

# Critique of CBMW's Statement on Abuse

By James Synot and Barbara Roberts

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The Council For Biblical Manhood and Womanhood issued a [Statement on Abuse](#) in 1994. To our knowledge there has been never been a detailed critique of this Statement. We offer this critique in the hope that it will edify the church and improve Christians' responses to the iniquity of domestic abuse.

We are happy to make further suggestions to CBMW should they be open to that. For example, it would be good if CBMW produced a document specially for the abused, and another document specially for abusers.

We use the female pronoun for the abused, and the male pronoun for the abuser because only in a minority of cases is the abuser female. For further discussion of this issue, see the section called "The Gender Question" in [Not Under Bondage chapter one](#).

In the critique below, all text from CBMW's Statement on Abuse is in bold font.

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**We understand abuse to mean the cruel use of power or authority to harm another person emotionally, physically, or sexually.**

We find the word *cruel* problematic. "Any use of power or authority to harm another person" would be an acceptable definition, since the word "harm" is sufficient to denote maltreatment. But we could suggest an even better definition: "A pattern of conduct designed to obtain and maintain ungodly control over another."

"Cruel" connotes overtly sadistic behavior; by adding "cruel" as a qualifier, many instances of abuse will not be identified as abusive. The extensive findings from abuser treatment programs and victim/survivor reports bear this out. Abusers justify their behavior by saying things like:

- what I did wasn't cruel; it was meant to help her
- it was only a joke
- my wife is too sensitive.

And many victims think

- my relationship is not “abuse”; my husband isn't that bad
- he's not *cruel*, he just works hard and gets tired and frustrated
- he is sorry afterwards, so he couldn't really have meant to hurt me
- it's my fault, I should have been (...), and I should have remembered (...).

**We are against all forms of physical, sexual and /or verbal abuse.**

We agree.

**We believe that the biblical teaching on relationships between men and women does not support, but condemns abuse (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 5:25-29; Col. 3:18; 1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7-8; 1 Pet. 3:7; 5:3).**

Ephesians 5:25-29 tells husbands to love their wives, a command which clearly implies that it's wrong to abuse their wives. Abuse and love are polar opposites; no-one would argue with that. But citing Colossians 3:18 (Wives submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord) is below the belt. It implies that in the case of wives, being abusive and being submissive are polar opposites. Only CBMW, with their distorted understanding of the woman's desire in Genesis 3:16, think that way. They claim that the woman's desire for her husband is a desire to usurp authority over him, and they base this claim solely on one author, ironically a female author, Susan Foh, who in 1975 advanced a totally novel interpretation of Genesis 3:16.

Foh noted syntactic and semantic parallels between Gen. 4:7 and Gen. 3:16 and concluded that the meaning of the two passages must be the same. Just as sin crouched on the threshold, desiring to destroy Cain, and Cain was told he must overrule this temptation, so the wife desires to control her husband (by usurping his divinely appointed authority) and the husband must master her if he can. This interpretation dovetails perfectly into the lying claim of the abusive husband (and his pastor-ally) that the husband was harsh towards his wife because the wife wasn't submissive. The perfect theological excuse for abuse!

Only if you accept this aberrant interpretation, one that no commentator had conceived of for the first 1900 years of the Christian era, do you swallow the notion that wifely in-submission is, by definition, abusive to husbands. There has been surprisingly little debate about Foh's interpretation within complementarian circles; they have gladly accepted and promoted it, and we count this as reprehensible on their part.

A more plausible interpretation of Genesis 3:16 is that as a consequence of the Fall, woman would desire to be cherished by her husband (Eve would want Adam's forgiveness and abiding love, despite her mistake with the forbidden fruit), but that man would be inclined to rule harshly over woman.<sup>1</sup> That is that what we see all around the world: male abuse and violence against women—

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<sup>1</sup> We are not the first to propose such a view; some others who have preceded are [Les Galicinski](#) and Henri Blocher, *In The Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, Leicester and Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984, p 181-2.

the elephant in the room that we have only recently begun to acknowledge. And the great majority of victims of intimate partner abuse are female; yes, sometimes men are victims, but it is less common.

When abuse is being perpetrated it's perfectly acceptable and right for the victim (whether man or woman) to issue an imperative: "Stop abusing me!" Any right thinking spouse *should submit* to this imperative, whether it's issued by either gender. But short of such an imperative issued against an abusive spouse, there is *nothing abusive per se in failing to submit*. If a wife fails to submit to a reasonable request from a non-abusive husband, she may be being unwise, slightly foolish, lacking in consideration for family harmony, etc. But it's wrong to claim she is "being abusive". Yet this is exactly what CBMW do when they cite Colossians 3:18 as as condemnation of abuse. They're implying that when a wife don't submit, she's being abusive. This is a gross slander of women that CBMW needs to repent of.

**We believe that abuse is sin. It is destructive and evil. Abuse is the hallmark of the devil and is in direct opposition to the purpose of God. Abuse ought not to be tolerated in the Christian community.**

We agree.

**We believe that the Christian community is responsible for the well-being of its members. It has a responsibility to lovingly confront abusers and to protect the abused.**

The problem is the word "lovingly". What do they mean? On the basis of many reports from victim/survivors who have been in complementarian churches (and even some in egalitarian churches) we suspect that they would give the abuser some basic interrogation and instruction, but their attempts to maintain a "loving" stance would render them sitting ducks to be enlisted as allies by the abuser. Ask professionals who run perpetrator change programs. They will tell you that abusers are masters at weaving webs of lies and partial truths over the minds of idealistic professionals and do-gooders, and that pastors are some of the worst offenders (the most easily deceived by such lies).

When a bystander fails to recognize abuse, that person unintentionally becomes an ally of the abuser.

For example, if the pastor says "It's a relationship problem" that means both parties are contributing to the problem, so it's not abuse. If the pastor says "The wife is not being submissive enough," then it's not abuse, because it's her fault. If the pastor says "It's not all that bad," when it IS that bad (even if the victim doesn't quite realize it is that bad, because she's numbed herself down to cope with the pain) then the pastor is minimizing the abuse so he's an ally of the abuser. If the pastor recommends a temporary separation of the couple in order to prevent bodily harm, then he's an ally of the abuser because he is saying that it will be safe for the couple to reconcile without the abuser having made solid and lasting demonstrations of genuine reformation. If the pastor tells the victim that she condoned or tolerated the maltreatment in any way, then he is being an unwitting ally of the abuser because he's saying she is stupid or masochistic, is bad at looking after herself, and has failed to maintain her personal dignity. This is so far from the truth it is

slanderous: all victims make an incredible number of micro-calculated choices and actions to resist abuse and maintain their dignity in the face of dehumanizing treatment. See [Honoring Resistance: How Women Resist Abuse in Intimate Relationships](#).

**We believe that both abusers and the abused are in need of emotional and spiritual healing.**

That makes it sound like abusers and abused need the same things. It's deceptive and dangerous to insinuate such a thing.

Abusers may need emotional and spiritual healing, but the way to achieve this is by confrontational teaching combined where necessary with penalties, consequences and loss of privileges for misbehavior. The term 'emotional and spiritual healing' connotes things like psychotherapy, counseling, prayer and tender encouragement. If you offer abusers this, they will milk you for a fool, and they will likely become more clever at using counseling jargon to masquerade phoney reformation. What they need is firm education for attitudinal and belief change, leading to behavioral change.

The abused may need emotional and spiritual healing, but the way to achieve this is totally different from what you should do with abusers. The victim of abuse needs validation that it isn't her fault, she is not to blame, she is a precious child of God, not a valueless piece of refuse (which is what the abuser will have been saying, one way or another). She will probably need empathetic, non-judgmental listening, to help her process the pain and trauma that she's been through. She may greatly benefit from participating in a victim/survivors group, to realize she is not alone, to get comfort from the sharing and caring that other victims provide. She may need help in getting free from false guilt: untangling distorted scriptures and doctrines that have been weapons in the hands of the abuser, or guilt trips dealt her way by fellow christians. She may benefit from coaching in how to assert herself justly, how to confidently express her views and preferences, and how to defend herself verbally against misunderstanding bystanders who so often "just don't get it" about domestic abuse. She could well benefit from encouragement to pursue her dreams, and help in managing her children who would have been badly affected living with the abuse.

And all those things may well be crowded out by the more pressing needs of safe and secure housing, food on the table, physical healing from problems caused by the abuse, financial security, child custody arrangements that hopefully don't expose her and the children to more abuse from the abuser, and the myriad other practical issues that will be jostling for attention in her daily life.

Contrast these real needs of the victim with what CBMW may envisage as the victim's needs. We expect (on the basis of many reports from survivors) that complementarian church leaders will think that victims of abuse need emotional and spiritual healing so that they:

- learn to submit better and to be quieter before their husband, so they may 'win him without a word'
- learn not to usurp authority from their husbands
- learn to have more faith and to pray more confidently that their husband will change

- learn they are valuable in God's eyes, so they don't let the abuser mistreat them. (Often women who are not abused say to women who are abused, "I would never let a man treat me like that!" Implication: you are stupid and dumb to put up with it! Why didn't you leave?)

Notice how each of these above points involves the victim having to "learn" something. There is the presupposition that she must be taught, and the non-abused person knows what to teach her. How arrogant, how wrong! The non-abused person would much better put him or herself in the role of learner: "I don't know much about domestic abuse. Can you teach me about it? How was it for you? How did you deal with it? What can I do to help you?"

**We believe that God extends healing to those who earnestly seek him.**

We agree.

**We are confident of the power of God's healing love to restore relationships fractured by abuse, but we realize that repentance, forgiveness, wholeness, and reconciliation is a process. Both abusers and abused are in need of on-going counseling, support and accountability.**

The problem here is again the inference that abuser and abused need the same kinds of treatment. In particular, the idea that the abused person needs to be made accountable is fraught with danger. What do they mean? It could easily be construed to mean that the abused person must be made to adhere to some list of requirements for conduct. We are not kidding; this really happens. We know of elders who, after a husband's abusiveness had been brought to their attention, called the couple in, listened to the abuser's complaints (the victim didn't complain much, for fear of payback later) and then issued the victim with a detailed lists of requirements she had to measure up to, including housework standards, things she must or must not say to her husband, how often she was permitted to do activities outside the home, etc. Is this the kind of accountability that CBMW envisages laying on wives who have been abused? If not, they should have spelled it out very clearly.

**In instances where abusers are unrepentant and/or unwilling to make significant steps toward change, we believe that the Christian community must respond with firm discipline of the abuser and advocacy, support and protection of the abused.**

This is better than many of the above points because at least it says the abused and the abuser need different treatment. But this differentiation is too little, too late, in light of all our concerns above.

Much more concerning, however, is the expression "make significant steps towards change". What do they mean by this? Again, it is a phrase that could be construed in a whole variety of ways, many of them highly risky for victims.

If complementarians construe "significant steps towards change" as a cluster of verbal professions, apologies and promises, along with a moderate number of short term modifications in behavior that are "steps in the right direction", then most abusers are quite capable of jumping through the hoops. In fact, they will probably make a great performance of it, and expect to earn bargaining chips for good conduct. Trouble is, following CBMW's guidelines, many pastors will award the

bargaining chips so demanded, and the victim will be encouraged to reconcile with the abuser prematurely, way short of real evidence of lasting or deep change in the abuser, with the result that the abuse becomes even more entrenched and the victim feels even less confident about raising a complaint again. The victim will have been led to believe that the abuser was changing, she will have been deprived of the opportunity to learn the “wise as serpents” skill of discerning when it is truly safe to reconcile. She will have been coerced to ignore her gut feelings, a significant loss, as her gut feelings are usually very accurate at telling her when a person is safe to relate to and when they are not.

The reports of victim/survivors tell over and over again a tragic tale: the process of repentance, forgiveness, wholeness, and reconciliation is cut short, side swiped, and stymied from reaching a truly godly conclusion—genuine reform of the abuser, and genuine reconciliation in which the abuser is a new, non-abusive person. It is stymied because church leaders cannot or will not learn how to identify “significant steps toward change” and are too reluctant to administer firm discipline to the abuser.

CBMW's statement is also dangerous because it doesn't call for firm discipline until abusers are “unrepentant and/or unwilling to make significant steps toward change”. [Evidence shows](#) that perpetrator reform is more likely to occur when a behavior change program is delivered in conjunction with disciplinary measures and deprivation of privileges as appropriate, *and* when that discipline is brought to bear by many people in the perpetrator's life: probation officer, court, counsellor, church leader<sup>2</sup>, congregation and abused spouse. Firm discipline should go in tandem with hard-nosed education and cognitive behavior change, not be applied only when exhortation and education has failed. CBMW's recommendation of discipline is too little, too late.

**We believe that by the power of God's Spirit, the Christian community can be an instrument of God's love and healing for those involved in abusive relationships and an example of wholeness in a fractured, broken world.**

This sounds really good at first: we agree that the Christian community can be an instrument of God's love and healing for those involved in abusive relationships. But the phrase “an example of wholeness in a fractured, broken world” is a Trojan horse.

The statement says the *Christian community* can be an example of wholeness to the broken world, but the abused person will think it is *her* responsibility to exemplify such wholeness. We alluded above to how CBMW slanders the female sex for having an innate desire to usurp authority from men, and how victims are often told if they submit more the abuse would stop. These things already make victims feel guilty for the abuse that they have not caused. The victim feels additional guilt knowing that the breakdown of a Christian marriage gives a bad witness to the world. Abused people are broken people; it should not be *their* responsibility to exemplify wholeness to the world.

In marriage the husband and wife are to relate to each other as Christ relates to his church. But complementarians like John Piper teach an exaggerated version of this analogy by saying that this is the ultimate purpose of marriage. “Marriage exists ultimately to display the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his church,” Piper writes, “The highest meaning and the most ultimate

<sup>2</sup> Nason-Clark, Fisher-Townsend, & Ruff, “An Overview of the Characteristics of Clients at a Faith-Based Batterers' Intervention Program,” *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 5(4).

purpose of marriage is to put the covenant relationship of Christ and his church on display. That is why marriage exists.”<sup>3</sup> But where does the Bible say the Christ-church analogy is the *ultimate purpose* of marriage? God created woman because it was not good for man to be alone, then told them to be fruitful and multiply; this tells us the purpose of marriage was couple companionship and the raising of children.

Most complementarians see the covenant-keeping display of marriage as inextricably linked with male leadership and female submission. The inference is that by maintaining or restoring marriages along correct gender-role lines, we are doing evangelism. Good marriages will be such shining examples of the covenantal love between Christ and his church that they will point unbelievers to the Kingdom of God.

By alluding to “an example of wholeness in a fractured, broken world” while discussing the restoration of abusive marriages, CBMW create intentional ambiguity, and imply a linkage of premises that victims will not fail to catch: If you submit to your husband, abuse will not occur, AND you will be a good evangelist because you will be displaying the church’s submission to Christ and the covenant-keeping love between Christ and the Church.

Furthermore, many complementarians argue that wives who submit, and husbands who lead, are portraying the supposed eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. The eternal subordination argument is yet another burden on the abuse victim who feels she must maintain her marriage in order to display God’s attributes to the world. The eternal subordination argument is highly controversial and it diverges from accepted Christian confessional statements that have stood the test of time. We agree with those who have called for a moratorium on using the eternal subordination argument to justify any doctrine about marital roles.

When does the Bible say we should evangelize the world by showing our *marriages* as examples? Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” (John 13:35) but this statement is not specific either to gender or to marriage roles. Jesus didn’t say the world would know we are his disciples if our marriages portray correct role relationships. That is an extension which the complementarian leaders have added, a subtle assertion they have slipped in. They have built a heavy edifice of oughts and shoulds on this subtle twist, and thus laid burdens on victims of marital abuse which they themselves would never be able to bear. They have also laid a heavy evangelistic burden onto the cart of marriage, a payload it was never meant to carry.

Evangelism means telling unbelievers about God’s law, warning them about his wrath, and telling them about Christ’s atoning death and resurrection, with the promise of forgiveness and eternal life. That is the core of evangelism. If displaying marital roles is so valuable for evangelism, we might ask why Paul didn’t mention this in any of his letters. He mentioned that some apostles, including the Lord’s brothers and Peter, took their wives with them when traveling on apostolic missions (1 Cor. 9:5), but he mentioned this only in defending his right to receive material support from fellow Christians, when false apostles had been denigrating him. He didn’t mention it when teaching Christians how to evangelize. If displaying one’s marriage (and in particular, the

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<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*, Wheaton: Crossway, 2009, pp 42, 25.

respective roles of husband and wife) was such a valuable item in the evangelist's toolkit, would not Paul have said so somewhere? Certainly his instructions for holy living included instructions on marriage, but he never indicated that the Christ-church analogy pertaining to marriage was to be employed as a witness to the broken world. For CBMW to so emphasize the “display value” of marital relationships is unbiblical, it's a subtle deception, it intimidates people into remaining in abusive marriages, it breeds false guilt and it perpetuates abuse.

CBMW, by implicitly prioritizing the witness to the world over the need to protect the abused in the church, has contravened Galatians 6:10 — *as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

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In summary, CBMW's statement leaves holes wide enough for abusers to drive the proverbial truck through, with only moderate expenditure of effort and steering skill on their part, resulting in little genuine change in their attitude and beliefs. The outcome all too often is that pastors become allies of abusers, victims are put at further risk, and the iniquity continues.