

## God Condemns Abuse

Rod Reynolds

A woman who grew up in a Church of God family reports that her mother was severely beaten during those years. Her father claimed he beat her mother to "get her under submission," and that the beatings were necessary for her salvation and to beat "Satan out of her."

He beat her with various objects, including a Bible. He was careful to leave bruises only where they could be covered up, so it wouldn't be obvious to others what was happening.

He not only administered frequent beatings, but also abused her verbally and mentally. He berated her, calling her filthy names, and used various tactics to keep her in a state of cowering fear, uncertainty, and mental anguish.

The man's "church face," however, was quite the opposite of his behavior at home. In public he was kind and courteous, complimenting his wife, doing acts of service for others in the Church. For years, few knew or suspected that he was an abuser, although some later admitted they knew "something bad" was going on, but did not know what to do about it.

Unfortunately, this story is only one of who knows how many examples of abuse that have occurred among families in the Church of God over the years. I know personally of several similar examples.

It's important that we understand what abuse is and what God's word really teaches about it. We need to understand clearly that there is never a justification for abusive conduct, and that God condemns abuse.

Abuse is an involved subject and there's no way one article can cover everything that could be covered about abusive behavior and how to deal with it. But we can consider some general guidelines and principles that are important to understand.

Marital abuse is not a phenomenon exclusive to the Church of God. Abuse occurs in virtually every society and among people of every religion and people of no religion. Sometimes religion is used to justify abuse. Sometimes even the Bible has been used – or misused – to make abuse seem okay, even within the Church of God.

One frequently used, but very perverted, justification is that Scripture requires wives to submit to their husbands. Then the logic is that husbands must use whatever means are necessary to force their wives into "submission," even if that means beating and profoundly humiliating them.

However, there is no command in the Bible for husbands to force their wives to submit. Rather, wives are to submit themselves (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1), of their own volition, as a matter of conscience toward God. This presupposes that the husband will be exercising his responsibility to love his wife with a godly, sacrificial love, and that he will honor his wife, treating her with respect, compassion, tenderheartedness, and courtesy (Ephesians 5:25-29; 1 Peter 3:7-8). Moreover, we are to submit to one another, and there are many situations in which either partner in a marriage may be obliged to give deference to the

other in a spirit of love and cooperation (Ephesians 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5).

The Bible teaches that God condemns abuse, and abuse must be eradicated from our midst. And it will be eradicated eventually, one way or another.

What is marital abuse? In one sense, it could include any mistreatment or disrespect toward a spouse. By that definition, most every married person has been guilty of abuse at one time or another. But what I want to focus on in this article is what I would term serious abuse, which is a pattern of mistreatment and disrespect toward and devaluation of a partner that has serious destructive effects on the victim's physical, mental, emotional and / or spiritual health and well being. Either sex may be the abuser or the victim, but more commonly spouse abusers are men, as men tend to be more aggressive and are generally physically stronger than women.

In general abuse can be classified under several headings, namely, (1) physical abuse; (2) verbal and mental abuse; (3) sexual abuse; (4) financial abuse, although these may overlap one another.

Physical abuse might include any kind of physical assault, threat, or deprivation. Some examples include slapping, hitting, shoving, bodily restraint, threats of violence expressed verbally or by body language, withholding of food or water, sleep deprivation or any other kind of abusive treatment that affects a person's physical well-being.

Verbal and emotional abuse might include constant criticism, humiliating remarks, ridicule, name calling, shouting and screaming. Abuse victims often report a sense of "walking on eggshells," never knowing when the abuser will explode into a tirade. Such abuse might also be manifested in isolating the victim from family and friends, checking up constantly on the victim's whereabouts or activities, excessive control over the victim's personal decisions, including financial decisions, withholding affection, or other behaviors that produce emotional stress and feelings of worthlessness or helplessness in the victim.

Sexual abuse could include any kind of sexual assault, forcing sexual acts that cause discomfort or pain, any kind of sexual activity that is unwanted by the victim, infidelity, withholding of conjugal dues, using sex to manipulate the victim, forcing unwanted pregnancy, putting the victim at risk for sexually transmitted diseases.

Financial abuse could include refusing to provide sufficient funds to maintain the household, refusing to work or carry out personal responsibilities toward the household, excessive control over the victim's personal finances, refusing to allow the victim any personal funds, demanding control over money the victim earns, forcing the victim to beg or commit crimes for money, misuse of child support money, refusing to include the spouse in major financial decisions affecting the household, gambling or reckless spending that saps the family's financial resources, fraudulent use of credit cards or checking accounts or other forms of theft and irresponsibility.

A partial list of what one woman reported that she endured at the hands of her husband over a period of thirteen years of abuse follows:

Destroyed her computer, her software and personal data disks. Put holes in walls and smashed furniture and household accessories. Deprived her of sleep by tipping the bed and deliberately making noise. Berated her in front of the children. Threatened and beat her. One of the beatings resulted in her having a miscarriage. Would not allow her to use the phone or TV. Refused to give her housekeeping money. Made her feel stupid and claimed to be far superior to her. Destroyed her personal possessions and cut up her clothes. Smashed up the house and made her clean up the mess. Repeated sexual assault. Drove recklessly threatening to kill her in that manner. Sexual infidelity. Ridiculed her appearance. Stole money from her. Refused medical treatment when she needed it.

What are our responsibilities?

(1) Understand what abuse is and that it exists. Abuse is often misunderstood, even by the victims, and even justified. It's absolutely vital that you understand that there is never any justification whatsoever for abuse. And also, abuse is never the victim's fault. Anytime you think something like, "If she would just submit more, he wouldn't beat her up," you're headed down the wrong track. I repeat, there is never any justification for abuse, and abuse is never the victim's fault.

Abuse is a violation of the marriage covenant. "You cover the altar of the Lord with tears, With weeping and crying; So He does not regard the offering anymore, Nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been witness Between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:13-14). A sound marriage is built on a foundation of mutual love and respect, both of which are entirely missing in abusive conduct. It's also built on a foundation of trust, which is likewise violated by abusive conduct. It's interesting that abusers are often perfect gentlemen until after the wedding. However, if you're a single person dating someone who displays abusive tendencies, get out of the relationship as fast as you can. It likely will *not* get better upon marrying the person.

"As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife. The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, And they go down into the inmost body" (Proverbs 26:21-22). The word translated "talebearer," Hebrew *nirgân*, means slanderer. Abusers are slanderers, which is a common tool used to demean and humiliate their victims. They accuse their victims of all sorts of things falsely, and love to play the victim themselves.

"Tasty trifles," in the KJV the Hebrew is translated "wounds." Hebraists and translators are divided on the meaning of the Hebrew word (*lâham*). In any case, there is no doubt the words of abusers deeply wound their victims. The New English Translation renders the latter part of the verse, "they go down into the person's innermost being." Often verbal and mental abuse is in some ways even more destructive than physical abuse. As one abuse victim told me, the emotional wounds are still there long after the bruises have healed.

"Fervent lips with a wicked heart Are like earthenware covered with silver dross. He who hates, disguises it with his lips, And lays up deceit within himself; When he speaks kindly, do not believe him, For there are seven abominations in his heart; Though his hatred is covered by deceit, His wickedness will be revealed before the assembly" (Proverbs 26:23-26). "Fervent lips" is translated more literally "burning lips" in the KJV. The words can be taken

either of two ways, to persecute, or to express fervent passion. Abusers typically keep their victims off balance by doing both, alternately professing passionate love, and persecuting the victim through verbal and possibly physical attacks or other kinds of abusive conduct.

An abuse counselor, Lundy Bancroft, who wrote an incisive book exploring the nature and psychology of abusive behavior, tells in his book of overhearing clients in the waiting area joking and laughing about how women fell for their deceitful machinations (*Why Does He Do That?*, p. 183).

Abuse is commonly accompanied by deceit, and abusers typically take measures to hide their abusive conduct from exposure. Every abuser is a dissembler (liar). Their word cannot be trusted, especially when they profess love. However, such conduct will eventually be brought to light (Luke 12:2).

In Psalm 64 we find an apt description of an abuser. They plot wickedly (verse 2), they, "sharpen their tongue like a sword, And bend their bows to shoot their arrows -- bitter words, That they may shoot in secret at the blameless; Suddenly they shoot at him and do not fear. They encourage themselves in an evil matter; They talk of laying snares secretly; They say, 'Who will see them?' " (verses 3-5). But, as verses 7-10 declare, God will ultimately deal with them.

"Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31). "Clamor," (*krauge*) can include the idea of shouting, screaming at someone. All these behaviors are frequently characteristic of abusers. As Christians we must put away such behavior.

(2) Expose and rebuke it.

God hates oppression, and requires us to rebuke it. "When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor" (Isaiah 1:15-17).

We must not hide our heads in the sand when abuse is occurring, as is so often the case. We may not personally be able to stop it, but at least we can decry it, and make our protests known. Certainly we should not try to justify it by making alibis or blaming the victim.

Conduct characteristic of abuse is abhorred by God. "For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, Nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; The Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man" (Psalm 5:4-6). As God abhors evil, so should we. "...have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

Victims also need to somehow muster the courage to expose the transgression, not cover up for the abuser (John 8:32; Ephesians 5:11-14). This takes courage and planning, and often

must be approached very carefully to avoid retribution, but it needs to be done. "A person experiencing spousal abuse should immediately report the abuse to the police or seek professional counseling. Continued abuse, or allowing the abuse, only increases levels of abuse" ([www.texas therapists.com/SpousalAbuse.html](http://www.texas therapists.com/SpousalAbuse.html)). Assault and battery are crimes. Because the victim is a spouse *does not* make it okay.

Often abuse does not stop until the victim physically separates from the abuser. Again, this requires courage and careful planning. Pray fervently, and ask God to help you with the problem.

Report abuse to your minister. A faithful and competent minister of God will consider the information, and endeavor to provide appropriate counsel. Unfortunately, some ministers have proven incompetent in these situations. Some in the past in situations I'm familiar with, have failed to respond in any meaningful way. Others have made the situation worse by justifying or otherwise encouraging abuse. Some ministers, sad to say, may be abusers themselves. Any minister of God who condones abuse, or engages in the kind of abuse discussed in this article, is not fit to be a minister, and should be removed from the ministry. Understand that just because a person is a minister, does not mean his counsel is necessarily trustworthy (Proverbs 1:5; 14:15; 20:18; 24:6).

Besides reporting abuse to your minister, you may well need to seek help from trusted professionals who specialize in abuse counseling if you are an abuse victim. In the United States, the national domestic violence hotline is 1-800-799-SAFE(7233) or TTY1-800-787-3224.

(3) Eradicate it. Includes several steps.

(A) Support the victim. Don't assume a victim is lying without investigating, and don't ever make the mistake of thinking abuse is justified. Sometimes false charges are made, sometimes charges of abuse are only partly true, but any such charge needs to be taken seriously and investigated. "He heals the brokenhearted And binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3 ; cf. Job 4:3-4; Isaiah 58:6).

(B) Warn the transgressor. The law is given to punish transgressors, including abusers (1 Timothy 1:9-10; "kidnappers," *andrapodistes*," means properly "enslaver," abuse is literally a form of enslavement). When there is opportunity the abuser should be confronted. "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Unfortunately, abusers seldom take such efforts seriously, but nevertheless, abusers need to be admonished about their behavior.

(C) If you are guilty of abuse, repent. A husband who abuses his wife cuts himself off from God (Malachi 2:13-14, 16-17; 1 Peter 3:7). If you are an abuser, and you have any desire to be in God's Kingdom, stop being an abuser, because if you don't, you won't be in God's Kingdom. "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor

sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; "revilers" is *loidoros*, "reviler, abusive person" -- *Greek-English Lexicon*, Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich).

(D) Finally, we are instructed to put abusers out of the Church if they will not repent. "But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner -- not even to eat with such a person" (1 Corinthians 5:11; "reviler" same as in above paragraph).

Spouse abuse, abuse of any kind, is a repugnant and extremely destructive sin. Abuse is condemned of God, and we must repent of it and eradicate it from our midst.

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