



Counseling Marital Abuse: A Critical Distinction

Leslie Vernick

Whenever we diagnose abuse in marriage, we don't look at one single episode of sinful behavior which we're all capable of. Instead, we must take a careful history of the marriage to see the big picture. We're looking for examples of abusive behavior and attitudes as well as seeing if there is an overall imbalance of power and control within the relationship. Diagnosis always determines the treatment plan. How we describe the problem determines what approach we will take in order to resolve and hopefully heal the marriage. But I'd like to describe two very different types of abusive behavior that we see in individuals, that often get confused by biblical and pastoral counselors and seen as one and the same.

Reactive abuse

Most marriages have experienced at least a few episodes of reactive abuse. John Gottman, psychologist and one of the leading researchers on marriage, describes four negative reactions that are guaranteed to ruin your marriage if you regularly indulge in

them. They are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Gottman called them the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.¹ Let's see their effects.

Donna felt crabby. The kids were screaming and there were dirty diapers and dishes all over the countertops. Overwhelmed, she started picking on her husband who was relaxing after work, watching the news.

"You're so lame. Can't you see I'm struggling? What's wrong with you? Look at this mess. Why can't you ever lift a finger to help around here?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Shut up. Stop nagging me already. I work hard. What do you do all day besides sit around on the computer?"

Donna flung a dirty diaper, hitting Jack square in the back of his head. "You have no idea how hard I work taking care of these kids and this house. Why do you have to talk to me that way? You're such a loser."

"Me!" Jumping up from the couch, whipping the diaper right back at Donna. "What about you? I was just relaxing here minding my own business when you started it."

Furious and hurt, Donna and Jack spent the rest of the evening in stony silence, neither one willing to wave the white flag or apologize. The apostle Paul warns us, "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." (Galatians 5:15). Disappointment and frustration occur every day and in every

¹ Gottman, John. 1994. Why Marriages Succeed or Fail

relationship. When we don't know how to tolerate our own negative emotions or communicate them maturely, we will react sinfully, sometimes abusively.²

The Bible warns us, "In your anger, do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). People do anger us. We curse, yell, threaten, shut down, withdraw and worse. Later on, when confronted with our abusive actions and attitudes we point the finger.

Donna said, "If Jack would have helped me clean up, I wouldn't have reacted that way."

Jack said, "Donna started the whole thing. If she would have just asked me nicely, everything would have turned out differently".

We all do this. We're held captive by our own storyline that says we had no choice but to respond the way we did. In addition, we tell ourselves that the only reason we reacted that way is because of what the other person did first. Therefore, it stands to reason, had they not done that thing, we wouldn't have reacted that way. The deceptive thing about this kind of thinking is that there is a grain of truth in it. Imagine what a wonderful person you could be if you were never provoked or disappointed or frustrated in any way.

The problem is that it's pure fantasy. People do provoke us, we do get disappointed and frustrated and others don't always love us like we'd like or do what we want. Our sinful and abusive reactions to life's hurts and disappointments only make things worse.

² For more help in learning how to respond biblically to provocative marital situations, read my book, *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong*. (WaterBrook, 2001)

Because we can so relate to these experiences, it's hard for us to call them abusive. But when an individual or couple regularly engages in this kind of warfare, their marriage is destructive not only to them but to their children who become the casualties of the war at home. In addition, it can be difficult for people helpers, and even trained counselors, to identify and validate other kinds of destructive and abusive patterns that need to be addressed. They see both of them behaving sinfully, so they see the abuse as mutual and reciprocal. Tit for tat. Sometimes that's true, but often it is much more. And that leads me to the second kind of abuse I want to briefly describe.

Controlling abuse

Teresa knew Tom's rules. One of them was she was not allowed to talk on the phone when he was home. He reasoned that she had all day long to talk to her family and friends if she wanted to. Shortly after dinner, Teresa's sister called. She needed some advice on a problem with her computer and wanted Teresa's help. Teresa felt torn. She wanted to help her sister, but she knew if she talked with her right now, she'd have a price to pay later.

"Tom," Teresa whispered, holding her hand over the phone, "Denise needs my help with something on her computer. I'll just be a few minutes."

Tom cocked his brow, glaring at Teresa.

When she got off the phone, Tom was furious. "Once again, I see I come last in your life," he said.

“That’s not true.” Teresa protested. “But I wanted to help Denise. She had an important work project and needed to use her computer tonight.”

“What about my needs? Give me your cell phone.”

“What?”

“I said, give me your phone.”

“No.”

Tom grabbed Teresa’s wrist and squeezed it so hard that her hand released the phone. Tom hurled it into the sink full of soapy water. “Now, I guess you won’t be able to talk on the phone when I’m home.”

Controlling abuse may look similar to reactive abuse, but the roots are very different. If confronted with his behavior, Tom may use the excuse, “If Teresa hadn’t talked on the phone, I wouldn’t have gotten so mad.” Or, “If she had just submitted to my leadership, this wouldn’t have happened.” Tom may even agree that grabbing Teresa’s wrist and forcing her to give up her phone was wrong and he shouldn’t have done it. But he thinks the core problem is Teresa’s lack of submission or love.

This is where the counseling gets tricky. Hopefully, we see Tom’s behaviors as abusive and talk with him about it but what often happens is, in addition, we turn to Teresa and encourage her to work harder to not “provoke” Tom.

“Try not to push his buttons,” we say.

This is always a grave counseling error but especially troublesome in cases of controlling abuse. This approach makes Teresa responsible to anticipate and manage Tom’s emotions. It also feeds his idolatry of control and endorses his misbelief that he gets to make the rules for Teresa to live by. As her husband, he believes he’s entitled to shape her into the person he wants her to become and you (as the biblical counselor) are going to help him.

Therefore the counseling approach for controlling abuse accompanied by this gross imbalance of power and control must be directed at Tom and his idolatry of control, his unbiblical thinking, and lack of love for his wife as a separate person. Teresa may be guilty of reactive abuse in her frantic attempts to survive the onslaught of Tom’s control over her but to see that as mutual abuse is short-sighted. To confront her in Tom’s presence would continue to fuel Tom’s idolatry. Teresa needs separate counsel, to learn how to respond to Tom’s excessive control with truth and grace. She also needs help to understand that pleasing God doesn’t mean she must bow to her husband as her god.

It’s crucial that we do not confuse controlling abuse with reactive or mutual abuse nor endorse blatant selfishness under the guise of biblical headship.