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## **Understanding Your Role as an Agent of God's Love**

I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality always helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.  
—Elie Wiesel Nobel Acceptance Speech, 1986

Rescue me, Lord, from evil men.  
Keep me safe from violent men.  
(Ps. 140:1 CSB)

You may not know what it is to pray a prayer like this. You may never have cried out to God from behind a locked door, hugging your knees and wondering how much the rage on the other side will build up this time. But you're picking up this book in part because you want to know how to help someone

who does have to pray this way. In fact, your reading this book may be the Lord's answer to her prayer.

Whether you are a pastor, a church leader, a friend, or a family member of someone you sense is under threat, you may feel paralyzed as to how you ought to respond to a situation you didn't cause, you don't know the full details of, and frankly scares you to death. But you also know paralysis is not an option when someone vulnerable is at risk.

Love is at the heart of God's will for you in this situation. Love, in fact, is at the heart of God's will for all of our relationships. It is the fulfillment of God's design for us, the realization of our greatest potential (Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10). But you may be surprised to learn that one of the primary tests of whether love is genuine is if it motivates a person to hate what is evil and to uphold what is good (Rom. 12:9-21). Love involves hate—a strong aversion to what harms others and dishonors the Lord. And it involves a strong attraction to what benefits others and honors the Lord. Love is the reverse of abuse because it builds others up at cost to self, rather than builds self up at cost to others. But love is not an equal opposite—it's far more powerful because, unlike abuse, love is sourced from the eternal depths of God's heart. You are an agent of a love much bigger than you. This love goes beyond sentiment, actually accomplishing good in someone else's life. It is dedication to their good. This is God's disposition toward people, and that should be a very encouraging thought for you as you try to help them. The love required to bring healing in this situation does not come from you. You are just an agent of God's love.

But how is love expressed in such an unclear and dangerous situation? In normal life, love often comes in pastels, the thousand gentle hues of human interaction. You enjoy light conversation, you overlook small offenses, you learn to appreciate people for who they are with all their shortcomings.

But when it comes to loving people in the swirling shadows of domestic abuse, love must come in stronger colors—colors that stand out in the gloom.

To the person being abused, your love comes in the color of dawn—a bright contrast to darkness, offering a new way of seeing life her eyes had forgotten. To the person committing abuse, your love is the color of alarm, disrupting the haze that hides their behaviors. To the family, friends, and church that surround them, your love is the color of the horizon, giving them a wider perspective to help them navigate this situation. In the dark grays of domestic abuse, your love comes best in stronger colors than normal.

We use the metaphor of strong colors to illustrate active care for those in an abusive relationship, as opposed to merely vague awareness of it. Our hope for this book is that the color of your love toward victims and abusers will represent the love that God has for them. Our goal is not just to call you as a church leader, friend, or family member to be involved, but to show you how to be involved in ways that reflect God's heart as displayed in His Word, and in ways that do not cause further harm.

## Why Active Involvement Is Difficult

But you may still be hesitant about why it's necessary to be involved. That hesitation is certainly understandable in an unfamiliar and threatening situation like this. But let's get rid of that hesitation with some firm conviction since without solid conviction you'll lose heart in the process.

*I am scared of making a mistake.*

Let's put this to rest right away. You will not make *a* mistake. You will make many mistakes. The nature of hazy situations is that you will not immediately know what is best to do at any

given point. This is part of the process. Part of our job in this book is to provide a framework that will help you avoid the kind of mistakes that cause harm.

Fear of failure is often the greatest enemy of righteousness. Do not fear. There is a secret that will make your mistakes far less likely to harm anyone else: the virtue of humility. Humility—that is, both an awareness of your own limitations and a willingness to be corrected as you go—will keep you seeking the right knowledge for wise response, both from Scripture and from those suffering under abuse. Humility invites the grace of God (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).

*I have no experience with these situations.*

You may have little experience with domestic abuse situations, but you can still be a learner and a helper. You may not have chosen to be in this situation, but God in His mysterious providence has placed you in it to help someone who is hurting.

You are also seeking wisdom from people who do have experience with these situations. We hope this book can be a helpful initial guide, but we also commend resources produced by other people with experience and specific training in domestic violence, trauma, victim advocacy, abuser intervention, and related subjects. You should also get to know the folks involved in local domestic violence shelters, victim advocates, batterer intervention programs, and knowledgeable legal experts. We will say more about a coordinated community response in the coming chapters. Church leaders should see such resources as gifts.<sup>1</sup>

You may not have as much experience as you would like to handle this situation, but people with more experience are not

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1. See Appendix C: National and State Domestic Abuse Resources for a good start on finding experienced and trained local resources in domestic abuse. Please take advantage of these resources. You cannot carry this burden alone.

sitting in the seat God placed you in at this time. You are in the position to help, and they are not. So learn from them, and help. By proximity, the burden to help is yours to bear (Gal. 6:2), but you should not bear it alone. You don't have to be an expert in domestic violence to respond competently.

*I need to believe the best about people.*

The process of caring for victims of domestic abuse often stalls before it even gets on the road. The point at which it often stalls is the initial disclosure, when a victim (or her friend) describes the cruelty of a man who is really a nice guy at church. To the church leader hearing the accusation, it may initially feel uncharitable to even consider the claim. It feels unloving to entertain the thought.

But this is an occasion where charitable instincts are wrong. A biblical view of people demands more from us. Christian love has more dimension to it than the flat pietism of 'believing the best about people.' Such pietism is often not much more than the vanilla tolerance of our age. Christians understand sin not just as external actions, but as inner corruption (Eph. 4:22). Christians also understand love not just as kind sentiments, but as the resolve to do what it takes to bring actual good to another person (1 John 3:18). So doing actual good for someone will sometimes involve not focusing on what they're doing right, but exposing what they're doing wrong (Heb 3:12-13). The self-deceit that is part of all sin is especially blinding in abusive sin. The more a person is self-deceived, the more taking him at his word is actually unloving. It allows him to maintain his illusion. God calls us to be discerning about people and their character, and to relate to them accordingly (Prov. 26:4-5, 24-25).

*I'm not sure who is telling the truth in this situation.*

You're right. You aren't sure. But you don't need to be certain about the truth to help. Unlike God, we discover truth through active exploration of the unfolding situation over time. If you waited to act until you knew who was telling the truth, you would be waiting a long time. And you would be acting too late for the sake of the victim.

False reports of abuse are rare, due to the stigma and shame associated with it. In fact, most experts say that abuse is typically under-reported. For this reason, we encourage first responders to take disclosures of abuse seriously. The truth will get sorted out through a coordinated community response in which there are multiple eyes on the relationship from many angles. We will not be recommending punitive measures toward a person accused of abuse without due process, but acting for the safety of a potential victim is not a question of punitive action of any kind. It is prudence.

More on that in the coming chapters. We will offer a framework to help you discern the best actions to take based on the limited knowledge you have at each stage. God does not expect you to be God. He alone knows the hearts of men. But, He does expect you to actively seek the knowledge necessary to make the hard decisions that, in faith, need to be made in a world of fallen relationships. Better yet, He will help you do it.

## **Why Active Involvement Is God's Will for Church Leaders**

God gave leaders to the church to shepherd, protect, comfort, teach, guide, warn, and admonish them. They are examples to the flock of how Christians ought to conduct themselves in a world that doesn't look much like the God who made it. For

our present concern, we want to highlight two particular ways church leaders model God's character.

*Church leaders embody the protective care of the Lord to hurting people.*

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

Christians have always found this to be one of Jesus' most beloved testimonies about Himself. We love it because it conveys how deeply He loves us—enough to face any danger that threatens His sheep. He is defensive of those who are His. They are weak. But He is strong. Church is where our families learn to sing this.

And church is where they see it modeled. Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd, but He extends His care through undershepherds. He places them over His church to model His care—to love the sheep He loves with the same protective heart. You hear this in the apostle Paul's voice as he speaks his parting words to the elders he appointed in Ephesus, 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock' (Acts 20:28-29).

Paul describes these wolves as coming 'from among your own selves' who go around 'speaking twisted things' in order 'to draw away disciples after them' (v. 30). Paul was warning them of men who would both *teach false doctrine* and *live falsely before the people* (2 Cor. 11:1-15; Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 3:1-9). The two always go together. False teachers exert their influence through both *teaching* and *behavior*.

Church leaders are charged with protecting the flock from false teachers. Perhaps you only considered false teachers as those who would try to teach some ancient heresy in Sunday School class. Those are not the people ‘from among your own selves’ you typically need to worry about. Those problems are apparent, and you have a doctrinal statement to help you draw the proper lines. No, the more typical danger to your people are those who, with their influence, *live falsely* before them. They may never get behind a lectern or hand out pamphlets, but they still teach. In fact, they teach far more effectively by modeling with their private behavior lies about who God is, what marriage was designed for, even what love is. When false living involves violence, the destructive effects mushroom.

Protecting God’s people is not easy. You are entering into a risky situation. We will offer suggestions for a wise approach that reduces certain risks, but the threat is real. Jesus is not a hired hand who flees when the wolves come (John 10:13). The shepherds He appoints don’t flee either. This is why you must respond resolutely when abuse is disclosed or the possibility of abuse becomes evident. Vague responses will not disrupt the anything-but-vague dynamic of abuse that vulnerable people endure. Unflinching response comes from strong resolve and clear perception. Strong resolve comes from sharing the Good Shepherd’s heart. Clear perception comes from understanding the dynamics involved. You are reading this book to begin forming that perception.

*Church leaders use their influence to serve the church, never to take from her.*

The apostle Peter, as bold a leader as he was, spoke of the responsibility of oversight tenderly, even poetically in 1 Peter 5:2-3:

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight,  
*not* under compulsion,  
*but* willingly as God would have you  
*not* for shameful gain, *but* eagerly  
*not* domineering over those in your charge,  
*but* being examples to the flock.

Peter's threefold contrast shows how easily that responsibility can be misused. This is why many people have rejected the very idea of authority—they cannot separate authority from its misuse. They may never have seen a good example of godly authority, in which the person in authority willingly takes on the responsibility to provide for others instead of himself, and the decisions he makes are for their gain and not his own.

Peter had learned from his Master. Power is never exercised for the gain of the one who possesses it, but for the gain of those who don't. Authority is exercised *at cost* to the one in authority. I imagine Peter remembered with some ache in his soul the rebuke of Jesus, when the disciples were elbowing past each other for more authority.

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

Jesus, the Son of God, used His authority to give His life for our gain, not to take our lives for His gain. But that's not all. After He had given His life, He was raised from the dead and granted all authority in heaven and earth as the risen Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God (Matt 28:18; Eph 1:20-

23). The manner in which He exercises His authority from this new position of privilege is the same: to bring life to those under it.

People who live under abuse experience the exact opposite. Whether an abusive person uses the word ‘authority’ or not, he uses greater influence (whether due to greater physical strength, earning potential, social connectedness, or otherwise) to gain from those with less. This is an evil authority. And evil authority is not combated with the absence of authority (which is a fantasy that ends up causing greater harm to vulnerable people). No, evil authority is combated with godly authority.

By displaying self-emptying authority, church leaders create an atmosphere that’s oxygen to victims and survivors of abuse. The apostle Paul makes this connection. At church, godly authority is displayed when pastors—and by implication, all church leaders—are self-controlled, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy for personal gain, not arrogant, not quick-tempered, not a drunk, and able to display the kind of leadership that rallies his family behind him rather than exasperates them (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9; Eph 6:4). This is oxygen to people living under abuse, who have to go home to deadlier air.

And as much as godly influence is oxygen to victims of abuse, it is carbon monoxide to abusers. The Lord, the ultimate authority, has never tolerated for very long the oppression of His people by the powerful people of this world.

For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;  
he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.  
(Ps. 9:12).

Remembering those who are afflicted requires a form of avenging—not going on some crusade or leveling threats at an abuser, as we’ll explain. No, the concept of avenging is when

the damage done is accurately accounted for, leading to the appropriate action to right it. You will learn that an abuser is unable to account for the damage he has done, and a victim of abuse is unable to take action in righting it.

Godly authority takes on the responsibility of both. And the relieving news for you is that this authority does not belong to you. It is derived from Christ, the ultimate authority.

## Conclusion

When the situation feels overwhelming, it's helpful to remember that you didn't put yourself here. You are only trying to respond in the wisest way possible, caring for everyone who is involved, especially the victim.

If the Lord has called you to care for people, He will be with you as you do it—however confused or clumsy you feel. The Lord is not confused or clumsy, and He will be with you. You are just His agent. An agent of His love. He will love you through this process, so that you can carry that love wisely into the lives of others.

So what does it mean to love wisely in a terrible situation like this? It starts with understanding the people caught up in it.