

## "UNDERSTANDING ABUSE"

The *word* abuse, the *concept* of abuse, and the *reality* of abuse are all sensitive and highly charged topics. As believers we need a working definition and understanding of abuse that is consistent with our faith. More than that, we need to appreciate that abuse is a profound reality that matters very much to God, and therefore, should matter to us. We need to view abuse as having to do with the very core issues of our faith (sin, death, repentance, and regeneration), and embrace a vision to care as God cares and act as God acts in response to abuse.

Although the word *abuse* occurs infrequently in scripture, the reality of abuse is addressed regularly. Abuse is sin. It is a violation of God's character and God's design. It destroys people, relationships, and hope. Abuse is a particular form of sin that can be understood in terms of three characteristics.

- 1. Abuse involves a *power imbalance* and the willful misuse of *power to control* (or neglect) another person.**

Sin can be summarized as a failure to love God and love people (Luke 10:25-28). All of us sin when we refuse to acknowledge God for who He is and turn from trusting Him to give us life to trusting something else to give us life. Even as believers, our flesh still tends to want to be in control and do things our own way without radically trusting God to meet our deepest needs. When we stop trusting God we usually turn to people with the expectation that they will satisfy our longings for security, love, and affirmation. This sinful expectation puts a strain on any relationship. In some situations it develops into what we are describing as abuse.



*God has promised to be: faithful and sure. All human relationships, even our most intimate alliances, are temporary and incomplete. When we demand that another person provide safety, certainty, and fulfillment of our deepest desires, we turn from God to an idol for the fulfillment of our needs.*

***The Healing Path***  
Dan Allender, pg.53

*Not self-justification, which means the use of domination and force, but justification by grace, and therefore service, should govern the Christian Community.*

**Life Together**  
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pg. 94

We are defining abuse, as distinct from sin in general, by the presence of an *imbalance of power* and a *misuse of power*. Although God's intention for those who are more powerful (physically, mentally, economically, spiritually) is to use their gifts and strengths to serve those who are weaker or more vulnerable, sinful (fleshly) people are constantly tempted to misuse power to *control* and *use* other people. The presence of a power imbalance also creates a situation where one person can sin unrestrained against another. Although the edges that define abuse are not always clear, a few short examples may help us appreciate the "power imbalance" aspect of this dynamic.

*It is sinful for two teen-aged boys to attack each other verbally or physically. It is abusive for two teen-aged boys to attack a two-year-old verbally or physically.*

*It is sinful for two consenting adults to commit adultery. It is abusive for a 30-year-old coach to overpower and rape a 12-year-old girl in the locker room.*

*It is sinful for a wife to withhold love and respect from her husband. It is abusive for a husband to use scriptural references about headship to control, manipulate, and intimidate his family.*

Abusive individuals can misuse almost anything to *overpower* and *control* their victim: physical force, verbal abuse, threats, economic control, mental mind games, or even scripture—anything that is used to create immobility, fear, or confusion so that the abuser maintains control and gets to have his way with the victim. Consider the following:

*A man who has just begun to date a woman who begins to call her every evening and leaves gifts for her at her home and work. He also talks her out of spending time with other people by saying repeatedly how much he enjoys being with her. He apologizes when he does something she has asked him not to do, but continues to not respect her requests to not call so often or expect to spend so much time with her.*

*A husband who, because he is afraid that his wife might leave him, forbids her to work or calls and visits her so much at every job that she quits or gets fired.*

*A single mother who routinely shares her personal struggles with her 14-year-old son and tells him she doesn't know what she would do without him.*

*A parent who makes promises to a child and then when he/she doesn't keep the promise, either denies that he/she ever made it or blames someone else for not keeping it.*

*A husband and father who will not participate in mutually-respectful conversations with his wife or children but instead ends every discussion by telling the other person that they have to do what he says because the Bible says they do.*

## 2. Abuse is a pattern of sinful behavior that is especially *intense* or *pervasive*.

Another way to distinguish abuse from sin in general is to appreciate it as particularly intense or pervasive. Sinful acts that go beyond the normal experience of imperfect relating between fallen people can often be viewed as abusive: unusual cruelty or neglect (child abuse), sadistic violence, or sexual perversion (rape).

Abuse can also be defined in terms of its pervasiveness. In some situations the individual acts are not so dissimilar to those experienced by many individuals (name-calling, blaming, criticism) as they are distinct because they affect the entire fabric of the relationship. Relationships where intimidation, control, and fear are part of a constant climate are distinct from the more normal rhythms of hurting and being hurt, apologizing, and trying to change that characteristic is what we would consider a "normal" relationship.

The pervasive nature of abuse relates back to how sin deceives and entraps the sinner. Every time we sin we are choosing to believe a lie. When we chose to sin repeatedly in a particular area we become more and more deceived and less and less aware that we are deceived. Many abusers *learned* their sinful patterns of control and intimidation in the home in which they grew up. As they watched an abusive parent or learned to control people and get their own way by being intimidating or overpowering, they also came to *believe* lies that reinforced and perpetuated their abusive behavior. This *learned behavior* and pattern of *self-deception* means that *abusers rarely admit that what they are doing is wrong or make genuine efforts to change*. Usually the abuse gets worse over time.

- Abusers **believe** that other people are responsible for their feelings, behavior, and problems.
- Abusers **believe** they have the right to overpower other people in order to get their own desires met.
- Abusers often **believe** they are the real victim in the family.

If they begin to lose control, abusers often fortify their position by escalating the threatening/controlling behavior or they may turn to a more positive form of control that often includes promises, gifts, and superficial apologies. The resulting fear or ambivalence each serve the same function. The abuser maintains control and devotion to his sinful/controlling pattern of behavior. As we will address later in this workshop, it is very important to be able to discern the differences between positive control tactics and genuine repentance.

As is true with all sin, abuse creates a spiral of deception and destruction that spins out of control. Each time the abuser chooses to embrace the lies and act out in abusive ways, another thread of bondage and self-deception wraps around his/her mind and heart. An abuser usually continues in the behavior unrestrained if there is no balance of power to make him/her stop and no threat of natural consequences to break through the self-deception.

## 3. Victims of abuse experience *confusion, fear, and helplessness*.

Abuse victims suffer the same pain and death that we all do when someone sins against us. They also experience some compound wounds as a result of abuse. The misuse of power and control by the abuser is mirrored in the victim by a loss of control. Control over:

- Their body.
- Their time.
- Their relationships.
- Their future.
- Their perceptions and beliefs.

The special pain of abuse victims relates not only to the individual acts of betrayal and abuse, but also to the inescapable nature of their situation. Because of the power imbalance, they cannot stop the abuse. Because of the constant climate of deception and control, they have a difficult time holding on to truth. No matter what they say or do, they cannot stop the abuser's behavior.

*One woman who struggled hard to tell her story explained why giving voice to what had happened seemed so difficult and pointless: 'Because silencing began with saying, "No, I don't want to, but being forced to do it anyway. Then my abuser physically silenced me by pushing my face into the pillow. Sometimes he would strangle me until I fainted. He paid no attention to my voice. Maybe that is why I didn't tell anyone about it. My voice was ineffectual. My voice was lost.'"*

***On the Threshold of Hope**  
Diane Langberg, pg. 34*

*A small child telling a parent that they don't like being touched (fondled), and the parent replying, "I touch you like that because I love you. It's a very special thing I do just with you because you are so special." or "If you don't let me touch you anymore or if you tell anyone I'm touching you, someone will come and take you away from our family."*

A woman who goes to work because her husband says she's a lazy \*&^%#, then, when she gets a job he tells her it's not a real job and she doesn't earn enough money to really help. Then when she tries to go back to school, he tells her she's too stupid to graduate and selfish for expecting him to support her while she's in school.

*Then I looked at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them.*

***Ecclesiastes 4:1***

As time goes on victims can become more confused, more desperate, more depressed, and more hopeless. Many settle into a survival mode, numbing themselves with a variety of substances or activities. Many have a hard time trusting God and loving people. Some become neglectful and abusive of others. Some miraculously find the strength and courage to grab hold of reality and grab hold of God. More might be able to experience God's grace and truth and liberty if there was someone available to help: someone who was gracious and strong, someone who understood their pain and understood God's gift of hope and life.

## CONCLUSION

When you try to answer the question, "Is someone being abusive?", try answering the following questions related to their behavior:

- Do they have more power (of any kind) than the other person?
- Are they trying to control the other person?
- Is their behavior extreme or pervasive?
- Is the other person confused, immobilized, or afraid to the point of not being able to regain a sense of reality or control?

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## RESPONDING TO ABUSE

To be wise in our response to abuse, we must be able to apply God's life-giving truth to the unique and particular needs of both victims and abusers.

### Looking Honestly At Sin

Perhaps the first biblical principle to consider is the *principle of looking honestly at sin*. Only those of us who know Christ as our personal savior and present Lord can really afford to take an honest look at sin. Abuse in particular is so horrible, so disorienting, so difficult to understand and deal with that most of the time we consciously or unconsciously avoid acknowledging it. Who wants to think about child sexual abuse, rape, or domestic violence? Who wants to grapple with the fact that abusers are normal- looking, church-going, "regular people"? Who wants to try to answer the question of why a good God lets vulnerable people suffer? It's hard to look at abuse but if we don't, we allow it to continue and leave its victims isolated and hopeless. God does not deal with sin by minimizing it or denying it, and neither should we. Sin destroys and only new life in Christ can adequately address the damage done. We must not be like the leaders in Jeremiah's day who said, "Peace, Peace," when there was no peace. We must face into the awful reality of abuse, knowing that we have what both the victim and the abuser need most.

*Denial of abuse in the family is widespread; people prefer to cling to the image of the family as an institution representing the best of human interaction: nurturance, love, support, protection, and comfort among family members. It is painful to admit that the home is a dangerous place and that people have a greater chance of being assaulted and battered, sexually abused, raped, or killed in the home by other family members than by strangers on the streets. This is perhaps especially painful for deeply religious people to admit to themselves or others.*

***Abuse and Religion***  
*Horton/Williamson pg. 2*

The *scriptural response to sin in general* is to face it, name it, stop it or remove it from our presence, and work toward genuine repentance and regeneration.

*Vindicate the weak and fatherless;  
Do justice to the afflicted and destitute.  
Rescue the weak and needy;  
Deliver them out of the hand of the  
wicked.*

**Psalm 82:3-4**

The *scriptural response to the misuse of power and control* is to protect the vulnerable and confront the power abuser. Throughout scripture, God shares his heart toward vulnerable people (widows, orphans, aliens, the poor, and needy) and reminds his people to not take advantage of them, but rather to care for them and to confront those who oppress them.

He warns Christian leaders in particular to not abuse or neglect those in their care but to "seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick." As SPM seeks to understand the heart and mind of God in relationship to abuse (the misuse of power and control), we concede that the issues and real-life situations are complex and involve many biblical principles. Each situation is unique and each person is at a unique place on their journey toward or away from God. We recognize the goal for all parties is eternal life. We do not pretend to know exactly what pursuing life looks like in these extreme situations. We offer the following

generalizations as a place to begin your thinking of how to respond to both victims and offenders.

We also offer this caution related to generalizations and labeling. Labels (abuser, victim) and generalizations (things that tend to be true of certain groups) can be helpful or hurtful depending on how we use them. Most teaching requires the use of both labels and generalizations. They can be valuable aids to help us understand certain groups of behaviors or experiences. They can also be harmful. They can be used to stereotype and devalue individuals. They must never be used as a substitute for learning about real people and praying to discern how God is moving in their particular situation. The goal is not to project a reality onto an individual but rather to understand people and their strategies enough to apply the truth of God's word with real wisdom.

### **Victims of abuse need choices, safety, support, truth and time.**

#### **Choices**

Depending on the situation either *choice* or *safety* can be viewed as the preeminent need for a victim of abuse. Healthy control and choices help victims reestablish the ability to deal responsibly with their situations and gives them hope. As advocates and shepherds, we are available to offer truth and life but must guard against coercing, controlling, withholding, or manipulating as the abuser has. Listening well, offering viable options, problem solving with victims, and supporting their choices is preferred to telling victims what to do or pressuring them to follow our agenda.

#### ***Qualities of a Good Advocate***

- *Believes your story and supports you.*
- *Is well-informed about resources and explains them clearly, thereby expanding your ideas about your options.*
- *Asks good questions and helps you as you try to make a realistic assessment of your alternatives.*
- *Informs you of your legal rights.*
- *Treats you like an adult. Expects you to make your own decisions and to carry out your plans.*
- *Offers help if you want it.*
- *Cares about you and lets you know it.*
- *Is not afraid of the system and helps you get what you need from police, courts, housing, welfare, and mental health.*
- *Takes your fear of your [abuser] seriously but does not let it overwhelm the two of you. Helps you assess danger and plan for safety.*
- *Helps you sort through and clarify your ideas.*
- *Teaches you what she knows so that you can become an advocate for yourself.*

*Adapted from, **When Love Goes Wrong**  
Jones/Schechter pg. 14*

#### **Safety**

The need for choice must sometimes be weighed against the need for safety. Ideally every victim has both a safe place and a safe person to help them to heal and grow. Safety is a prerequisite to healing. No one can really begin to heal as long as they are spending the bulk of their energy protecting themselves against further harm. We should be willing to provide that safety whenever a victim asks for it, and occasionally we may need to provide it even when they don't ask for it. Generally we should honor their choices and timing, but in situations where they are in immediate danger or when a child is in immediate danger, we will need to act. Even then the victim should still be consulted and offered as much choice as is compatible with the preservation of safety.

Some victims who don't know Jesus, who are young in their faith, or who are overwhelmed by their situation may initially need to respond in whatever way they can to provide some measure of safety. We must not be arrogant or naïve about this scenario. We need to help victims to become safe enough that they can then begin to grapple with the core issues surrounding their abuse and their faith.

*"Your safety is important to me. What will help you feel safe?"*

## **Support**

Victims need support. Their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual reserves have been depleted by the demands of the abuse. They need a caring, supportive companion to accompany them as they heal and grow. They need someone to listen, believe, validate, encourage, and point them to God. They may need someone to go with them to court, to the hospital, or to see an attorney. They may need housing, food, childcare, medical care, or transportation. They may need someone to change the locks on their doors or help them rearrange the furniture in a particular room.

## **Truth**

The truth sets us free, and eventually the victim of abuse needs the truth about many things in order to be set free from the effects of abuse.

- Ultimately victims need to know the truth about who God is.
- They need to know the truth about who they are in Christ.
- They need to know that they were not responsible for the abuse.
- They need to know that the abuser was responsible for the abuse.
- They need to know that they do not deserve to be abused and can say no to abuse.
- They need to know what faith and love look like in the context of abuse.
- They need to know what forgiveness is and what genuine repentance looks like.

*"It's not your fault. You are not responsible for your husband's abusive behavior. Abuse is not a part of God's design for marriage."*

## **Time**

To minimize the extent of the damage done by abuse and the time it takes to heal is to minimize sin and make trivial Christ's death on the cross. Sin destroys and only the finished work of Jesus on the cross can redeem us from its effects. Abuse wounds people at the very core of their being. Without Christ those wounds motivate victims to protect themselves from further destruction in any way they can. Even with Christ the wounds heal slowly and are not completely healed until we experience the redemption of our bodies. Until then we all groan and wait and trust and grow: each in a unique way— keeping our eyes on the author and finisher of our faith until we are with Him and are like Him.

**Abusers need to accept responsibility for their behavior, get the help they need to change, respect the victim's choices, and demonstrate genuine repentance over an extended period of time.**

**Accept responsibility for their behavior**

Often the beginning of new life for abusers and their families comes when abusers do the very difficult work of looking honestly at their beliefs and behavior, and admit that what they are doing is destructive and that they are responsible. This is a huge breakthrough that not many abusers ever make. We offer abusers life when we resist buying into their denial, minimization, and blaming. We offer life when we affirm them as people and affirm our belief that with God's help they can look honestly at themselves and trust God in new ways that will end up giving them what they have wanted all along: security in relationships with God and other people.

**Get appropriate help**

Many times when a victim or family begins to set limits on abusive behavior, or separates from the abuser, the abuser *promises* to get help *or even gets some help*. Unfortunately abusers often do both of these things with the underlying motive of controlling other people's behavior and not radically changing their own behavior. Abusers often:

- Promise to get help but then drop out of the process prematurely.
- Get help but pick someone to go to that does not adequately understand or confront the issues.
- Go for help with the condition that the victim or family does something they want.

It is in everyone's best interest to expect the abuser to get help specific to their problems and to go for help because they are choosing to take responsibility for themselves not trying to manipulate the situation. Appropriate help will involve both stopping the abusive behavior and understanding how to get their legitimate needs for intimacy and significance met in healthy, godly ways.

**Respect the victim's choices**

A point of real repentance for the person who has been misusing power and control is to let go of control by respecting the victim's need for safety, help, and healing. Repentance involves turning from trusting in their control tactics to trusting God to work in each of their lives. Checking up on the victim and pressuring the victim into spending time with them are fruits of the flesh not the Spirit. Even sending flowers and writing love letters can be attempts to stay in control instead of focusing on trusting in God and exercising *self-control*. Respecting the victim's choice to have space and safety also demonstrates an awareness of how hurtful their behavior was.

**Demonstrate genuine repentance over an extended period of time**

Once abusers look honestly at what they have done and accept the destructiveness of their choices, they will also begin to understand how their behavior has destroyed the trust needed to maintain relationship. They must relinquish their right to relationship: they never had a right to demand relationship in the first place, and now their sin must be seen as having destroyed the basis of relationship. True repentance must be demonstrated over time with changes in both attitudes of entitlement and behaviors that seek to control. Demands for forgiveness are not the abusers to make but are for the victims to graciously offer when they are ready. Even after the

gift of forgiveness has been extended, reconciliation of relationships must be reestablished on a foundation of real change and demonstrated trustworthiness.

It should be noted that we have focused on different issues for the victim and the abuser. We do not want to be misunderstood as valuing one person above the other, or as believing that one person is categorically different from the other. Indeed, we know that many **abusers are in fact** also victims, but stopping the multigenerational pattern of abuse begins when abusers take responsibility for their behavior.

We understand that all individuals are of equal worth and have the same basic needs to be loved and valued. Every individual has both been hurt deeply by the sin of others and has hurt others deeply with their own sin. All people are a complex combination of dignity and depravity. No one person is as bad as they could be or as good as they should be. All that being said, we do want to defend the distinction we have made. Our purpose in this Response Guide is to help you understand the specific dynamics of abuse. To that end, it is appropriate to focus on providing a safe, healing environment for a victim, and it is appropriate to hold an abuser accountable to stop being abusive.