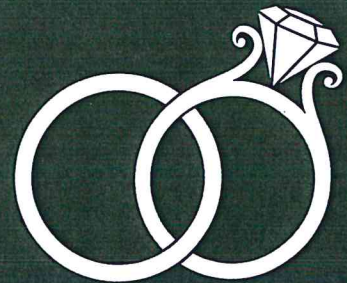


# MARRIAGE DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

CRITICAL  
QUESTIONS  
AND  
ANSWERS



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FOREWORD BY EDWARD T. WELCH

of this marriage?" If they make it clear that they have no intention to make any effort to fulfill their duties as spouses, the believing spouses may, after making every effort toward reconciliation, consider themselves abandoned.

### SUMMARY

While we should be very cautious about expanding the definition of abandonment to include any failure to keep the marriage covenant, there are situations in which a believing spouse may consider himself or herself deserted, even if the unbeliever was not the one who physically moved away from the home and filed for divorce. People facing situations of possible abandonment should seek godly counsel from their church leaders as they strive to honor God through very difficult circumstances.

### — QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION —

1. What are some dangers of expanding the definition of abandonment beyond physical departure and filing for divorce?
2. What biblical basis could be given for saying that a spouse who willfully refuses to fulfill marital duties has abandoned the marriage?
3. Which of the difficult cases described in this chapter would qualify as desertion?
4. What role might church leaders play in helping a believer determine whether his or her spouse has provided grounds for divorce for desertion?
5. What should be done if a professing believer abandons his or her marriage?

## IS ABUSE GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE?

Abuse as possible grounds for divorce also has significant support among evangelicals. Many have wondered whether, if one ten-minute incident of adultery could be just cause for divorce, ten years of physical violence would not. Instone-Brewer points out that the church father Origen "asked why Jesus did not allow a husband to divorce a wife who had tried to poison him or who had killed one of their children, because 'to endure sins of such heinousness which would seem to be worse than adultery or fornication would appear to be irrational.'"<sup>1</sup>

### UNDERSTANDING ABUSE<sup>2</sup>

Abuse, broadly defined, is an improper and harmful treatment of one person by another. There are different kinds of abuse, including physical abuse (behavior that results in the nonaccidental injury of the victim), sexual abuse, verbal abuse, and emotional abuse. Abusive actions and words typically come from fleshly hearts that are ruled by angry desires (Matt. 5:21–22; Gal. 5:19–21; James 4:1–2).

Abuse can be hard to prove in that two parties may give radically different accounts of what transpired, and there are no other witnesses.

1. David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 94.

2. See Jim Newheiser, *Help! Someone I Love Has Been Abused* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2010).

Sometimes significant sin and provocation occur on both sides of an argument. In one case the wife came in, sporting a black eye. I asked the husband, "How did your wife get the black eye?" He replied, "It happened when I threw my cell phone at her." At that point, the wife chimed in, "That was right after I tried to run him over in the car and broke his leg." It is important to hear from all sides when an accusation of abuse is made. I have seen cases in which one spouse claims to have been terribly mistreated, but when I heard the other side, I realized that I hadn't heard the whole story. "The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him" (Prov. 18:17).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it should not be assumed that there is equal blame on both sides. Abusers are often masters of manipulation, who can make it sound like they were the victims. Finally, it should not be assumed that all abusers are men. I have encountered numerous situations in which the wife repeatedly became violently angry, while the husband would futilely attempt to placate her.

### PROTECT THE VICTIMS OF ABUSE

Scripture teaches that God is concerned for the oppressed (Pss. 10:17–18; 82:3–4) and that leaders are responsible to protect those who are afflicted: "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy" (Prov. 31:8–9). The church is to reflect the Lord's care for the oppressed (Ps. 9:9; Luke 4:18–19).

Sadly, there have been many cases in which church leaders have failed to protect the victims of abuse. Leaders have not taken the claims of abused spouses seriously. Battered women have been told that if they were more sweet and submissive, the abuse would stop. Sometimes it is implied that it is their fault that their husband is so angry. This counsel

3. William A. Heth writes about his experiences in counseling marriage conflicts: "If we've learned anything from this, it is that our initial judgments about who was at fault in the relationship were almost the opposite of what was really going on." "Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion," in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*, ed. Mark L. Strauss (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 79.

is based on a misinterpretation of 1 Peter 3:1–2, which reads that wives should seek to win their disobedient husbands without a word through their chaste and respectful behavior. While it is true that God may use the gracious submission of a mistreated wife to win her husband to faith, Peter is not saying that she is under obligation to take a daily physical and verbal beating. Nor is Peter saying that the wife can be certain that if she just behaves sweetly enough, her husband will come around. As Paul reminds us, "How do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband?" (1 Cor. 7:16a). Some men are hard-hearted and will continue to abuse their wives, regardless of what they do. Church leaders who send a woman back into a situation in which she is likely to be beaten have failed to fulfill their call to protect Christ's sheep (Acts 20:28) and are unworthy of their office (Ezek. 34:1–10).

Even those who question whether abuse is grounds for divorce should agree that a wife has a right to be physically safe and that if she is at risk of violence, she is free to find another place to live until it is safe to return home. Holcomb provides several biblical examples of those who took advantage of opportunities to avoid suffering, including Paul's escapes from persecution (Acts 9:25; 22:25–29; 23:12–24).<sup>4</sup> Others note that Paul was willing to use his rights under Roman law to avoid mistreatment. Church leaders should step up to offer protection to battered spouses by providing a safe place to stay, offering compassionate counsel, and furnishing other needed practical help. If the abusive spouses are church members, they are subject to church discipline (Matt. 18:15–20). If the abusive spouses are guilty of criminal physical abuse, the victims may need encouragement to report the matter to the appropriate civil authorities (Rom. 13:4).<sup>5</sup> If children have been physically or sexually abused, church leaders are required by law to report these crimes to the government authorities.

4. Justin Holcomb, *Is It My Fault?* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 129–37.

5. Victims of abuse often fail to report crimes against them because of misunderstanding submission (thinking that it would be unsubmitive to report), fear (of being alone, or of retaliation from the abuser), or false guilt ("If I were a better wife, he wouldn't be this way").

## DEGREES OF ABUSE

Angry words (verbal abuse) are very sinful: “With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor” (Prov. 11:9a). There is a difference, though, between a man who raises his voice on occasion and the man who physically beats up or berates his wife. Just as we wouldn’t encourage divorce in the case of every person who has a lustful thought or look (Matt. 5:28), we wouldn’t say that every spouse who has spoken hatefully in anger should be punished as a murderer (5:21–22) or has given grounds for divorce.

One of the most difficult situations that a leader may face is one spouse’s relentless verbal (and psychological) abuse of the other. I have seen cases in which the always-angry spouse will follow the partner around the house, railing at him or her, even as the victim just tries to get away. I have encountered controlling husbands who totally micromanage their wives and try to isolate them from others, forbidding them to spend time with family and friends. I have seen abusive spouses who would not let their partners sleep as they continued to berate them throughout the night. While I would be reluctant to tell such people that they have a right to divorce, it is hard to argue that they don’t have the right to escape (at least temporarily) the constant verbal attacks.

## CAN THE VICTIM OF ABUSE FILE FOR DIVORCE?

Just as we seek to offer godly counsel—which would ideally lead to repentance, forgiveness, and restoration in cases of marital infidelity—our first hope in cases of spousal abuse is to bring the abuser to true repentance. Then the home would become a safe place for the victim, who could forgive, and the marriage could begin to be rebuilt. Many abusers, however, are arrogant, unrepentant, and manipulative, thus making peaceful reconciliation impossible.

Many believe that severe cases of abuse qualify under the category of abandonment of the marriage, reasoning that if the violent spouse

isn’t willing to live at peace with the believer, he or she is effectively causing a separation by forcing the innocent spouse to leave. According to Paul, “God has called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15b).<sup>6</sup> Crippen writes, “We emphasize once more that abuse is a form of desertion . . . . ‘Constructive’ desertion occurs when one partner’s evil conduct ends the marriage because it causes the other partner to leave.”<sup>7</sup> One danger of opening this door is that it could be used to broaden the grounds for divorce to anything that a supposed victim considers to be abusive. Given that we are all sinners who are prone to sinful anger expressed through sinful words and actions, virtually every marriage could be ended on these grounds. On the other hand, there may be extreme cases in which abuse has broken the marriage bonds beyond repair.<sup>8</sup> Consider the following:

1. The husband has repeatedly abused the children physically and sexually, but somehow has escaped prison. Child Protective Services has told the mother that if she lets the husband back into the house, the children will be taken away from her.
2. The wife has engaged in a long-term pattern of verbal and physical abuse against her husband. She will not let him sleep. She constantly yells at him and frequently hits him. The children are traumatized by seeing their parents this way. She has gone to counselors, but hasn’t changed. This has been going on for more than ten years.
3. The husband is constantly full of rage and has beaten his wife several times. Once—when he pushed her down—she broke her wrist, but she told the doctors that she had just fallen.

6. This ground would apply only to an unbelieving spouse. But again, a professing Christian who refuses to repent could be considered an unbeliever after the biblical process of church discipline has been followed.

7. Jeff Crippen and Anna Wood, *A Cry for Justice* (Lincroft, NJ: Calvary Press, 2012), 304.

8. John M. Frame quotes a PCA Report that explains that divorce may be necessary “to protect a blameless spouse from intolerable conditions.” *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 781.

- Finally, one night, he came home drunk and beat her so badly that both eyes were blackened and her nose was broken. She wants to know how much more of this she has to take.
4. The husband—after being arrested for beating his wife, burning her with a cigarette, and stabbing her in the arm with a knife—has been sentenced to seven years in prison. Should she consider herself abandoned?
  5. The wife attempted to kill her husband and their children with a knife in a fit of anger.

One alternative in such cases of abuse would be to live separately (and safely), while hoping that the Lord would bring the abusive spouses to repentance (1 Cor. 7:10–11). I would not, however, support a church's exercising discipline against the victims who, after a long period of significant abuse with no indication of true repentance on the part of the abusers, chose to regard themselves as abandoned and filed for divorce. I would strongly advise that people considering such a decision work closely with church leaders in evaluating their options biblically.

## SUMMARY

Physical, verbal, and emotional types of abuse are contrary to God's design for marriage, which is supposed to reflect love and grace instead of anger and hatred. Victims of abuse have a right to protect their own lives and the lives of their children. Church leaders should carefully investigate claims of abuse and should be faithful to protect the innocent, which may sometimes involve offering shelter or calling the authorities. While some cases of abuse may equate to abandonment by an unbeliever, every effort should be made to rescue the marriage, and great caution should be exercised before granting approval to divorce.

## — QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION —

1. What behavior constitutes abuse?
2. How have some church leaders failed in their calling to protect victims of abuse?
3. When is it right for the victim of abuse to physically get away from his or her spouse?
4. Why would many consider some forms of abuse to be grounds for divorce? Which of the examples above would provide grounds for divorce?
5. What should church leaders do when they aren't sure where to draw the line about what qualifies as valid grounds for divorce?