrow."⁶⁰ As noted in his verdict of his parents' discipline above, Luther believed that faithful discipline should take into account the disposition of the

⁵⁵ Luther, *Table Talk*, 235.

⁵⁶ Luther, *Table Talk*, 457.

⁵⁷ It is important to note that these talks were recorded by Luther's companions who had been at his dinner table and were published posthumously. So, they are susceptible to the vagaries of human memory and had not been reviewed by Luther himself.

⁵⁸ Erik Erikson famously made too much of these events in his study. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958).

⁵⁹ Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 149.

⁶⁰ Luther, *Table Talk*, 157.

child and be sensitive to producing the desired effect. Many modern critics considering these events would see no proper role for corporal punishment at all.⁶¹

John Calvin's Geneva (AD 1536–1609)

One of the most famous sites of an interwoven church and state in the Reformation era was Geneva, Switzerland during the time of John Calvin. In his delightful study⁶² of pastoral care during Calvin's time, Scott Manetsch chronicles a number of interesting historical details that are pertinent to our study. One of the most surprising may be that 16 percent (22 out of 135) of Geneva's ministers were disciplined and removed from office during that 73-year period.⁶³ Church discipline was not just applied to the hoi polloi, but also to those who held church office. While most of the deposed ministers were restored to the Lord's Supper, *none* were restored to his office in Geneva. This was clearly not the modern American system of quick repentance, quicker restoration, and an opportunity for new ministry vistas and a lucrative book deal.

Given the establishmentarian arrangement in Geneva, all citizens were properly church members. Therefore, the various councils of the church were kept quite busy dealing with the typical disruptions in human affairs: drunkenness, domestic disturbances, theft, financial misdealings, and the like. Some cases, though, were particularly heinous:

More sinister was the case of Jean Clemencin who threatened to kill his wife if she ever reported his abusive behavior to Consistory. After demanding that Clemencin stop beating his wife, the ministers and elders suspended him from the Lord's Supper and sent him to the magistrates for punishment. This last example illustrates the legal consequences that sometimes accompanied Genevan church discipline. As

⁶¹ See Victor I. Vieth, "Until the Blood Ran: A Call to Re-Appraise the Experience of Child Physical Abuse in the Life and Works of Martin Luther," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 47, no. 4 (October 2020): 60–73.

⁶² Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶³ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 196.

an ecclesiastical court the Consistory had no authority to impose corporal punishment. However, in cases where misbehavior was not only sinful but criminal, the Consistory functioned as a de facto advisory board to civil justice both by gathering evidence about the crime and by recommending appropriate punishments, whether, fines, imprisonment, beatings, or banishment. These three dimensions of church discipline—spiritual sanction, social shame, and the threat of civil punishment—made suspension and excommunication particularly effective pastoral tools for regulating public behavior and restoring sinners to the church. Whether these sanctions also promoted a change of heart and stimulated personal sanctification is far more difficult to determine.⁶⁴

Apparently, “many Geneva households were troubled and violent: reports of vicious arguments, abused wives, neglected children, and mistreated servants fill the pages of the register of the Consistory.”⁶⁵ In the quote above we see how the leaders of the church fulfilled their duties in dealing with sinful behavior among their parishioners, in cooperation with civil authorities.

Another category worth special mention involves fornication between masters and servants, a situation today that likely would be treated under the category of power differentials:

The large number of cases of fornication that involved members of the servant class is especially striking: around one-quarter of all censures for sexual sin involved members of the servant class, and a sizeable percentage of this subset involved a master or male family member having sexual relations with a female servant or wet nurse. The vulnerability of female domestic workers is illustrated in the sad account of the maid Françoise and her master Pierre Chapuis. Pierre imposed his will on Françoise with promises of marriage and assurances that drinking honey would prevent an unwanted pregnancy. In the presence of the Consistory, Pierre denied having said anything about marriage; both were suspended from the Lord’s Table and sent away with a sharp rebuke.⁶⁶

Notice that both parties were held responsible for their sin. Françoise was not excused because of her poverty and relative lack of social influence, nor was Pierre exonerated by

⁶⁴ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 197.

⁶⁵ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 202.

⁶⁶ Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company of Pastors*, 203. Interestingly, Manetsch does point out that the illegitimacy rate in Geneva was significantly below the rest of Europe (367n101), which should be interpreted as a positive sign for the Genevan program. In the scenario noted here, Manetsch describes the situation as one where the master “imposed his will” on the “vulnerable” maid; but the means he cites are primarily lies (promised marriage, the alleged contraceptive effects of honey). This is certainly sinful and despicable; but there is also a potentially prejudicial effect in his editorial presentation.

his wealth and stature. This is especially noteworthy because the Consistory was known to protect those who today would be labeled as disadvantaged.⁶⁷ They

regularly intervened in cases of child abuse, confronting and often disciplining parents who savagely beat their children or neglected to provide them necessary goods, clothing, and shelter. The ministers and elders also disciplined fathers who refused to support bastard children, mothers who refused to nurse sickly newborns, and parents who attempted to marry their prepubescent daughters to older men Calvin's consistory employed its disciplinary authority to enforce basic norms of compassion and mercy in the city. It admonished Genevans who refused to care for elderly parents and grandparents. . . . The Consistory also worked to root out social and economic injustice. The ministers and elders confronted landlords for cheating or threatening poor tenants.⁶⁸

They also rebuked abusers and oversaw stern discipline:

Customarily, the Consistory employed moral persuasion and even threats in an effort to stem destructive behavior, end violence, and foster reconciliation. Thomas Thomasset was told that if he ever again beat his wife, he would be sent to the magistrates. Marguerite Charton received such a stern rebuke for accusing her husband of being a traitor and "Judas" that she burst into tears and admitted her fault. Many times moral persuasion and threats were not enough, however. In 1561, a wife beater named Jean Pradaire was summoned to Consistory for vicious batteries against his wife. A half dozen witnesses described a gruesome pattern of abuse. In previous attacks, Pradaire had showered insults upon the poor woman, pinched her thighs with hot tongs, hit her in the stomach and face, and tried to strangle her. Now he had struck her in the head with a board and knocked her unconscious. The victim—who was judged "an honorable and virtuous woman"—was still in bed recovering from a cracked skull and other injuries. Hearing this report, the ministers and elders excommunicated Pradaire and commanded him never "to touch nor mistreat his wife again." He was then sent to the city magistrates with recommendations that he receive additional corporal punishments.⁶⁹

Here again, we see due process, the role of witnesses, and proper jurisdiction (civil and ecclesial authorities, with separate but complementary processes, responsibilities, and penalties). We also see that the Consistory took a proactive initiative to address a known problem in the community.

⁶⁷ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 200. One wife-beater, a Jean Mercier, complained that "the Consistory is the 'paradise of women' and that the city magistrates 'pursue men and protect women'" (200).

⁶⁸ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 215–16.

⁶⁹ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 217.

William Gouge (AD 1575–1653)

William Gouge was a Westminster Divine whose *Domesticall Duties* (1622) provides us with a good example of a Puritan approach to the home. Over its eight treatises, Gouge addresses the duties of marriage, wives, husbands, children, parents, servants, and masters from Ephesians 5:21–6:9.⁷⁰ Within its pages we find both explicit and implicit instructions related to matters of abuse, authority, and justice. It provides a wealth of biblical wisdom on these matters, and it is worth considering an extended selection of his instructions, as follows.

In commenting on “the near conjunction of man and wife together,” he offers insight into the dynamic that makes marital sins especially potent. After celebrating the one flesh relationship (“No *two* so nearly and truly made *one* as man and wife”), he writes, “This sheweth that the transgressions of man and wife one against another are of all the most heinous, more than of friend, fellow, brother, child, parent or any other.”⁷¹ This highlights the terrible poignancy of abuse at the hands of one known to and trusted by the victim.⁷²

In addressing “the connexion of Parents’ duty with Childrens,” he identifies the proper purpose of parental authority: “The authority which parents have, is not so much for their own advancement, as for the better governing of their children, which being so, their very government is a duty.” The Lord has given parents authority in order to fulfill their duty in governing their children. Indeed, in addressing the sins of parents and children,

⁷⁰ Reformation Heritage Books published an updated version of Treatises 1–6, under the title: William Gouge, *Building a Godly Home*, ed. Scott Brown and Joel R. Beeke, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2014). Treatises 7–8 on servants and masters were not included. Many of the topics and quotes treated here may be found in a more modern form in those works.

⁷¹ *DD*, 1:84. I cite treatise number, followed by section number, and I have lightly modernized some of Gouge’s spellings for greater readability throughout this section.

⁷² Research demonstrates that most acts of abuse are done by someone known to the victim, and often by a close relative, as noted above.

Ministers ought of the two to be more earnest in urging parents to perform their duty, because they are under no such power and authority as children are. Fear of parents' authority keepeth children much in awe. There is no such thing to keep parents in awe. They will be more ready therefore to take the greater liberty, if by fear of God, and by a good conscience, they be not kept in compass.⁷³

If a parent does not properly fulfill his duty to govern his children, he is liable to fall into some form of abuse (“Of parents provoking children”). “Parents should take such heed of their carriage toward their children, as they give them no occasion to be stirred up to wrath.” This includes

too much austerity in carriage, sourness in countenance, threatening and reviling in words, too hard handling, too severe correction, too much restraint of liberty, too small allowance of things needful, with the like Parents being flesh and blood are subject in this kind to abuse their authority: yea, even they who fall into the other extreme of too much indulgency and cockering [*indulgence, pampering*] of their children, are very prone to fall also into this extreme: as many who for the most part too much suffer their children without due restraining and correction to run into all riot will sometimes on a sudden, like lions, fly upon them, and after their own pleasure correct them (Heb 12:10), and so exceedingly provoke their children. Such as are most cockering, are prone to provoke to wrath: for, 1. Such least know how to keep a mean [balance]: one will sooner leap out of one extreme into another, than go from an extreme to the mean. 2. The children of such are soonest provoked *Parents must be so watchful over their carriage, as thereby they make not their children to sin.*⁷⁴

Here he demonstrates one of my concerns in this paper: the solution to parents' improper exercise of authority is not its abolition via some manner of familial egalitarianism, but its proper and loving exercise. Indulgence and harshness are not the same sins, but they are sinful and do harm to those who should be subjected to righteous authority. It is only in the embrace of the biblical pattern that the family functions as God intended and everyone benefits from his design.

Yet all earthly authority is circumscribed. In addressing masters, Gouge references Ephesians 6:9 to teach us that “*Masters are as well bound to duty as servants.*”⁷⁵ Further, threatening is forborne because “*Authority must be moderated and*

⁷³ *DD*, 1:115.

⁷⁴ *DD*, 1:117.

⁷⁵ *DD*, 1:128.

kept in compass: else will it be like a swelling river without banks and walls.”⁷⁶ Quite helpfully, this is grounded in the ultimate authority of Christ: “*Masters and servants are in the same subjection*, and under a like command. There is one master, even Christ: and all men whosoever are *brethren, fellow-servants*.”⁷⁷

This dual emphasis of (a) proper authority and hierarchy in human relations with (b) equality of status before God is well-represented in his treatment of marital roles. In addressing the duties of wives, Gouge speaks to a wife’s respect for her husband’s authority in that office (“Of a wife’s acknowledgment of her husband’s superiority”). Even if she is noble-born and he “of mean place,” she must respect and submit. But another objection is raised:

2. *Object*. But what if a man of lewd and beastly conditions, as a drunkard, a glutton, a profane swaggerer, and impious swearer, and a blasphemer, be married to a wife, sober, religious matron, must she account him her superior, and worthy of an husband’s honour?

Answ. Surely she must. For the evil quality and disposition of his heart and life, doth not deprive a man of that civil honour which God hath given unto him.⁷⁸

This language is grating to modern ears, both in its language of hierarchy (superiority) and in its call to *salute the uniform, if not the man*, in effect. Yet Scripture teaches the same principle in many places.⁷⁹

However, respect and submission do not equal subservience and passivity (“Of a wife’s liberty in extraordinary matters”):

If there fall out an extraordinary occasion whereby the wife by disposing the goods without or against the consent of her husband may bring a great good to the family, or prevent and keep a great mischief from it, she is not to stay for his consent; instance the example of *Abigail* (1 Sam 25:18) . . . This is no part of disobedience,

⁷⁶ *DD*, 1:130.

⁷⁷ *DD*, 1:131.

⁷⁸ *DD*, 3:5.

⁷⁹ Superiority refers to functional rank, not to ontological worth. Submission to due authorities as our superiors is a basic, Christian duty, e.g., on respect to an unworthy husband: 1 Pet 3:1–7; on respect to an unworthy ruler: 1 Sam 24:1–7; on respect to an unworthy religious authority: Acts 23:1–5.

but a point wherein she may shew herself a great good help unto her husband; (Gen 2:18) for which end a wife was first made.⁸⁰

Abigail opposed the express wishes of her wicked and worthless husband, Nabal, and Gouge cites her as an example not of disobedience, but of being “a great good help.”⁸¹ Further, “*If God expressly command the wife any duty, and her husband will not by any means give consent that she shall do it, but forbid her, she may and ought to do it without, or against his consent The wife must yield no other subjection to her husband than what may stand with her subjection to Christ.*”⁸² Likewise, “*If an husband require his wife to do that which God hath forbidden she ought not to do it.*”⁸³ Again we see the language of duty and of moral obligation, “must yield” and “ought not,” which points to some manner of requirement that those under the authority of any human agent owe to the Lord as regards their ultimate and entire submission to him.

In addressing the authority of husbands, Gouge speaks first of the “duty of love,” whereby even if a man simply does not hate his wife, he fails: “for even the *want of love*, though it be only a privation, yet it is a great vice,” given his duty.⁸⁴ Further, his love is the root out of which the branches of his authority grow. For

the place wherein God hath set him, which is a place of authority; for the best good that any can do, and so the best fruits of love which he can shew forth to any, are such as are done in his own proper place, and by virtue thereof. If then an [sic]

⁸⁰ *DD*, 3:22

⁸¹ I will examine Abigail as an example of faithful resistance to unrighteous authority later in this study.

⁸² *DD*, 3:51. Elsewhere, he notes the “extent of a wife’s subjection” in the phrases, “*in the fear of the Lord, as to the Lord, in the Lord* (Eph 5:21, 22; Col 3:18)” (3:63). If her husband has made a decision in an “indifferent thing” (related to the house, their goods, guests, etc) that “she thinketh not the meetest” (3:66), she may “reason with him” and “labour to persuade” with “modesty, humility, and reverence,” and “he ought to hearken unto her,” yet if he persists, “she must yield.” In this way, “her subjection is most manifested” and “her yielding in indifferent things tendeth much to the peace of the family.” Correspondingly, in addressing husbands, he urges them to be solicitous to their wives (“Of husbands’ ready yielding to their wives’ humble suits”). “Again, it being a token of reverence in a wife humbly to make known her desire to her husband, he ought to shew so much courtesy as readily to grant her desire” (4:17).

⁸³ *DD*, 3:52. Gouge does give several cautionary comments in order to help the wife to walk righteously before the Lord if she must resist her husband’s authority.

⁸⁴ *DD*, 4:3.

husband relinquish his authority, he disableth himself from doing that good, and shewing those fruits of love which otherwise he might. If he abuse his authority, he turneth the edge and point of his sword amiss: instead of holding it over his wife for her protection, he turneth it into her bowels to her destruction, and so manifesteth thereby more hatred than love.⁸⁵

Note that there are two ways for authority to go bad: first, by the failure to exercise it. If a husband will not lead his wife, he incapacitates himself from accomplishing what the Lord commands. Second, by the abuse of authority, he uses his strength not to provide and protect, but to harm and destroy. The latter is broadly recognized as a problem, while the former often goes unnoticed. Yet an egalitarian⁸⁶ approach to the abuse of authority does not allow for the proper remedy, but authority rightly exercised for the good of those who are called to submit to it and those who are called to exercise it is necessary.⁸⁷

Obedience to God is always for the good of those who obey.

Husbands, then, ought to maintain their authority and the best means is by being “*an ensample in conversation, in love, in spirit, in faith, and in pureness.*”⁸⁸ If he does not do so, he may lose his authority through his harshness:

Contrary is their practice who by their profaneness, riotousness, drunkenness, lewdness, lightness, unthriftiness, and other like base carriage, make themselves contemptible, and so lose their authority: though a wife ought not to take these occasions to despise her husband, yet is it a just judgment on him to be despised, seeing he maketh himself contemptible. Contrary also to the forenamed directions is

⁸⁵ *DD*, 4:4.

⁸⁶ It is important to note that I use the term “egalitarian” throughout this work to refer to the broader societal phenomenon, of which evangelical egalitarianism (as opposed to complementarianism or patriarchy) is a subset. In the modern West, egalitarianism has largely triumphed in the minds of most, further distancing us from the biblical world and making godly authority seem strange. This triumph affects us all—often even without intentional deliberation or affirmation. Thus, egalitarianism has undergone a phenomenon that Mark T. Mitchell has described thus: “A victorious ideology is as invisible as it is ubiquitous. It loses its aura of novelty and becomes the furniture of our minds.” Mark T. Mitchell, *Power and Purity: The Unholy Marriage That Spawned America’s Social Justice Warriors* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2020), 11. Mitchell’s core thesis is that modern social justice activism has joined the strange bedfellows of Puritanical moral absolutism and activism and with Nietzschean moral commitments.

⁸⁷ As Alastair Roberts has noted, “In any society where sanctioned forms of masculinity are emasculating, there will be a tendency for young men to pursue unsanctioned and destructive forms of masculinity. The alt-right is the dysfunctional masculinity movement that the stifling maternalism of progressivism has brought upon itself.” Alastair Roberts, “A Crisis of Discourse—Part 2: A Problem of Gender,” *Alastair Adversaria*, November 17, 2016, <https://alastairadversaria.com/2016/11/17/a-crisis-of-discourse-part-2-a-problem-of-gender/>.

⁸⁸ *DD*, 4:4.

the stern, rough, and cruel carriage of husbands, who by violence and tyranny go about to maintain their authority. Force may indeed cause fear, but a slavish fear, such a fear as breedeth more hatred than love, more inward contempt, than outward respect.⁸⁹

He may also lose his authority through his failure to exercise it:

And contrary is their servile disposition, who against their own judgment yield to the bent of their wife's mind in such things as are unlawful: they will lose their authority rather than given discontent to their wife: which is a fault expressly forbidden by the law (Deut 13:6,7): and yet a fault whereinto not only wicked *Ahab* (1 Kings 21:7,9), but also wise *Solomon* fell (1 Kings 11:4). . . . Husbands may hearken to their wives' moving good things, but they may not obey them in evil things: if they do, their fault is double: 1. in doing evil: 2. in losing their authority.

Let husbands therefore be very watchful against their wives' evil instigations. Satan laboured to supplant *Job* by his wife: and by this doth he subvert many in these days.⁹⁰

So, the authority relationship between husband and wife is important and must be recognized and preserved. "Yet there are no unequals betwixt which there is so near a parity as betwixt man and wife,"⁹¹ and "none can be nearer than a wife, and none ought to be dearer."⁹² As part of his duty of love, there should be an "unfeigned and earnest, entire and ardent affection which an husband ought to bear unto his wife." Further, "because of the husband's place of authority, he must especially take all occasions to manifest this his inward affection."⁹³

In describing husbands who demonstrate "too much strictness toward their wives," he identifies dynamics that typify

husbands, who stand upon the uttermost step of their authority, and yield no more to a wife than to any other inferior. [Such men are] never contented or satisfied with any duty the wife performeth . . . care not how grievous and burdensome they are to their wives . . . hold their wives under as if they were children or servants . . . are

⁸⁹ "Lightness" is not a term in common usage today. Though it is not possible to have certainty at this distance, in consulting the *OED* (8:939), it seems likely that the intended sense is "Levity in behaviour; fickleness, unsteadiness, frivolity, thoughtlessness, unconcern."

⁹⁰ *DD*, 4:5.

⁹¹ *DD*, 4:7.

⁹² *DD*, 4:8.

⁹³ *DD*, 4:11.

over busy in prying into every business of the house . . . are over suspicious of their wives, and thereupon over strict in taking account of them.⁹⁴

Such a husband is a profound discouragement to his wife, as demonstrated by the proverb, “*Oft did I well, and that hear I never: Once did I ill, and that hear I ever.*”⁹⁵

While clearly advocating the authority of husbands, Gouge counsels a “rare and mild using their commanding power” for “authority is like a sword, which with over much using will be blunted, and so fail to do that service which otherwise it might when there is most need.”⁹⁶ He later contrasts “giving favours” to one’s wife with “husbands beating their wives,” with the latter receiving a harsh rebuke. “Contrary are the furious, and spiteful actions of many unkind husbands whose favours are buffets, blows, strokes and stripes: wherein they are worse than the venomous viper.”⁹⁷ He then answers the question: “May not then an husband beat his wife?” His answer: “He may not,” for three reasons:

There is no warrant throughout the whole Scripture by precept, or example for it . . . That small disparity which is betwixt man and wife, permitteth not so high a power in an husband, and so low a servitude in a wife, as for him to beat her . . . The near conjunction, and very union that is betwixt man and wife suffereth not such dealing to pass betwixt them.⁹⁸

Indeed, “*no fault should be so great, as to compel an husband to beat his wife.*”⁹⁹

Similarly, he corrects those husbands whose “variableness, whose love is ready to turn as a weather cock with every blast of a contrary wind: now tender-hearted, then again hard-hearted, now smiling, then lowering: now giving this and that favour, then

⁹⁴ *DD*, 4:20.

⁹⁵ *DD*, 4:22.

⁹⁶ *DD*, 4:32.

⁹⁷ *DD*, 4:46.

⁹⁸ *DD*, 4:46.

⁹⁹ *DD*, 4:46.

denying every thing, even such things as are needful.”¹⁰⁰ Instead, a wife ought to be able to expect “a husband’s constancy in love.” He appeals to the example of Christ, whose love was constant “for his love resteth not on the desert of his Church, but on the unchangeableness of his own will.” If a man wishes to love his wife similarly, he must do two things: “ground his love on God’s ordinance” and “support and strengthen it with an inviolable resolution to be changed and altered with no provocation.”¹⁰¹

In speaking of children, he writes of “*fear . . . which is a child’s awful [awe-filled] respect of his parent,*” contrasting it with the fear of a slave.¹⁰² The child’s proper fear is mixed with love and concerned about giving offence to a parent; the slave’s is mixed with hatred and concerned with the punishment which may be afflicted. That the parent-child relationship might be described in such terms, even in part, is quite foreign to most contemporary models.

He also applies the limited nature of earthly authority to the parent-child relationship (“Of children’s sin in yielding to their parents against God”). He calls out two sinful extremes:

On the one side, a flattering eye-service in many children, who care not what they do, be it good or evil, lawful or unlawful, so they may please their parents thereby; and on the other side a slavish fearfulness, which maketh them to so dread their parents as they fear not God at all: they will rather choose to sin and so provoke God’s wrath, than do any thing whereby their parents’ wrath may be provoked.¹⁰³

Parents, too, must avoid the extremes of “too much lenity” or “too much severity.” The latter, especially, offends against the duty of parents (“provoke not to wrath”) and those who are too severe prove themselves “of the two . . . the more unnatural parents.”

“Immoderate severity” provokes children because it “argueth no love in the parent, but

¹⁰⁰ *DD*, 4:76.

¹⁰¹ *DD*, 4:75.

¹⁰² *DD*, 4:75.

¹⁰³ *DD*, 5:38.

rather hatred . . . it softeneth not the child’s heart, but hardeneth it rather. It maketh him dull, and stupid, and clean perverteth the right and true end of correction. It oft maketh a child think of doing some mischief to his parent or himself.” Further, one can identify such severity “when correction is given: for no fault . . . for small faults . . . to children that are young and tender . . . too often . . . [and] too sorely.”¹⁰⁴

As regards servants, Gouge grounds the authority of masters over servants in the Word of God.¹⁰⁵ He also qualifies the submission that servants owe their masters, identifying

an excellent limitation thereof . . . in these four phrases, As unto Christ, As the servants of Christ, Doing the will of God, As to the Lord; all which do shew that the Obedience which servants yield to their master must be such as may stand with their obedience to Christ. So that if masters command their servants never so peremptorily to do any unlawful thing, that is, any thing forbidden by God’s word, they may not yield to it.¹⁰⁶

This last point is noteworthy, and raises a question: are those who are under authority *required* to resist when it is abused? Said another way, is it morally wrong to fail to resist when one is oppressed in some way? This would seem to be the implication of Gouge’s words: “Again, if masters forbid their servants to do that which God hath commanded them to do, they must, notwithstanding their master’s prohibition, do it.”¹⁰⁷ I will revisit these questions later in this paper.

Finally, with masters, Gouge teaches them to maintain their authority over their servants.¹⁰⁸ However, he also cautions against “making their authority to be despised,” as when masters “carry themselves basely and abjectly before their servants,” when mistresses undermine the master “by conspiring with their servants to go abroad,

¹⁰⁴ *DD*, 6:49.

¹⁰⁵ *DD*, 7:2.

¹⁰⁶ *DD*, 7:38.

¹⁰⁷ *DD*, 7:38.

¹⁰⁸ *DD*, 8:4.

take away goods, gossip, etc.” Masters may also be “too remiss and sheepish: entreating and praying their servants to do such things as they ought to command and require at their hands,” or when they “suffer their servants to be their companions, playing, drinking, revelling with them” rather than honoring their respective stations. Masters also lose respect when they are “over-ruled by their servants to do any unjust or unlawful thing.”¹⁰⁹

Of course, masters may also err by “too great rigour,”¹¹⁰ whether in look, speech, or actions. Therefore, masters must restrain their authority to “things lawful,”¹¹¹ which are defined by God’s Word. Masters who do not honor that standard are guilty of “presuming above their authority” and in their “arrogancy and presumption . . . make their own will the rule of their servants’ obedience.”¹¹² The righteous master patterns his commands after God’s will, which requires him to command his servants¹¹³ and to make sure that they not neglect their duties. “If they cause not their servants also to do them, they make themselves accessory to their servant’s sin.”¹¹⁴ The master who does not enforce the servant’s duties is himself sinning.

However, the master does not have power over his servant’s life. Here again, we see due process and the nature of proper authorities. “The power of life is proper to the public Magistrate, who doth all things in open public places, that so there may be many witnesses of his just proceeding. If masters had this power, many might privily be

¹⁰⁹ *DD*, 8:5.

¹¹⁰ *DD*, 8:6.

¹¹¹ *DD*, 8:7.

¹¹² *DD*, 8:8.

¹¹³ *DD*, 8:9.

¹¹⁴ *DD*, 8:10.

put to death, and no man know for what cause, as it is in popish inquisitions”¹¹⁵ (Gouge was a Puritan, after all).

Gouge closes the eighth treatise with four headings: “Of the subjection under which masters are,” “Of the equality betwixt masters and servants in relation to God,” “Of God’s being in heaven, how it is a motive to provoke masters well to respect their servants,” and “Of God’s impartial respect of all.” These four serve as a good summary of Gouge’s understanding of biblical, honorable hierarchy, both in the goods it offers and in the parameters it provides for our dealings here on earth.

Contemporary Usage

Transitioning to the present, we find that our day is also not silent on abuse. Perhaps the most common usage of the term is in relation to the improper consumption of various psychoactive drugs for nonmedical purposes, or *drug abuse* (increasingly, *substance* abuse). Here, however, I am focusing on the usage of *abuse* to label what we might categorize as interpersonal mistreatment at a high level. The term is also usually modified by some additional descriptor, child, elder, physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, and the like, which attempts to make clearer the specific kind of mistreatment being identified, whether as regards the age or developmental status of the victim (child, elder), the tangible means employed (physical, sexual), the intangible means employed (spiritual, verbal),¹¹⁶ or what we might describe as the area of invisible impact (emotional, psychological).¹¹⁷ In most of these categories, a shift of emphasis may be

¹¹⁵ *DD*, 8:14.

¹¹⁶ During the writing of this paper, the term “gaslighting” (“the act or practice of grossly misleading someone especially for one’s own advantage”) was chosen as Merriam-Webster’s word of the year for 2022. Merriam-Webster, “Word of the Year 2022,” accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/word-of-the-year>. As noted in Joseph Pisani, “‘Gaslighting’ Is Merriam-Webster’s Word of the Year,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 28, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/gaslighting-is-merriam-websters-word-of-the-year-11669654788>.

¹¹⁷ The legitimacy of these various categories will be discussed in chapter 2.

detected in the use of *abuse*, with the focus falling less on the improper use of something and more on the state of mistreatment which the victim has endured.

In order to orient the reader to the current state of discussions surrounding the terminology of abuse, I am providing a representative sampling of popular definitions within the field—mostly written by Christian authors—with comments focused primarily on their shared terminology. My goal is not to critique these definitions at this point, but to survey the terrain and to set the stage for further discussion.

Domestic Abuse

We begin with a general definition from Darby Strickland:

Abuse occurs in a marriage when one spouse pursues their own self-interests by seeking to control and dominate the other through a pattern of coercive, controlling, and punishing behaviors . . . I like to use the term *oppression*, since it provides a framework for this behavior that is addressed in Scripture and captures the domination that it involves. No matter what form the oppression takes, its intended outcome is the same: to punish and wound a victim so that an oppressor gets their world the way they want it. An oppressor’s behavior says, “Serve me or suffer the consequences!”¹¹⁸

Strickland’s definition includes the synonyms *control*, *dominate*, *coercive*, *controlling*, *oppression*, and *domination* as well as the implied idea of an *ultimatum* (“serve me or suffer”). We will find these themes recurring throughout the definitions to follow. She also links those terms to the concept of selfishness (“their own self-interests,” “their world the way they want it”).

Chris Moles captures a similar definition much more succinctly: “The heart of the matter is pride that seeks to control.”¹¹⁹ And later, “Abusive men desire control above everything else. They attempt to dominate and control their partner, and the circumstances enlisting support from any means possible. I cannot overstate this point

¹¹⁸ Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 24.

¹¹⁹ Chris Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for Men Who Use Control and Violence in the Home* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 2015), 21.

enough: abusive men want to control and will go to extraordinary lengths to gain and maintain control over their partners.”¹²⁰ Moles’s assessment is remarkable for its clarity in designating the motivating desire of the abuser repeatedly and with emphasis: *control*.

Diane Langberg focuses on similar dynamics of abusive power and control throughout her indictment of abuse within the church. “What happens when our story includes the abuse of power? The word *abuse* comes from the Latin *abuti*, it means ‘to misuse or use wrongly’ and encompasses the ideas of exploiting, causing injury, assaulting, and perpetrating violence and offensive language.”¹²¹ She details how various types of power, physical, verbal, emotional, etc., may be deployed abusively. She also argues that “abuse involves three components: the deception of self, the deception of others, and the coercion of others.”¹²²

Wade Mullen analyzes abuse through the lens of “impression management,”¹²³ arguing that “abuse involves any action that takes power from another in an attempt to use them. And it almost always begins with language—words that lead to confusion and captivity.”¹²⁴ Here, we see an emphasis on the *disempowerment* of the victim with the implication that the abuser thereby gains power (“in an attempt to use them”). Further,

¹²⁰ Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse*, 37.

¹²¹ Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 61–62. She asserts that “Adam and Eve told themselves they were pursuing a greater likeness to God. They seemed blind to the fact that they were pursuing a seemingly good goal through utterly ungodly means” (62). She sees this is an example of how humans mistakenly intend to use their power for good. However, though the serpent did tell them that they “will be like God” if they ate the fruit, it seems more likely that their intention was not merely mistaken notions of greater godliness, but self-serving aspirations for God-like self-determination.

¹²² Langberg, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 140.

¹²³ Wade Mullen, *Something’s Not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing Yourself from Its Power* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 9. Mullen utilizes Erving Goffman’s concept of impression management, which Mullen describes as “the process of creating, influencing or manipulating an image held by an audience” (9). Using the analogy of a stage play, he writes, “Impression management becomes unethical when the front-stage persona is used to hide trusts that ought not to be hidden” (12).

¹²⁴ Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, 2.

“The chief desire of abusive individuals and organizations is to attain or retain power.”¹²⁵
The focus of his work is on linking power to external reputation, and then analyzing how abusers seek to promote and maintain their reputation at the expense of others.

Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb also emphasize dynamics of power and control in their discussion of domestic violence: “A pattern of coercive, controlling or abusive behavior that is used by one individual to gain or maintain power and control over another individual in the context of an intimate relationship.”¹²⁶ Brad Hambrick presents a similar perspective: “The very heart of abuse is centered in the love and misuse of power.”¹²⁷

Kristin L. Kellen offers the following definition:

Abuse means mistreatment or misuse of something. When applied to a person, it is a set of actions between people that is marked by mistreatment, power, or control rather than mutual honor and value. Typically, a person with relative power or authority mistreats a person in a position of weakness or subordination. . . . *At its core, abuse involves power and control.* An abuser exerts improper power and control over another human at that person’s direct expense. The abuser directly and significantly sins against the victim.¹²⁸

Her definition identifies issues of power as well as power differentials, again finding these dynamics at the core of abuse, though without specifying in what sense (The abuser’s motive? The means employed?).

Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson integrate other considerations into their definition:

Abuse occurs as a person in a position of greater influence uses his personal capacities to diminish the personal capacities of those under his influence in order to control them. Because God made people as embodied souls, these personal capacities are both physical and spiritual. Abuse is identified from two directions:

¹²⁵ Mullen, *Something’s Not Right*, 15.

¹²⁶ Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 57.

¹²⁷ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 7.

¹²⁸ Kristin L. Kellen, “Trauma and Abuse,” in *The Gospel for Disordered Lives*, by Robert D. Jones, Kristin L. Kellen, and Rob Green (Nashville: B & H, 2021), 377, emphasis added.

(1) the manipulative intent and behavioral forcefulness of the one in a position of influence, and (2) the diminishing effect on those under his influence.¹²⁹

This definition offers more developed metrics for identifying abuse while also employing the power and control paradigm, thus linking power to the abuser's desire for control ("in order to control them"). Again, control appears to be the primary, if not the exclusive, motive of the abuser.

Finally, from a secular perspective, the United Nations offers a similar, though more expansive, definition:

Domestic abuse, also called "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence," can be defined as a pattern of behavior in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that frighten, intimidate, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, injure, or wound someone.¹³⁰

Here again, the motive or purpose of the abuser is assessed as "to gain or maintain power and control over" the victim. In all these definitions, we notice a continuity of language that emphasizes the themes of power, control, and, at times, domination. Having established that pattern, I will turn very briefly to the definitions of other forms of abuse.

Economic or Financial Abuse

Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar define economic abuse as "using control of the family income or limiting your partner's access to money to keep her dependent on you or to get your own way."¹³¹ Similarly, Strickland defines financial abuse as "a way of controlling a person by making her economically dependent or exploiting her resources. Forms of financial abuse may be subtle or overt. They include concealing financial

¹²⁹ Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts: A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021), 39–40. They later add, "Abuse is any diminishing of an individual's God-given capacities of personhood, including their ability to perceive rightly" (74).

¹³⁰ United Nations, "What Is Domestic Abuse?," accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse>.

¹³¹ Ellen Pence and Mike Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model* (New York: Springer, 1993), 152.

information, limiting a victim's access to assets, controlling her ability to acquire money, exploiting her resources, or dictating how all family funds are spent."¹³² Again, control is central—indeed, it is the exclusive motive identified.

Emotional Abuse

Hambrick identifies emotional abuse as perhaps the most difficult to define: “If you’ve ever tried to research a definition for emotional, verbal, or psychological abuse, you’ve doubtless been frustrated. Unfortunately, there is no consensus amongst experts. This doesn’t mean emotional abuse doesn’t exist, it just means it is hard to objectively define.”¹³³ Pence and Paymar take a shot: “Emotional abuse is any attempt to make your partner feel bad about herself or any attack on her self-esteem.”¹³⁴ Strickland writes, “Emotional abuse, which can also be categorized as *mental, verbal, or psychological abuse*, is a pattern of behavior that promotes a destructive sense of fear, obligation, shame, or guilt in a victim.”¹³⁵ She specifies “two forms of emotional abuse”: extreme neglect and gaslighting.¹³⁶ Notable by its absence is the terminology of control, though “make her feel” can probably be understood as synonymous. The idea of “behavior that promotes” is significantly weaker in force.

Physical Abuse

Pence and Paymar give a succinct definition of physical abuse: “Physical abuse is the use of any physical force against your partner intended to make her afraid of you or

¹³² Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 235. Strickland also notes, “Financial abuse occurs in almost every domestic abuse situation” (237).

¹³³ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 108.

¹³⁴ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 112.

¹³⁵ Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 178.

¹³⁶ Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 183–86.

to hurt her.”¹³⁷ Though not using the language of control, “make her afraid” does connote a high level of coercive influence. Strickland defines physical abuse as “intentionally or recklessly using physical force in a way that may result in bodily injury or physical pain . . . Physical abuse does not need to cause pain or leave a bruise in order to be consider abusive.”¹³⁸ There is no statement of intention or motive supplied in this definition beyond being “intentional or reckless;” an act can be considered abusive if it “may result” in injury or pain. This is a very broad definition that is liable to mislabel certain normal behaviors (e.g., contact sports) as abusive.

Sexual Abuse

Given the increased attention that sexual abuse has received recently, more authors are currently addressing this topic. Langberg offers a succinct definition: “Sexual abuse is generally defined as any sexual activity—verbal, visual, or physical—that is engaged in without consent.” It is important to note, therefore, how she understands consent:

When we are talking about adults, it is important to understand what makes something consensual. First, in order to consent, one must have the capacity to choose. If you are anesthetized in a hospital bed, you obviously do not have that capacity. The intoxicated young woman in a previous chapter did not have the capacity to choose. If your whole self has been anesthetized by years of sexual abuse, battering, verbal tirades, or drugs or alcohol, you do not have that capacity—it has been trampled, killed. Second, consent means it is safe to say no. If you are five and he is forty, if he is the boss and can fire you, if someone has the power to ostracize you from your community, consent is not possible because it is not safe to say no.¹³⁹

We find here that the categories of behaviors that remove the possibility of consent include a mix of one’s own actions and of ways one has been, or potentially may be,

¹³⁷ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 98. Their definition is obviously fixed narrowly on adult domestic abuse, which is the focus of their project.

¹³⁸ Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 127.

¹³⁹ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 70.

acted upon. Through the language of power (“if someone has the power to”), it appears to be consistent with her understanding to state that the lack of consent equates to some measure of disempowerment, whether in part or total.¹⁴⁰ I will develop and assess those themes of power differentials, consent, and the like later in this paper.

Strickland focuses on abuse within marriage:

Marital sexual abuse is a broad term that can encompass many heinous and exploitive acts. The worst violations occur when sex is demanded, required, or taken by force—as in instances of rape or forced sex acts. Other abusive acts include the unwanted instruction of pornography or implements into sex, undesired sexual activities, peeking, or spying. Sexual abuse can be manipulative and coercive. In such cases, an oppressor uses unrelenting pressure or threats to leverage a sexual encounter even after a victim expresses discomfort or refusal.¹⁴¹

Further,

Abuse is fueled by entitlement. Entitlement says, “My needs and desires are the priority; it is your job to make me happy.” *Abusive* entitlement says, “If you fail to fulfill my desires, I will hurt you.” Sexually abusive oppressors believe that they are entitled to sex. They love themselves and their own pleasure to such an extent that they are willing to harm another person in order to be satisfied.¹⁴²

Though the terms power and control are not used, many synonymous ideas are:

“demanded, required or taken by force,” “manipulative and coercive,” and “leverage.”

¹⁴⁰ Langberg is not alone in this approach to consent. Within broader secular discussions of sexual morality, consent has become essentially the sole category for evaluating the acceptability of any sexual act—a task for which it is demonstrably insufficient. Carl Trueman has noted and commented upon this development at various points, including, Carl R. Trueman, “In Bondage to Pornography: What You Watch Determines What You Want,” *First Things*, February 20, 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2015/02/morality-a-supply-side-economy>. This new standard is reflected in campus culture in the idea of an “Affirmative Consent Policy,” which argues that consent for sexual activity must be “actively present, continual, conscious, and voluntary.” Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, “Affirmative Consent,” *FIRE*, accessed September 18, 2023, <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/affirmative-consent>. From a Christian understanding of sexuality, making consent the sole issue is obviously deeply problematic. Especially within the field of abuse, one sees how pedophilia thus becomes a viable option as proponents argue that children are indeed able to provide consent—and especially as the broader society lacks any philosophically and morally compelling reason besides instinctual revulsion for arguing against it.

¹⁴¹ Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 151. Interestingly, she believes “not all usage of pornography is abusive. Both the use and creation of pornography is always sinful, but it is not abusive unless it is undesired. Mutually agreed upon evil behaviors are simply wrong—not abusive. Remember that abuse requires coercion” (152).

¹⁴² Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 152.

Hambrick speaks to the specific issue of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy: “The power differential between a church leader and church member makes the consent language of ‘having an affair with’ inaccurate in most cases. This would be like saying a therapist had an affair with a client or college professor with a student. The more accurate language is ‘sexualized abuse of power.’”¹⁴³ The dynamics of power and power differentials are noteworthy here and will be assessed below. Similarly, at a recent President’s Forum, Albert Mohler commented on the ongoing abuse scandals within the Southern Baptist Convention, stating, “If you are in authority over someone then any kind of sexual expression or sexual activity is just absolutely, categorically wrong and rightly defined as abuse.”¹⁴⁴ Though too much should not be read into a one-off statement, this seems to reflect a power dynamics view of abuse.¹⁴⁵

Spiritual Abuse

The idea of spiritual abuse is one of the newer categories and is receiving increased attention. In a new book, Michael J. Kruger applies familiar themes to this category:

Spiritual abuse is when a spiritual leader—such as a pastor, elder, or head of a Christian organization—wields his position of spiritual authority in such a way that he manipulates, domineers, bullies, and intimidates those under him as a means of maintaining his own power and control, even if he is convinced he is seeking biblical and kingdom-related goals.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 153.

¹⁴⁴ R. Albert Mohler Jr., “President’s Forum: A Discussion of Issues Facing the SBC,” Southern Seminary, November 11, 2022, YouTube video, 56:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWwmdKsILk>. The comments quoted above begin at 50:23.

¹⁴⁵ Since it seems safe to assume that he is referring to sexual acts outside of marriage, then two considerations arise: (1) every sexual act outside of marriage is sinful and wrong; (2) why does the authority factor make the sexual act abusive? It is certainly true that a person in a position of authority who engages in sinful sexual activity is guilty of a greater sin because of the honor, respect, and responsibilities of his office. But does the office/authority make the sexual sin abusive? Or must there be some other factor for an act to be identified as abuse? I will argue for the latter below.

¹⁴⁶ Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 24.

Further, “The hallmark of spiritual abuse is that it involves one person with ecclesiastical or spiritual authority over another.” Kruger utilizes familiar terminology, identifying power and control as both means (“domineers, bullies, and intimidates . . . as a means of maintaining”) and as a desired end (“his own power and control”).

Strickland also weighs in: “Spiritual abuse occurs when an oppressor establishes control and domination by using Scripture, doctrine, or his ‘leadership role’ as weapons. This form of abuse can be subtle, because it can mask itself as religious practice.”¹⁴⁷ The language of “control and domination” is explicit and again is assigned the level of motive. And Langberg has written an entire book on the topic. “Spiritual abuse involves using the sacred to harm or deceive the soul of another.”¹⁴⁸ She laments that, for example, churches look for expertise and charisma in their leaders, just like the world. “Sadly, many of us in Christendom have looked for these same qualities in our leaders.”¹⁴⁹ In other words, for Langberg, we are drawn to wrong conceptions of power in choosing those who lead us, which creates a culture that facilitates abuse.¹⁵⁰

R. Scott Clark offers a mediating definition of spiritual abuse: “The malevolent, ungracious use of the authority or processes of the church to lord it over the laity or other officers in the church for personal gain, emotional or psychological manipulation, or for the exercise of ungodly or undue control over others, which infringes

¹⁴⁷ Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 212.

¹⁴⁸ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 127.

¹⁴⁹ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 128. To appreciate the force of this statement, one must understand that for Langberg, “Christendom” is “the system of Christianity” which is often confused with Christ (82). It is one of two cultures that we simultaneously inhabit, the other being secular culture (47). For Langberg, Christendom is what is bad about Christianity in this world, being committed to our own, personal kingdoms, institutions, and agendas in the name of Christ.

¹⁵⁰ One would suppose that Langberg is not looking for incompetence and lethargy in leaders either, so the vague nature of her lament begs many questions. For example, is the problem with expertise or charisma *per se*, or are those qualities merely tools that may be used well or poorly?

upon Christian liberty and that violates the second table of the moral law of God.”¹⁵¹ While utilizing the language of control, his use of “ungodly or undue” in modifying it at least appears to allow for the possibility of *godly* and *due* control as a possibility.

Child Abuse

Deepak Reju offers a straightforward definition: “Child abuse can be defined as any act or failure to act resulting in imminent risk, serious injury, death, physical or emotional or sexual harm, or exploitation of a child.”¹⁵² Noticeably absent here is the language of power or control—there is actually no statement of motive or intent in his definition. Further, defining “any act . . . resulting in . . . serious injury” of a child as abusive is far too broad to be useful. However, Reju does recognize dynamics of authority and responsibility between adults and children. “God has entrusted the care of children to parents (and extended family), which means they have the moral responsibility to protect, feed, mentor, care for, and love their children. There is also a more general sense in which God has given moral responsibility to adults.”¹⁵³ The failure to fulfill that moral responsibility is therefore part of what is blameworthy about abuse.

While referencing the broader topic of sexual abuse, Langberg notes a unique element when a child is involved: “A child victim is considered unable to consent due to developmental immaturity and an inability to understand sexual behavior.”¹⁵⁴ The inability to give consent would seem to imply that the abuser possesses entire control in relation to the child. This is an important theme that will be developed further in chapter 2.

¹⁵¹ R. Scott Clark, “A Beginner’s Guide to Addressing Spiritual Abuse in the Church,” *Heidelbergblog*, March 17, 2021, <https://heidelbergblog.net/2021/03/a-beginners-guide-to-addressing-spiritual-abuse-in-the-church/>.

¹⁵² Deepak Reju, *On Guard: Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse at Church* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2014), 5.

¹⁵³ Reju, *On Guard*, 6.

¹⁵⁴ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 70.

Power and Control

Even this brief survey of contemporary definitions demonstrates that the terms *power* and *control* are almost universally employed when describing abuse. Not only are they utilized, but they are seen as *essential* for understanding what abuse is, especially at the level of the motive of the abuser: the abuser wants power or control. On the one hand, such an understanding appears to be obvious and unobjectionable. Of course, the abuser is using power to control his victim. He wants her to do what he wants, and thus he is seeking to control her. On the other hand, such an understanding easily turns *means* into *motive*, and thus risks simplifying what is driving the abuser, which opens the door for smearing the legitimate use of power and control with the same broad brush of accusation. As I will demonstrate shortly, power and control are positive concepts in Scripture, central to what it means to be human.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, to distill the abuser's motive to the pursuit of power or control muddies the issue at best.

The prevailing paradigm for understanding abuse sprang from clear-eyed feminism and egalitarianism. In the first chapter of their seminal work, Pence and Paymar set out the theoretical framework that guides their program with helpful clarity:

The curriculum described in this book is based on the theory that violence is used to control people's behavior. This curriculum is designed to be used within a community using its institutions to diminish the power of batterers over their victims and to explore with each abusive man the intent and course of his violence and the possibilities for change through seeking a different kind of relationship with women.

Often a fine line separates those of us who teach the class from the court mandated to attend. We've all been socialized in a culture that values power, a culture in which the thinking that we challenge in the groups is present in every aspect of our daily lives. Our schools, churches, and places of work are all structured hierarchically. All of us have engaged in at least some of the tactics batterers use to control their partners.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ The most obvious connection in this regard is found in the "dominion mandate" of Gen 1:26, 28. See below for discussion.

¹⁵⁶ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 1. They repeat and develop the idea that "This curriculum is based on the premise that the purpose of using physical abuse in relationships is to control the thoughts, feelings, or actions of another person" (69). Further, "When we as a society decide that women have certain subservient roles and men have certain privileged roles, then we also give men the message that they can enforce those roles with whatever tools are at their disposal . . . The historic

They explain further, “Violence in the family is directly linked to status in the family and to socialization. Men are culturally prepared for their role of master of the home even though they must often physically enforce the ‘right’ to exercise this role. They are socialized to be dominant and women to be subordinate.”¹⁵⁷ While I will explore the history of the DM and its widespread influence in how abuse is understood and treated in chapter 3, as well as providing critique, it is worth noting here both how foundational the concepts of *power* and *control* are to their system and how they understand those concepts to have permeated American society—especially in terms of *hierarchy*¹⁵⁸—and unhelpfully so.

That is why their prescription for solving the problem of abuse is the relinquishment of power and control in order to operate in an egalitarian manner:

To move from a society in which individuals seek power, and its corresponding ability to control, to a society in which its members seek collective and personal empowerment and its creative power is a complex process. Any system that gives one group power over another group dehumanizes both those with too much power and those without enough power.¹⁵⁹

Two notes are in order here: first, the difference between “individual power” and “personal empowerment” does not seem to be vast, regardless of whether a collective

oppression and continued subjugation of women in most cultures occurs because men have defined almost every facet of their societies, thereby perpetuating a sexist belief system and institutionalizing male privilege” (147).

¹⁵⁷ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 5.

¹⁵⁸ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 72. They teach that “hierarchy as a social order is a cultural pattern,” as opposed to something that is natural. Hierarchy is socially conditioned, and thus part of the privilege of men and the oppression of women.

¹⁵⁹ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 180. They have noted the influence of Paulo Freire on their program: “The analysis of critical thinking that underlies this curriculum is based on the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. . . . We live in a society that uses myth to maintain societal order in what is essentially a dysfunctional culture.” Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 72. Freire views power similarly, though on the level even of the individual: “Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber’s consciousness. Thus, the behavior of the oppressed is a prescribed behavior, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor.” Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Penguin, 2017), 21. Freire writes of dehumanization: “As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized” (30).

element is also in view. As will be developed in chapter 3, it is likely more honest to state that the goal is not merely the relinquishment of power and/or control, but their transfer to another whom the counselor finds to be superior. “Some animals are,” as Orwell aptly noted, “more equal than others.”¹⁶⁰ Second, the idea that empowering “one group over another dehumanizes both”¹⁶¹ calls into question the very idea of authority itself, such as with police over criminals, parents over children, or rulers over subjects.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (London: Macmillan Collectors Library, 2021), 98. Herbert Marcuse laid out the principle when writing on the need to withdraw tolerance from the forces opposing his program of liberation. “The question, who is qualified to make all these distinctions, definitions, identifications for the society as a whole, has now one logical answer, namely, everyone ‘in the maturity of his faculties’ as a human being, everyone who has learned to think rationally and autonomously.” Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, by Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr., and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 106. Authorities will be chosen. Enforcement must happen. The only question is who has the power? C. S. Lewis would identify this as a fruit of man’s rejection of the *Tao* (i.e., “Natural Law or Traditional Morality or the First Principles of Practical Reason or the First Platitudes”) (43), leading to the rejection of Man as designed by God and the Natural order. “Man’s power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men, with Nature as its instrument.” C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: Or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 55.

As noted above, the prevailing paradigm was born out the work of Paulo Freire. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he speaks of the two stages involved in such a pedagogy:

In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage . . . this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted. In the first stage this confrontation occurs through the change in the way the oppressed perceive the world of oppression; in the second stage, through the expulsion of the myths created and developed in the old order, which like specters haunt the new structure emerging from the revolutionary transformation. (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 28–29)

Christianity, capitalism, and the like are all part of that “old order” that must be confronted and overthrown so that the revolutionary leaders can realize their liberated utopia.

¹⁶¹ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 180.

¹⁶² Human authority is, of course, always limited in God’s world. Ironically, because the prevailing view of power and control represented by the DM is godless, it inevitably grants greater power to the state as the enforcement arm of their paradigm, and thus opens the door to tyranny. Every system must have a god, a final arbiter and authority. If there is no god above the state, then the state takes on increasing authority and ends up becoming totalitarian. Only a proper biblical understanding of authority can guard against such tyranny. As Bavinck predicted over a century ago (1908), “The state is the one true family, and all the citizens are members of that family with equal rights.” Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library, 2008), 139. Further, “Anyone who expects the state to satisfy all those interests, for which family and society and church are to look after, is undermining the independence of these spheres of life and is calling for a remedy that in the long run will turn out to be more dangerous than the disease” (141).

This is also evident in a shift in language in the previous century that C. S. Lewis noted as reflecting a shift in political philosophy. “The modern State exists not to protect our rights but to do us good or make us good—anyway, to do something to us or to make us something. Hence the new name ‘leaders’ for those who were once ‘rulers.’ We are less their subjects than their wards, pupils, or domestic animals. There is nothing left of which we can say to them, ‘Mind your own business.’ Our whole lives *are* their business.” C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 314. Note that even in America persons once spoke in such a manner. For example, the first Chief Justice of the US

Thus, our dilemma presents itself: how can we define and understand abuse rightly—including the obvious aspects of power or control—without unhelpfully disparaging the genuine and proper dynamics of authority and hierarchy that the Lord has built into his good creation? Authority is always susceptible to misuse or abuse, of course, but must we seek an egalitarian solution to this problem? Or might egalitarianism actually further the problem?

Rosaria Butterfield came out of CT and lesbianism as fruits of turning to Christ. She also left academia to become a pastor's wife. In the eyes of her modern, secular peers, she went from an independent, empowered woman to a subjugated housewife. In addressing her critics, she presents their critique, and offers the counterargument, brilliantly:

One of the fair criticisms of my choosing the role of a submitted wife over and against returning to Syracuse to serve as an English professor is that in doing so, I am showing my support of biblical patriarchy. Guilty as charged. But let's be clear; I do not support biblical patriarchy because of the belief that men are good. I embrace biblical patriarchy because men are *not* good (Jer 17:9). Because men are not good, I am grateful to encourage and stand behind a godly redeemed man who defends and protects the church and his family against ravaging wolves.¹⁶³

Butterfield contrasts Pence and Paymar. Abuse of power certainly occurs in this fallen world; one may either combat it with egalitarianism or with godly power and control, but only the latter can offer lasting help.¹⁶⁴

Supreme Court, John Jay, wrote, "Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest, of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers." John Jay, "Letter to John Murray (October 12, 1816)" in *The Life of John Jay: With Selections from His Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*, by William Jay (New York: J & J Harper, 1833), 2:376.

¹⁶³ Rosaria Butterfield, "Leading with Who You Are: The Misunderstood Calling of the Submitted Wife," *Eikon* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 89.

¹⁶⁴ Interestingly, Lewis appears to have occupied a confused middle ground on these matters. He wrote, "I do not believe that God created an egalitarian world. I believe the authority of parent over child, husband over wife, learned over simple to have been as much a part of the original plan as the authority of man over beast." So, he affirms the goodness and originality of the hierarchical relations built into creation. However, he ultimately finds them untenable. "But since we have learned sin, we have found, as Lord Acton says, that 'all power corrupts, and absolutely power corrupts absolutely.' The only remedy has been to take away the powers and substitute a legal fiction of equality . . . Equality is for me in the same position as clothes. It is a result of the Fall and the remedy for it." C. S. Lewis, "Membership," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 1980), 168–69.

A Biblical Vision

I stated above that power and control are positive concepts in Scripture.¹⁶⁵ In order to defend that position, I will develop here a *very* brief biblical theology of power and control, tracing those themes through the fourfold lens of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Through this examination, we should be able to identify both the goodness of these concepts and the source and reason for their corruption. In addition, we will see how they have been redeemed in Christ and will one day be restored to their state of pristine goodness.

Creation. Power and control belong to the Creator God. He alone is independent and self-existent. His will is sovereign and inviolable in creation, and all things are created according to his Word. He is God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth (Ps 134:3). He is omnipotent, and he exercises power and control both in his governance of his creation—providence—and in his reign as Creator and Lord over all—sovereignty.¹⁶⁶ The largest part of recognizing and affirming the goodness of power and control is in understanding that they are attributes of God himself, and therefore must be good.

¹⁶⁵ Representatively and briefly: Prov 20:29, “The glory of young men is their strength”; Deut 31:6, “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you”; 1 Sam 2:10, “The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed”; 1 Chr 19:13, “Be strong, and let us use our strength for our people and for the cities of our God, and may the LORD do what seems good to him”; Ps 29:11, “May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!”; Luke 2:52, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man”; Mark 12:30, “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength”; Eph 6:10, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might”; 1 Pet 4:11, “whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies”; 1 Cor 16:13, “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.”

¹⁶⁶ Herman Bavinck presents the traditional Reformed position in summarizing *providence* under the categories of preservation, concurrence, and government of creation. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 1:615. *Sovereignty* includes the idea of God as “owner, possessor, and Lord of all things . . . He alone has absolute authority. Always and everywhere his will decides (1:229). Richard Lints notes the uniqueness of God’s power and actions in Gen 1: “His sovereign act of speaking creation into existence separates him from all that is created. He alone is the uncreated one. All else is dependent upon God.” Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 36 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 31–32.

As regards humanity, power and control are most clearly and positively presented at the climax of day six in the creation account. As the pinnacle of the program, man alone is created *imago dei* and receives an express divine endowment and charge:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. *And let them have dominion over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it, and have dominion over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:26, 28 *emphasis added*).

Mankind is commanded and empowered to reproduce and fill the earth, but this is not merely filling. It is filling so that the earth may be *subdued*, and so that man might *exercise dominion over* the fish, birds, and every living thing. The emphasized terms sound suspiciously like synonyms for power and control.¹⁶⁷ Mankind was literally created to multiply and fill the earth¹⁶⁸ so as to exercise power and control over it, thus leading creation toward its God-appointed ends.¹⁶⁹ Such expansive dominion would be the fulfillment of the call to glorify our Creator by covering the earth with image-bearers who exercise dominion in obedience to him. As the Psalmist teaches, “You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet” (8:6), and “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man” (115:16).¹⁷⁰ Aquinas taught that a civil ruler “bears a special likeness to God, since he

¹⁶⁷ Anecdotally, it is interesting that as talk of dominion has decreased in evangelical circles, *stewardship* appears to have taken its place. Stewardship is a biblical concept, of course; but if these terms are viewed as alternatives, rather than complements, then something vital has been lost.

¹⁶⁸ Note the repeated awareness of the fulfillment of the command to multiply/fill the earth as a sign of blessing, representatively in Gen at 17:2, 20; 28:3; and 35:11.

¹⁶⁹ “To govern is to lead the thing governed in a suitable way toward its proper end.” Aquinas, *On Kingship*, 58.

¹⁷⁰ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary 1A (Nashville: B & H, 1996), 175.

does in his kingdom what God does in the world.”¹⁷¹ John Calvin wrote similarly, “Wherefore no man can doubt that civil authority is, in the sight of God, not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honorable, of all stations in mortal life.”¹⁷² Man’s dominion in this world is a positive good and commanded by God.¹⁷³

Richard P. Belcher Jr. makes an important application of this command: “Of course, human beings rule creation under God’s authority. Practically, this means that it is appropriate for human beings to use creation for their benefit.”¹⁷⁴ John Murray appeals to Jesus’s instruction in Mark 2:27 to make a similar point:

In the sense in which Jesus spoke of the sabbath as made for man and not man for the sabbath, so we may say that the earth and its resources were made for man and not man for them; he was to exercise dominion over them, they were not to rule over him. The earth and its resources were to be brought into the service of his well-being, enjoyment, and pleasure.¹⁷⁵

His argument is (sometimes unknowingly) opposed by many Christians today who teach that power is never to be exercised for personal benefit, but only for the good of others. I will assess this argument at the end of this chapter. However, I note here that not only is it a false dichotomy, but it is also simply impossible. Man’s ongoing existence requires that

¹⁷¹ Aquinas, *On Kingship*, 41. See also, Adam M. Carrington, “Reviving the Christian Dignity of Politics,” *Ad Fontes*, June 20, 2022, <https://adfontesjournal.com/politics/reviving-the-christian-dignity-of-politics/>.

¹⁷² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 4.20.4. Aquinas argued similarly, speaking especially of kings, “Those who rule others well are more worthy of praise than those who act well under others’ direction.” This is because greater virtue is required to rule others than oneself, and thus the work of kings is of “extraordinary virtue.” Aquinas, *On Kingship*, 39.

¹⁷³ Contemporary evangelical rejection of political power—and the chaos that has developed in the resulting vacuum—demonstrates the need for a recovery of a positive vision of power as an instrumental good. I have addressed that theme with regard to abuse in a recent article derived from this study: Steve Heitland, “Reclaiming Power and Control,” *American Reformer*, April 12, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2023/04/reclaiming-power-and-control/>.

¹⁷⁴ Richard P. Belcher Jr., *Genesis: The Beginning of God’s Plan of Salvation*, Focus on the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2012), 56–57. Calvin argues that Gen 1:30 points not just to basic provision, but to abundance. “God certainly did not intend that man should be slenderly and sparingly sustained; but rather, by these words, he promises a liberal abundance, which should leave nothing wanting to a sweet and pleasant life.” John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King, Geneva Series Commentaries (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000), 100.

¹⁷⁵ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 37.

he work to his own benefit, at least to some extent.¹⁷⁶ Even the oft-quoted Philippians 2 passage argues likewise: “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (v. 4).¹⁷⁷ It is both my own interests and others’, not either-or. In assessing Jesus’s use of power and control below, we will see how he resolves this false dichotomy.

Genesis 2 offers more specific insights into other dynamics of power and control. As the events of the sixth day are recounted in greater detail, it becomes evident that there is a space of time between the creation of the man and the woman. The LORD God formed the man and placed him in “a garden in Eden” (v. 8), a place of beauty and abundance. Verses 15–17 then outline the man’s charge. He has been placed in the garden with a twofold task: *to work it and keep it*.¹⁷⁸ Bavinck argues, “The first included the obligation to develop all the treasures that God had deposited in the earth, and the second involved the calling to protect the entire creation against every hostile power seeking to ruin the creation, and to preserve it from the tyranny of destructive forces.”¹⁷⁹ He is commanded that he may eat of every tree, save the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which brings death. At this point, the woman had not yet been created. So, the

¹⁷⁶ Surely the apostolic instruction in 2 Thess 3:10–12 implies at the very least that we are obligated to work to provide the basic necessities of life for ourselves, if at all possible. “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

¹⁷⁷ NA28: *mē ta heautōn hekastos skopountes alla [kai] ta heterōn hekastoi*. The NET Bible notes on the bracketed *kai*: “The bulk of the Western witnesses (D^{o,c} F G K it) dropped καὶ (*kai*) here, most likely due to ascetic concerns (the absence of the καὶ makes the statement express absolute self-denial). Strong external attestation for its inclusion from excellent witnesses as well as the majority (Π⁴⁶ Å A B C D¹ ¥ 075 0278 33 1175 1241 1505 1739 1881 2464 Å sy) also marks it as autographic.” NET Bible, “Note 8 on Philippians 2,” accessed October 10, 2023, <https://netbible.org/bible/Philippians+2>.

¹⁷⁸ Many commentators note the parallel usage of the work/keep pair here and in the Levites’ duties with the tabernacle in Num, esp. 3:6–8; 8:26; and 18:5–7, though in Num they are often translated into English as “serve/guard.”

¹⁷⁹ Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 6.

specific charge of dominion is first given to the man by himself.¹⁸⁰

Verse 18 then sounds a note of jarring dissonance. For the first time, something in creation is not good: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” And what a helper she was—as Matthew Henry has written, “The woman was *made of a rib out of the side of Adam*; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.”¹⁸¹ As pertains to roles, the man and the woman are both distinct and complementary.¹⁸² The man is commissioned, and then the woman is created to help him in that commission.¹⁸³ There is both equality, in being, dignity, and worth, and inequality or hierarchy, in roles and function, in God’s good, pre-fall, creation.¹⁸⁴ Both the man and the woman are called to exercise power and control, or dominion—called to do so, especially through the design

¹⁸⁰ Alastair Roberts notes that one of the “contrasts between the *adam* and his companion, the woman, in Genesis 2” is that the man “peculiarly represents and symbolises God’s dominion in the world.” Alastair Roberts, “The Music and Meaning of Male and Female,” *Primer* 3 (August 2018): 2–18, <https://primerhq.files.wordpress.com/2018/08/primer-03-the-music-and-the-meaning-of-male-and-female.pdf>.

It is also important to recognize a key distinction between mankind’s exercise of power and control and God’s exercise of the same. Ours is dependent and contingent, tied to the Lord’s revealed will, primarily as recorded in his Word. Further, as creatures, there are a great many limitations upon our power and control that existed even before the corrupting and polluting effects of the fall. Relative weakness is part of being a creature, even apart from sin.

¹⁸¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 1:16.

¹⁸² It is important to note that roles are at least partially grounded in natures, a point that complementarianism as a whole has been lax in understanding and affirming. In his wisdom, the Lord designed men and women with different natures (masculinity and femininity) that fit us for our respective roles. As in 53n176 above, Roberts elsewhere argues: “men create, possess, and symbolize power much more directly in the world than women.” Alastair Roberts, “The Virtues of Dominion,” *Theopolis Institute*, September 10, 2020, <https://theopolisinstitute.com/conversations/the-virtues-of-dominion/>. Thus, the egalitarian instinct of our age must resist men and power as inherently unfair and oppressive.

¹⁸³ The NT cites the historical fact of man’s *priority* in creation as part of its argument for male headship (1 Cor 11:8; 1 Tim 2:13). Bavinck notes, “The man is called to subjugate under his feet the whole earth, in obedience to God’s will . . . the woman must assist in performing this task. Assist in the fullest and broadest sense, physically and spiritually, with her wisdom and love, with her head and her heart.” Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 6.

¹⁸⁴ Though a historic and biblical understanding of patriarchy is important for this topic, I will assume the validity of the position rather than defend it. It is not coincidental that confusion surrounding justice, power, and authority have arisen in our feminist age. Indeed, they are symptomatic of the same. But I will treat those topics incidentally and as they arise naturally within the broader project of this paper.

of marriage and procreation—and their roles are not identical in accomplishing those tasks.¹⁸⁵ There are good inequalities within mankind’s original estate, and those design features affect how men and women exercise power and control within creation. Hierarchy and authority are design features of creation.¹⁸⁶

Fall. Of course, the fall radically changed the scene.¹⁸⁷ Another creature entered the garden and spoke and acted with malevolent intent. The serpent sought to wrest interpretative control of reality from the Lord, offering mankind a fresh vision for life: the illusion of autonomy—power and control apart from the Creator. He circumvented the protective hierarchy that the man was called to enforce by appealing directly to the woman.¹⁸⁸ He began with a question (“Did God actually say?”), proceeded

¹⁸⁵ Stephen B. Clark comments on the divine order, “‘Subordination’ simply refers to the order of a relationship in which one person, the subordinate, depends upon another person for direction. The purpose of this order is to allow those in the relationship to function together in unity.” Stephen B. Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Bloomington, IN: Warhorn Media, 2021), 23. Naming is one evidence for the divine order here. Adam alone names the animals, before the woman is created (2:19–20), thus exercising sole authority and dominion in that regard. He then names the woman (2:23), later Eve (3:20), again showing his authority in relation to her. Of course, his authority is complemented by his delight at receiving his helper, who alone is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23). The authority of man does not negate or in any way diminish his ontological equality with woman, or his existential joy in her companionship.

¹⁸⁶ Bavinck noted over a century ago how persons were rejecting this design in the form of complaints against “society.” Bavinck claims, “When one investigates carefully, it will become apparent that the intense struggle against society actually does not focus, at least not exclusively, on the abuses arising in society, but against the foundations on which society rests. Those abuses provide the occasion, but not the deepest cause, of the struggle. . . . The deepest complaint against which conflict is being targeted is *inequality*, which exists everywhere.” Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 124–25. This egalitarian instinct is even more rampant today, and though some forms of inequality are indeed wicked, Christians must affirm that many are righteous and good. In that regard, Peter Jones has argued that the modern West is returning to a form of paganism that is focused on flattening distinctions and embracing One-ism, and therefore rejecting Two-ism (Christianity, the Creator-creature distinction, male-female, etc.). Peter Jones, *The Other Worldview: Exposing Christianity’s Greatest Threat* (Bellingham, WA: Kirkdale Press, 2015). Lewis posited the same two options in his prescient work. C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 1996). Near the end of the tale, as she is realizing the folly of her previous life, the Director tells Jane, “I’m afraid there’s no niche in the world for people that won’t be either Pagan or Christian” (312).

¹⁸⁷ Consider Lewis’s observation regarding the Tao: “A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery.” Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 73.

¹⁸⁸ Though Adam had been commanded to “keep” the garden, there is good reason to believe that he passively observed the interaction between Eve and the serpent, rather than intervening to fight off the enemy. When Eve ate, “she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” It is most likely that “with her” implies close proximity. Calvin rejects that possibility as “by no means credible.” Calvin, *Genesis*, 152. Either way, verse 17 also condemns Adam “because you have listened to the voice of

to contradiction (“You will not surely die”), and sealed the deal with deception (“you will be like God”). The serpent used his creative capabilities to communicate a compelling alternative future, and Eve took the bait. However, it is vital to recognize that though Eve sinned first, it is in and through Adam that sin is accounted as having entered the world (Rom 5:12). Adam’s positional authority and responsibility as the federal head of mankind meant that he was responsible for the fall in ways that Eve was not, and the consequences of his sin were far greater than those of Eve. Mankind is fallen *in Adam* (Rom 5:15, 17–19).

As a result of this rebellion, the capacities that the Lord had given to Adam and Eve were twisted and distorted, *incurvatus in se*, in Augustine’s memorable phrase.¹⁸⁹ It is in the fall that power and control are first applied to selfish and sinful use, though certainly not for the last time.¹⁹⁰ In the curse to the woman the Lord declared, “Your desire will be for your husband, yet he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16 CSB). Relations between the sexes would now be characterized by conflict and opposition rather than by loving cooperation.¹⁹¹ Selfishness would rule the day: the woman desiring improper power and control over her husband, and the man enforcing his will through improper power and control.¹⁹² Instead of using their God-given capacities to bless the other and to

your wife and have eaten of the tree.” The sin of eating was preceded and compounded by his passive submission to his wife, instead of the loving headship that was needed.

¹⁸⁹ Luther picked up on the phrase and expounded it well. “Due to original sin, our nature is so *curved in upon itself* at its deepest levels that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself in order to enjoy them . . . nay, rather, ‘uses’ God himself in order to attain them, but it does not even know that, in this wicked, crooked way, it seeks everything, including God, only for itself.” Martin Luther, *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, Library of Christian Classics 15 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 159, emphasis added.

¹⁹⁰ James, for example, uses the ideas of dominion and depravity to demonstrate how mankind has indeed subjugated the animal world but has yet to tame our own tongues (3:7–8).

¹⁹¹ Bavinck notes that the punishments inflicted in the curse were “related to the nature and calling of each” party. Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 12–14. The woman is cursed as wife and mother, the man as husband and in working the ground.

¹⁹² Many trees have been slain and much ink has been shed over the interpretation of this verse. Susan T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no 3 (Spring 1975): 376–83, is the original advocate of the view laid out above. For a synopsis of six popular options, see Nick

exercise dominion together complementarily, they would instead experience conflict and division as they each fought for their own selfish agendas.

From Genesis 3 forward, the story of power and control in Scripture is rather mixed. On the negative side of the equation, examples are legion. Cain overpowered Abel, murdering him (Gen 4). The postdiluvian mandate of Noah to fill the earth and exercise dominion terminates upon a much less sanguine note: “The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast” (Gen 9:1–7). The peoples of the earth united to construct a powerful monument of defiance against the Lord, inviting his judgment at Babel (Gen 11:1–9). Abram ordered Sarai to lie about their marriage to protect his own skin (Gen 12:10–20). Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar (Gen 16:6). Lot offered his daughters to be raped in order to spare his angelic visitors (Gen 19). Joseph’s brothers beat and overpowered him, selling him into slavery (Gen 37). Potiphar’s wife sought to entice Joseph into adultery and then slandered him so that he was imprisoned (Gen 39). Many more examples could be listed from the Bible’s first book, and the situation does not improve with the passage of time. Amnon raped Tamar (2 Sam 25). Jesus, nailed to the cross, was mocked and derided by passersby (Matt 27:39–44). Stephen was stoned for his faithful witness to Christ (Acts 7). Indeed, the entirety of creation is suffering futility and corruption under the diminished dominion of mankind as a fruit of the fall (Rom 8:20–21).

These are just a very few of the myriad examples of the sinful and wicked misuse of power and control in Scripture. History books are filled with scores more. Man’s inhumanity to man is amply evident, as the capabilities that our Creator has given us, our abilities to exercise power and control, have been twisted to self-love and

Batzig, “Desiring to Rule Over Genesis 3:16,” *Reformation21 Blog*, September 15, 2016, <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2016/09/desiring-to-rule-over-genesis.php>. For a view that closely examines the parallels with Gen 4:7 and arrives at modified conclusions, see Jason DeRouchie, “‘Her Desire Will Be for Her Husband’? What Genesis 3:16 Means for Marriage,” *Desiring God (blog)*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/her-desire-will-be-for-her-husband>.

exercised at the expense of others. This is, in fact, both the seedbed and the essence of abuse. And we are all accountable to the Almighty, whose power and control have in no way been diminished.¹⁹³

It is in understanding the fall of man that we might best understand the divine judgment. Two points on the judgment pertain especially to this study. First, every human person will stand before the divine bar: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor 5:10). Creatures are judged by their Creator, and Scripture is clear that his judgment will be perfect in every way: based on perfect knowledge, with perfect justice, and accomplishing perfect results. Abraham teaches us as much by implication in his intercession for Sodom. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen 18:25). The question is rhetorical because the answer is an obvious affirmative.

Second, those with greater authority in this age bear greater responsibility for any failure to properly exercise power and control.¹⁹⁴ As Gouge noted, “Because husbands having a more honorable place, their failing in duty is the more heinous, scandalous and dangerous.”¹⁹⁵ This principle is evident at numerous places in Scripture, such as Jesus’s teaching in Luke 12:41–48. The manager who had been placed in charge of the master’s household, and acted selfishly and abusively, was held to account by the master upon his return and punished harshly. Jesus’s summary statement (v. 48) captures well the principle involved: “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be

¹⁹³ Even the mightiest human rulers do not threaten him. “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision” (Ps 2:4).

¹⁹⁴ See Jer 5:4–5; Ezek 8:11–12; and Rom 2:17–24. This principle is true especially on judgment day, but even in the current age, the Lord often accomplishes a measure of justice providentially as a means of discipline (for his people) or punishment (for his enemies). For the former consider the death of David’s son with Bathsheba (2 Sam 12:7–23). For the latter consider the numerous judgments of the nations recorded in the Prophets, who used their God-given might to evil effects—often against the people of God.

¹⁹⁵ *DD*, I:26.

required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.” In light of the abundant blessings bequeathed to mankind in creation, we all stand indicted by this formula. And those who, by providence, have been granted positions of honor and authority over others in this age bear even more responsibility.

Redemption. Jesus Christ is both the means and the manifestation of the redemption of power and control. Yet his person and program have often been co-opted for various partisan purposes. As Voltaire noted, “If God created us in his own image, we have returned him the favor.”¹⁹⁶ One pertinent example is the Liberation Theologies that have arisen especially in the twentieth century. Whether Feminist, Black, Latin, Queer, or in any other form, Liberationists read the storyline of Scripture, and especially the Gospels, through a framework of oppression and liberation. In this way they share a largely neo-Marxist viewpoint.¹⁹⁷ Therefore, they are very interested in power dynamics on both the individual and societal levels. In such a system, Jesus becomes the Great Liberator, come to deliver those in bondage—not to personal sin, but to oppression from others—through a kingdom revolution in this age. As we will see in chapter 3, many of the neo-Marxist/Liberationist concepts of oppressor-oppressed, with corresponding principles of justice, are utilized in the prevailing paradigm of abuse to varying degrees. Therefore, it is important to account for the full, biblical witness of who Jesus is and what

¹⁹⁶ Voltaire, *Le Sottisier* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1883), 151. The original is, “Si Dieu nous a faits à son image, nous le lui avons bien rendu.” For a helpful summary of the plasticity of Jesus in the American cultural imagination, see Stephen Nichols, *Jesus, Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to the Passion of the Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).

¹⁹⁷ See John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2015), 423–29, for further discussion and interaction. See also Robert Smith, “Cultural Marxism: Imaginary Conspiracy or Revolutionary Reality?,” *Themelios* 44, no. 3 (2019): 436–65. The feminist notion of liberation is prevalent in sexual ethics today, especially as it pertains to abortion: “my choice,” “power over my body/future,” etc. Biblical femininity, marriage, and childbearing are considered oppressive under such a system. As Bavinck presciently warned, “One can indeed seek the happiness of women in their political, social, and economic equality with men. But then one injures the nature of women, failing to distinguish between equality with men and identity with men, and society becomes more disintegrated than it already is now.” Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, 153. History has certainly vindicated his prediction.

he has done in terms of power and control. Accordingly, we will consider the themes of both weakness and strength, using Philippians 2 as our guide.

It is perhaps best to begin with weakness. The incarnation of the Son of God, *forma servi*,¹⁹⁸ demonstrates the profound humility and condescension of our Savior. That the eternal Word of God would assume human form, “emptying himself”¹⁹⁹ for the sake of others, is a great wonder indeed. In becoming human, he endured all the sufferings that come with a physical body: tiredness, hunger, physical pains (the cross!), and the like. He refused to exercise power and control illegitimately, whether by acquiescing to the devil’s temptations (Luke 4:1–13), or in summoning the angels to crush his enemies (Matt 26:53). He truly did nothing from “selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count[ed] others more significant than [himself]” (Phil 2:3).

Liberationists have made much of Jesus’s humble beginnings, his wanderings and poverty, and his identification with the poor and needy. There is no doubt that Jesus did demonstrate a special regard for the outcast and oppressed. From the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:16–21) to its end (John 19:26–27), Jesus cared for those whom society tended to overlook. He identified himself as gentle and lowly (Matt 11:29). He reserved his harshest criticisms for those with religious and political power and authority (Matt 23). It is no coincidence that it was his half-brother, James, who taught his readers that “pure and undefiled” religion consists of caring for orphans and widows, as well as in personal holiness (Jas 1:21). Weakness is certainly a major theme in Jesus’s earthly career.

¹⁹⁸ The “form of a servant” does not refer to Jesus’s “human nature as such but the servant condition of the Word incarnate.” The Word, existing *forma Dei*, does not give up his divine essence or nature, but “relinquishes his glory to assume the *forma servi*.” Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 134.

¹⁹⁹ In employing the Scriptural terminology here, or *kenosis* in the Greek, it should be noted that I reject every form of kenoticism. See Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 356–419.

Yet the incarnation also demonstrates the strength of the Word. He humbled himself willingly, not involuntarily. During his earthly ministry he exercised tremendous authority, using his power to control demons (Mark 1:25), natural forces (Mark 4:41), and crowds (Luke 4:28–30). He powerfully healed the sick and raised the dead. Moreover, he was exceedingly clear in his assessment of who was in charge of his own, humiliating death. “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:17–18). When he rose from the dead, he defeated sin and death and gained power and authority over them (Matt 28:18–19; Rom 8:1–11). He ascended in order to give powerful gifts to his people (Eph 4:8–16; cf. Acts 1:8). Most importantly, in passing from the *status humiliationis* to the *status exaltationis*, he has received maximum glory. “Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9–11). As God, he is all-powerful and exercises control over all things in his sovereignty. It will not do to reduce the ministry of Jesus to the theme of weakness.

Turning to his people, we find that we are weak in at least two ways: as created, finite beings and as sinners. So, we experience creaturely weakness and moral weakness intermingled. As disciples of our Lord, our disposition toward him is clearly intended to be one of perpetual dependence in our weaknesses, but that dependence is also meant to result in Christian growth, strength, and maturity (Josh 1:6–9; Eph 6:10; 2 Tim 2:1). Two passages are enough to demonstrate this truth. First, 2 Corinthians 12:9–10: “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with

weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Here we see the paradox of Christian strength—it grows and matures through weakness, and as we receive strength from our Savior, we bring him glory as the only all-sufficient One whose Word and promises are true.

Second, a similar point is registered in 1 Peter 4:10–11:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Service to others is not a self-willed or self-wrought project. Instead, it is an opportunity for the Christian to rely upon the Lord and to seek to serve for his glory. Christian reliance and our glorifying the Lord are linked. As J. I. Packer has written in his aptly titled, *Weakness Is the Way*, “Clearly, it is proper to aim at being spiritually strong and improper to settle for being anything less.”²⁰⁰

Two further notes on Christian leadership and authority should be considered. The first is that those with authority or power carry an obligation to look out for those under their authority who may be suffering abuse or oppression. Psalm 72:1–4, 12–14 is one of many passages that demonstrates this:

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice! Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness! May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor! . . . For he delivers the needy when he calls the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.

Both love and justice require the one in authority to be aware of oppression within his realm of responsibility. He has been entrusted with power by God in part to seek to remedy those situations.

²⁰⁰ J. I. Packer, *Weakness Is the Way* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 13.

Second, those with authority or power must fundamentally understand their roles as ones of responsible service, not as opportunities to be exploited for selfish gain.

Mark 10:42–45 teaches us as much:

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The ideal of servant leadership is distinctively Christian. Fallen man seizes on power as an opportunity for self-promotion or selfish gain. For those who have been regenerated by the Spirit of God and who are bearing his fruit in their lives, other ends must be in view.

Jesus demonstrated this approach at the last supper (John 13:1–20). In washing the feet of his disciples, he assumed the lowliest of tasks. More than that, he self-consciously did so as an example for his disciples, commanding them to serve one another likewise in the future (vv. 14–15). Many sermons have rightly magnified the example of Jesus in his lowly service as one for us to follow. However, what is often overlooked in our egalitarian age is that Jesus was also exercising his authority at every step. He arranged for the meal and commanded his disciples to make preparations. He was clearly in charge throughout the entire evening. Those he was serving were *his* disciples, after all. Jesus rebuked Peter’s attempted rebuff of his service. Further, he affirmed the appropriateness of the disciples calling him “Lord and Teacher” (13:13). He did not eschew the honorifics; rather, he demonstrated the proper execution of their attendant responsibilities.

In the life and ministry of Jesus we see the proper and redemptive exercise of power and control. We see the godly exercise of authority for the good of those called to

submit to it.²⁰¹ We find weakness and strength, service and lordship, uniting in perfect harmony and serving to accomplish fully the divine agenda of redemption. As his people, we know that we have received salvation as an entirely gracious gift (Eph 2:8–9) because he powerfully overcame the forces of evil that held us, both our own sinful hearts and our cosmic enemy (2:1–7). We also know that as he has worked powerfully for us and within us in order that we might ourselves accomplish “good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (2:10).

Consummation. A few notes about eschatological power and control will wrap up this brief, biblical theological treatment of the topic. I shall restrain my observations to the book of Revelation. There we find that the work of God in his people is such that “you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev 5:10). Moreover, we “will reign forever and ever” (22:5). As Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley note, “Therefore, in the new creation, God’s children will exercise a dominion similar to that granted to man in the first creation, but with far greater glory, for they shall reign in union with God the Son incarnate.”²⁰²

Most importantly, we find the risen and ascended Lord Jesus exercising his power at every turn. His rule and reign are evident in the letters to the churches (Rev 1:4–3:22), in John’s visions of his heavenly glory (4:1–7), and in his entire sovereignty over human events (e.g., 12:10–11). His power and glory are attested by the worship of those around his throne (4:8–11). Strength through weakness is demonstrated in the “Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (5:6), who opened the scroll and is therefore worthy of all praise (5:9–14). In his death (weakness), he ransomed people for God

²⁰¹ David expressed similar ideas on his deathbed (2 Sam 23:3–4): “When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.”

²⁰² Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Man and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 1166.

(strength) and made them a kingdom and priests who shall reign on earth, as his empowered disciples (5:9–10).

His power is most seen in two respects. First is the defeat of his enemies: false prophets, beasts, ungodly rulers, and dragons. Second is the salvation of his people. The Lord reigns over history and calls his people to persevere in faith (Rev 1:9; 2:2, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12), knowing that at the fullness of time he will set all things right (20:11–15). All evil and corruption will be removed unto punishment (17:7–14; 19:11–21; 20:7–10; 21:8, 27) and all those who trust in him will be glorified and rewarded (19:6–10; 21:1–7, 9–26; 22:1–21).

Understanding these great truths about the end of this age is essential for this study. Justice will ultimately prevail. Abuse will be finally and fully eradicated. Peace and comfort will rule the day for those who are “in Christ.” Marx may have considered religion to be “the opium of the people,”²⁰³ serving to maintain the status quo and preventing the ordinary *Volk* from rising up and throwing off their oppressors, but that merely reveals the paucity of his understanding of the true nature of both oppression and liberation. The despair that always accompanies attempts to establish his utopian system here on earth testifies to the un-reality of his project. It is true that Christians wait in hope and that what they wait for is not always readily apparent, but, far from diminishing their senses, biblical hope heightens their anticipation as they long increasingly for that day and join in the Johannine cry, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (22:20).

Power for Others?

I close this chapter with a brief examination of a view that appears to be

²⁰³ The original states, “Der Religion . . . ist der Opium des Volkes.” For Marx, “the critique of religion is the prerequisite of every critique.” This is so because religion is manmade, which means that the state produces it, and it can only support otherworldly (and hence unreal) hope. “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness.” Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right,’* trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley, ed. Joseph O’Malley, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1977), 131.

gaining popularity within evangelical circles, especially when addressing the problem of abuse. The legitimate exercise of power is represented as an either-or proposition: either one exercises power to serve others, or it is exercised in service of self.²⁰⁴ Here, I provide a sampling of this teaching before offering analysis and an alternative.

Marcus Honeysett demonstrates this paradigm in his book on the problem of abusive leaders. “The key principle, however, is this: power must be exercised wholly for the benefit of others and not for the benefit of the leader. Christian leadership, modelled on Jesus’s leadership, is self-giving, not self-serving.”²⁰⁵ Jacob and Rachael Denhollander offer similar thinking in their understanding of power and justice:

The cross stands in stark opposition to the behavior of an abuser, providing the ultimate example of each of these concepts that abuse destroys. In the incarnation, at the cross, the Son sets aside his divine prerogatives—the strong becomes weak. God himself enters into human brokenness and accomplishes on behalf of mankind what humans neither deserve nor can accomplish by themselves. The one who is owed obedience as creator enters into creation to render that which is due him. At the cross, God acts for others—to overcome evil, uphold justice, free the enslaved, and restore creation. God himself perfectly identifies with the victim because he himself has willingly subjected himself to injustice. The cross is the ultimate repudiation of the idea that power is to be wielded for the benefit and pleasure of those who possess it. In the cross, victims have the framework and foundation for beginning to properly define and understand concepts which were twisted, subverted and manipulated during their abuse, and begin to heal the damage which was done.²⁰⁶

Similarly, in discussing 1 Peter 5:2–3, Kruger glosses “not for shameful gain” as “*leading for one’s own gain*.”²⁰⁷ Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel contrast two ways of using power: “The way from above is power for love By contrast, the way from below is

²⁰⁴ The operative paradigm is “power over vs. power under,” and was apparently coined by Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 14. The concept has roots in Anabaptist and pacifistic theologies, see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

²⁰⁵ Marcus Honeysett, *Powerful Leaders? How Church Leadership Goes Wrong and How to Prevent It* (London: InterVarsity, 2022), 22.

²⁰⁶ Jacob Denhollander and Rachael Denhollander, “Justice: The Foundation of a Christian Approach to Abuse,” *Fathom Magazine*, November 19, 2018, <https://www.fathommag.com/stories/justice-the-foundation-of-a-christian-approach-to-abuse/>

²⁰⁷ Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 54.

power for the sake of being powerful, for the sake of control.”²⁰⁸ Langberg, too, argues, “Any power that you and I hold is God’s and has been given to us by him for the sole purpose of glorifying him and blessing others.”²⁰⁹ Moles appeals to Christians to view power differently as well: “The bottom line is that we are different The heart of pride longs for power over, but the heart of Christ calls for power under I use power as a means of promoting and helping others Power under places our priorities, motives, and expectations beneath those we love and serve, giving us little time or motivation to abuse.”²¹⁰ Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky offer a similar assessment:

Abusive family members, toxic friends, and dangerous organizations all have one thing that unites them: they attempt to control other people. That’s the opposite of how Jesus told us to live In following Christ we do not seek power over others; rather, we aim to tear down hierarchy as a way to revere the *imago Dei* in ourselves and in others.²¹¹

Hambrick teaches that we must understand power differentials in order to understand the story of Joseph. He argues that the power struggle between Joseph and his brothers was not ended until Joseph “broke the cycle of power” by inviting “them into a family (power balanced) relationship.”²¹²

Fundamentally, all these perspectives represent both genuine truths (some

²⁰⁸ Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel, *The Way of the Dragon or the Way of the Lamb: Searching for Jesus’ Path of Power in a Church That Has Abandoned It*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2021), 9.

²⁰⁹ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 10–11. She even goes so far as to make vulnerability (lack of power and control) a prerequisite of love: “The capacity to love makes everyone vulnerable . . . even God. By creating us in such a fashion, he opened himself up to failure and injury. And injured he has been!” (26). Unless she has the *communicatio idiomatum* in view, Langberg appears to be denying the sovereignty and impassibility of God.

²¹⁰ Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse*, 73.

²¹¹ Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky, *She Deserves Better: Raising Girls to Resist Toxic Teachings on Sex, Self, and Speaking Up* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 127–28. They go on to argue that parents who “believe in power hierarchy . . . can unwittingly groom their daughters to fall prey to abusers because they’ve given the abusers an out: just claim Christian male headship” (128).

²¹² Brad Hambrick, “The Story of Joseph: Abuse, Forgiveness, Power Differentials, and Wisdom,” Brad Hambrick, November 5, 2019, <https://bradhambrick.com/the-story-of-joseph-abuse-forgiveness-power-differentials-and-wisdom/>.

more than others) and a false dichotomy. It is certainly true that Jesus “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42). However, he made that statement in response to the selfish ambition of James and John who were seeking their own promotions in his kingdom (10:35–41). He also commanded his disciples to serve him repeatedly (e.g., Luke 16:13; John 12:26), though not from a position of need (Acts 17:25). All Christians serve the Lord in this life (1 Pet 4:10) and even in the next (Rev 7:15). Further, and quite importantly, Jesus himself served others for his own gain and pleasure. He gave his life on the cross “for the joy set before him” (Heb 12:2). He regularly received the warm affirmation and approval of his Father as the beloved Son (Matt 3:17; 17:5). He was made our exalted high priest (Heb 5:5). As mentioned above, he gained “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:9–11).

The falseness of the dichotomy is in the framing: gain for others versus gain for self. The correct framing is sinful gain versus righteous gain for both parties. Intentionally or not, the views above are expressing the idea that there is no such thing as righteous, personal gain in exercising authority or power. Yet Scripture is filled with appeals and promises of reward and blessing that come to those who seek to obey our Father.²¹³ In an effort to prevent or resist the use of power and control for unrighteous, selfish gain, some Christians appear to be embracing the idea that all personal gain is wrong.

Further, the proper pursuit of personal gain is *necessary* for exercising power and control rightly. As creatures, there is a transcendence to both human nature and our

²¹³ The entire ministry of John Piper is essentially predicated on this perspective. See John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011).

purpose for being that points back to our Creator.²¹⁴ Therefore, there are standards outside of ourselves to which we must aspire and, as our Creator has revealed himself and his will to us, he has called us to obedience. In his kindness, our obedience leads to life and flourishing while disobedience leads to suffering and death.²¹⁵ Therefore, it is always a personal advantage to obey, hence the Bible's repeatedly linking of the two concepts.²¹⁶ So we must do all that we do, including the exercise of power and control, in obedience to our God, which will produce righteous, personal gain.²¹⁷

Two things the Christian understanding of power and control does not produce are despots and tyrants. One way of affirming this is by reviewing the attacks of our critics. For example, one of the chief Nazi complaints against Lutheran Germany was its supposed passivity and weakness. Goebbels wrote, "Our Christianity is strongly tinged

²¹⁴ Carl R. Trueman has demonstrated how these ideas are nearly incomprehensible in our age. "The modern self assumes the authority of inner feelings and sees authenticity as defined by the ability to give social expression to the same. The modern self also assumes that society at large will recognize and affirm this behavior." Carl R. Trueman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 22. This is an age of "expressive individualism," which teaches us to look within to find our own identity, and from there to pursue our own joy. For a deeper exploration, see Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. It may well be that at least some of those cautioning against using power for personal gain are operating within a framework of expressive individualism, rather than understanding personal gain from the standpoint of growth in and conformity to godly virtue and competencies with the attendant blessings.

²¹⁵ Many scriptural citations might be provided. Consider the call to Israel during the exodus to obey and be blessed, e.g., Exod 19:1–8. Even in judging Israel, the Lord promised blessing for those who responded with obedience, cf. Jer 21:8.

²¹⁶ For example, in response to Peter's words about the sacrificial nature of obedience, "Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life'" (Mark 10:29–30).

²¹⁷ The Westminster Divines made a similar connection in discussion of the Eighth Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal."

Q. 141. What are the duties required in the eighth commandment? A. The duties required in the eighth commandment are, truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to everyone his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others; moderation of our judgments, wills, and affections, concerning worldly goods; a provident care and study to get, keep, use, and dispose of those things which are necessary and convenient for the sustentation of our nature, and suitable to our condition; a lawful calling, and diligence in it; frugality; avoiding unnecessary lawsuits, and suretyship, or other like engagements; and an endeavor, by all just and lawful means, *to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own.* (Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed., *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader's Edition* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022], 384–85, emphasis added)

with Judaism. A religion that is based on the principle that you must love your enemies, that you must not kill, and that you must turn the left cheek when you are struck on the right, cannot serve as a virile doctrine of defense for the fatherland. . . . Its activity is treason.”²¹⁸ This is, of course, a very common critique of Christianity, coming from critics such as Nietzsche and Marx as well. In America today, however, the critique is more likely to be extended the other way, arguing that Christians have exerted themselves too much in public affairs and that they need to withdraw into pietistic quietism, lest they be guilty of Christian Nationalism.²¹⁹ Regardless, a genuinely biblical understanding of these topics avoids both extremes.

It is certainly the case that power and control can be exercised abusively. Selfish ambition and selfish gain are sins according to Scripture. However, not all ambition or gain is selfish (Eccl 2:13; Rom 15:20; 1 Tim 3:13).²²⁰ Not all personal benefit is wrong. Sacrifice is certainly a requisite part of Christian service in this age, but so is reward. Exercising power and control for personal benefit is not necessarily wrong or sinful and may, in fact, be required by righteousness. The essence of faith, according to Hebrews 11:6, is the twin affirmations that the Lord exists and that he “rewards those who seek him.” So, if we wish to please him (Rom 14:23), we must look to him for his reward in all we do. Therefore, we must be careful in what we label as abusive or sinful, lest we find ourselves chastising what the Lord commends.

The answer to our problems is to be found in understanding and embracing the

²¹⁸ Joseph Goebbels, “December 14, 1941,” in *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels, 1924–1945*, 29 vols., Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich, Saur, 1987–2008; in French, *Journal*, excerpted in 5 vols., Tallandier, 2005–2009, quoted in Johann Chapoutot, *The Law of Blood: Thinking and Acting as a Nazi*, trans. Miranda Richmond Mouillot (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018), 184.

²¹⁹ The recent publication of Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2022), has produced a great deal of interaction on these topics. There are, of course, a great many commonalities between how one views power and control within one sphere (e.g., the home) and how they will be viewed in another (the nation).

²²⁰ The very concept of “unjust gain,” often condemned in Scripture, presupposes the just alternative.

perspective of our Creator and Savior on all these matters. Solomon repeatedly reminds his readers that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom (Prov 1:1, 29; 2:5; 9:10; 15:33) and, if we are to sort through the thorny matters of abuse, including responding well and providing appropriate care for all involved parties, we must embrace his perspective in all respects. Surely this is the significance of Proverbs 28:5, “Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it completely” (cf. Prov 2:6–11). Therefore, we turn in chapter 2 to an examination of how abuse is defined and understood according to Scripture.

CHAPTER 2

A BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF ABUSE

Abuse is a complex concept that resists simple description or explanation.¹ In this chapter, I do not propose to write the final word on its definition. Rather, my aim is to identify and consider the constituent elements that make up the phenomena that we label by the English word, *abuse*. I will examine those elements in light of the teachings of Scripture, seeking to understand as deeply as possible the wisdom and perspective that the Lord has granted to us as his people. Though no succinct summary definition can capture every potential nuance, or answer every question about abuse, my hope is that this proposed definition will provide a better way to understand and respond to abuse as well as helping to clarify issues of justice when allegations are brought.

By way of beginning this process, I remind the reader of my proposed definition: *selfish compulsion to the pronounced detriment of another*. Each facet of this definition is important. Abuse is *selfish*: it is aimed at achieving the abuser's wrongly desired ends. Abuse is *compulsion*: the abuser uses words, physical force, or other actions in a compelling and authoritative manner that overrides the agency of the victim, at least to some extent. Abuse is *pronounced*: it is mistreatment at a high level, whether in its duration or intensity or both. Abuse is *detrimental*: it causes objective harm or injury to those who endure it. Abuse affects *another*: the abuser seeks to achieve his ends by taking something from others. Others bear the cost of his project of oppression.

¹ See Chris Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse: Gospel Solutions for Men Who Use Control and Violence in the Home* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 2015), 18. "The only characteristic that every abuser has in common is that they abuse. That is to say, while circumstances, situations, or conditions may seem contributive they are not necessarily causative."

The great challenges in defining a word are at least three: (1) *authority*—no dictionary has come down from the heavens on golden tablets; (2) *circularity*—one must use words (with debatable definitions) in order to define any word; and (3) *temporality*—the meaning of words change over time, so that even the words that we use to define a term at a given time do themselves change, thus changing our definition.²

Acknowledging the challenges, we must begin somewhere in the quest to understand and define abuse. To that end, I offer ten biblical stories that should inform our understanding of abuse.³ They include: Cain and Abel (murder), Dinah (rape) and Shechem (murder and plunder), Joseph and his brothers (physical abuse, kidnapping, and enslavement), Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (false accusation and imprisonment), Lot (prostituted⁴ and incest), Pharaoh and Israel (tyranny, slavery, genocide, and oppression), the Levite’s concubine (prostituted, rape, and murder), Amnon and Tamar (rape), and Stephen (false accusation and murder). The story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) is especially debated today as to whether it is a story of rape or adultery, a question I will seek to answer near the end of this chapter.

The Constituent Elements of Abuse

Having identified some of the main biblical stories that recount abusive (or potentially abusive) acts, it is helpful to consider briefly the various elements involved in an abusive situation. A proper definition needs to account for these constituent elements

² One of the challenges in writing on abuse at the current moment lies here, as many of the terms involved are currently being debated. For example, during the writing of this chapter, the *Cambridge Dictionary* changed the meaning of the word “woman” to include “an adult who lives and identifies as female though they may have been said to have a different sex at birth.” Carl Trueman, “Words Matter. Definitions Matter,” *World*, December 27, 2022, <https://wng.org/opinions/words-matter-definitions-matter-1672146617>.

³ These stories are meant to be diverse, representative, and illustrative, but not exhaustive. Other biblical examples could certainly be added and utilized.

⁴ I use “prostituted” verbally here (and with the Levite as well) in the technical sense of offering someone sexual activity in exchange for payment. Lot despicably offered his daughters to be raped in exchange for the lives of his guests and perhaps the rest of his family as well.

in order to explain what abuse entails, understand what motivates it, and identify what its effects may be. At least six constituent elements should be considered.

Abuser

The first element is the abuser, the perpetrator of the act. The abuser is the person (or persons) who is perpetuating the abuse. He or she is sinning at a high level, inflicting damage on another person or persons. In discussions surrounding abuse, almost all persons agree that the abuser is blameworthy and has done something reprehensible. Since abusers often have been abused themselves, sometimes efforts are made to mitigate their present culpability by recognizing their past victimhood.⁵

Victim

The victim is the person(s) who is on the receiving end of the abusive treatment. When abuse has occurred, *someone* is suffering from it. There is no such thing as victimless abuse—it is always an interpersonal phenomenon. Some persons prefer the term *survivor* to *victim* because of its more positive and hopeful connotations.⁶ Pierre and Wilson note on the use of *victim*, “Her entire identity is not captured by this term. Insofar as this term helps a person understand what occurred to her and the consequences on her life, it is helpful. Insofar as it becomes the inalterable center of her identity, it is unhelpful.”⁷

⁵ Often, phrases such as “hurt people hurt people,” with the first use as an adjective and the second as a verb, are used. How such thinking might be assessed from a biblical perspective will be discussed below.

⁶ I understand the reasoning behind both terms and can see a proper role for each. I am less concerned about the label chosen and more concerned with how the label functions.

⁷ Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts: A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church*, (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021), 35. Douglas Murray notes a curious connection in this regard:

Victimhood rather than stoicism or heroism has become something eagerly publicized, even sought after, in our culture. To be a victim is in some way to have got a head start in the great oppression race of life. At the root of this curious development is one of the most important and mistaken judgements of the social justice movements: that oppressed people (or people who can claim to be oppressed,) are in some way better than others, that there is some decency, purity or goodness which

Within the prevailing paradigm, the term *victim* is applied to anyone who makes an accusation of abuse against herself (“believe the victim”), which reveals one of the primary challenges of justice in these situations. If a woman has been abused, she is indeed a victim, but at the moment of first accusation/report, only she, the abuser, and God may know the truth. Those receiving the accusation will need to work through the process carefully. Therefore, a person may be a victim (as known to God) without yet being recognized as a victim by other persons. Indeed, one cannot be labeled rightly as a victim until a due process of justice has been concluded. We will examine those matters in our discussions of justice in chapter 4.⁸

Motive

The third element to consider is the motive of the abuser. As persons created in the image of God with hearts that value and worship various goods, we always act for reasons. There are always motives for human behavior, even if they are more, or less,

comes from being part of such a group. In fact, suffering in and of itself does not make someone a better person. A gay, female, black or trans person may be as dishonest, deceitful and rude as anybody else. (Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* [New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019], 252)

⁸ It is also important, however unpopular, to keep in mind that everyone involved in a situation of alleged abuse is a sinner as well, including the victim. As John Bettler notes:

I’m not saying that all suffering is the result of personal sin. People do suffer at the hands of others; people are victimized. What I *am* challenging is the idea that the issue of sin is no longer important in such situations. Paul says that God is in the business of saving sinners. Even in the hearts of those who have suffered horribly at the hands of others, who have been victimized and sinned against, there beats a heart that with every beat pumps the blood of rebellion. Everybody needs saving because everybody, no matter what else has happened to him, is in active rebellion against the God of the Scriptures. You have to pay attention to the victimization. But you should never forget that underneath all of that beats a sinful heart in rebellion against a holy God. That’s Paul’s peg. Saving sinners is the business that he—and we—are in. (John Bettler, “Counseling and the Doctrine of Sin,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13, no. 1 [Fall 1994]: 3)

Bettler does not clarify here to whom he refers: the unregenerate (and totally depraved) unbeliever or the regenerate believer fighting indwelling sin. The context would favor the idea that the former is primarily in view as he is addressing the need for salvation. However, Luther tells us that the Christian is “at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man” (*simul peccator et iustus*), and thus there is a level of applicability for believers as well. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, vol. 25 of *Luther’s Works*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 266.

obscure and complex to oneself⁹ (and others) and may indeed be contrary to what one assesses his own behavior to be.¹⁰ Christians know that they cannot see into the heart of another in order to discern someone's motives. However, Scripture does supply a wealth of material for understanding the anthropological condition, and Jesus told his disciples they would recognize evil actors "by their fruits" (Matt 7:16). He also taught them that all manner of wickedness comes "out of the heart" of man (Matt 15:19).

Therefore, there are reasons for the abuser's actions. He is seeking something to which he has assigned value or worth, and he is demonstrating that he is willing to sin at a high level to achieve or obtain it. As noted in chapter 1, most abuse counselors have identified that value as power or control. They believe that the abuser is motivated by those goods and will not stop in their pursuit. However, as I will develop below, such an assessment confuses motive with means.

Means

The means that the abuser uses to accomplish his sinful desires may vary, though it is here that power and control are best applied. As we will discuss below, abuse involves the compulsion of another, overriding the agency and/or desires of the abused to at least some extent. The means of abuse, therefore, must compel the victim in some manner. The means of abuse also provide pertinent information for assessing the motive of the abuser, and therefore should be recognized and considered. Further, in the various descriptive labels attached to abuse as categories, sometimes means have been utilized as a descriptor, for example, *verbal* abuse. I will consider the issue of categorization at the end of this chapter.

⁹ See Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 12–23, 31–37.

¹⁰ John Calvin famously assessed "the human mind" as "a perpetual forge of idols." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 1.11. Part of the idolatry of the human heart is in manufacturing compelling justifications for our own sinful behavior.

Effects

The effects of abuse are many; affecting the victim, the abuser, and all who exist within their relational orbits. My definition will not directly address the effects of abuse. However, it does provide ample grounds for considering and assessing what those effects may be as well as grounds for applying the truth of God's Word to all parties involved. How we define a problem profoundly affects what symptoms we expect and anticipate as well as the remedies that are sought for it.

Witness(es)

The final constituent element is not part of abuse proper, *per se*, but it is very important for handling abuse justly. Given the finitude of humans—not to mention fallenness—justice in this age can be a very difficult project. It is with good reason that the processes of justice tend to move slowly and deliberately, seeking to uncover all relevant data and deal with matters in an above-board and honorable manner. Therefore, it is important to study and understand all the tools that the Bible offers us for each stage of the process of seeking justice. There is much wisdom to be gleaned from Scripture and, though we cannot escape our human limits, we can honor the Lord and genuinely care for people by walking in the ways he ordains.

It is also important to note that justice is not merely an applicable category for legal remedies or even church discipline proceedings. Justice must be part of a proper theology of care and counsel, including for the victim of abuse. As will be developed in chapter 4, our God is just in all he does¹¹ and he calls his people to the same standard. If we wish to be of maximal help to hurting people, we must treat them justly at all times. Christians ought to be wary of the phrase, “err on the side of.” To err is unjust and unrighteous. It dishonors the Lord, who is Truth itself. There are certainly many

¹¹ Deuteronomy 32:4, “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”

situations where patience, perseverance, and great care are needed, but if we would honor the Lord in our counsel, we must seek to act justly at all times and in every way. Thinking about and utilizing witnesses and evidence as prescribed in God's Word is part of that process.

The Definition of Abuse

We come now to the definition of abuse. My aim in this section is to walk carefully through each term in the proposed definition, assessing it from God's Word. My hope is that by the conclusion of this section that we will have a biblically faithful, robust, and useful definition of abuse that will promote an understanding of its causes and effects, as well as help to direct us in responding to allegations of abuse justly. None of these terms stand alone, so there will necessarily be a "hermeneutical spiral" effect as I work through each one. That is, the definition and discussion of each word should be considered within the development of all the others. I will begin each section with the attendant descriptive phrase utilized in the definition above, before developing those ideas in greater detail.

Selfish

Abuse is selfish: it is aimed at achieving the abuser's wrongly desired ends.

Selfishness as a category is focused, quite obviously, on the motive of the abuser. Rather than placing power and control as the central motivation, I propose that selfishness provides a better explanation. In each of the stories identified near the beginning of this chapter, selfishness was central. The murderers, rapists, enslavers, and temptress/slanderer all placed their own, sinful interests ahead of their victims. A simple comparison chart may help. Below I briefly assess the stories mentioned at the outset of the chapter, seeking to provide categorical breakdowns relevant to the discussion:

Table 1. Dynamics of abuse in selected biblical narratives

| Text | Parties | Sin | Primary Motive(s) | Explicit? | Means |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Gen 4: 1-16 | Cain → Abel | Murder | Jealousy? Anger? | No | “rose up and killed him” |
| Gen 34: 1-4 | Shechem → Dinah | Rape | “saw her” = lust? | No | “seized her and lay with her and humiliated her” |
| Gen 34: 5-26 | Simeon and Levi → all males | Murder | Indignant, angry | Yes | Tricked into circumcision, slain by swords |
| Gen 34: 27-29 | Brothers → all males | Plunder | Revenge? | No | They raided the city and took everything |
| Gen 37: 12-26 | Brothers → Joseph | Sold to slavery | Jealous | Yes | Stripped, threw into a pit, sold off |
| Gen 39: 1-20 | Potiphar's wife → Joseph | Tempt sexually, slander | Lust (handsome, cast her eyes on) | Yes | Daily temptation, sexual advances, then slander |
| Gen 19: 4-11 | Lot → Daughters | Prostituted | To protect his guests | Yes | Offered his daughters for rape |
| Gen 19: 30-38 | Daughters → Lot | Abetting drunkenness, incest | To preserve the family line | Yes | Made their father drunk & committed incest |
| Exod 1: 8-22 | Pharoah → Israel | Tyranny, Enslaved | Fear of being overthrown | Yes | Placed into forced labor |
| Exod 5: 6-19 | Pharoah → Israel | Genocide | Fear of being overthrown | Yes | Attempted to murder all newborn sons |
| | Pharoah → Israel | Oppressed | Punish/dissuade | Yes | Bricks without straw |
| Judg 19 | Levite → concubine | Prostituted, murdered | Self-preservation | Yes | Offered her to be raped (& murdered) |
| 2 Sam 13 | Ammon → Tamar | Incestuous rape | Lust (beautiful, tormented by her) | Yes | Tricked, then overpowered and violated |
| Acts 6: 11-14; 7:1-60 | Jewish leaders → Stephen | Suborn perjury, Murder | Losing debates, Enraged | Yes | Stoned by the Jewish council |

I have not identified power or control as a primary motive in any of the scenarios above. Pharaoh's express motive in oppressing Israel is probably the closest (Exod 1:9–10). He was fighting to retain his power, and he certainly sought to control the Israelites. But were those his prime motives? The inspired text does not affirm that view, instead focusing on the potential of their alliance with a foreign power in battle and the potential result of losing them as laborers (1:10). In all these scenarios, power and control are certainly present as means (Lot's daughters get him drunk to overcome his resistance, men overpower women in rape, and murderers overpower their victims), but the element of selfishness is abundantly clear in each and clearly central as regards motive.

In this regard, abuse may be understood as a particularly egregious form of interpersonal conflict (as opposed to the peaceable state that ought to characterize any relationship). James 4:1–3 describes the genesis of conflict: unmet desires. James even links murder to this motive (“You desire and do not have, so you murder”). It is the unrighteous elevation of self—self-interest, self-promotion, selfish pleasure—that produces the conflict. James also describes the motive: “your passions (*hēdonais*) are at war within you.” Again, it is self-centered desire that is fueling the train that—once it reaches runaway speed—will eventually arrive at abuse.

Jealousy is one fruit of such high self-regard. To be jealous is to envy another based on the self-perception that one compares unfavorably to her. As the *OED* informs us, jealous[y] is:

Troubled by the belief, suspicion, or fear that the good which one desires to gain or keep for oneself has been or may be diverted to another; resentful toward another on account of known or suspected rivalry . . . feeling ill-will towards another on account of some advantage or superiority which he possesses or may possess; grudging, envious.¹²

It is noteworthy how often jealousy is explicitly identified as a motive for grave sins in Scripture. Rachel “envied her sister” in her fertility and manipulatively commanded

¹² *OED*, 8:206.

Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Gen 30:1). Joseph’s brothers were jealous of him (Gen 37:11; Acts 7:9), Aaron and Miriam were jealous of Moses (Num 12:1–9), and the people of Israel led by Korah were jealous of Aaron and Moses (Num 16, esp. v. 3; Ps 106:16). The Jews were jealous of Jesus (Matt 27:18) and Paul (Acts 17:5). Paul identifies envy as a primary motive of false teachers (Phil 1:15; 1 Tim 6:4). It is one of the qualities that is the exact opposite of love (1 Cor 13:4). Envy also regularly appears on NT sin lists (Rom 1:29; Gal 5:21; Titus 3:3; 1 Pet 2:1).¹³

Of course, the deepest nature of selfishness is seen only in relation to God.¹⁴ Apart from a divine standard of justice by which to measure and assess the relative morality of these actions, we are left merely with behavior that one may find more or less objectionable based upon past experience and personal preferences. What qualifies these behaviors as abusive and wrong is the divine standard of judgment. Murder, rape, enslavement, sexual enticement, and slander are not merely in poor taste or some manner of anti-social behavior. They are violations of the law of our Creator and therefore unjust and unrighteous. They are an affront to the Almighty, as well as being harmful to human persons created in his image.

All sin is selfish. Sin is the proud outworking of the unbelieving heart that rejects the sovereign goodness of the Creator.¹⁵ Sin heeds the siren call of the serpent:

¹³ In contrast, the Lord is righteously jealous, requiring the absolute loyalty of his people because he is good (Exod 20:5; 34:14; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Josh 24:19; Ezek 36:6; Joel 2:18; Nah 1:2; Zech 1:14; 8:2). He also commends his people when they are jealous for his name, which is an aspect of the fear of the Lord (Num 25:11, 13; 1 Kgs 19:10, 14). Jesus is the paradigm of this quality (John 2:17). Again, the *OED* comes through: “In biblical language, said of God: Having a love which will tolerate no unfaithfulness or defection in the beloved object.” *OED*, 8:206.

¹⁴ Sin is always a personal offense against the good and holy God. “Sin has an ‘objective’ character to it, for it involves violation of divine command (whether knowingly or unwittingly). At the same time, sin is most commonly and vividly portrayed as rebellion that is both ‘personal’ and ‘conscious.’” Thomas McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 101.

¹⁵ “‘Sin’ . . . consists of the desire of humans to be autonomous, to use their God-given freedom (Isa 1:18–20) to decide against God.” McCall, *Against God and Nature*, 113. As the *Trinity Confession* (to which I subscribe) describes it, “All are now conceived in sin and by nature children of wrath, the servants of sin, the subjects of death, and all other miseries: spiritual, temporal, and eternal, unless the Lord Jesus sets them free.” Trinity Fellowship Churches, *The Trinity Confession of Faith* (Apex,

“You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). In that sense, all sin is an attempt at both anarchy and autonomy.¹⁶ As Herman Bavinck noted, “The organizing principle of sin is self-glorification, self-divination; stated more broadly: self-love or egocentricity.”¹⁷ Abuse, therefore, is not distinct or unusual in being selfish. Every day we encounter persons—and we are persons—who behave selfishly toward others. To sin is to place ourselves above and before God and, therefore, to place ourselves above and before others. Accordingly, since abuse is on the extreme end of the spectrum of sin, the selfishness factor is more pronounced.

Creatures do not reject God without replacing him with an alternative (Rom 1:18–23). Motivationally, the sinful heart aims not at obeying God but at its own illicit pleasure. Because all sin is unbelief, the sought-after pleasure is either itself sinful, or it is being pursued in a sinful manner, or both. Therefore, the sinner’s cry is “my kingdom come, my will be done.” As Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb note, “The pattern starts at its center, which is the abuser himself. He puts his wants and whims first and foremost.”¹⁸ This is also the reason that the abuser often blame-shifts, rebuking his victim for her alleged failure. Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley rightly link this attitude to the garden and Adam’s blaming of Eve (Gen 3:11): “Here we see the roots of masculine domestic abuse, when men try to avoid their own shame and guilt by verbally or physically attacking their wives.”¹⁹ The abuser is committed to his own kingdom and

NC: Trinity Fellowship Press, 2022), chap. 7, sec. 3. This confession follows the teaching of the Westminster and Second London Baptist confessions as well.

¹⁶ Anarchy refers to the disorder that results from a lawless state. Etymologically, *an-* negates the *arche*, or ruler. Autonomy refers to the independence of self (*auto*) -government, or -law (*nomos*). Sin seeks to negate the rule of God (1 John 3:4) and to install ourselves in his stead (e.g., Phil 3:19).

¹⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 2, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 105.

¹⁸ Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 42.

¹⁹ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Man and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 354.

blames his own failures on others. Materials on abuse often recognize and affirm both of these dynamics in the motive of the abuser.

But is *selfish* the best term to characterize the motive of the abuser? It is inarguable that rightly understood, all abuse is selfish. But does selfishness describe the core desire of the abuser? I argue that it does, in part, because it describes the dynamic better than the prevailing paradigm. What is seen as a love of power and control is better understood as a love of self. Darby Strickland’s definition acknowledges this dynamic: “An oppressor’s behavior says, ‘Serve me or suffer the consequences!’”²⁰ Chris Moles does as well, in a section entitled, “The Heart of Violence Is a Heart of Selfish Pride”: “The prideful man seeks his own benefit and looks to gain praise and support.”²¹

Interacting more deeply with Moles demonstrates both the overlap and the divergence between my proposal and the prevailing paradigm. He identifies “the heart of the matter” as “pride that seeks to control.” He then explains how abusive men go to great trouble to hide information, avoid scrutiny, and “work hard at ‘protecting their image.’”²² He reiterates later, “Abusive men desire control above everything else . . . abusive men want control and will go to extraordinary lengths to gain and maintain control over their partners.”²³ While desire for control certainly may be an explanation for these behaviors, selfishness is a deeper and more satisfying category. In this instance, it is a matter of taking one step further and asking *why*? Why does the abuser want control?

²⁰ Darby Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2020), 24. Elsewhere, she notes that “toxic entitlement is at the core of oppression” (65).

²¹ Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse*, 44.

²² Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse*, 21.

²³ Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse*, 37.

The superiority of selfishness as a defining category is demonstrated in Moles's analysis of the abuser's motives through the lens of James 4:1–3. He writes,

God is not included in the choices made by the abusive man. He is not relying upon God's sufficient grace but upon his own power to control his partner and achieve his desired outcome. This self-serving motivation gives life to the evil behavior consistent with abuse and domestic violence. In many ways this is a rejection, often covert, of God's sovereignty as this man abuses power to get what he wants instead of serving God.²⁴

There is much to appreciate in this analysis. Moles brings a wealth of experience to this topic and has worked diligently to understand and care for abusers. However, I propose that a small but significant adjustment would improve the paradigm presented here. The reference to "self-serving motivation" is one key. I agree with Moles that the "heart of abuse is pride," though I would gloss the latter term as *inordinate self-regard*.²⁵ But the misstep occurs especially in the ensuing phrase, "that seeks to control." Were he to posit this as a consequence or means he would be nearer the mark. But he is identifying control as a motive ("the heart of abuse"), and a problematic one at that.

It is interesting to see how Moles pits God's grace against the abuser's selfish aims. He writes, "He is not relying upon God's sufficient grace but upon his own power." This is the second key: to rely upon God's grace is to look to the Lord for righteous *power*, even while entrusting the outcome to him (as Moles also notes in commenting on God's sovereignty). The abuser may need God's grace to empower him to love his wife, to be patient with her, or to restrain his own anger. There may be any number of ways that the abuser needs God's grace to empower him to think, feel, and act righteously.

God's grace has aims, it is power in service to an outcome (Eph 2:8–10; Phil 2:12–13). The Christian does not seek power for its own (self-aggrandizing) sake but to

²⁴ Moles, *The Heart of Domestic Abuse*, 39.

²⁵ The *OED* strikes again: "Pride—A high or overweening opinion of one's own qualities, attainments, or estate, which gives rise to a feeling and attitude of superiority or contempt for others; inordinate self-esteem." *OED*, 12:462–63. Bavinck made the connection between pride and selfishness evident in describing the former as "the naked expression of the principle of egocentricity." Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:112.

produce righteous fruit. As Paul taught, we “make it our aim to please him” (2 Cor 5:9–10). The problem is not that the abuser is on a quest for power, but that he is seeking his own kingdom, and the victims of his abuse are merely means to an end. This is demonstrated by the conclusion of Moles’s quote: “this man abuses power to get what he wants instead of serving God.” He seeks control in order to achieve his desired outcomes and, in that way, he is *abusing* power. Power is not itself bad. What makes it evil is the selfish aims of the abuser. But if power is utilized in a righteous manner and aimed at righteous goods, then it is a positive good. That idea leads naturally into the issue of control.

Compulsion

Abuse is compulsion: the abuser uses words, physical force, or other actions in a compelling and authoritative manner that overrides the agency of the victim, at least to some extent. Abuse is coercive and compulsive, seeking to accomplish something that is contrary to the best interests of the abused, and almost always against her will.²⁶ In this manner abuse is tied to inequality. The abuser is able to accomplish his selfish goals because of some disparity in size, strength, or the like. That is why a boxing match between two adult men in the same weight class can be considered a fair fight, but a match between an eight-year-old boy and a man would not be, regardless of their respective heights and weights. The disparity in age, physical development, and experience would make the match unfair, and likely abusive.²⁷ Abuse requires that the

²⁶ One can imagine rare scenarios where a person receiving abusive treatment does so willingly, especially as regards BDSM (bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism). However, the perversion on display there is clearly contrary to God’s design; and though a given person may “want” to be treated in that manner, the desire itself is debased. Here again we see the importance of a divine standard of judgment and the importance of the divine perspective in definition. Though such behavior might not be considered abuse in such an instance because of the willingness of the participants, it certainly fits every other facet of the definition: selfish acts to the pronounced detriment of another. Most importantly, it is wicked and offensive to God, and profoundly damaging to everyone involved, spiritually and often physically.

²⁷ Recent controversies surrounding transgender “women” in female sports demonstrate the same principle. The physiological advantage of the man competing in women’s sports is markedly unfair,

abuser have the ability to overwhelm the abused in some respect. The terminology of power and control, and the study of power dynamics or power differentials, is thus duly recognized in discussions of abuse, though often misapplied.

In this regard, the potential for abuse is found wherever inequalities exist, and since the Lord made a world that teems with inequality by design, the potential for abuse is everywhere. In Scripture, it is generally the rich who exploit the poor (Prov 14:20; 18:23; 22:16; Amos 4:1; Mal 3:5; 1 Tim 6:17; Jas 2:6; 5:4). It is generally men who exploit women (Gen 34:1–4; 2 Sam 13:11–14).²⁸ It is generally rulers who exploit their subjects (Exod 2:8–22; Dan 3; 6; Acts 7:34; Heb 11:26). However, it is one thing to recognize that inequalities may be exploited for abuse and quite another to argue that all inequalities are *ipso facto* abusive.²⁹ That is, while inequality is a *necessary* condition for abuse, it is not a *sufficient* condition.

Inherent in each of those categories of exploitation is disparity in strength: economic, physical, or governmental. For example, the rich are able to oppress the poor primarily because they have the resources and relationships to steer situations to selfish advantage. The poor may not be able to hire a lawyer, or they may not have the time off from work that would be needed to deal with a situation effectively.³⁰

and in some cases, quite dangerous to his competition. Conversely, a woman with a weapon can harm or kill a man who is her physical superior because of the power disparity she achieves through the weapon.

²⁸ Even the well-known exception of Potiphar’s wife demonstrates the principle. Joseph was the servant of her husband, whom the Bible calls “his Egyptian master” (Gen 39:2). Joseph was wildly successful in his roles, so his master promoted him, eventually making him “overseer of his house and . . . in charge of all that he had” (39:4). So, Joseph was a man, and had authority and power within Potiphar’s household. But he was also a foreigner and a servant, and a social inferior to Potiphar’s wife. She thus used the inequality of their social status to her advantage, causing significant harm to Joseph when he successfully resisted her.

²⁹ This argument anticipates the discussion of chapter 3. Critical Theory identifies inequalities in the world and operates on the assumption that they reflect hegemonic oppression, by definition. Critical Theory is, in the abstract, a profoundly egalitarian project. Given the—ironically—hegemonic power of CT within the most powerful cultural institutions in America (higher education, commerce, government), it would be naïve to think that those categories have not affected how abuse is understood, even within the church.

³⁰ J. D. Vance notes these dynamics quite helpfully in his autobiography. J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: Harper, 2016).

Oppression by men can function likewise. The manner in which a man compels a person is generally more direct and forceful. This is owing to both the general size and strength advantage of men and to the masculine orientation to dominion in the world, twisted though it is by sin. Therefore, physical beating and rape are generally considered to be more masculine sins. By contrast, women are generally less direct and more manipulative. As Shannon Thomas has noted,

There are many women who are the cause of intense relational harm. In fact, I have had nearly as many male clients who have been survivors of hidden abuse as I have had female clients. The manner in which the female abuser operates is somewhat different than a male abuser. It is often more covert (i.e., sneaky). This isn't always true, as some are very aggressive.³¹

While some women are physically abusive, it is in the areas that women are generally superior (e.g., verbal and relational aptitudes) that the potential for abuse is heightened.³²

Similarly, government authorities can abuse their citizens by utilizing their God-given power and authority for selfish gain. Romans 13:1–7 teaches that civil government has been given “the sword” to be “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” Here we note the importance of the previous term in the definition: selfish. The state has power from God to compel its citizens—even against their wills—in punishing them for wrongdoing. The police officer need not (and ought not) ask permission from the rapist before arresting him. The Lord has appointed the officer as his servant (13:4) for good and the officer’s authority includes the power to arrest and detain.

³¹ Shannon Thomas, *Healing from Hidden Abuse: A Journey through the Stages of Recovery from Psychological Abuse* (Tempe, AZ: Mast, 2016), 16.

³² The verbal and relational strengths of women are confirmed by experience, Scripture (e.g., the personification of wisdom in Proverbs as a woman, crying out; the association of nurturing and the home with the feminine in biblical imagery [i.e., Luke 13:34]; the relational orientation of Titus 2:4), and research. “Females tend to excel in verbal abilities, with large differences between females and males found when assessments include writing samples.” Diane F. Halpern et al., “The Science of Sex Differences in Science and Mathematics,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 8, no. 1 (August 2007): 1.

Alastair Roberts has noted this power differential as well: “Power in the dense social arena chiefly belongs to women, as they generally form much closer relations than men can . . . within this realm, women can use their greater social leverage to ‘bully’ men into silence through the threat of social ostracization or marginalization.” Alastair Roberts, “A Crisis of Discourse—Part 2: A Problem of Gender,” *Alastair Adversaria*, November 17, 2016, <https://alastairadversaria.com/2016/11/17/a-crisis-of-discourse-part-2-a-problem-of-gender/>.

Yet that same power can be wielded to unrighteous, self-serving effect. Regardless of where one now stands regarding the responses of various governmental authorities to the recent COVID-19 crisis, there were certainly abuses of authority around the world that cost people their livelihoods and often their very lives. History books are filled with many such accounts of rulers oppressing their citizens, using them for personal gain. Christians have been (and still are in some places) viciously persecuted for practicing ultimate allegiance to Jesus, and especially when the state demanded otherwise.³³

In their more developed definition of domestic abuse, Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson utilize the power and control terminology, as noted above:

Abuse occurs as a person in a position of greater influence uses his personal capacities to diminish the personal capacities of those under his influence in order to control them. Because God made people as embodied souls, these personal capacities are both physical and spiritual. Abuse is identified from two directions: (1) the manipulative intent and behavioral forcefulness of the one in a position of influence, and (2) the diminishing effect on those under his influence.³⁴

They find in *control* the key dynamic: “An abuser’s behavior should be understood as an attempt to gain control, that precious commodity that buys all his other desires . . . what sets him apart from those who don’t abuse is that he’s figured out how to exert control as the means to gain those things.”³⁵ They identify a contrast:

The Lord designed people with God-like faculties for one main purpose: to love. Love is using one’s personal capacities to bring about good for others in the world. A person should be considered abusive when he has established a pattern of doing the opposite: using personal capacities to force others to bring about good for

³³ In the context of the Roman Empire, the cry “Jesus is Lord” certainly had political ramifications. In one sense, Rome was correct to recognize the threat of Christianity. As its leaven spread, the old values of Rome were gradually undone, and the old gods displaced. For a recent application of these truths to our contemporary context, see Andrew T. Walker, “Against Catacomb Christianity,” *American Reformer*, October 18, 2021, <https://americanreformer.org/2021/10/against-catacomb-christianity/>.

³⁴ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 39–40. They later add, “Abuse is any diminishing of an individual’s God-given capacities of personhood, including their ability to perceive rightly” (74).

³⁵ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 50.

himself. This can be called control. To control is to diminish the capacities of others so they're left in a position where they must conform.³⁶

Two notes are important here: first, when they identify control as “that precious commodity that buys all his other desires,” they are demonstrating that control is a means—more so than a motive—and it is directed at selfishness. Second, we again see that there does not appear to be a positive vision for control in this system.

It is also important, therefore, to understand how Pierre and Wilson view love and authority. They define love as “using one’s personal capacities to bring about good for others in the world. . . . Love helps others flourish at cost to self.”³⁷ They add, “Whatever authority exists in human relationships is derived authority, given only for the purpose of serving the ones under authority rather than being served by them (Mark 10:42–43).”³⁸ Again, there is much to commend in this understanding. Serving others is an expression of love and those entrusted with responsible roles must serve those under their care. The abuser does use others for selfish gain (“force others to bring about good for himself”). Abuse is manipulative and forceful. But the power and control framework can pit goods against one another in unhelpful ways. In this view, love is entirely “power under” and service oriented. There is no room for a positive vision of compulsion, nor for a positive role of authoritative leadership that sets direction and calls others to follow.³⁹ They call out *manipulative intent* as a factor: “The intention to gain personal control over the other.”⁴⁰ They warn against *behavioral oppression*: “the degree of coercion the person’s behavior has on those under his influence . . . how much effort is being used to

³⁶ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 49–50.

³⁷ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 42.

³⁸ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 40.

³⁹ Pierre and Wilson state this explicitly: “Trying to control others is not why God gives people personal strength.” Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 42. This is true as regards selfish control, but there are proper forms of control that require personal strength.

⁴⁰ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 72.

incapacitate another person's freedom of choice?", and *forcefulness*: "the degree of threat a person faces for not conforming to the manipulative intent of the abuser."⁴¹

While one can easily understand how all those elements may be true in some sense in an abusive situation, they also reveal a tension inherent in their definition of control as a diminishment of others' capacities that requires conformity. God's Word threatens those who do not obey him with a terrible fate (e.g., John 3:36; Acts 7:39; Rom 2:8; 2 Thess 1:8). The church is called to enforce conformity to God's Word, even if that enforcement is contrary to a person's free choice on some level (1 Cor 4:21; 2 Thess 3:14). Children are called to obey their parents as unto the Lord (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20), and parents are called to discipline them if they do not obey. Servants are called to obey their masters with all respect (Eph 6:5; Col 3:22; 1 Pet 2:18). Wives are called to submit to their husbands in everything (Eph 5:24; Titus 2:5; 1 Pet 3:5). The nature of authority in God's Word is such that there is a positive element of compulsion and an inherent threat for disobedience. The secret is that obedience leads to life and flourishing and that authority has been given as a means to provoke those goods.⁴² Further, it simply cannot be wrong for someone in authority to call those under him to serve him—Jesus did it all the time.⁴³ He certainly did serve us in a profound and unparalleled manner and he calls us to serve him in the accomplishment of his purposes in the world.

⁴¹ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 73.

⁴² The specific remit of civil authority in Rom 13 is to: terrorize bad conduct (v. 3), approve of the righteous (v. 3) and serve their good (v. 4), and avenge by executing God's wrath on the evildoer (v. 4). In this way, they disincentivize evil and reward righteousness. Authorities who work contrary to the Lord's revealed will are illegitimate and foster injustice (Ps 94:20).

⁴³ Representatively, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commanded his disciples: to follow him and be his disciples (4:18–22; 9:9); to pray earnestly for laborers (9:38); to evangelize Israel only (10:6–15); to have no fear amidst persecution (10:26–33); to feed the multitudes (14:16); to beware of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5–12); and to take up their cross and follow him (16:24–28). He also commanded them to adopt many attitudes and to perform many deeds through his didactic teaching (e.g., Matt 5–8).

There is an English word that captures a person who utilizes their personal skills and capacities exclusively for the good of others: "servant." It is an honorable, biblical role. However, much of Evangelicalism seems uncomfortable with the second half of the label that is often applied to those in authority: servant-leader. As noted in chapter 1, we must have a positive, biblical vision for power and control so that we can utilize those qualities righteously, including calling others to serve in a way that may

Positive compulsion. To better understand that tension, we must first understand how compulsion can be utilized righteously. The idea of compulsion is inherent in the concept of authority. Genuine authority always includes the power to compel others to some extent.⁴⁴ I have already referenced one instance: when the police officer arrests a criminal, he utilizes his God- and civil government-given authority to compel the criminal and takes her to jail against her will. This is a positive instance of compulsion and can be a good work biblically, if the officer is a Christian and performs his duties in faith. He can love God and love the criminal by treating her justly as a responsible moral agent and holding her to account for her misdeeds.

Similarly, a father can discipline his children through corporal punishment, applying that remedy in obedience to the Lord and according to his prescribed methods and motives (Prov 22:15; 23:14; 29:15).⁴⁵ Such actions may be—and generally are—contrary to the expressed wishes of the child in the moment, but they are loving acts aimed at the child’s good, in imitation of our heavenly Father (Prov 13:24; Heb 12:5–11). It is the failure to discipline that is a failure to love (Heb 12:8).⁴⁶

A father might also command his son to go split firewood for the family stove. He is calling the young man to work for the benefit of others, including the father. In so

benefit ourselves. Consider: is an army captain being selfish when he commands his men to charge a line, knowing they may die, but also knowing that their deaths will save other lives, including potentially his own? Is a father abusing his authority when he asks his son to fetch his slippers?

⁴⁴ Once again to the *OED*: “Authority—Power or right to enforce obedience; moral or legal supremacy; the right to command, or give an ultimate decision.” *OED*, 1:798. The nature and extent of the authorization to compel varies, sometimes greatly, from role to role. But if there is no potential compulsion, there is no authority. An interesting application of this truth has played out in the Protestant doctrine of the lesser magistrate. As will be discussed below, the story of Abigail (1 Sam 25) captures some of these themes, though the setting is domestic and not civil.

⁴⁵ See also William Farley and Judy Farley, *Biblical Discipline That Makes Children Fun! A Companion Booklet to “Gospel Powered Parenting”* (Middletown, DE: Pinnacle Communications, 2017). It seems to me that biblical discipline would be an example of control in the Pierre and Wilson model: it overrides the child’s agency to some extent and punishes non-conformity, even as it seeks to speak to the heart and calls the child to obedience from the same.

⁴⁶ Two well-known examples from the OT demonstrate the point: Eli with his sons (1 Sam 1–2) and David with Adonijah (1 Kgs 1:5–6). See also my discussion by Gouge in chapter 1.

doing, he is teaching his son many things, including the value of hard work, the role of men in providing for the family sacrificially, and the reality of an authoritative division of duties in the home (as everywhere else in the world). We might balk at the use of “command” above, but the father is not making a mere request. It is his right to charge his son to perform various duties, and to reward or punish him accordingly.⁴⁷ That is all part of a positive good of compulsion.

Church discipline, likewise, has both a protective and a restorative function (Matt 18:15–20; 1 Cor 5:5), aimed at upholding the glory of our Savior (Rev 2:14–16; 2:20–23) and working for the good of the entire church (1 Tim 5:20; Titus 3:10–11). The member living in unrepentant sin is likely to resist and despise the discipline (and may label it as abusive given our prevailing cultural moment), but the church’s careful and deliberate persistence in following a just process of discipline is actually a profound act of love designed to promote his eternal welfare.⁴⁸

Other relationships, such as employer-employee, or husband-wife, do not offer as much of an authoritative gap between the superior and the inferior.⁴⁹ Gouge noted as

⁴⁷ As Abraham Kuyper notes,

The child senses that his father is someone *who stands above him*. A father does not ask his child: “Is this what you would like?” He commands. Those commands may be given in a kind tone of voice, but commands they are. They are expression of a higher will that transcends the will of the child. In the figure of father there is a “power” in the home which decided how things have to be and an authority that the child is to obey. (Abraham Kuyper, *On Charity and Justice*, ed. Matthew J. Tuininga, Collected Works in Public Theology [Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2022], 275)

It is interesting to note another connection made by Kuyper, which will become relevant in chap. 4: “A father impresses his child with a sense of justice” (275). Of course, this kind of command/compulsion does not encapsulate the entirety of the father-child relationship; but it is an important part of the paternal role.

⁴⁸ See Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). Discipline can go bad as well. Thus, James Bannerman offers wise counsel on the limits of ecclesial power: “It is no less necessary to mark the *limits* of church power, as contradistinguished from a spiritual and uncontrolled tyranny, or a supernatural and mysterious charm, and as restricted by the nature of its office and the appointment of its Divine author.” James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 248.

⁴⁹ Some modern readers may recoil at the superior/inferior language above, finding it to be demeaning and offensive. Yet it is the language that has been employed throughout most of human history. The reference is to rank or order, not to being, dignity, or worth. It is also a recognition of the reality that the employer can fire the employee, but not vice-versa.

much with reference to marriage: “Yet there are no unequals betwixt which there is so near a parity as betwixt man and wife,”⁵⁰ and “none can be nearer than a wife, and none ought to be dearer.”⁵¹ Therefore, the influence of the one in authority is generally more a matter of persuasion than of compulsion, though the presence of authority does place those relationships on the same spectrum.⁵²

In order to have positive compulsion one must also have authority, which requires hierarchy.⁵³ Christianity embraces hierarchy as a design feature in God’s world. As Paul wrote in Romans 13:1–2, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” While the context refers to civil government—and no earthly authority is absolute—the general point remains. Authority (and therefore, hierarchy) is a design feature of creation.

Therefore, Christians must see hierarchy and authority as positive goods. We must have a positive vision for compulsion and control appropriately exercised (e.g., Titus 2:15), otherwise, we will advance untenable positions, such as, “Jesus used power not to rule but to influence, to invite, to welcome, and to transform.”⁵⁴ A moment’s

⁵⁰ *DD*, 4:7.

⁵¹ *DD*, 4:8.

⁵² For a somewhat different perspective, see Jonathan Leeman, “What Authority Has God Given to Governments?” *9Marks*, April 29, 2023, <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-authority-has-god-given-to-governments/>; Jonathan Leeman, *The Rule of Love: How the Local Church Should Reflect God’s Love and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018). Gilbert, following Leeman, does not categorize the authority of a husband or a pastor/elder as in any way coercive, but rather as an authority of counsel. In part, this no doubt reflects the Congregationalist polity they share; but it also appears to be an attempt to create a kind of authority that ought not, and indeed cannot, enforce obedience in any manner. “They can recommend and explain, but they can’t enforce.” Greg Gilbert, “Is There Such a Thing as Church Authority?” *9Marks*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.9marks.org/article/is-there-such-a-thing-as-church-authority/>.

⁵³ One may debate whether the hierarchy is ontological or functional, but either way, someone is in charge and will dole out rewards or punishments accordingly.

⁵⁴ Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 177.

reflection reveals this idea to be a false dichotomy. Jesus commanded the demons in exorcisms (Matt 4:24; 8:16, 31). He commanded the wind and the waves, and they obeyed him (Mark 4:35–41). He commanded his disciples in ministry (Matt 10:5–33; 28:16–20). He commanded the Pharisees and Sadducees to repent (Matt 3:8). He taught with authority,⁵⁵ unlike the typical teachers of his day (Matt 7:28–29). The list goes on and on.

It will not do to pit influence against authority in God’s world. It is certainly true that Jesus exercised his rule and authority in ways that were attractive to many, but he also repelled many (John 6:50–59; cf. John 6:2, 60–71). His ministry was divisive (Luke 12:49–53). He required, and requires still, the entire allegiance of his disciples, which necessarily produces conflicts with ungodliness in this age (Matt 10:34–39). A full-orbed appreciation for the nature of authority, power, control, and compulsion as described in Scripture will help all persons to exercise those qualities in faith when they are required to do so in their various God-given vocations. It will also help to identify when those qualities are being utilized sinfully.

It is ironic that in the name of preventing abuse, egalitarianism can undermine faith and wind up promoting the dispositions that lead to abuse. This is because it provides no solid ground or positive vision for persons in authority to exercise their authority as positive goods. Therefore, there must always be some sense of impropriety or guilt when authority is exercised (Rom 14:23) or authority is simply not exercised, leaving those who should be subject to it subject instead to the whims and vicissitudes of the resultant anarchy (Judg 17:6; 21:25; Jas 1:22–25). A proper, positive vision for authority gives those in such positions the opportunity to trust God and embrace their

⁵⁵ The Sermon on the Mount is illustrative: “You have heard . . . but I say to you” (Matt 5:21–48). He quoted Scripture and provided authoritative interpretation and expansion. That is an expression of surpassing power and authority. “Then notice, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, the way in which He deliberately sets Himself up as the authoritative Teacher.” D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2016), 18.

responsibilities humbly and for God’s glory. It does not castigate what the Bible commends.

Negative compulsion. Selfish compulsion that exploits or oppresses others is the essence of abuse. When authority and compulsion are exercised sinfully the results are wicked and oppressive. Sadly, history is replete with examples, including the history recorded in Scripture. Many were already referenced above, and others could be added. On this topic, the verdict of Scripture is clear: those who utilize the advantages they have been granted by God for selfish gain bear greater guilt (2 Sam 12:7–9; Jer 5:4–5; Ezek 8:11–12; Luke 12:48; Rom 2:17–24).⁵⁶

The issue of consent is especially pertinent in considering the topic of negative compulsion. The nature of abuse is such that the abuser acts contrary to the will of both the victim and, even more importantly, the Lord. He exploits and oppresses the other(s) selfishly and causes harm. There is a spectrum from coercion (persuasion) to compulsion, and discerning when one has “crossed the line,” is not always simple. However, much as threats are not *ipso facto* abuse, but may be part of the package, so too coercion is not abuse, but may be part of a broader whole that is appropriately so labeled.

The “forbidden woman” of Proverbs 7 illustrates the distinction between coercion and compulsion.⁵⁷ She certainly seeks to persuade the young man. She dresses provocatively (v. 10) and is bold and sexually available (vv. 11–12). She makes sexual advances toward him (v. 13) and seeks to entice him with promises of pleasure (vv. 15–19). She even promises that they are safe from discovery, as her husband is away on a long trip (vv. 19–20).

⁵⁶ A large part of Paul’s outrage against the Corinthian church (1 Cor 5) is that they soft pedaled the sins of one of their own and then boasted about it, instead of disciplining the rebellious man.

⁵⁷ I am indebted to John Henderson for discussion on these category distinctions from Prov 7.

Then the tone changes: “With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life” (Prov 7:21–23). The translation “compels” is obviously of special interest. The NET notes, “The basic meaning of the verb (*nadakh*) is ‘to go/be led astray.’ In the causative Hiphil form it means ‘to drive away, to entice, to seduce.’ As an imperfect verb in a past time setting it is progressive: she turned him aside and was leading him astray.”⁵⁸ The imagery is also important: an ox to slaughter, a stag caught fast, and a bird ensnared. All three images use unthinking animals facing impending and unwanted death. So, there is certainly a sense in which the woman is convincing (and culpable). She has made an attractive presentation and argument that has stupefied and ensnared the foolish young man.⁵⁹ However, at no point is there any indication that she has actually overridden his personal agency.⁶⁰ Indeed, the closing admonitions make little sense if the young man is not both able and responsible to resist. “Let not your heart turn aside to her way; do not stray into her paths” (25).

For the purposes of my definition, I am distinguishing between coercion (persuasion) and compulsion.⁶¹ The distinction is to be found in that the young man is a

⁵⁸ NET Bible, “Note 45 on Proverbs 7:21,” accessed January 7, 2023, <https://netbible.org/bible/Proverbs+7>.

⁵⁹ A similar dynamic may be observed in the story of Samson and Delilah (Judg 16). For example, verses 16–17a, “And when she pressed him hard with her words day after day, and urged him, his soul was vexed to death. And he told her all his heart.” Delilah was selfishly coercing Samson daily, and he was foolishly and presumptuously exposing himself to folly and temptation. Her actions are condemnable and so are his.

⁶⁰ Most modern translations support this understanding: CSB (“seduces . . . lures”); NIV (“led . . . seduced”); NASB (“entices . . . seduces”). The RSV, as the immediate predecessor of the ESV, has the same translation. The KJV, however, is even stronger: “With her much fair speech she caused him to yield, with the flattering of her lips she forced him.” It seems likely that the KJV was seeking to emphasize the woman’s culpability, even as the young man is himself being held out as an example of the folly of sin that leads to death.

⁶¹ I am also distinguishing between senses of compulsion. I am using it in the sense of being compelled, constrained, or obligated. The *OED* defines “compel” as “to urge irresistibly, to constrain, oblige, force” (3:599). The psychological sense of an internal “insistent impulse to behave in a certain way, contrary to one’s conscious intentions or standards” (*OED*, 3:638) is not in view here.

free moral agent who has the power of choice. He need not enter her bed, no matter how enticing she makes it. She is certainly coercive and persistent, but he can resist, and the Lord requires him to do so. In this regard, all persons have a duty of resistance as regards personal sin. The problem for the young man is that external temptation in the form of the forbidden woman has found internal resonance within his own heart. She is offering him what he wants, and it is in that sense that she compels him. He is living out the pattern later recorded by James: “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (1:14–15). Thus, though the forbidden woman is sinful and selfish, she is not abusive. Her behavior is condemnable, but it falls under a different category of sin.

Compulsion is the *sine qua non* of abuse.⁶² Abuse requires that the victim’s agency be overridden to some extent, whether in part or entirely. The rapist physically overpowers his victim in order to perform his wicked act. The physical abuser uses his superior size and strength to inflict blows upon his victim against her will.⁶³ The groomer⁶⁴ works to ingratiate himself to the victim in order to prey upon the unwitting

⁶² Threatened compulsion, therefore, is somewhat of a gray area. Several considerations pertain. First, does the potential abuser possess the authority and/or ability to follow through on the threat? For example, a 3-year-old threatening to “beat you up” poses no actual threat, but a 13-year-old with a gun is a threat. Second, does the potential victim have reason to believe the threat would be effectively realized? Third, are there any legitimate means for resisting the threat?

⁶³ This scenario pictures a man beating a woman. However, it is estimated that nearly 20 percent of domestic abuse cases are the reverse. Shannan Catalano, “National Crime Victimization Survey, 1993–2010,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, revised September 29, 2015, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/ipv9310.pdf>. In those scenarios, one might imagine several options: the size ratio is reversed, the woman is utilizing explosive anger, or a weapon is being used in order to operate from a position of dominance.

⁶⁴ Natalie Bennett and William O’Donohue claim:

Grooming in child sexual abuse has been conceptualized as a preparatory stage in which the perpetrator attempts to establish a pattern of secrecy and complicity with the child. It has been more formally defined as antecedent inappropriate behavior on the part of an offender that functions to increase the likelihood of being able to abuse the child. In this grooming stage the abuser uses various manipulations that function to gain increased access to the child, seclude the child, sexualize the relationship, and introduce secrets into the relationship. (Natalie Bennett and William O’Donohue, “Identifying Grooming of Children for Sexual Abuse: Gender Effects and Increased False Positives from Internet Information,” *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* 20, no. 2 [2020]: 133–34)

child and to compel secrecy.⁶⁵ Tyrannical governments use threats, ostracization,⁶⁶ imprisonment, torture, and even death to keep their citizens under heel. When the prevailing paradigm utilizes power and control as definitive motives for abuse, it is almost certainly recognizing this element of compulsion. However, the error lies at two points: (a) finding no positive and legitimate use of power or control and (b) identifying them as motives of the abuser rather than as potential means to an end.

Before turning to examine the extent of the harm inflicted on others through abuse, there are two other matters to consider. Both are duties. The first duty is for those in positions of authority. The second duty potentially pertains to those who may be victimized.

A duty of protection. One of the obvious tasks of authorities in God’s world is to protect those under them from harm. Sometimes this is made explicit, as in Paul’s instructions to the Ephesians elders:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert. (Acts 20:28–31a)

There is a consistent thread of responsibility throughout Scripture for the spiritual leaders of God’s people to protect them, or to face the Lord’s condemnation (Ezek 34:1–11; cf. 1 Pet 5:1–5). The command to protect is also explicit for civil authorities such as kings:

“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth,

⁶⁵ Here we recognize the special case of young children, including their God-given predisposition to trust and defer to adults. The terrible reality of grooming highlights the responsibility of parents to teach their children about threats, proper physical touching, the duty of resistance (discussed below), and the like. The child’s relative innocence produces a natural susceptibility to abuse, which means that those persons who are responsible for the child’s well-being (primarily parents) have a duty of protection, as discussed below.

⁶⁶ Ostracization may include physical (like the Nazis infamously did with the Jews), professional (cutting off access to various licensures, grants, etc.), or reputational aspects (as the Romans did with the early church, or as many governments sought to do with the unvaccinated during the recent COVID-19 crisis). Of course, there is also overlap among these categories and others might be added.

judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov 31:8–9; cf. 16:12; 29:4; 14; Jer 21:12; 22:3). In this way, these authorities follow the example of the Lord himself who takes special notice of the poor and oppressed and is himself their Protector (Prov 22:22–23).

Sometimes, however, the command is implicit, though obvious. When Abram commands Sarai to pass herself off as his sister—twice! (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18)—the obvious and correct critique the reader carries for him stems from his failure to protect his wife, choosing instead to expose her to danger in order to protect himself. When Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:1–19), the same critique applies, though this time it is directed against the Lord. Could he possibly order a father to kill his child? In both instances, it is obvious that it is the duty of the husband and father to protect his wife and child from harm, not expose them to it. One of great failings of the abuser is at this very point: he is a danger to those under him, harming them, instead of being a danger to those outside who would seek to harm his beloved.⁶⁷

Ultimately, the duty of authorities to be mindful of those entrusted to them and to protect them from harm—especially those most susceptible to it (e.g., the widow, orphan, and foreigner: Prov 14:31; Isa 3:14; Jas 1:27; Heb 10:34)—reflects our Heavenly Father. He is everywhere commended in Scripture as the defender of the oppressed (Deut 10:17–19; Ps 9:7–10; 14:6; 103:5–6; 146:5–7; Isa 25:4; Matt 9:35–36). Therefore, those in positions of responsibility must know for whom they are responsible, and then they

⁶⁷ Michael Clary speaks to the necessity of masculine strength in this regard:

If God has designed and equipped men for the task of being the leaders, providers, and protectors of society, then emasculating and feminizing them will not only weaken them, but also society as a whole. Evil men will use their masculine strength to tyrannize, and godly men will lack the strength to resist. The strength of tyrants and bullies in the world can only be stopped by the greater strength of masculine virtue. Men who deny their masculinity and embrace passivity are not capable of protecting others. Evil men will exploit their error. (D. Michael Clary, *God's Good Design: A Biblical, Theological, and Practical Guide to Human Sexuality* [Ann Arbor, MI: Reformation Zion, 2023], 70)

must be diligent in the duties of care and protection for them.⁶⁸ We carry an obligation of care, first for those closest to us (e.g., 1 Tim 5:8; Gal 6:10), then for those that the Lord providentially places in our paths (e.g., Luke 10:25–37; 16:19–31). The further away we are from a problem geographically, relationally, or in other providential factors, the less our responsibility for it.⁶⁹

This duty of protection also speaks to the issue of agency for those entrusted to our care.⁷⁰ As discussed above, persons in inferior/weaker positions are more susceptible to be abused. It is not the case that inferiority/weakness is itself abusive, but that position does make them more susceptible. Further, some persons have a heightened susceptibility to abuse due to relative immaturity (e.g., young children, those with certain developmental disabilities) or to decay and diminishment (e.g., persons with debilitating illnesses, dementia, etc.). Therefore, it is especially incumbent upon those in positions of authority to be mindful and solicitous of such persons. Their susceptibility to abuse is part of the burden entrusted to the authority by the Lord, who is their ultimate Protector (Ps 68:5).

⁶⁸ Theodore Roosevelt demonstrated this disposition, as recorded in a personal letter: “One feels a little shy about talking of the deepest things, and therefore it is difficult for me to say all I feel about the attitude that should be taken by the husband to the wife, by the son to the mother. Brutality by a man to a woman, by a grown person to a little child, by anything strong toward anything good and helpless, makes my blood literally boil.” Theodore Roosevelt to Hamlin Garland, July 19, 1903, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, <https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o185403>.

⁶⁹ This is a necessary recognition of our finitude. We are all limited in time, money, and energies. The neediness of this world is vast, and, with modern communication technologies, we can be more superficially aware of problems in the world than at any previous time in history. I believe this largely accounts for the widely recognized phenomenon of continuous, short-lived outrage on social media over the scandal of the moment. It is far better to be diligent and faithful in the lives of the actual persons the Lord has placed us with than to cut ourselves off from them as we dedicate our lives to persons and causes that we cannot possibly know enough about to handle justly, wisely, and well.

Anecdotally, I have observed that often those who are most animated about large-scale problems “out there” are the least faithful in the everyday, mundane problem “in here” within their own families, churches, and other vocations. Advocacy and activism for great causes can sometimes be a way for persons who are failing in their personal lives to try to achieve success or recognition from others.

⁷⁰ Numbers 30 speaks to the duty of a father with his daughter, and a husband with his wife, vis-à-vis her vows to the Lord. The authority may either supervise or allow the vow to stand.

Thus, if one has a duty to perform a given task, then one is culpable for the failure to do so. Selfishness, laziness, and other forms of disengagement are the main obstacles for most authorities. One may be morally blameworthy (Zech 10:3; 11:1–17), and perhaps even criminally culpable, for the failure to protect someone assigned to one’s care. One positive fruit of the heightened awareness of abuse in recent years is that more people seem to be aware of this responsibility to protect those entrusted to them. Inasmuch as this awareness is producing self-evaluation and a new or renewed dedication to the task, it is all to the good.⁷¹

A duty of resistance. So, those in positions of authority are responsible to protect those entrusted to their care, but are those who are facing abuse *obligated* to resist? This is, obviously, a very provocative question.⁷² Is it wrong if someone endures abuse without fighting back in some capacity? Deuteronomy 22:23–27 appears to imply as much in the scenario of rape:

If there is a betrothed virgin, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor’s wife. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.

⁷¹ As with any similar situation, heightened awareness of a particular problem “out there” can also produce great fear and anxiety in those newly informed or aware of a danger. Increasingly desperate attempts can be undertaken to ensure that no harm befalls those under our care, which often leads to other harmful extremes (anxiety and fear, withdrawal, hostility toward the world, condemnation of others who do not share the same level of concern, etc.). It is impossible and undesirable to avoid all risk in a fallen world.

⁷² Gregoire, Lindenbach, and Sawatsky argue that “compliance does not equal consent.” Sheila Wray Gregorie, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky, *She Deserves Better: Raising Girls to Resist Toxic Teachings on Sex, Self, and Speaking Up* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 192. They identify four characteristics of “sexual coercion: 1. Flattery can be a form of coercion; 2. Using a power imbalance is coercion; 3. Gradually wearing a girl down is coercion; and 4. Overt threats are coercion” (189–90). The context makes clear that their understanding of “coercion” does not equal persuasion—even unwelcome—as these are listed as “some examples of coercive sexual assaults” (189-90).

In these verses, the betrothed virgin is stoned for adultery if the incident occurred in the city and no one heard her cry out.⁷³ The clear assumption is that if the incident were rape, and not adultery, she would have and should have cried out. It is the difference between innocence and guilt, between life and death (because of the penalty for adultery). However, if the incident occurred in the country, she is given the presumption of innocence. The assumption is that she did indeed cry out, but no one heard her because no one was around to do so. Though she may have been a willing participant (and thus adulterous), the biblical standard of *innocent until proven guilty* applies unless there is evidence to the contrary. In both instances, the obligation to resist in the form of crying for help is clear.⁷⁴

Similarly, Daniel's brave companions stood up to the civil-religious tyranny of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3:16–18:

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

Their insistence that they "will not serve your gods or worship the golden image" is part of a long-standing and well-established tradition in the history of God's people.⁷⁵ When

⁷³ Jeffrey H. Tigay notes that "this guideline is not absolute: whether in town or in the country, evidence that there was no one who could have saved her, that she resisted, or that her life was threatened if she resisted, would establish innocence; evidence to the contrary would establish guilt." Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 207. Most of those qualifications are almost certainly correct, as those guidelines are basically consistent with other biblical standards for evidence and due process.

⁷⁴ If one might postulate that the woman would not cry out in the country in order to not enflame her attacker further, the text offers no support: "though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her" (Deut 22:27). Crying out is clearly the right thing to do, and in the absence of contrary evidence she is assumed to have done so. Daniel I. Block argues similarly: "It assumes that if the act occurs in town an innocent woman will cry for help and either the man to whom she is betrothed or her townspeople will rescue her. However, since there is no one in the country to hear her cries when she is violated by a man, it gives her the benefit of the doubt and assumes her innocence. Meanwhile the man must be executed." Daniel I. Block, *The Gospel According to Moses: Theological Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade 2013), 163. These perspectives on justice will be discussed further in chapter 4.

⁷⁵ The Lord not only forbids worshipping other gods (Exod 20:1–6) but also syncretism in any form (Deut 12).

faced with the choice between denying our God and certain death, millions have chosen death.⁷⁶ The Babylonian exiles may have had the instructions of Proverbs in mind when they resisted: “Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked” (25:26). Jesus also taught his disciples, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt 10:32–33).

Naboth resisted the unrighteous land grab of King Ahab when he sought to steal his vineyard (1 Kgs 21). His express reason was obedience: “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers” (v. 3). Naboth was honoring the Lord and his express commands regarding how land was allotted in Israel (cf. Lev 25:23; Josh 13:1–7). Ahab merely wanted the land for personal gain and convenience. When he reported his failure to Jezebel, she taunted him, “Do you now govern Israel?,” and promised to fix the problem. In the end, she acted as a slanderous tyranness, arranging for false charges to be brought against Naboth, which led to his stoning. In this sad tale, Naboth is clearly the righteous man whose integrity exposed the rot in the royal palace.

Finally, the last book of Scripture speaks to these issues as well. Throughout Revelation, John references “the one who conquers,” referring especially to those who are faithful to Christ in the midst of great opposition (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7). In Revelation 21:7–8, he writes, “The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” It is noteworthy that the first category on the list of damnable sins is “the

⁷⁶ The Decian persecution in the mid-third century brought this issue to the fore, with some Christians denying Christ in order to save their lives, only to seek readmission to the church after the death of Decius (AD 251). The church was divided over whether to readmit them. Cyprian’s treatise *On the Lapsed* speaks to the issues. Cyprian, *Laps.* (ANF, 5:437–47).

cowardly,” and it stands both next to “the faithless” and in contrast with the one who conquers. Cowardice is a sin, biblically speaking, and given the opportunities for apostasy, the need for courage and conviction is great.

Perhaps it is one thing to stand up to governmental tyranny and another to stand up to more personal oppression and abuse. Perhaps it is one thing to cry out or resist the rapist and another thing with domestic violence, where resistance will likely produce worse beatings. What are the implications of resistance for children whose great disparity in size and strength make resistance practically impossible? What are the implications of resistance for a mother whose children are being threatened by an abuser and who rightly feels a burden of responsibility for them? These are very difficult topics which require great care and consideration.

One approach to answering the question is to consider: is there any instance in Scripture where compliance with or resignation to oppression or abuse is commended? One example immediately arises: the commanded response of Judah to the Babylonian exile (Jer 29). However, the Jews were explicitly commanded to cooperate with the exile because the Babylonians were accomplishing God’s judgment against them, even if they did so sinfully and imperfectly (Rev 18). Apart from this situation, I cannot find a single instance in the scriptural narrative where either cooperation with or resignation to abuse is approved or commended.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Two didactic passages in the NT could be used to argue for resignation to abuse: Matt 5:38–42 (turn the other cheek) and 1 Pet 2:18–25 (servants unjustly beaten). These passages can be read as calls to pacifistic resignation. However, that is an oversimplification of Jesus’s and Peter’s arguments. Jesus instructed against personal vengeance, but he was not advocating quiet resignation (John 18:22–23). See also Chris Moles’s argument for “peaceful resistance.” Chris Moles, “Resisting Abuse and Matthew Chapter 5,” Chris Moles, February 25, 2018, <http://www.chrismoles.org/news/2018/2/25/resisting-abuse-and-matthew-chapter-5>. Peter assumed that the slave (in this instance) was in an inescapable situation and must therefore navigate his suffering in a God-honoring way. Elsewhere, slaves are commanded to seek their freedom (1 Cor 7:21).

One OT passage that appears to be questionable is Gen 16:1–16. As Sarai gives Hagar to Abram, and she bears a son, a conflict arises between the two women. Abram is passive throughout and allows Sarai to “deal harshly” (v. 6) with her servant. Hagar flees, only to meet the angel of the LORD who directs her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her,” (v. 9) promising her the blessing of innumerable descendants for obedience. Two comments are apropos: (1) “dealt harshly” may (R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004], 239–41) or may not (John Calvin, *Genesis*, trans. and ed. John King, Geneva Series of Commentaries [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth,

Another factor to consider concerns other responses in Scripture to potential abuse or oppression, such as, David acting like a madman to escape the Philistines (1 Sam 21:10–15), the Hebrew midwives lying to Pharaoh in order to save infant boys (Exod 1:15–22), and Rahab lying to the king of Jericho to save the Hebrew spies and ultimately her entire family (Josh 2). In each of these scenarios, the person(s) who practiced deception in order to save innocent lives is commended. Their actions are viewed as honorable in Scripture.⁷⁸

Besides the examples listed above, there are many other instances where God's people fight back or otherwise resist in the face of abusive treatment. Abram fought a battle to rescue his nephew Lot from his kidnappers (Gen 14). Jesus was not passive or pacifistic in response to abusive threats (Luke 4:28–30). Paul escaped his persecutors through trickery in one instance (Acts 9:23–25),⁷⁹ and publicly humiliated them in another (Acts 16:35–40). Other examples could be supplied, but the point is clear.

One other category should be adduced: patient wisdom. Jesus did not call his disciples to revolt against Rome, even though there were certainly tyrannical elements in Roman rule. Yet Christianity did successfully displace the gods of Rome through a process of centuries.⁸⁰ Similarly, the NT commands slaves to serve their masters well in all things even if they are mistreated (1 Pet 2:18ff.). It also, and simultaneously, commands them to avail themselves of the opportunity for freedom, if at all possible (1

2000], 429–30) denote abuse and there is room for disagreement; (2) the promise of blessing also implies a promise of protection. The second factor is most important for the duty of resistance: Hagar had a clear and specific divine command to return to a situation where she had been mistreated but would now be blessed. She was not commanded to return to be abused.

⁷⁸ See Jochem Douma on the *mendacium officiosum*. Jochem Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1996), 325–31. For a somewhat different reading, see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), esp. chap. 6, “The Sanctity of Truth.”

⁷⁹ I am indebted to Robert Jones for this illustration.

⁸⁰ Constantine made Christianity licit with the Edict of Milan in AD 313. Later that century Theodosius established Christianity as the official religion of the Empire in AD 380.

Cor 7:21). The gospel itself produced a societal transformation that has led to the abolishment of slavery everywhere Christianity has spread. Peter also commands wives to work to win their disobedient husbands through “respectful and pure conduct” even in the face of a frightening situation (1 Pet 3:1–7).⁸¹ Their godliness under duress is “very precious” in God’s sight (3:4).

Abigail. Scripture also provides a sterling example of godly resistance to unrighteous domestic authority: Abigail (1 Sam 25). Though an extended treatment of this important story is not possible, a brief survey will reveal the value of her comportment. First, the text is very clear that her husband, Nabal, is a worthless man (25:3, 17, 25). He is the epitome of a selfish, boorish figure who looks out only for his own interests. Second, David had looked out for Nabal’s flocks and was entitled to some recompense, both as payment and, perhaps, as hospitality.⁸² Nabal’s servants affirmed as much (25:15–16). Third, Nabal’s refusal was offensive and contemptuous, accusing David of rebellion and insubordination (25:10). Fourth, David’s anger—while understandable—leads him to an unrighteous response: he vows to kill Nabal and all the males of his household as well (25:22).

It is just then that Abigail appears on the scene. She is the very opposite of her husband: beautiful, discerning, and godly. When she is told of the unfolding situation, she rightly discerns that not only her husband, but her entire household, is threatened.

⁸¹ Peter’s command has certainly been both misused and maligned. His is no call to quietism, fatalism, or passivity. The wife is very active under Peter’s program: she evaluates her husband’s behavior (he is disobeying the Word), has a vision for change, and works to bring about his change through her respectful, pure, and faith-filled behavior. Further, Peter’s commands are not unconditional—there is certainly a time to resist and report, as the ensuing section should make clear.

⁸² M. J. Selman claims, “Throughout Scripture, the responsibility of caring for the traveller and those in need is largely taken for granted. . . . Failure to provide for the traveller’s needs was a serious offense, liable to punishment by God (Dt. 23:3–4) and man (1 Sa. 25:2–38; Jdg. 8:5–17).” M. J. Selman, “Hospitality,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall et al., 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 484–85. John L. Mackay notes, “David is merely asking for reciprocity since his men have ensured that Nabal’s flocks have not been depleted by Philistines or marauding dessert tribes.” John L. Mackay, *1–2 Samuel*, in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 3, *1 Samuel–2 Chronicles*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 245.

Therefore, she uses her authority to circumvent the express commands of her husband.⁸³ Where he commanded that no goods be given to David, she quickly arranges a small feast (25:18). Where he was dismissive and arrogant, she approaches David humbly and takes responsibility for her husband's folly, even while she pronounces him to be worthless (25:24–25). Remarkably, she also respectfully and artfully urges David to avoid shedding blood wrongly.⁸⁴ The character of David is then revealed by his response. He is persuaded by Abigail and relents from his planned revenge, praising her for her role in redirecting him (25:32–35).

The story concludes with Abigail skillfully revealing to Nabal the disaster that she had averted, the realization of which produces a fatal illness within him (25:36–38). After he dies, David takes Abigail as his wife, thus producing a remarkable, redemptive turn in her life (25:39–42). She is, then, one of the more commendable and godly women in the entire OT. Her example is a very helpful illustration of how someone who is in a physically and/or socially weaker position can successfully resist an oppressive authority—and in her case, do so while working with another authority who is himself bent on evil—in a manner that honors the Lord and works for the good of everyone involved. There is no guarantee that everyone who follows her example will experience similar results, but the path forward is clear.

⁸³ It is at this point that Abigail is operating similarly to the lesser magistrate in Protestant resistance theory. She has real, though subordinate, authority in her household. The unrighteousness of her husband's commands does not generate a duty of obedience for her. Further, her responsibility to her household means that she has a duty of protection for them (as outlined above). Therefore, her actions—disobedience, from Nabal's perspective—are righteous, loving, and faithful. See my discussion of Gouge, above (p. 27ff.).

⁸⁴ Ken Sande cites this passage as an example of an inferior interacting with the problematic behavior of a superior by offering “a creative alternative that will accomplish the same end (assuming it is a proper one) but do it in a biblical and efficient manner.” Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 124. I am indebted to Robert D. Jones for this reference, though I do not read the text in the same manner as Sande. It appears to me that Abigail dissuades David from a sinful end by reminding him—quite skillfully—of his obligation to obey the Lord and to entrust vengeance into his hands.

Conclusions on compulsion. I close this section with several conclusions.

First, the positive example of Scripture testifies to a duty of resistance for those suffering abuse or oppression. Some situations offer a clearer path than others, but the general pattern is clear: abuse should be resisted if at all possible. Second, the Bible nowhere commends or celebrates compromise with or resignation to an abusive situation. Some situations may be inescapable, and therefore require great endurance and patience, but faith does not compromise or resign itself.⁸⁵ Faith names evil as such, even as it continues looking to the Lord for salvation and seeks to obey him at all times.⁸⁶ Third, those situations that offer the greatest disparity in power (child-adult, slave-master, citizen-tyrant) also require the greatest patience and wisdom in engagement. Deception and misdirection may be the best path in the short-term as longer-term solutions are pursued (Exod 1:15–22; Josh 2:1–7; 1 Sam 21:12–15). One may spend a lifetime in an abusive situation without escape. If that is the Lord’s providence, he will provide the grace needed to endure in such a desperate situation.⁸⁷

Though it might easily be done, nothing I have written should be interpreted or utilized to condemn those struggling with how to resist in the midst of an abusive

⁸⁵ Sadly, when Moses came to the Israelites with the promise of an exodus, they responded poorly: “Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery” (Exod 6:9). We should have compassion and understanding for persons suffering under pronounced oppression, and we should also continue to call them to faith in the good God whose ways are good and true and whose promises never fail. Genuine care gives no quarter to unbelief, in part because unbelief devours hope and demeans God.

T. Desmond Alexander translates the two enervating conditions as “despondency and heavy servitude,” noting that “the final two expressions in v. 9 probably both refer to the impact the Egyptians have had on the Israelites. It is possible, however, that the people were impatient with Moses, since his confrontation with Pharaoh has added to their labour.” T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary 2* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2017), 129.

⁸⁶ Many scriptural stories and instructions commend such a path (Israel in Egypt [Exod 2:23–25; 6:5–8]; Dan 3:8–30; Rom 12:17–21; 1 Pet 2:15–3:6).

⁸⁷ These concepts could easily sound dismissive or trite, but the biblical perspective is both resolute and absolute. A brief survey of both Scripture and church history reveals that the Lord has indeed ordained that some of his children must endure extended seasons of considerable suffering and torment. In the face of such evidence, one has only two options: (1) deny the sovereign providence of God (and thus silence the Scriptures and cut off all grounds for hope); or (2) affirm his providence and consider deeply what it means to affirm his goodness in the midst of crushing circumstances. Sentimental faith will not survive in times of trial.

situation. A dissertation is not a pastoral manual. The primary purpose of this section is to encourage those suffering abuse that their resistance is good and right, and to encourage the church to teach strongly on this topic. It is good and right to resist abuse, and our children need to be taught as much. Further, it may be sinful not to resist abuse, a point Luther and Gouge made above.⁸⁸ At the end of the day, our ultimate allegiance to the Lord conditions everything else about us, helping us to submit to due authorities, and to identify and resist tyranny and oppression in whatever forms.

Pronounced

Abuse is pronounced: it is mistreatment at a high level, whether in its duration or intensity or both. The difference between more ordinary, sinful mistreatment and abuse is determined, in part, by the extent of the harm inflicted on the other. For an act to be abusive the effect must be pronounced. This is essentially a matter of common sense and propriety. Anyone who applies the term *abuse* to light mistreatment is either attempting to jest or being melodramatic or manipulative. Everyone recognizes that abuse is a term best reserved for serious mistreatment. One ought not to trivialize a term that offers such rhetorical potency, lest that force be lost through casual familiarity.

In order for mistreatment to qualify as pronounced, several factors may be considered sufficient. A one-time action such as rape or murder certainly qualifies given the severity of the violation. These are wrongdoing at a pronounced level. Other categories are not as simple to evaluate. Physical abuse as a category may potentially include a broad range of behaviors, ranging from physical intimidation (cornering/trapping, towering over, threatening gestures and words) up to severe

⁸⁸ See chapter 1, footnotes 50 and 82.

beating.⁸⁹ One can imagine how a wife who is regularly threatened by her larger husband may feel cowed into surrender, even if he never lays a hand on her.

Yet one might imagine a scenario where a couple is in conflict and the wife repeatedly walks away. The husband grows increasingly frustrated at their inability to resolve the conflict, so he follows his wife into the bedroom to try to talk. His presence in the doorway is an impediment to her easily leaving the room. She feels trapped. He may not be intending to trap her, but the presence of abuse in her past—or even just a pacifistic theology that views all conflict as a danger to be avoided at all costs—might lead her to interpret his presence as intimidation. Does this scenario qualify as abuse?

This hypothetical scenario demonstrates several challenges. A subjective element in evaluating abuse is inescapable. Differing past experiences, differing sensitivities to mistreatment, and differing evaluations concerning the gravity of various acts will likely continue until the time of the *parousia*. It will not be possible to produce a thick black line that separates abuse from mistreatment, crafting neat, hermetically sealed compartments. However, the definition being proposed here does offer help in evaluation. It also allows for the identification of categorical gradations. For example, the question of intent is significant: does the husband intend to intimidate his wife? Is he selfishly seeking to finish the argument? Or does he carry a right concern about unresolved conflict and so is seeking (even, perhaps, somewhat inconsiderately) to achieve relational peace? Further, what is the wife's perception of her husband's intention? How do a husband and wife love one another when their perceptions of each other's intentions may differ significantly?⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Threatening behaviors are not abusive in and of themselves. However, included as part of broader patterns or alongside other categories, they may indeed be part of the “package” that is properly labeled as abuse. Further, a threat made after a similar act has already been performed is quite different from a threat that has not been realized.

⁹⁰ See Robert D. Jones, *Pursuing Peace: A Christian Guide to Handling Our Conflicts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

One might imagine a different scenario. Every day when a young boy returns home from school, he is told by his mother that he is worthless and ungrateful. She eagerly looks for ways that she can express her disappointment, whether over his report card, his torn jeans from recess, or his failure to remember to bring home a note from his teacher. As the years go by her bitterness and critique only intensify. Her son increasingly avoids her and begins lying to her in order to try to minimize her opportunities for critique. Hurt by his distancing, his mother ramps up the rhetoric, growing even more demanding and resentful. Does this scenario qualify as abuse?

The ongoing conflict in this home is certainly pronounced, especially as concerns its continual, day-after-day quality. The young boy is certainly being mistreated, at an increasing level, and the cumulative effect of weeks and months and years of the same does appear to be pronounced. If the reader is inclined to agree with that assessment, at what point did it cross the line from mistreatment to abuse? That is an exceedingly difficult question to answer, and in one sense, it does not matter. The label applied is less important than understanding the dynamics involved so that care and consequences can be applied appropriately to each person in the situation. In another sense, the label does indeed matter as the stigma attached—to say nothing of potential legal consequences—may have a significant effect on everyone involved going forward.

In the ESV, the term oppress(-ion) is only utilized for situations of pronounced suffering or wrongdoing.⁹¹ It is important that we do the same, both in our own thinking and in our counseling and care for others. Jesus affirmed degrees of sin in a very straightforward manner: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone

⁹¹ Laban warns Jacob not to oppress his daughters (Gen 31:50). The suffering of the Israelites in Egypt is labeled oppression (Exod 3:9; 22:21; 23:9) and harsh (Num 20:14; Deut 26:6). Failing to pay a hired worker is oppression (Lev 19:13; 24:14; cf. Isa 58:3). Job likens his personal suffering to oppression (10:3). The fate of Judah suffering societal breakdown under God’s judgment is designated as oppression (Isa 3:5). These situations are not all of equal gravity, but they are in the same general strata of pronounced suffering.

who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matt 5:21–22; cf. Ezek 5:6; 8:15; Matt 7:3; 11:21; Luke 12:48; John 19:11).⁹² By reserving the term for situations of pronounced harm, we can engage with it responsibly and seek to ensure that genuine cases of abuse receive the attention and care they require and deserve.⁹³

Detriment

Abuse is detrimental: it causes objective harm or injury to those who endure it.

The detrimental nature of abuse is simultaneously the most objective and the most subjective aspect of it. The *OED* defines *harm* as “evil (physical or otherwise) as done to or suffered by some person or thing; hurt, injury, damage, mischief.”⁹⁴ Objectively, *that* abuse is harmful is universally acknowledged. Further, the harms associated with abuse may be horrific or unspeakable and thus incur and deserve our harshest condemnation. Though much that passes for indignation in our society is unrighteous, with abuse we find ground for righteous indignation indeed.

Subjectively, however, *what* is labeled as detrimental and abusive may be the source of considerable debate. The LGBTQ+ lobby has successfully labeled any opposition to their program as hateful and bigoted and liable to lead to self-harm or even suicide when directed against those who so identify.⁹⁵ Similarly, a church member who

⁹² See also Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:113–14.

⁹³ See the discussion between Jay Adams and John F. Bettler. Jay E. Adams, “What about Emotional Abuse?,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 8, no. 3 (1987): 1–10; John F. Bettler, “Biblical Counseling: The Next Generation,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 8, no. 4 (1987): 3–10; Jay E. Adams, “A Reply to the Response,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9, no. 1 (1987): 1–4. These articles show how some of these issues were debated in the early days of the Biblical Counseling movement.

⁹⁴ *OED*, 6:1121.

⁹⁵ This is especially the triumph of the Q: Queer (Theory), which specializes in deconstructing “normal” in an attempt to eradicate it. Therefore, no moral judgments are to be passed against any sexual behavior. The only acceptable response is to embrace and affirm. See Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay,

receives unwanted pastoral admonition or a teen being kept from her heart's desire by a parent are quite likely to be labeled as situations of abuse in our day.⁹⁶ Thus, thinking clearly and biblically about the detrimental nature of abuse is essential.

In a discussion on “the gravity or lightness of sin,” Bavinck seeks to provide categories for assessing sin. He identifies five determinative elements, which can serve to begin our discussion on how abuse causes objective harm:

1. according to the *subject*, depending on the extent of knowledge, the firmness of the will, etc. (Hosea 4:14; Luke 12:48; Heb 10:26; John 15:22);
2. according to the *object*, whether it is a sin committed immediately against God or against the neighbor (and, furthermore, whether it is committed against the authorities, parents, etc.);
3. according to the *nature of the sin*: in general, murder is a greater sin than theft and spiritual sins greater than sensual ones, etc.;
4. according to the *principle of intentionality*, whether a sin proceeds from anger, from weakness, from ignorance etc.;
5. according to the *circumstances*: according to Proverbs 6:30, stealing in circumstances of poverty mitigates the sin. . . .

. . . The same sinfulness exists in every sin. Nonetheless, there is a distinction; for instance, whoever lusts after a woman or desires someone's death has committed adultery or murder. Yet this is not the same as if someone had carried them out in actuality. As long as the sin resides in the mind and is not carried out in word and deed, there is still fear, shame, and reticence before God and his law, and there is still a restraint, a rein, a dam. Words are therefore worse than thoughts, and deeds worse than words.⁹⁷

These categories serve primarily as a means to identify and evaluate the motive and blameworthiness of the abuser. Since abuse is both selfish and compulsive, as discussed above, it is safe to say that it would rate as highly sinful in each of these categories.

Secondarily, however, we can utilize these categories in assessing the potential harm to the abused. As regards *subject*, the more familiar the acquaintance the greater the potential harm. This is so especially because of the added layer of betrayal involved in

Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020), esp. chap. 4, “Queer Theory.”

⁹⁶ As a pastor I have witnessed all the above scenarios, and more.

⁹⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:114–15.

the abuse (and the closer the relation, the greater the betrayal).⁹⁸ As regards *object*, the more personally one is targeted, the greater the potential harm. This is so because collateral damage is generally lesser than intentional. If an abuser is focused on rebellion against God, then human victims are less central. But to be the direct object of the abuser increases the likely harm. As regards *nature*, the greater the degree of sin, the greater the potential harm. This category is obvious but, to illustrate, a beating is less harmful than a murder. As regards *intention*, the more selfish (as discussed above), the greater the potential harm. As selfishness increases, love and consideration for the victim decrease, leading the abuser to perform more harmful actions.⁹⁹ As regards *circumstances*, the more compulsory (as also discussed above), the greater the potential harm. The abuser compels in order to override the victim's resistance, thus performing even more harmful acts that may elicit even greater resistance, but to no avail.

In considering objective harm upon the abused, some scenarios are simpler to evaluate than others. A situation of physical abuse generally leaves tangible evidence: bruises, broken bones, and the like. Sexual abuse can produce similar physical effects and evidence upon the body. These harms are both objectively measurable and verifiable. Governmental tyranny most often has tangible results as well, such as loss of livelihood, imprisonment, or loss of life.¹⁰⁰ However, other types of harm are far more difficult to evaluate and often more subjective as well. In an effort to provide conceptual clarity, I will examine the category of emotional harm.

⁹⁸ See my discussion of Gouge, above (p. 25).

⁹⁹ The OT categories of "unintentional sin" and "sin with a high hand" operate in accordance with this principle. The penalty and/or atonement for a sin was settled according to the degree of intentionality behind the sin. Motives matter (cf. Lev 4:1–5:13; Num 15:22–31).

¹⁰⁰ Moses is an example of fidelity in just such a situation. For example, see Heb 11:26: "He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward."

When suffering through a broken relationship, much of the sting comes from the value that was previously attached to the relationship. The loss of a preferred dry cleaner is unlikely to cause duress, but the breakup of a marriage is profoundly harmful and disruptive. As Bavinck wrote,

There are many unhappy marriages, more than we might suppose or know. There are people by the thousands bound to each other for life who are more a curse than a blessing to one another, and who in their marriages are already living a hell on earth. When the best gets corrupted, it becomes the worst; love that wanes becomes hatred, and affection that dissipates gives way to aversion. When marriage loses its delight, it turns into unbearable drudgery.¹⁰¹

When drudgery gives way to divorce, there are many negative emotions that might arise: grief, anger, and embarrassment are illustrative. If one party is clearly guilty and at fault, such as an adulterous and unrepentant wife, then can we say that she has emotionally harmed her husband? Has she caused him to undergo suffering? The answer appears to be clearly yes, as he has lost his marriage and his companion and thus has had “an evil done to him.” Whether or not his wife fully considered and intended the suffering, her actions made it unavoidable.

Further, it is righteous before God for the wronged husband to grieve the loss of his marriage and it would be wrong not to do so. Grief is the sad, but appropriate, response to this kind of suffering in a sin-besotted world. No one can force someone else to experience any given emotion, but certain emotions are part of a “correct,” righteous, God-glorifying response to various behaviors.¹⁰² So to label this suffering as *emotional harm* seems to be appropriate.¹⁰³ One’s emotions are God-given response systems designed to register and materialize our evaluations of life in this world. As J. Alasdair

¹⁰¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library, 2012), 75.

¹⁰² In Rom 12:9, we are commanded to “abhor what is evil” (*apostygountes to poneæron*); see Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 22. Throughout Scripture the Lord commands our emotions (rejoice, weep, love, praise, etc). Therefore, there are correct and appropriate emotions whose absence would be properly considered disobedience.

¹⁰³ I will consider the question of emotional and other types of abuse below.

Groves and Winston T. Smith write, “Your emotions are always expressing the things you love, value, and treasure, whether you understand them or not.”¹⁰⁴ They serve as external indicators of hidden realities, helping us to express and assess the internal value system of the human heart.

So, the husband who is experiencing the negative emotion of grief is experiencing a harmful emotion.¹⁰⁵ He is suffering. His emotions are registering and responding to the relational harm he is experiencing in the breakup of his marriage.¹⁰⁶ His grief is not pleasant, to be sure, but again: is it *harmful* to experience grief? That appears to be the core question. And the answer is *yes* because grief only exists in a fallen world. It is not the way things are supposed to be.¹⁰⁷ If there were no sin, there would be no grief. Grief is always the result of sin in some manner.¹⁰⁸

Two other notes are important here. First, in using the language of having correct or appropriate emotions, I am not indicating that we can make someone experience any emotion in the sense of them being entirely involuntary and passive in the

¹⁰⁴ J. Alasdair Groves and Winston T. Smith, *Untangling Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 35.

¹⁰⁵ A standard legal definition of harm is “injury, loss, damage; material or tangible detriment.” Bryan A. Garner, ed., *Black’s Legal Dictionary*, 6th pocket ed. (St. Paul, MN: West, 2021), 375. To classify an emotion as harmful is to recognize that persons are embodied souls and that emotions are part of our God-given response system to events in this world. Grief is a negative but necessary response to loss.

¹⁰⁶ Of course, there may be other harms as well: financial, reputational, other familial relations, vocational implications, etc.

¹⁰⁷ Saul’s words to Jonathan are a less extreme example of emotional harm, and his actions are a more extreme example of attempted physical harm (1 Sam 20:30–34). Saul curses Jonathan (through his mother). Jonathan stands up for righteous David, and Saul attempts filicide in response. Jonathan leaves “in fierce anger and ate no food . . . for he was grieved for David.” Jonathan is the humble, faithful foil to Saul’s selfish unfaithfulness. Jonathan’s anger and grief are presented as the righteous responses to his father’s unrighteous attitude and actions. Scripture seems to approve of these responses from Jonathan. However, they are harmful. A righteous son behaving righteously should not have to experience the treatment that Jonathan received from Saul.

¹⁰⁸ I am not saying it is sinful to grieve—quite the opposite. At the very least, grief comes after death and death only exists because sin entered the world. In an unfallen world, there would be no loss, and thus nothing to grieve (Rev 21:4). So, the person who is grieving properly is only doing so because sin has had its way in the world. The glory of the new heavens and new earth includes the abolishment of such things (Rev 21:3–4). I am using “harm” in the sense of “an evil done or sustained; an injury, a loss” (*OED*, 6:1121). The negative emotion of grief, “a feeling of offence; displeasure, anger” (*OED*, 6:834), is the registration and manifestation of the loss sustained through some harm, for example, the death of a loved one.

response process. Rather, I am referring to a given emotion as being the fitting and righteous response to a certain situation. So, if a man's wife dies, grief is the appropriate response, and it would be wrong for a widower not to grieve. Faithful grief occurs within a context of enduring hope (1 Thess 4:13) and produces comfort and growth for the Christian (2 Cor 1:3–7). But grief is a negative emotion, its experience is unpleasant, and it is harmful to have to endure it (to say nothing of the harm that occasioned the grief in the first place).

Second, and most importantly, the propriety of a given emotion is determined by God alone. The mere presence of a negative emotion is not enough. Because emotions are indicators of our interpretations of life, a given negative emotion may merely reflect that we are badly and willfully misinterpreting a situation out of pride, self-pity, bitterness, or the like. The category of emotional harm is not a license for sinful responses because someone “hurt my feelings.” Rather, it is a recognition that emotions are part of our God-given response system in his world, that various emotions are part of the appropriate and righteousness responses to various situations in this world, and that the experience of some emotions is indeed harmful in the sense of being part of our suffering in this age. Therefore, there is a legitimate, though limited, sense in which we might properly speak of emotional harm, and that sense is defined by God's objective standard of righteousness.

On a related note, Pierre and Wilson catalog “some common false stories that abuse can write in a person”¹⁰⁹ and then identify “common unhelpful behaviors that abuse can condition a person to do.”¹¹⁰ As a record—born of real-world counseling

¹⁰⁹ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 55–58. They list five: “*I am not a victim since this is not really abusive. . . . I am not a victim since I deserve this. . . . I am not a victim. I am a sinner. . . . I am a victim and will always be. . . . I am nothing but a victim.*”

¹¹⁰ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 59–62. Again they list five: “*A victim of abuse may withdraw. . . . A victim of abuse often spends a great deal of her time and mental energy trying to adjust to the abuser's often unpredictable patterns of behavior. This is exhausting. . . . A victim of abuse may be*

experience—of the heart-breaking effects of abuse, these lists are truly grievous. These ten categories capture a great deal of suffering and ought to elicit our sincere pity and compassion. However, Pierre and Wilson then deliver a significant assessment of agency in conclusion: “Under no circumstances should you attribute any of these effects of abuse to the victim herself or her personal sin . . . If it is an effect of the abuse, then it is suffering, not sin.”¹¹¹

They are concerned that we not “be like Job’s ‘worthless healers’” (Job 13:1–5). That is certainly a legitimate concern and one we must take to heart. However, the error of Job’s counselors was in assuming and assigning sin to his life because of the suffering he was enduring. They had not identified actual sin in his previous behavior or responses but assumed the presence of sin because of the losses he endured. They were effectively operating out of a moralistic, Prosperity Gospel mentality.¹¹² Inasmuch as a counselor simply attributes a victim’s suffering to personal sin, that is indeed profoundly unhelpful and unjust. One of the primary critiques of modern Biblical Counseling has been that it can be perceived to—if not actually—operate under just such a perspective.¹¹³ However, wise biblical counsel is able to hold together the various strands of the person,

hypervigilant. . . . A victim of abuse may try to out-love, out-loyal, and out-last the abuse. . . . A victim of abuse may seem to turn against those who try to help her.”

¹¹¹ Pierre and Wilson, *When Home Hurts*, 62. Strickland offers a similar argument in a section entitled, “Blaming the Victim.” She notes helpfully that, like Job, victims may sin, but that does not “make them directly culpable for” their sufferings. But then she argues, “We forget that they are enslaved—they are not free. . . . We think that victims have choices, but we fail to understand the fallout that results when they make them. . . . Our attention needs to stay focused on what is *happening* to them.” Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 84–94.

¹¹² Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014). Ash identifies four points to the friends’ theology: “1. God is absolutely in control . . . 2. God is absolutely just and fair. 3. *Therefore*, he always punishes wickedness and blesses righteousness . . . If he were ever to do otherwise, he would necessarily be unjust, which is inconceivable. 4. *Therefore*, if I suffer I *must* have sinned and am being punished justly for my sin” (90).

¹¹³ One interesting line of development here has been the increased attention given to the role of suffering, as well as of motives, in more recent generations of biblical counseling. David Powlison discussed the need for these developments in David Powlison, “Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9, no. 3 (1988): 53–78. See also Heath Lambert, “The Theological Development of the Biblical Counseling Movement from 1988” (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009).

her situation, and her responses in order to prioritize well and make sound gospel application. Faith in God is always the target, though counsel may focus on suffering more than sin in any given moment as most beneficial to the counselee and most glorifying to God.

However, unless I am misunderstanding their intent, Pierre and Wilson appear to be absolving the victim of moral responsibility for any of her responses by labeling them as “effects of abuse.” It appears to be a kind of antinomianism¹¹⁴ that reduces—or even eliminates altogether—the ethical responsibility for a victim in the face of great suffering. I am not saying that the victim is to blame for her suffering, but I am saying that she is responsible before God for how she responds, which must ultimately be righteously and in faith.

It would be better to integrate both categories in response to a victim, with a clear priority on care and compassion for the suffering.¹¹⁵ Unless the sinful response is pronounced and dangerous, a counselor should be inclined to overlook sin and focus on caring for the suffering victim. However, we do not offer holistic care for a victim if we absolve her of moral responsibility in how she interprets and responds to her sufferings. Sinful responses to pronounced suffering are both common and understandable, but they are never justifiable. Inasmuch as she is sinning in response to her sufferings, she is walking in unbelief and pride and missing out on the grace and mercy that can be hers in Jesus Christ. Much as in any human interaction, we may choose to overlook certain sins unequivocally, other sins may be tabled for future address, and some sins require

¹¹⁴ Voddie Baucham coined the phrase “ethnic antinomianism” to refer to the unequal weights and measures utilized in CRT in excusing the sins of minorities because of the assumed oppression of the majority. It is related to “ethnic gnosticism . . . the idea that people have special knowledge based solely on their ethnicity.” Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Salem, 2021), 91–92. There is some conceptual overlap here in the argument that the oppression of the abuse victim offers a similar outcome. I will discuss these topics in greater detail in chapter 3.

¹¹⁵ See David Powlison, *How Does Sanctification Work?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 33–43.

immediate engagement. The counselor needs wisdom and patience in knowing when and how to address such things, but we should seek to maintain biblical clarity throughout so that we can offer whatever truth is needful and helpful at any given moment.¹¹⁶

Of Another

Abuse affects another: the abuser seeks to achieve his ends by taking something from others. Others bear the cost of his project of oppression. As mentioned above, abuse is always an interpersonal phenomenon. Someone is always suffering in situations involving abuse. More than that, abuse is most often a multi-personal phenomenon. The collateral damage of abuse can be quite significant, both synchronically (other family members, close relations, etc.) and diachronically (generationally modeled behaviors).

To say that abuse is interpersonal is not to deny the category of self-harm. Indeed, they are often related, as persons who harm themselves through cutting and the like, or who experience suicidal ideation, have often suffered some manner of abuse in their pasts.¹¹⁷ But while treating oneself in such a manner is certainly a misuse of our God-given capacities and can indeed cause profound detriment, it seems best to reserve the term *abuse* for interpersonal behavior because of the element of compulsion. One cannot compel oneself to do something against one's will.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ The story of Job is illustrative here as well. Job's counselors are mostly unhelpful, and the Lord's anger burned against them at the end (42:7). Job himself had also been in the wrong in some ways and was rebuked at various points by Elihu (chaps. 35–37) and the Lord himself (chaps. 38–41). Yet in the end, it is Job who is called upon to intercede for them (42:8) and is twice affirmed as having “spoken of me what is right.” Job's sin was not excused even though his suffering was immense. Yet, he is declared to be in the right with God. James even identifies him as the object of the Lord's compassion and mercy (Jas 5:10–11).

¹¹⁷ See Svein Mossige et al., “Suicidal Ideation and Self-harm among Youths in Norway: Associations with Verbal, Physical and Sexual Abuse,” *Child and Family Social Work* 21, no. 2 (May 2016): 166–75; Kathleen Green and Anthony Webster, “The Relationships Between Childhood Abuse and Neglect, Sub-clinical Symptoms of Psychosis and Self-harm in a Non-clinical Community Sample,” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma* 15, no 3 (November 2022): 605–14; and Elise Paul and Ana Ortin, “Correlates of Suicidal Ideation and Self-harm in Early Childhood in a Cohort at Risk for Child Abuse and Neglect,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 23, no. 1 (January 2019): 134–50.

¹¹⁸ This is not to say that one cannot feel a “compulsion” in the psychological sense, which can cause pain when refraining from something. Nor does this deny the presence of inner turmoil in things we may say or do every day, like Paul in Rom 7. However, this affirms what the Bible teaches

Utilizing the terminology of “another” is helpful in identifying another aspect of abuse: the tendency to depersonalize the victim. The degree of selfishness that is necessary to abuse another person requires one to depersonalize the victim to some extent. She becomes less than a real person, instead being treated as an object or a means to an end. She is *other*, less than human. One finds a similar phenomenon in warfare, when the enemy is depersonalized as a step toward being able to kill a foe in battle.¹¹⁹

The corollary to this principle is that part of caring for a repentant abuser is in helping him to understand and affirm the reality of the person(s) he abused. The difference between “worldly sorrow” and “godly sorrow” (2 Cor 7:7–11) is the “vertical” element of the sinner before God. Does he recognize his offense against the Lord (Ps 51:4), and is he repenting of that? Or is he merely mourning the “horizontal” effects of his sin: damaged relationships, financial loss, reputational harm, and/or other unpleasant consequences?¹²⁰ If he is to truly repent, understand, and affirm the nature of his transgression, part of that process will require seeing his victim as God sees her: a precious daughter, created in his image,¹²¹ and greatly harmed by someone who should have loved and protected her.

David and Bathsheba

We come now to the story of David and Bathsheba, and we can apply the categories above in an attempt to answer the question: *was it rape?* In abuse discussions today, how one answers this question is often indicative of the framework that one

anthropologically, that we always do what we most want to do (e.g., Luke 6:45). Therefore, behavior reveals values.

¹¹⁹ One thinks of WWII when Germans—my ethnic background—were labeled “krauts” by the Allies, obviously referencing the idea that Germans stereotypically ate sauerkraut. It is certainly far from the most offensive label applied to an enemy in warfare, but it is a depersonalizing one.

¹²⁰ For an excellent discussion of faith and repentance in this regard, see Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

¹²¹ See Gen 9:6 and Jas 3:9 as examples of how Scripture reveals the sinfulness of sin by highlighting that it occurs against image bearers.

utilizes for the topic of abuse. We begin by gathering the arguments of those who indicate that it was indeed rape.¹²² While not every proponent of this view affirms all these factors, three in particular are most commonly utilized for the affirmative position: the presence of power differentials, the choice of terms in the narrative, and the nature of Nathan's rebuke.¹²³

The first category of *power differentials* (or *power dynamics*) asserts that the great disparity between David and Bathsheba would make her consent impossible in a sexual relationship.¹²⁴ Because David is king, Bathsheba would have no other choice but to obey when he summoned her, lest she lose her life.¹²⁵ Langberg proposes a similar understanding of consent as quoted above and reproduced here:

When we are talking about adults, it is important to understand what makes something consensual. First, in order to consent, one must have the capacity to choose. If you are anesthetized in a hospital bed, you obviously do not have that capacity. The intoxicated young woman in a previous chapter did not have the

¹²² Richard M. Davidson, "Did King David Rape Bathsheba? A Case Study in Narrative Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 81–95, offers perhaps the fullest defense of this view. He posits "eighteen lines of evidence that have convinced me—contrary to the common interpretation implicating Bathsheba—that Bathsheba was a victim of 'power rape' on the part of David" (82). David G. Firth finds both camps to be missing the point and argues that textual ambiguities are meant to teach a different lesson: "There was one dominant sin, an attack on Uriah that had two parts, a sexual relationship with his wife and then his murder. But the two are one, and that one thing was evil." David G. Firth, "David and Uriah (With an Occasional Appearance by Uriah's Wife)—Reading and Re-Reading 2 Samuel 11," *Old Testament Essays* 21, no. 2 (January 2008): 326.

¹²³ Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili takes somewhat of a mediating position, arguing that David's sin does not fit the Hebrew concept of rape: "'The physical' use of power by a man in overpowering a woman into non-consensual sexual intercourse." Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, "Was It Rape? The David and Bathsheba Pericope Re-examined," *Vetus Testamentum* 61, no. 1 (January 2011): 6. He recognizes that the contemporary conception is much broader, referencing violation "physically, psychologically, and/or emotionally through the commission of a non-consensual sexual act," while also involving "domination, force and/or violence" (4). Therefore, 2 Sam 11 does not meet the biblical definition of rape, but whether it meets the contemporary definition "is an open question" (15).

¹²⁴ Erin Moniz claims that "to read Bathsheba's story faithfully, we need to understand power dynamics." Erin Moniz, "A Tale of Two Rapes: What Tamar and Bathsheba Teach Us about Power, Consent, and Sexual Violence," *Mutuality* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 21.

¹²⁵ At the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission's Caring Well Conference in 2019, Rachael Denhollander argued, "David didn't fornicate. David raped. And if you understand the power dynamics and you understand the Hebrew and you look at the Levitical examples and discussion of rape and you understand what Nathan is saying in his parable it is *abundantly* clear from that text that David raped." Russell Moore and Rachael Denhollander, "What Is a Girl Worth? A Conversation with Rachael Denhollander and Russell Moore on the Church's Abuse Crisis," Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, October 5, 2019, Vimeo video, 34:50, <https://vimeo.com/365072432>. The quoted comments begin at the 17:38 mark.

capacity to choose. If your whole self has been anesthetized by years of sexual abuse, battering, verbal tirades, or drugs or alcohol, you do not have that capacity—it has been trampled, killed. Second, consent means it is safe to say no. If you are five and he is forty, if he is the boss and can fire you, if someone has the power to ostracize you from your community, consent is not possible because it is not safe to say no.¹²⁶

Though not directly addressing our narrative, it seems safe to assume that if she believes that an employee cannot consent to a boss, this would apply to a subject and her king. This line of thought has become increasingly common within abuse circles, and I will interact with it more thoroughly in chapter 3.

Here, however, I note three problems with this interpretation. First, this interpretation of power dynamics relies on a selective focus on the details of the text. Is it not possible that Bathsheba used her beauty (part of feminine “power”) to attract the attention of the king, thus seeking to secure more political/social power for herself? There is no record of any resistance on her part, and Tamar’s example of (unsuccessful) resistance is fully recorded a mere two chapters away. Further, she does receive a significant promotion in social status through this encounter, becoming part of the royal family and eventually serving a major role in the ascension of her son to the throne (Solomon—1 Kgs 1). Of course, this alternative interpretation relies almost entirely on conjecture about her motives, not on revelations from the text—just as the power differentials interpretation does.¹²⁷ There is not enough information *in the text* to answer the question definitively.

Second, the Bible does not offer us a “power differentials” view of consent. Scripture certainly recognizes the existence of disparities in power and the lopsided ratios of abuse, as discussed above. However, there is no evidence that such disparities *ever*

¹²⁶ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 70.

¹²⁷ Dale Ralph Davis raises a number of unanswered questions from the text: Was Bathsheba baiting David? Was Uriah wise to the misdeeds? How did Joab feel about David’s plans? “We do not and cannot know. The writer offers no help on this The writer seems to silence all feeling in order to isolate David’s actions.” Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Out of Every Adversity*, Focus on the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 140.

absolve the inferior from responsibility as regards a superior. The superior can and does bear even greater responsibility for sin, given the dignity of his office, but the inferior is also held responsible if she sins.¹²⁸ That is, David is guilty of other sins (as a father and a king) in addition to his adultery (as a husband) with Bathsheba, but the presence of a power differential does not absolve Bathsheba of responsibility before God and it does not make David's adultery *ipso facto* abuse.

Third, the attribution of rape as David's sin appears to be a very recent view in church history and seems to be tied to a neo-Marxist interpretation of power differentials. Christians throughout history have recognized the reality of power differentials—perhaps better than modern, democratic Westerners—yet they did not conclude that David's superior power in the situation necessitated that the encounter was a rape. Matthew Henry, for example, is quite clear concerning “David's shame, in being himself conquered, and led captive by his own lust. The sin he was guilty of was adultery, against the letter of the seventh commandment, and (in the judgment of the patriarchal age) a

¹²⁸ Biblical examples of persons in inferior positions who nonetheless acted responsibly can be considered. Daniel was a displaced captive with very little social capital, but he resisted the Babylonian dietary program that would contradict God's command. “Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself” (Dan 1:8). It is interesting that Daniel negotiates with the eunuch. On a more serious matter, Daniel simply and directly defies the command to make petitions to King Darius alone (Dan 6). Moses was a despised Hebrew, a son of slaves, who should have been killed in infancy. However, he is commended for “choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb 11:25). Esther, while facing death and the genocide of her people, chose to approach the king without permission: “I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish” (Esth 4:16; cf. 4:11). Further, Mordecai's appeal to her after her initial refusal is instructive: “Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esth 4:13–14).

Perhaps most pertinent is the teaching of Jesus:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt 10:34–39)

Given the patriarchal structure of ancient Israel, opposing one's father was nearly unthinkable. Given the corporate solidarity experienced in families, such division was also nearly unthinkable. Yet Christ demands our ultimate and entire allegiance, regardless of who stands against us—no exceptions (see also Matt 10:34–39 and Luke 9:59–60).

heinous crime.”¹²⁹

The second category of evidence of those arguing for an attribution of rape concerns the choice of terms that the inspired author utilizes when recounting the story.

The ESV translates thus:

It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king’s house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, “Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (2 Sam 11:2–4a)

John Piper argues, “He didn’t invite her. He didn’t woo her. He didn’t lure her. He didn’t trick her. *He took her*. That’s what the text says: he took her. In other words, the description is of a completely one-sided, powerful exertion of this desire, with no reckoning with hers.”¹³⁰ Similarly, Paul Carter argues, “King David sent armed guards to bring one of his subjects into his bed—in every civilized country in the world that is considered rape. David was a rapist. To cover up his rape he became a murderer.”¹³¹

Similar problems arise with these interpretations. Carter’s thesis proves too much: there is no mention of armed guards as the messengers in the text. The term is *messengers*, (*mal’akim*, often translated “angels”), which obviously does not provide the detail that Carter supplies. Piper, similarly, places great weight on *took* (*laqakh*), but the term admits of a broad semantic range, and while *capture* is one option, *fetch* is another.¹³² There is no textual indication of resistance from Bathsheba at any point. One could make the opposing argument from the text with equal accuracy (and selectivity):

¹²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 2:386.

¹³⁰ John Piper, “Did David Sin with Bathsheba?,” *Desiring God (blog)*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/did-bathsheba-sin-with-david>.

¹³¹ Paul Carter, “Did King David Rape Bathsheba?,” *The Gospel Coalition (blog)*, April 22, 2018, <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/did-king-david-rape-bathsheba/>.

¹³² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1906; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 542–44; cf. 1 Sam 8:11. The same term is utilized in Ruth 4:13, when “Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife.”

“*She came to him*. He did not drag her. He did not coerce her. That’s what the text says: *she came to him*. In other words, the description is of a completely one-sided, willing response to his invitation.”¹³³ The issue is not that the text speaks definitively one way or the other, but that the text simply does not answer the questions being asked of it: “David took” and Bathsheba “came.” The incident is clearly, deeply sinful. However, to pretend as though the text provides definitive clarity on the motive and means is to go beyond what is written. As Robert D. Bergen has argued,

Bathsheba “came to him,” perhaps because she was naïve or simply lacked the will to resist the powerful king’s request, or perhaps because she desired to be unfaithful to her husband. The writer’s omission of an explicit motive behind Bathsheba’s action reinforces the conviction that this story is not so much about Bathsheba’s actions but David’s.¹³⁴

In addition, the contrast between 2 Samuel 11:4 and 13:14 is instructive. David “lay with” Bathsheba, and Amnon “forced” Tamar. Both instances are deeply sinful, but they are not the same sin.

The final category of evidence cited comes from Nathan’s prophetic rebuke of David after the sin. Nathan uses a parable in which he likens David’s sin to a rich man who “took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him” (2 Sam 12:4). Piper writes, “he really re-created the adultery in the categories of theft and killing,” which he finds “even more significant” for arriving at a verdict of rape.¹³⁵ Davidson likewise identifies the innocence of the lamb in the parable with the innocence

¹³³ The NET textual notes offer a similar idea: “The expression בוא אל (*bo’ ’el*) means ‘come to’ or ‘approach,’ but is also used as a euphemism for sexual relations, the implied purpose for approaching someone. Here it refers only to the stage of approaching while the next verb describes the result. That she is the subject of this verb (while David is the subject of the next verb) probably indicates that the act was consensual.” NET Bible, “Note 10 on 2 Samuel 11:4,” accessed January 7, 2023, <https://netbible.org/bible/2+Samuel+11>.

¹³⁴ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary 7 (Nashville: B & H, 1996), 364–65.

¹³⁵ Piper, “Did David Sin with Bathsheba?”

of Bathsheba in the narrative. Further, David is the one culpable for the ensuing death of his son (2 Sam 12:13–14), without mention of Bathsheba.¹³⁶

These are certainly possible interpretations of the text. However, they rely on an over-equating of Bathsheba with the ewe lamb, pushing the hermeneutical boundaries of the parable form beyond what it can responsibly bear. Throughout the entire pericope, the focus in Nathan’s rebuke is on David alone. Bathsheba is simply not in focus in the parable. Her role is noted but not emphasized, and Uriah even less so. Surely no responsible interpreter wishes to argue that Bathsheba is so ignorant and powerless as an ewe lamb. The metaphor serves primarily to remove Bathsheba’s motives from consideration. The purpose of the parable is for David to be hoisted with his own petard, skillfully convicting himself in the process of denunciation. As Bergen notes, “David’s own Torah-violating behavior had not robbed him of his commitment to impose the requirements of the Torah on others!”¹³⁷

In conclusion, the actual text of the sad and sinful affair of David and Bathsheba simply does not provide enough information to conclude that it was indeed a rape. If rape were in view, obedience to the Lord required Bathsheba to resist and refuse David’s advances. There is no evidence that she cried out (Deut 22:23–24) or resisted David’s summons in any way. There is no indication that he overrode her agency or threatened her. Given the biblical standard of conviction, and the clear recording and condemnation of a rape less than two chapters later, the balance of evidence should leave us with the conclusion that the act was indeed adulterous. The ambiguities, and scarcity of accompanying details, ought to promote some restraint among interpreters in assuming motives for Bathsheba especially, but also for David to some extent. Finally, the presence

¹³⁶ Davidson, “Did David Rape Bathsheba?,” 91–92. Bergen notes that David experienced the “stern curses of the Torah, including loss of family,” as promised in Deut 28:18: “Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb.” Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 361.

¹³⁷ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 370.

of a “power dynamics” perspective among the majority of those who argue that it must be rape should give us some concern about what that view entails¹³⁸—a topic to which I will turn in the next chapter.

Categories of Abuse?

I conclude this chapter by briefly considering the matter of categorizing abuse. Is it valid and helpful to append other labeling terms to abuse or do those labels confuse or otherwise function unhelpfully? As mentioned in chapter 1, other labels are often added to abuse in order to highlight the specific kind of mistreatment being identified, whether as regards the age or developmental status of the victim (child, elderly), the tangible means employed (physical, sexual), the intangible means employed (spiritual, verbal), or what we might describe as the area of invisible impact (emotional, psychological). Thus, in categorizing we are dealing with either the victim, the means, or the harm, and some categories could potentially apply to both means and harm.

There is little debate over labeling something as abusive as regards age/developmental status (child, elderly) or tangible means employed (physical, sexual). Even though persons may debate what exactly qualifies as abuse under each of those categories (e.g., corporal punishment for children), the existence of child abuse is largely uncontroversial. However, when it comes to the more intangible or invisible categories of means and/or harm (spiritual, verbal, emotional, psychological), there is more room for debate.

The debate is not over whether those categories can somehow be connected to abuse. Proverbs, for example, demonstrates how speech can be quite harmful: “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals

¹³⁸ There can also be a concerning tendency to resort to *ad hominem* remarks against those who disagree with a power differentials interpretation, accusing them of not caring about abuse or dismissing the sins of men too lightly. As will be seen below, such behavior is characteristic of those who hold a Critical Theory framework for viewing the world.

violence” (10:11); “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18). Similarly, both Testaments record condemnations of leaders who selfishly exploit their authority for personal gain, which is the misuse of either civil or spiritual power (e.g., Jer 2:7–8; Matt 20:25; 1 Pet 5:2).

Those who suffer under a continual verbal tsunami or who are governed by manipulative, self-serving leaders can indeed experience profound harm. Depending on the situation, they may have little opportunity to escape from the oppression either due to governmental power¹³⁹ or parental power.¹⁴⁰ Similar to the discussion of emotional harm above, I believe it can be appropriate to label certain experiences as verbal, psychological,¹⁴¹ spiritual, or emotional abuse. However, a good deal of caution must be utilized in applying these labels, for several reasons.

First, because they are largely intangible, the ability to identify any kind of evidence that would meet the biblical standard of justice is more challenging. It is not impossible, but it is certainly less straightforward. Further, one must be quite careful in defining precisely what one means by the labels. Again, the need to define all the constituent terms presented above from God’s perspective is supremely important. As will be shown in chapters 3 and 4, a significant revision of justice is occurring under the prevailing paradigm and in the name of rooting out abuse, but the substitutions are not for the better. Abuse is still a rhetorically potent word and can itself be utilized as a means to gain power or control in a situation. In a CT world, to be labeled an oppressor is to

¹³⁹ One thinks of Chinese citizens locked in their apartments for COVID restrictions. Steven W. Mosher, “China Leading Citizens to Jump from Balconies in Quest to Achieve ‘COVID Zero,’” *New York Post*, April 9, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/04/09/how-china-brutalizes-its-people-to-try-to-achieve-covid-zero/>; Zachary Evans, “Chinese Authorities Lock Citizens inside Homes in Attempt to Stop Coronavirus Spread,” *National Review*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/chinese-authorities-lock-citizens-inside-homes-in-attempt-to-stop-coronavirus-spread/>.

¹⁴⁰ One thinks of a very young child with an exceedingly cruel parent where the child cannot fully appreciate the magnitude of what they are enduring, let alone conceive of or be capable of an escape.

¹⁴¹ This label is based on the understanding of the human person as an embodied soul and recognizes that our souls (the immaterial aspect of the human being) are affected by others in God’s world.

become *persona non grata*. Any resistance to the narrative becomes further proof of one's oppressive nature.

Second, the intangibility of these categories also lends itself to minimize or ignore principles of biblical justice in labeling experiences as abusive. If someone alleges physical abuse, the expectation of obtaining tangible verification is far greater. But to allege abuse in these latter four categories comes with very little expectation of utilizing evidence. Many times, a simple, one-party accusation is enough for most persons, as social media amply demonstrates, to say nothing of hearings for Supreme Court nominees. The accuser may indeed be sincere (though not necessarily), but she may be operating out of a misunderstanding, or she may simply be offering a maliciously twisted interpretation of reality in order to justify labeling an experience as abusive that may have actually been righteous¹⁴² or at worst a more ordinary failure of some kind. Any parent of a rebellious teenager knows what it is to have one's words and motives misrepresented for a self-serving purpose, as does anyone who watches spokesmen for our political parties. Language is powerful, and a term as potent as abuse is certain to be itself *abused*.

Third, various principles adopted under the prevailing paradigm further heighten the two concerns above. The practice of believing all allegations and strongly discouraging any questioning or investigation—and especially when those and other categories are described as victim blaming or shaming—work contrary to clear, biblical standards of justice. They give a false accuser prosecutorial immunity, place the accused in a guilty-until-proven-innocent scenario, and privilege the accuser. Biblical standards of justice with fallen and finite persons in a fallen world cannot ultimately satisfy those who wish to prevent or uncover all wrongdoing. Quite apart from sin, there are limits to what

¹⁴² In discussing the work of Robert Reich, Trueman notes how conceptions of abuse have changed to include any hindrance of proposed sexual progress. The concept has not been psychologized, and “once oppression becomes primarily psychological, it also becomes somewhat arbitrary and subjective.” Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 237.

we can know; add sin into the mix and there are bound to be mistakes. Yet the Lord has given us his Word in order for us to walk righteously before him. He knows our frames, he knows what is at stake, and he knows what is best in every situation.

By studying deeply what his Word has to teach us about justice, we can and should allow our own understanding and practice to conform to his truth. Some of what we find may be surprising or even counter-cultural, but it will certainly be for the best for everyone involved. Therefore, we turn now to examine the roots and fruit of the prevailing paradigm as represented in the DM in chapter 3, before turning to explore what Scripture teaches about justice in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 3

CRITIQUING THE PREVAILING MODEL

Given the complexity of abuse and the diversity of situations in which it is found—not to mention the diversity of those who are involved in addressing it—the near-universality of the terminology and concepts employed in current discussions of abuse is striking. Especially within biblical counseling, with its roots in the recovery of a biblical understanding of care and counsel and a corresponding critique of the prevailing therapeutic psychology of our day, it is remarkable how broadly the power and control paradigm has been adopted and deployed. One might posit any number of reasons for this: the paradigm rings true, the desire to not “reinvent the wheel,” an emphasis on practice over principles, or the exigencies of responding to both personal and reputational harm. Regardless of the reason(s), it is important for Christians to identify, critically analyze, and understand the roots and fruit of the prevailing paradigm in order to decide if we have been wise to follow it. There are truths to appreciate and learn from this model, even as we assess and critique it so that we can honor the Lord and genuinely serve others. In this chapter, I will outline the history and values of the prevailing model, as well as highlighting its connections with CT. I will also demonstrate how those values have broadly affected the mainstream discussion about abuse.

The Duluth Model

Within the short history of the United States, violence against women has been a problem, and especially so during certain eras in our history. It has also been a strong

motivating factor within the various waves of feminism that have arisen.¹ Widespread drunkenness in the nineteenth century brought new attention to the “drunkard’s wife,” who suffered at the hands of her brutish husband.² This was one of the driving forces behind the Temperance movement that led to the successful passage of the Eighteenth Amendment (Prohibition) in 1919. Violence against women has also been a significant motive behind the move to liberalize divorce laws, change custody arrangements, increase women’s workforce participation, and accomplish women’s suffrage.

In the 1970s, the feminist movement was bringing renewed attention to the plight of battered women.³ The first battered women’s shelters were opened, and batterer intervention programs were created “based on a feminist theory that a man needs to control a woman.”⁴ In addition, widescale efforts were underway to change the way that the legal system would classify and respond to domestic violence, which led to a societal

¹ Many identify at least three waves in American feminism: nineteenth–early twentieth century (including Seneca Falls in 1848; Susan B. Anthony; and Margaret Sanger and the push for birth control); 1960s–1970s (Betty Friedan; Gloria Steinem: *Roe v. Wade*; the ERA); and 1990s–present (Kimberle Crenshaw; Judith Butler; #metoo). See Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Man and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 207–10; and Rebekah Merkle, *Eve in Exile: And the Restoration of Femininity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2016), esp. chaps. 3–5.

² Liane V. Davis, “Violence and Families,” *Social Work* 36, no. 5 (September 1991): 371–73.

³ For two informative articles on the history of the movement, see Kathleen J. Tierney, “The Battered Women’s Movement and the Creation of the Wife Beating Problem,” *Social Problems* 29, no. 3 (February 1982): 207–20; and Lenore E. A. Walker, “Politics, Psychology and the Battered Woman’s Movement,” *Journal of Trauma Practice* 1, no. 1 (January 2002): 81–102. Note that the plight of minority battered women was the primary concern that Kimberle Crenshaw addressed in her seminal article: Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–299.

⁴ Johnna Rizza, “Beyond Duluth: A Broad Spectrum of Treatment for a Broad Spectrum Domestic Violence,” *Montana Law Review* 70, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 3.

shift from treating it as a private, personal or family matter to designating it as a criminal activity.⁵ Surprisingly, Duluth, Minnesota was to become the epicenter for those efforts.⁶

As feminism gained influence in the 1970s, Duluth—like many American cities—instituted more proactive arrest and prosecution policies in response to heightened awareness of domestic violence.⁷ However, the courts proved reluctant to incarcerate men for domestic violence. As the city struggled to find a path forward, a novel solution was proposed—a system that would later come to be known as a Coordinated Community Response. As a result, Duluth Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP) were started in 1980. Ellen Pence and Martha McMahon note, “The Duluth project should be seen as a system of networks, agreements, processes and applied principles created by the local shelter movement, criminal justice agencies, and human service programs that were developed in a small northern Minnesota city over a fifteen year period.”⁸ This response eventually became the DM and as awareness of abuse has grown through the years, so has the influence of the model.⁹

⁵ As Pence notes, “We wanted to train the eye of scrutiny away from a woman’s so-called “healthy” response to being beaten, on to both the abuser and the institutional practices that failed to help women.” On that front, the Pennsylvania Coalition against Domestic Violence was the first to have success at the state level, in 1976. Thus, Pence continues, “Within 5 years of the coalition’s success, more than 30 other states had passed legislation allowing courts to grant immediate restraining orders.” Ellen Pence, “Advocacy on Behalf of Battered Women,” in *Sourcebook of Violence against Women*, ed. Claire M. Renzetti, Jeffrey L. Edleson, and Raquel Kennedy Bergen (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 2–4.

⁶ Duluth is a port city of around 87,000 people located in the northeastern reaches of Minnesota, on the shores of Lake Superior. It is a fairly progressive city, having adopted a Domestic Partner Registry in 2009 (City of Duluth, “Ordinance 29D,” Recreation, Libraries and Authorities Committee, April 14, 2009, <https://duluthmn.gov/media/7140/09-021-o.pdf>) and a Conversion Therapy Ban in December 2019 (City Clerk, “About Duluth’s Conversion Therapy Ban,” City of Duluth, accessed January 2, 2023, <https://duluthmn.gov/city-clerk/conversion-therapy-ban/about-duluths-conversion-therapy-ban/>).

⁷ “Our strategy was inspired by the assumption that to make wife beating a crime would profoundly alter the premise of male dominance in marriage.” Pence, “Advocacy on Behalf of Battered Women,” 5.

⁸ Ellen Pence and Martha McMahon, “A Coordinated Community Response to Domestic Violence,” in *The Multi-Agency Approach to Domestic Violence: New Opportunities, Old Challenges?*, ed. Nicola Harwin, Gill Hauge, and Ellen Malos (Bristol, UK: Whiting & Birch: 1999), 150.

⁹ The DM is internationally recognized and is currently utilized in all fifty US states and at least seventeen other countries.

From the outset, the program was led by advocates¹⁰ who were straddling two worlds. “An advocate, therefore, places herself at the position of interactions between the battered woman and the system and makes her agenda the problematic ways in which the woman experiences that interaction.”¹¹ Though she works in both worlds, the advocate must be undivided in her loyalties: she is focused on the woman, and especially on her safety. “Safety was to this social movement what liberation was to the larger women’s movement.”¹² It was the program’s special focus on the battered women themselves that was its greatest contribution, helping to raise awareness of the problem and to care for victims who were often lost in the bureaucratic and legal shuffle.

Even four decades later, the early values of the DAIP remain largely unchanged. They currently list five on the “About Us” page of their website:¹³

We listen to battered women: Our work involves active engagement with women who have experienced violence so that our efforts are guided by their realities and concerns.

We educate to promote liberation: An educational process of dialogue and critical thinking is key to our efforts to assist women in understanding and confronting the violence directed against them, and to our efforts to challenge and support men who commit to ending battering.

We advocate for institutional and social change: We examine the practices and policies of social and governmental agencies that intervene in the lives of battered women, and address systemic problems by engaging with institutional practitioners and leaders in the development of creative and effective solutions.

We struggle against all forms of oppression. Women are not defined by a single identity, but live in the intersection of their race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality,

¹⁰ The founders were Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar. Pence was the advocate—a sociologist, a leader in the battered women’s movement, director of Praxis International, and a lesbian feminist. Paymar was the politician—serving on the Duluth City Council from 1980 to 1988, before moving to the Minnesota House of Representatives for eighteen years. He has also served a Resource Specialist for the Battered Women’s Justice Project (<https://bwjp.org>). Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, “Paymar, Michael,” Minnesota Legislature, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.lrl.mn.gov/legdb/fulldetail?id=10513>.

¹¹ Pence, “Advocacy on Behalf of Battered Women,” 9.

¹² Pence, “Advocacy on Behalf of Battered Women,” 4. Paymar and Barnes broaden that topic a bit: “the Duluth Model prioritizes victim safety and autonomy.” Michael Paymar and Graham Barnes, “Countering Confusion about the Duluth Model,” Battered Women’s Justice Project, accessed November 15, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20150319081107/http://www.bwjp.org/files/bwjp/files/Countering_Confusion_Duluth_Model.pdf, 2.

¹³ Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, “About Us,” accessed January 2, 2023, <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/about-us/>.

disability, age, religion and sexual orientation. Our work must also challenge all systems of oppression that create a climate of supremacy and intolerance that facilitates violence and exploitation in women's lives.

We promote non-violence and peace: Every step we take, every interaction we have with others, is an opportunity to advance non-violence, continually working toward and building a culture and a future of peace.

The first value is central: listening to and prioritizing the needs of battered women.

Christians can and should appreciate this concern, and I believe that its presence helps to explain why the DM has enjoyed such broad adoption today. Abuse and oppression are real sins that have plagued mankind throughout history. The DM arose to address an area of need and to offer help to those who were hurting. They sought to understand what had gone wrong and offer both safety and care to victims, and a path to growth for offenders.

However, several other values have affected the framing of both the problems and the solutions that the DM seeks to address. Those values are steeped in the language and concepts of CT and therefore define and deploy the topics of authority, leadership, identity, and oppression in a profoundly different manner than Scripture. In order to offer a helpful critique, I will first identify three of those values before discussing their connection with CT.

Feminism

The philosophical commitments that undergird the DM are feminist. “Whether the particular planners are aware of it or not, programs for batterers are situated in a political and historical context of the feminist anti-violence movement.”¹⁴ More specifically, the founders of the DAIP believed that American society had been structured in such a way that it unfairly benefits men. “We have to establish that these belief ‘systems’ operate for the benefit of men, at the expense of women. The men must come

¹⁴ Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model* (New York: Springer, 1993), 172. While feminism as a movement predates Critical Theory, it has become an active participant in and contributor to it, especially beginning in the 1980s. Pluckrose and Lindsay discuss the various “feminisms.” Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020), 135–58.

to see that these beliefs maintain a system that is unfair and destructive to both men and women.”¹⁵ However, individual men are not to blame: “We do not see men’s violence against women as stemming from individual pathology, but rather from a socially reinforced sense of entitlement.”¹⁶

Therefore, rather than focus on a given man’s reasoning for using violence, they seek to locate his beliefs within this broader cultural narrative. “Violence perpetuated by individual men against individual women is understood to be informed and licensed by a patriarchal society that renders more social power to men than to women.”¹⁷ Further, “When we as a society decide that women have certain subservient roles and men have certain privileged roles, then we also give men the message that they can enforce those roles with whatever tools are at their disposal.”¹⁸ That is, the societal dominance of men justifies their violence against women, and this is a long-standing problem. “The historic oppression and continued subjugation of women in most cultures occurs because men have defined almost every facet of their societies, thereby perpetuating a sexist belief system and institutionalizing male privilege.”¹⁹

Johnna Rizza rightly identifies this as an ideological approach which therefore “dismisses other possible causes of familial violence, and thus excludes the possibility of

¹⁵ Scott Miller, “Discussing the Duluth Curriculum: Creating a Process of Change for Men Who Batter,” *Violence against Women* 16, no. 9 (August 2010): 1019.

¹⁶ Paymar and Barnes, “Countering Confusion about the Duluth Model.”

¹⁷ Tineke Ritmeester, “Batterers’ Programs, Battered Women’s Movement, and Issues of Accountability,” by Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model* (New York: Springer, 1991), 171.

¹⁸ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 147.

¹⁹ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 147. Crenshaw writes against historical rape laws that dared to inquire into whether there was evidence of the woman’s resistance or whether she was promiscuous. “Legal rules thus functioned to legitimize a good woman/bad woman dichotomy in which women who lead sexually autonomous lives were usually least likely to be vindicated if they were raped.” Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1266. One especially notes the power of the Critical Theory construct in shaping how a problem is understood and how justice is defined.

more appropriate treatment options for some population segments.”²⁰ As will be discussed further below, such constructs are characteristic of CT. Well-known Critical Race Theorist, Robyn DiAngelo, utilizes similar categorization in her handout on “Basic Tenets of Anti-racist Education”:

1. Racism exists today, in both traditional and modern forms.
2. All members of this society have been socialized to participate in it.
3. All white people benefit from racism, *regardless of intentions*; intentions are irrelevant.
4. No one here chose to be socialized into racism (so no one is “bad”). But no one is neutral—to not act against racism is to support racism.²¹

Substitute “patriarchy” for “racism,” and “men” for “white people,” and the construct is essentially transferable to the DM framework. Tineke Ritmeester demonstrates as much: “From this profeminist perspective, sexism is defined as ‘power and prejudice based on sex.’ It defines violence more broadly as ‘any act that causes the victim to do something she doesn’t want to do, prevents her from doing something she wants to do, or causes her to be afraid.’”²² The redefinition of sexism to include the category of power is the same maneuver that Critical Race Theory (CRT) advocates have attempted with racism.²³ The redefinition of violence evinces similar changes. Such ideologically driven analysis and programming is a common source of critique for the DM, and the widespread adoption

²⁰ Rizza, “Beyond Duluth,” 6.

²¹ Robin DiAngelo, “Basic Tenets of Anti-racist Education,” Robin DiAngelo, last modified 2012, <https://robindiangelo.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Anti-racism-handout-1-page-2016.pdf>.

²² Tineke Ritmeester, “Batterers’ Programs, Battered Women’s Movement, and Issues of Accountability,” by Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 170–71. The addition of power to the formula follows the pioneering move of Patricia Biddell-Padva in redefining racism as prejudice plus power. Patricia Biddell-Padva, *Developing New Perspectives on Race: An Innovative Multi-Media Social Studies Curriculum in Race Relations for the Secondary Level* (Detroit: New Detroit, 1970).

²³ Delgado and Stefani trace the roots of CRT back to radical feminism, and especially to “feminism’s insight into the relationship between power and the construction of social roles, as well as the unseen, largely invisible collection of patterns and habits that make up patriarchy and other types of domination.” Richard Delgado and Jean Stefani, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University, 2017), 5.

the DM has enjoyed means that it has many critics. However, further exploration of secular critiques is outside of the scope of this paper.²⁴

Egalitarianism

A second and related animating value in the DM is egalitarianism. This is seen both in their opposition to hierarchy and in their elevation of egalitarian relations as the solution to the problem of abuse.²⁵ Pence and Paymar write, “Any system that gives one group power over another group dehumanizes both those with too much power and those without enough power.”²⁶ Further, hierarchical relations are neither normal nor natural, but societally derived and imposed.²⁷ “We live in a society that uses myth to maintain societal order in what is essentially a dysfunctional culture . . . we must first separate nature . . . from what is culture . . . hierarchy as a social order is a cultural pattern.”²⁸

The DM understands this societally imposed order as a quest for power: “We’ve all been socialized in a culture that values power, a culture in which the thinking that we challenge in the [batterer] groups is present in every aspect of our daily lives. Our

²⁴ See the critiques addressed in Paymar and Barnes, “Countering Confusion about the Duluth Model.”

²⁵ Trueman identifies a broader pattern in this regard, with the “collapse of traditional hierarchies,” to be replaced by egalitarian values. Concomitantly, honor has been replaced by dignity as the pattern of social engagement. Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 67. Coupled with the therapeutic and individualistic turns in our society, that dignity is essentially the affirmation of a person’s own self-concept. Therefore, “the only moral criterion that can be applied to behavior is whether it conduces to the feeling of well-being in the individuals concerned. Ethics, therefore, becomes a function of feeling” (79). The further result is that “modern ethical discourse is chaotic because there is no longer a strong community consensus on the nature of the proper ends of human existence” (83).

²⁶ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 180. As noted in chapter 1, this construct undermines the very idea of authority itself.

²⁷ It was reflecting upon male privilege that led Peggy McIntosh to turn the lens of oppression upon herself and to identify her “white privilege” in her now-famous article. Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Peace and Freedom* 49 (July/August 1989): 10–12. “One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms which we can see and embedded forms which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see” (12). This perspective is clearly conceptually consistent with the DM approach to patriarchy and violence.

²⁸ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 72.

schools, churches, and places of work are all structured hierarchically.”²⁹ Therefore, it is not surprising that men would seek and use power in order to maintain their positions of prominence. “Batterers, like those who intervene to help them, have been immersed in a culture that supports relationships of dominance.”³⁰ Indeed, the conditioning is ubiquitous: “The institutional and societal support for the thinking that justifies the use of male privilege and control over women so permeates this country that every culture within it has felt its effects.”³¹

Such hierarchy is dehumanizing, in their view, because those under authority actually lose their own identities for the sake of the authority.³² Pence and Paymar illustrate this by quoting a facilitator in a men’s group who stated, “If you believe that being married makes you one, then every time she does something apart from you it will stir up a lot of those feelings, I assume” (referencing feelings of insecurity, abandonment, and the like). They continue, “the facilitator draws a pyramid on the board and talks about how people at the bottom of the pyramid are obligated to give up their identity and exist on some level for the people on the top.”³³ So, even the concept of oneness in

²⁹ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 1.

³⁰ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 3.

³¹ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 86. West and Zimmerman would later reflect this same perspective in their formative essay, “Doing Gender”:

Little boys appropriate the gender ideal of “efficaciousness,” that is, being able to affect the physical and social environment through the exercise of physical strength or appropriate skills. In contrast, little girls learn to value “appearance,” that is, managing themselves as ornamental objects. Both classes of children learn that the recognition and use of sex categorization in interaction are not optional, but mandatory. (Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 [June 1987]: 141)

The source of these decisions? “It is children’s concern with being seen as socially competent that evokes their initial claims to gender identities” (141). These are rather shallow and cynical analyses, but they reveal the pervasive thinking embedded in CT philosophies, such as the feminism of the DM..

³² Trueman traces this perspective as far back at least as Rousseau, who argued “that it is society and the relations and conditions that society embodies that decisively shape and . . . decisively corrupt individuals. That is a point so basic to much of modern liberal thought that it verges on the platitudinous.” Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern of the Modern Self*, 115.

³³ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 49. The myopia of the facilitator’s interpretation demonstrates the philosophical prejudices that CT imposes upon the world and may explain—at least in part—why the number of claims of victimhood appear to have skyrocketed in

marriage is a tool of oppression. Men must give up their societally conditioned power and pursue an egalitarian relationship: “If a batterer does not have a personal commitment to give up his position of power, he will eventually return to use of threats or violence to gain control.”³⁴ All hierarchy is corruptive. Salvation will only come through egalitarianism.

Group Identity

Though perhaps less obvious than the two previous values, there is a strong element of group identity and identity politics within the DM. This can be seen in the quotes above as they eschew “individual pathology” and instead focus on how society conditions men for violence. It is also seen in their core values, as they “advocate for institutional and social change.” As will be discussed below, within CT, group identity is paramount, and the DM certainly utilizes those constructions.³⁵

However, the emphasis on group identity also places programs like the DM in an interesting quandary. Their construct operates by utilizing large, group categories such as “Male Privilege.” However, the deconstructive nature of CT, especially as manifest in philosophies like Queer Theory, insists on tearing down normativity and the gender binary, and seeks to negate the idea of being distinctively or essentially male or female.

recent years. Douglas Murray contrasts the behavior of polio “victim” Franklin D. Roosevelt in minimizing his disability with modern attitudes of maximal victimhood, noting:

Such reflections suggest the possibility that the extraordinary number of victimhood claims of recent years may not in fact indicate what the intersectionalists and social justice proponents think that they do. Rather than demonstrating an excess of oppression in our societies, the abundance of such claims may in fact be revealing a great shortage of it. If people were so oppressed, would they have the time or inclination to listen to every person who felt the need to publicize that a talk by a novelist at a literary festival had upset them, or that it was intolerable to be sold a burrito by someone of the wrong ethnicity? (Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race, and Identity* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2021], 251–52)

³⁴ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 7.

³⁵ Campbell and Manning note the use of this same tactic in relation to microaggressions. Advocates aim to show that various behaviors “are not simply isolated incidents, but rather part of structural inequalities . . . a repeated pattern of oppression said to contribute to the marginalization of entire collectivities.” Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures,” *Comparative Sociology* 13, no. 6 (January 2014): 701.

This has led to a clash between feminism and transgenderism, as the former want to *deny* that there is such a thing as essential femininity in order to open wide the social opportunities that historically have been denied to women. But the latter want to *affirm* that there is such a thing as essential femininity, such as in the case of a person born male but who feels deeply and compellingly that “they” is a woman.³⁶

The DM must face those challenges.³⁷ As noted above, they hold that, “Women are not defined by a single identity, but live in the intersection of their race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, disability, age, religion and sexual orientation.” This is textbook Intersectionality, but also seems to be at least sympathetic to the transgender perspective (distinguishing sex from gender). Therefore, it is largely in conflict with the second-wave feminism of the early batterer’s movement and with the exclusive focus on women and their oppression and safety. If the very existence of femininity and womanhood is eradicated, then in what meaningful sense can anyone speak of protecting women?

These few pages of quotes merely scratch the surface of the feminism and egalitarianism that are at the heart of the DM. However, they do set the stage for a discussion of what are likely the best-known aspects of the model: the Power and Control Wheel and the Equality Wheel.³⁸ These two tools have been adopted and utilized around

³⁶ Trueman highlights this tension and its inevitable conflict in his *Rise and Triumph*. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph*, esp. chap. 7, “The New Left and the Politicization of Sex,” and chap. 10, “The Triumph of the T.” The category of TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) illustrates the dilemma.

³⁷ Crenshaw’s presentation of intersectionality implies as much:

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women Adopting either analysis constitutes a denial of a fundamental dimension of our subordination and precludes the development of a political discourse that more fully empowers women of color. (Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1252)

³⁸ The Power and Control Wheel was one of the earliest tools developed at the outset of the DM in 1984. The Equality Wheel soon followed, “to describe the changes needed for men who batter to move from being abusive to non-violent partnership.” The date of its creation is not clearly identified. Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, “Understanding the Power and Control Wheel,” accessed August 8, 2023, <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/faqs-about-the-wheels/>.

the world when dealing with matters of abuse. The former can be found on the United Nations web page on domestic abuse,³⁹ and both are utilized across the ideological spectrum. They are effective visual aids for communicating about the nature and impact of abuse.

The Power and Control Wheel



Figure 1. The power and control wheel⁴⁰

³⁹ United Nations, "What is Domestic Abuse?," accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/what-is-domestic-abuse>.

⁴⁰ Both wheels include the following identifying information: Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 202 East Superior Street, Duluth, Minnesota, 55802, 218.722.2781, www.theduluthmodel.org.

A large part of the genius of the DM is that they dealt directly with women who were being abused, and sought to benefit from their perspectives and experiences:

We spent months going to educational groups for women in Duluth and asking them what is happening in their relationships. We asked women, “If we have 10, 15, or 20 weeks to spend in a group with the men who are abusing you, what themes do you want us to raise in the group? What kinds of concrete things are going on in your relationship that you want us to be helping the men to change?”

From those discussions and meetings with women, we developed the power and Control Wheel. Women said these are the things they want the men to talk about, the ways they are treating them—how they use intimidation, how they isolate, how they use money, and how they use the children. They want them to talk about the sexual abuse and the physical abuse. So, each item on the Power and Control Wheel came from those women’s groups.⁴¹

While the focus is clearly on domestic abuse, there is also a great degree of conceptual overlap with other forms of abuse, and the Power and Control Wheel has been modified and utilized for any number of categories of potential abuse.⁴²

This single graphic has been foundational to the DM and to its widespread adoption. “The Power and Control Wheel depicts the primary tactics and behaviors individual abusers use to establish and maintain control.”⁴³ It is visually effective on several fronts: the centrality of “Power and Control” to their understanding of abuse, the ubiquity of “Violence” as the outer ring that surrounds the whole, and the multi-pronged nature of abuse with each wedge of the pie representing a tactic for gaining and maintaining power and control within the threat or actuality of violence.

⁴¹ Miller, “Discussing the Duluth Curriculum,” 1009.

⁴² On the DAIP website there are wheels for: “Post-separation,” “Abuse of children,” “Nurturing children,” “Culture,” “Creator,” “Christian power and control,” “Christian partnership and equality.” There are also “DAIP Approved Adaptations”: “Tactics used by gay men who attended an LGBTI men’s behaviour change program;” “Equity & accountability wheel-ways to increase safety while gay men attend an LGBTI behaviour change program;” “Power and Control-the African American/Black community;” “Equity wheel—the African American/Black community;” “Economic Power and Control wheel;” “Post-separation economic Power and Control;” “Women in politics Power and Control wheel;” “Abuse of animals wheel;” “Amish/plain community Power and Control wheel;” “Caring for our Mokpuna (nurturing wheel);” with the promise of “more wheels to be added soon.” On the Praxis International website, one can also find a Power and Control in LGTB relationships wheel (Praxis International, “Power and Control in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans gender Relationships (Wheel),” 2015, <https://praxisinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/DVWheel.pdf>). The Q is noticeably absent on this last wheel.

⁴³ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 31.

Positively, the wheel does capture any number of useful categories. The prevalence of the terminology of “using” is helpful in identifying various means and in highlighting the selfishness of the abuser. An abuser may seek to *selfishly compel* (to use my terminology) his victim in any number of ways. He uses tactics to seek to override the agency of his victim, tactics which may range from physical intimidation or force to manipulation and blame shifting, to financial penalties, and beyond. Further, some of the specifics under each category are clearly sinful and wrong.

However, some of the explanations might better be assessed as neutral, with the facts of the situation determining if the behavior is abusive or loving. “Threatening to take the children away” would often be evil, but if a mother is behaving wickedly and is herself a threat to her children’s welfare, such an act may be loving and necessary. Similarly, “limiting her outside involvement” could indeed be quite selfish and restrictive, but if a husband notices that his wife is over-extended or ill and calls her to pull back from various activities in order to prioritize her God-given responsibilities and to have adequate rest, that is loving leadership. Even these two simple situations demonstrate that greater clarity is needed. It is possible to view most of these listed explanations as possible manipulations of abuse when wrongly motivated, but that is not the most natural reading. Most people would interrogate the graphic in order to identify the various symptomatic expressions of abuse. They are presented as inherently abusive actions, the tactics of the abuser. Here again, we see the need for the categories of *selfish compulsion*: what are his motives (from God’s perspective) and is he seeking to override her agency? Further, though presumably arising from the lived experiences of battered women, these categories have been analyzed, organized, and labeled by persons working from an admittedly feminist perspective.

Negatively, some of the categories are labeled in such a way as to bias discussion. What a secular person labels as “economic abuse,”⁴⁴ “male privilege,”⁴⁵ or “using children” might actually be righteous and loving from a biblical perspective. If a wife works in the home taking care of her family in traditional ways, many moderns might label that as “treating her like a servant” and “preventing her from getting or keeping a job.”⁴⁶ The Bible presents it as a common expression of feminine piety (Titus 2:3–5). Additionally, much of the terminology privileges the woman’s subjective assessment of the situation, utilizing the language of “making her feel/think” in various ways (“guilty,” “afraid,” “think she’s crazy”). Similarly, if she decides that he is making light of her concerns, treating her like a servant, or playing mind games, then that is sufficient to label his behavior as abuse. Her concerns may be valid or of mixed validity, but the nature of the construct is such that it makes objective assessment exceedingly difficult. Using the construct to define or identify abuse builds a great deal of bias into the construction. The theological and philosophical commitments of the designers are baked into the cake, and though one may attempt to apply different icings,⁴⁷ the essential framework and value commitments remain unchanged.

⁴⁴ Economic abuse is identified as “the problem of the power imbalance that results when one person brings home a paycheck and the other provides free labor at home.” Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 44. “Central to any discussion of economic control is the division of labor by gender both in the family and at the workplace.” Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 148.

⁴⁵ “Male privilege is a belief system that contends that you as a man are entitled to certain privileges simply because you are male.” Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 151. “Male privilege is not granted by nature, God, or chromosomal differences; it is something that men have built into the structure of society and that they fight to maintain. More than any other tactic of control, the use of male privilege will spark heated debate” (148).

⁴⁶ Along the same lines, Pence and Paymar would see the traditional structure as part of the evil of patriarchy, especially because it reinforces female dependency (Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 2-8). Similarly, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza claims, “Patriarchy is a sex/gender system of authoritarian male dominance that reinforces female dependency and diminishes female agency.” Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, *Activist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), xxi.

⁴⁷ The Christian power and control wheel and the Christian partnership and equality wheel, mentioned above, demonstrate this syncretistic approach. The Creator wheel represents the same idea from the perspective of traditional Native American religion.

The Equality Wheel

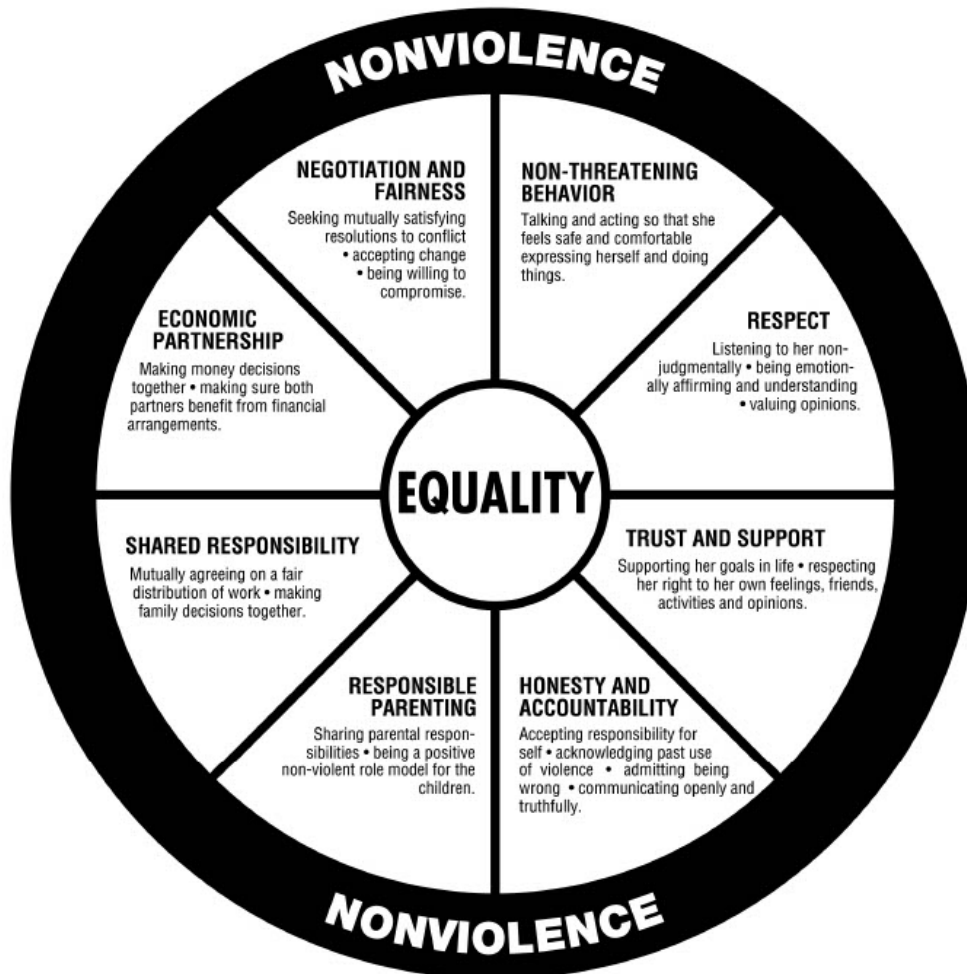


Figure 2. The equality wheel

The inverse of the Power and Control Wheel is the Equality Wheel. If the Power and Control Wheel is the problem, then the Equality Wheel is the solution. “The behaviors and aspects of an egalitarian relationship shown on the wheel become the model offered to men for egalitarian and interdependent relationships with women.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 31.

Again, the wheel is visually effective in communicating the DM values: “Equality” is the central value and is in direct contrast with “Power and Control.” By focusing on equality, the relationship can exist within an environment of “Nonviolence” instead of violence.⁴⁹ Further, the wheel effectively identifies various aspects of an egalitarian relationship, contrasting directly with the values exposed on the Power and Control Wheel.

There are more areas of agreement between this wheel and a biblical understanding of marriage. Most of the headline values are Christian values, properly defined, and many of the explanatory phrases capture helpful truths. The problems lie more under the category of omission than contradiction. However, the most fundamental problem is that equality ought not to be set against power and control, properly understood. Christianity affirms ontological equality *and* functional/vocational hierarchy. It affirms both mutuality/shared responsibility *and* leadership. It affirms both supporting/respecting others and their agency *and* providing leadership and direction.

The implicit value that corresponds with equality here is consent. In advocating for nonviolence in their curriculum, Pence and Paymar approvingly quote Gandhi: “Any attempt to impose your will on another is an act of violence.”⁵⁰ This is a helpful summary statement of their views on power and control and demonstrates their lack of any positive value for both concepts. Instead, the pinnacle of human interaction is apparently manifest in equality and consent.

⁴⁹ Freire demonstrates the typical CT link between inequality and violence. He defines oppression as “any situation in which ‘A’ objectively exploits ‘B’ or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person.” The second half of the definition is problematic and it gets worse:

Such a situation in itself constitutes violence . . . because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. With the establishment of a relationship of oppression violence has *already* begun. Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed. How could they be the initiators, if they themselves are the result of violence? . . . There would be no oppressed had there been no prior situation of violence to establish their subjugation. (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos [New York: Penguin, 2017], 29)

⁵⁰ Gandhi, quoted in Pence and Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter*, 96.

It is true that both concepts are necessary in their own way, but they are woefully inadequate as constructs to explain and explore the richness of God’s good design for mankind. Yet one finds again and again the issue of consent as the crux of morality as regards sexual activity, for example.⁵¹ This perspective reflects a commitment to the power and control paradigm more than a strong or consistent moral basis as consistent with understanding human sexuality from a biblical perspective. Consent is certainly one necessary part of an appropriate relationship, as is some aspect of equality (at the least, ontologically). But the poverty of their system is seen in that they have nothing more compelling to offer by way of a solution. The logic appears to be that one should not be hierarchical, and thus dominant, and thus violent. Instead, one should see themselves as equal to the abused and pursue a relationship of mutual compromise and consent. Such an approach does offer minimal help for the already violent man, but it is far from the delightful picture of celebrated differences and ordered relations found within Scripture.

Summary Analysis

While any number of critiques might be raised against the Power and Control Wheel and the Equality Wheel, two should be prominent. First, the wheels demonstrate the weaknesses characteristic of all godless ethics. They are an attempt to have human rights and moral values without any discernible foundation beyond human autonomy.⁵²

⁵¹ See the discussions above in chapter 1 (pp. 41–43) and chapter 2 (pp. 117–20).

⁵² A similar dynamic may be observed in Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*. They are self-described “left-leaning liberals” animated in opposition to Critical Theory because it goes too far and is undoing the “progress” that they identify as the fruit of classic liberalism. They are sympathetic to some of the concerns of CT advocates; but they are—ineffectively—asking them to rewind to an earlier time. They see CT as a step (or two) too far. They thus fail to understand that ethical values without God are ultimately and inescapably unstable and unjustifiable. Yascha Mounk, “What an Audacious Hoax Reveals about Academia,” *Atlantic*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/new-sokal-hoax/572212/>

Andrew T. Walker captures the tensions in this dynamic while assessing the new natural law perspective of Robert George:

Any sustained moral discourse, ultimately, is going to require transcendent authority for its intelligibility. If morality exists, God must exist. Still, one could hypothetically affirm morality’s

The autonomy, dignity, and equality of persons is assumed and championed, but without explicit grounds. Moral judgments are made, but without objective standards. They want to argue that it is wrong for some persons to have power over other persons, but they offer no compelling reason as to why this is so.⁵³

The second critique concerns the philosophical and moral assumption that absolute equality is the correct and obvious standard for human behavior. The authors assume the correctness of their ideology without argument. They do not appeal to any authority or to any particular line of argumentation. Rather, their reasoning must be reverse engineered: we all know wife beating is bad, wrong, and needs to stop. Men beat their wives because they want to control them.

At that point their reasoning begins to break down. Originally, DAIP advocates assumed that men used violence for control: “*He does it for power, he does it for control, he does it because he can*—these were advocacy jingles that, in our opinion, said just about all there was to say.”⁵⁴ However, they eventually began to realize that their ideological assumptions were overwriting reality. “By determining that the need or desire for power was the motivating force behind battering, we created a conceptual framework

existence without having confidence in God’s existence. Through one’s confidence in a moral order would stand on irrational, shaky, tentative, and potentially culturally destabilizing grounds, one could hypothetically affirm the existence of morality without the full confidence of where that inclination to moral certitude originates. (Andrew T. Walker, “Robert P. George and (New) Natural Law Ethics,” in *Social Conservatism for the Common Good: A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George*, ed. Andrew T. Walker [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023], 82)

Robert Lewis Dabney warned of this trajectory over 150 years ago: “There is but one ground of moral obligation, the will of God, and among the people of this country he who does not find the disclosure of that will in the Scriptures, most often finds it nowhere.” Robert Lewis Dabney, *Dabney on Fire: A Theology of Parenting, Education, Feminism, and Government*, ed. Zachary M. Garris (Middletown, DE: Zachary M. Garris, 2019), 53.

⁵³ The gist of their argument appears to be that power imbalances are dehumanizing, and that they condition those with power (generally men) to use violence in order to maintain their power. However, this analysis begs the question and fails to account for the many men throughout history who have loved and led their families well within a patriarchal system.

⁵⁴ Ellen Pence, “Some Thoughts on Philosophy,” in *Coordinating Community Responses to Domestic Violence: Lessons from Duluth and Beyond*, Pence, Sage Series on Violence against Women. Edited by Melanie F. Shepard and Ellen L. Pence (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 28.

that, in fact, did not fit the lived experience of many of the men and women we were working with.”⁵⁵

In particular, three lines of evidence challenged their assumptions: “the violence of women toward their partners, the prevalence of lesbian violence,⁵⁶ and the violence of men who did not like what they were doing,” which led them to reassess the problem. The new conclusion is: “Violence is rooted in how social relationships (e.g., marriage) and the rights people feel entitled to within them are socially, not privately, constructed.”⁵⁷ While this does share some continuity with a Christian understanding—especially in the analogy between entitled rights and idolatrous cravings—it appears that ideology has once again triumphed. Men still use violence for control, but now it is *society* that makes them do it.

While the philosophical convictions that drove their conclusion are not identified, it is interesting both that they were willing to reexamine their understanding in the face of contrary evidence and that they were only willing to go so far in that examination. Their two options appear to have been: the problem is within (selfish desire for control) or the problem is without (societally conditioned male dominance). However, there are multiple problems with either analysis. Male dominance does not explain the very high rates of lesbian violence. Further, societal expectations are not a comprehensively satisfactory explanation for why persons feel entitled to their rights. And there is no compelling explanation for why some men batter in a “hierarchically

⁵⁵ Pence, “Some Thoughts on Philosophy,” 29.

⁵⁶ For example, a recent study of college students concluded that “Interpersonal violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence (SV), are disproportionately experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer sexual identity (LGBQ+) students compared to heterosexual individuals.” Jane E. Palmer, Erin Williams, and Annelise Mennicke, “Interpersonal Violence Experiences and Disclosure Patterns for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer+, and Heterosexual University Students,” *Journal of Family Violence* 37, no. 3 (October 2021): 505.

⁵⁷ Pence, “Some Thoughts on Philosophy,” 29.

conditioned society” and other men do not, nor for those same outcomes in an increasingly egalitarian society.

The biblical theology of power and control that I presented at the end of chapter 1 offers a more comprehensive and compelling explanation for the problem. Christianity affirms both that mankind was created to exercise dominion, within hierarchal structures, and that fallen mankind is apt to use power and control for sinful and selfish purposes. Further, fallen mankind both influences and is influenced by others, so one might reasonably expect to find both righteous and sinful values and structures operating within any given social grouping. Different men may approach the same institution with vastly different goals and methods in mind. For example, in marriage, different men may approach it as an opportunity to oppress a wife, or as a negotiated, egalitarian arrangement, or as an opportunity to love and lead her in holiness. Different groups of men in society will tend to cluster at various points on that spectrum. The DM wants to explain men who batter as being conditioned by patriarchal society to pursue power and control and thus to dominate women. The biblical perspective explains those same behaviors through a far different lens: men who batter are sinners behaving selfishly in the world God created and using even his good gifts, such as a wife (Prov 18:22), as a means to self-serving ends. Instead of rightly recognizing the responsibilities (and accountability) inherent in the power, authority, or abilities they have been given by God, abusers focus on selfish gain and then compel others to do what they want.

Applied Critical Theory

Having briefly discussed the DM and its values, it is necessary to locate it within a broader overall philosophical shift in American society over the past half century. CT has become one of—if not the most—influential philosophies at work within the most influential institutions in America in almost every field: education, commerce, and government included. Central to CT is an emphasis on and examination of power and

how it shapes and affects humans and our world. By achieving “critical consciousness,” one becomes aware (i.e., “woke”) of oppression and can therefore work for liberation.⁵⁸ As Shenvi and Sawyer note, “Critical theory . . . seeks to understand human relationships through the fundamental lens of power.”⁵⁹ Pluckrose and Lyndsay discern a similar ideal, from a slightly different angle: “A critical theory is chiefly concerned with revealing hidden biases and underexamined assumptions, usually by pointing out what have been termed ‘problematics,’ which are ways in which society and the systems that it operates are going wrong.”⁶⁰ Especially as regards its Marxist roots, CT focuses on the struggle of oppression, though changing the focus from a material⁶¹ to a political perspective:

At the core of the various approaches of the critical theorists lies a relatively simple set of convictions: the world is to be divided up between those who have power and those who do not; the dominant Western narrative of truth is really an ideological construct designed to preserve the power structure of the status quo; and the goal of critical theory is therefore to destabilize this power structure by destabilizing the dominant narratives that are used to justify—to “naturalize”—it.⁶²

Given the prevalence of CT within American institutions and the obvious terminological and philosophical overlap with the prevailing paradigm for defining abuse, it is well worth considering its basic tenets, especially in its contemporary manifestations.

I begin with a helpful summary analysis from Shenvi and Sawyer:

⁵⁸ Freire frames the issue of consciousness (*conscientização*) as a battle between “sectarianism” and “radicalization.” Sectarianism is a form of bondage: “Sectarianism in any quarter is an obstacle to the emancipation of mankind.” However, “radicalization criticizes and thereby liberates.” Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 11. Further, “The radical, committed to human liberation, does not become the prisoner of a ‘circle of certainty’ within which reality is also imprisoned . . . the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it” (13).

⁵⁹ Neal Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory and the Social Justice Movement* (Lafayette, IN: Ratio Christi, 2023), 1.

⁶⁰ Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 13–14.

⁶¹ Trueman notes Marx’s transformation of the Hegelian dialectic into a material vein, focusing especially on oppression as class warfare. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern of the Modern Self*, 94–95. Critical Theory is thus better understood as neo-Marxist, as the primary struggle has moved from the material/economic (Marx) to broader forms of oppression.

⁶² Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern of the Modern Self*, 226.

Because contemporary critical theory divides society into oppressed groups and oppressor groups, many critical theorists insist that our identity as individuals is inextricably bound to our group identity. From the perspective of contemporary critical theory, our experience of reality, our evaluation of evidence, our access to truth, our moral status, and our moral obligations are all largely determined by our membership in either a dominant oppressor group or a subordinate oppressed group. It's important to note that the definition of "oppression" in critical theory differs markedly from the definition one finds in the dictionary, where "oppression" refers to "unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power." According to critical theory, "oppression" should additionally or even primarily be understood in terms of "hegemonic power," the ability of a particular group to impose its norms, values, and expectations on the rest of society.⁶³

Many of the core tenets of CT come through in that summary: group identity, hegemonic power,⁶⁴ oppressor-oppressed dynamics, the nature of virtue, and the implications of these categories for one's epistemological ability. We also see the focus on lived experience and improving the plight of the oppressed, a concern with which the DM is clearly aligned.⁶⁵

One of the central applications of CT in contemporary American society comes in the form of group identity and intersectionality, especially as manifest in identity politics. Because of its focus on power and on group dynamics, much of CT is devoted to identifying those groups that have power and those that do not. Under their rubric, groups that have historically held power are assigned the title of *privileged* and they are assumed to have ordered society in such a way as to protect and reinforce their power and privilege. Interestingly, that such an ordering is wrong and bad is rarely explicitly

⁶³ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory*, 4.

⁶⁴ Antonio Gramsci, one of the fathers of CT, identified the "'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society" through "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group." Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 2021), 12. This hegemony is "a complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces." Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 128.

⁶⁵ The organization Ellen Pence led before her death was named Praxis International. "Praxis" is a term deployed in CT to distinguish their approach from one of mere theorizing. Critical Theory practitioners are very much concerned to effect "*practical*, political change." Felluga, *Critical Theory*, 240. Freire specified the role of praxis: "oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 25.

stated—it appears to be assumed that everyone would make that judgment.⁶⁶ In America, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian, white men are especially culpable under this rubric.⁶⁷ Other groups are then assigned varying levels of oppression and are therefore granted victim status as a matter of course. Further, these guilt-virtue statuses are (unlike sex now) assigned at birth and largely inalterable.

The result has been an increase to levels of hyper-awareness of one's group identity.⁶⁸ Indeed, under CT, one's identity as an individual is largely erased in favor of group status.⁶⁹ Additionally, the narrative of oppression and of concomitant victim status is also ascendant. In modern America, victimhood is power, and grievances are its

⁶⁶ It is inevitable that some group in society will privilege its views in some way. In previous centuries, this may have been the king and his allies. In totalitarian regimes, it may be the dictator and his army. In democracies, it may just be a majority vote. But certain values being privileged and prioritized at various levels of human organization (family, community, state, nation, etc.) is inevitable. Currently, the far-left progressives who most embrace CT are proving to be just as—if not more—intolerant than those they have fought to replace. Within some fields of CT like decolonization, intolerance and violence are design features, meant to unsettle the masses and to provoke the next synthetic stage of development in the march toward egalitarian utopia. James Lindsay, “The Violence of Decolonization,” *New Discourses*, January 9, 2023, <https://newdiscourses.com/2023/01/violence-decolonization/>. I am indebted to Quay Hanna for this latter connection.

⁶⁷ I employ these terms as they are the prevalent categories of CT. However, I do not recognize the validity of most of them as categories of human identity. Indeed, they reveal the chasm between a biblical anthropology and currently popular views. See Matthew P. W. Roberts, *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2023).

⁶⁸ Pluckrose and Lindsay claim, “Critical race theory and intersectionality are centrally concerned with ending racism, through the unlikely means of making everyone more aware of race at all times and places.” Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 132. Scott Yenor notes how an emphasis on CT-driven Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives has had a highly counter-productive effect at Texas A&M University, where, for example, the percentage of students who “strongly agreed” they belonged at TAMU has decreased significantly as efforts at being more “inclusive” and “improving the climate” have been increasingly emphasized over the past decade. Scott Yenor, “At Texas A&M, a Different Kind of ‘Climate Change,’” James G. Martin Center, February 22, 2023, <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2023/02/at-texas-am-a-different-kind-of-climate-change/>.

⁶⁹ Pluckrose and Lindsay claim, “The ‘individual’ in applied postmodernism is something like the sum total of the identity groups to which the person in question belongs.” Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 61. The individual is thus lost, as is the unity of mankind. If one were to think of a continuum: individual to group to mankind (universal), CT only affirms the middle category. Christianity, on the other hand, affirms all three, though with varying levels of import. This is why the emphasis on group categories in CT produces more division and hatred—it idolizes one aspect of identity (e.g., race or sex) and thus minimizes our shared humanity and, in the church, our shared identity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

currency.⁷⁰ Within discussions on abuse through the DM paradigm, it is easy to see how these categories of group identity and oppressor-oppressed have risen to the fore.⁷¹

The church, meanwhile, has not been untouched by these developments. This should not be surprising as the church is always composed of humans who live in various communities and are therefore affected by the values of those communities. Given our focus on how abuse is understood and addressed, it is helpful to consider some of the fruits of CT in American society and how they are affecting our understanding of and response to abuse, even within the church. I will highlight three.

Suspicion of Authority

The first and most obvious effect is suspicion of authority.⁷² If egalitarianism (or equality) is primary, then the world is fundamentally divided into oppressors and oppressed, and if power is the fundamental lens through which we view oppression, then

⁷⁰ “It is in victimhood culture that privilege is most shamed, marginality most celebrated, and the handling of grievances increasingly dependent on convincing others that one is the underdog. We should thus expect competitive victimhood to be a frequent occurrence in both individual and collective disputes.” Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 162.

⁷¹ As noted in chapter 1, these are similar themes to the Liberation Theologies. Groups that focus on abuse tend to adopt this thematic lens as well. Consider the example of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment). Under “Our Values,” they list eight values:

1. Jesus repeatedly spoke up on behalf of the weak, marginalized, and wounded.
 2. Reflecting Jesus means we listen to the wounded, affirm the broken, and defend the vulnerable—regardless of the cost. (cf. Matthew 25:40, 45)
 3. A church that reflects Jesus will be a safe community for the suffering, wounded, and vulnerable.
 4. Faith communities ought to be the safest place for victims; a place where offenders are held accountable.
 5. The Church must become the community where those with the most painful histories are affirmed, loved, and defended. (cf. Matthew 25:40)
 6. You do not need a tragic experience in order to support and love those experiencing tragedies.
 7. If you know someone who is abusing, expose it. Do not leave the victim or perpetrator in the darkness. You become complicit if you do. (cf. Luke 8:17; Ephesians 5:11)
 8. Any church that redefines or minimizes abuse instead of stopping it is not a safe place and is contradicting the clear command of Jesus to welcome the vulnerable as we would welcome God (cf. Matthew 25:40; Mark 9:36-37).
- (GRACE, “Our Values,” accessed February 7, 2023, <https://www.netgrace.org/our-values>)

These values reflect a CT-influenced reading of Scripture that privileges the categories of oppressor-oppressed.

⁷² In a very helpful post, Kevin DeYoung notes the problem of this tendency: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, so we must not be suspicious of all authority.” Kevin DeYoung, “Toward a Better Discussion about Abuse,” *Clearly Reformed*, January 25, 2022, <https://clearlyreformed.org/toward-a-better-discussion-about-abuse>.

those with power are essentially abusive by default.⁷³ At the very least, theirs is a guilty-until-proven-to-be-an-ally-to-the-oppressed status.⁷⁴ In one sense, this is endemic to humanity from Genesis 3 onwards. However, suspicion of authority is baked into the cake of CT, as is evident by the DM's Power and Control Wheel. How could it be otherwise when power and control are at the very center of the problem? As a result, at least four fruits of this suspicion may be identified.

One fruit is a broad push to quash differences and flatten hierarchy. Over two decades ago, Peter Jones demonstrated that such flattening is, in fact, a fundamental feature of paganism and has a long and deadly history. The essential battle is between Christian diversity and pagan flattening, and the choices are stark:

What is often not seen in the debate on sexuality is that we are also in the presence of two "gospels": the one, pagan, preaches redemption as liberation from the Creator and repudiation of creation's structures; the other, Christian, proclaims redemption as reconciliation with the Creator, and the proclamation of creation's goodness. In a pagan world, a truncated gospel of personal salvation will no longer do. Sexuality within the context of creation must be announced as an essential part of the Christian message of reconciliation with God and glad submission to his good will.⁷⁵

It is a distinctive feature of paganism that it despises distinction and hierarchy.

Everything must be flattened so that relations can be equitable. The parallels to the DM are obvious.

⁷³ Amos 5:10 provides an example of why faithful authorities are often despised: "They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks the truth." Authorities are often called upon to enforce discipline or consequences, and those who are subject to that enforcement may despise it. Of course, the Lord himself is the One who is subject most often to being despised for the existence and the exercise of his righteous authority.

⁷⁴ Freire champions such a view in his pedagogy: "arguments based on 'authority' are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side of* freedom, not *against* it." Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 53. Freedom, in his system, is essentially self-determination: "Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (52).

⁷⁵ Peter Jones, "Androgyny: The Pagan Sexual Ideal," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43, no. 3 (September 2000): 468. By "sexuality," Jones is referring especially to the distinction of the two sexes (male, female), while also including the implications and applications of those distinctions in the created world.

Christian versions of this flattening tend to be less comprehensive and thorough, though they still demonstrate a deep unease with authority and a suspicion of its exercise. Kruger demonstrates such a disposition in his work on spiritual abuse. His proposed solution to the problem is to erect an elaborate system of checks and balances and committees and annual reports, including representation from the oppressed classes (women and lay persons), in order to ensure that abuse does not happen.⁷⁶ While indicating that he is still in favor of leadership and authority, he has championed structures that would ensure that it operates under a cloud of suspicion. There is no discussion of ecclesiology or polity in his prescribed solutions, nor of the roles of officers and members in the church vis-à-vis authority and accountability. In pursuit of a good goal—the elimination of spiritual abuse—it is exceedingly easy to overcompensate. If the avoidance of abuse is our ultimate aim, we will find it very difficult to function in God’s world in any meaningful way.

Though most evangelical Christians do affirm at least some level of differentiation and distinction between men and women, and to various authority structures within creation, there is a profound cultural pressure to conform to egalitarian assumptions and minimize hierarchy. This is especially obvious in the academy.⁷⁷ One also finds it within some Christian books on abuse. Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb exhibit these attitudes both in their positive statements and in negative ones. Positively, they assert, “The core of a healthy relationship focuses on equality. Once a power imbalance has occurred in a relationship, it opens the door for abusive behavior.”⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 113-30.

⁷⁷ Uwe Peters, for example, argues that egalitarian confirmation bias is both real and necessary. Uwe Peters, “An Argument for Egalitarian Confirmation Bias and against Diversity in Academia,” *Synthese* 198, no. 12 (September 2020): 11999–2109.

⁷⁸ Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 42.

There is, of course, an element of truth to this idea. All persons created in God’s image have equal dignity and value. However, equality seems to be a poor core focus for relationship. It is in the diversity and differences that characterize us that much of the richness of relationship occurs.⁷⁹ Further, as discussed above, almost all relationships have some imbalance of power—by divine design: parent-child, husband-wife, teacher-student, and the like. To assert that these imbalances open the door for abuse owes more to CT than to a biblical perspective and fails to recognize the positive goods that the Lord designed in the authority structures he instituted in his world, as we saw in chapter 1.

Negatively, the Holcombs also use the label of “‘Male privilege’ . . . a term that refers generally to the special rights or status granted to men but denied to women in a society on the bases of their sex. This position is problematic because it’s oppressive.”⁸⁰ Given this definition, any patriarchy—including in the home (Eph 5) or in the church (1 Tim 2)—is oppressive by definition. Again, one sees the overtones of CT in their paradigm and the violence this does to the biblical celebration of diversity and proper hierarchy.

Another fruit is in the anti-institutionalism that characterizes CT. It exists to tear down the structures of oppression and to liberate the masses from their chains.⁸¹ Within the church, this manifests in the power-over/power-under rubric discussed above. It also manifests in sentiments such as: “The ways of Jesus were never intended to be institutionalized. They were institutionalized as a result of power and control and the

⁷⁹ For a deeper development of this idea, see Sam Andreaes, *enGendered: God’s Gift of Gender Difference in Relationship* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

⁸⁰ Holcomb and Holcomb, *Is It My Fault*, 47.

⁸¹ One thinks of the Marxist call that the “WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 2002), 258, capital letters original. The irony in our day is that CT has largely captured the most powerful institutions of our society and therefore enjoys massive institutional advantages. Given its deconstructive nature and lack of any positive vision, this is ultimately untenable and will eventually lead to some manner of compromise or the destruction of the institutions.

ways that post-Constantine Christianity can only be understood as empire religion.”⁸² Langberg champions a similar perspective in her critiques of “Christendom,” as noted above.

A third fruit is which virtues are championed as replacements for the designated sin. An obvious demonstration of this is seen in the *antiracism* movement led by Ibram X. Kendi. Virtue is not found in treating all persons with equal dignity or respect regardless of ethnicity, in line with Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.⁸³ Color blindness is racist in this rubric, because of the oppressive nature of structures, systems, and narratives.⁸⁴ One must be actively antiracist, which actually ratchets race up to a first order, definitive quality.⁸⁵

Similarly in addressing abuse, the idea of *advocacy* can easily become the counterpart to antiracism. It is a way not only to register disapproval of an evil, but also to attempt to remedy it (and perhaps to signal one’s innocence⁸⁶ or virtuous status as

⁸² Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, *Activist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 67. Critical Theory is essentially deconstructive and there is no vision for alternative structures. The vacuum created by destroying existing authorities and structures is thus only filled by the CT-fluent experts, which means that it is a short-lived project at best. CT cannot last and the only question is how much devastation it wreaks before history moves on.

⁸³ Absent is Augustine’s understanding of virtue as *ordo amoris* (ordered loves): “We must, in fact, observe the right order even in our love for the very love with which we love what is deserving of love, so that there may be in us the virtue which is the condition of the good life. Hence, as it seems to me, a brief and true definition of virtue is ‘rightly ordered love’.” Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 15.22. In a CT framework, the virtue of rightly ordered love is replaced by prejudicial treatment prescribed and accomplished according to group identities.

⁸⁴ Shenvi and Sawyer note that “members of oppressor groups are not seen as morally neutral, even if their individual behavior has been unimpeachable A member of the dominant group benefits from—and is morally tainted by—the privilege he obtains from his group membership.” Shenvi and Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory*, 5.

⁸⁵ Under CT, antiracism is not so much opposition to the sin of racism as it is penance. Cline writes, “The only acceptable response by white people is a continual penance that is the divestiture of whiteness; a relinquishment of their privilege.” Timon Cline, “Identity Politics and the Bondage of the Will,” *Founders Journal* 118 (Fall 2019), <https://founders.org/articles/identity-politics-and-the-bondage-of-the-will/>. Kendi writes, “The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘anti-racist’ One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist.” Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 9.

⁸⁶ The phrase “innocence signaling” comes from Joshua Mitchell, “A Godless Great Awakening,” *First Things*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/07/a-godless-great-awakening>.

pertains to the subject). Advocacy can become a way to identify with the oppressed, just as the DM organizers indicated. Such desires are not necessarily wrong. However, when wedded to a CT-derived understanding of authority, power and control, oppression, and the like, advocacy tends to assume a position of superiority (I care about this topic more than you), omnicompetence (I understand this topic better than you), and inquisitorial zeal (I will be eternally vigilant [especially online] and will feel free to pass judgment on situations from a distance). As a pastor, I have witnessed far more unhelpful advocacy in the local church than helpful. The biblical category of *busybody* exists for a reason. Such a person unhelpfully involves herself in matters that are not properly her responsibility, inserting herself with the ostensible desire to help, yet doing so illegitimately and thereby failing to fulfill the responsibilities she *has* been given by God (1 Thess 5:13; 2 Tim 3:11).

There is, however, a proper biblical understanding of advocacy. In large part, it lies in the duty of authorities to protect those entrusted to them and to deal justly with wrongdoing when it occurs, as discussed above. Job seems to be one such example:

Because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth (29:12–17).

Job seems to fulfill the role on two levels: that of the responsible authority (as an elder and leader in his community) and as a wealthy man (1 Tim 6:17–19).

The problem arises when advocacy is presented as an unqualified or unbounded command, such as: “God calls us to confront oppression but also to provide protection and care for the vulnerable. We see Jesus doing these things. He identifies with the powerless, takes up their cause, and stands against those who do harm to the

vulnerable.”⁸⁷ There is truth to these statements, but there is at least potential overstatement in two respects. First, in Scripture, calls to confront oppression and to protect the vulnerable are not generic or comprehensive. They are not even programmatic. That kind of thinking is characteristic of a CT worldview. Though it may sound terribly unspiritual, Christians cannot live their lives constantly dedicated to those two tasks. They are part of our responsibilities, but not the entirety. More to the point, Jesus himself did not demonstrate such a perspective. There were many injustices he did not address, many sick he did not heal, many hungry he did not feed. Such categories are a legitimate part of Christian responsibility and witness, but not its totality. Our providential vocations define the scope of our responsibilities.

Returning to the theme of suspicion of authority we find, second, that we must be careful in understanding what it means to say that Jesus “takes up their cause,” or that he identifies with “the powerless.” This is the kind of rhetoric that characterizes liberation theology. It is certainly true that Jesus cared for the oppressed and that he opposes unjust and exploitative acts. However, nowhere in Scripture do we find that he “identifies with the powerless” in an undefined sense. Nor do we find him taking up “our cause.” We are certainly powerless to rescue or redeem ourselves from the wrath of God against our sins and he does identify with sinful humanity in taking on human form and assuming the burden of our sins. He does so in fulfillment of his own cause and purposes in history. Yet there is an important difference between the clear and undeniable truth that Jesus rescues us and meets our greatest need—to rescue us from the wrath of God—and the idea that he comes to take up our cause. Jesus’s earthly program was most decidedly not prioritized on identification with the marginalized. The wonder of the incarnation is not that he came for the oppressed, but that he came for the rebellious. Our oppression is

⁸⁷ Darby Strickland, quoted in Brad Hambrick, ed., *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused* (Nashville: B&H, 2019), 8.

downstream from our rebellion, not the cause of it. We must be careful in how we understand and speak about the nature of Jesus's redemptive program, as well as the nature of our oppression.

The final fruit of CT's suspicion of authority is the assumption that those in power will always seek to diminish and cover up instances of alleged abuse. Because group identity is central, and because those with positions of power or authority are assumed to be primarily dedicated to protecting and strengthening their identity group, it is not a large logical leap to make that assumption. How else can they maintain the hegemony? It is certainly true that there have been many instances of covering up abuse throughout history. Such practices are wicked and craven. However, the biblical principle of "innocent until proven guilty" surely applies to those in authority equally as to anyone else. To assume that all authorities are corrupt and that their first priority is to protect the institutions they lead is sinful prejudice, plain and simple.⁸⁸

Langberg demonstrates a similar prejudice in her analysis of systemic abuse:

Systemic abuse occurs when a system, such as a family, a government entity, a school, a church or religious organization, a political group, or a social service organization, enables the abuse of the people it purports to protect. Even when acts of abuse are perpetrated solely by an organization's leader, his or her behaviors tend to be perpetuated by a systemic organizational response with the goal of preserving the system in reaction to a perceived threat. What is a system? A system is a combination of parts that work together, forming a complex unitary whole.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ One recent example of this is seen in the work of Wade Mullen in his PhD dissertation. Wade Mullen, "Impression Management Strategies Used by Evangelical Organizations in the Wake of an Image-threatening Event" (PhD diss., Capital Seminary and Graduate School, 2018). Using the field of Impression Management, he analyzed the public statements of various evangelical groups as they went through crises. There is some value in his research, but the level of assumption and motive-assignment that such a project requires is remarkable. In that way, it risks (and often seems to) mislabel as evil what the Bible calls good. May words be used deceptively and selfishly? Absolutely, they may. However, it is one thing to recognize the potential for sin in such ways and quite another to assign ill intent without due process.

⁸⁹ Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 75. She also writes, "We often confuse the system of Christianity, Christendom, with Christ." For Langberg, Christendom is the bogeyman, the church's power play aimed at gaining and maintaining power in the world, and therefore contrary to the spirit of Christ. It is seen, for example, especially in how "Christendom uses terminology regarding gender," and that "much of masculinity in Christendom looks nothing like Jesus" (93).

It is certainly true that any group can circle the wagons and seek to protect its own at all costs. It is also true that a malicious leader can arrange his organization in a way that privileges his own protection. Yet in this reckoning, anyone within any organization where abuse has occurred is essentially assumed to be a collaborator with the abuser. Any call for careful, deliberative justice is almost certain to be labeled as a cover-up or evasion. And even if the abusive acts may have been performed “solely by a . . . leader,” there is an assumption that everyone was complicit to some extent. To operate within a CT paradigm or in sympathy with CT values is to be suspicious of authority, and often to be suspicious of institutions as well.

Short-Circuiting Process

Another fruit of the CT worldview is the diminution of the processes of justice. Since group identity and intersectionality necessarily assign at least a presumption (and often much more) of guilt and innocence to various persons by virtue of their membership in various groups, one needs merely to recognize the group identities of the various persons involved in a situation in order to know who is in the right and who is in the wrong. This is deeply problematic and leads to truisms like “believe all victims.” The conclusion assumes the premise: if someone is indeed a victim, then the fact of their abuse is already established. But what seems to be intended instead is “believe all accusers,” and the grid for evaluation of the accusation flows out of CT. A full discussion of justice and abuse awaits in chapter 4, but I address here one example of short-circuiting process.

Strickland represents the dilemma in her paradigm for reporting abuse. “It helps to keep in mind it is not your responsibility to know or prove that a child has been abused. A report is not an accusation, but rather a request to investigate a situation.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Strickland, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 37.

However, a request for authorities to investigate a situation surely contains moral judgments. In this case, the request is being made to investigate potential abuse. One would not notify the authorities with a request to investigate loving interactions between a parent and child, of course. So, while the reporter may not and need not be claiming with certainty that abuse is happening, he or she is indeed claiming that there is “reasonable suspicion”⁹¹ of abuse (to use the language codified in my home state of Pennsylvania). It is hard to understand that claim as anything less than some level of accusation, and those who are falsely reported will indeed feel accused, and rightly so.

There is certainly an admirable and appropriate instinct to protect innocent victims. Yet we must recognize that we do not know who the victim is until guilt or innocence have been established. And in a CT paradigm, accusations of abuse are attended with heightened power, instantly calling into question the credibility and character of the accused. Regardless of what one thinks of recent accusations made against Justice Brett Kavanaugh in his confirmation hearing, it was obvious that his opponents considered him to be morally unfit and compromised by the very accusation. Some have argued that the accusations were leveled primarily to accomplish that purpose—tainting a candidate in order to angle for his removal.⁹² Indeed, those accusations (and the resultant media circus) will almost certainly be noted in every history book that mentions his Supreme Court career.

We find these diminutions of justice wherever a CT worldview gains power. In 2011, the assistant secretary of the Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights, Catherine Lhamon, issued a “Dear Colleague” letter that defined sexual harassment more

⁹¹ Pennsylvania Child Welfare Information Solution, “Referrals Learn More,” accessed February 7, 2023, <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/CWIS/Public/ReferralsLearnMore>.

⁹² The reader may recall that tainting by accusation was one of the categories uncovered in the review of church history in chapter 1 (p. 16).

expansively than previously and championed a different understanding of how to handle allegations of the same. As Teresa R. Manning has summarized,

Her OCR also launched investigations of colleges and universities that had been deemed insufficiently zealous in their enforcement of Title IX. The same Dear Colleague letter lowered the burden of proof, discouraged cross-examination, and encouraged a single-investigation process whereby the Title IX coordinators at colleges and universities were called to act as police, judge, and jury—all changes that tended toward more frequent findings of fault.⁹³

The program appears to be premised on assigning guilt to the oppressor class (men) in such a way that the traditional processes of justice can and should be disregarded, again all with the admirable goal of protecting women.

When the CT paradigm prevails, it necessarily short-circuits due process. And while it is almost certainly the case that most Christian counselors are *not* self-consciously embracing or espousing CT ideals in their writings on abuse, it is evident that CT has colored the thinking of many on what justice entails and how biblical standards apply to these serious matters. Christian counselors must study and understand biblical justice both philosophically and procedurally if they are to avoid the many pitfalls that lie along the way.

Gnostic Tendencies

One of the most unhelpful features of CT is in its epistemological implications. In brief, it teaches that “oppressor groups are blinded by their privilege and members of oppressed groups have special access to truth that should not be challenged.”⁹⁴ In this way, there is a gnostic quality to group identity in a CT-flavored world. Members of

⁹³ Teresa R. Manning, “Repeal Title IX,” *First Things* 329 (January 202): 32. Under the Trump administration, Secretary of Education Besty DeVos rescinded this letter in 2017. However, Lhamon has been restored to her former office under the Biden administration and is pursuing the reimplementation of her previous standards, as well as broadening sex discrimination to include disagreement with homosexuality and transgenderism. Manning, “Repeal Title IX,” 33.

⁹⁴ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory*, 16. This is the reality expressed by Baucham’s terminology of “ethnic gnosticism.” Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism’s Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Salem, 2021), 91–92.

groups labeled as “oppressed” have knowledge and status that those groups labeled oppressors cannot obtain. This is a version of standpoint theory, which asserts “a cognitive asymmetry between the standpoint of the oppressed and the standpoint of the privileged that gives as an advantage to the former over the latter.”⁹⁵ Similarly, Richard Delgado writes that CRT operates with a “voice-of-color thesis”: “Minority status . . . brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.”⁹⁶ That is, persons who occupy the ethnic minority in America are competent and, just as importantly, ethnic majority persons⁹⁷ do not possess that same competence.⁹⁸

Shenvi and Sawyer develop these ideas in greater detail. “Contemporary critical theory insists that an oppressor’s perception of reality is necessarily distorted by his participation in structures of power. His identity, values, and sense of control are all tied up in false and oppressive social constructs.”⁹⁹ Members of oppressor groups are morally tainted and compromised. This is original sin with no hope of redemption, and in line with the DM’s view on hierarchy and patriarchy. “Conversely, contemporary critical theorists maintain that an oppressed person’s perception of reality and apprehension of truth is enhanced by her social location This advantage is multiplied by the

⁹⁵ José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 197.

⁹⁶ Delgado and Stefanic, *Critical Race Theory*, 11. Interestingly, they acknowledge that this thesis coexists “in somewhat uneasy tension with anti-essentialism.” This is a significant understatement that speaks to the incoherence of their system.

⁹⁷ Interestingly, the group assignment is not truly of the ethnic majority, but of the skin tone of whiteness. White skin tends to subsume many different ethnicities, which are not recognized as true diversity in our culture. The only diversity recognized is non-whiteness.

⁹⁸ Thaddeus J. Williams summarizes the result of such a standpoint epistemology: When applied to questions of justice, this means that anyone who claims that theocrats, racists, Islamophobes, bigots, exploiters, or sexists have hurt them must not be merely heard, but taken authoritatively. Lived experiences must, in turn, become the foundations on which we rebuild everything from public policy and school curriculum to theological systems and church ministry. Questioning the narratives of the oppressed and the policies or theologies derived from them makes *you* the oppressor. (Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask about Social Justice* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020], 139)

⁹⁹ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory*, 7.

phenomenon of intersectionality.”¹⁰⁰ Members of oppressed groups are morally pure and enlightened. Their victim status offers an almost antinomian indulgence.

Given a CT paradigm, what is to be done? “Members of dominant groups need to defer to the claims of subordinate groups. Demands for ‘objective evidence’ and a desire to engage in ‘rational dialogue’ are seen as invalidating an oppressed person’s lived experience.”¹⁰¹ One sees here the parallels to the prevailing counseling paradigm of “believe all victims.” Calls to investigate claims of abuse are dismissed as short-sighted and uncaring, or even dangerous. They are labeled as victim blaming or shaming. Instead, counselors are called to demonstrate concern and empathy and then get out of the way of the experts and civil authorities.¹⁰² It is one thing to recognize (rightly) that such situations are often complex, that much is at stake, and that great care and consideration must be shown throughout. It is another to dismiss altogether the ability of the average Christian or average church to care for a suffering brother or sister and to rely upon God’s Word for guidance and direction. This disdain for ordinary people is a part of the “obvious elitism” that Trueman identifies in Marcuse, and it leads to very dangerous results:

¹⁰⁰ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory*, 8. Cline concurs, “CRT [Critical Race Theory] in particular features the concept of “double consciousness” which affords people of color the power of second sight from the perspective of anti-black prejudice.” Timon Cline, “Identity Politics and the Bondage of the Will,” *Founders Journal* 118 (Fall 2019), <https://founders.org/articles/identity-politics-and-the-bondage-of-the-will/>. Similarly, Pluckrose and Lindsay note, “Everything the marginalized individual interprets as racism is considered racism by default—an episteme that encourages confirmation bias and leaves wide open the door to the unscrupulous.” Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 133.

¹⁰¹ Shenvi and Sawyer, *Engaging Critical Theory*, 9. Denhollander has called such requests for a “significant, high level of detail” about accusations a kind of “voyeuristic engagement with sexual abuse.” Rachael Denhollander, “Rachael Denhollander Calls for a Southern Baptist Reckoning on Abuse,” *The Russell Moore Show*, May 23, 2022, YouTube video, 40:24, https://youtu.be/8_ZYbFiZ7Z8?t=581.

¹⁰² This is the view demonstrated, for example, in *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*. The authors are identified as “Subject Area Experts” throughout, the church is repeatedly critiqued for its widespread failure to protect the abused, and pastors and counselors are diagnosed as well-meaning but ignorant in general. Such an approach is by no means unusual in the counseling literature. Strickland claims, “As you work with the oppressed, you will be wounded. You will be frustrated by other Christians.” Darby Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2020), 51.

Marxism's notion of false consciousness is in essence a sophisticated rationale for justifying not simply a type of intellectual snobbery but also a form of gnostic knowledge, such that all and any criticism of Marcuse and company is merely sure evidence of the false consciousness of the critic. And how is this gnostic knowledge to be imposed? In the short term, by destabilizing the status quo through the constant critiquing of dominant narratives that support the established order and through transgressive actions, such as the practical shattering of bourgeois sexual codes. Ultimately, one assumes, this will all require coercion by government force. Marcuse may have started out in part motivated by a desire to present an alternative to Stalinism, but he really ends up practically in much the same totalitarian place.¹⁰³

The parallels to the values of the DM and to the broader model and goals of CT are striking.

Conclusion

The religious nature of CT is evident in many respects. Contrary to most postmodern theories, it is itself a metanarrative that seeks to interpret all of life through a grid of oppression and power. "The belief that society is structured of specific but largely invisible identity-based systems of power and privilege that construct knowledge via ways of talking about things is now considered by social justice scholars and activists to be an objectively true statement about the organizing principle of society."¹⁰⁴ This view is certainly a recognizable theory, but it is only that—one possible explanation of the nature and shape of reality. That the DM operates within a CT frame, and that such a frame is incompatible with Christianity, should be obvious.

Further, CT is practiced and pursued with religious zeal. As Pluckrose and Lyndsay—no Christians, they—have assessed the broader project of which CT is now the lead participant, they conclude:

Indeed, the whole postmodern project now seems, in retrospect, like an unwitting attempt to have deconstructed the old metanarratives of Western thought—science and reason along with religion and capitalist economic systems—to make room for

¹⁰³ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern of the Modern Self*, 253. "False consciousness" refers to proletariat's unwitting absorption of values that are contrary to their own best interests. Those values are part of the domination of the majority that keep the oppressed from recognizing the inequality and exploitation that they are, in fact, enduring.

¹⁰⁴ Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 182.

a wholly new religion, a postmodern faith based on a dead God, which sees mysterious *worldly* forces in systems of power and privilege and which sanctifies victimhood. This, increasingly, is the fundamentalist religion of the nominally secular left.¹⁰⁵

Christians have an even better explanation for this inevitable development. The *semen religionis*¹⁰⁶ resides in the heart of every man, inevitably confronting us with God and the divine. When fallen man rejects the true God, he does not enter a state of neutrality or independence (*contra* modern secularism); instead, he must ever and always engage a replacement. For those who have imbibed the worldview of CT, it is societal forces that are the source of evil (which sounds suspiciously like an update on the spirits of ancient paganism), corrupting man's goodness and producing devastation in the world. By appealing to reason and various chosen virtues like egalitarianism, salvation may be achieved. For an avowed atheist like Lyndsay, it is ignorance that is the enemy and science that saves.

In any and every scenario, religion abounds. There is always a god, always some problem to be solved, always some solution to be offered (or sold), always some authority to be obeyed, and always a priesthood to mediate the solution. The worldly and godless philosophies of this age cannot fully describe—and certainly cannot adequately address—the evils of our age.¹⁰⁷ Abuse is one of those evils. As Christians, we must

¹⁰⁵ Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 210–11. Of course, their assumptions are on display, as is their failure to recognize the fundamentally religious nature of their system.

¹⁰⁶ Richard A. Muller argues, “The rudimentary knowledge of God that arises in every human being because of the objective revelation of God in his work of creation and providence, and because of the subjective reality of a remnant of the image of God in each person. Because of the fall, however, the *semen religionis* gives rise, not to true religion, but to idolatry and error in the name of God.” Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 329.

¹⁰⁷ Former anarchist Conor Barnes quotes and then develops Richard Day's concept of the “infinite responsibility” that a radical “paradigm of suspicion” produces:

We can never allow ourselves to think that we are “done,” that we have identified all of the sites, structures, and processes of oppression “out there” or “in here,” inside our own individual and group identities.’ Infinite responsibility means infinite guilt, a kind of Christianity without salvation: to see power in every interaction is to see sin in every interaction. All that the activist can offer to absolve herself is Sisyphean effort until burnout. (Conor Barnes, “Sad Radicals,” *Quillette*, December 11, 2018, <https://quillette.com/2018/12/11/sad-radicals/>)

recognize how the world thinks about and addresses that evil and how those views do and do not align with the biblical presentation. Only then can we honor the Lord in how we work to understand and prevent abuse, and in how we respond to it whenever it, sadly, occurs. Only then can we walk justly before God and demonstrate clarity, courage, compassion, and conviction to a watching and hurting world.

CHAPTER 4

JUSTICE AND PROCESS

Both subtly and directly, matters of justice have peppered these pages thus far. The topic of abuse does pose a number of exceptionally challenging questions as relates to justice, questions which defy easy answers. Further, the rise of CT has both greatly heightened the emotional and cultural freight of justice issues as well as complicated and confused much of what had previously passed for a cultural consensus on understanding justice.¹ When it comes to abuse, efforts are underway to redefine how we as a society understand and respond to abuse, including concepts such as the presumption of innocence, the statute of limitations, due process, and the burden of proof. Higher

¹ Perhaps the most influential person for the modern change in understanding justice is the Episcopalian layman and philosopher, John Rawls (1921–2002). Leif Wenar, “John Rawls,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, rev. April 12, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/>. Rawls’s seminal work, first published in 1971, offered a widely influential vision of social justice. Rawls framed the issue as “justice as fairness.” He utilized the concept of “original position . . . the appropriate initial status quo which insures that the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair.” John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 15. He thus challenged persons to define a just society without knowing what position they might be born into under such a society. Consequently, he championed a version of redistribution of goods in an effort to ensure that the disadvantaged might gain access to those things necessary to secure their rights.

Later, he modified his original teaching to rule out arguments from comprehensive worldviews (save his own), including religion and natural law, allowing only for versions of religions that he deemed to be “reasonable”—quite literally, open to reason and thus unwilling to seek to impose morality on others (ironically). Fairness is judged by the standard of “public reason,” that is, what all reasonable citizens could agree to as justification. “Since justification is addressed to others, it proceeds from what is, or can be, held in common; and so we begin from shared fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture in the hope of developing from them a political conception that can gain free and reasoned agreement in judgment.” John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 100–1. As Robert P. George summarizes,

Thus, citizens are constrained from appealing to and acting upon beliefs drawn from their most fundamental moral understandings and commitments precisely at the most fundamental political level, namely, the level of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. And they are so constrained on grounds entirely separate from the putative falsity, unreasonableness, or unsoundness of those understandings and commitments or the beliefs drawn therefrom. (Robert P. George, *The Clash of Orthodoxies: Law, Religion, and Morality in Crisis* [Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001], 47–48)

education especially is leading the way in this regard,² but there are also efforts being made within our criminal and judicial systems.³ On a more mundane level, how individual Christians and local churches understand and respond justly to abuse is also a topic of vast discussion and debate. All of the above makes it quite important that we understand how Scripture directs us to think and respond justly whenever an allegation of abuse is made.

Defining Justice

Justice is manifest both in disposition and in action. The links between character and conduct are obvious, as justice is tied to integrity, rectitude, and morality in all respects.⁴ Justinian defined justice as “the settled and permanent intention of rendering to each man his rights.”⁵ The idea of conformity to a standard, or uprightness and straightness, is at the heart of justice.⁶ As Stephen Wellum notes: “At its heart, justice and

² See Scott Yenor, “Higher Ed Reform in Red States,” *American Reformer*, January 17, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2023/01/higher-ed-reform/>.

³ Many other legal changes over the past 40–50 years have been concurrent with those concerning domestic abuse, which were noted in chapter 3. In Australia, for example, “since 2015 . . . every Australian state and territory has removed limitation periods for child sexual abuse claims prospectively and retrospectively, enabling commencement of a claim at any time.” Ben Mathews and Elizabeth Dallaston, “Reform of Civil Statutes of Limitation for Child Sexual Abuse Claims: Seismic Change and Ongoing Challenges,” *UNSW Law Journal* 43, no. 2 (2020): 386. In America meanwhile, “In 1963, no state had a law requiring the reporting of suspected child abuse. Now, all fifty states have such laws.” Besharov was writing in 1985. Douglas J. Besharov, “Right Versus Rights,” *Public Welfare* 43, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 20. More broadly, he noted, “There has been an unprecedented increase in the level of state intervention into private family matters over the past twenty years. Such intervention often is needed to protect children from serious injury and even death. But just as often state intervention appears to be unnecessary—and sometimes it is demonstrably harmful to the children and families involved” (19). Most recently, Scotland has proposed abandoning juries for rape trials because the conviction level has been unacceptably low. Scottish solicitors have voted to boycott such trials as contrary to the interests of justice. “Lawyer Boycott of Juryless Rape Trials ‘To Be Unanimous,’” *BBC News*, May 9, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-65531380>.

⁴ *OED*, 8:326. “The quality of being (morally) just or righteous; the principle of just dealing; the exhibition of this quality or principle in action; just conduct; integrity, rectitude.”

⁵ Caesar Flavius Justinian, *The Institutes of Justinian*, trans. J. B. Moyle, 5th ed. (Oxford, 1913), I.i, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5983/5983-h/5983-h.htm>; C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 94.

⁶ J. B. Payne, “Justice,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall et al., 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 635.

righteousness means ‘a strict adherence to law,’ and it always carries a legal or forensic sense.”⁷ The *OED* identifies two principal categories of definition: “the quality of being just” and “judicial administration of law or equity.”⁸ Thus we find twin threads: (a) personal character—justice manifest in right behavior from right motives; and, (b) legal/authoritative process—justice manifest in impartial treatment.⁹

Therefore, “justice demands an authority.”¹⁰ In order to understand and assess matters of justice, some standard will be utilized and some authority will serve to define (and generally, to enforce) those standards. According to Scripture, the options for a supreme authority are essentially two: man or God.¹¹ That is, one can either look to autonomy or to divine law.¹² For Christians, the choice should be clear. Given the reality of the fall and its effects on mankind, we know that the ability of persons to think, feel, and choose righteously and justly have been seriously compromised. Even apart from the

⁷ Stephen Wellum, “Thinking Biblically and Theologically about Justice,” *Christ Over All*, July 17, 2023, <https://christoverall.com/article/longform/thinking-biblically-and-theologically-about-justice/>. The phrase “strict adherence to the law” is found in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2005), 74. Berkhof utilized the phrase in discussing the righteousness of God in its “relative” capacity, that is, in relation to his creatures. “It is to this righteousness that the phrase ‘justice’ more particularly applies. Justice manifests itself especially in giving every man his due, in treating him according to his deserts. The inherent righteousness of God is naturally basic to the righteousness which He reveals in dealing with His creatures” (75).

⁸ The *OED* also identifies a third category of “an administrator of justice,” which is a person fulfilling a role related to the second category above (8:326).

⁹ Deuteronomy 16 demonstrates the conjunction, as the Lord commanded his people to identify and “appoint judges and officers” who will “judge the people with righteous judgment” (v. 18). They are not to “pervert justice . . . show partiality . . . [or] accept a bribe” (v. 19). Instead, “justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you” (v. 20). Just men were to be appointed to administrate justly.

¹⁰ Douglas Wilson and Randy Booth, *A Justice Primer*, 3rd ed. (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022), 27. Justice is thus a subset of the broader domain noted by Lewis: “A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery.” C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 73.

¹¹ Thomas Sowell depicts this reality in his portrayal of traditional justice against what he terms “cosmic justice.” The latter is an attempt to achieve equality (especially of outcome, i.e., equity) through force, if necessary. “For cosmic justice, someone must *oversee* the social results of these individual transactions and intervene directly to ensure that the desired social results or prospects are arranged.” Thomas Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 156.

¹² For further discussion, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 56–58, 166–70. Of course, true autonomy is impossible and attempts to achieve it almost always lead to some manner of totalitarian state government.

fall, the limitations of our humanity point to our need for external guidance and direction. Thankfully, the Lord has provided amply in his Word.¹³ “The only warrant for a universal, objective ground for justice is God himself. God *is* the law because his will and nature determines what is right and just.”¹⁴

Scripture provides many compelling presentations of justice. Ezekiel, for example, demonstrates some of its contours:

If a man is righteous and does what is just and right—if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor’s wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord GOD. (Ezek 18:5–9)

The breadth of activities covered is impressive. Justice is not just a matter for courts of law, but it should be manifest in all we do every day. Justice is seen both in what the righteous man avoids and in what he performs. It is seen especially in his conduct, though it clearly arises from his inner dispositions (avoid idols, be faithful to the Lord’s statutes and rules).

The Psalmist also teaches that justice involves what we love (and by extension, what we despise). “I hate the double-minded [unjust], but I love your law” (Ps 119:13). “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies” (Ps 139:21–22). Therefore, both mercy and judgment can and must be loving and just. As Thomas Aquinas taught,

¹³ In a recent article excerpted from a forthcoming book, Jonathan Leeman notes that “the Hebrew word for ‘justice’ is the noun form of the verb ‘to judge.’ Biblical justice, I’d say, is making judgments according to God’s standard of righteousness.” Jonathan Leeman, “What Authority Has God Given to Governments?,” *9Marks*, April 29, 2023, <https://www.9marks.org/article/what-authority-has-god-given-to-governments/>.

¹⁴ Wellum, “Thinking Biblically and Theologically about Justice.”

We ought to love sinners, out of charity On the other hand their guilt is opposed to God, and is an obstacle to happiness. Wherefore, in respect of their guilt whereby they are opposed to God, all sinners are to be hated, even one's father or mother or kindred, according to Luke 12:26. For it is our duty to hate, in the sinner, his being a sinner, and to love in him, his being a man capable of bliss; and this is to love him truly, out of charity, for God's sake.¹⁵

Even the judgment of capital punishment can be an act of charity (in the ancient, not modern, sense of the term). “Nevertheless the judge puts this into effect, not out of hatred for the sinners, but out of the love of charity, by reason of which he prefers the public good to the life of the individual.”¹⁶

As noted in chapter 1, Christians have been dealing with matters of justice for millennia. Church history offers further help in understanding justice. Aquinas, for example, provides a standard definition: justice is “the perpetual and constant will to render to each one his right,” or, more expansively, “justice is a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due by a constant and perpetual will.”¹⁷ So justice is as justice does in its treatment of our fellow man, and it is so in its constancy. Further, justice is very much an interpersonal phenomenon: “Legal justice . . . stands foremost among all the moral virtues, for as much as the common good transcends the individual good of one person.”¹⁸ As Ambrose of Milan observed, “How great a thing justice is can be gathered from the fact that there is no place, nor person, nor time, with which it has nothing to do. It must even be preserved in all dealings with enemies.”¹⁹

The relationship of justice with other qualities must be recognized as well.

Ambrose wrote, “Justice cannot exist without prudence, since it demands no small

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, 10 vols. Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012), IIa-IIae, Q 25, A 6 (17:244).

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, Q 25, A 6, ad. 2 (17:245).

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, Q 58, A 1, arg. 1 (17:535). Similarly in David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 79: “What is justice? The short answer is, ‘To render to each his or her due’.”

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, Q 58, A 12 (17:551).

¹⁹ Ambrose, *Off.* 1.29.139 (*NPNF*², 10:23–24).

amount of prudence to see whether a thing is just or unjust.”²⁰ C. S. Lewis would agree: “Justice means much more than the sort of things that goes on in law courts. It is the old name for everything we should now call ‘fairness’; it includes honesty, give and take, truthfulness, keeping promises, and all that side of life.”²¹ Cicero likewise noted that “the foundation of justice is good faith.”²² Part of the challenge of our day is that grand visions of justice are being promoted (i.e., CT) that are often disconnected from these broader qualities while also ruling out objective assessment *a priori*.²³ Genuine justice cannot be so constrained.

True justice is robust, affecting every area of life and all that persons do in God’s world. This ought not to be surprising, as justice is broadly recognized as one of the attributes of our holy God, in whom all virtues dwell in fullness and perfection: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne” (Ps 89:14). “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he” (Deut 32:4). God is just and his work is just. As his creatures living in his creation, justice must, therefore, be fully integrated in a righteous life and cannot be understood apart from true morality.

Scripture also ties the ability to understand justice to the moral status of the knower. That is, the ability of a person to rightly conceptualize (and by implication, to practice) justice is in some manner commensurate with a person’s established character. Proverbs 28:5 is perhaps best-known in this regard: “Evil men do not understand justice,

²⁰ Ambrose, *Off.* 1.27.126 (*NPNF*², 10:22).

²¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 79.

²² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (New York: MacMillan Co., 1913), I. vii, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47001/47001-h/47001-h.htm#Pg001>.

²³ This is one of the primary tactics of CT adherents: to label critics pejoratively and then to dismiss their claims as morally compromised and therefore unworthy of consideration. Hence, the rapid devaluation in the term “racist,” and the introduction of new categories of cultural offensiveness such as mansplaining, whitesplaining, white fragility, and the like. The simplicity of CT allows those who have embraced it to judge instantly: one either agrees with the CT perspective or one disagrees and is racist/sexist/homophobic/etc., dependent upon the topic under consideration.

but those who seek the LORD understand it completely.”²⁴ Proverbs 2 explicitly ties the ability to “understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path” (v. 9) to seeking the Lord for wisdom in his Word. Justice is a topic for which the line of division between those who fear the Lord and those who do not is quite stark.²⁵ In discussions of justice, we must never lose sight of these vital truths. Godless systems have never and will never produce true justice. There is a stark dividing line between righteous and unrighteous—between godly and worldly—visions of justice.

Justice is a rich and integral topic that runs throughout creation and affects everything that we do every day. Justice reflects the character of our God. In a fallen world, there is great and constant injustice that affects us every day. For Christians, then, “to do justice” (Mic 6:8) is a very important aspect of our obedience to God, bringing him glory and testifying to his truth and goodness amid the corruption of the world. When it comes to abuse, all that we do in seeking to prevent it, to handle accusations, to addressing it when it occurs, and to dealing with its aftermath, must be just. We need just protections, just processes, just care and confrontation, and just consequences. We also need just redemption and just reconciliation, whenever possible.

Components of Justice

Though entire dissertations can and have been written on justice, we constrain definition to the discussion above in order to turn to the particulars of justice, and especially of justice as relates to abuse. Seven topics in particular will occupy our attention in the succeeding pages. It is certain that more could be written, but these seven

²⁴ Lewis would likely agree, as consistent with his broader concept of the *Tao*. “Only those who are practicing the *Tao* will understand it.” Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 49.

²⁵ Those who would insist that the doctrine of total depravity means that all should be classified as “evil” (and therefore, no one should pretend to understand justice) must reckon with complementary biblical truths. For example, Jesus taught that the Father sends sunshine and rain on both “the evil and the good . . . the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45).

ought to provide a sufficient basis for discussing the weightier matters of justice that abuse raises.

Duly Constituted Authorities

The need for clear definition and limitation of authorities is great in this fallen world, and perhaps nowhere more so than when accusations begin to fly. All throughout Scripture, the clear teaching by precept and principle is that one of the most important responsibilities of any authority is to address matters of justice. Just authority begins with God himself: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you” (Ps 89:14). It passes down through the highest human authorities, such as the king: “Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place” (Jer 22:3). It also extends throughout every level of rule:

You shall appoint judges and officers in all your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Deut 16:18–20).

Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace (Exod 18:21–23).

Without just and duly authorized rulers, there is little hope for justice in this age. Human history amply demonstrates this truth, as does the front page of every daily newspaper.

Jurisdiction. One important application of such authorization is the concept of jurisdiction.²⁶ As was discussed in chapter 2, all authorities bear a duty of protection toward those called to submit to them.²⁷ This again demonstrates that the fundamental Christian disposition toward power, control, and authority is one of recognized responsibility. The question Christians must ask when entrusted with any position of leadership is: *for whom and for what am I responsible?*²⁸ This includes both the duties of exercising authority in leadership and of exercising authority in protection. Those authorized by God to fulfill responsible roles have a scope of authority, a jurisdiction. The term need not be restricted to a legal/judicial sense, as it does communicate helpfully the twin truths of full authorization within a given realm of responsibility and of no authorization without.

One application of the need for clarity in recognizing due authorities is seen in the thinking of Hambrick in discussing “the relationship between ministry leaders and social workers”:

Social workers and mental health professionals *are beholden to one individual or family at a time*. They have a series of isolated helping relationships, and each choice they make is for the flourishing of that individual.

By contrast, pastors *are beholden to an entire congregation and care for each individual as a member of the group*. Each choice a pastor makes has the felt sense of being a precedent for the entire congregation.

When providing care in an abuse context—which is always interpersonal and is usually marked by wildly varying renditions of what actually happened—these differences have immense implications.²⁹

²⁶ The *OED* defines jurisdiction as, “the extent or range of judicial or administrative power; the territory over which such power extends” (7:320).

²⁷ “The rulers had a special obligation to stop oppression.” Allen D. Verhey, “Oppress,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:610. Authorities are also required to not be oppressive (Ezek 45:7-12).

²⁸ Of course, this is not a uniquely Christian perspective. It is God’s design for all authorities everywhere. However, Christians have the Spirit of God and the Word of God, and therefore we should be especially attuned to these realities.

²⁹ Brad Hambrick, ed., *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused* (Nashville: B & H, 2019), 45.

Elsewhere Hambrick identifies differing ethics and lead principles for the pastor and counselor.³⁰ The pastor, in his reckoning, is committed to *make Christ known*. The counselor is committed to *do no harm*. He continues,

A counselor will be more neutral with a counselee than a pastor is with a parishioner because [sic] pastoral relationship is authoritative while a counseling relationship is advisory. Even when the pastor and counselor share the same values, the tone of the interaction will be different. This is based upon at least one key distinction between pastoral and counseling relationships.

Note: I believe it is this distinction, which is often misunderstood by both sides, that leads to much of the friction that exists (when it is present) between pastors and counselors.

Pastoral relationships *exist in covenant community* governed by biblical standards and overseen by the elders of the church. Pastors have a delegated authority to which their parishioners have agreed to adhere to in order to remain a member in good standing with that particular church.

Counseling is a *voluntary relationship* that exists for the duration of time for which the counselee deems the benefits of counseling as being greater than the time investment. Counselors have no authority over a counselee and their influence is had purely through the voluntary cooperation of the counselee.

One certainly understands his points and should agree in some respects. However, as a pastor, I must disagree with his synopsis and presentation of pastoral ethics. The question of authorization is not a neutral one. Every Christian must consider what behavior the Lord has authorized, and though we are all called to fulfill many different roles both vocationally and providentially, we are all called to the same ethical standards. The counselor or social worker must also understand the nature of their authorization.

Similarly, it will not do to separate entirely pastoral ethics, as it were, from counseling ethics, nor will it do to separate care for a given individual from care for the societies to which that individual belongs (whether that society is a family, a community, a church, or a workplace). One of the challenges facing Christian counselors lies here. If the counselor conceives of his care as an isolated project, focusing merely on the individual, he is failing to care for the groups to which the counselee belongs (her family, church, and the like). Faithful pastors recognize that their responsibilities always include

³⁰ Hambrick, "Comparing Pastoral Ethics and Counseling Ethics," Brad Hambrick, June 24, 2016, <https://bradhambrick.com/comparing-pastoral-ethics-and-counseling-ethics>.

both the whole and the parts, so the issue is less one of precedent and more one of extent. The pastor cannot set aside the responsibility of care for the entire church in order to care exclusively for one member, nor should he. But neither should the (non-pastoral) counselor. Their roles and responsibilities as regards various groups may differ somewhat, but the pastor and the Christian counselor ought not to be operating on different planes.³¹

It is even worse when in the name of caring for the individual, the counselor sets aside the principles of biblical justice and authority. As regards the latter, if the counselee is a member of a church, those pastors have responsibility for her soul (Heb 13:17). If she is married, her husband is likewise accountable for how he has exercised his authority over her (Eph 5:25–33; 1 Pet 3:7). Further, if she is alleging crimes, then the justice system and its authorities might be engaged (Rom 13:1–7). For Christians, all relationships carry some degree of voluntarism and some degree of obligation.³² It will not do to set aside what Scripture teaches on one topic (say, justice or authority) in the name of fulfilling what Scripture teaches on another topic (care and compassion). Challenging though it may be, all of these truths should be held together, just as they are always held within our God in all he is, says, and does.

In my review of the literature, most abuse counselors seem to be most comfortable in commending the social work and criminal justice systems, followed most closely by themselves. Familial and ecclesial authorities are often minimized or

³¹ A social worker who works for an agency of the civil government (or an agency that contracts with the government) faces similar considerations. He must consider the nature and scope of his civil authority, the degree of its consistency with God's Word, and the nature of the care and responsibility he should provide.

³² For example, though pastors have authority in the lives of church members, it is still a voluntary association from which a member may withdraw. Conversely, all Christians have a measure of authority in one another's lives as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have all been united to Christ and are therefore members of one another (Rom 12:5).

dismissed altogether.³³ If the alleged abuser is a familial or ecclesial authority then such an assessment might be understandable. But it is not uncommon for counselors to be called upon in situations for which they have no authority beyond being a brother or sister in Christ and they may also have little knowledge of the other participants and the setting for which they are providing counsel. The counselor so situated is therefore counseling in a position of presumptive authority (by virtue of training and expertise) without the attendant responsibility and accountability. The at-large counselor is in a dangerous place biblically.

We dare not dismiss and dismantle the structures that the Lord has instituted so quickly or easily. If a Christian counselor views his role as independent of the local church, he will show little regard for the role of the church in choosing who and how he counsels. It is generally a far more commercial arrangement: if someone needs services (counseling), the counselor is willing to provide them (and generally for a fee). This need not be conceived of as a mercenary motivation; rather, it is the recognition that counselors both want to help persons and they need “clients” in order to make a living. Both aspects provide a strong disincentive for asking potentially inconvenient questions regarding a person’s church membership, asking for permission to speak with her pastor, and certainly not for deferring to those that Scripture explicitly authorizes to provide such care. Ecclesiology and polity are likely not a priority in many counseling curricula and the prevailing CT views of authority and oppression make such topics suspect as well.³⁴

³³ Strickland demonstrates this disposition in her advice to a counselor. “Before you have the victim share her story of abuse, seek to assess whether her church has experience with caring for the oppressed. You want to be aware of the church’s strengths and weaknesses so that you can both guide the victim wisely and assist the church with responding well.” She then lists a series of questions that the church must answer before she will allow her counselee to share her story. She also advises that if the counselor believes that the church does not have experience (or if the counselor is unsure), “then anticipate that you will have to educate the church about abuse.” Darby Strickland, *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2020), 205. The unwritten assumption is that the counselor is authorized by God to sit in judgment over the church in this manner and therefore to function as the ultimate authority in determining the best path forward.

³⁴ The irony is that in recognizing that authorities sometimes do fail at their duties or even mistreat those under their charge, the CT mindset does not dispense with authorities altogether. It merely

Further, in 1 Corinthians 6:1–6, Paul argues that Christians should judge one another within the church for matters under dispute, rather than appealing to outside (and unbelieving!) parties. The scope of his prohibition is debated, but he argues *a fortiori* that those who will one day judge “the world” and “angels” should be able to judge disputes among themselves. If such thinking has no place in our considerations, we are missing an important biblical theme.

When dealing with civil authorities, the situation may differ somewhat. The police and various social workers may have genuine authority in a situation that entitles them to be involved in those situations that also occasion the church’s care and counsel. Christians should recognize and respect those roles and cooperate with civil servants insofar as practicable. However, recognizing the role of other authorities does not entail the abdication of our own. As Douglas Wilson has noted,

The church frequently must deal with the same sins and crimes that the state does. Our roles overlap and yet have distinctly different objectives. Ideally, the church and state work together While the state’s primary objective is justice, the church’s primary objective is redemption. These are not mutually exclusive concepts, but complementary.³⁵

And further: “The state’s job is to provide justice. The church’s job is more complicated: justice and mercy. The state’s job is to protect the innocent. The church’s job is to protect the innocent and to provide salvation for the guilty. We may not choose one over the other. Redemption is always about restoring bad people.”³⁶

Third-party investigations. Another aspect of due authorization concerns third-party investigations. Langberg’s position is typical among many abuse counselors:

shifts functional authority to experts who are often independent and, therefore, lack accountability. Why should we suppose that those with such investigative or counseling power and control would be exempt from abuse? For example, “SNAP Announces Director Named in Lawsuit Has Resigned,” *CBS News Chicago*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/snap-announces-director-named-in-lawsuit-has-resigned/>.

³⁵ Wilson and Booth, *A Justice Primer*, 227.

³⁶ Wilson and Booth, *A Justice Primer*, 228.

“The capacity for deception in all of us is why independent investigations are crucial to finding truth.”³⁷ The appeal is made that third-party investigators will be more impartial,³⁸ better trained,³⁹ and therefore better able to achieve a just outcome.⁴⁰ Those arguments have some merit and deserve consideration. However, especially when directed to local churches,⁴¹ they can also represent assumptions that owe more to CT than the Bible. The assumption that those in power are only interested in protecting the institution is especially uncharitable, and especially among Christians. Further, the elders of a local church are explicitly authorized by God to oversee the church and will give account to him for that responsibility (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:1–4). One cannot make the same argument with third-party groups, who have their own agendas and

³⁷ Diane Langberg, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 141. Boz Tchividjian makes similar arguments. See Boz Tchividjian, “Are Abuse Survivors Best Served when Institutions Investigate Themselves?,” *Religion News Service*, October 16, 2015, <https://religionnews.com/2015/10/16/are-abuse-survivors-best-served-when-institutions-investigate-themselves/>. One notes that these sentiments would seem to apply equally to independent investigators as to those they investigate.

³⁸ It is ironic that the firm recommended by Denhollander and hired by the SBC Executive Committee for their independent investigation, Guidepost Solutions, posted a pro-LGBTQ+ tweet on their Twitter feed (June 6, 2022) within weeks of their hiring (May 25, 2022). Guidepost Solutions, “Guidepost is committed to strengthening diversity, equity and inclusion and strives to be an organization where our team can bring their authentic selves to work. We celebrate our collective progress toward equality for all and are proud to be an ally to our LGBTQ+ community,” June 6, 2022, <https://twitter.com/GuidepostGlobal/status/1533872616812978176>. If investigators cannot affirm something so basic and essential as biblical sexual ethics, can they seriously be expected to offer a sound and just assessment of abuse?

³⁹ See the apologetic offered by GRACE. GRACE, “Independent Investigations,” accessed February 12, 2023, <https://www.netgrace.org/independent-investigations>.

⁴⁰ Denhollander has argued that “an independent review by a qualified firm requires higher, not lower, standards than the less-defined and basic standards set out in Scripture.” Rachael Denhollander, “A Response to Sovereign Grace Churches Statement on an Independent Investigation,” Edited April 16, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/rachael-denhollander/a-response-to-sovereign-grace-churches-statement-on-an-independent-investigation/2290404937706480/>. The idea that the standards of Scripture are basic and lower than other standards is a very concerning line of argumentation, and again speaks to the CT influence prevalent in conceptions of abuse and justice.

⁴¹ One of the challenges of parachurch settings is that most institutions do not have explicit biblical warrant (e.g., a seminary, retreat center, etc.). Therefore, the structures of authority and accountability can be unclear or limited. In those situations, a third-party investigation may make more sense; however, if parachurch institutions are under denominational authority, for example, the need for a third-party diminishes greatly.

philosophical/theological commitments, and whose accountability structures and financial arrangements certainly deserve closer scrutiny.⁴²

Further, such organizations have a vested interest in drawing attention to instances of alleged abuse and in offering their services for a fee. Again, this is not to allege any kind of mercenary motivation, but to recognize that the questions of motives, power dynamics, and the like are inescapable in our world and cut in all directions. Our societal deference to the “expert” certainly has its own problems as well.⁴³ Therefore, it seems both wise and biblical for churches to establish clear and biblical structures and policies for addressing cases of alleged abuse, including how such reports will be investigated and adjudicated.⁴⁴ It is part of their responsibility before God, it is care for their members, and it is sadly necessary in a world gone mad. Outside groups may be consulted for training and input so long as they affirm and operate with a biblical understanding of justice.

⁴² To quote Juvenal, *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (“who will watch the watchers?”). Juvenal, “Satira VI,” in *Saturae*, Latin Library, accessed October 2, 2023, <http://thelatinlibrary.com/juvenal/6.shtml>. The core questions, from a biblical perspective, are: By what standard is a person or group authorized and empowered to perform its functions? What standard of justice will be employed? The essence of the appeal from third-party advocates seems to be expertise (e.g., trauma-informed, power dynamics, etc.) and independence. Persons must decide for themselves if those are satisfying grounds for authorizing outsiders. From my perspective, they are not. It may be helpful to consult with various people to benefit from their wisdom and experience, but that is different from empowering them to exercise (unaccountable) authority. Those who advocate for third-party investigators also tend to minimize the theological commitments of said groups. These commitments exercise a tremendous influence on their philosophy and approach to a situation, their assessment of what constitutes abuse, and their recommendations for a response.

⁴³ Phillip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 23–38; Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 45–53. Both authors have noted this same move with therapeutic psychology through the years. As science and expertise gained increasing value and credibility within broader society, replacing the traditional role of religion, psychologists sought to portray themselves as experts and to portray their field as a science. The reliance on “expertise” can convey an aura of objectivity that may not fit the situation, such as during recent events when citizens were repeatedly reassured that various leaders were merely “following the science.”

⁴⁴ Churches do not perform criminal investigations, but they should perform ecclesial investigations as is fitting to the situation. A well-designed policy will consider how the church should interact with the civil authorities and how it will fulfill its responsibilities to everyone involved (accuser, accused, members and guests, community, etc.).

Advocacy. In chapter 3 I discussed the role of advocacy and the dangers inherent in such an approach to abuse, as well as the potential for proper advocacy. Here I want to discuss advocacy in relation to justice. There are various models of advocacy. Some would identify an advocate as what the Bible would call a friend:

A counseling advocate is a *peer-based* relationship, a friend, mentor, encourager, etc., who serves as a *periodic guest* in counseling, meaning they don't come to every session. Their role is to provide *support and reinforcement* while that individual is in counseling and serve as a long-term *encouragement and accountability after counseling concludes*.⁴⁵

Such a role can be proper and helpful, though I do not prefer the terminology because it implies some level of hostility, bias, resistance, or reluctance on behalf of the counselor or authorities. Indeed, I wonder why *friend* does not seem to be a suitable term. It is a rich, biblical term that communicates all the above qualities, and more.

However, a more typical definition of advocate is one who publicly supports and pleads on behalf of persons or causes, and especially in the face of resistance or apathy. This has become a more common practice in our day, and especially so on social media. However, when dealing with headline-grabbing stories advocacy is of limited value. The ability of anyone to understand and comment upon important matters from a distance is extremely limited, as is the propriety of doing so. Indeed, social media encourages an Inquisitorial mindset, including the presumption of guilt, the rush to judgment, the thrill of joining the multitudinous minions in condemning the accused, and the castigation of anyone who does not join in immediate, full-throated participation in the same.⁴⁶

This is one of the great dangers of advocacy and is commonly manifest in other CT-influenced arenas. Since CT views authority as suspect (at best) as well as

⁴⁵ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 127.

⁴⁶ Anne Applebaum notes, "The modern online public sphere, a place of rapid conclusions, rigid ideological prisms, and arguments of 280 characters, favors neither nuance nor ambiguity." Anne Applebaum, "The New Puritans," *Atlantic* 328, no. 3 (October 2021): 62.

viewing its own adherents as unusually enlightened, it is only natural that those who have drunk deepest of its detoxifying draughts should be established as the new court of (public) justice. Indeed, it is a form of self-authorization, inserting oneself into situations illegitimately. Those who would act as advocates need to consider the basis of their authorization to do so. As Sowell notes, “For cosmic justice, someone must oversee the social results of these individual transactions and intervene directly to ensure that the desired social results or prospects are arranged.”⁴⁷ Advocacy certainly seems inclined to try to fulfill that role. The problem is that, for Christians, such a role belongs to God alone, who then designates various authorities to play their parts in fulfilling the requirements of justice. Freelance societal advocacy seems difficult to legitimize within such an understanding.

Conclusions on due authorization. I am concerned that in an admirable effort to provide care for hurting persons, some abuse counselors have adopted a “whatever it takes” attitude toward preventing abuse. There is much that is commendable in their efforts at care. However, such a disposition can work contrary to the biblical perspective and prescriptions on justice. When seeking to walk justly before our God it is very important that we recognize what we cannot do, as well as what we can do. Rawlsian justice advances the ideal of fairness and then proceeds to enforce unfair standards in order to try to achieve an equitable result. Not only is this futile, but it is also profoundly unjust and counterproductive. Similarly, I am concerned that the approaches to abuse advocated by some seek to remedy unfairness and abuse at any cost. This is understandable, but neither wise nor just. Instead, we must recognize and respect the authorities and processes that the Lord has established as we deal with the horrible

⁴⁷ Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, 156.

injustices that the term *abuse* represents. We must not abuse justice in our attempts at achieving it.

Impartiality

One of the bedrock principles of justice is impartiality. Again, this quality reflects the character of our God, who “shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34; cf. 2 Chr 19:7; 1 Pet 1:17). The traditional depiction of Lady Justice as blindfolded while holding scales and a sword visually demonstrates the principle. She does not judge according to the fallible assessments she can gain from the appearances of others.⁴⁸ She is not impressed by the wealthy or famous, nor moved to pity by the poor or oppressed. Rather, she has one standard—one set of scales—that she applies to all without prejudice or equivocation. To fail to do so produces injustices, which are abominable in the Lord’s eyes: “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD” (Prov 17:15; cf. 24:23b–25).

Scripture repeatedly warns us to adopt such a posture in matters of justice. We must not be partial in any way, including the influence of crowds: “You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit” (Exod 23:1–3). We should neither privilege the poor (or today, the “underprivileged”) nor the rich (the “privileged”). “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor” (Lev 19:15). In these ways, we follow and honor our Lord: “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome

⁴⁸ Apparently, the blindfold was not originally used (or deemed necessary). It was added in 1494 as satire, to suggest that she was blind to the injustices around her. Only later was it reinterpreted to the modern understanding. Desmond Manderson, “Blind Justice,” *McGill Law Journal* 66, no. 1 (2020), <https://lawjournal.mcgill.ca/article/blind-justice/>.

God, who is not partial and takes no bribe” (Deut 10:17). If one fails to be impartial, condemnation results: “These also are sayings of the wise. Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, ‘You are in the right,’ will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations, but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them. Whoever gives an honest answer kisses the lips” (Prov 24:23–26).

It is at this point that the poison of CT is most evident. By distilling the complex troubles of the world to an oppressor-oppressed framework, and by assigning those respective statuses to persons *beforehand* through recognizing their group identities, CT is inevitably prejudicial and partial.⁴⁹ Further, by identifying outcomes instead of processes as the standard by which justice might be evaluated, CT is willing to commit great injustices in the name of achieving equity or justice.⁵⁰

Similarly in accusations of abuse, the prevailing paradigm offers a rigged system. By utilizing group identities, it assigns presumed victim status to those in the inferior position (children, wives, church members, citizens [to say nothing of

⁴⁹ A recent blog post by Nate Brooks for the Biblical Counseling Coalition demonstrates this perspective. In arguing against the efficacy of the Presbyterian court of appeals for addressing abuse, he critiques the assumption “that (in the case of complementarian denominations) an entirely male court of appeals is going to give a woman that they do not know a fair hearing when the accused is someone who has been their partner in ministry for years or decades. If clear-eyed impartiality and justice go hand in hand, the deck is rather stacked against the likelihood of justice being done in that kind of court of appeals.” Nate Brooks, “When Good Doctrine Enables Abuse,” *Biblical Counseling Coalition (blog)*, January 23, 2003, <https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2023/01/27/when-good-doctrine-enables-abuse/>. Strickland argues likewise, when advising a counselor on helping her counselee to report domestic abuse to her pastors: “When it comes time for you to meet, you will want to make sure that there is a female presence in the room. The victim has already been harmed by a man who is in authority over her; be sensitive to this. It will be challenging for her to face several male leaders alone.” Strickland, *Is It Abuse?*, 207. These are both rather cynical perspectives which seem to discount the biblical teaching on the role of authorities in justice. It is a DEI approach to justice, demanding intersectional representation in authoritative roles for the potential of justice to be achieved. Not only is this an unbiblical assumption, but it also produces the very divisiveness that the gospel is meant to overcome.

⁵⁰ Paul Butler, for example, has famously argued for racially based jury nullification due to the irreparable corruption of the American justice system “controlled by white lawmakers and white law enforcers.” Paul Butler, “Racially Based Jury Nullification: Black Power in the Criminal Justice System,” *The Yale Law Journal* 105, no. 3 (December 1995): 677–725. Of course, equity of outcomes only flows in one direction (from oppressed to privileged). As Baucham has noted, no one is troubled by the underrepresentation of white men in the NBA.

noncitizens]) which heavily biases the scales of justice in their favor.⁵¹ As Matthew Schmitz has noted,

In the name of dismantling old hierarchies, we have elevated members of victim classes above those seen as privileged. This is why the testimony of women is assigned greater weight than that of men—in Title IX tribunals, in trials by media, and increasingly in courts of law. It is also why women, in turn, are compelled to share their spaces with a more prized victim: the transgender woman. There is no end to the creation of new victim classes, resulting in the subordination of those who were once on top.⁵²

Further, it generally seeks to absolve them of any responsibility to resist (as discussed in chapter 2) or report due to “power differentials.” However, nowhere in Scripture do we see such standards deployed—quite the opposite, as discussed above.

In contrast, Scripture charges those in authority to proceed according to just processes in the fear of the Lord. When instructing Timothy on how to handle charges against an elder, Paul wrote: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality” (1 Tim 5:21). Similarly, when Jehosaphat appointed judges, he charged them to, “Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes” (2 Chr 19:6–7). If authorities will not be constrained by the fear of the Lord, it little matters what dizzying heights of intersectional achievement were reached in the composition of the adjudicating body. But if those authorities do not fear him in this age—and thus act unjustly—they will certainly fear him in the next.

⁵¹ Interestingly, in a recent podcast interview with Michael Kruger about his book on spiritual abuse, professor and former OPC minister Carl Trueman stated, “I have never met a pastor who has never been abused by a congregant or even a congregation . . . spiritual abuse is real from pastors to congregants; but it is *more* widespread and *more* universal among congregants aimed at their pastors—what do we do about that?” Carl Trueman, “Bully Pulpit,” *Mortification of Spin*, January 4, 2023, podcast, 34:42, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/bully-pulpit>. The quoted comments begin at 23:43.

⁵² Matthew Schmitz, “The Wrongs of Woman,” *First Things* 327 (November 2022): 58.

Presumption of Innocence

Given the scriptural requirement for two or three witnesses (Deut 17:6; 19:15; Matt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19), it seems inescapable to conclude that under biblical justice it is preferable for the guilty to go free (for now) rather than for the innocent to be wrongly punished.⁵³ Lowering the standard of proof per the prevailing model would certainly result in more convictions, both of wrongdoers and of the innocent. So when the Lord set what many today would consider to be too high a bar, he was announcing his priorities to us. Admittedly, that is a tough sell in an age obsessed with safety, but perhaps that disposition, too, needs to be assessed.⁵⁴

The presumption of innocence is a biblical teaching. It also has long-standing esteem in legal settings. English jurist William Blackstone is often cited in this regard: “It is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer.”⁵⁵ Blackstone’s centuries-old wisdom does not seem likely to resonate with many today. However, it is one of the most important aspects of impartiality. If the mere accusation of wrongdoing prejudices either those authorized to judge, or the system itself, then the result is to create a race to accuse. If a husband is a domestic abuser, can he not seek out a pastor or the

⁵³ This perspective can be difficult to embrace, and especially so in a CT-infused world. Therefore, it is extremely important to recognize—and integrate well into our engagement with the world—that these temporary injustices are only for this age, cf. Eccl 12:13–14.

⁵⁴ Safety is an important biblical theme. Psalm 91 speaks to the promise of safety that the Lord provides for his people. However, the risk aversion that is evident in our society today is often antithetical to genuine faith in a fallen world. Recent events have demonstrated yet again that persons are willing to trade liberties for the promise of safety, and that governments are almost always willing to make that trade. The rise of the concept of trauma and its increasing application to interpersonal (non-martial) conflict also demonstrates some of the dangers of a safety-centered approach to life. John Ehrett, “The Culture Keeps the Score,” *American Reformer*, March 27, 2023, <https://americanreformer.org/2023/03/the-culture-keeps-the-score/>.

It is also interesting to note the fragility that CT appears to generate and promote. Campus “safe spaces” provide one of the more egregious examples. See ISI Archive, “How ‘Safe Spaces’ Kill Human Dignity,” Intercollegiate Studies Institute, November 18, 2015, <https://isi.org/intercollegiate-review/how-ldquosafe-spacesrdquo-kill-human-dignity/>. Contrast those attitudes with what J. I. Packer wrote of our Puritan forefathers who “prepared themselves for death, so as always to be found, as it were, packed and ready to go.” J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 14.

⁵⁵ William Blackstone, *Blackstone’s Commentaries on the Laws of England*, vol. 4, *Of Public Wrongs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765–1769), 352. Quoted in Alexander Volokh, “*n* Guilty Men,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 146, no. 1 (November 1997): 174. There is an argument to be made that the 10:1 ratio comes from Abram’s intercession with the Lord for Sodom in Gen 18 (esp. v. 32), which is another line of evidence for the principle.

police and make the first accusation, thus ensuring his protection under the prevailing paradigm? “Believe all victims” may sound wise and caring, but the shrewd abuser will recognize the bias in the system and utilize even this principle against the interests of justice. And the malicious manipulator will utilize the principle to bring pressure and havoc into the life of anyone who displeases her (e.g., Potiphar’s wife).

That the presumption of innocence is biblical is seen in several respects. First, is the requirement of two or more witnesses. One witness is an accusation, but the Bible requires more—it requires corroboration.⁵⁶ Therefore, those who would accuse others of wrongdoing while honoring biblical justice must recognize the standard and proceed accordingly. Second, the warnings against believing one-party accusations testify to the presumption of innocence (Prov 18:13, 17). They recognize the enticements of gossip and the proclivities of our hearts to sinful prejudice, and then forbid us to walk those paths. Third, is the case law such as Deuteronomy 22 (discussed above) which demonstrates positively that justice requires the exoneration of a person unless sufficient corroboration of the charges can be found. It is interesting that the Scriptures—which are not often accused of portraying a rosy picture of fallen man—nonetheless presume the innocence of the accused in the absence of proof. Those affected by a CT view of justice are prejudiced to assign guilt to those in the “oppressor” classes, discounting entirely the biblical witness to the universality of the fall. Justice must be impartial or it is no longer just.

⁵⁶ This is demonstrated in the remarkable statement of Jesus that even his own self-witness was insufficient to establish his true identity (John 5:31). “If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true” (cf. John 8:13). Greg Morse, “Thou Shalt Not Slander,” *Desiring God (blog)*, May 6, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/thou-shalt-not-slander>.

Due Process

Thomas Sowell notes, “Traditionally, justice or injustice is characteristic of a *process*.”⁵⁷ In part, this is a recognition of the limits of human justice: without omniscience and holiness we cannot know all that could be known and cannot judge or discern with perfect judgment. It is also an affirmation of other teachings in Scripture. Nicodemus appealed to due process when Jesus was being condemned unjustly: “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” (John 7:51). And Proverbs 16:11 is about more than business transactions: “A just balance and scales are the LORD’s; all the weights in the bag are his work.” This is especially true when one recognizes that in context the king is addressed, the person most responsible for maintaining and promoting justice in human society. Due process is a manifestation of just scales—equity of process is the only way to pursue true justice.

It is not surprising, therefore, that CT does not champion due process. “Rules and standards equally applicable to all are often deliberately set aside in pursuit of ‘social justice’.”⁵⁸ When the presence of any inequality is considered to be incontrovertible evidence of injustice then there is no incentive to utilize impartial processes. Partiality is the order of the day in hopes of achieving a “just” outcome through redistribution, *a la* Rawls.⁵⁹ It is the failure to be partial that is considered an injustice under such a system.⁶⁰ But there is only one certain result in such pursuits: “Ideological crusades in the name of

⁵⁷ Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, 8.

⁵⁸ Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, 9.

⁵⁹ Such an outcome is often presented as a matter of “equity,” which can be glossed as “forced equality of outcome.” See the discussion at the outset of this chapter.

⁶⁰ This is the perverse logic of antiracism, for example. Instead, as Chief Justice John Roberts wrote, “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” US Supreme Court, “Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle School Dist. No. 1,” June 28, 2007, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/05-908.ZS.html>.

equality promote envy, the principal victims of which are those doing the envying.”⁶¹ As noted above, envy is one of the most potent motives for abuse known to man.⁶²

A well-known example of due process in Scripture is found in Matthew 18:15–20. The situation is interpersonal sin: “if your brother sins against you.”⁶³ In such a scenario, the sinned-against person approaches the sinner privately, before escalating the matter to include others, eventually culminating in the excommunication of the unrepentant sinner. The standard of two or more witnesses is required for that judgment, as well as the time and patience necessary to work through the various steps—time and patience that provide the sinner with ample opportunity to repent and be restored.

But Matthew 18 does not apply to every situation of sin or conflict. It does not, for example, apply to well-known and public actions which involve wrongdoing against a group. When Peter withdrew from the Gentile Christians in Antioch over “fearing the circumcision party” (Gal 2:13), Paul did not approach him privately. He rebuked him publicly (“I opposed him to his face,” Gal 2:11) because his act had been public and affected the entire group.⁶⁴ Similarly, when a Christian writes a book or article with theological error or heresy, Matthew 18 does not describe the process of confrontation or rebuke. That kind of public danger requires a public rebuttal.⁶⁵ Similarly, Paul advises Titus to deploy an abbreviated process of discipline with a divisive person. “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more

⁶¹ Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, 77.

⁶² See chapter 1.

⁶³ There is some debate as to the original text: “*Ean de hamarteasee [eis se] ho adelphos sou.*” At issue is whether or not *eis se* (“against you”) is original. I am indebted to Robert D. Jones for this observation.

⁶⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner notes, “A public rebuke in this instance was warranted because Peter’s sin was committed in the public sphere, and it had public consequences in that others followed his example. Therefore, a public reprimand was necessary, given the widespread impact of Peter’s sin.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 139.

⁶⁵ D. A. Carson, “Editorial on Abusing Matthew 18,” *Themelios* 36, no. 1 (April 2011): 1–3.

to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Titus 3:10–11).⁶⁶ So Scripture does recognize various kinds of due processes, all the while affirming consistent standards of justice (witnesses, due authorization, etc.).

Due process requires, and provides, adequate time for all the relevant details to be gathered. Allowing for the cross-examination of witnesses, consideration, and deliberation as applicable, honors the principles of biblical wisdom. “The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps” (Prov 14:15). “If one answers before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (Prov 18:13). “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him” (Prov 18:17). There is much to be gained in following a thoughtful, clearly articulated, and agreed upon process in matters of justice. The example of history ought to exert great influence here, as ours is not the first generation to deal with such matters. Those who are entrusted with authority need to have a positive vision so that they can engage such processes with faith and so they know where their responsibilities lie before the Lord. Deuteronomy 17:2–7 demonstrates due process in the case of an alleged idolater:

If there is found among you, within any of your towns that the LORD your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing his covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden, and it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones. On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

An accusation of wrongdoing is not enough. The authorities must “inquire diligently” in order to find out if the accusation “it true and certain,” and then penalties are enforced.

⁶⁶ The heightened danger to the church represented by the divisive person required a more expeditious process of discipline. Similarly, situations of abuse often present heightened danger as well, and therefore may require similar redress.

The example of Joshua with the men of Gibeon is presented in Scripture as a warning against the contrary: hasty judgment, and especially when appearances seem to be convincing (Josh 9:3–27). Joshua made a covenant with the Gibeonites, thus sparing their lives, based on circumstantial evidence that was presented with the intent to deceive. The text provides an explicit critique of Joshua (and perhaps the elders of Israel), who “did not seek counsel from the LORD.” They failed to utilize the processes that the Lord had provided and were duped accordingly.

However, due process does also require proper expedition. “Justice delayed is justice denied” is a biblical concept: “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil” (Eccl 8:11). There is certainly an element of subjective judgment in balancing the requirements of due process, but the recognition of all its qualities helps those in authority to make those judgments well and wisely.

Cities of refuge. The cities of refuge provided under OT law (Deut 19; cf. Num 35:6–34; Exod 21:12–13; Josh 20:1–9) offer useful insight into due process as well, and especially as pertains to abuse. They were initially established as a means of regulating the practice of blood vengeance and of providing for a just resolution in cases involving a manslayer⁶⁷ (19:4–6):

This is the provision for the manslayer, who by fleeing there may save his life. If anyone kills his neighbor unintentionally without having hated him in the past—as when someone goes into the forest with his neighbor to cut wood, and his hand swings the axe to cut down a tree, and the head slips from the handle and strikes his neighbor so that he dies—he may flee to one of these cities and live, lest the avenger of blood in hot anger pursue the manslayer and overtake him, because the way is long, and strike him fatally, though the man did not deserve to die, since he had not hated his neighbor in the past.

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Tigay argues, “In tribally organized societies, where there is no strong central authority, the kinship group is the primary defender of the life of its member. When a person is killed, his or her kinsmen are obliged to ‘redeem’ the blood by slaying the killer.” Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 179.

Several conditions are worth noting for our consideration: first, is the provision for safety for one who is under a cloud of scrutiny for likely wrongdoing. Given that the situation is the death of one man at the hand of another, with no other witnesses present, the survivor would be rightly considered the prime suspect in a murder. Under the prevailing understanding of blood vengeance, the survivor rightly would be concerned for his life. Second, the manslayer is protected because he did not kill intentionally—and perhaps most importantly, his previous character vouched for his innocence: “since he had not hated his neighbor in the past.”

Modern application. The principle could be applied to a woman who alleges abuse against her husband, for example, by allowing her to seek refuge when there is no means of proving her allegations one way or another. Ordinarily, it would be wrong for a wife to leave her husband and she would rightly be suspected of wrongdoing if she did so (1 Cor 7:39). Thus, we see the applicability of the principle. However, her demonstrated character is an important qualification in assessing the legitimacy of her allegations and request for safety. If she has been a trustworthy person and there is no reason to suspect of her evil intent toward her husband, her appeal should be received. However, if she has demonstrated bad character, including lying and deceiving in the past, her application for refuge is greatly weakened. Here again, CT attempts to apply a “virtuous victim” status to persons by virtue of their group identities before the fact of their victimhood has been established.⁶⁸ Many abuse advocates do the same in their treatment of abuse accusations. The biblical perspective on allegations is more nuanced and is, therefore, both caring and just.

⁶⁸ There is a kind of inverse power dynamic at work here. Those who are otherwise considered to be underprivileged or oppressed are instead privileged and empowered so that their mere accusation of wrongdoing against another results in some degree of judicial consequences apart from judicial processes: removal from the home, suspicion of wrongdoing, reputational harm, etc.

Before developing the application of the concept further, the passage does provide more details:

But if anyone hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and attacks him and strikes him fatally so that he dies, and he flees into one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die. Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you (Deut 19:11–13).

These verses obviously presuppose the presence of further evidence that demonstrates the guilt of the manslayer—now, murderer. The ability to flee to the city of refuge operated under the category of the presumption of innocence: if no contrary evidence were found, he would be free to continue to live in the city. However, the presence of damning evidence meant that he could not escape justice.⁶⁹ He would receive capital punishment for his crime.⁷⁰

Numbers 35:22–29 provides more details and scenarios to fill out how the cities of refuge were intended to function:

But if he pushed him suddenly without enmity, or hurled anything on him without lying in wait or used a stone that could cause death, and without seeing him dropped it on him, so that he died, though he was not his enemy and did not seek his harm, then the congregation shall judge between the manslayer and the avenger of blood, in accordance with these rules. And the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge to which he had fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood. For he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest, but after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession. And these things shall be for a statute and rule for you throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.

⁶⁹ Tigay notes that “biblical law institutes a revolutionary change in the concept of asylum; not even the sacred protection of the altar can be invoked amorally.” Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 182. Thus, the clear aim of the cities of refuge is justice, not pragmatism.

⁷⁰ Exodus 21:12–14 states, “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee. But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die.”

These are situations that require deliberation and debate, and we recognize the Lord's intention for justice to apply within the complex situations that occur in this fallen world. There is concern for questions of intentionality and culpability. Further evidence and testimony are necessary. The deliberations of qualified judges are required.

In addition, even if the manslayer is deemed not guilty of murder, he still faces obligations to remain in the city. His life is constrained by the deed, keeping him from returning to his land and living freely as he would have before the death of the victim. The gravity of the situation in the death of a man means that the manslayer must remain within the refuge or face the potential retribution of the avenger of blood.⁷¹ He must remain, that is, until the "death of the high priest" (35:25, 28). Though there is some debate over the meaning of that qualification, it seems best to understand it as a typical atonement, consistent with the high priest's role in atoning for the sins of Israel during his lifetime (Lev 16:16, 21).⁷²

Broadening out the application, then, we find that the city of refuge provides a means for due process to occur. In case of imminent threat, it offered safety to the accused until he could be judged by those in authority who were to employ the standards of God's Word. Since the cities of refuge were Levitical cities, it is reasonable to conclude that those called upon to judge would have been of the priestly class.⁷³ This, too, is an argument for the involvement of both civil and ecclesial authorities in cases of

⁷¹ The shedding of innocent blood is a blight on the land and cannot be merely overlooked. This is also demonstrated in Deut 21:1-9, when a dead body is found in the open country and no cause of death is discernible. The elders of the nearest city must sacrifice a heifer for atonement, even as they vow that "our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it shed" (6). This is a necessary act of righteousness: "So you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from your midst, when you do what is right in the sight of the LORD" (9).

⁷² Jacob Milgrom argues, "Since the blood of the slain, although spilled accidentally, cannot be avenged through the death of the slayer, it is ransomed through the death of the High Priest, which releases all homicides from their cities of refuge." Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 294. See also Gordon Wenham, *Numbers*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary 4 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 265.

⁷³ The Levitical priests and "the judge who is in office in those days" were specifically called on by the Lord for serious cases, including "any case within your towns that is too difficult for you" (Deut 17:8-13).

abuse. The church does not have civil or criminal jurisdiction, but it does have ecclesial authority and responsibility. Further, if the civil and criminal justice systems do not respect biblical principles of justice, then the church especially ought to represent a truly just process.

One, final passage should be noted. Numbers 35:30–34 completes the pericope on the city of refuge:

If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness. Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death, but he shall be put to death. And you shall accept no ransom for him who has fled to his city of refuge, that he may return to dwell in the land before the death of the high priest. You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.

True justice requires consequences. Harkening back to the Noahic Covenant (Gen 9:5–6), murder requires the death penalty. There is no way to purchase exemption (“ransom”) when such a great evil has been done. The authorities are commanded to act justly; once the evidence condemns the murderer, he must receive just consequences.

Conclusions on Due Process

It is with good reason that Scripture warns us against partiality and the influences of the crowds. When Jesus stood trial (Luke 23:18–25), Pilate declared him innocent *and* delivered him to be crucified, because of the crowds (“their voices prevailed,” v. 23). Today, many crowds and interest groups are clamoring for competing visions of justice when it comes to matters of abuse. Some of those crowds hate the Lord and his people and are actively working to tear down the “structures of oppression” that have been built by “white Christian cis-gendered heteronormative men.” Their concerns and complaints may possess some degree of merit at times. However, it is vital that Christians honor biblical justice in every respect and that we are not blind to nefarious

agendas. Due process is one of the safeguards that the Lord, in his wisdom, has established in his Word. Christians, counselors, and churches all do well to consider beforehand what due process and justice entails so that we can honor the Lord when faced with the very serious situation of alleged abuse.

Witnesses

Under the OT, matters of justice were often more transparently mundane than we are accustomed to recognizing today. Many modern persons might rarely, if ever, enter a courtroom. We may only go to the courthouse for a birth certificate or marriage license. But in ancient Israel matters of public import were carried out openly at the city gates. The elders of the city were there to witness and judge. Business transactions were finalized, marriages were arranged, and legal disputes were resolved.⁷⁴ Oaths, therefore, were a matter of great import, as is evident even today in the Reformed confessions which inevitably contain a chapter on the topic.

It is to the detriment of modern persons that we tend to think of justice at some distance. Justice has been limited to matters of civil or criminal law, while we simultaneously fail to recognize that every time a signature is affixed to a document or agreement to terms and conditions is indicated in an App Store, we are transacting in the realm of justice. More to the point, every time we hear an accusation made by one person against another, we are transacting in the realm of justice. By compartmentalizing our lives in this way, we can miss out on the implications of the teaching of Scripture. This is certainly true when it comes to the topic of witnesses. As Douma notes,

In Bible times, courtroom justice was rather uncomplicated. There were no lawyers, fingerprints were not used as evidence, nor were there detectives like Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot.

Everything could depend on what the *witnesses* said. Naboth was killed because two witnesses had accused him unanimously of blaspheming God and the

⁷⁴ Burton S. Easton and Ralph W. Vunderink, "Gate," in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2:408.

king (1 Kings 21:13). Unanimity among (false) witnesses played a role also in the trial of Jesus (Matt. 26:60–61) and that of Stephen (Acts 7:13–14).

So witnesses could hold decisive sway over life and death. At the testimony of two or three (unanimous) witnesses, a defendant could be sentenced to death (Deut. 17:6:19:15). In view of the seriousness of their role, it is no wonder that the ninth commandment warns against the lying witness. For such a witness functioned as an accuser against his neighbor and could even be held responsible for his death. His words could be fatal.⁷⁵

Witnesses were essential to biblical justice. There was no formula, no scientific process, that could be used to provide some manner of supposed objectivity. Instead, justice was dependent on people who would testify to what they heard, saw, or otherwise experienced. Those witnesses were also expected to play their part in the execution of justice as needed (e.g., Deut 13:9; 17:7; John 8:7; Acts 7:58). Inescapably, therefore, justice provided accountability for all parties involved.

We find these themes in a number of Scriptures dealing with witnesses. “On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst” (Deut 17:6–7). “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses” (Matt 18:15–16). “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established” (Deut 19:15). Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses” (1 Tim 5:19). “Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me (Acts 24:13). “If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness,

⁷⁵ Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1996), 314.

whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity” (Lev 5:1). The connections between being a witness, accountability, and duty need to be recovered.⁷⁶

This is quite evident in how the broader culture has responded to accusations of abuse against various celebrities, athletes, and business leaders. As Schmitz has noted: “The #MeToo movement was and is notable for its contempt for due process, rejection of the presumption of innocence, and indifference to journalistic standards. Several of its targets—unheralded names including Benny Fredriksson, Carl Sargeant, and Armando Vega Gil—have committed suicide.”⁷⁷ Activists have taken a matter of great seriousness and used it as a political or social leveraging tool. Given the deconstructive nature of CT noted above, this is hardly surprising. But it is important for Christians to recognize this cultural environment so that we do not fall prey to the same tactics.⁷⁸

Witnesses serve the interests of justice—public or private, civil or ecclesial—by providing verifiable, accountable confirmation on matters of import. They serve victims by validating their stories. They serve by helping to promote justice in the midst of challenging circumstances. It is understandable that someone may prefer not to get involved in something so unpleasant or messy, but we have identified clear biblical reasons to do so.

It is also worth noting briefly that Scripture and reason both testify to the reality of evidence—a kind of witness—that does not have to be personal testimony. Whether it is financial records, electronic communications, recorded voicemails, blood

⁷⁶ Pastorally, I have often observed that those who are willing to engage in situations that should not concern them (i.e., busybodies and gossips) are unwilling to participate in a manner that would provide accountability (e.g., confrontation and church discipline). They are happy to “help” when it is pleasant or reflects well on them, but unwilling when it comes at potential cost to their personal reputation.

⁷⁷ Schmitz, “The Wrongs of Woman,” 57.

⁷⁸ See Aaron Renn, “The Dog That Didn’t Bark,” *Aaron Renn*, February 24, 2022, <https://aaronrenn.substack.com/p/the-dog-that-didnt-bark>.

stains, or the like, other means of evidence can be used to witness to the reality of what has, and has not, transpired. However, evidence does not have a voice, so it is subject to various interpretations. Nonetheless it remains an important strand of witness.

The standard of two *or* three witnesses testifies to the need for the witnesses themselves to be evaluated. If the “witness” is some form of material evidence, then the less clear or certain that evidence is, the more necessary a third witness becomes.⁷⁹ Further, if the two witnesses are a married couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Smith, then the need for a third witness is also likely to be greater. That is, the flexibility inherent in the phrase “two or three” points to the evaluation required of witnesses.

The character of the witness(es) matters and is part of what must be evaluated when weighing their testimony. The word of a known liar, for example, is essentially worthless. But anyone who has a reputation for truthfulness and trustworthiness should be regarded. A child, on the other hand, should be treated as such. Children are prone to exaggeration and dramatic license with their tales and are also more open to suggestion from outsiders.⁸⁰ This does not mean that their stories should be disbelieved, but that they should not receive the same weight as a responsible adult, all other things being equal (which they rarely are).⁸¹

It is also important to recognize that the character of many witnesses is obvious. As discussed in the tale of Abigail, Nabal was widely known to be a worthless fellow. So were the accusers of Naboth: “And the two worthless men came in and sat opposite him. And the worthless men brought a charge against Naboth in the presence of

⁷⁹ Toby Sumpter, “Nine Principles of Biblical Justice,” *Having Two Legs*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.tobysumpter.com/nine-principles-of-biblical-justice/>.

⁸⁰ See the history highlighted in Lee Coleman, “False Accusations of Sexual Abuse: Psychiatry’s Latest Reign of Error,” *Journal of Mind and Behavior* 1, no. 3/4 (Summer/Autumn 1999): 545–56.

⁸¹ See also, African Code, “The Canons of the CCXVII Blessed Fathers Who Assembled at Carthage, Commonly Called The Code of Canons of the African Church” (*NPNF*², 14:505).

the people, saying, “Naboth cursed God and the king.” So, they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones” (1 Kgs 21:13). The situation was even more dramatic when Jesus was on trial:

Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” (Mark 14:55–60)

One notes two additional points from these verses: first, the authorities were corrupt. They entered the “trial” with a verdict and were merely looking for legal cover for their jihad. Second, the accusers were corrupt. There were many of them, and none of them agreed.⁸² We also see the corruption of the authorities in response: even though the false witnesses contradicted each other the high priest still presumed to demand an answer from Jesus, as though his case had been proven. Such injustices surely occur in our day as the popular media delight in reporting on Christian misdeeds—at least, that is, on Christians who have not cooperated with the prevailing ideologies.⁸³

There is one final category of witnesses that should be noted, especially in light of the discussions above. Anonymous accusers fail to meet the standards of justice, in large part because they are not able to be identified and thus to be held accountable. Therefore, all anonymous accusations must be rejected out of hand.⁸⁴ Further, those who are exposed to those accusations must take special care to reject the accusations that the

⁸² The unconcern of false witnesses for the injustices they commit and the consequences upon others are surely part of the reason that they are listed among the few things that the Lord hates and finds abominable in Prov 6:16–19.

⁸³ Many have noted the scorn and scrutiny heaped upon the SBC, for example, alongside the relative silence on similar allegations at the church of Sen. Raphael Warnock.

⁸⁴ This is not to say that there may not be some degree of confidentiality afforded to an accuser, especially as regards the public. However, those authorized to decide the outcome of a situation must know who the accuser is, and, ordinarily, the accused has a right to face his accuser as well.

anonymous accuser makes. Proverbs 18:8 warns, “The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body.” Online comments, emails and texts, and the like can all have a negative effect on those who hear or read them, failing to recognize that they have been prejudiced by those with a sinful agenda.⁸⁵

Handling Accusations

The first and chief difficulty in handling accusations is the problem of recognition. The commonplace sins of gossip and slander—of which we are all guilty—always involve some accusation of wrongdoing by another. Yet the relative ease, if not glee, with which we regularly hear such sinful talk demonstrates that our radar for detecting accusations may not be as finely attuned as we might hope. Social media has greatly heightened the ability and desirability of participating in these sins: more information is shared more quickly—generally without context—and the more sensational the information the more “clicks” one is likely to accrue.⁸⁶ Proverbs is full of admonitions to beware of such patterns of speech (cf. Prov 11:3; 12:17, 23; 16:28; 18:8; 23:9; 26:20, 22).

Counselors especially need to heed these warnings. A counselor is, almost by definition, a person who wants to help others with their difficulties. The counselor must rely on the counselee as the primary (and often, sole) source of information. Further, the counselor should ordinarily employ a welcoming disposition toward the counselee as he seeks to understand what has brought the counselee to meet with him. However, almost

⁸⁵ Pastorally, this is a source of significant concern for me, and not just when it comes to abuse. Many persons can end up in an online wormhole of information on topics of concern, thus stoking their fears, confirming their prejudices, and hardening the sense that outrages are being committed and “something must be done about *x*.” In the meantime, biblical standards of justice are disregarded entirely, fear and anxiety are stoked to fever pitch, and an impenetrable fog of righteous vengeance descends. Correspondingly, the very real responsibilities and problems of daily life are often pushed to the side in order to focus on *x*. Sometimes, *x* provides a welcome respite from the mundane, and a sense of accomplishing something grand and worthy. The results of such are almost universally destructive.

⁸⁶ Peter Leithart argues, “Not by accident but by design, social media encourages violations of the Ninth Word.” Peter Leithart, *The Ten Commandments: A Guide to the Perfect Law of Liberty* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 108.

every counseling situation will involve some manner of alleged wrongdoing against another person, and the counselor often has no means of verifying the validity of the alleged wrongdoing.

Biblically, this ought to present the counselor with several dilemmas. First, does he meet the criteria of one who is duly authorized to be involved in this situation, as discussed above? The biblical circle of righteous involvement in the conflicts of others tends to be smaller than we imagine. Second, does he do well to listen to the allegations without challenging the counselee to, for example, seek to resolve interpersonal conflict directly *a la* Matthew 5:23–24 and 18:15? Third, how much validity should he attach to any allegation that he cannot otherwise verify? It will not do for a Christian counselor to treat the counseling room as a space that lies outside of the claims of biblical speech ethics, biblical conflict resolution, and biblical authority structures. Yet such is easily done.

When matters of alleged wrongdoing involve accusations of abuse, the stakes are even higher. The magnitude of the alleged wrongdoing pressures the situation. Civil authorities may have jurisdiction in some manner. The additional element of a threat to safety also complicates matters. From the literature on abuse, two conclusions are oft repeated: (1) the church has done very poorly at responding to abuse and needs to do much better; and (2) the proper response to accusations of abuse is always to “believe the victim.” These two assertions characterize almost every work I have consulted on this subject. I will address the first assertion below. As regards the second: must Christians always “believe the victim”?

Christian counselors seem to agree broadly that the answer is *yes*. Kilpatrick’s stance is typical: “The only and best response to an adult who is disclosing physical or

sexual abuse is to listen with compassion, validate the story, and offer support.”⁸⁷

Vernick argues similarly,

First, asking for details or trying to verify the victim’s story to make sure it’s truthful is not your place. There will be a time for that if and when a police report is made. You are not the investigator. You are the pastor or ministry leader. The shepherd who is to comfort and protect the sheep who’s just got bit and abused by a wolf.⁸⁸

As does Hambrick,

First, you can *believe the victim*. “Innocence until proven guilty” is the appropriate legal standard, but you are a ministry leader, not a judge or investigator. We take the posture of 1 Corinthians 13:7, “love believes all things,” until there is evidence to the contrary.⁸⁹

Langberg also writes against those who appeal to “theological mantras” as an excuse for improper responses, such as “when a female comes alone before a board of all male ‘shepherds’ with an accusation of rape or battering and ends up being cross-examined rather than believed.”⁹⁰

Kruger takes a lightly mediated position,

A Posture of Openness. As our modern culture has grown more aware of the problem of abuse, we hear a common mantra: “Believe the victims.” If that implies that the victims’ claims should automatically be accepted as proven, then it should be rejected. People should be considered innocent until proven guilty. But most don’t use the mantra to mean that. Instead, it is often intended to communicate that organizations, including churches, should have a posture toward the accuser that is marked by sympathy and openness rather than suspicion and doubt. It’s a shorthand way to say that churches should not assume the accuser is lying but to take their claims seriously. Or, put bluntly, the accuser should not be accused. They should be afforded the same rights as everyone else: they should be considered innocent until proven guilty.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Kilpatrick, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 42.

⁸⁸ Vernick, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 41.

⁸⁹ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 87.

⁹⁰ Diane Langberg, *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 94.

⁹¹ Michael J. Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 125.

However, all of these positions bias the conversation. The issue is not primarily one of belief, but of the responsible engagement of just processes. Ordinarily, an accuser should not be accused of wrongdoing in making an accusation. However, if an accuser is a known liar, or if there are obvious and wicked motives for making accusations, those are relevant factors in how a responsible authority should evaluate any accusation. To pretend otherwise is to jettison biblical justice and authority. We must also recognize that the accuser is doing something in making the accusation. She is trying to accomplish something. Her aims may be righteous or wicked, and following biblical justice is our best hope for gaining clarity on that front. Those authorized by God to hear and deal with the accusation must do so righteously, loving everyone involved, and seeking their ultimate good according to the Lord's revealed standards. It is no accusation of an accuser to follow due process in assessing her account. According to Scripture, it is the necessary and just response.

Accusations of abuse must be treated with the utmost seriousness. Much is at stake, and the Bible lays out thorough processes for evaluating such claims. It also commands various authorities to recognize their responsibilities for addressing abuse (e.g., Deut 19:17). But it will not do to soft-pedal biblical principles in an attempt to ensure that abuse is addressed and abusers are brought to justice. If we do so, we may find ourselves abusing innocent parties that have been wrongly accused.⁹² Thaddeus J. Williams has analyzed the vision of justice behind such a sentiment (which he terms "Social Justice B") and warns, "Scripture puts strong standards of evidence for accusations of injustice. It never encourages to take people's word for it if they claim to

⁹² Many stories could be presented, but one recent account is instructive. A Loudoun County, Virginia, high school English teacher was arrested in November 2018 for sexual assault of a 17-year-old male student. A mug shot and press release were issued announcing her arrest and she was fired from her job. Proof of the crime was never offered, and when a competent attorney challenged the arrest, all charges were dropped. She sued, and after four-and-a-half years she won \$5 million from the police and the sheriff. Ashe Schow, "Virginia Teacher Awarded \$5 Million After False Accusation of Sexual Assault," *Daily Wire*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/virginia-teacher-awarded-5-million-after-false-accusation-of-sexual-assault>

be victims of oppression. The Bible is far too realistic about the human potential for deception to let justice rest on such a shaky foundation.”⁹³

When it comes to weighing accusations of wrongdoing, the testimony of Scripture is clear: “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established” (Deut 19:15; cf. Matt 18:16; 2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19; Heb 10:28). Given this biblical evidence, what is the basis for always believing accusations of oppression?

I have only discovered two possible explanations in the literature. First is the idea that false allegations of abuse are extremely rare. Langberg is representative, mentioning that research shows that “the rates of false accusations runs [sic] between 3 and 9 percent”⁹⁴ of abuse reports. While this number is low, it is not exactly extremely rare, and especially when one considers three other factors. First, if the number is accurate, then by believing every accusation of abuse we will be falsely prosecuting someone between once-in-every-eleven and once-in-every-thirty-three occurrences.⁹⁵ Given the appropriate stigma attached to abuse, the effects of false allegations are substantial and can cause great loss to those wrongly accused. Second, it is important to note that the citation has to do with “abuse reports.” Advocates regularly state that abuse is widely under-reported, which seems likely to be true. However, it is also likely that

⁹³ Thaddeus J. Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask about Social Justice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 157.

⁹⁴ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 141, 156. Denhollander agrees, “false accusations are incredibly rare.” Denhollander, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 157.

⁹⁵ It is naïve to believe that various parties do not have agendas at play in these statistics. K. C. Johnson and Stuart Taylor have documented how political officials used an outrageous statistic of 1 in 4 college women being sexually assaulted in order to further their Title IX agenda. K. C. Johnson and Stuart Taylor Jr., *The Campus Rape Frenzy: The Attack on Due Process at America’s Universities* (New York: Encounter, 2018). The actual amount was still a cause for concern, but it was roughly 1/10th of what was reported (1 in 40). Further data points concerning the use of alcohol or drugs, sexual history, and the like are rarely included in the final data.

false accusations are even more under-reported, for who would bother to report false accusations when there will be no prosecution or penalties for such a pernicious act?⁹⁶ As a pastor, I have heard many false accusations of all manner of wrongdoing for which there is no legal remedy.

Third, research has demonstrated that a high percentage (roughly 65 percent) of reported incidents of child sexual abuse are deemed unsubstantiated (i.e., found to offer insufficient evidence to proceed).⁹⁷ These reports are not likely to be labeled as “false” (only 4–10 percent of unsubstantiated reports are), but are more likely either an overreaction to a concern, or stem from situations of poor childcare. That is, many reported situations of alleged child abuse may have some other cause for concern, but not of abuse. They reflect other sad realities in this fallen world. As Besharov writes, “The emotionally charged desire to ‘do something’ about child abuse, fanned by repeated and often sensational media coverage, has led, in this author’s view, to an understandable but counterproductive overreaction on the part of the professionals and citizens who report suspected child abuse.”⁹⁸

Similarly, an extensive recent study of sexual assault reports at a major Northeastern university over a ten-year period found an incidence rate for false (i.e., “unfounded”) allegations of 5.9 percent, and an incidence of unsubstantiated allegations of 44.9 percent. Another 13.9 percent contained “insufficient information to be coded.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ A 2020 survey found that 8 percent of Americans (roughly 20.4 million adults) report being falsely accused of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, or other forms of abuse. Rebecca Stewart, “Press Release,” Center for Prosecutor Integrity, December 17, 2020, <http://www.prosecutorintegrity.org/pr/survey-over-20-million-have-been-falsely-accused-of-abuse/>.

⁹⁷ Douglas J. Besharov, “Responding to Child Sexual Abuse: The Need for a Balanced Approach,” *Sexual Abuse of Children* 4, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1994): 140. All the stats from this paragraph are taken from his article. Besharov was the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.

⁹⁸ Besharov, “Responding to Child Sexual Abuse,” 139.

⁹⁹ David Lisak et al., “False Allegations of Sexual Assault: An Analysis of Ten Years of Reported Cases,” *Violence against Women* 16, no. 12 (2010): 1329.

It is important to recognize the significance of these findings. False allegations or reports are deemed false, or unfounded, only when there is conclusive proof that no crime occurred, and only after a thorough investigation. However, a false allegation rate of 5.9 percent does not mean that 94.1 percent of allegations are true. In the study, only 35.3 percent of cases were referred for prosecution of disciplinary action.¹⁰⁰ Roughly two-thirds of reported cases were not so pursued, for a variety of reasons. Thus, the assertion that (demonstrably) false reports are in the 2–10 percent range appears to be supported. The often-unstated implication that 90–98 percent of allegations are true is entirely unsupported.

The second reason for believing all accusations was cited above: “First, you can *believe the victim*. ‘Innocence until proven guilty’ is the appropriate legal standard, but you are a ministry leader, not a judge or investigator. We take the posture of 1 Corinthians 13:7, ‘love believes all things,’ until there is evidence to the contrary.”¹⁰¹ This position has an appearance of biblical wisdom, though it does not hold up under scrutiny, for at least five reasons. First, as mentioned above, *believe the victim* is a truism. It assumes what needs to be proved. The accuser is an alleged victim. Second, *innocent until proven guilty* is not merely a legal standard, but the standard of biblical justice. Without it, for example, much of the ground for the sinfulness of gossip and slander falls away. Third, *love believes all things* cannot be understood literally. We are never commanded to believe lies—quite the opposite. The immediately preceding phrase makes this plain: love “rejoices with the truth” (v. 6b). So, the believing in view here must speak to our general disposition of charity, receptivity, and hopefulness, not the automatic assignment of veracity to whatever propositions happen to traipse across our eardrums.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ No data is provided for how many of those cases led to confession or conviction.

¹⁰¹ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 87.

¹⁰² Matthew Henry cautioned, “Indeed charity does by no means destroy prudence, and out of mere simplicity and silliness, believe every word, Prov. 14:15. Wisdom may dwell with love, and charity

Fourth, is the concerning demotion of *evidence to the contrary*. The role of proper authorities and due process is to uncover all available evidence as expeditiously as possible so as to arrive at a just and supportable conclusion. To privilege an accusation until it is repudiated is to act unjustly. Fifth, the *analogia fidei* teaches us to interpret Scripture in light of Scripture. *Love believes all things* may be attractive as a wall hanging, but it is woefully deficient as a full-orbed approach to handling accusations of wrongdoing. Many other Scriptures must be brought to bear, as discussed above.

Two particularly concerning examples of this unbiblical standard for handling accusations come from *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*. Denhollander counsels churches to “have a flat church policy of always making the congregation aware of an abuse allegation” against an elder.¹⁰³ Mika Edmondson writes similarly, advocating for a six-step approach, including: “5. A single accusation is sufficient to warrant an investigation of a leader.”¹⁰⁴ These approaches are a complete contradiction to 1 Timothy 5:19–20 and would open pastors to scurrilous accusations that

be cautious.” Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 6:463. Thomas Schreiner claims, “The verbs cannot be read to support naivete, as if love believes the most improbably or ridiculous things.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 278. Why should the “believing” be constrained to the accuser? Is not the accused also due to receive the consideration of “believing the best” about someone? The reference to Prov 14:15 seems especially apropos: “The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps.” Andrew David Naselli offers a similar note: “Paul does not mean that love is naively gullible. Rather, love generously believes the best about others rather than being sinfully cynical.” Andrew David Naselli, *1 Corinthians*, in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 10, *Romans–Galatians*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 346.

¹⁰³ Denhollander, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 164. Her counsel is in answer to the question: “How do you pursue the truth without ‘entertaining a charge against an elder’ unless there is real evidence?” She advises pastors not to reveal the accuser’s identity, but to reveal “enough facts that congregants who may have information can realize they hold a piece of the puzzle and know what to do with it,” as well as “instruction for who ought to be considered a potential victim and where to go if someone suspects more abuse has occurred to others in the church. This blanket policy ensures that you aren’t the one weighing the credibility of an allegation or ‘accepting a charge,’ and also helps take the sting out of the process in the event you do receive a false accusation.” This is a complete inversion of the biblical instruction.

¹⁰⁴ Edmondson, quoted in Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 166. Throughout his six steps, Edmondson alternates between the language of “the abusive leader” and “If the leader is found to be guilty,” so there is some potential for confusion in his approach. He does not clearly outline what initiates the six-step process, though he does call for notifying the entire congregation and for removing him from his leadership role, pending the outcome of the investigation.

would permanently damage their reputations and leave them unable to regain the trust of some members. It would be disastrous to pastoral ministry. If churches must report every allegation of abuse against a leader, and if the proper biblical response to allegations is to always believe them, then every pastor in America would be one allegation away from termination. That such an approach resonates with many speaks to how CT has influenced our notions of justice and the prejudices that are brought into situations of alleged abuse. Innocent until proven guilty and the need for two or three witnesses is the biblical standard.

So, the command to believe all accusations cannot stand. But our choices are not between simply believing or disbelieving accusations. Rather, the biblical paradigm is to receive such accusations as what they are: allegations of wrongdoing. In cases of alleged oppression, the allegations are extremely serious and every effort should be taken to address them appropriately. If the accuser has been abused, then we are indeed dealing with a victim, even as we need to follow due process to establish that fact. The accuser should be treated with care and justice. Evidence should be presented. The character of the various parties should be weighed. The means and motives of the various parties should also be evaluated (as possible). Engagement with civil authorities may be pursued in accordance with the appropriate legal statutes. In addition, ecclesial authorities also bear responsibility before God to discern the truth, to confront wrongdoers, and to protect innocent victims. In order to fulfill these God-given responsibilities, those in authority must pursue the truth, righteously and vigorously.

False accusations. As awareness of abuse has grown, and as its potential categories have multiplied, concerns about spurious accusations of abuse have been largely minimized or dismissed altogether. Yet Scripture and human history, to say nothing of the daily news, demonstrate that false accusations are not exactly

uncommon.¹⁰⁵ Social media is filled with such, and generally without much accountability.¹⁰⁶ However, the Bible treats false accusations with the utmost seriousness. The ninth commandment forbids them (Exod 20:16). Deuteronomy 19:15–21 is perhaps the most developed treatment of the topic:

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

We note, first, a single witness is deemed to be insufficient to establish a charge, as discussed above. Second, the authorities are commanded to investigate the charges diligently, as indeed they must. Third, if a witness has testified falsely, he or she is to receive the penalty that would have been executed upon the one falsely accused, without

¹⁰⁵ It is apparently well-known among divorce lawyers that new accusations of abuse are common during separation and divorce proceedings. The potential agenda is obvious, yet the statistics do not fit advocates' claims that false accusations are rare. "In the 129 cases for which a determination of the validity of the allegation was available, 50 percent were found to involve abuse, 33 percent were found to involve no abuse, and 17 percent resulted in indeterminate ruling." Nancy Thoennes and Patricia G. Tjaden, "The Extent, Nature, and Validity of Sexual Abuse Allegations in Custody/Visitation Disputes," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 14, no. 2 (1990): 151–63; Elyse Sheehan, "Using Rule 11 Sanctions to Punish Accusers Who Make False Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse in Custody and Divorce Cases," *Family Court Review* 57, no. 1 (January 2019): 121–35. See also, Nicholas M. Bala, Mindy Mitnick, Nico Trocme, and Claire Houston, "Sexual Abuse Allegations and Parental Separation: Smokescreen or Fire?" *Journal of Family Studies* 13, no. 1 (May/June 2007): 26–56.

Even a few, recent headlines demonstrate the power of false accusations (i.e., the Duke lacrosse case). Dan Subotnik, "The Duke Rape Case Five Years Later: Lessons for the Academy, the Media, and the Criminal Justice System" *Akron Law Review* 45, no. 4 (June 2015): 883–921. Similarly, false accusations of racism were raised at a BYU-Duke volleyball game. Hank Berrien, "BYU Finishes Investigation, Says No Racial Slurs Were Hurlled at Duke Volleyball Player," *Daily Wire*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/byu-finishes-investigation-says-no-racial-slurs-were-hurlled-at-duke-volleyball-player>. And false accusations of racism were leveled against a family baker by Oberlin College. Brittany Bernstein, "Court Upholds Bakery's \$32 Million Victory against Oberlin College over False Racism Accusations," *National Review*, April 1, 2022, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/ohio-court-upholds-bakerys-victory-against-oberlin-college-over-false-racism-accusations/>.

¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, as I am writing this section, a University of Idaho professor is suing a "TikTok personality" ("psychic cyber-sleuth") who claims the professor murdered four students. Ryan Saavedra, "TikTok Personality Gets Sued after Accusing Professor of Murdering 4 Students at University of Idaho," *Daily Wire*, December 24, 2022, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/tiktok-personality-gets-sued-after-accusing-professor-of-murdering-4-students-at-university-of-idaho>.

mercy. Finally, all observers to the false charge and ensuing punishment will then hear and fear and be dissuaded from following a similarly wicked path (v. 20).

Scripture provides many examples of false accusations as well as teaching on the accompanying motives. Deuteronomy 22 offers the example of a newlywed man who wishes to be rid of his wife, so he invents a charge of infidelity. His motive is simple, namely, hatred (22:13–14): “If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then hates her and accuses her of misconduct and brings a bad name upon her, saying, ‘I took this woman, and when I came near her, I did not find in her evidence of virginity.’” Wicked persons recognize and utilize the power of a false accusation. Here I list eight other examples of the perspective of Scripture on false accusations:

1 Kings 21:1–16 “and the two worthless men came in and sat opposite him. And the worthless men brought a charge against Naboth in the presence of the people, saying, ‘Naboth cursed God and the king.’ So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death with stones” (v. 13).

Psalm 5:6 “You destroy those who speak lies; the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.”

Proverbs 6:16–19 “There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers.”

Matthew 5:11–12 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Mark 14:55–60 “Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, ‘We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, ‘Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?’”

Mark 15:3–5 “And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, ‘Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.’” But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.”

John 8:44 “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth,

because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Romans 3:8 “Any why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.”

There are also many other narrational examples: Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39), David, Ziba, and Mephibosheth (2 Sam 16:1–4; 19:24–30), Haman and Mordecai (Esth 5–6), or Paul and Festus (Acts 25). The scriptural witness on the topic is not obscure or insubstantial. I am concerned that out of a right desire to ensure that genuine victims of abuse receive the care they deserve, many are adopting a standard of care that at best minimizes (if not ignores) what the Bible teaches on justice. Abuse is not new or unprecedented. Abuse is not *sui generis*. Abuse is a very serious situation that is amply represented in God’s Word and is subject to what his Word teaches us about biblical justice.

The Westminster Larger Catechism addresses the Ninth Commandment in Questions 143–45. There, the Divines lays out with admirable clarity and thoroughness both the positive and negative requirements of the commandment.¹⁰⁷ Positively, it requires the “preserving and promoting of truth” and the “good name of our neighbor.” We must love, desire, and rejoice in their good, “defending their innocency,” and discouraging “talebearers, flatterers, and slanderers.” Negatively, it forbids prejudice, false evidence, “passing unjust sentence,” “concealing the truth,” “evil suspicion,” “scornful contempt,” and more. The answers are lengthy, but they repay careful reading and meditation. Part of what impresses the reader is the scope of what the catechism addresses under this one, seemingly simple commandment. The ninth commandment applies to all that we do and say all day, every day.

Especially when considered within the broader scope of the biblical teaching on justice, false accusations reveal the seriousness of what is at stake. Lives can be ruined

¹⁰⁷ “Westminster Larger Catechism,” in *Creeds, Confessions, and Catechisms: A Reader’s Edition*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 386–88.

by slander and deceit, no less than by other forms of abuse.¹⁰⁸ Biblical justice honors the full magnitude of what is at stake for everyone involved. It is not biased toward the presumed “oppressed,” *a la* CT. Rather, it honors the Lord by considering and operating according to his standards, trusting him throughout the entire process, caring for genuine victims, punishing genuine wrongdoers, and avoiding superficial or sentimental notions that hinder—not promote—true justice.

Accusations without other evidence. One of the most vexing topics when it comes to handling accusations of abuse concerns knowing what to do when one is presented with a single-party accusation, but no other evidence. The seriousness of the allegation commands great attention, as does the potential threat that the alleged abuse represents. When abuse does genuinely occur, it is often performed privately in an effort to elude discovery. Thus, it is a sad reality that many allegations will involve a he-said, she-said scenario. Since a one-party accusation is never sufficient for conviction in Scripture, it would appear that we must be stymied in our efforts to move forward.¹⁰⁹

However, here again we see the wisdom of our Creator. This is our Father’s world and he is never inactive within it. Even though no other human party may have witnessed the abuse, the Lord always has done so. As Moses reminded the Israelites who lived through severe affliction: “And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Exod 2:24–25). This should be no small consolation for those suffering abuse and should inform their hope. Our God is not mocked (Gal 6:7), and his arm is not

¹⁰⁸ To slander another person with false accusations, knowing that the falsely-accused will likely lose his reputation, job, and perhaps relationships—this would certainly be up for consideration as an example of selfish compulsion to the pronounced detriment of another.

¹⁰⁹ Note that under the African Code (AD 419), even the accusation of a bishop was insufficient for conviction on its own. Corroboration is always required. African Code, “The Canons of the CCXVII Blessed Fathers Who Assembled at Carthage, Commonly Called The Code of Canons of the African Church.” (*NPNF*², 14:505).

too short to save (Jer 32:17, 21). Faith affirms that God is present and that he is good (Heb 11:6), and though human justice may be slow—or may never bring the desired resolution in this age—the Lord will always be good to his children, and especially as they look to him for comfort and care (2 Cor 1:3–5).

Yet more may be said. The case law of the OT does provide examples of how one-party accusations were handled in the absence of other corroborating evidence. As Kline explains,

In the ancient world the judicial impasse resulting from lack of evidence or conflicting testimony might be resolved by an appeal to the gods. One could make such appeal by oath, exposing oneself to the oath-deity's curse on false witnesses. Dread of the curse would deter the guilty from taking the oath and his silence would betray and condemn him. Insofar as an oath contemplates direct revelation of the divine verdict in an external act of judgment, it falls into the category of trial by ordeal.

A more spectacular form of this judicial procedure went beyond mere verbal description of the oath-curse or even the symbolic dramatization of the curse that frequently accompanies the oath. It prescribed a physical ordeal, pitting the oath-taker against some element which the deity would employ to punish the perjurer.¹¹⁰

The jealousy ordeal of Numbers 5:11–21 is perhaps the most pertinent biblical example:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel, If any man's wife goes astray and breaks faith with him, if a man lies with her sexually, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her, since she was not taken in the act, and if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself, or if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, then the man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.

And the priest shall bring her near and set her before the LORD. And the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD and unbind the hair of the woman's head and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And in his hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, ‘If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while you were under your husband's authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse. But if

¹¹⁰ Meredith G. Kline, *Essential Writings of Meredith G. Kline* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2017), 171.

you have gone astray, though you are under your husband's authority, and if you have defiled yourself, and some man other than your husband has lain with you, then' (let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse, and say to the woman) 'the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh fall away and your body swell. May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away.' And the woman shall say, 'Amen, Amen.'

Then the priest shall write these curses in a book and wash them off into the water of bitterness. And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain. And the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand and shall wave the grain offering before the LORD and bring it to the altar. And the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering, as its memorial portion, and burn it on the altar, and afterward shall make the woman drink the water. And when he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people. But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children.

This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, though under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself, or when the spirit of jealousy comes over a man and he is jealous of his wife. Then he shall set the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall carry out for her all this law. The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity."

This rite is obviously quite archaic to the modern mind. However, given the inspiration and authority of Scripture, and the universality of the human condition, it is a kind providence of God to have provided his people with an explicit situation that details how to address one-party accusations of serious sin without further corroboration. The ordeal does not map precisely onto situations of abuse, but it is certainly quite similar.

Four key statements point to the challenge of applying justice in this situation (v. 13): "hidden from the eyes . . . she is undetected . . . no witness against her . . . not taken in the act." Milgrom notes,

This stylistic inflation, however, may have been deliberately written with a judicial purpose in mind: to emphasize the cardinal principle that the unapprehended criminal is not subject to the jurisdiction of the human court Unapprehended adultery remains punishable only by God, and there is no need for human mediation. The punishment for this sin against man (the husband) and God is inherent in the ordeal.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 349–50.

There is a lesson for us in this ordeal: if someone is not caught in a sinful act—and no further evidence is available—then the perpetrator is not subject to human justice.¹¹² Many acts of injustice go unpunished in this age, to our obvious consternation. Yet if we apprehend the magnitude of the justice to come at the end of the age, including the disjunction between what Christians deserve and what we will receive in and through Christ, we must take the greatest comfort in the certainty of That Day.¹¹³ Justice is coming surely. Part of the saints’ joy in eternity is in rejoicing at the Lord’s justice in punishing his enemies (Rev 6:9–11; 14:7). Scripture repeatedly presents these truths as a source of considerable consolation.

Examining the ordeal more closely we note that holy water and dust from the tabernacle (holy ground) were given to the woman. The significance of the act lies in the punishment for eating a sacrifice while unclean: sudden death (Lev 7:21; 22:3; cf. Num 9:6). Wenham also notes, “This dust from the very presence of God himself was likely to have been more lethal still.”¹¹⁴ The woman was to pronounce the curse herself, placing herself in the hands of the Almighty. “Only God could bring about the curse upon her. It was an act of faith on the part of the woman and the community, placing judgment in the hands of God, who sees the unseen, rather than in the hands of man.”¹¹⁵

¹¹² Marvin Olasky and Leah Savas detail a fascinating example of a more modern attempt to resolve a situation of disputed responsibility in colonial Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. Given that 1 in 6 colonial marriages produced a child within 6 months, there was an obvious and significant problem with fornication. In response, the legislature passed a law for “reputed fathers,” seeking to prevent bastardization.

The law stipulated that midwives should ask unwed mothers during labor to name the father. Legislators believed that women, facing the travails of childbirth, would not lie about such an important fact, so the man named became the ‘reputed father’ with an obligation to pay support. With ‘trust the woman’ as official policy, Middlesex County in Massachusetts had only a single case of abortion in 50 years, but 96 cases of men cited as the father for purposes of child support. (Marvin Olasky and Leah Savas, *The Story of Abortion in America: A Street-Level History 1652–2022* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023], 50)

¹¹³ Psalm 10 expresses the cry of the oppressed seeking justice, and hope in the Lord for comfort, endurance, and deliverance.

¹¹⁴ Wenham, *Numbers*, 94–95.

¹¹⁵ Iain M. Duguid, *Numbers: God’s Presence in the Wilderness*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 74.

Further, the punishment in thigh and belly fit the alleged crime, as the adulteress sinned with her thigh and conceived in her belly. The punishment may have been miscarriage or childlessness,¹¹⁶ or it may have been some other kind of physical affliction. Milgrom notes,

Whereas man has no choice but to put the apprehended adulteress to death, God metes out a more precise retribution. It is called the measure for measure principle, poetic justice, individually fashioned for each criminal so that the punishment precisely fits the crime. . . . So the adulteress who acquiesced to receive forbidden seed is doomed to sterility for the rest of her life. . . . The ordeal clearly presumes the belief in its efficacy, to wit: The guilty woman would be so fearful of its consequences that she would rather confess than subject herself to them.¹¹⁷

This is justice, sovereignly administered.

I suspect that this ordeal would appear primitive or superstitious to many moderns. I am not advocating for an “abuse ordeal” where one accused of abuse needs to perform a similar ritual as the accused adulteress. However, the virtue of the ordeal is that it recognizes and operates within the ultimate authority of God himself. Especially in cases of a single accuser (he-said, she-said), taking oaths before the Lord can be part of due process (Num 5:16–22; 1 Kgs 8:31–32). “She stands before the altar so that the imprecation she takes upon herself will most certainly be effective” (cf. 1 Kgs 8:31–32).¹¹⁸ When a pastor, or other authority figure, faces a he-said, she-said scenario, it is certainly appropriate to charge both parties to fear the Lord and to tell the truth. It is appropriate to remind them of the scriptural witness regarding God’s omnipresence and omniscience, to remind them of the fearsome terror of judgment day, and to charge them again to tell the truth.

¹¹⁶ See Gen 20:17 and Abimelech’s wives’ barrenness because of his “adultery” with Sarah.

¹¹⁷ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 350.

¹¹⁸ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 39.

It may also be appropriate to ask both parties to take an oath before God, inviting the Lord to bring his discipline upon each if he or she is lying.¹¹⁹ That is the clear pattern in Numbers 5. How were they to deal with suspicion of a serious breach of God's law with no conclusive proof? "The answer is that they were to take it to the Lord and leave judgment in his hands."¹²⁰ Given the limits of human justice and the comprehensiveness of the Lord's justice, one certainly will not find a better solution in this age.¹²¹

Accountability and Consequences

Scripture teaches us that justice includes consequences, so that good is promoted and evil is diminished: "When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers" (Prov 21:15; cf. Rom 13:1–7). The Lord, as King, brings about justice in punishing the evildoer. "O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more" (Ps 10:17–18). Above I briefly noted the role of consequences for the category of witnesses. Here we briefly consider consequences within the entire scope of justice. In their foundational text on educating men who batter, Pence and Paymar note: "No theme will evoke as much

¹¹⁹ Proverbs 18:17 is well known: "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him." Less known is verse 18: "The lot puts an end to quarrels and decides between powerful contenders." The lot was used, in part, to settle matters when the available evidence was insufficient to resolve the issue otherwise. Again, one sees the wisdom of placing ultimate justice into the Lord's hands. See also Deut 17:19, 24, 26.

¹²⁰ Duguid, *Numbers*, 73.

¹²¹ The passages cited above testify to this practice, as does 2 Chronicles 6:22–23: "If a man sins against his neighbor and is made to take an oath and comes and swears his oath before your altar in this house, then hear from heaven and act and judge your servants, repaying the guilty by bringing his conduct on his own head, and vindicating the righteous by rewarding him according to his righteousness." The Lord is always the primary party in the affairs of men, and a Christian conception of justice ought to integrate his presence in meaningful ways. Exodus 22:7–13 demonstrates a similar practice when money or goods entrusted by one party to another for safekeeping had been damaged or lost. The trustee must either make recompense or swear an oath that he did no wrong.

resistance or discomfort as the theme of honesty and accountability.”¹²² Such a response is not unique to wife-batterers, of course, as Scripture informs us that the bent of fallen men is to “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18). Fallen man always resists responsibility and accountability.

When announcing judgment on Israel, Isaiah noted that the Lord would execute judgment against all persons equally: “Therefore the Lord does not rejoice over their young men, and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows; for everyone is godless and an evildoer, and every mouth speaks folly. For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still” (Isa 9:17). The Lord is just in all he does, and Scripture is filled with examples of his judgment exercised upon mankind, including upon those that are often considered to be “underprivileged” or “disempowered” today. He is truly no respecter of persons.

One application of this as regards abuse is that past abuse or suffering endured does not excuse inflicting present abuse or suffering on others. Though the “hurt people hurt people” mantra may capture a general, sinful pattern of behavior in God’s Word, it does not express the perspective of justice. Abuse suffered in the past does not mitigate the present responsibility of those who abuse others. The Lord forbids victims from taking (personal) vengeance (Rom 12:19; cf. Lev 19:18; Prov 24:29). Levi Secord identifies two reasons for this prohibition:

First, when we are wronged, we feel justified in doing evil things. It is natural, in our fallen state, to respond to sin with sin. But God warns us, that being the victim does not negate our responsibility as moral agents to act righteously.

Second, God gives these commands because justice must be sought and applied according to his universal standards. We are to trust God to act. We are to trust the justice systems to act impartially and pursue justice. Hear this—victims do not have special access to the truth about justice! The repeated commands to not repay evil for evil exist because once wronged, we cannot be trusted as guides for

¹²² Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model* (New York: Springer, 1993), 118.

justice. True victims should be heard, but not heard louder than the commands of God.¹²³

Accountability and consequences for the wrongdoer are righteous, but they must be a matter of just processes, not of personal vengeance. We must remember that there is no genuine independence or anarchy in the world of the Creator. “The LORD has made himself known; he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands” (Ps 9:16). As previously discussed, he also empowers and commands various authorities in this age to act as his instruments, his servants, in dispensing consequences and justice (Rom 13:1–4; 1 Pet 2:13–14).

Aquinas provides an interesting process and metric for weighing out remission versus consequences. Lower judges must follow the dictates of the law

for the inferior judge has no power to exempt a guilty man from punishment against the laws imposed on him by his superior On the other hand the sovereign who has full authority in the commonwealth, can lawfully remit the punishment to a guilty person, provided the injured party consent to the remission, and that this do not seem detrimental to the public good.¹²⁴

So, when the law speaks clearly to a matter, only the highest authority can set aside the penalties of the law and dispense mercy. However, in other matters, “there is a place for the judge’s mercy in matters that are left to the judge’s discretion.”¹²⁵ Finally, Aquinas warns why, in general, consequences must be upheld:

If the judge were to remit punishment inordinately, he would inflict an injury on the community, for whose good it behooves ill-deeds to be punished, in order that men may avoid sin He would also inflict harm on the injured person; who is compensated by having his honor restored in the punishment of the man who has injured him.¹²⁶

¹²³ Levi Secord, “Always Wronged but Never Wrong: The Demented Heart of Wokeness,” *Fight Laugh Feast* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 38.

¹²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae, Q 67, A 4 (17:636).

¹²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae, Q 67, A 4, ad. 1 (17:636). Perhaps he had Deut 17:8–13 in mind, where local authorities were instructed to refer cases that are “too difficult for you” to the Levitical priests for a final judgment.

¹²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae, Q 67, A 4, ad. 3 (17:637).

The principle that justice requires the enforcement of consequences upon the determination of wrongdoing is consistent throughout Scripture (Deut 25:1–2).

Yet the justice of the Lord is not at odds with his mercy. As Romans 3:21–26 demonstrates, justice and mercy meet at the cross. By sending his Son, the Father has treated sin with the full justice that it deserves. He put his Son forward as a propitiation so that the wrath incurred by the sins of Christians could be forgiven as they place their trust in the Christ. This demonstrates “his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:26). So, the mercy extended to Christians, and offered freely to all, is a *just* mercy. God’s mercy did not put aside the demands of justice, it fulfilled them. We, too, must not pit mercy against justice. In any given situation of abuse, it may be appropriate to enact consequences or to show mercy. In both cases, our actions must be just.

The Main Culprits

One other category of justice should be recognized. The statistics on abuse, to say nothing of theological implications and common sense, indicate that various categories of persons are more likely to be abusers. Those categories¹²⁷ include men and

¹²⁷ There are many factors that could be recognized, and different types of abuse would obviously involve somewhat different risk factors. For child maltreatment, for example, 80 percent of perpetrators are in the 18–44 years age range. Children’s Bureau, *Child Maltreatment 2020* (Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, 2022), 66, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2020>. This is not surprising as most maltreatment is by parents (77 percent), who would fall in that age range, and who have the greatest access to children.

women who practice homosexuality,¹²⁸ cohabiting men,¹²⁹ substance abusers,¹³⁰ and the nominally religious.¹³¹ Conversely, those who attend church at least weekly are much less

¹²⁸ Ana Samuel explains,

Contrary to recent and widely circulated conclusions that there is no sexual victimization in lesbian households, the NFSS [New Family Structures Survey] found that, when asked if they were ever touched sexually by a parent or an adult, the children of MLRs [Mother-Lesbian Relationship] were eleven times more likely to say “yes” than the children from an IBF [Intact Biological Family] and the children of FGRs [Father-Gay Relationship] were three times more likely to say “yes.” The children of IBFs were the least likely of all family types to have ever been touched sexually: only 2 percent reported affirmatively (compared to 23 percent of MLRs who replied “yes”). When asked if they were ever forced to have sex against their will, the children of MLRs were the worst off again, four times more likely to say “yes” than the children of IBFs. The children of FGRs were three times more likely to have been forced to have sex than the children of IBFs. In percentages, 31 percent of MLRs said they had been forced to have sex, compared with 25 percent of FGRs and 8 percent of IBFs. These results are generally consistent with research on heterosexual families; for instance, a recent federal report showed that children in heterosexual families are least likely to be sexually, physically, or emotionally abused in an intact, biological, married family. (Ana Samuel, “New Family Structures Research and the ‘No Differences’ Claim,” accessed August 10, 2023, <http://www.familystructurestudies.com/summary>)

¹²⁹ A 2010 study (NIS-4) found,

Children living with their married biological parents universally had the lowest rate, whereas those living with a single parent who had a cohabiting partner in the household had the highest rate in all maltreatment categories. Compared to children living with married biological parents, those whose single parent had a live-in partner had more than 8 times the rate of maltreatment overall, over 10 times the rate of abuse, and nearly 8 times the rate of neglect. (A. J. Sedlak, J. Mettenburg, M. Basena, I. Petta, K. McPherson, A. Greene, and S. Li, *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect: Report to Congress* [Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2010], 12, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf)

A 2015 study from the American College of Pediatricians found that women who cohabitated (35.3 percent) were more than twice as likely to suffer IPV than those who married and stayed married (15.5 percent). Patricia Lee June, “Cohabitation: Effects of Cohabitation on the Men and Women Involved—Part 1 of 2,” *American College of Pediatricians*, March, 2015, <https://acped.org/press/cohabitation-effects-of-cohabitation-on-the-men-and-women-involved-part-1-of-2>. Todd K. Shackleford has found that from 1976-1994, “Married women were murdered by their partners at a rate of 13.11 women per million married women per annum, whereas cohabitating women were murdered at a much higher rate of 116.06 women per million cohabitating women per annum. Thus, cohabiting women in the United States incurred about 8.9 times the risk of murder by a partner than did married women.” Todd K. Shackleford, “Cohabitation, Marriage, and Murder: Woman-Killing by Male Romantic Partners,” *Aggressive Behavior* 27, no. 4 (July 2001): 285. Abuse, violence, and murder are obviously heinous, and cohabitation greatly increases the risk of all three.

¹³⁰ Children’s Bureau, *Child Maltreatment 2020*.

¹³¹ Many studies have shown that nominal Christians tend to be more likely to divorce, engage in domestic abuse, and the like. Conservative Christians tend to be much less likely to do so. See the NFSS cited above (Samuel, “New Family Structures Research and the ‘No Differences’ Claim”), and Caleb Morrell, “Nominal Christianity—Not Complementarianism—Leads to Abuse,” *9Marks*, November 22, 2018, <https://www.9marks.org/article/nominal-christianity-not-complementarianism-leads-to-abuse/>. My own hypothesis is that such persons generally have the worst combination: the guilt of Christianity (through its moral teachings) without the grace of the gospel and the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16–26). That certainly seems like a strong motivation for bad behavior. This echoes Augustine’s experience as well: “I have hardly found any men better than those who have done well in monasteries, so I have not found any men worse than monks who have fallen.” Augustine, *Letters of St.*

likely to commit domestic violence, for example.¹³² As Nancy R. Pearcey has summarized, “Research has found that evangelical Protestant men who attend church regularly are the *least* likely of any group in America to commit domestic violence.”¹³³ Yet another fruit of our egalitarian age is that we tend to discount such patterns as stereotyping, and thus dismiss obvious connections that provide useful information.

It is simply untrue that patterns of abuse are the same within believing churches as without, especially when statistics are controlled for other basic factors such as regular attendance, let alone church membership. This is not to say that abuse does not happen within the church—it certainly has and does, and it will continue to happen until Jesus returns. But it is important to gain an accurate picture of the scope of the problem and the primary factors that contribute to it. Wild generalizations and subjective impressions help no one.¹³⁴

Disparaging the Church

If one trope recurs in modern Christian works on abuse, it is that the church has done very poorly in caring for victims of abuse. Hambrick writes, “Historically, the

Augustin 78.9.4–78.9.20 (NPNF¹, 1:348). Robert Lewis Dabney noted how pagans were more amenable to gospel witness than the nominally religious who had been reared by hypocritical parents. He averred that “parental hypocrisy . . . [is] the most deadly of all means for fatally searing the conscience and petrifying The Heart of Domestic Abuse.” Robert Lewis Dabney, *Dabney on Fire: A Theology of Parenting, Education, Feminism, and Government*, ed. Zachary M. Garris (Middletown, DE: Zachary M. Garris, 2019), 33.

¹³² Christopher G. Ellison, John P. Bartkowski, and Kristin L. Anderson, “Are There Religious Variations in Domestic Violence?” *Journal of Family Issues* 20, no. 1 (January 1999): 87–113.

¹³³ Nancy R. Pearcey, *The Toxic War on Masculinity: How Christianity Reconciles the Sexes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 37.

¹³⁴ In the United States, which has been majority-identified as Christian for quite some time, it is unsurprising that “Christians” would be indicated in any number of statistical metrics of bad behavior. However, when other controls are applied—especially those that tend to correlate with sincere belief and deeply-held convictions (e.g., weekly church attendance)—the statistics tend to tell a different story. For example, American Christians were told for years that the divorce rate was the same within the church as without. However, when said controls are applied, the divorce rate is significantly lower. Glenn Stanton, “FactChecker: Divorce Rate Among Christians,” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 25, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-divorce-rate-among-christians/>.

church has been more skilled in applying the gospel to sin than suffering.”¹³⁵ As does Ruth Everhart: “But where is the church? Instead of exposing wrongdoing and calling for justice, it is too often the culprit. Even worse, it’s the place where culpability hides.”¹³⁶ Mary DeMuth does as well: “Sexual predators are wolves. But so often we have seen wolves protected, sheep slaughtered, and money within the structure of churches preserved. This should not be.”¹³⁷ And Chuck DeGroat is even more damning:

The long, sordid history of the church testifies to our arrogant love of power, position, wealth, prestige, success, and privilege But given changing ecclesial dynamics and a growing social movement that takes clergy narcissism and abuse seriously, the church and its servants may be in a season of needed humiliation and reckoning.¹³⁸

Similarly, Langberg condemns the church’s corruptions:

Contemplate the church’s many deceptions regarding those seen as less than in various ways We believe our denomination or our church has the only correct doctrine. We believe our race is superior and needs to be protected above others at all costs. We believe only one gender, one race, one group is capable of holding power Virulent deceptions that destroy lives and entire nations are clung to as truth. If you doubt this, hang out on “Christian” social media for a week.¹³⁹

Fitzpatrick also writes that, “violence within the Christian community is as prevalent as it is without . . . and possibly worse because Christian women notoriously under-report.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ Hambrick, *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused*, 6. Frankly, I find this statement to be so demonstrably false and historically ignorant that it is laughable. Christian care for the suffering has been one of the hallmarks of the church from its infancy and has been a major factor in the spread of Christianity worldwide.

¹³⁶ Ruth Everhart, *The #MeToo Reckoning: Facing the Church’s Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 4.

¹³⁷ Mary DeMuth, *We Too: How the Church Can Respond Redemptively to the Sexual Abuse Crisis* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2019), 15.

¹³⁸ Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 25.

¹³⁹ Langberg, *Redeeming Power*, 37.

¹⁴⁰ Elyse Fitzpatrick, foreword to *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence*, by Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 12.

Similarly, the Holcombs argue that “many churches are woefully unprepared to deal with domestic violence.”¹⁴¹ Kruger offers a similar perspective:

Most churches and Christian ministries don’t have a sufficient accountability structure for the leaders they hire . . . most elder boards or leadership boards are not composed of the type of leaders who will stand up to narcissistic bully pastors . . . most elder boards quickly succumb to the pressures of an aggressive senior pastor.¹⁴²

He calls out churches that hold to an unbiblical standard of leadership: “The problem is that more and more churches seem to prefer only the latter [bold pastors rather than gentle]. If they have a model of leadership, it’s Jesus flipping over tables rather than holding the little children.”¹⁴³ Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer pick up the same theme: “For some reason, church leadership at times seems to attract unempathetic, selfish narcissists . . . far too many churches have narcissists in leadership. And they are predominately male.”¹⁴⁴

To read the list is discouraging, but it also raises many questions, and especially: *are these critiques just?* That is, are these complaints demonstrably true or are they merely a very effective rhetorical device? Beyond that, how might these authors possess such comprehensive knowledge? The claims here are so grandiose and so sweeping that they beggar belief. It is probably true that we are more aware of abuse than ever before (due to communication technologies and the human appetite for bad news), but we also tend to generalize quite unhelpfully from limited data and to imagine that problems are much larger than they actually are.¹⁴⁵ Further, CT has a vested interest in

¹⁴¹ Justin S. Holcomb and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Is It My Fault? Hope and Healing for Those Suffering Domestic Violence* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 27.

¹⁴² Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 13.

¹⁴³ Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 53–54.

¹⁴⁴ Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture that Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2020), 25–26.

¹⁴⁵ Kevin DeYoung recently wrote about the same phenomena and reached similar conclusions: “There are nearly 400,000 churches in America, so there will always be plenty of bad examples to go around, and the bigger the denomination or movement the quicker the numbers will

stoking these fires because they serve the narrative that power is corrupt, that institutions are corrupt, and that all “chains of oppression” (i.e., existing authorities) must be thrown off in order to deliver us to their promised liberation.

It does not help that none of these authors actually cite any data to support their damning claims. Given the number of churches and the number of Christians in America, it is certain that there is abuse occurring. Simon G. Brauer has estimated the number of churches in the US at 384,000 as of 2012.¹⁴⁶ The 2020 Census of American Religion found that 70 percent of Americans identify as Christian.¹⁴⁷ Given a total population of roughly 330 million,¹⁴⁸ that places the number of self-identifying Christians at 231 million. It is likely that every reader of this paper will be aware of a number of high-profile abuse cases in those churches, but given the sheer number of persons involved, the question remains: does the church have a major problem with abuse? Is it fair to lay widespread blame and failure at “the church’s” feet?¹⁴⁹ One of the surprising responses to the Guidestone Report on Abuse in the SBC last year came from demographer Lyman Stone who, without in any way minimizing the wrongs of abuse, indicated his surprise at

multiply. But before we denounce most leaders as Pharisees and large swaths of the church as complicit in the evil deeds of darkness, let’s make sure we are not trafficking in well-meaning, but unhelpful, myths.” Kevin DeYoung, “Is the Church Failing at Being the Church?” *Clearly Reformed*, February 17, 2023, <https://clearlyreformed.org/is-the-church-failing-at-being-the-church/>.

¹⁴⁶ Simon G. Brauer, “How Many Congregations Are There? Updating a Survey-Based Estimate,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 2 (2017): 438–48.

¹⁴⁷ Public Religion Research Institute, “The 2020 Census of American Religion,” July 8, 2021, <https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>.

¹⁴⁸ United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts,” accessed June 11, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP010220>.

¹⁴⁹ The well-known *Houston Chronicle* report on abuse in the SBC found more than 700 alleged victims over 21 years, among the SBC’s approximately 47,000 churches. By way of comparison, a recent Department of Education report has found over 15,000 cases annually (Department of Education, “Civil Rights Data Collection: Sexual Violence in K–12 Schools,” October 2020, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/sexual-violence.pdf>) among the roughly 99,000 public schools in the US (National Center for Education Statistics, “Fast Facts,” accessed June 11, 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/FastFacts/display.asp?id=84>). Total enrollment at public schools is roughly 55 million (National Center for Education Statistics, “Enrollment Trends,” accessed June 11, 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/FastFacts/display.asp?id=65>), while the SBC claims roughly 15 million members (Carol Pipes, “SBC: Giving Increases While Baptisms Continue Decline,” *Baptist Press*, May 23, 2019, <http://www.bpnews.net/52962/sbc-giving-increases-while-baptisms-continue-decline>).

the low number of current abuse cases given the demographic composition of the SBC. He argued that while the report may show the need for reforms in responding to allegations, it does not show an endemic problem of sexual abuse.¹⁵⁰

In my own experience, I have seen churches care well and protect victims of abuse. I have seen them provide for material needs, mourn with those who mourn, show patience and faithfulness, and demonstrate great tenderness and concern toward those who are walking through difficult times. I have seen abusers confronted and denounced. I have heard teachings celebrating the love and tenderness of Christ and Christian marriage, and denouncing the self-centeredness and selfishness that abuse demonstrates.

I am aware of abuses within the church, both past and modern. But the critiques above are simply untrue and unfair. They do not accurately represent reality within the broader body of Christ, and therefore, they are being used to fuel agendas that work contrary to the good purposes of our God in his world and to undermine the principles of justice that he has called us to recognize, love, and obey. I am concerned that out of the very good desire to minimize abuse, to care well for the abused, and to bring appropriate consequences into the lives of abusers, some persons have gone beyond the biblical mandate. It is heart-breaking to sit with genuine victims of abuse and to hear the stories of the evils they have suffered. Genuine Christians are troubled, deeply and rightly, by these evils and want to do something about it. It is also probably safe to conclude that any Christian who has gone to the trouble to write a book on the subject has devoted greater than average time and energy to the topic, perhaps adding fuel to the

¹⁵⁰ Megan Basham interviewed Stone and reports:

Stone added that he was shocked that Guidepost investigators only found two current cases, given how many exist in the general population. “I mean, if I had been betting beforehand, I would have bet for a couple of hundred,” he said. “Because if you’re talking about 100,000 to 150,000 people who are disproportionately men, just your baseline rate of sex offenders tells you, you should have gotten a couple thousand sex offenders in there just by random chance.” (Megan Basham, “Southern Baptist’s #MeToo Moment,” *Daily Wire*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/southern-baptists-metoo-moment>)

The “100,000 to 150,000 people” category comes from his guess at an average of 2–3 staff per SBC church. Stone is a Lutheran, so he is not a partisan in this matter.

perception of the problem. It is also likely that they have dealt personally and directly with abuse, whether in their own lives or in the lives of those they love.

But vague assertions about how widespread abuse is within the church and about how poorly the church has done in handling it—no matter how often they are repeated—do not amount to evidence of the same. Further, the response to such assertions seems to be an overreaction that is jettisoning biblical justice in the futile attempt to eliminate the problem. Vague assertions serve to deepen suspicion for the church and authorities and can promote overreactions in the name of safety. It is difficult to write on these matters—to raise these questions is to open oneself to charges of minimizing or dismissing abuse and of failing for care for victims.¹⁵¹ Yet this is precisely why a biblical understanding of justice is so necessary: so that we can identify and deal with problems both for what they actually are, and in a manner that honors the Lord and therefore cares for everyone involved. Too much is at stake. It is imperative that Christians understand abuse biblically so that we can address it with the sobriety and courage it requires. And it is imperative that we think, feel, and act justly so that we do not create new problems in our attempts to eradicate existing ones. We must fear the Lord and proceed with care and wisdom.

Can Abusers Change?

One final question needs to be answered: can abusers change? In a significant way, how one answers the question posed here reveals one's theology of abuse. The perspective of Scripture is clear:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you

¹⁵¹ Williams would likely identify this as a manifestation of “concept creep,” expressed in the idea that “questioning sexism, racism, or any other evil ism as the best explanation is to side with oppressors against the oppressed.” Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth*, 130.

were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9–11)

Abuse is a heinous sin. The level of selfishness that is required to treat another person in a truly abusive manner is significant. But it is also a sin which can receive the atonement provided by the blood of Jesus Christ. It is a sin that can be confessed and forsaken, and the abuser can grow in humility and love for others. It is imperative that we hold both truths in hand as we address this topic.

Abusers can change, through faith and repentance in Christ. Given the high levels of selfishness and manipulation that abuse represents, great caution and patience must be exercised in assessing such claims. Patience and process must be deployed. And given the danger that abuse inflicts on its victims, the same caution and patience must be exercised when pursuing reconciliation. By properly recognizing and understanding the dynamics of abuse, we can account for its sinfulness more fully, we can be more discerning in catching its evidence, and we can apply the gospel more skillfully so that those who want to change can do so, by the grace of God.

If the abuser chooses not to change, we cannot force him. But by holding him accountable, by explaining his sin to him from a biblical perspective, and by protecting and caring for his victims, we are loving everyone involved—including the abuser. We dignify him by treating him as a responsible moral agent, created in the image of God, and accountable before his Creator. We pursue his good by warning him of the punishments of hell and by calling him to faith and repentance. And we pursue his good by explaining to him the truth about our God, who is rich in mercy and great in love (Eph 2:4), and who loves his enemies. In Jesus Christ there is hope for abusers. In Jesus Christ is the *only* hope for abusers.

Final Thoughts on Justice

As we prepare to turn to practical responses, it is important to end where we began. As Christians, we must condemn abuse in all its forms as contrary to the good

purposes of our God in creating his world, in creating mankind in his image, and in placing us on the earth to work for his glory. Sadly, abuse is not rare within this fallen world. It is all around us: rape and sexual assault, government tyranny, domestic violence, sex trafficking, murder, and slander. The list could go on and on. For Christians, this is both tragic and unsurprising. It is tragic because this is not how it is supposed to be. The world has gone wrong—haywire—and the disruptions described by the term *abuse* are among the most heinous results. Yet it is also unsurprising, because we understand the effects of the fall and the wickedness resident in the heart of every man, and we know all too well that selfishness is neither rare nor avoidable. It is found within us all.

But we also know that there is a cure in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In him we find the grace and mercy that are required to receive pardon for our sins and the transforming grace that reorients our loves so that we want to obey our God and love our neighbors. Only Christ can and does accomplish this transformation within the hearts of his people. Whenever evil seems to triumph in this age it is discouraging: “when the wicked rise, people hide themselves” (Prov 28:12b). Yet even the ravages of abuse cannot ultimately prevail. Jesus has triumphed over sin and death, and there is hope and redemption at work in his world: “when the righteous triumph, there is great glory” (Prov 28:12a). Christians must operate at all times within the certainty of this knowledge as all of history hinges upon it.

This dissertation has not been written as a manual to care for the abused. That is certainly a worthy concern that must be part of our response to this important topic, and it will be noted in the practical responses below. But my focus over these four chapters has been more specific: we must understand abuse as Scripture describes and portrays it—not as the world does—so that we can understand and respond to it rightly, so that we can work for its prevention, and so that we do not mislabel and malign qualities that God designed for our good. Precious souls are at stake. It is vital that the

church, of all bodies, understand the righteous good and purposes of power and control—of authority—and deploy those qualities for the benefit of everyone involved. It is vital that the church, and individual Christians, recognize and embrace our duties of protection. When godly authorities are functioning in the manner the Lord designed, flourishing is the result. As David wrote (2 Sam 23:3–4): “When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.”

CHAPTER 5

PRACTICAL RESPONSES

Concerns of justice are not limited to a courtroom or other formal setting. As chapter 4 demonstrated, justice must inform everything that we do all day and every day. In a day when accusations of abuse abound, Christians must understand abuse biblically and respond justly to these very serious matters. How we respond will either honor or dishonor our Lord and will reveal the degree of our allegiance to him and to his Word. As we understand the world as he describes it, we can walk wisely and well with the responsibilities he entrusts to us.

Christians do well to ponder and integrate the clear teaching of Proverbs 28:5: “Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it completely.” There is widespread societal conversation about abuse and justice, and at least some of those who seem to be most animated by these topics demonstrate that their understanding of justice is highly skewed.¹ Indeed, when examining scenarios of potential abuse, the theological commitments of those involved is a very significant factor.²

¹ For example, those arguing for trans rights and the like have co-opted the language of the civil rights movement, following the same path taken by homosexual activists. Christians need to understand biblical justice so that we think, feel, and act justly. We must not fail to address genuine injustices, but we must also be shrewd and discerning so that we do not support wickedness in the name of tolerance, liberty, or equality.

² For example, the celibacy requirement for clergy in the Roman Catholic Church should certainly be considered when one evaluates the abuse scandal that arose within that religious body. Celibacy as a *requirement* for ministry is a clear example of transgressing biblical requirements for the role, which inevitably sets up persons for failure. Jesus (Matt 19:12) and Paul (1 Cor 7:25–35) both recognize that some persons may become “eunuchs” for the sake of the kingdom, but they certainly do not require that practice and the whole of Scripture argues for the normativity of marriage, including for elders/ministers (1 Cor 9:5; Heb 13:4). On the other hand, how many Protestant churches have unqualified leaders who do not meet other biblical standards for their roles (1 Tim 2:13–13; 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Pet 5:1–4; etc.)? With apologies to Shakespeare, *theology will out*.

Below I identify several variables that need to be considered when an accusation of abuse is made, noting the categories of biblical justice for each in italics at the outset of each variable. I frame the discussion in second-person language so as to represent the experience of someone who hears an accusation. The emphasis of this first section is on applied biblical justice. Care for those involved must be informed by a just approach and processes. In the second section, I identify several possible responses that must be informed by the answers to the questions noted in the variables. Acknowledging and recording these elements may appear to result in an artificial approach, but these are tasks that we do every day in many settings. Most of the time, recognizing and assessing such variables occurs in a largely instantaneous and seemingly subconscious manner. Therefore, it is helpful to consider and analyze what is involved in these situations. Again, the goal is to recognize and implement the various categories discussed above so that we honor the Lord in all that we do.

Variables

The variables below explore a number of factors that come into play when accusations of abuse are made. They do not represent a step-by-step checklist for handling an accusation of abuse. Depending on the information available to you, some questions may not apply at all, or the order in which you process them may change. They also do not represent an exhaustive approach to accusations of abuse. However, they do cover much important ground that should be considered in these sad situations.

A church's polity is also a factor. Autonomous Baptist churches must deploy somewhat different processes for handling accusations of abuse than do denominations that recognize extra-local authority (e.g., Presbyterian, Anglican, etc.). Of course, if a church does not have an abuse policy, or does not practice church discipline, then those theological commitments will also exercise significant influence on the potential outcomes. Christian schools and other parachurch ministries also need to consider how to apply biblical principles within their various governing and administrative offices.

Duly constituted authorities; Jurisdiction: Are you a member at this church, or a guest? Are you a pastor or other ministry leader? Are you a family member to either party? Do you know the accuser?

If you are not a responsible party to the issue, you should consider first why an accusation has been shared with you and whether it is righteous for you to be involved. You must recognize the possibility that an accusation is slanderous and is being made for sinful purposes. The instinct to care for another person is well and good, though it must be informed by the totality of the biblical witness to handling accusations in a manner that honors the Lord and obeys his Word.³

In addition, those who have been given roles of authority by the Lord are most responsible for the well-being of those under their care.⁴ We rightly feel a deeper impulse to help our own families and neighbors in times of trouble (Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 5:8). Conversely, an out-of-town guest will be at considerable disadvantage since she does not know the parties involved and has few lasting ties to the community. It will be more difficult for her to understand the apparent allegation within its larger context. On the other hand, in a truly oppressive situation, an outsider may be able to identify abusive dynamics that those on the inside have minimized or absorbed as normal.

The Lord in his providence has ordained that you would be the one to hear the accusation. Having biblical clarity on what your responsibilities are will help to penetrate the fog of subjectivity that such a situation can present. Do you immediately tell your pastor, or husband, as applicable? Do you call the police? Do you urge the accuser to tell someone in authority (civil or ecclesial)? The greater your relational proximity to the situation, the more information you may have for evaluating the accusation.

³ Abigail Dodds, “The Beauty and Abuse of Empathy,” *Desiring God (blog)*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-beauty-and-abuse-of-empathy>.

⁴ One significant factor to consider is an accusation made by a child. Adults have God-given responsibility for children, within our various roles and relations, and children have a God-given deference and trust toward adults. Those factors certainly come into play in such situations.

You need not and ought not to adopt the demeanor of a zealous inquisitor, but you do need to carry a preeminent concern for the truth of the matter. In the end, setting the truthfulness of an accusation to the side in the name of caring for the accuser (often [mis]labeled as the “victim” before corroboration) is unloving and unjust. It is one thing to recognize the difficulty of discovering the truth of an accusation and to try to navigate the tricky waters of next steps; it is quite another to attempt to smooth out those waters by bypassing due process, enforcing penalties and protections, and then potentially passing the buck to civil authorities.

Due Process; Jurisdiction: Have they shared their accusations with anyone else? Have they attempted to work through their problems with the accused?

Given the scriptural injunctions against gossip and slander (Exod 20:16; Prov 10:18; 2 Cor 12:20), as well as the dominical command to go to those who sin against us (Matt 18:15–20), persons who are alleging to have been wronged ordinarily bear the biblical duty to confront the alleged wrongdoer. The duty to confront is the normative position. There are exceptions (especially as regards children with adults, and in some cases of alleged sexual abuse), though they should be considered carefully so that a due process of justice can still proceed.

It is exceedingly common in our day for persons to leave any organized body (a family, a business, or a church) and to allege all manner of misdeeds against that body, and especially against those in authority. It is also exceedingly common for such reports to be received and believed without question. Such a response is unbiblical and unjust. When one hears a report of mistreatment for which one is not a responsible party, most often the proper response is to graciously stop the person and ask him if he has attempted to work through the alleged offense with the accused party (in interpersonal disputes) or reported the offense to the responsible authorities (in a criminal matter). If the answer is “no,” then one should ask why. If the accuser states that such a tack would be impossible, then it might be permissible to offer to go with the accuser in order to help him to

confront the accused or to make the report to the authorities. Often, the character of all parties is revealed in significant ways through such conversation and through the responses and reasoning of the accuser.

Discussions of abuse often highlight the self-protective instinct of leaders and organizations, but loyalty to friends and a desire to be “helpful” can also prevent us from considering potentially sinful motives or even misunderstandings in an accusation of being harmed. Proven character matters, both in establishing and in undermining credibility. If there is no threat of imminent harm, the truth of the accusation is the primary matter that must be considered before any potential responses can be offered.

Accusations; Witnesses: Is the accuser an adult or a child? Is he or she male or female? How old is he or she? What was his or her countenance? Did anyone else hear the accusation? How did those around him or her react?

There are several factors that affect our evaluation of an accusation. The age and maturity of everyone involved are relevant factors. Also, if an accusation was made with a laugh, that is quite a different matter than a statement made furtively in hushed tones, while swearing the hearer to secrecy. Black words on a white page devoid of context look like a damning indictment but meaning comes largely from context.

The opportunity to corroborate what you heard is also significant. A friend may indeed verify that you heard correctly. Or he might correct you, explaining what the accuser actually said. He might provide further context since he may have seen or heard other details that you did not notice. On the other hand, your friend may not have heard anything, which does raise questions about the legitimacy of your recollection. The standard of multiple witnesses serves a significant role in the administration of justice, and corroboration is a very valuable help.

Witnesses; Due Process: Is there any physical evidence of mistreatment (bruising, etc.)? Is there other, non-physical evidence: e.g., does she seem to be especially anxious or fearful?

There are many strands of evidence that apply in an accusation of abuse. If a child has a black eye, for example, that is an indication of some manner of harm that was suffered. The attitude and countenance of the child also ought to be taken into consideration. The response of the child's friend may also give insight into the accusation, as the friend's reaction will demonstrate the degree of concern he or she assigns to the accusation. The more subjective the evidence is, the less weight you should assign to it.

If you are aware of ongoing conflicts in a marriage, that is an obvious factor in evaluating an accusation. If you have been in their home or otherwise seen how the parties involved relate to one another, that, too, should be part of your evaluation. On the other hand, if the accuser is a relative stranger to you, then you are at a considerable disadvantage in making an informed decision about next steps.

Due Process; Impartiality; Accusations (in cases involving a girl accusing her mother): Do you know the girl's mother? If so, what is her character? Would it matter if the accused was the child's father? Would it matter if the accuser was a boy?

The proven character of the accuser and the accused is a significant factor (Jer 13:23). Further, the intersectional ethos of our day is inevitably prejudicial. It assigns tentative (at least) guilt or innocence on the basis of sex and/or skin tone of the various parties involved. Christians must do better. We must walk justly so that we can be wise and judge well.

Due Process, Witnesses: What would you do if you did not hear the child directly, but your child came and reported the other child's statement to you?

This question raises the topics of gossip and slander. Not all second- or third-hand accusations are created equal. Children ought to report such news to their parents, given the parents' responsibility to protect and train the child. However, gossip and slander are very common human sins, and given the high level of concern that

accusations of abuse raise, we ought to be very careful if we receive a second-party accusation.

Possible Responses

The primary matter to settle is the issue of jurisdiction: does the Lord command you in his Word to take up the accusation? If you have God-given authority within the situation, then the answer is “yes,” and you must proceed accordingly. However, if you do not, then it is likely that you are dealing with a scenario of gossip or slander and you must put a stop to it as soon as practicable. Much heartache can be averted in so doing. “Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears” (Prov 26:17).

There is also the matter of care for the accusers. While they ought not to be considered victims until the matter can be duly adjudicated, they may have been victimized indeed. Helping them to trust and honor the Lord as they seek resolution for their situation will likely require perseverance and ongoing care. Sometimes, biblical standards of due process are considered to present an undue burden or hardship, but Scripture provides clear and relevant guidance for trusting the Lord and following his wise guidance in faith, out of proper love for everyone concerned. By obeying his Word, we fear him and act for his glory.

Another significant factor in your immediate response should be an attempt to understand the threat of immediate harm. If your friend winced when you placed your hand on her shoulder, or shows other signs of potential physical abuse, that should affect your assessment. If there are bruises or other signs of physical harm, that should increase your level of concern as well.

Are you able to follow up with a conversation, or does she leave the church that evening as soon as possible? Do you have a means to follow up with her the next day, inviting her to get together? It may be that she begins to avoid you out of fear or

embarrassment. How well do you know her husband? What is his reputation and proven character? Total depravity affects us all, and abusers can be notoriously manipulative, so caution is warranted. However, biblical principles of justice still apply and must guide all that we do.

Depending on your proper role in the matter and the amount of evidence you are able to gather, your range of responses includes: praying for the woman and her family, to reporting your concerns to ecclesial and/or civil authorities, to working to provide alternative living arrangements for the woman. Many factors influence such decisions, and we ought not to pretend that such choices can or should be made lightly.

If you do have authority within the situation, then your focus should be to continue with care, even as you turn to information gathering and next steps. Especially in light of the potential difficulties identified with a term like “spiritual abuse” or “emotional abuse” as noted above, it will be helpful to understand what someone means by using it and what specific actions they have identified as such. It is also necessary to consider which parties are properly involved in the matter. Is an allegation made against the pastors, or against others in the church? What processes does the church possess for resolving the conflict and how can you engage them?

The general rule in treating accusations of abuse is that the greater the degree of alleged harm, and the greater the credibility of the accuser, the more seriously and thoroughly the alleged abuse should be pursued. Included in the assessment of the accuser’s credibility is the evidence provided. Not all accusations are created equal. The language that you heard in an accusation may be shocking and concerning, especially as considered in the abstract. However, even the handful of questions above demonstrate that other information may affect our understanding of the situation significantly.

The legal standard to report child abuse generally contains language such as: a mandatory reporter shall report suspected child abuse “if the person has reasonable cause

to suspect that a child is a victim of child abuse.”⁵ From a legal perspective, a “reasonable person” is,

A hypothetical person used as a legal standard, esp. to determine whether someone acted with negligence; specif., a person who exercises the degree of attention, knowledge, intelligence, and judgment that society requires of its members for the protection of their own and of others’ interests. The reasonable person acts sensibly, does things without serious delay, and takes proper but not excessive precautions.⁶

So “reasonable cause” would appear to be cause that a “reasonable person” finds appropriate for reporting the allegation. Again, there is an inescapably subjective element to this standard, and we do well to recognize it.

Another challenging dynamic in some cases concerns the parent-child relationship. Abuse advocates warn against speaking with—let alone confronting—the accused. Instead, they counsel that victim safety should be the primary concern. However, in such cases, the parents are the persons designated by God as the most responsible for the safety of the child. If a parent is indeed abusive, then to return the child to his or her parent can be quite dangerous. However, if there is a misunderstanding, or if the accusation is untrue, then to keep the child away from the parent is a grave injustice. It is proper to speak of prioritizing victim safety, but who is being victimized must be one of the questions under consideration. Intersectional prejudices based upon popular views of power dynamics do not meet the threshold of biblical justice.

At different times, it may be reasonable that you do or do not decide to report an accusation of abuse. The tipping point appears to be your evaluation of the nature of the allegation: was it said in jest, or seriously? Was the accuser credible? How do you evaluate the character of her accused? All of these factors, and more, might lead a “reasonable person” to arrive at either conclusion depending on how the facts settle.

⁵ Pennsylvania Child Welfare Information Solution, “Referrals Learn More,” accessed February 7, 2023, <https://www.compass.state.pa.us/CWIS/Public/ReferralsLearnMore>.

⁶ Bryan A. Garner, ed., *Black’s Legal Dictionary*, 6th pocket ed. (St. Paul, MN: West, 2021), 662.

If you do indeed determine that the accusation is credible, then the proper response for potential child abuse is to call the Child Abuse Hotline, or whatever authority is so designated in your location. Further, if the accusation occurred at church (and involves church members), you should also notify your pastors/elders who are commissioned by the Lord to lead and care for the church. Both the civil and the ecclesial authorities can then undertake their own appropriate next steps. Especially in the church, this should include care for all parties involved, applying the scriptural principles delineated in this study to comfort, counsel, protect, and investigate the matters under consideration.⁷ Depending on what comes to light and when, there are many different potential outcomes to such a scenario.

If all of the above strikes you as complex, then you are understanding the situation rightly. Accusations of abuse are rarely simple and always serious. Life in a fallen world is filled with many sorrows, and navigating the many dynamics involved in hearing and responding to accusations of abuse is hard. Simple mantras like “believe the victim” can be offered as a well-intended effort at providing conceptual clarity, but Scripture helps us to understand what is involved in that seemingly simple phrase. Yet the Lord promises to be with his people, and he has equipped us with his Word so that we can think, feel, and act righteously when we are faced with such difficult situations. As we trust him, follow his Word, and love everyone involved, we will honor him with how we respond.

A Flowchart for Handling Accusations

In light of all of that has been examined above, it may be helpful to present a very simplified flow chart that captures the dynamics in question when an accusation of

⁷ An ecclesial investigation is not identical to its civil counterpart. Pastors do not exercise civil authority and are neither trained nor called of God to prosecute criminal offenses. Instead, their concern is to keep and guard the church, promoting the spiritual vitality of her members. This may include church discipline, counseling, benevolence care, and the like. Pastors may utilize the resources and findings of the civil authorities as appropriate, but pastoral authority and priorities are not identical to theirs.

abuse is made. Real persons and real scenarios do not fit into neat and tidy boxes, so my aim is not to present a fool-proof process that eliminates all questions, ambiguities, and subjectivity. Rather, I am seeking to present visually the categories that the Lord provides for us in his Word. I conclude the chapter with this chart.⁸

⁸ I wish to thank Morgan Heitland for her graphic design work on this flowchart.

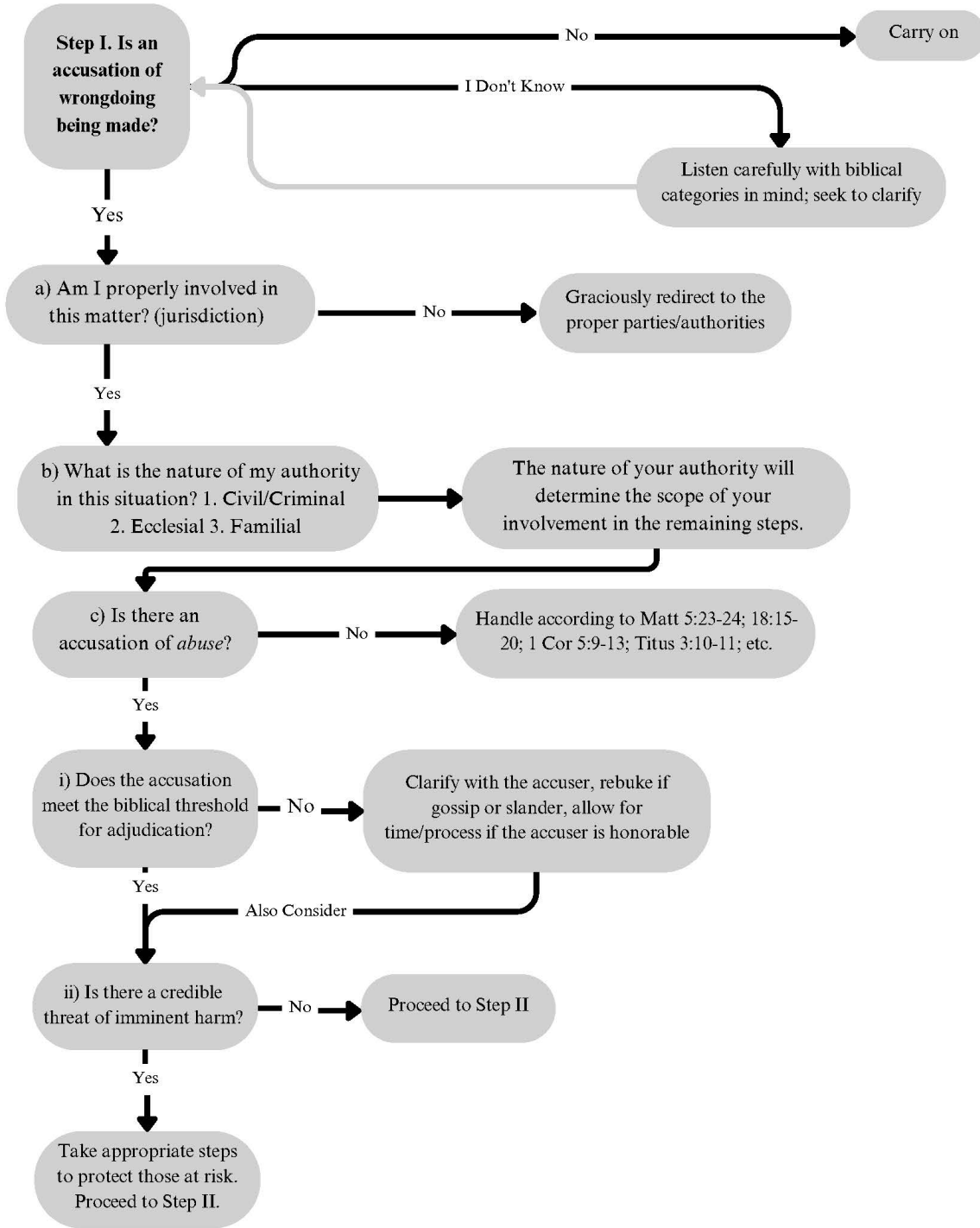


Figure 3. A flowchart for handling accusations of abuse (step 1)

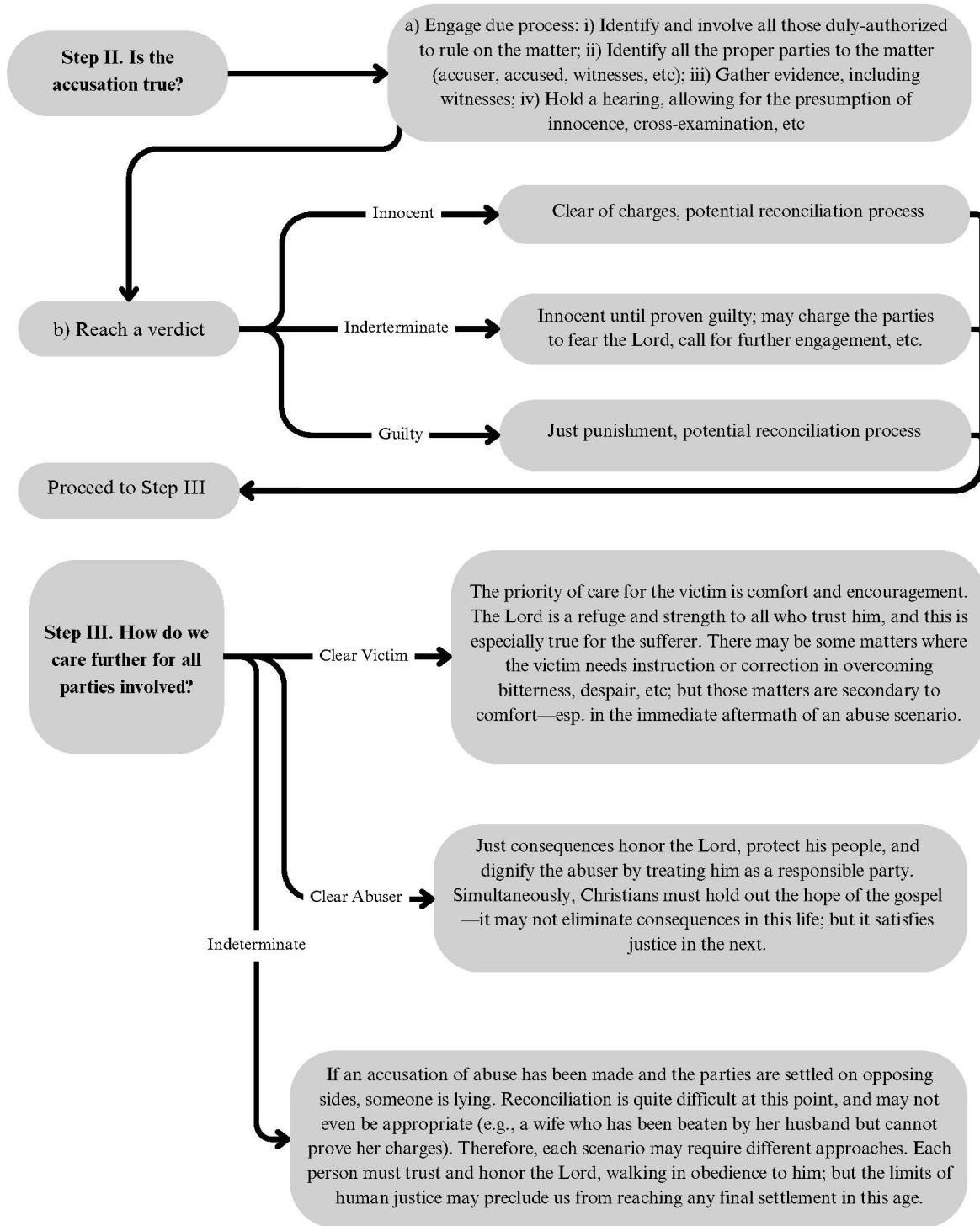


Figure 4. A flowchart for handling accusations of abuse (steps 2–3)

APPENDIX 1

ABUSE AND RESPONSE WHEELS

Given the influence of the Duluth Power and Control Wheel and the Equality Wheel as highlighted above, I thought it would be useful to provide alternative wheels based upon the values expressed in this paper. The alternative nature of these two wheels should be obvious, especially in light of the materials presented above. My hope is that by presenting these values in a familiar format that the contrast may be clear, and that the format might be useful for Christians who work with both victims of abuse and abusers. Please note that I have deployed the pronoun “them” to refer to the recipients of the various behaviors. I have done so in recognition of the fact that the subject(s) can be of either sex, and may also be plural (e.g., a woman and her children). I have deployed the pronoun “your” to refer to the behavior of the responsible party. For ease of use, I have chosen to utilize the same terminology throughout.¹

Selfishness Wheel

It is helpful to recall the definition of abuse provided in this paper: *selfish compulsion to the pronounced detriment of another*. In contradistinction to the DM Power and Control Wheel, this wheel identifies Selfishness as the center of abuse, and Compel and Dominate as the outer rings (that is, as means not motive). I have also modified or changed the subcategories found in the DM, seeking to apply a biblical grid to the various phenomena. It is also important to recognize that the various behaviors identified in the various spokes of the wheel themselves exist on a spectrum. The greater

¹ I wish to thank Morgan Heitland for her graphic design work on both wheels.

the selfishness as motive, or the greater the compulsion as means, or the greater the harm or detriment produced, the more likely it is that abuse is occurring. As for the categories identified, most refer to the means employed (blame shifting, threats, economic, physical, verbal/emotional, and isolation), while one refers to the primary location for much abuse (in the home). The category of “children” considers them both as the targets of abusive actions and as an instrumental means of affecting others—especially their mother.

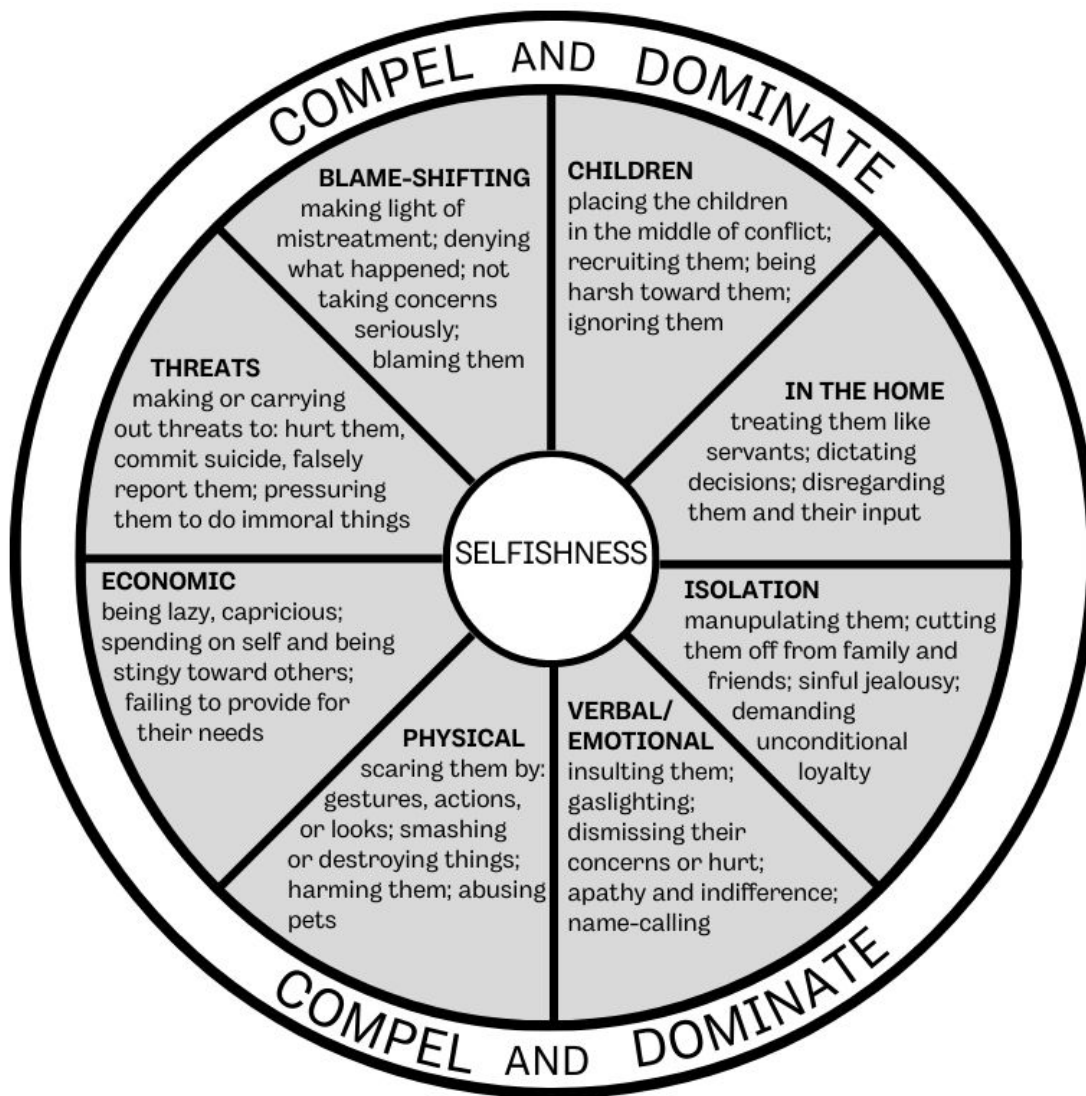


Figure A1. The selfishness wheel

Love and Leadership Wheel

Again, in contradistinction to the DM Equality Wheel, this wheel identifies Love and Leadership as the opposite of abuse, and places Righteous Authority as the outer ring (again, as the means of its accomplishment). Because authority is always linked to responsibility in Scripture, those who exercise authority righteously will engage the various spokes of the wheel as responsibilities to be undertaken conscientiously and consistently. I have also modified or changed the various subcategories found in the Equality Wheel, to bring them into alignment with Scripture.

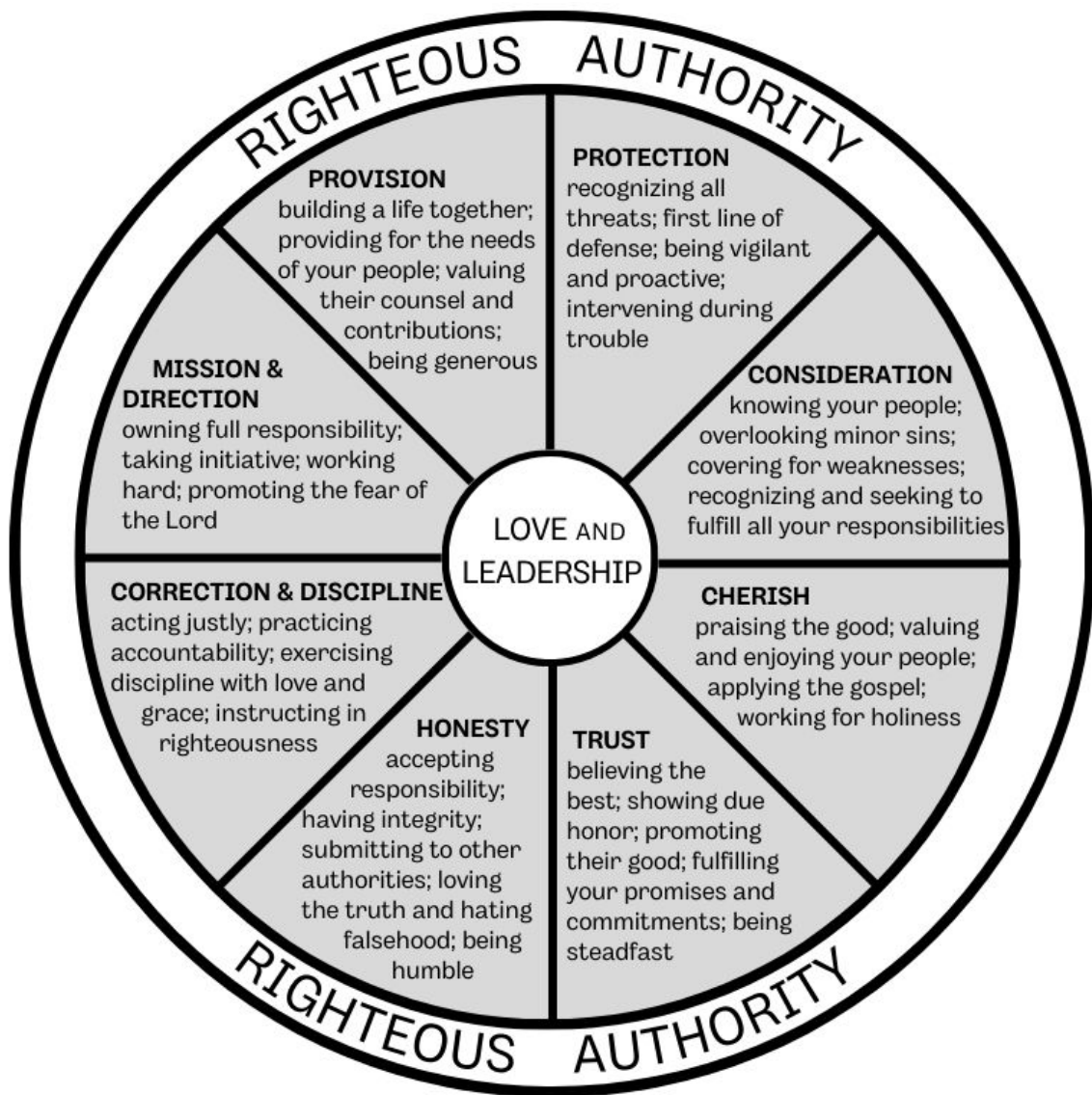


Figure A2. The love and leadership wheel

These wheels are my proposal for a better description of the phenomena of abuse, and a better positive vision for its alternative. I welcome feedback in the hope of offering useful tools to the church for addressing this important topic.

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ABSTRACT

A POWERFUL WORD: ON DEFINING AND RESPONDING JUSTLY TO ABUSE

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The topic of abuse has received increased societal scrutiny of late, and with good reason. Yet the very subjectivity of the term can be problematic, as most resources on abuse do not give adequate attention to the question of definition. In this dissertation, I define abuse as *selfish compulsion to the pronounced detriment of another*. This definition shares some similarities with the most prevalent paradigm today, which generally identifies abuse through the lens of *power and control*, in line with the Duluth Model and their Power and Control Wheel. However, the Duluth Model minimizes or misses altogether a positive understanding of power and control, especially as identified in Scripture, and therefore is liable to mislead, mislabel, or even malign when it comes to identifying and responding rightly to abuse. Further, the conceptions of justice that are brought to contemporary discussions on abuse are often unhelpfully influenced by Critical Theory, which obscures or dismisses a biblical understanding of justice. Therefore, the need for definitional and practical clarity on matters of abuse, oppression, and justice is great. This dissertation begins with an examination of the term and concept of abuse, including its historical and contemporary usage, before examining Scripture's positive witness to power and control. Chapter 2 then examines the biblical text in order to present and defend a biblical definition of abuse. Chapter 3 turns to critique of the prevailing model, identifying how it does and does not overlap with the biblical perspective. Chapter 4 then examines justice, providing a succinct definition and

examining the components necessary for acting justly when allegations of abuse are made. Chapter 5 concludes by offering several practical considerations for applying the concerns and principles developed throughout the work. An appendix offers alternative Wheels which represent my understanding of these important topics.

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