



**UNHELPFUL COMMENTS
BY WELL-MEANING PEOPLE:
WHY THEY HAPPEN
AND HOW THEY MIGHT BE ANSWERED**

A Coaching Clinic for Victims of Domestic Abuse
and their Supporters or Bystanders

I pray no sufferer of domestic violence need say “your platitudes are proverbs of ashes” as she seeks help from the body of Christ. (Job 13:12a)

Being misunderstood is painful. Somebody thinks they see what your problem is when they don't see it at all, or only see a little bit of it. Somebody makes an assumption about you and gives you unhelpful advice. Somebody subtly blames you when you are not the one to blame. Somebody makes a quick "off the cuff" comment when they haven't taken the time to understand where you are coming from. Very often the person doesn't mean to hurt; it happens because of lack of knowledge or lack of empathy. Domestic abuse victims frequently experience misunderstandings when they seek support from others. This article has been written in the hope that such misunderstandings will be reduced. It offers a coaching clinic for victims of domestic abuse and their supporters or bystanders.

To help victims, the article gives suggested answers to unhelpful comments which well-meaning people often make. The purpose of these answers is not to train victims to simply parrot the suggested answers. Rather, the aim is to build their confidence so they can make similar or appropriate answers using their own words.

To help supporters and bystanders, the article discusses reasons why unhelpful comments may be made, and why such comments may hurt. We want to avoid the situation Job was in, where he said to his so-called friends, "How then can you comfort me with empty words, since falsehood remains in your answers?" (Job 21:34)

Genuine comments made to victims

All of the unhelpful comments quoted in this article have been made to victims of domestic abuse. In most cases the victim was trying to seek help, or had already taken steps (such as separation) which made her predicament fairly public. Some of the unhelpful comments have been made by friends or family, others by professionals such as clergy, theologians, counsellors, seminar leaders, respected Christian psychologists, and authors of marriage guidance books.

Why well-meaning people may make unhelpful comments

There are many reasons why well-meaning bystanders may make unhelpful comments to victims of domestic abuse. Probably the most common one is that people feel unsure how to respond because the topic of domestic abuse has been a bit taboo, like divorce or death. We have seen little modelling of how to "do" these conversations.

If a well-meaning bystander knows both spouses of the marriage, he or she could fear that talking with one spouse will restrict his or her relationship with the other spouse — in other words, there is a reluctance to be seen to be taking sides.

There is also a very real fear of getting involved. Will it mean having to advise/direct/assist the spouse(s) towards taking action? How would I know what to do? If I got involved, would it mean dealing with health professionals, offering help with child care, money or material support, or being called to be a character witness in a family court conflict?

There may also be a reluctance to give solace straight away. The bystander may privately think "Maybe this person didn't always put their best foot forward in the marriage. How can I be sure where the blame lies for this marriage problem? Maybe my role should be to help the person before me to engage in self-examination and self-scrutiny." This approach frequently seems right because the two spouses present differently in public. The perpetrator often presents as a civilised, amiable and reasonable individual and will posture as the victim if problems in the marriage become publicly evident. The victim may appear to be the provoking spouse if they evince significant depression, sensitivity, discontent or anger. The bystander may think that the victim seems to be overly dwelling on the abuse, almost "nursing" it. Moreover, the victim's behaviour may seem contradictory: sometimes presenting as if everything in the marriage is all right, but then displaying moments of extreme pain, anxiety or volatility, or making "way out" assertions about troubles in the marriage.

Bystanders may also feel that their role should be to teach the biblical principles of relationships. Surely this spouse's attitude is making the marriage difficult? Maybe this spouse needs to learn forgiveness, submission, prayer, longsuffering, trust, etc.

Tips for supporters

If a victim discloses abuse it is not helpful to change the topic, for this will probably increase the sense of shame in which the victim is already engulfed. It is better to respond with empathic listening and open-ended, non-judgmental questions. For example: "That experience must have been terrible for you. Would you like to tell me more about it?" Taking the victim's disclosures seriously, while refraining from knee-jerk advice, is very helpful. Victims get enormous relief when assured they are not crazy. The very best thing to say to the victim is "You are not to blame; it is not your fault."

Generalised critical comments made in the presence of the victim may only cause the victim to feel more condemned. A victim of domestic abuse is usually entrenched in self-blame. For example, after I separated from my husband, my daughter would return home from visiting her father in an extremely defiant mood. One evening of particular defiance, I asked a church elder for help. He came to my house and said to my daughter and me, "This shouldn't be happening." He may have been trying to commiserate with both of us, but I automatically assumed his shouldn't was directed at me (for ending the marriage and thereby precipitating my daughter's distress and defiance). I thought he was blaming the one who separated, instead of blaming the one who caused the separation.

To avoid such interpretations by the victim, supporters who make value judgements should take care to specify where the blame for the situation lies, rather than make generalised judgements.

Some readers may think the responses I am suggesting for victims are so simple that they wonder why I should write them. The reason is that most victims are tormented by self-doubt: the ongoing abuse has undermined whatever confidence they once possessed and they are too afraid to articulate their feelings or ask for fair treatment. To a non-abused person some of the suggested responses may seem patently obvious, but to a victim they may be revelatory.

Some supporters may never have said unhelpful comments to victims such as those recorded in this article. Perhaps you are a sensitive supporter who knows not to blame the victim. If so, you could read the article merely to broaden your appreciation of how a victim may be aching not only from the perpetrator's conduct but also because other supporters have, unawares, said unhelpful things to the victim.

Tips for victims disclosing abuse and seeking help

Surveying the pool of potential supporters, a victim often has a gut feeling about who will be judgemental and who will listen non-judgementally. Such gut feelings are often right (but not always). Many people will never really understand the painful dynamics of domestic abuse unless they have been through similar situations themselves. Some who have been abused (in childhood or by a partner) don't want to face their own woundedness; so may encourage another victim to bottle up their situation and not seek help. However, some people are willing to learn how better to respond to victims of abuse, and a few are excellent listeners.

Matthew 18:15 reminds us that if we feel hurt by a fellow believer we should first talk to them one-on-one, explaining that we feel injured. This implies that recipients of unhelpful comments may seek to educate those who make unhelpful remarks so that such remarks are not made in the future. Occasionally it helps to be more specific about the conduct of the perpetrator so the listener takes the disclosure more seriously. Doing this is not easy for a victim who is already emotionally overloaded, but sometimes it can be accomplished.

In all of this, Jesus is the Wonderful Counsellor, the only one who will always respond to us with full compassion and understanding. He knows first-hand the horror and evil of a defective spouse — his Bride continues to have multiple idolatries, worldly methodologies and alliances etc. "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" implies he feels our griefs with us, rather than commanding us to deny or suppress them.

The comments, with possible answers

Remember: these answers are not intended to be repeated parrot fashion. Victims may use them to gain confidence so they may respond to unhelpful comments in their own words.

What did you do to deserve that? What did you do to make him so angry?

- That's a good question; I've been asking myself that for a long time. But my behaviours seem to bear little relation to whether he explodes or not. On several occasions I might do something and he doesn't react; another time I might do the same thing and he explodes. And no matter what I do to change my behaviours, or how much I walk on eggshells, it never seems to prevent another eventual explosion.
- It sounds like you are blaming me and I feel hurt — please stop blaming me.
- I don't believe I did anything to 'deserve' it. No one deserves violence in an intimate relationship, just as no one deserves child sexual abuse.
- (To make it obvious how unfair the abuser's criticisms are:) I put the peas on the wrong part of the plate... His tea was cold when he came home two hours late... I phoned my mother... I got a little mud on the car when I went out... I fell pregnant even though (at his demand) I had been using contraception... I asked him to hang out the washing... Do you think I really "deserved" it for such a thing?

No matter what you might have done to provoke him you didn't deserve to be hit.

- What if I did nothing to provoke him? It sounds like you're implying that I did provoke him in some way, and that hurts me, because I have examined myself and I don't believe I provoked his violence.

You provoked him.

- Why would I do that? This whole experience is causing me pain, shame, humiliation, fear, embarrassment and rejection by my church acquaintances. Would anyone deliberately bring such distress on them self? I did not provoke him. On the contrary, I am so frightened of him that I usually let him get away with far too much. And even if I have sometimes "stood up" to him, it is only because he is sinning, and the Bible tells us to rebuke sin.
- Even if I had provoked him (which I don't believe I did), would that be an excuse for him to use violence?

If you took more care with your washing and got it whiter, your husband might have less to be unhappy about. (Implying: my husband does not have to hit me because I am a "good girl".) ¹

- Please believe me — I have worn myself to shreds trying to stop his abuse. It makes no difference. He still finds "excuses" to get angry.

I can't imagine Bill behaving like that. (No Christian man would do such a horrible thing!)

- Well he does. He is both Jekyll and Hyde; most abusers are.

If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all. Don't run your husband down.

- Jesus never followed that "rule"; he named sin as sin.
- I'm sorry you feel this way. How can domestic violence be exposed if we use this theory? How can we get help?

It's all in your mind. You're oversensitive. You're letting your imagination run wild.

- No, that is not true; please don't accuse me of something so unfounded. It sounds like you've just believed what my husband is telling you. Have you never been deceived by anyone? Perhaps he has deceived you?

Why did you marry him if he was like that?

- For the courtship and the first few months, he was nice. Then he changed.
- His abuse was infrequent and subtle at the start so I didn't see it.

You can put up with it. I did!

- Yes, but at what price? Just because you put up with it does that make it right? Should we put up with burglars, or lead poisoning or cigarette-induced illnesses, just because it is possible to put up with them?

You can go home now. It will be all right. He's asleep / he'll be calmed down now / he's sorry. (Said to a woman who has fled for her safety in the past few hours.)

- It will not be all right — it maybe all right for a while, until the next time! It always happens again sooner or later. Please understand: he hasn't really changed.

An abused wife must have entered marriage with unrealistic expectations.

- I concede I might have been too naïve — trusting that because I was marrying a Christian everything would be fine. But could that have caused the abuse? Was it wrong to expect him to at least respect me, when he had vowed to love and cherish me?
- Should I have expected my marriage to be hellish? Why would any woman marry then?

We would like to send you away on a holiday together, paid for by the church. (This was actually done, more than once, to “remedy” the marriage of a man in ministry! Note: such conduct by the church may be criminal — if a further assault ensues the church could be considered an accessory before the fact.)

- Don't you think that will be like rewarding him for being abusive? Besides, I think I will only be more at risk if we are completely out of sight of any people we know. Surely the church needs to make him accountable for his behaviour, not give him greater freedom to indulge in it. Can you help me to feel safer, please, not more endangered?

Trust in God. Put your marriage in God's hands.

- I do trust in God, but does that mean I should not have any feelings of pain or anxiety? It sounds like you're blaming me for feeling distressed about my situation, and that doesn't seem fair. Wouldn't you feel distressed if it was happening to you?
- It sounds like you're saying that if I seek help from others, it means I'm not trusting God. Do you really mean I shouldn't seek help from others? Doesn't God use many means to help us, including helping us through other people?
- I do trust in God, but I also need to analyse the difficulties of my situation, so I can understand it. Are you saying that if I even think or talk about the problem that would be a sign that I would not be trusting God? Are you advising just a blind optimism? I'm not leaving God out of my attempts to understand and deal with this.

Have you prayed about it? Have you asked God for more faith to believe that your husband will change? A variant is: Families that pray together stay together.

- Yes I've prayed, of course. But when you ask me that, I feel that you only want me to keep silent about it. Is that true?
- Yes I've prayed. But I've never heard any prayers made about domestic abuse during church services. Why doesn't the corporate church pray about these things? It wouldn't be necessary to give personal details. Just something like “We intercede for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, incest, abuse, and marital rape.” If those sorts of prayers were heard in church, people like me would be more confident about seeking help.
- Yes I've prayed, and I intend to keep praying, but I may do other things too. Like find a safer place to live. I can pray from there.

Don't try to change him. Go along with what he says or does, then at another time you may be able to talk his behaviours over with him.

- I don't think you understand what he is like. It is not easy to talk over his behaviours with him. If I try to, he either blames me, changes the subject, minimises the problem, deliberately misunderstands me, twists what I'm saying, intimidates me, abuses me more, belittles me, ignores me, or makes promises that he never keeps. He is not “reasonable” — he cannot be reasoned with. He isn't like your husband. It is like talking to someone in a different reality.

Accept him the way he is.

- Should I accept whatever he wants to do to me? Am I meant to be a doormat for any kind of disrespect and cruelty? Do you think God wants that?

You must give and take.

- I have done that, but it doesn't help. He is not like normal people. He just takes, and hurts. He is very abusive.

Let him who is without sin cast the first stone. (John 8:7) Implying: Don't judge your husband. A variant is: Each time you point a finger at someone you have three pointing back at you.

- That sounds like you're saying I have to be perfect before I rebuke a brother. But isn't the text talking about punishment of a person, not rebuking a person? The Bible says to rebuke a brother who offends me. And although there is the "log in the eye" scripture, there is no requirement to be totally sinless before we rebuke a brother.

You must forgive him. (To err is human, to forgive is divine.)

- Why do you emphasise my forgiving him, when you don't seem to put much emphasis on him showing lasting fruits of repentance?
- It sounds like you're implying I must let him back even though there is a high chance that he will do it again (as has happened so many times before). Are you saying I should extend cheap grace to him?
- It seems like you're focusing on what I must do, but not thinking about what he must do. I feel this is unfair — once again, I'm the one who needs to change, not him. That's what he says to me all the time: he never takes responsibility but blames me for everything. (Note: a supporter should never confront an abuser about his behaviour without being first given permission by the victim. The victim may assess that, at that stage, she doesn't want to risk more reprisals by the perpetrator. However, it may sometimes be appropriate for the police to charge the perpetrator for his criminal conduct even though the victim doesn't want charges laid. Romans 13 says the government has a duty to protect the vulnerable and punish offenders.)

Everybody sins. Don't you sin too?

- Yes; but I don't commit crimes and I don't try to completely control and demean another person's existence.
- Yes; but I confess the things I have done wrong, repent of them, and try to make amends if I have caused harm to another. He just minimises what he does, shifts the blame, never really repents and never makes amends.

If you stay with him you may be able to bring him to salvation.

- It is not me who will bring him to salvation, but the Holy Spirit.
- Maybe he will come to salvation; but maybe he will just wear me away till I cannot go on, or till the children and I are badly injured or killed. He has heard the gospel, and rejected it. Once people openly rejected Paul's message he went to preach elsewhere. How can you be sure it is God's will that I always I persist with him? Isn't that taking one scripture out of balance from the whole?

What about marriage counselling? If you haven't tried that you have not given the marriage your best shot.

- Well we did try it, but the counsellor just told us we needed to improve our communication skills. I don't think he/she saw what the problem really was. In counselling, I felt too confused and frightened to talk about the abuse. I didn't really understand it myself. Now I've read that joint counselling is not the right thing for abusive marriages. We should have had separate counselling.
- I tried to interest my husband in counselling but he refused to go (or only went once).

It will be such a feather in my husband's cap if he can get you two back together! (Spoken by the wife of a Christian therapist to a victim who was depressed to the point of suicide and had managed to leave the marriage.2)

- Are you saying that your husband's kudos is more important than my safety and my life?

You must be letting this happen because it fulfils some unconscious need of yours. (What is the pay-off for you? You must be somehow attracting it.)

- I hope you're not saying that I'm a masochist. I don't have any "need" to be abused. But I do need to learn to be more assertive and to not take on every guilt trip that others lay on me. And I need support to become strong enough to leave him, to risk the very real dangers that arise when I tell him it's over, to run the gauntlet of that hard road of protection orders, police brush-offs, legal battles, condemnation from others, the housing and financial crises... will you help me?

Maybe you need antidepressants.

- Why do I have to be treated with medication when he has the problem? Antidepressants are not going to stop the violence.
- I doubt I need medication; I just need to be treated with respect and courtesy. And to have people believe me and not blame me.

Your self esteem is low. You need to improve your self esteem. Then you will have a better relationship.

- How do you know that my low self esteem is the cause (rather than the result) of the abuse I've gone through?

To love someone you have to love yourself first.

- Isn't that a secular belief rather than a biblical belief? The Bible says we love God because he first loved us, not because we valued ourselves highly to start with.

Your husband loves you.

- How do you know he loves me? Maybe he tells you that. But if he loves me, why does he treat me like dirt?
- How does the Bible define love? Doesn't it say actions speak louder than words?

Do you love him?

- What does it matter, when I am in danger? Surely getting and keeping safe is the most important thing right now.
- If I say I don't love him, does that imply that I've fallen short somehow? It sounds like you're implying that I'm to blame. Yes, I care about his welfare, and I wish him a life of godly blessing, but as far as emotions go, I am so full of fear, anger and pain that I can't feel anything else at the moment.
- Yes, I love him; but does that mean I should let him continue to terrify me?

He is God's representative in your home and you must obey/submit to him.

- Yes it says "Submit to your own husband, as unto the Lord," but should I obey his instructions when he requires me to sin, or to comply with his sin? The Lord wouldn't require me to comply with sin. If my husband wants me to do that, he is not being God's representative. And doesn't that passage also say that my husband should love me as Christ loved the church? Does the Lord abuse, beat, rape, put down his church?
- Did you know that violence intensifies when women submit to it? Probably the single worst action I could take is to submit to his abuse.³

Wives should be in subjection to their churlish husbands, not from dread and amazement, but from a desire to do well and to please God. (This is Matthew Henry's comment on 1 Peter 3:6.)

- That word "should" sounds like you are telling me that I'm in sin if I dread and am terrified by his violence. It only lays more blame on me. It hurts me so much I can barely find words to respond.

If you submit properly, he will treat you properly. The responsibility for a good relationship belongs with the wife. Good husbands are made by God; good marriages by women.

- Where does the Bible say that, or give such a guarantee?
- Are you saying his violence is my fault? Frankly, I'm tired of being told that this is a relationship issue and that if I behave in a certain way, he will stop doing what he's doing. It isn't a relationship issue, it's a criminal issue.

What were the "issues" in the marriage?

- Domestic abuse is not about fighting over "issues of disagreement". It is about power and control exerted by a cruel and selfish person.

It takes two to cause an argument.

- Why do you believe that about marriage, when you don't believe it about other interactions? If someone defrauds you in business, does that "take two"? If someone assaults another person in the street, does the victim always share in the blame? Were the Jews to blame for Hitler's holocaust? Why can't you conceive that some homes have vicious tyrants in them?

It takes two to contribute to a marriage break down.

- Not necessarily; it takes two to make a marriage work, but it only needs one to make it fail. Everything I have done to try to adjust to his demands has not stopped the abuse. I'm prepared to examine whatever I might still need to change about my own conduct, but it will be pointless unless he addresses his abuse. I am not responsible for his sins.

If your husband hurts you, imagine that it is God punishing you because of your sins, and that in this way you are doing penance for your sins.

- Where is penance in the Bible? Jesus took the punishment for my sins, so why should I have to be punished for them as well? There is no purgatory in the Bible either, so you can't tell me that by suffering now I am gaining remission from the torments of purgatory, because it doesn't exist. ⁴

It is your cross to bear, but God has promised never to give you more than you can handle.

- Does that mean that if I can't handle his abuse any more I have failed? Because that sounds like what you're saying.
- Do you think I should submit to his sinning against the image of God in which he was made, and therefore sinning against me? Do you really think I should ceaselessly tolerate and overlook his abuse?
- Yes. Jesus gave himself up to cruel persecutors in his death on the cross, but that was because far bigger things were at stake. God was pouring the wrath of his justice on his innocent son, so we (who are not innocent) could be forgiven without having to suffer that wrath. Yet even the crucifixion had an end point. Surely domestic abuse and violence may have an endpoint too? Jesus said we could suffer persecution, but he also promised us life and life abundantly.

Each time your husband hits you just think of it as an opportunity to be a little closer to Jesus and the angels. (Spoken by a priest at the hospital bedside of a woman who had been admitted with severe injuries after a beating.)

- Is it all right for me to hit you then, so you can have that opportunity too? Your doctrine only justifies abuse, but doesn't the Bible say we should confront abuse and protect the weak?
- Please stop trying to tell me how I should change myself, and start telling my husband how he should change himself.

It must be part of God's plan for your life.

- I feel hurt when you say that. Certainly God will be able to work all things together for good, but is it God's plan for me to suffer forever? How could that be "good" — for me, or for my husband?
- God is not the author of sin.

This must be God's way of teaching you a lesson.

- OK, but what lesson? I'd like some help in working that out, but I don't feel I'll get it from you — I feel you judged by you.
- Isn't God teaching him a lesson too? Why treat me like the naughty girl who needs correction, when it's his behaviour that needs correction?

If he does kill you, the worst that can happen is that you go and be with Jesus. (Said by a pastor to a victim who consulted him for advice.)

- But wouldn't it be better to prevent our kids ending up with a murderer as their only remaining parent?

Perfect love casts out fear.

- Fear is a God-given response to danger so that we will act self-protectively.
- Are you saying I should have no fear when I am in danger of being assaulted? That I am a failing Christian if I feel afraid of him? Jesus felt fear when he was in Gethsemane. Was he imperfect? Please stop putting such a heavy burden on me!
- Surely "perfect love casts out fear" refers to our freedom from God's condemnation and wrath, rather than our never being supposed to fear our persecutors.

I'd never put up with that from anyone!

- That tells me you don't understand much about domestic abuse. How do you know what you would do in my situation? Abuse is subtle; it wears you down so you have virtually nothing with which to resist it. And you think you have plenty of reasons to stay.

You chose him. Now you have to live with it. (You made your bed, now lie in it.)

- He didn't seem abusive at the beginning. He put on his nice face.
- Even if I did make some error of judgment, or sinned myself in my initial involvement with him, does that mean I should suffer forever as a result? If you were not concentrating one day and injured yourself in a driving accident, wouldn't you hope that others would help you out of the wreckage and assist you in your recovery? Or should they leave you in the wreckage because they thought the accident was "your fault"?

Try to understand how difficult his childhood was.

- I do, but does that excuse his current behaviour? Lots of people had a difficult upbringing, but not all those people abuse their spouses.

Is it caused by alcohol or drugs?

- No, it is caused by him.
- No, he can still abuse me stone cold sober.
- No, to say that lets him off the hook by blaming something outside himself.

He has had a lot of worries lately / he is out of a job / etc. You owe it to him to help him through this. He needs you. Stand by your man.

- Yes that's true, but does that excuse it? Lots of men are unemployed or burdened with worries but don't abuse their wives. Being beaten is worse than being unemployed.
- You say "stand by him", but who will stand by me?

It isn't that bad. You'd leave if it were really that bad. You seem too calm for someone who has had all that happen to them. It doesn't happen often. He doesn't hit you. There are no bruises. Be grateful he doesn't hit the children. All marriages experience valleys. (Minimisation and disbelief can take many forms.)

- It is that bad. The violence may not happen often, but the other parts happen all the time — the intimidation, threats, isolation, financial abuse and emotional abuse. A little violence goes a long way, when all the other control techniques are in place too!
- Even if violence doesn't happen, does that make it OK? Are other forms of abuse “acceptable”?

Maybe he just needs to learn to control his anger. Or, in psychological jargon: He has a deficit of interpersonal skills. There is an inhibition in his anger control mechanisms.

- I don't think so. He can control his anger well enough at work, on the street, at church, in public. He doesn't hit strangers or his workmates. He chooses to let himself be angry just at me, in private.
- The fact that he hits me only where the bruises won't show indicates he is still in control of himself, even when he is angry.
- He could be beating me ... the doorbell would ring and he'd be all calm and civilised ... then when the visitors left he would get straight back into beating me. Doesn't that show quite a degree of control?
- Someone who stores up every little fact I trustingly confided in him about my past mistakes and sins, and then uses them against me years later, displays purposeful and intentional abuse. That is no lack of control. On the contrary, such conduct displays complete mastery of himself.

He feels intimidated and frustrated by you. You are so intelligent. You could beat him in any argument.

- But when he talks and threatens, he reduces me to jelly. I may look confident to the outside world, but at home I live in fear
- The competence you see in me now has only developed since I left him.
- Even if I am somewhat competent and intelligent, does that give him the right to abuse me? Do you become violent when someone else is more competent than you? Surely he should protect whatever good qualities I have, not try to stamp them out! And even if he does feel inadequate, he has no right to put me down just so he can feel better.

You are too professionally respected, you earn too much money, I can't believe you would put up with abuse, as though you were stupid, a minority or poor.⁵

- You are believing a lot of myths about abuse. It occurs in every walk of life.

Maybe he needs deliverance/exorcism.

- Maybe, but in his present state it would be useless because he must confess and repent of his sin first, otherwise he will go on “giving legal ground” to the enemy and the demons would just come back (Matt. 12:43-45).

You shouldn't run away from these things. You can't just walk out at the first sign of trouble. “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

- But there is a biblical principal of fleeing. David fled from Saul. Mary and Joseph took refuge in Egypt because of Herod. The believers left Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen.

Are you going to reconcile with your husband, or go on being a floozy?

- That really hurts me. I'm not a floozy. I'm deliberately dressing down, because I'm afraid of attracting men.

Are you willing to let Satan destroy your marriage?

- It's not me who is letting Satan do it, it is my spouse.

Children need their father.

- Yes, generally speaking that's true, but what if their father does more harm than good?

We're praying for you.

- Thank you, I appreciate that. But do you think you could listen to me too? Because I've got lots of people praying for me, but hardly anyone who is willing to just listen to me patiently and without judgment.

We're praying for the two of you. (Said after the couple had separated.)

- If you're praying for reconciliation, I doubt it will help unless somebody is also prepared to hold my husband accountable. I prayed for years, and it didn't get him out of his denial. How could your prayers do any more than mine did?

We hope this (the separation) doesn't go on much longer!

- Why do you hope that? Does it make you uncomfortable?

You must reconcile with your husband.

- Why must I, when he hasn't shown solid evidence of changing?

You and Tom have got to get back together!

- Would you like to know why we are separated?
- Why is our "getting back together" compulsory?

We suggest you don't come to church any more because the rest of the church will feel uncomfortable about you and Jim sitting separately. (Said by some church elders to a woman who had recently separated from her abuser.)

- Well I mean no disrespect, but I'm coming to church anyway. There is no scriptural reason why I shouldn't, and if other people have a problem with that, that's their problem.

You are not allowed to take communion until the church forgives you.⁶ (Said to a woman when she told her minister her husband was hitting her.)

- Why should I be disciplined when it my husband who is doing the wrong thing?
- What is your scriptural basis for barring me from communion? What scripture have I broken to merit that?

What God has joined together let no man put asunder.

- What God has joined together, a man has already put asunder!

Marriage is "for better or worse". Till death us do part.

- Yes, but was the "worse" meant to extend to the cruel abuse that my husband is dishing out to me? God doesn't condone sadism. Surely "for better or worse" only means the ups and downs of life in the providence of God? And by the way, that phrase "for better or worse" does not occur in the Bible.

Don't get a divorce. (Said soon after you separate, or even when you are just thinking of separating.)

- I am only taking time-out from my marriage at the moment; why do you leap ahead and assume I will be getting a divorce?

Don't divorce. God hates/forbids it. It is a sin.

- It is not me who is breaking the covenant — it is my spouse. He is behaving like an unbeliever in his abuse of me, and in his conduct he is patently NOT “pleased to live with me”. He is pushing me away by his abusiveness. The fault in any divorce, if there is to be one, is his.
- Would you give your daughter the same advice if she was in the same situation?
- That's based on a wrong translation. Malachi wrote “He who hates and divorces ... covers his garment with violence.”

There's got to be a time when you get beyond this. (Stop feeling sorry for yourself.)

- Yes, I agree — but it's not yet. It takes a lot more to recover from this than I think you appreciate. Especially when every access weekend he re-abuses by turning the children violently against me and involving them unfairly in the adult issues.
- I'm sorry that you don't want to hear/listen. I need to talk to come to terms with it all.

Final note to supporters and bystanders

Consider the collective ignorance and denial of the church/society. Consider how hard a victim finds it to face such a thick wall of unbelief and misunderstanding.

Consider the victim's confusion and guilt as the pain of these victim-blaming comments registers slowly in her mind — she thought these people were helpers! Consider the shame that clings to every fibre of her being as she is subtly undermined over and over again by these victim-blaming comments.

Consider the victim's silence, and understand! Consider the courage and risk involved if she does stand up and answer with some hard, searing truths! Consider the pain when she is belittled and attacked for standing up for the truth! Consider her desperation, her determination, her resoluteness. If she retreats and succumbs to the snares of the abuse again, consider the forces arrayed against her. And if she stands up again, and resolves for justice and safety, support her!

Final note to victims

There is something of a pattern in these suggested answers. The pattern involves asking your critic/questioner another question or challenging them in return. Turn it back on them, so they can begin to see the absurdity and unfairness of their mindset. Parents often use this with their children, when dealing with challenging behaviour and immature demands.

Jesus used this “answer a question with another question” technique on the Scribes and Pharisees many times (for example, Luke 20:2-8; John 8:4-7; Matt. 9:4-6; 15:3-9; 22:42-45; also see Acts 16:37; 22:25; Gen. 38:25). You can learn to do this too, respectfully, without hostility, but with truthfulness.

Endnotes

¹ Comment reported by an older woman in *Two Lives, Two Worlds — Older People and Domestic Violence*, vol.1, (Morgan Disney & Assocs, Leigh Cupitt & Assocs, Council on the Ageing; Partnerships against Domestic Violence, Commonwealth of Australia, 2000) p. 27.

² Catherine Clark Kroeger & Nancy Nason-Clark, *No Place for Abuse: Biblical and Practical Resources to Counteract Domestic Violence*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001, p. 100.

³ James & Phyllis Alsdurf, *Battered into Submission: The Tragedy of Wife Abuse in the Christian Home*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989; Guildford UK: Highland Books, 1989, p. 84.

⁴ If you have questions about purgatory and penance you might like to read one of the many good books which examine Catholic doctrines from a scriptural basis. For example, *The Gospel According to Rome* by James G. McCarthy (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1995) or *Answers to my Catholic Friends* by Thomas Heinz (Ontario: Chick Publications, 1996).

⁵ Said by a white, male pastor to a physician who earned six figures a year and was being beaten by her husband. See Al Miles, *Domestic Violence — What Every Pastor Needs to Know*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000, p.63.

⁶ See *Two Lives, Two Worlds*, *ibid.* p 65.