COUNSELING WOMEN IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

I. Introduction

Over the 29 years that I have been counseling, I have, on occasion, counseled a wife who is in an abusive relationship with her husband. Each couple was different but the wives had several things in common: they were very afraid and embarrassed to come forward and tell what was happening, they felt somehow responsible and protective of their husband’s reputation, they were being greatly manipulated and intimidated, sometimes they and/or the children were in physical danger. Sadly, as the children got older, they would begin to treat the mother like their father did. I have had several wives tell me that they are afraid that their husbands would kill them or the children.

II. For this workshop, I would like to cover the following:

A. A brief overview of how a secular expert views and helps the abusive man and their partner.
B. A brief critique of how one Christian psychologist views and helps the abusive man and his wife.
C. A much more detailed view of how the biblical counselor should help the wife.

III. Secular Expert – Lundy Bancroft

A. Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men
B. Lundy has really good insights into the thinking and actions of an abusive man and the protection of the wife or female partner.
C. He routinely calls the wife to hear her side of the story but does not tell the husband due to protecting her from harm. He also calls the wife if her husband has made threats against her.
D. Insightfully, Lundy does not recommend psychology/therapy help for these men. He says that the psychologist simply helps the men justify their abuse because of their upbringing or a previous romantic relationship gone wrong. They have been “wounded” in some way.
E. Also, he emphasizes that the wife most likely will be very slow to seek help and be confused and “brain washed” by her husband to
think it is her fault. So, he cautions anyone trying to help her to be patient with her. That has also been my experience.

F. Lundy is very dogmatic about not starting out trying to help the man by putting him in marriage counseling. He says it puts the wife in danger and obviously she is not doing everything right and sometimes defies her husband or blows up at him. He says wait for the marriage counseling until the husband has really made significant progress and sees his wrong thinking.

G. Lundy also emphasizes for the counselor to believe the wife when she is afraid and refer her to an abuse hotline.

H. Lundy is not a Christian and does not think that “converting to God” is something that you can trust with these men.

IV. Christian Psychology View

A. *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage* by Leslie Vernick ii

B. This book is better than most integrative books but it is non-the-less highly psychologized.

C. She writes about abusers “destroying the personhood of the abused,” “inhibiting her growth.” iii

D. Defines “An emotionally destructive marriage is one where one’s personhood, dignity, and freedom of choice is regularly denied, criticized, or crushed. This can be done through words, behaviors, economics, attitudes, and misusing the Scriptures.” iv

E. Vernick describes abuse in often psychology terms: healthy, mutuality, caring, respect, responsibility, reciprocity, freedom, security needs.

F. Secular, and at times boards on feminist, wording.

G. Vernick brings God into the discussion but in a psychologized sort of way: “…your husband is not the final word on your personhood and worth, God is.” v “He values you so much that he came to earth as a human being to rescue you from darkness and bring light and life to your soul.” vi

H. Vernick has some good points but her Scripture emphasis is on the wife’s value and worth and mutuality in marriage so it comes across to me as too man-centered instead of God-centered.

I. Also, some of the Scripture she used quoted the NIV Bible and NLV Bible. That was confusing to me as I sometimes did not recognize the quotes. NLV is the New Living Bible which, I believe which supports her points, but results in some applications of Scripture out of context.
V. Biblical Counseling View

A. SEPARATE COUNSELING

1. As a rule, I require a wife that I am counseling to tell her husband. As biblical counselors we cannot be deceptive but the wife has to tell him, not us. *Abuse is the exception to the rule.* Most likely, it would put the wife in harm’s way and you need to protect her privacy. Be cautious and wise. The three greatest predictors of potential harm, even murder, of a wife are strangulation, weapons, and animal abuse. If there is a history of those things, the wife is in extreme danger especially if she seeks help.

2. If the husband agrees (or is pressured into counseling by the church, his family, or the courts) to counseling, it needs to be separate counseling *not* marriage counseling. As biblical counselors we are always taught to hear both sides of the story but abuse is a case where it would put the wife in danger. When Chris Moles counsels an abusive man, he requires the wife to have either a biblical counselor or an advocate who can let Chris know if the wife feels threatened.

3. The wife also needs counseling to help her sort through the issues of her heart.

B. HOPE

2. Other verses: Lam. 3:21-25; Ro. 8:28-29; 1 Cor. 10:13; 1 Peter 1:3-9; Romans 15:13.
3. That you and the wife can ask God for wisdom. James 1:5-6.
4. That you are committed to helping her. I normally give a wife like this my phone number so that she can call or text me anytime.

C. DATA GATHERING
1. Be very patient! She is likely to be confused and frightened and her thinking may be way off-base. Her thinking is hyper-vigilant to try and avoid her husband’s abuse.

2. Often he will scream, yell, curse, belittle her, threatened, tell her she is the problem, she is mentally ill, she is not a good Christian or not a Christian at all. If she were, she would be submissive. Often he won’t let her communicate with her family or friends. He may be extremely jealous. He lies and threatens her either overtly and subtly but the message is clear. This goes far beyond an ordinary anger problem, it is cruel and punishing. Often, the husband will “groom” the children to be on his side, telling them how much their mother has hurt him. The husband does bizarre things but can act very calm when the police or someone else shows up. Usually the abuse, especially the physical abuse, escalates over time and if the wife tries to exhort him to get help, confronts him in some way, seeks shelter, a protection order or divorce, it is a very dangerous time for her. An abusive husband will not forgive anything especially if the wife stands up to him even in a kind way. Sometimes drugs and alcohol are involved but not always. Sometimes when he is confronted, he will initially agree with his wife but within hours or a day or two, he changes his mind and totally blames her.

3. Confused and frightened thinking. Romans 12:1-2; Phil.4:8

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unbiblical Thinking</th>
<th>God-Honoring, Right Thinking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maybe this is my fault.</td>
<td>What he is doing is not right. It would not matter who he was married to. He would treat them this way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What can I do to avoid him getting angry and cursing at me?</td>
<td>I should be kind and give him blessing instead, but if he gets angry, God will give me grace to bear up under it. 1 Cor.10:13; 1 Pet.3:8-9</td>
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<td>I don’t want to ruin his reputation.</td>
<td>I should not cover up for the deeds are darkness but instead even expose them bibically. Eph. 5:11-12</td>
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4. Bitter, unforgiving thinking towards her husband or God. Ps.37; Matt. 18:35; 1 Cor. 13:5; Eph.4:31-32

Examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bitter Thoughts</th>
<th>Forgiving, God Honoring Thoughts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I hate him.</td>
<td>I will be kind to him because he doesn’t know the Lord and has no capacity to love me as he should. Luke 6:35-36</td>
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<td>I wish he were dead.</td>
<td>I wish the Lord would save him – granting him repentance and faith. I will pray for him. Matt. 5:43-45</td>
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<td>I am going to divorce him and take him for all he is worth.</td>
<td>I will seek counsel from my church about the wisest course of action. Hebs.13:17</td>
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<td>I will move away with the kids and he will never see them again.</td>
<td>Again, seeking shelter and hiding may be the wisest thing to do. I will seek counsel and come up with a good safety plan.</td>
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<td>How can he want to have sex again after what he just said to me?</td>
<td>I will pray for him to be convicted of his cruelty and selfishness. Lord, help me to show love whether he deserves it or not. I Cor.13:4-7; Ro. 12:21</td>
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5. Despairing Thoughts.

a. Question her for suicidal thoughts and/or plans.
b. Examples of despairing thoughts

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<th>Hope in God Thoughts</th>
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<tr>
<td>I can’t take it any more.</td>
<td>It feels like I cannot take it but the Lord will help me bear up under this. 1 Cor. 10:13</td>
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<td>The only way out is for me to kill myself.</td>
<td>Killing myself will only make matters worse. I need to seek shelter.</td>
</tr>
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<td>There is nothing I can do and even God won’t help me.</td>
<td>I have “need of endurance, so that when [I] have done the will of God, [I] may receive what was promised. Hebs.10:36, adaption mine</td>
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<tr>
<td>He will never change.</td>
<td>I don’t know if he will ever change or not but I know I can obey the Lord and be faithful no matter what my husband does. With God’s help, I can do what is right and not be frightened. 1 Pet. 3:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My children hate me.</td>
<td>It seems like that now but “if a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord even his enemies will be at peace with him.” I can be kind and not speak to the children about their father in a spiteful way but, when appropriate, give them the facts they need to know. Pro. 16:7</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is no hope.</td>
<td>There is hope with the Lord and, meanwhile, if I have to suffer, I want it to be for righteousness sake not because I sinned. Ro. 8:16-18</td>
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<tr>
<td>I will get into trouble because I</td>
<td>Whether I end up in jail or not, I...</td>
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6. Teach Her

2. Help her to redefine what is happening biblically. Use biblical words instead of abuse, personhood, your worth, and dignity, restate what she is telling you such as “being in Christ,” “malice” and “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, false witness, slanders.” Don’t fuss at her but kindly take her to Scripture to help her sort it all out.
3. The ins and outs of submission (God is the highest authority). We won’t have time to go through this, but The Excellent Wife book by Martha Peace goes through it in detail. Bottom line, if a husband is forbidding her to seek godly counsel or reprove him or not tell anyone what is happening, he is asking her to sin. We are told in Scripture to “expose the deeds of darkness” and to go to our brothers caught in any trespass but with a motive to restore them and to do it gently. (Caution, it may not be safe for a wife to reprove him. Let it be her judgment call.) Eph. 4:11-13; Eph. 5:21; Gals.6:1-4; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; Romans 12:17-21.
4. Resources to protect the wife when her husband is sinning. Chapter 14 in The Excellent Wife book.
5. She is to fight back biblically (overcome evil with good) which includes thinking rightly (Phil.4:8) and taking advantage of the resources God has given to protect her.

7. Protect Her

1. Safety tips and plan: hidden car keys and house key, keep cell phone charged at all times, gas in car, instruct the children to call 911 if they are old enough or to run to a neighbor’s house and ask them to call 911. One wife that I know would routinely hide her husband’s guns when he would be irate. Have her talk with someone on an abuse hotline/shelter/elders in the church.
2. Behind the scenes, instruct the children, “If I say, ‘come with me even if Daddy is screaming not to,’ you quietly come and we will walk out of the house.”

3. Protection orders, divorce or separate maintenance lawsuit increases her risk to be hurt especially during the first three months.

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iii Vernick, p.14


v Ibid, p.76.

vi Ibid, p.81.