

Framework and Key Guidelines for Handling Abuse Cases¹

The following document is intended to serve three purposes. First, it is intended that this document be read in conjunction with ACBC's Affirmations and Denials on Abuse in order to offer practical wisdom from the doctrinal focus of that document. Second, the *Discerning Abuse Framework* serves as an aid to define and categorize more clearly the sin of abuse. Current definitions of abuse are often too broad and ambiguous in providing biblical counselors a proper understanding of abuse and its harmful impacts. The framework is designed to help us identify abuse, both in the language and concept presented in the Bible, so that we may be helped to seek the heart of God toward the abused and abusers. Third, these guidelines are not intended to serve as strict policy. The nature of the complexities of abuse demand case wisdom for a myriad of details related to specific situations. We are therefore providing guidelines that maintain doctrinal fidelity and godly compassion in our approach to caring for the abused.

Counseling in an abuse situation is made complex for several reasons. First, abuse cases are protracted, messy entanglements of sin. The deep-seated patterns and effects of the abuse demand patience and wisdom to discern so that proper counsel, appropriate to the person, can be given. Second, reporting laws are different depending upon your location. Particular details of mandatory reporting for abuse varies from state to state, which may add to a counselor's confusion and trepidation to engage. We recommend that all ACBC certified counselors know and understand your local reporting requirements for minors, adults, and special cases (e.g., adults with disability, elderly, etc.). ACBC standards of conduct demand that all counselors meet mandatory reporting requirements in cases of abuse.² A third reason that abuse cases are complex is that the counselor may not be aware of all pertinent information in real time. The abused may be timid to disclose details related to the abuse. While actions are required because of the sensitive and often volatile nature of abuse situations, counselors must be cautious not to make assumptions or neglect listening well to the details of the story. The counselor may only offer counsel based on knowledge they have in the moment. A fourth reason is that abuse cases often do not flow in a linear fashion. The multifaceted nature of abuse and counseling care does not typically follow a normal or easily identifiable pattern of discovery and remedy. For example, forgiveness and repentance are very difficult to qualify in cases of abuse. New information may be uncovered which may alter the direction and aim of counseling. For these reasons, and others, we acknowledge that biblical counseling in cases of abuse is complex and difficult, requiring godly wisdom, compassion, humility, and courage.

Both the *Discerning Abuse Framework* and *Key Guidelines* below are an attempt to help ACBC certified counselors think through abuse in a way that honors the Lord Jesus, cares for the abused and mistreated, and biblically engages abusers. Steps and stages of a counseling process are

¹ This document is written for ACBC counselors and ministry leaders.

² Free Mandatory Reporting seminars are offered by each state in the U.S.

simply not attainable in abuse cases, so we have provided guidelines which help the counselor to prepare for difficult situations while upholding their biblical responsibilities to care well and honor the Lord. Guidelines are not always linear either and are merely suggestive in helping counselors consider decisions or actions that will need to be made at different points in the counseling process. First, counselors need to be prepared for cases of abuse before they ever happen. Second, counselors should consider what to do when an allegation is made. Third, biblical counselors, as ministers of reconciliation, should aim to address the slower-paced process of counseling once the moments of crisis have passed. With that being said, not all cases of abuse will end in reconciliation. Cases in which there is unforgiveness or in which repentance is lacking—e.g., bitterness and selfish desires remain—reconciliation is not possible. But we do believe that our God can change the hearts of men and women to restore what has been broken by the ravages of sinful abuse.

This document will be refined as we grow, to understand the sin of abuse and its effects, and as we better understand the sufficient Scripture which the Lord has provided to guide us for the care of wounded souls.

Table of Contents

<i>Discerning Abuse Framework</i>	3
Definition and Parameters for Abuse	3
Categorizing Effects of Abuse	4
<i>Key Guidelines for Handling Abuse Cases</i>	6
I. Preliminary Matters	6
II. Allegations	8
III. Reporting and Informing	11
IV. Data Gathering and Assessment for Ongoing Counseling	12
V. Treatment of Husband's Authority and Responsibility During a Period of Separation	13
VI. Post-Allegation Care for the Abused	16
VII. Post-Allegation Engaging the Alleged Abuser	17
VIII. Considerations for Church Leaders (Elders, Pastors, Overseers)	20
IX. Considerations for Facilitating Reconciliation and Restoration in Cases of Abuse	24

Discerning Abuse Framework

The *Discerning Abuse Framework* is intended to provide a biblically-informed lens through which we can best define, understand, and categorize abuse and its effects. Thresholds regarding what constitutes abuse are often vague and confusing. The framework is arranged to capture, in principle, biblical words and concepts in order to identify acts and the effects of abuse. Effects, or symptoms, of abuse may vary in degree depending upon a variety of factors and are an unreliable and inconsistent threshold for labeling abuse. This framework is critical, since the way one defines a problem narrows the direction in which solutions are sought and found.

Definition and Parameters for Abuse

Abuse is the pattern of sinful, selfish mistreatment of another made in God's image, whereby moral agency, freedom of conscience informed by God's Word, and God-given human dignity is violated by harmful acts (physical, sexual, verbal) or schemes to perpetuate oppression and unbiblical control (Exodus 3:9-10; Deuteronomy 26:6-8; Psalm 10; Isaiah 19:20; Isaiah 30:12-13; Isaiah 49:26; Matthew 20:25-28). Acts of abuse are vile practices arising from selfish ambition and bitter jealousy, born from sinful desires in the heart (James 3:16).

- **Physical abuse** encompasses actions that harm the body including but not limited to beatings, sexual assault, physical or sexual coercion, sleep deprivation, starvation, or confinement.
- **Verbal abuse** involves patterns of degrading and dehumanizing communication in all forms, including threats of violence to spouse or child, threats of continued abuse, threats of suicide and self-harm, lying, and manipulation. Spiritual manipulation may happen when misuses or misinterpretations of Scripture are enforced in order to be a stumbling block, oppress, or control another person.
- **Scheming** includes intentional efforts and plotting by the abuser to inflict harm by threatening future abuse, continuing abusive behaviors, concealing past abuse, or hiding the scope of the abuse. Scheming against another can consist of limiting access to material assets, isolating from social relationships, and controlled monitoring of the individual. While scheming can take many forms, it is marked by evil intentions and using resources to inflict harm (Psalm 5:6; Psalm 7:14; Psalm 35:4; Psalm 40:14; Psalm 70:2; Psalm 71:10).
 - *Restricting material assets in order to perpetuate abuse* may include, but is not limited to, intentionally cutting off access to finances, neglecting familial

fiduciary responsibilities, limiting ability to communicate and travel, and blackmailing. This obviously does not include the biblical stewardship of resources like budgeting.

- *Restricting relational support in order to perpetuate abuse* may include, but is not limited to, isolating the abused from family, church, friends, and other social connections and deceiving outsiders for the purpose of concealment. This does not include the clear biblical principle of leaving and cleaving.
- *Monitoring the abused in order to perpetuate abuse* may include, but is not limited to, surveillance through cameras, cellphone activity, financial transactions, other technology, or co-conspirators.³ This does not include the use of technology for safety or proper stewardship of such things as security cameras, cellphones, bank statements, etc.

Categorizing Effects of Abuse

While the terms emotional and spiritual abuse can describe genuine evil and real experiences, these are better thought of as effects of abuse listed above rather than distinct categories of abuse for four primary reasons:

- First, since each individual is impacted differently by their own experiences, the labels of spiritual and emotional abuse are inconsistent ways to measure abuse. Identifying objective acts of abuse enables more precise ministry of the Word of God to individuals in order to help them respond to those sinful acts in faith.
- Second, people may experience deeply abusive behavior without displaying severe emotional or spiritual distress. Likewise, people experience emotional and spiritual distress when intentional and severe harm has been done to them, but some may experience similar distress when there has been little to no harm. Therefore, measuring abuse by the effects of distress is an inconsistent threshold.
- Third, emotional distress is a normal response to abuse and should not be viewed categorically as pathological. Distress and sorrow can be godly responses to suffering and being sinned against which mirror God's posture towards sin.⁴ These emotions should be expressed through lament before God rather than losing hope or considering these emotions as the problem itself.

³ Consider Jonadab in 2 Samuel 13:3-6

⁴ Consider Lamentations, Psalm 25:16-17; Psalm 119:136; Psam 77

- Fourth, abuse certainly influences the inner man of the abused, but abuse does not keep one from being obedient to God and joyful through the power of the Holy Spirit and His Word. Labeling emotional and spiritual symptoms as abuse rather than the effects of abuse concedes power to the abuser and dismisses the responsibility of the abused for their beliefs, thoughts, and emotions before God. An abuser can control the body, the words one hears, resources, and may attempt to deceive through twisting thoughts and beliefs, but he or she cannot control the responses and emotions of the victim. One important way to remove the harmful or demeaning manipulative control of the abuser over the victim is to restore the victim's freedom of conscience before God. Acknowledging the moral responsibility of the victim before God restores human dignity (2 Corinthians 5:14-16).

Along with the emotional and spiritual symptoms of abuse, biblical counselors must be ready to address physiological symptoms which may include anxiety attacks, post-traumatic stress, restless sleep, and more. These effects have a connection to and are perpetuated by the inner man of the abused. Emotional, spiritual, and physiological problems can potentially point counselors to an abusive situation, but they are best considered symptoms as opposed to distinct categories of abuse. Counselors must use discernment because these symptoms may or may not be related directly to abuse.

Key Guidelines for Handling Abuse Cases

These guidelines do not represent strict policies; instead, they are intended to aid counselors to consider critical decisions at moments when abuse allegations have been made. Since each case of abuse is unique in fact, situation, and context, providing an inflexible methodology would be detrimental in attempting to replace much-needed discernment with the particulars of any abuse case. Case wisdom is necessary due to the variability in these types of cases. However, what follows is an attempt to offer considerations of wisdom at different junctures of the counseling process which aims at the honor of Christ, the protection and care of the abused, and biblical change for abusers.

- I. Preliminary Matters:** Guidelines in this section are considered preemptive concerns that should be considered *in preparation* for addressing allegations of abuse that arise.
- a. Be reminded of ACBC's *Standard of Conduct*, especially section III. Commitment to Care.
 - b. Research your local laws and statutes related to mandatory reporting for abuse cases and incorporate these within key counseling and organizational documents.
 - i. Include limits of confidentiality which address mandatory reporting within your church or ministry counseling consent forms and documents.
 - ii. Include clear policy and procedural statements within your church constitution and by-laws, or your ministry organizational documents.⁵ If your counseling ministry is under the authority of a local church, you should consider polity and leadership structure within the church. Questions to consider may include:
 1. How do counselors and church leadership report abuse to civil authorities?
 2. Does mandatory reporting reflect the local requirements?
 3. Are any cautions given by local authorities to consider before reporting? What cautions should you be aware of when considering abuse reporting?
 4. How do you report abuse to church and/or ministry leadership?⁶
 5. To whom would you report in church and/or ministry leadership?
 6. Does the membership understand and affirm the process?
 7. What constitutes biblical confidentiality in these cases?

⁵ See T. Dale Johnson, Jr. and Edward Wilde, eds., *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling: Direction and Help for Churches and Counselors* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2022).

⁶ Although confidentiality is often one aspect of the counseling process and counselors intend to guard the information received from a counselee, there are a number of situations, like abuse, when it may be necessary or prudent (as determined in counselor's sole discretion) for the counselor to share information with others.

- iii. Enlist the help of a legal professional to review your counseling documents, forms, and organizational policy and procedural documents to ensure appropriate and clear language.⁷
- c. Commit to care for the abused and to engage the abuser.⁸ Churches and their leadership need to provide protection for the abused and should seek to hold the abuser accountable based on scriptural mandates to minister to sufferers and sinners. Suggestions may include:
 - i. Develop a safety plan with the victim.
 - ii. Considering physical safety, create a short confidential list of homes within the church or other places of safety to shelter those in a crisis situation.
 - iii. Write and maintain a clear care plan for the abused that includes a care team to help meet practical needs. Care team members should be mature believers that have gone through additional vetting and preparation by church leadership. This can include background checks among other evaluations.
 - iv. Establish and maintain a working relationship with local law enforcement. Remember, it is their job to investigate potential criminality. If there is a suspicion or credible allegation of a crime, counselors should call local law enforcement consistent with mandatory reporting requirements (Romans 13:1-5).
 - v. The church still has a responsibility to minister to the victims even while a criminal investigation is ongoing.
 - vi. Plan for confronting and ministering to the abuser, which may include, but is not limited to, calls to repentance through the church discipline process according to Matthew 18.
 - vii. In obedience to Scripture, church leaders responsible for shepherding bear the responsibility to engage the sin of the abuser—being careful not to jeopardize the physical safety of the abused. It is encouraged and preferable to have the consent and knowledge of the victim before confronting an abuser so that a safety plan is in place.
 - viii. In cases where the counselor disagrees with the pastors/elders, under the provision of the informed consent, the counselor should speak with the pastors/elders regarding any disagreements in order to seek a biblical solution. The authority of the counselor is limited, and the pastors/elders are responsible to the abused and the Lord for their stewardship of care. Counselors are responsible to submit to the guidance and oversight of the pastors/elders unless they are directed to sin against the counselee by inducing harm or neglect.

⁷ Johnson and Wilde, *Legal Issues in Biblical Counseling*

⁸ While these guidelines use gender-specific language when appropriate (such as the treatment of a husband's authority), these documents recognize that either men and women can perpetuate abuse against their spouses and children.

II. Allegations: Guidelines in this section relate to the initial responses of the counselor upon receiving allegations of abuse. Counselors are responsible for what they know at the time of the allegation and should act according to their pastoral obligation and legal responsibilities for reporting as a practice of biblical care.

- a. Firsthand Allegations – These are disclosures made directly to the counselor by the abused.
 - i. Take allegations seriously.
 1. We recommend that all ACBC certified counselors know and understand their local reporting requirements for minors, adults, and special cases (e.g., vulnerable adults). ACBC recommends all counselors to meet legal requirements and standards for reporting in cases of abuse.
 2. Elements of abuse are not easily disclosed by victims. Therefore, counselors should always listen carefully and take seriously what is being told them by a counselee. Wisdom dictates the necessity to gently verify objective claims made which may include seeking out other witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6; Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1). Pay careful attention to church’s confidentiality statements.
 3. Counselors endeavor to protect counsees from exposure to the harmful treatment of others.
 - ii. Document details relating to the allegation.
 1. Establish and document a timeline for the abuse, including when it began, the most recent incident, the people involved, and objective facts rather than opinions. This may include children, witnesses, or co-conspirators.
 2. Record necessary details of the abuse allegation even if there is not time to fully gather data.
 - iii. Consider the *Discerning Abuse Framework* as you hear allegations and gather further data.
 - iv. Gather data through key initial questions. These questions may be asked of the abused or may be a question for the counselor to consider and look into further.
 1. Care for the victim spiritually. This includes, but is not limited to, discerning improper guilt and shame the individual may be carrying, give the hope of Christ, provide assurances of God’s sovereignty and love, and clarify the need to obey the Lord even in times of suffering; including ways of escape.
 2. Is there an imminent physical threat?
 3. Has any prior reporting been made regarding this allegation?

4. Does anyone else know about this allegation? Specifically, has anyone in the church been involved to date in any way?
 5. Are there any reports of prior instances of abuse? Were there any court findings in the prior reports of abuse?
 6. Are children, the elderly, or otherwise vulnerable individuals involved in any way in this instance of alleged abuse?
- v. Consider the unique support structures and resources available to the abused. This includes safety, financial assets, supportive relationships, and current church affiliation.
 - vi. Assess the threat of immediate harm. This includes current physical abuse or threats of violence.
 - vii. Depending upon the immediacy of threats of physical harm and in addition to reporting if required, there are two options to consider that will determine whether other steps need to be taken before additional counseling and the course of that on-going counseling:
 1. If physical harm is imminent or a credible threat of harm, it is important to find a safe place, report to civil and ecclesiastical authorities, receive medical care (if necessary), see that basic needs are met, assess length of time for immediate care.
 2. If there is no immediate physical threat and the abused does not report feeling unsafe but instead desires to return home, then
 - a. Consult with ecclesiastical authorities
 - b. Plan regular follow up meetings in the near future with victim.
 - c. Consider the wisdom of confronting the abuser, in consult with the local church pastors/elders and victim.
- b. Secondhand allegation - These are allegations made directly to the counselor by someone other than the abused.
 - i. Listen and gather information carefully and with discretion.
 - ii. Ask questions about the one making the secondhand allegation. This does not mean the counselor should engage in “criminal investigation” but rather engage in due diligence to verify the facts of the allegation. A few questions to consider:
 1. Did the witness see the abuse firsthand themselves and/or have corroborating witnesses? If so, then did this person report the abuse to proper legal authorities?
 2. Is the report credible? (i.e., is it from someone who would have reasonable knowledge about the events and individuals involved in the allegation) Your state may require reporting even with reasonable suspicion. After sorting reporting responsibility, and reporting if mandated, seek out and speak with alleged victim in order to verify the

facts of the allegation. As a first option the second-hand reporter should request that the victim speak with the counselor. As a second option, the person reporting the allegation second-hand should go with the counselor to speak with the alleged victim (see the section on firsthand allegations for steps to consider).

3. Who else did the reporter speak with about this allegation?
 4. Is the abused person aware that the reporter is sharing this allegation with you? If so, are they supportive of the reporter sharing this information? Is the victim willing to disclose the information?
 5. Could there be potential ulterior motives of the reporter?
- iii. Consider necessary steps needing to be taken if the alleged victim does not corroborate the allegation made by the reporter. This could include facilitating a meeting between the reporter and alleged victim in order to gain further clarity about the situation, keeping documentation about these conversations and outlining the discrepancies, and informing pastoral leadership or other ministry staff.
 - iv. Consider the requirement and/or wisdom to report to various authorities, especially when children, the elderly, or other vulnerable people are involved (see the section on preliminary matters for steps to consider).

III. Reporting and Informing: Guidelines in this section relate to considerations that must be made when legally reporting an abusive situation.

- a. When there is abuse (see *Discerning Abuse Framework*), it should be reported to law enforcement in accordance with your legal reporting requirements. Please remember that reporting requirements may differ depending on the location and the type of abuse (child, domestic violence, vulnerable adults, etc.). The church can help support this action step by preparing documentation if church discipline is needed (see the section on preliminary matters).
 - i. *Documentation for Law Enforcement:* It helps law enforcement to document the situation and if there are repeated reports, there is evidence should it go to legal proceedings. Based on meetings with local law enforcement as a preliminary measure, the church could provide a form or template to aid counselors and church leaders in documenting allegations.
 - ii. *Documentation for Medical Records:* If there is visual evidence of the abuse it needs be documented by law enforcement who should be called immediately for this purpose at 911 and Child Protective Services.
 - iii. *Obtain Consent from Abuse Victims* (when possible): While it is preferable to obtain consent from abuse victims, there are limits to confidentiality and it may be necessary to report criminal activity to civil authorities without the consent of the victim. Discernment must be used in all reporting cases, especially considering the physical safety of the victim. This discernment is guided by biblical principles, deferring to pastoral leadership when appropriate, and exercising spiritual and physical care for the alleged victim.
- b. Involve victims of abuse, when appropriate, in decisions that need to be made as events unfold in an attempt to be considerate, gracious, and wise in shepherding.
 - i. Victims' input is helpful in identifying patterns of rebellion or growth, but their permission is not required to advance Matthew 18.
- c. Informing pastors/elders of the parties involved in the abuse allegations for appropriate biblical care.

- IV. Data Gathering and Assessment for Ongoing Counseling:** Guidelines in this section relate to the general counseling methodology in scenarios where allegations are made about abuse. This section is *not* required *prior* to reporting if it is a mandatory reporting situation.
- a. Uphold biblical principles (Proverbs 18:13, 17) to hear both sides while acting on urgent priorities such as ensuring physical safety and reporting to law enforcement if necessary.
 - b. Gather pertinent information related to the allegation. Establish and document a timeline for the abuse, including when it began, and the most recent incident, and people involved.
 - c. Make assessment regarding allegations to determine biblical responsibilities to the parties involved.
 - d. Take into consideration any restraining orders, visitation restrictions, the results of an investigation, and any legal proceedings by civil authorities.
 - e. Seek the truth and determine if there is sin. If so, then consider the types of sin since that will determine the direction of counseling and care. Utilize the *Discerning Abuse Framework* to consider the categories and symptoms that are present in this particular case.
 - i. Biblical counselors should use biblical terminology to define and evaluate various problems.
 - ii. This stage is important in order to identify and categorize the problems rightly. If the problem is only defined using non-biblical categories, then solutions follow suit that will not be grounded in Scripture. To make the problem “supra-sin” is to require a “supra-Scriptural” solution.
 - iii. Secular tools like the Duluth Model, the ACE, and CBT are not compatible with biblical wisdom and push counselors and victims towards unbiblical ways of thinking about abuse. Even though people who employ these models may have some accurate observations, the categorization and interpretation of all data should be biblical in nature and counsel.

V. Treatment of a husband's authority and responsibilities during a period of separation

- a. Understanding there are theological differences related to separation and divorce, this section addresses the need to consider the question of the husband's authority in the event of separation for the good and safety of the family.⁹ The spiritual care and physical needs of the family in the husband's absence should be a priority for the church and if possible, the extended family.
- b. If a husband is considered an abuser by ecclesiastical authority separation may be warranted. Guided by pastoral wisdom many of the husband's normal, biblical responsibilities and privileges may need to be set aside and "reserved" for a season. While he is still obligated to love and provide for his family, a consequence of his sin is the abdication of exercising his headship in financial and spiritual decisions for the home and of sexual intimacy with his wife.
 - i. This imparts tangible consequences and gives the husband time and space to focus on repentance with his counselor.
 - ii. While sin has devastating effects and consequences that cannot be alleviated in the short-term, these steps encourage the family to continue what is necessary for the home to function appropriately.
 - iii. Church leadership is to exercise oversight and case-specific wisdom here, seeking biblical wisdom and perhaps delegating the care and counsel of the family as deemed helpful overall. Where appropriate, it is recommended to work closely with adult children and/or the extended family.
- c. Biblical insights for coming alongside the wife/mother can be gained from passages that address both single women and widows in the church.
 - i. 1 Timothy 5:1-16 on widows and "widows indeed"
 1. Scripture makes it clear that we are to provide compassionate care for women who have lost the support and care of their husbands (e.g., "widows" in Isaiah 1:17 and Psalm 94:6).
 2. The woman's "household" is to assume a prominent role in meeting financial and material needs, to the best of their ability, similar to their responsibility to care for "dependent widows" in 1 Timothy 5:8, 16.
 3. The church is to take a prominent role in meeting financial and material needs when family is absent or cannot/refuses to meet her needs. In this sense, she is like the "widows indeed" in 1 Timothy 5.
- d. Responsibilities that need to be addressed include:
 - i. Spiritual leadership in the home (regular prayer and time in the Word, church involvement, giving, etc.)
 - ii. Finances and material resources

⁹ Separation in this case includes but is not limited to legal separation.

1. Especially in cases where finances have been severely controlled or constrained by the abusive husband, the wife may need help managing the basics of the family finances.
 - a. The husband should be expected to cooperate fully here as evidence of repentance, ensuring his wife has full cognizance of and access to all financial accounts.
 2. Church leadership should work with available family members potentially to help her manage finances and to meet financial and other material needs.
 3. Note there may be additional financial impacts as a result of the separation, such as rent for where the husband is living.
- iii. Discipline and instruction of the children
1. This includes modeling humility and trust in the Lord for the children during the trial.
 2. This includes encouraging the children to glorify God as they honor their father by showing respect when they are with him and praying for him regularly, for this is what God declares is “right” (Ephesians 6:1-2).
- iv. Sexual relations and physical intimacy
1. While a counselor does not have authority to command abstinence in these cases in order to avoid binding the conscience, however, strong consideration should be given toward a pause for sexual intimacy by mutual agreement for an unspecified amount of time. This will ensure that further sin is not perpetuated or condoned, and the focus remains on eradicating sinful behaviors. Case wisdom is important here to avoid using intimacy as a tool of manipulation and as a stumbling block to genuine repentance. In such cases, counselors ought to seek pastoral wisdom from their pastors/elders to guide such recommendations.
 - v. It is wise to avoid unusual or significant decisions that are not truly essential and/or time-sensitive, and thus can be put off for a season (e.g., purchasing a new vehicle, moving, sale of the house, etc.)
- e. To help the wife/mother avoid being overwhelmed with too many new responsibilities while functioning like a single parent, church leadership may consider working with her to provide relief from some or all of her responsibilities in the church as well as counseling her about other responsibilities she may have within the community, school, etc. These actions should in no way be punitive in nature.
- f. In addition to counseling the wife through the issue of abuse, a separate time should be set aside to have godly women and/or church leadership meet with and come alongside her in bearing her daily/weekly burdens of running the household.

- i. Consider that she may be in a weakened, fainthearted state, making regular tasks and chores more difficult to keep up. Encouragement with patience is the task of the counselor when the victim is fainthearted (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
- ii. Identify areas where the church can serve her (i.e., babysitting, home repairs, free time outside the home).

VI. Post-allegation Care for the Abused

- a. After addressing immediate concerns for safety, processing the initial allegations appropriately, and discerning that abuse has happened, counseling moves into the next stage of caring for the victim.
- b. Address any emotional, spiritual, and physiological effects (i.e., symptoms) of abuse. See the *Discerning Abuse Framework* for more about how to appropriately view symptoms of abuse as distinct from categories of abuse.
- c. Provide a biblical understanding of the following:
 - i. Biblical understanding of suffering, including the holiness, goodness, and sovereignty of God in our suffering.
 - ii. Biblical understanding of guilt and shame
 - iii. Hope for transformation and healing (biblical sanctification)
 - iv. Identity in Christ
 - v. Biblical change, including renewing the mind and put off/put on.
 - vi. Biblical forgiveness
 - vii. Biblical repentance and reconciliation
 - viii. Biblical understanding of submission and authority (not hyper-headship).
 - ix. Loving one's enemies
- d. Differentiate approaches to care
 - i. In cases where the abused is a Christian and a member of your church.
 1. Be sure pastors/elders or key leaders responsible for care in the church are briefed on this situation.
 2. Consider ways to coordinate care in both material and spiritual ways (see the section on preliminary matters for more details).
 3. Check in with the abused often through structured sessions.
 - ii. In cases where the abused is a Christian and a member of another local church
 1. Be sure pastors/elders of the victim's church are briefed on this situation and offer to work with them in the physical and spiritual care of the abused and abuser.
 2. Offer counseling to the victim while encouraging active worship and attendance at their local church.

VII. Post-allegation Engaging the Alleged Abuser

- a. General Counseling Considerations
 - i. Data gathering and discernment of the heart
 1. Consider potential heart dispositions and their manifestations that could include the following: self-pleasure, self-pain and flagellation, self-prescription and medication, pharisaical attitudes, self-pity, punishing others, lust for power, desire for worship, people pleasing, misunderstanding of biblical roles and responsibilities within marriage, attempting to alleviate a guilty conscience.
 2. Reproof and admonition
 3. Hope for change
 4. Establishing a pattern of faithful obedience, trustworthiness, and spiritual growth.
 5. Humble submission to the Lordship of Christ.
 6. Demeanor and behavior should be transformed into Christlikeness as a gentle servant leader.
 7. Growth in patience and having the mind of Christ to prefer others.
- b. Bearing fruit in Keeping with Repentance (Matthew 3:8; Matthew 7:17-20; Luke 3:7-14)
 - i. All sin is first against God and reconciliation must begin in the heart toward God.
 - ii. Reconciliation is possible if there is both genuine forgiveness and repentance. Biblical repentance is the focus of this section.
 - iii. Humility, confession, and genuine repentance (godly sorrow) are often misunderstood and confused with worldly sorrow.
 - iv. The fruit of repentance may take considerable time to be evidenced.
 - v. There is no tool that guarantees a genuine heart of repentance, church leaders and the abuse victim must consider biblical principles and evidences of genuine repentance from Scripture.
 1. Principles
 - a. All sin, including abuse, is first a sin against God.
 - b. Repentance is not simply a change in thinking, but a change in attitude bearing outward evidence of fruit from the heart into actions (Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20; Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 2:3-8; 1 Thessalonians 5:15-18; John 16:7-8).
 - c. One should not seek to conceal sin, but confess sin (Proverbs 28:13; Psalm 51).
 - d. Repentance is a putting off of the old man, renewing the mind, and putting on of the new man. (Ephesians 4:17-32)
 - e. Repentance is an acknowledgment of sin and seeks transparency to expose the unfruitful works of darkness

wanting nothing to do with them (Ephesians 5:3-14; 1 John 1:8-10).

- f. Repentance is not perfection, but distinct change of heart in the mind, will, and emotions that leads to change in specific behaviors.
- g. Repentance is a change of the mind that is active in forsaking wickedness and pursuing righteousness (Matthew 5:6; Luke 9:23; Colossians 3:5).
- h. Repentance is more than regret and sorrow. It will involve regret and sorrow, but it is much more than those two things alone. Repentance is a godly grief that is sorrowful over sin committed and the hurt caused by the sin. It is not a desire to simply remove the consequences of sin, which is worldly sorrow that does not lead to true change but leads to death (2 Corinthians 7:9-11).
- i. Repentance does not necessarily avoid the consequences of sinful actions (Luke 23:39-43).
- j. Repentance is necessary for true salvation and should be a consistent practice of all true believers.
- k. God's Word exposes sin and is the means, by the power of the Spirit, to make genuine change.
- l. Repentance is a turning from the world and fleshly lust to God and his ways.

2. Evidences

- a. We must keep in mind that repentance is not perfection, but distinct change of heart in the mind, will, and emotions that leads to change in specific behaviors.
- b. Bearing fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8)
 - i. Poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3)
 - ii. Mourning over sin (Matthew 5:4)
 - iii. Meekness (Matthew 5:5)
 - iv. Hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6)
 - v. Merciful (Matthew 5:7)
 - vi. Purity of heart (Matthew 5:8)
 - vii. Peacemaker (Matthew 5:9)
 - viii. When reviled do not revile in return (Matthew 5:11; 1 Peter 2:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:15).
 - ix. Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 3:12-17) rather than fruit of flesh (Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5-11)

1. Love (Colossians 3:14), joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control, compassionate heart
- x. Attitude of thanksgiving (Colossians 3:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)
- xi. Putting sin to death (Romans 8:13; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:5)
- c. Brokenness and contrition in heart (Psalm 51)
- d. Humility and Fear of the Lord (Colossians 3):
 - i. Fear of the Lord (Proverbs 22:4), rather than a fear of consequences (Matthew 10:28; Hebrews 13:6)
 - ii. God opposes the proud (James 4:6-10; 1 Peter 5:5).
 - iii. Is there defensiveness? Are they teachable and open for correction?
 - iv. Is the person self-protective?
 - v. Primary concern is glory of God, not approval of man (Matthew 10:28).
 - vi. Primary concern is good of others not the good of self (Philippians 2:3-8).
- e. Earnest
 - i. Are they seeking to build broken relationships or simply trying to get the situation back to the way it was?
- f. Zeal
 - i. Is there a zeal to pursue righteousness? (Matthew 5:6)
 - ii. Is there zeal to kill the sin? (Colossians 3:5)
- g. Avenging wrong
 - i. Desire to make right what has been done wrong (Luke 19:8-10)
 - ii. Should be a sense of, "I'll do whatever it takes to make this right." The excuses, minimizations, justifications, or blame-shifting of the person's sin must be replaced with taking personal responsibility for their own sin.

VIII. Considerations for Church Leaders (Elders, Pastors, Overseers)¹⁰

- a. Your leadership is needed in any crisis, especially in cases of abuse. Please do not delegate this responsibility to your counseling team alone. We glorify God as we confront evil and defend the vulnerable. Honor and allegiance to God and his glory includes the call to defend the defenseless.
 - i. Responsibilities
 1. The care of souls is a primary responsibility of “shepherds.”
 2. Pastors/elders have a divine calling to enter into the pain and help all involved see God and respond in a way that honors Him (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2; Hebrews 13:17).
 3. Pastors/elders will give an account for oversight of souls and will give an account to God (Ezekiel 34:1-5).
 4. Pastors/elders are to emulate Christ’s tender care for the weak, meeting imminent needs (Matthew 12:20).
 5. Failing to care for the vulnerable is condemned by God (Proverbs 21:23; Proverbs 28:27; Matthew 25:31-46) and caring for the vulnerable is commended by him (Isaiah 58:6-10; Acts 2:32-35; Acts 4:44-45).
 6. Pastors/elders are not criminal investigators; however, it is the responsibility of shepherds to bring the Word of God to minister to the pain and suffering, providing hope and comfort.
 7. To lead, defend the truth, care for counselors, and protect the flock.
 - ii. Wisdom and discernment concerning allegations.
 1. Abuse allegations should be heard with grace and wisdom rather than antagonism or hostile interrogation. Take all allegations seriously with humility and compassion.
 2. There is wisdom in having a mature, godly, female in the room who may be an advocate for the victim when pastors/elders are seeking further information.
 3. Pastors/elders must be biblically responsible to acquire, discern, and act upon information obtained in order to respond in ways that are honoring to God and in likeness to Christ. (Act in accordance with the level of information you have and seek to keep gathering information).
 - a. Pastors/elders must discern when there is imminent danger.
 - b. Pastors/elders must know when to report to the appropriate abuse hotline.
 - c. In an effort to avoid future escalation, pastors/elders must consider the danger of further harm toward the abused once reporting occurs and act accordingly.

¹⁰ When “church leadership” is mentioned in the document we are referring to pastors/elders/overseers.

4. Address imminent needs of the crisis (i.e., safety plan, housing needs, financial burdens, etc.)
 5. There has been much confusion between requirements to report allegations of abuse and the biblical responsibility of church leaders to withhold a charge against another without two witnesses.
 - a. Pastors/elders are not criminal investigators; therefore, proper legal reporting is required (make sure to understand your state requirements for reporting various kinds of abuse).
 - b. Legal reporting is appropriate and encouraged as obedience to God by honoring the governing authorities for proper protection of the abused and as proper punishment for evil doers.
 - c. Legal reporting, however, does not nullify the responsibility of the pastors/elders to engage in cases of abuse. Avoid the false dichotomy of abuse cases as either legal or spiritual. All cases have spiritual implications, which requires biblical oversight and care, and some cases may require legal involvement.
 - d. Legal reporting requirements do not necessitate prior adjudication by pastors/elders as to whether an individual is guilty of the accusation.
 6. Gently verify
 - a. Admittedly, this is a most crucial step in the process where many mistakes have been made.
 - b. Again, there is wisdom in having a mature, godly, female in the room who may be an advocate for the victim when pastors/elders are seeking further information.
 - c. The pastors/elders must proceed under the jurisdiction of the church to assess the allegations with spiritual wisdom and discernment, caring in the process for the individual making the disclosure and the individual accused. Hearing from both sides and considering proper corroboration is biblically required (Proverbs 18:13, 17).
 - d. Shepherds must be careful and gentle in this stage to take disclosure seriously while using wise discernment to verify the allegations in order to act biblically.
 - e. Pastors/elders must be wise and faithful stewards of the information entrusted to them.
 7. Pastors/elders must be willing to confront the sin of abusers and offer compassionate biblical care for the ones sinned against.
- iii. Develop a Shepherding Plan

1. Remain vigilant to define problems in biblical terms. The problems of abuse are created and manifested as a result of sin. Be aware of cultural and extra-biblical nomenclature to define abuse and its causes in order to avoid seeking solutions that fall short of a biblical response. Resist secularizing the situation in jargon which focuses upon non-Christian terminology and practice.
2. There are conflicting statistics regarding false accusations, so all allegations must be taken seriously. However, biblically, due diligence is required in every case in order to either protect the abused or avoid false condemnation. Biblical discernment, humility, and compassion are critical to avoid any premature dismissal of allegations.¹¹
 - a. Mistakes have been made in over reactions to false allegations.
 - b. Mistakes have been made in reaction to legitimate disclosures of abuse.
3. A plan for restoration of individuals involved precedes a plan for restoring the marriage. This is not to neglect the goal of marital restoration, but recognizes forgiveness and repentance are individual responses which are necessary on an individual level toward God before biblical reconciliation and marital restoration is possible. (Consider Matthew 7 and Matthew 22:37-39).
4. Reconciliation is a biblical goal. However, we must not neglect biblical wisdom regarding forgiveness and true repentance which bears fruit.
5. The plan must seek to minister biblically to all involved. Maintain urgency to minister to the needs but avoid hasty responses so as not to neglect asking appropriate questions and listening to understand in order to provide the best spiritual counsel (Proverbs 18:13).
6. Take time to meet with the abused and their counselor very early in the process. In order to understand the perspective of the abused, it is recommended to meet on a regular basis with the abused and their counselor.
7. Consider the financial burdens, safety concerns, and housing needs. Coordinate responses between various church ministries attempting to meet the acute needs (i.e., housing, childcare, meals, etc.) of abuse cases.
8. Considerations should be added to the plan when social services are involved.

¹¹ *Journal of Family Violence*, Volume 31: 1035-1037, 2016; *Journal of Family Violence*, Volume 37: 1391-1403, 2022.

9. Children affected need particular and focused shepherding care. Pastors should care about the most vulnerable. Children who go through domestic violence are particularly vulnerable to negative views of marriage and are more vulnerable to LGBTQ+ and cohabitation.¹²
 10. The abused may need help with legal authorities, lawyers, or the court system which can be tedious and exhausting.
- iv. Support for the counselors
1. The spiritual leadership of the church is vital, please do not delegate the responsibility of care solely to the counselor.
 2. Counselors need encouragement and shepherding care while ministering in cases of abuse.
 3. Counseling needs, especially in abuse cases, demand the strength of the body of Christ together, not simply the counseling ministry. God uses His church to be His earthly representative in caring for the vulnerable, just as Jesus did (Ephesians 1:22; 1 John 2:6; Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 4:38-39; Luke 7:11-15; Luke 8:43-48; Luke 13:11-13; Mark 13: 3-9; John 4:4-42; John 19:26-27).
 4. Counselors need prayer and support from their pastors throughout the process.

¹² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report*. pgs. 71-75. Retrieved February 27, 2023.

IX. Considerations for facilitating reconciliation and restoration in cases of abuse

As counselors, it is necessary to generate and give clear expectations for reconciliation.¹³ Before reconciliation of the relationship or restoration of the marriage, the abused must be willing to forgive and repentance must be evidenced in the abuser for reconciliation to be possible. The biblical pattern is repentance, then reconciliation, and finally restoration. A particular timeline is case by case.

- a. Avoid criteria for reconciliation that are ambiguous, formulaic, or easy to manipulate legalistically (e.g., giving an arbitrary timeline like 6 months). Also avoid provoking counselees by frequently moving the “goal posts” for what constitutes fruits of genuine repentance and safety.
- b. Genuine repentance is central to reconciliation
 - i. Internally, repentance is a process in which there is to be a complete change of purpose, a turning from sin, a sincere godly sorrow over how the sin has affected your relationship with God and others, and a turning to God alone to pursue and sustain faithful obedience, regardless of the progress/outcome of the trial (Psalm 1:10; Acts 26:20; 2 Corinthians 7:9-11; Revelation 2:5; Revelation 3:19). Please see the section in this document labeled “Bearing Fruit in Keeping with Repentance.”
 - ii. Externally, this is manifested in confession without excuse or qualification; asking of forgiveness to God and others; prioritizing God’s glory through one’s personal turning from and forsaking sin and one’s eager pursuit of personal holiness above all other goals; and bearing the fruit of repentance.¹⁴ (Psalm 51:12-13,15,17; Romans 6:11,14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15)
 1. An earnest, aggressive pursuit of change
 2. Rather than expecting others to have trust and confidence in the abuser based on what they may say, trust and confidence is built by the bearing of outward spiritual fruit.
 3. A righteous hatred of one’s sin
 4. A growing fear of the Lord demonstrated by obedience to Christ.
 5. A strong, sustained desire to right all wrongs caused by one’s sin

¹³ Many points here are appropriately adapted from Gembola, Michael Scott, *After an Affair: Pursuing Restoration*, 31-Day Devotionals for Life (ed. Deepak Reju), P&R Publishing (2018) as well as Lambert, Heath, *Finally Free*, Chapters 1-2.

¹⁴ “... as in the case of faith, repentance is viewed biblically from two different, but complementary angles: it is both the duty of man and ‘the gift of God.’ Man must indeed repent, but that responsibility does not negate the fact that God enables people to repent. Because of man’s hard-mindedness, divine enablements are necessary if there are to be proper human responses in the spiritual realm. This reality pertains not only to initial repentance but also to progressive ‘repentance’ (i.e., that renewal of mind which expresses itself in holy living).” (Zemek, *Part III: Biblical Soteriology*, 191)

6. A full acceptance of any personal consequences of your sin, loving righteous justice no matter what it costs you personally
- iii. Similarly, worldly sorrow bears fruit that exposes lack of genuine repentance, and thus has no redemptive capability (Psalm 32:3-4; 2 Corinthians 7:10).
 1. A quick fading from an aggressive pace
 2. A renewed interest in self-indulgence
 3. A hatred of the consequences; wanting to let bygones be bygones
 4. A priority of removing the consequences
 5. Fear of man
- iv. Counseling homework should therefore reflect the various means the Holy Spirit uses to bring about and sustain repentance. Consider principles of Ephesians 4:25-32. Change is not when one simply ceases to commit the sinful acts, but when they begin to exhibit the character of Christ.
- c. Individual pursuits for both the abuser and abused that promote and reflect repentance
 - i. Be faithful to sustain your hope in and humble dependence upon the Lord. (Micah 7:1, 2, 7-8; Hebrews 6:19-20; Joel 2:12-13).
 - ii. Sustain endurance throughout the process (Hebrews 12:1-2).
 - iii. Watch your heart with all diligence (Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 15:19; Luke 6:45).
 - iv. Do not isolate, but rather remain faithful to your church and church leadership (Proverbs 18:1; Galatians 6:1-2).
 - v. Guard against resentment and sinful anger and pursue kindness, tenderheartedness, and a spirit of forgiveness (Ephesians 4:30-31; James 1:9-10).
- d. Specific pursuits for the abuser
 - i. Understand that inward repentance will be evident to the sinner before the fruits of repentance becomes evident and convincing to others.
 - ii. Build a progressive testimony of humility, patience, faithfulness, and trustworthiness (James 1:25; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Isaiah 50:10; Romans 5:1, 3-5) versus trying to control the narrative with their spouse, remembering that a gentle answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1).
 - iii. Prioritize God's glory and personal responsibility before God above all other agendas (Matthew 7:5; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Romans 14:10-12).
 - iv. As the repentant begins to walk in the light, teach them to be patient if others are slow to rejoice in their change; resumed closeness with your spouse is a gift to be offered rather than a right to demand (James 1:17; 1 John 1:5-7).
- e. Specific pursuits for the abused

- i. Do not lean on your own subjective feelings over against the wisdom and imperatives of Scripture.
- ii. As trustworthiness is demonstrated, in faith, give trust (Romans 12:1-2, 14-15; 2 Corinthians 2:7-8).
- iii. Encourage even the smallest evidence of repentance in your spouse as they pursue new habits rather than simply focusing on how far short of complete change they may be. This is with the understanding that time will attest to the genuineness of the change as opposed to superficial change (i.e., cleaning the outside of the cup). We must remember that God grants repentance in a believer's life (2 Timothy 2:25).
- iv. In faith, handle any sinful fear. Do not lose sight of Christ's love and care for you; when fear sinfully consumes you, it reveals that your love for Christ is weak. Love does not cast out your *reason* to fear, but it has the ability to cast sinful fear out of your life (1 John 4:18).
- v. Recognize your strength comes from the living God (Isaiah 40:27-31).
- f. Apply biblical wisdom for when to reunite a couple who have been separated for the sake of safety and protection of the abused. Note that many of these should be incorporated into the counseling agenda well enough before considering any reunification so data/evidence can be collected.
 - i. Church leadership should not abdicate their shepherding responsibilities to the wife or to the counselor.
 - 1. Church leaders are responsible for their sheep and will ultimately give an answer to God for them.
 - 2. Church leadership is encouraged to seek wisdom and may even delegate counseling responsibilities to biblical counselors who are walking in the Spirit and skilled in handling abuse cases.
 - 3. Church leadership should seek regular updates from any counselors and provide shepherding and instruction for those counselors.
 - ii. Questions to consider before reuniting them together in the counseling room
 - 1. Has the counselor had time and opportunity to observe fruits of godly sorrow and repentance in the abuser?
 - 2. Is the victim seeing change and willing to reunite in counseling?
 - 3. Are there one or two other godly persons who can give a similar testimony (using biblical criteria)?
 - 4. In the past, if the abuser has used counseling to manipulate the abused and/or the counselor, do they readily acknowledge their manipulation as sinful, and have they demonstrated a forsaking of the sin?

5. Keep in mind that if counseling together resumes, and a lack of godly sorrow and repentance is exposed, church leaders and counselors can quickly remove that privilege.
- iii. Questions to consider before reuniting them together in the home
1. Have you (the counselor) clearly established the actions of abuse from the past?
 - a. Do both the abused and abuser agree on the list of actions?
 - b. Is there a clear, mutual plan for both on how to handle old habits when they manifest themselves?
 - c. Have all former restrictions of resources been removed with a mutual understanding of how those resources will be handled going forward?
 2. Has the counselor had time and opportunity to see established evidence of godly sorrow, repentance, trustworthiness, humility, and patience in the abuser?
 3. Are there one or two other godly persons who can give a similar testimony (using biblical criteria)? How about extended family members?
 4. Have there been consistent interactions between the two (including some with you as an observer) that are completely absent of the warning signs and/or actions that have resulted in abuse in the past?
 - a. Do these interactions include discussion of issues that have been difficult in the past which have been handled with grace and an abundance of self-control?
 5. Does the abused spouse consider her/himself to be safe to reunite in the home?
 - a. If “yes,” are the criteria cited based on Scripture (instead of merely feelings, emotions, or outside pressures from others, finances, etc.)?
 - b. If “no,” consider how they arrive at their conclusion. If there is biblical support for the stated concern(s), investigate why it potentially disagrees with your answers to 2 and 3 above. If it is clear the concerns are based purely on feelings, fear, etc., it may still be wise to pause the process for a time while you work through this with them and/or develop a more gradual process that increases opportunity to demonstrate repentance, trustworthiness, and safety.

- c. Church leaders may conclude in some cases that the victim's options are either to reconcile or to remain single (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).
6. Do you (the counselor) have a plan that all seek to accept on how to closely monitor the initial days, weeks, months going forward?
7. Is there a viable safety plan in place if threats of or sinful abuse were to occur again?