Introduction
No human whose body and mind are intention-
ally and continually damaged by their marital
partner can be fully alive nor live as confident
and fruitful a life as circumstances otherwise
allow. Worldwide, it is women who bear the
main burden of such abuse at the hands of their
husbands whose behaviour may receive tacit or
even open support from religious leaders. My
research on the overlap between faith and con-
text illustrated by attitudes to and the practice
of such violence by lay and ordained Christians
was undertaken primarily from 2005-2016,
employing anthropological methods of data
collection and analysis. Its central finding
is that both men and women collude in such
abuse through silence as well as open support,
whether the silence of the knowing observer or
the complicit institution, despite all worship-
ing God who ‘created humankind in God’s
image.’ This overview discusses the theologi-
cal and historical aspect of that research while
giving voice to women and men across the world. It concludes that inaction is collusion in sin.

Keywords
Domestic violence, contextual theology, pastoral care of abused women, world Christianity

Abstract
The church affirms that God created male and female in God’s image, but research across diverse
church traditions suggests the theological and pastoral consequences of this fact are easily set aside.
Too many lay ignore, condone, or openly allow the abuse of Christian wives by husbands, lay or
ordained, though never the reverse. The situation is supported or exacerbated by inadequate or poor
teaching (a kindly Mother’s Day sermon is not enough), by a church history in which the twin threads
of misogyny and equity struggle for dominance, and by a crucial failure to clarify whether God or
culture is worshipped. Based on anthropological investigations over twelve years and five continents,
this paper summarises biblical, historical and theological aspects, giving voice to women and men
across the world. It concludes that inaction is collusion in sin.

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Christians have supported, as well as rejected, violence against wives for at least the last 1600 years dashes hopes that a little tweaking, a little teaching, will resolve ecclesial collusion. Some have opposed violence against wives, others have not. This is partly attributable to varied views of male and female which distort fundamental theology. An Indian woman expressed the crucial and universal tension: ‘in talking about marriage, priests must start with “all made in the Image of God” not our lives here. We have to keep away from culture to talk about faith.’ A one-off sentence (‘domestic abuse is Satanic’ says Pope), a special sermon for White Ribbon Day, a Mothering Sunday plea may each be well meant, but lack theological bite and ecclesial responsibility. National and international programmes may trickle down to regional and local levels. However, often they do not, given widespread inconsistency in opposing marital violence in training, teaching, and preaching.

At every level, faith traditions interact with and are entangled in local worldviews. Every faith community, all faith teaching, all faith practice, is embedded in specific cultural and historical assumptions, ready to harness the Divine to Our/My Way and failing to hear alternate voices. Each context fails to see the cultural mote in their own contextually embedded eye, assuming that rejecting ‘local influence’ means ‘others’ worshipping wrong gods, despite worshipping one’s own culture being both ubiquitous and pernicious.

Scripture, Theology and Abuse

The simple question is: how do Christians, those living out their formal training in theology and scripture, and others their life-skills and faith, use the Bible, use a theology, to support a husband who hits and otherwise abuses his wife, and how can that act be theologically and pastorally opposed in all communities, rich and poor, urban and rural, everywhere?

Secular law has made a start, legal recognition that women and wives should be free from marital violence gaining pace over the last half-century. The 1993 UN Declaration against Violence against Women noted in Article 4: ‘States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid its elimination.’ Some informants felt states should not interfere in marriages, unequal power is irrelevant, and modernity and feminism, not godly equity underlies interest in the subject. Others applauded state intervention and hoped churches would follow suit. A Trinidadian pastor insisted that ‘the church should not be seen to support violence by opposing or remaining silent about national legal changes regarding domestic violence’. This point was made, mainly but not only by women, in each researched country.

Yet where states do act, clergy may feel let off the hook or, in extremis, ready to ‘massage’ the law to accommodate church rules. For example, a Polish woman sued for divorce due to her husband’s violence but lost at the lower and then the appeal court, despite Article 33 of the 1997 Constitution saying, ‘Men and women shall have equal rights in family, political, social and economic life’, and Article 47, ‘Everyone shall have the right to make decisions about their personal life’. Echoing Pius XI’s 1930 Casti Conubii, the judgement privileged the family unit:

Abuse may be recognised as committed through necessity imposed by the desire to preserve marriage or justified by the well-being of children or the alleged victim or any other value protected by law and more important than the dubious dignity of misconducting victims. Even if violence amounts to domestic abuse, it may still not meet the criteria of an offence. (Dominiczak, 2010).

How easy is it to ignore marital violence? Firstly, persistent violence against wives appears in every place and tradition, yet rarely in ‘our sort of street or family.’ The poor had a predilection for marital violence, according to the influential lawyer Blackstone, noting their ‘unwillingness to abandon their [wrongly] assumed right to hit’ (Chapter 15, 1765). Nurses in a rich South Indian Christian hospital insisted ‘only the poor’ hit wives, despite explaining their expensive hospital logs such abused patients as ‘accident.’
Marital violence was attributed to them ‘down there’ at the end of the small Christian Borneo village of my long-term research, the last such being from ‘the next valley’, just as wealthy people lower down a New England river eagerly attributed violence to ‘those up-river people’.

Richer world or poorer, rural or urban: responses are similar. A group of women in Scotland, like their peers in Kenya, said: ‘Keep quiet, keep problems under wraps.’ Villagers in northern England did speak up, albeit tardily:

As the widow followed the coffin of her late husband out of the church, the congregation began to applaud, tentatively at first. The widow having survived forty-six years of an abusive marriage in quiet submission, villagers were expressing their solidarity with her. Her closest friend described the event as the village ‘telling her that they stood by her all those years, that they knew and that they saw it all, and that they’d cared all along.’

By ‘seeing’, the speaker meant understand rather than see the violence, the ‘privacy of the family’ enabling silence to be the cowardly choice for observers. Silence is generally easiest for both urbanite and villager. In the above Christian hospital, my link-informant attributed the relative silence of a large group of nurses at the end of a discussion to their shock at my discussing the topic as ‘they are all from rural places.’ Two evenings later, she attended a small meeting of high-caste female church friends to discuss the issue. As it ended, she said, in concert with the other women: ‘We’ve known each other for years, but never talked about this before. We always talk with a certain reserve, and we’re careful not to go over boundaries.’

Secondly, if attributing violence to ‘others’ cannot wish the problem away, it can be slickly reframed as a social or personal issue. Certain church leaders in my country, as elsewhere, know ordained men under them beat their wives yet say nothing, sometimes renaming it ‘poor anger management’ or, wringing hapless hands, explaining how hard it can be to sack vicars. A last-ditch universal strategy, linked to clear membership boundaries, is insisting a Christian who beats his wife is not really a member and thus of no concern to faith-leaders, irrespective of the contribution faith had in developing his views, or the wider public’s assumption of his membership.

Thirdly, respectable collective complicit silence of clergy and laity alike pushes such violence under the carpet, with church workers especially culpable, insists a Myanmar Baptist: ‘The church doesn’t support violence against women, but because it does not see it as a theological problem, and is often silent, it looks as if it does.’ Yet if the church is the people of God all, not just leaders, are culpable Moreover, it is the silence of their peers, those other laywomen who know but turn away or excuse the abuse, which is especially debilitating for survivors.

Voices of the Abused

Some ask if marital violence is a real problem (or really a problem), or just media-hype. Figures for ‘that which should not happen’ are tricky, but the annual country-by-country UN figures find violence over the duration of 20–40 per cent of marriages and more. Yet numbers cloak as well as clarify. An unknown proportion of women do not report violence for fear of being hit more, because they deem reporting pointless and because it may shame them and their family: abused men may under-report through shame. No faith condones violence by wives, but some churches pressure them not to report. Assemblies of God members in Tonga have the lowest marital violence rate on the island (police charge sheets include denomination) yet, noted an older lady whose house often serves as temporary sanctuary for abused sisters:

People look up to me but if I go to the police they’d be shocked. My church says “Don’t go to the police or the government when you have a domestic problem. Deal with problems yourselves (Matthew 18.15–17), and don’t take them to an unsaved person.” And yes, only Assembly people are saved!

Yet only Assembly wives are restrained from using courts against violent husbands, all
members freely bringing other cases. Until recently, the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan dealt similarly with dirty linen, but its Gender Justice Unit excludes marital violence from that policy, the reputation of the church taking second place to the safety and dignity of the woman. Churchgoers may assume there is more marital violence outside their group than within.

A recent study in Cumbria, England, reports that while 71 per cent saw such violence as a problem in the area, only 37 per cent thought it was in the church (Aune, 2018), despite insider figures being little different, as Nason-Clark (1997) found in Canada. Yet numbers are irrelevant: violence against one pledged partner is wrong, however skilfully texts are utilised.

If states in their laws and Christians in their words insist on the just treatment of all, why is this a contentious or silenced issue in churches? One reason is that Bible texts are interpreted by gate-keepers within the worshipping community past and present to fit ‘cultural norms’ which they insist are appropriate, even if their views are scarcely shared by less empowered members, let alone the unchurched.

Let me make a crucial point here. Neither users of nor listeners to a text, irrespective of faithfulness, are necessarily oppressed, wise, gullible or hypocritical. Christian women and men who accept that Eve’s taking of the apple in Eden mandates a husband’s rule over them (Genesis 2–3), or that given a husband’s family headship (Ephesians 5.23), wifely obedience (Ephesians 5.22) is due, are not misguided fatalists, even if such texts are cleverly used to ‘validate’ violence. That is what their background, experience, teaching and milieu tell them and that is how they manage or explain their lives. Christian women and men who reject marital violence, using Genesis 1.27 ‘God made man and woman in God’s Image,’ or Ephesians 5.21 ‘Husbands and wives live in mutual submission one with another’, or ‘Husbands do not be harsh to your wives […] so that nothing may hinder your prayers’ (1 Peter 3.7), are by the same token neither automatically wise nor feminist, manipulative nor virtuous. That is what their background, experience, teaching and milieu tell them and that is how they manage their lives. All people with mental capacity make use of texts, written or otherwise absorbed, fully, inconsistently or partially. Whatever the context, a skilful leader can pull the rabbit out of the hat, validating perpetrators.

Verses can impact behaviour in the sense of not only explaining – ‘He hit me because he is “head of the house” and I spoke out of turn’ – but transforming. Take one verse relevant for Christians, Muslims and Jews: ‘God made man and woman in God’s Image’ (Genesis 1.27), of which Goodman wrote, ‘deliberately harming another person desecrates God’s name’ (2003:58). Taught in a confirmation lesson in northern England in 2017, this verse led one older candidate to leave her husband. As she said to her surprised female priest two days after her confirmation: ‘My husband has hit me for the 43 years of our marriage. Now I know I’m made in God’s image and equal to my husband: I’m off.’

Yet it is not just wives who suffer: so do children:

It is very painful for children to watch their dad beating their mother. I used to plead with dad to stop. His behaviour discouraged me from marriage. I love him very much, but what he used to do to my mum keeps haunting me (Kenyan female: Anglican).

The school children (aged nine) don’t say much when I teach the ten commandments until we get to marriage and adultery. Then they talk about the hitting between their parents, most saying they should split rather than fight (German female: Roman Catholic).

Replication by imitation may affect the sons of an abuser, both those who abuse their wives and others who are crippled by the fear that they might: ‘My father hit my mother. I was so afraid I’d hit my wife that in a dispute I was paralyzed, backing off,’ said one Borneo friend. Children
may reject a church which gave tacit support for violence. A German woman explained: ‘My stepfather hit my mum a lot back in St Lucia. The pastor said “pray, persevere, be patient and God will deal with it.” I decided at fourteen not to have anything to do with the church if that’s what they said and I haven’t until today.’ That mantra posing as advice could have come from any continent, any country. The voices of those damaged by twisted teaching are lost when the hurt or angry spurn colluding churches.

And here we return to the initial point: why is violence in Christian marriage ignored? Are lay and ordained people deliberately blind and theologically ignorant? Must ‘institutional respectability’ take priority over damage to people caused by wrong or ineffective teaching?

Historical Timeline

I indicated above that historical teaching coupled with cultural views on men and women have played their part in maintaining silence and sin. Two threads of thought and teaching stand out in the early Christian and medieval period. On the one hand we have Chrysostom: ‘Such a constantly beating partner is as much to blame for a separation as a partner guilty of fornication’, and ‘For a wife to be beaten is the extremest affront, not to her that is beaten, but to him who beateth’ (Homily on 1 Corinthians). Similarly views were expressed later by Laurence Hispanus, who allowed the husband to beat his wife for minor misdeeds, but not with rods, or by blows (Kelly:358). On the other hand stands Augustine, ‘If any member of the family interrupts its peace by disobedience, they are corrected by word or blow’ (Power,1995:80) and ‘A Christian husband should love his wife like Jesus’ command to ‘love our enemies’ DeConick, 2011:123) and Basil: ‘In the case of her being beaten, and refusing to submit, it would be better for her to endure than to be separated from her husband’ (Basil, Letter 88). Laurence’s peer Huguccio of Pisa states: ‘If she is to be judged in matters of behaviour, because she does not cook and prepare food well...she can certainly be corrected and beaten by her husband’ (Kelly, 1994:359). Aquinas contributed dangerously to the argument by ignoring human egoism, insisting that in domestic (as opposed to servile) subjection, ‘the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good’ (1952:489), a view still held in too many churches.

The growth of catechisms in the Roman Catholic Church from the fifteenth century made clear that where a husband ‘had’ to hit his wife because her opposition was ‘without good and legitimate cause,’ she must understand that ‘she committed a mortal sin, being the cause of his evil deed’ (Bast, 1997:75). The benefits of wifely suffering were spelled out by Juan Vives in ‘Instructions to Christian Women’ of 1523, dedicated to the future Mary I of England: ‘You are fortunate if, with a little suffering in this life, you gain remission of the torments of the next. In fact, very few good and prudent women are beaten by their husbands’ (Elizonda, 1994).

Yet once again, the alternate strand showed itself. Bucer in Strasbourg saw marriage as primarily for love and mutual service, and in 1533 allowed divorce for various reasons, including a partner’s brutal violence and cruelty (Hopf, 1946). Others explicitly picked up on Chrysostom’s text, slating the abusive husband as the shamed sinner (Homily on Marriage: 1563). Early Calvinists in Geneva were firmly against abuse in marriage as a failure of both faith and civic duty: between 1564 and 1569, sixty-one Genevan men and two women were convicted of spousal abuse and excommunicated or exiled (Philipps 1991:98). In England, similar changes allowing divorce where a husband was relentlessly cruel and a danger to his wife stalled when Edward VI’s death stymied Cranmer’s Church Law Bill in 1553. Subsequent changing attitudes to violence in marriage were part of secular developments of the later European Enlightenment, based more on the ideal of the reasonable man’s scorn for vulgar violence than the theology of the person.
This grim past is not irrelevant dead wood: many stems still sprout from those hard words of Augustine, Basil, Huguccio etc al. supported until 1917 and beyond by Gratian’s laws of 1140. ‘Wrong or dull food’ is still used to ‘validate’ marital violence, whether Elders giving a Kenyan preacher permission to beat his wife for not having enough food for five surprise guests, an English vicar upending the spread dining table when annoyed with his wife, or countless wives hit for cooking too soon, too late or not to her master’s taste. The guilt of the victim not the perpetrator, who bears little or no responsibility for his freely chosen sin, (rejected by Chrysostom and followers), is still strongly represented in churches across the world, the first question a pastor, priest or minister often asking the woman being ‘What were you doing to make him hit you?’ An abused clergy-wife in England was told by a parishioner: ‘Model yourself on St Monica who was abused but stayed and produced St Augustine.

Two US-based groups founded in 1987 and 1988, Christians for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and Christians for Biblical Equality, illustrate the continuing two-strand pattern across the world. CBMW’s complementarian ethos, with female submission in marriage, chimes in more often with local predilections than CBE, which sees roles in church and society as open to all. CBMW’s mission statement insists that disregarding Bible teaching that ‘men and women are equal in value and dignity and have distinct and complementary roles in the home and the church means members ... will be less likely to submit to God’s word in other difficult matters as well.’ CBMW opposes CBE for ‘giving in’ to culture. A CBMW-supporting South Asian minister said in a meeting firstly that his culture allows him to hit his wife, and secondly ‘that if we do not discipline and even hit our wives, we sin:’ was he responding to God’s word, or his culturally-defined manhood?

One CBMW-influenced text is Created to Be His Help Meet (2004) by D and M Pearl:

When God put you in subjection to a man whom he knows is going to cause you to suffer, it is with the understanding that you are obeying God by enduring wrongful suffering...and you bring great glory to God, who called you for the very purpose of suffering for him just as he suffered for you’ (206-9).

A far cry from Bucer and Chrysostom, whose approach is echoed in CBE’s current mission statement written by the first president, the late Catherine Kroeger, and maintained by the current leader, Mimi Haddad:

In the Christian home, husband and wife will help the Christian home stand against improper use of power and authority by spouses, and will protect the home from wife and child abuse that sometimes tragically follows a hierarchical interpretation of the husband’s ‘headship’.

But enough of theology and history for now! What of current thoughts and practice? Are some married clergy abusers, and what effect might that have on their ministry? How do Christian survivors and bystanders explain abuse, or access and experience pastoral care?

Pastoral Care of the Abused

Clerical abusers were excoriated across the world, offending a congregation’s image of itself (Koepping, 2008) as well as hurting a woman. Firstly, they remove a source of support for other abused women. As women across Kenya put it, ‘You can’t go to a pastor who beats his wife to complain about your own: he may seem nice, but you know he’s a liar because you’ve heard her scream.’ The abused may go to known neighbouring leaders, especially women, provided they are kind and open. Secondly, theologically trained people were felt to be skilled at twisting Bible verses: ‘Repeatedly I was told by my Methodist Minister husband that it was my duty as a Christian to forgive... but there was no mention of repentance or sorrow on my husband’s part (4:2002). An English clergyman,
knowing his ordained brother-in-law abused his sister, insisted she was ‘chosen to carry a heavier cross’, echoing Vives and Pearl. Thirdly, such a person’s personal life lacks integrity as, therefore, does his public prophetic voice, negating both teaching and preaching. A mixed group of conservative laypeople in Pakistan summed up:

Pastors who hit their wives give a bad example. Their jealousy, anger, and attitude towards dispute might be wider than just with the wife. It is hard enough to put our spiritual and daily life together, and such a pastor will not help that. The church has to be protected from such a pastor because he is an impediment to the church.

Abused clergy wives who spoke openly might find little support from church leaders who either could not be bothered with complaining wives, hit their own, or favoured the institution above the person.

What pastoral care did abused women in general experience? Headship, along with other mantras, was the most widespread and problematic teaching and Prayer, Patience and Perseverance the most irritating or downright sinful advice, as these collated comments show:

[we were told]: ‘pray for him, persevere, be patient and know that suffering brings you closer to God’ ... ‘that’s a private issue, sort it out yourself’ ... ‘what were you doing to make him hit you?’ ... ‘don’t be lazy and then he won’t hit you.’ ... ‘He is your head.’

If the powder is not removed from weaponized texts, they become the propellant for spiritual abuse and hell on earth for the abused. Submission, a common theme in many regions, might be initially defined by informants as ‘being humble, and trusting him’ but, talking longer, some would then volunteer: ‘our submission makes some men feel very important. Then they’ll say: “I am the head and you were just made from my rib so you are nothing,” and they hit.’ Stressing submission as both preventative and cure-all increased guilt for abused wives: ‘Our pastor says, “If you submit he will not beat you, so if he does still beat, that is your fault for not submitting.”’ Church people, ordained and lay, might well teach ‘You are in God’s care, and if you really trust God, God will care for you,’ but the sceptical said: ‘Trust God and get out early.’

Male headship of the family does not cause abuse, provided the head consistently subordinates himself to God, fully respects his wife’s voice as co-heir (1 Peter 3.7), and regards Aquinas’ ‘domestic submission’ sceptically. However, teaching male headship without at the same time teaching that any abuse of wives is always sinful is itself sinful, because it risks supporting spiritual abuse and violence. As an Evangelical head of a Women’s Shelter said, ‘The wrong understanding of male headship [by men] is the main problem,’ a view shared by an abused ex-clergy wife, who blamed the theology of headship for her husband’s violence.

‘Wives obey’ may be the best-known validation for men hitting wives, but ‘Eve as the spoiler of Eden’ is the substratum on which that partial reading relies. Regularly I asked women, ‘which creation story do you know: the Image of God, or Adam and Eve?’ Adam and Eve won, and commonly an Eve who was solely responsible for the Fall. That does not mean everyone believed Eve was the ultimate sinner, but were loath to object with male clergy present lest they be marked off as rebellious. The Bible easily becomes a scapegoat for the abuse of Christian wives. Yet damage is done more by the decontextualised use made of it to control and subordinate females than by the scriptural texts themselves.

Take Hebrews 12.6: ‘The Lord disciplines those whom he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts.’ No woman to whom I spoke felt encouraged by that decontextualised verse, some being so burdened by it they set it, and even faith, aside. Might 1 Corinthians 10.13 be more helpful? ‘God will not let you be tested beyond your strength,’ frequently rendered as ‘God will not send you more [suffering] than you can manage.’ This brought abused women close to tears of hopelessness and guilt if they
felt they could not manage, as clearly lacking faith in their capacity to endure was itself a further affirmation of their sin. Wifely submission suggested by 1 Peter 3.1 apparently results in husbands (whether abusive or not) being ‘won without a word by the behaviour of their wives.’ Some clergy had a quiver-full of examples, to the silent scorn of disbelieving women. As one survivor noted: ‘That line is nonsense. Violence only stops if the perpetrator goes to prison, or you leave him. How long should you hold on? Till you die?’ Some women were willing to risk death, sure of getting their reward in heaven: they may have been applauded by their pastors, but not by other women. Suffering through the intentional sin of others is no reason to applaud the sufferer but rather to name the evil.

Prayer, often advised by other women and clergy, was not always seen as helpful, especially if otherwise passive bystanders offered prayer for, like carefully aimed Bible verses, being prayed for (prayed on?) can oppress the object, increasing their hopelessness. A mixed group in Trinidad made clear that a combination of pressure to bear up ‘because Christ suffered,’ in conjunction with people praying she can endure, limits a survivor’s decision-making: the woman knows they are praying and praying yet she is still hit. As Van Leeuwen put it, ‘to overcome both prejudice and abuse, praying is not enough’ (1994:3). Those clergy and laywomen who suggest a victim forgives an abuser whose unrepentant intention is to maintain power over her can contribute to ongoing wife-battering (Manzanan 2002:210). Such a one-side expectation (not offered to an equivalent unrepentant woman) makes a nonsense of what is a psychologically and theologically sound sequence moving through reflection to repentance and forgiveness. Forgiveness without true repentance makes a mockery of the cross.

But it is not just silence by the church, nor self-serving unhelpful and unchristian advice based on ‘men first’ rather than ‘all in the Image of God.’ It is the silence of the far greater number of women of faith who ignore their sisters’ needs pretending, or hoping, that they are not vulnerable to such violence by displaying their housewifely prowess against the implied inadequacy of a downtrodden survivor. It is the silence by millions of men who say nothing when those peers for whom masculinity means power over others brag about ‘keeping the wife in order with a clout’. It is the silence which assumes violence and other forms of abuse are a result of failure in the victim, not a demonstration of raw power by the perpetrator. It is the silence which elegantly ‘others’ survivor and perpetrator.

Conclusions
Subordinated people in various places said that following Christ should free them from disabling social controls and enable a full life in which they are fully acknowledged and respected as they respect their partners. Being hit, kicked, punched, or knifed does not fit anyone’s view of respect, whatever their rank or ethnic background, and none appreciates being subordinated by church ‘culturalk talk’. Christian women will continue to be abused, their families damaged and their children alienated from the church if its leaders emphasize wifely obedience even to abusive husbands or, just as unchristian, hide amid the ‘holy hush of cowardice’. That it begins to be talked about on the fringes of church life is not, as a couple of male priests said at an English clergy training session on Domestic Violence, because of ‘all this feminism’. It is because ‘Marriage is not slavery: you marry for happiness, not death’ as a survivor noted. It is because once again in church history, marital violence is being named for what it is: a blatant sin against the Body of Christ. And it is a sin abusers share with silent observers, whatever their gender and status. A South Indian woman priest insisted, ‘such violence must be opposed by the church and all people who are the church:’ a Ghanaian male pastor said, ‘We must act now, not hope someone else will.’ Indeed: am I, are you, we?

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