

**The Modern-day Widow: Wrongly Shamed and Shunned in Evangelical Communities**

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### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated first to my God and Redeemer, the Husband to the widow, who makes all things new, who heals the broken-hearted, sets captives free, and makes beauty from ashes. Next, I dedicate this to my daughters, Alexandra and Victoria, whose steadfastness and commitment to truth inspires hope. They held fast when I could not. To my daughter Isabella, whose honesty and gentle spirit encourages me daily. Finally, to the countless thousands of believing women who make every effort to suffer well in abusive marriages, to hold silence and secrets because they are told it is God's plan – I dedicate this to you and add my voice to the growing numbers who, rightly dividing the word of truth, are co-operating with God to set captives free and heal broken hearts. God hates treachery and abuse; you did not, do not, deserve it, and divorce is God's provision for safety and wholeness to you and your children. Find peace.

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### **Abstract**

Evangelical women suffering in destructive, abusive marriages suffer doubly when their faith communities do not understand the nature of intimate partner violence and the trauma of sexual betrayal. Too often these women are sent back into dangerous relationships without resource and with the additional burden of shame (Matthew 23:4). If they choose to divorce in order to escape abuse and find peace and healing, they are most often rejected and shunned as sinners. This work identifies who these women are according to scripture, defines abuse and betrayal trauma, and calls the evangelical community to an awareness of the suffering made greater by their ignorance or negligence. While seminary and bible school training for prospective pastors is ideal, the scope of this thesis focuses on educating the local church and providing a website resource template through which the faith community can learn to practice true religion (James 1: 27), do justice (Isaiah 1:17), and minister effectively to abused and divorced women.

*Keywords:* abuse, betrayal trauma, divorce, evangelical, widow, modern-day widow

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The beautiful bride gazes into the enraptured eyes of her groom. The pastor encircles their joined hands with his and prays over their marriage as the onlookers silently bless the couple. An ‘amen,’ a kiss, and the pastor introduces the new Mr. and Mrs. As the celebratory music swells, everyone smiles and claps, rejoicing as a community. To all appearances, a new God-ordained family has been formed. But things are not always as they appear. Several years pass, and what started in the light, with the blessing of a church community, ends in the darkness of secrecy and betrayal as the Mr. moves in with his affair partner, leaving his wife and children to cope with the aftermath of his sexual addiction, adultery, and abandonment.

This time, the church community does not enter into the experience. The traumatized, betrayed woman reaches out to her church and is rebuffed by pastors who do not want to offend the adulterous husband. The soon-to-be divorced woman is interviewed by an eager young volunteer at the church benevolence office, who unwittingly re-traumatizes her and offers inane platitudes. The volunteer hands the weeping woman grocery gift cards, says a quick prayer, tells her to trust God, and sends her away with a “go, be blessed, and be filled” as if her pain is assuaged by checking the one box providing food for the week. The psychological violence of intimate partner betrayal, digital and physical sexual infidelity, and the accompanying web of deception and abusive control that has brutalized her soul has been completely ignored.

In a short matter of time, this betrayed wife gives up seeking spiritual and practical help from her church. Her absence is unnoticed, and perhaps a relief, while her soon-to-be ex-husband and his affair partner start a ministry at their place of employment. Days after the divorce is final, the adulterous couple marry, making it, in their words, ‘official.’ Left broken and without

resource, the betrayed now ex-wife and two teen daughters of the marriage eventually become homeless under the nose of the church, and a decade later, still struggle to rebuild their lives and their faith.

### **The Problem**

The story above is an actual account of a woman who grew up in in the church, always serving in active ministry from the time she was a young teen. This woman and far too many like her live or have lived in marriages to professing Christian men who lead secret lives of deceit and sexual infidelity. There are many such stories, in dozens of non-profits, online ministry groups, blogs, and communities for divorced women. Many of these groups are specifically for Christian women. Sarah McDugal, founder and director of one such group, reports that there are 10,000 women in her support groups. Of those in her group, 90% or more are conservative, evangelical, churched women. Her online reach on Facebook alone shows 18-20 million people in 20 countries. Over 25,000 have signed up for email support in the past three years (McDugal, personal communication, October 4, 2023).

Christian wives who have experienced the trauma of marital infidelity, divorce, and the spiritual crisis that accompanies their husband's integrity abuse, if and when they turn to their faith leaders, too often experience secondary trauma at their hands. According to data reported on Divorce.com (2023), 40-50% of marriages end in divorce in the United States, and 40% of those divorces are due to infidelity. A Pew Research study on divorce rates in the church, which includes evangelical, mainline, and historically black protestant churches, shows a combined 51% divorce rate (Pew, 2023). Religious couples report intimate partner violence and infidelity rates similar to non-religious couples (Wilcox et al., 2019, p. 4). These statistics which identify

divorce in the church closely aligned with those of the general population are not so new that they are shocking. A peer-reviewed study out of the University of Denver in 2013 found that of couples tracked 14 years after taking the same pre-marital course, 59.6% of the marriages ended in divorces due to infidelity, and another 23.5% ended because of domestic violence (Scott et al., 2013, p. 4). Sadly, even with such numbers showing rates of intimate partner violence, abuse, infidelity – and the relational fallout of betrayal trauma – these realities are rarely addressed in the church. Even more rarely does the church come alongside and minister to the betrayed, divorced woman, who is crushed and struggling to survive her trauma.

The church is meant to be a refuge, a place of safety and healing. But a lack of understanding about the debilitating trauma of infidelity and the psychological violence of a husband's integrity abuse, of divorce as a provision from God to protect the abused and abandoned spouse, and of the biblical definition of the word 'widow' converge, creating a critical, devastating blind spot in most Evangelical churches in the west. When this is the case, women who have suffered traumatic psychological abuses perpetrated by their former husbands are too often either neglected or actually shunned by their spiritual leaders and the faith community as a whole.

I was in Christian ministry. No one would let me sing in their churches anymore. My pastor said I could stay at the church, but I knew I would be pressured to move back in with my now ex and continue marriage counseling. I basically had to leave the denomination I was in because you couldn't transfer membership to another church without a recommendation from your former pastor. (Anonymous-a, personal correspondence, September 28, 2023)



Rather than recognize abuse and infidelity of the husband as sin, this woman's faith community blamed her for his choice to break the marriage covenant. She has been shamed and shunned for someone else's sin.

With awareness and education, the church can alleviate the suffering of women in the aftermath of divorce and facilitate their healing. The Body of Christ suffers when one member suffers, yet women who have divorced due to abuse and infidelity are suffering deeply and are too often not seen. Inspired by personal experience, and by listening to and reading accounts of dozens of women who have also lived through the same trauma, the work ahead is to call attention to the neglect of the abused and divorced woman in the western evangelical church.

There are thousands upon thousands of women who suffered abuse and infidelity in their marriages. As in grounded theory, common themes emerge when researching both personal accounts and relevant studies across the western world. Most Christian women sought but could not find help in their churches. From Australia to the UK to the Americas, women survivors of abuse and betrayal trauma have written books and blogs, formed non-profits and online support groups, published peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, theses, and articles in various media, started podcasts and held conferences – and yet there are still men in churches abusing and cheating on their wives with relative impunity, and modern-day widows re-traumatized and neglected by Christian leaders. The goal of this project is to bring to the evangelical community an awareness of these many women by highlighting available resources and by creating specific educational resources to inform and equip the Body of Christ to minister effectively to the modern-day widow.

## Definitions

The terms used in this work and their definitions or explanations are included here for clarity.

1. Abuse – In this work, domestic abuse, intimate partner violence (IPV), and domestic violence are terms employed to indicate patterns of behavior used to gain or keep power and control over another person in a relationship. Abusive behaviors are used to scare, intimidate, humiliate, isolate, diminish, and demean. These behaviors can be found in the domains of spirituality, finances, parenting, sexuality (sexual coercion or withholding), and shaming, publicly and privately, i.e. in front of children, parents, siblings, friends, in-laws, counselors, and pastors.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology definition is as follows: 1. n. interactions in which one person behaves in a cruel, violent, demeaning, or invasive manner toward another person or an animal. The term most commonly implies physical mistreatment but also encompasses sexual and psychological (emotional) mistreatment. 2. vb. to subject a person or animal to such treatment (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

2. Betrayal Trauma – Also referred to as intimate partner betrayal in this work, wherein an intimate partner, a spouse, violates trusted explicit or implied social agreement (i.e. marriage fidelity) or harms the victim psychologically, financially, spiritually, sexually, etc. in which the victim's perception of reality and self are shattered.
3. Church – In this work, the word 'church' is construed as the broad Evangelical Christian community of believers in the United States, which includes organized churches, para-church organizations, outreaches, ministries, publishers, music companies, and etc.

4. Complex PTSD - Complex PTSD is a form of post-traumatic stress disorder that develops after a prolonged traumatic event such as physical or psychological captivity or abuse that occurs over a period of months or years. People with complex PTSD have many of the symptoms of PTSD but may experience different, more severe symptoms as well (Jones, 2023, para. 4).
5. Complex Trauma – Complex trauma can arise in any situation where the affected person feels an ongoing sense of fear, horror, helplessness, or powerlessness over an extended period of time, with the perceived or actual inability to escape (Lebow, 2021, para. 17).
6. Disenfranchised Grief - Disenfranchised grief refers to a loss “that's not openly acknowledged, socially mourned, or publicly supported...Disenfranchised grief can also occur when your relationship to a deceased is not recognized” (Rush, 2022, paras. 1-2).
7. Evangelical – For the purposes of this work, the belief that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God, and to those individuals, organizations, and institutions that so declare. Also, the belief that absolute truth is contained in the Bible and actions and attitudes are informed by this belief.
8. Gaslighting – The psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories, typically leads to confusion, loss of confidence and self-esteem, uncertainty of one’s emotional or mental stability, and dependency on the perpetrator (Merriam-Webster, n.d.); can lead to self-isolation due to shame and feelings of inadequacy.
9. Infantilization – A type of abuse in which a perpetrator manipulates another adult with psychological or spiritual control, such that the victim is reduced to accepting the perception

of herself as needing the oversight of the perpetrator as if she were a child. It is a controlling tactic used to gain the upper hand in a romantic relationship (Connor, 2022, para. 1).

10. Modern-day widow –A term used to differentiate a woman who is divorced, most often due to spousal abuse and adultery, from the traditional understanding of a woman who is a widow due to the death of her spouse (Burke, 2022, para. 8).
11. Spiritual abuse – This is emotional and psychological abuse that is a systematic pattern of coercive and controlling behaviors in a religious context; manipulation, exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, coercion to conform, control through the use of sacred texts or teaching, requirement of obedience to the abuse, the suggestion that the abuser has a ‘divine’ position, isolation as a means of punishment, and superiority and elitism (Oakley, et al., 2018, p. 3).
12. Trauma - Trauma is an emotional and neurological response to an overwhelming event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea (American Psychological Association, 2022).
13. Trauma-informed – This term refers to the awareness of trauma when giving care to its victims. In this work, it specifically refers to the care of victims/survivors of betrayal trauma, i.e., asking “what happened to you?” rather than “what did you do?” To be trauma-informed is to realize the impact of trauma and understand various paths for recovery; to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma; to integrate knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and to actively avoid re-traumatization (Trauma-Informed Care, 2021). This awareness includes understanding the neurological impact of trauma.

14. Victim blaming – Holding the victim accountable, in part or whole, for the crime or abuse perpetrated against them is ‘victim blaming.’ This manipulative tactic is often used by the abuser to gaslight and control the victim. People outside the situation blame the victim as a method of reassuring themselves that such things would never happen to them personally. It can be used by pastors, law enforcement, medical caregivers, and therapists who seek to quickly move on from a messy situation, or if they have personal preferences or beliefs that align with the perpetrator. Also called ‘sin-leveling’ in which all sin is equal in God’s eyes, i.e. lying to the IRS = premeditated murder.

### **History of the Problem**

There is, as King Solomon declares, “nothing new under the sun” (*The Christian Standard Bible*, 2018, Ecclesiastes 1:9; *all scriptures in this work taken from this translation unless otherwise indicated*). Intimate partner violence and domestic abuse fall neatly under that label. The low status of women, single, married, or divorced, has transcended time, culture, race, ethnicity, and religion, with very few exceptions. Recorded in writings of the founders of western civilization, Euripides, Aristotle, et al., a negative view of women (Payne, 2009, p. 32) is a common refrain. Some of the early church fathers, though by no means all, were influenced to read that theme into the Pauline epistles, specifically in 1 Corinthians 11:3, with regard to the Greek word ‘head’ [*kephalē*]. However, translating *kephalē* to mean ‘authority,’ thereby placing women under the authority of men, is heresy because it forces the assertion that Christ is not God, an equal Person in the Trinity (The Apostle Paul argues that Christ is not subordinate to God in Romans 9:5, Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20 and 2:9, and Titus 2:13). Recent scholarship by over 40 academics and Biblical historians noted by Payne translates the Greek *kephalē* as ‘source’ rather than ‘authority’ (Payne, 2009, pp. 117-118). Nevertheless, this

holdover idea of subordinationism allows a strict patriarchal hierarchy in the church and in the home (Payne, 2009, pp. 130-131). The influence of translating kephalē as ‘authority’ in 1 Corinthians 11:3 may be the most significant driver that some use to assert that women are subordinate to men and especially that wives are subordinate to husbands. Subordinates are not equal and are obliged to acquiesce to power.

As the nature of abuse is the coercive acquisition of power and control over others, and because humans are generally bent toward selfish gain, the logical end to the subordinationist interpretation of the 1 Corinthians 11 passage grants permission for abuse. An overt example of that logical conclusion is from a pastor in the Bronx, New York. When preaching on Ephesians 5: 22, “wives submit to your husbands,” he states:

In this matter of submission, I want you to know upfront ladies, that once you get married, you are no longer your own. You are your husband’s. You understand what I’m saying? I emphasize that because I saw in court the other day on TV where a lady sued her husband for rape. And I would say to you gentlemen, the best person to rape is your wife. (Shimron, 2021, para. 4)

The pastor concluded that thought by incorrectly noting that [rape] is legal in marriage. It is not legal, it is a form of abuse and illegal in every state since 1993 (Pirius, 2022, para. 1). Significantly, no pushback was noted in the article.

Not only is sexual coercion in marriage a logical end to subordinationism, so also are other types of abusive entitlements, including infidelity. Christian women today who find themselves in abusive marriages to adulterers and who then find relief in divorce, often suffer the ramifications of a pervasive, demeaning attitude directed toward them because of

subordinationist doctrine. Added to the subjugation of wives in marriage is the concurrent view of marriage as the ideal and divorce as, in essence, failing God and his church. Due to these ubiquitous views of female subordination and the revered institution of marriage among evangelicals, often the divorced woman, the modern-day widow, is summarily dismissed as culpable and therefore in sin, or simply ignored or shunned.

### **Proposed Solutions**

Recent history shows that Christian leaders of all denominations were slow to recognize and call out the abuse of children in their church organizations. It took years of investigative work and a growing chorus of survivors to bring realization, ownership, and the beginnings of change. In the same way, correcting the neglect of modern-day widows has been and continues to be slow. Change is needed from the top down, in seminaries and bible schools, and from the bottom up, in the local church. Developing curriculum for theological studies to inform potential pastors about the issue of domestic violence and caring for the modern-day widow in their pews is the one approach. At a different level, providing resources for training in the local church is another.

The top-down approach recommended in this project is a curriculum for a semester course in seminary or Bible school containing three major topics. The first proposed topic would cover doctrinal underpinnings of subordinationism which facilitate abuse in hierarchical systems. This initial topic will provide the biblical framework of the course of study, including a review of the translations of Malachi 2:16 since the 1996 Dead Sea scrolls discovery of that passage (Figure 1, Appendix A). The second topic would focus on trauma from a neurobiological aspect and the specific attachment woundings of betrayal trauma with a concentration on marital

infidelity. Finally, the curriculum would review scripture that addresses the inclusive biblical definition of widows, and the legal, material, and marital provisions for the divorced and abandoned woman.

At the local level, a comprehensive information and resource hub would be established for local churches in a website. Information tabs and printed matter will be written and made available identifying abuse, infidelity, and betrayal trauma, with a map of the biblical provisions for divorce as a remedy. The correction to Malachi 2:16 will be explained with references to associated scholarly work. Emphasis will be placed on becoming trauma-informed carers for the modern-day widow and practicing true religion according to James 1:27, but also including verses 13-15, acknowledging from where the actions of an abuser originate, putting an end to victim-blaming. Further, and importantly, the resources will teach a biblical understanding of divorced women as modern-day widows. Her unique needs will be outlined, with suggestions on how the church, and the members, can together meet her needs and facilitate her through the ravages of betrayal trauma to a restored, thriving individual.

### **The Scope of This Project**

The second chapter here will provide the biblical definition of widow, which places the divorced, abandoned woman – the modern-day widow – in her true identity and place in God's heart and in his family, the church. The importance of this understanding cannot be minimized as the Bible clearly addresses how God views widows, and the inclusion to that group of the divorced and abandoned wife. There is clarity about widow care in both the Old and the New Testaments. Evangelical churches that claim the authority of scripture in orthodoxy and orthopraxy too often have not taken the time to consider who exactly is a widow, as the common



understanding is limited to a woman whose husband has died. There is more to the word, both in Hebrew and Greek.

Chapter three will explore what constitutes abuse, beyond the immediate idea of physical harm. Domestic violence is much broader than the kinds of behavior that leave bruises. When the invisible nature of abusive power and control is perpetrated in intimate relationships of trust, the resulting injury of betrayal is traumatic. There are neurological changes that drive symptoms which are often misunderstood, and chapter three provides some explanations. Understanding betrayal trauma is the first step to compassionate, Christlike care for women who are decimated by adultery and divorce.

Studies and personal accounts of the church's response to the divorced Christian woman show a great lack of awareness, and therefore of compassion. Much evidence shows that Christian women will most often go to their church for help, sometimes to friends, sometimes to pastors. Too often the responses are hurtful; too often the advice sends her back into an unsafe situation. Too often, the fact that she went for help will escalate the danger of her situation, if she is still married. "The language of redemptive suffering tied to Christian talk of forgiveness tends to encourage Christian women to return to or remain in abusive marriages" (Brock & Parker, 2001, cited in Westenberg, 2017, p. 5). If she is divorced and struggling, too often she simply will be turned away empty, her practical, emotional, and spiritual needs unmet. Still, the role of the church in being an essential part of her recovery cannot be denied.

Chapter four proposes solutions. In the crisis of betrayal trauma, for a Christian woman whose Christian husband betrayed her, the response of her church family and spiritual leaders deeply impacts her recovery. Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, leading researcher in the field of trauma, states, "If you have people who care for you, understand you, or protect you, [trauma] generally

becomes less traumatic as compared to if you're not believed or it's kept a secret, which is much worse" (van der Kolk, 2021, as cited in Rai, 2021, para. 2). The compassionate care of the church will either help her through her crisis or be a major setback as she struggles to believe in what she once knew. When the church protects the abuser and blames the victim, it is a significant and sometimes fatal blow to the betrayed woman's faith in God. The education of the Body of Christ, from the top down and the bottom up, is critical to the providing compassionate, effective care to the modern-day widow.

Chapter five will look back at the experiences of many modern-day widows and the studies and findings of researchers and professionals in the related fields of betrayal trauma and intimate partner violence. The evangelical church's problematic or non-existent responses to marital abuse, infidelity, and to divorced women as modern-day widows, can be mitigated and improved through education at the pastoral training level with courses addressing these common issues. More immediately, at the level of the local church, these issues can be addressed through training materials and promotion by the pastoral and counseling staff. The heart of the church is to practice true religion by caring for the needs of her members, and such praxis is what this project endeavors to facilitate.

In regard to the care of the modern-day widow, the contemporary evangelical church has misunderstood who she is. Biblically, she is a widow. The women who have divorced due to abuse and infidelity are suffering deeply and are too often not seen. With awareness and education, the church can do much to alleviate their suffering and assist their healing.

## **Chapter Two: The Divorced Woman, a Widow**

God is very clear about his heart towards widows. There are multiple passages in which he instructs his people to care for widows in particular. Prior to the Mosaic law, and even the Abrahamic covenant, there is record of Job's compassion for widows as he followed God. In detailing his righteous life, Job included in that litany that he "made the widow's heart rejoice..." (Job 29:13b). According to common tradition, a widow is only a woman whose husband has died. But that is not the full and accurate meaning of the word in the Hebrew or in the Greek. Looking at the word itself and its origins, a more complete picture emerges, a picture which has, over time, become narrow. This limited view excludes individuals to whom God clearly extended protection and provision, as seen throughout the scriptures. To understand God's heart for widows, the definition of the word 'widow' and its origins must be considered.

### **Defining the Modern-Day Widow**

So, what is a widow? The narrow understanding of this word, limiting it to a wife whose husband has died, is similar to the narrow understanding of the word 'neighbor' prior to clarity from Jesus. In Luke chapter 10, a lawyer asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor" (v. 29)? The answer Jesus gave went beyond the easy and the obvious in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus introduced a definition of 'neighbor' which extended beyond the cultural boundaries of the hearers. Jesus included those they despised, those they would not have considered as neighbors. Evangelical Christians now understand that a 'neighbor' is every person, transcending all and any of the ways people separate from one another. Paul echoes this in Ephesians 2:14, "For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility..." In a similar fashion the contemporary western culture, including the church, has a thin understanding

of the word ‘widow,’ one less inclusive than God’s intent made clear in the scriptures, in both the Old and New Testaments. God communicated not only his heart towards widows, but who they are and how they were to be treated, protected, and what specific provisions were to be made for them, both practically and legally.

God’s heart and especial attention to widows is unmistakable. In the Old Testament, the word ‘widow’ is found on over 80 occasions. God consistently identifies himself as One who “...executes justice for the fatherless and the widow” (Deuteronomy 10:18). He promises good to those who care for widows, “...if you no longer oppress the widow...I will allow you to live in...the land I gave to your ancestors” (Jeremiah 7:6) and cursing to those who neglect to do so: “The one who denies justice to...a widow is cursed” (Deuteronomy 27:19). There are many more references to the widow and the specific care they are to be given throughout the Law, the Prophets, and the wisdom literature of scripture. It is important to note that the only Hebrew word for widow used in the scripture is *‘almânâh*, shown here with its word origins (Strong, n.d., p. 3; Bible Hub, n.d.):

**H490**     אַלְמָנָה     'almânâh (*al-maw-naw'*) Feminine of H488; a *widow*; also a desolate *place*: - desolate house (palace), widow.

**H488**     אֶלְמָן     'almân (*al-mawn'*) Prolonged from H481 in the sense of *bereavement*; discarded (as a divorced person): - forsaken.

**H481**     אֶלֶם     'âlam (*aw-lam'*) A primitive root; to *tie* fast; hence (of the mouth) to be *tongue tied*: - bind, be dumb, put to silence.

It is not only the wife whose husband has died who is identified as a widow. A discarded, forsaken, divorced wife is also one bereft of a husband, and she has lost both her place in her community and a voice in her world. The metaphor of the word, that of a ‘desolate house,’

depicts a house unguarded, a house easily plundered, a house falling apart. That metaphor is an easy mental picture, stark and accurate. In 2 Samuel 14:5, a woman who identifies herself as a widow to the king adds the explanation that her husband is dead: "...I am a widow; my husband died." If a widow was only a woman who lost her husband to death, this woman would not have needed to clarify that he was dead. In 2 Samuel 20:3, the concubines of the king were put in seclusion, provided for, and lived as widows while the king was still alive (Gola, 1992). These women were no longer wives to the king, with the status and benefits of that position. They were discarded by the husband to whom they had been married, who was not dead, yet their needs were met according to the laws protecting widows.

The widow to whom God's especial care extends, therefore, includes a wife abandoned, discarded, divorced, forsaken, and silenced, as well as she who lost her husband through death. There are several laws protecting and providing for the needs of the abandoned and discarded wife set in place for God's people, including in regard to her legal, practical, and property rights. God instructs care for a first wife in the event that a second wife is taken by her husband. In that situation, the husband is not to "...reduce the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. And if he does not do these three things for her, she may leave free of charge, without any payment" (Exodus 21:10-11). She is free to marry another. She does not have to buy her freedom, and keeps her ketubah, which is essentially a monetary pre-nuptial agreement (Baskerville, 2022, pp. 227-228). Ginger Baskerville, Christian counselor, author, blogger, and researcher who has led divorce recovery groups in churches since 1998, highlights God's provisions for abandoned and divorced wives. She notes the certificate of divorce a husband must give her allows her to remarry whom she will (Baskerville, 2022). Protections extended to women who were captured in battle and taken as wives. Exodus 21:11-14 stipulates that the

captor must allow a captured bride a month to mourn before having marital relations. After becoming his wife, she had all the same rights and protections set in the Exodus passage. If a man rapes a woman, he has to marry her, he has to pay the bride price and, in this case, he may never divorce her. He must always provide the three requirements – food, clothing, and marital rights (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). The victim's father can deny the marriage, but the rapist must still pay the bride price, essentially making her a legal widow.

These laws and others were implemented by necessity specifically to ensure protection and provision for women bereft of a husband because, as Jesus pointed out, of hard hearts. “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts...” (Matthew 19:8). Additional legal provisions were put in place for the community to look after widows, such as leaving gleanings in the fields and orchards (Deuteronomy 24:19-21), warnings of judgement should a widow's property be infringed upon (Proverbs 15:25), God's curse if she is denied justice (Deuteronomy 27:19) and the prohibition against debt collectors taking advantage of her (Deuteronomy 24:17). All these provisions and warnings suggest that widows – all previously married women who lacked a husband by death, abandonment, divorce, or other reasons – would require legal, financial, and community assistance. God still expects his people to carry out his instructions.

### **Early Church Care for Widows**

The protections and provisions set in the Hebrew scriptures would have been understood by the early Jewish church. A marker of the early church in the Roman world was their love for one another, as well as for the widows, orphans, and strangers, the sick, and the poor. Caring for the marginalized set them apart from the cultures around them. The commandment Jesus gave in

John 13:35, "...by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" proved a great social contrast to those who served other gods.

The record in Acts 6:1-6 shows that the early church was indeed caring for widows, but also that they were neglecting a specific group of widows. This group of believers were in Jerusalem, so it can be assumed that they were Jewish and knew the teachings of the Law. However, the Hellenist Jewish widows were being overlooked in the daily distributions. Ted Olsen (2021), writing for Christianity Today, characterizes this neglect as prejudice in the church. However, when this negligence was brought to the attention of the church leaders, they listened; they heard. They moved to rectify this oversight by explicitly assigning the care of all widows to specific individuals by name. James writes later that "Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..." (James 1:27). It seems that the believers had to be reminded again.

New Christians from outside the Jewish tradition, however, would need to be instructed on this important work, as their cultures did not regard women as equal in value to men. The Hellenistic view of women was very misogynistic, as it was grounded in the writings of several Greek philosophers, including Euripides: "[women are] this bane to cheat mankind" (in *Hippolytus* 616-17); Plato, who called men superior to women (*Tim* 42a); and Aristotle, who asserts that "the female is as it were a deformed male" (*Gen. an.* 737a and 775a) (Payne, 2009, pp. 32-33). Greek women were the property of their husbands in the first century, and a married woman who found herself without a husband for any reason was in a very difficult situation. Paul sent a letter to young pastor Timothy in Ephesus which included specific instructions about widows. Paul's detailed instruction in I Timothy 5:1-16 indicates that there were some questions that needed to be settled concerning the care for women in the Ephesian church who no longer

had husbands. The Hebrew law still applied; the word for widow in the New Testament Greek, as in the Hebrew Old Testament, is more inclusive than the idea of a woman whose husband had died. The Greek word for widow is *chēra*, here with its word origins (Strong, n.d., p. 77; Bible Hub, n.d.):

**G5503**  $\chi\eta\rho\alpha$  *chēra* (*khay'-rah*) Feminine of a presumed derivation apparently from the base of G5490 through the idea of *deficiency*; a *widow* (as *lacking* a husband), literally or figuratively: - widow.

**G5490**  $\chi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\mu\alpha$  *chasma* (*khas'-mah*) From a form of an obsolete primary “chao” (to “gape” or “yawn”); a “chasm” or *vacancy* (impassable *interval*): - gulf.

This definition does not exclude those women whose husbands may still be living, simply that she lacks a husband – there is an absence previously filled by a husband. This absence would leave her with a chasm, a vacancy, rendering her with a deficiency of resources and protection.

The contemporary church in America has, like the early church, neglected a specific group of widows in their midst. Not the traditional widow who is bereft of her husband by death – these women are recognized and cared for, as they should be. Beside her, however, is another widow, the abandoned and divorced woman. According to scripture, that woman is a widow as well. Similar to the early church, a kind of ignorance, prejudice, and stigmatization against this group of women leaves them without the compassionate, practical, and healing resources of the Body of Christ.

### **Traditional Widows and Modern-day Widows**

The traditional widow in contemporary society and in the Evangelical church is the widow-by-death. This assumption is universal when the word widow is used. Losing a spouse is absolutely heartbreaking, and life-changing. Death is, however, a natural part of life; it is



inevitable. Every adult knows and understands death. The apostle Paul speaks to the church about death in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, "...you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. So that if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep..." Knowing that one's believing husband is with the Lord is a comfort to the believing wife, even in her grief and loss. Her loss is as temporary as life on earth is temporary. In the church, people are quick to understand this widow's grief, and are willing to bear witness to it, to hold space for her, and to be with her in her grief.

Pastors and the church body normally practice a culturally and spiritually appropriate response. People reach out with kindness, casseroles, and comfort. Families lean in; tears are shed for her and with her; memories are rehearsed and cherished. Assistance of any type is respectfully offered, including pastoral visits, spiritual consolation, financial advising and contributions if necessary. She is given the time and space to grieve, and understanding is extended to her without judgement. Even in the instance of a lack of pastoral connections, or lack of church ministry specific to widow-care, attuned family members, friends, and Christian brothers and sisters will often continue to check in with the traditional widow over time, making sure that her needs are met.

But what about the other widow, the abused, abandoned, divorced woman, as identified in scripture? She also has lost a husband. Her loss is different; there is no outpouring of comfort for her. Her husband is not in the arms of Jesus, he is most likely in the arms of another person. She has not only lost her closest companion, but she has also suffered debilitating betrayal and rejection from the most intimate and trusted person in her life. A modern-day widow, then, is a wife whose husband has betrayed her, abandoned and divorced her, just as in the Hebrew and Greek definitions. He is still living, but he is absent, and she has become desolate.

The intricate web of deceit and gaslighting that necessarily surrounds secret – or not so secret – sexual betrayal is incredibly damaging to the betrayed partner. Rarely does a pastor and church community understand the trauma of betrayal and the psychological violence that is wreaked by living in a marriage for any length of time that has become a culture of deceit. In this situation, a wife is constantly questioning her reality. The bewildering web of gaslighting deepens as the deception of the sexual betrayal is deflected and her felt doubts dismissed and condemned. In the evangelical tradition, she has been taught to trust, to forgive, and to protect others. Statistically, if she dares to reach out, she will not find support in her church. Research for this project uncovered more personal accounts than can be accurately referenced here.

The overwhelming consensus that emerges is that friends, family, and faith communities do not support victims of domestic violence. Studies and surveys confirm this narrative, and especially in a Christian context. Far too often the manipulative tactics and false presentation of the cheating spouse is more believable than what the victim might express about her experience. The idea of abuse and infidelity is very uncomfortable. It is difficult to see domestic violence when there are no external bruises; yet the trauma is real.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention includes psychological abuse in its definition of intimate partner violence (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, para. 1), and an increasing number of mental health professionals, including those in the field of neuroscience research, are recognizing intimate partner infidelity and betrayal as psychological trauma. After five years building a program to address domestic abuse in a church setting, and training church leaders on the issue, Ava Kanyeredzi, author, researcher and lecturer at London Metropolitan University, found that

Churches can be a refuge for women fleeing domestic abuse. But sometimes they can help perpetuate abuse by failing to offer support when needed. There can be many reasons for this. Sometimes it's because church leaders simply don't understand—or are not willing to accept—that domestic abuse occurs within their congregations.

(Kanyeredzi, 2021, para. 1)

Added to the reluctance of church leaders to accept domestic violence as a reality is the concurrent reality that abuse victims are most often slow to acknowledge their normal experience as abuse. Moreover, too often the messages received culturally in religious settings contribute to a victim's reluctance to speak up.

In a 2009 Breakpoint article, Chuck Colson tells a heartbreaking account of an abused woman whose pastor prayed with her and sent her home. Two weeks later, she was murdered by her husband. In the same article, Colson references a survey asking over 6,000 pastors how they would counsel a woman who was being abused; 26% said they would have told the women to continue to 'submit' to their husbands, no matter what. Another 25% of the pastors told the woman it was her fault, for failing to submit in the first place. Half (50%) said that women should be willing to "tolerate some level of violence" because it is better than divorce. Colson ends the article by saying that while it is important to uphold the sanctity of marriage, the church shouldn't ignore abusers, especially those who use the Bible to justify their actions (Colson, 2009). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics in 2021, 34% of female victims of murder or non-negligent manslaughter were killed by an intimate partner (Smith, 2022, para. 1).

The fact that Colson recognized and wrote about the church's failure to respond biblically to abused wives in 2009, and that this is an area that remains largely unchanged, suggests that there needs to be increasing conversation about abuse, betrayal trauma, the remedy of divorce,

and the care of modern-day widows. Research for this project revealed that the conversation is building, but that it remains largely unheard in the evangelical community. Some voices share statistics, while others express experiences, and finally, there are voices raising doctrinal problems in what is taught. A clear-eyed understanding of abuse, intimate partner violence, and betrayal trauma, admitting its pervasiveness, and willingness to engage is essential to alleviating the suffering of the modern-day widow. The need for the evangelical community to face this messy, painful, and very real situation crushing members of its community is abundantly evident.

### **Chapter Three: Abuse, Betrayal Trauma, and Christian Teaching**

Messy, painful topics make difficult conversations. It is easier to acknowledge that such things happen, but ‘out there.’ There are things about which conversation is simply difficult. Domestic abuse and intimate partner violence are certainly in that category for most people. If it is happening to someone whose face and name is unknown, as long as it can remain a ‘clinical’ or obtuse topic, then the conversation is easier. For a pastor, to keep such topics at arm’s length is a kind of comfort, as he can assume that it is not happening on his watch, to his people.

According to statistics, however, that is simply not true. The same can be said about marital infidelity, about the trauma experienced by women divorcing, or divorce as a consequence of infidelity or abuse. These things are happening in the church at roughly the same rate as in secular society, as previously noted. Clearly it is important for pastors and leaders in the local church to understand abuse, betrayal trauma, and with what the modern-day widow, the wife divorced as a result of abuse and infidelity, is actually suffering. Raising a robust awareness of the nature of abuse, its patterns and consequences, is necessary for faith leaders to equip themselves and their churches to minister effectively to those who are, undoubtedly, experiencing abuse.

#### **Abuse is Not Just Physical**

Abuse is most often only associated with physical or sexual violence. However, the reality of abuse extends beyond those harms to the types of abuse that, while the body is adversely affected, do not leave physical marks. The most comprehensive description of abuse is simply that it is gaining and maintaining power and control over another person or group through manipulation, fear, intimidation, coercion, and violence or threats of violence. Abuse can be

financial, spiritual, verbal, psychological, emotional, and more (Figure 2, Appendix A).

Narcissistic abuse is not overt or physical but is common in intimate partner violence and betrayal. The abuser must necessarily wage a campaign of deceit and confusion to conceal his infidelity. Using a tactic known as ‘gaslighting,’ the abuser, over time, causes the victim to question their own sense of reality and doubt their own intuition, essentially breaking the connection between the victim’s perceived reality and actual reality. Gaslighting is self-absorbed in that, absent an actual diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder, the purpose of the gaslighting is to manipulate and maintain control of the victim and to protect the pattern of deceit surrounding the abuser’s infidelity. The victim becomes confused, and in efforts to sort things out will often blame herself for the culture of turmoil cause by his duplicitous integrity abuse. It is common that an abused woman does not realize that she is being abused before being advised that what is happening to her is not normal. Controlling tactics are abuse (Gupta, 2022, para. 1), and in a Christian context can be, and often is, characterized as submission to one’s husband (Figure 3, Appendix A). But it is not biblical submission, rather she is being infantilized and victimized.

### **Betrayal Trauma: Intimate Partner Violence**

All abuse is about power and control. In the context of a marriage, when power and control are exerted in order to subjugate a spouse, a sacred trust is violated. When that abusive control is designed to hide a secret sexual reality such as sex addiction and/or marital betrayal, the psychological, emotional, and even physical damage is trauma. When the victim seeks divorce as an avenue to safety, she is, according to scripture, a widow. Unlike the grief of the traditional widow, however, the modern-day widow has suffered a different and very specific kind of trauma. She has lost many of the same things as a traditional widow, such as an expected

future with her spouse, enjoying children and grandchildren together and celebrating life traditions and milestones with an intimate, trusted companion. These and other losses are grieved in the loss of a spouse to death. Conversely, the modern-day widow who was derailed by her now ex-husband's deception and sexual betrayal has experienced a loss that is also an act of abusive psychological violence and treachery.

The Center for Disease Control includes psychological abuse in their definition of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, para. 1), recognizing that abuse is not limited to physical or sexual violence. The overwhelming shock of intimate partner betrayal – extra-marital sexual acting out, physically or virtually – is now recognized and named by many in the fields of psychology and the social sciences as *betrayal trauma*. Dr. Jennifer Freyd, professor emerita and researcher in psychology at the University of Oregon, first introduced the general concept and terminology of betrayal trauma in 1991,

...the core issue is betrayal -- a betrayal of trust that produces conflict between external reality and a necessary system of social dependence...The phrase "betrayal trauma" refers to those traumas in which individuals or institutions that people depend on for survival harm or violate them in some way. Betrayal traumas involve the depended-upon person or institution breaking an explicit or implied social agreement, such that a violation of trust occurs. (Freyd et al., 2004, p. 84)

Marriage, whether in a Christian context or not, is that very explicit social agreement. When a wife has been betrayed by her husband's sexual infidelity, whether pixelated, physical, or both, it is an indescribably traumatic emotional and psychological wound. He had been her closest and most trusted companion; moreover, aspects of her safety and security depend on him. Now, her

survival and defense mechanisms are spontaneously aroused, as she tries to find safety – often in isolation, or ‘flight,’ just as King David, in his context of betrayal, described:

My heart shudders within me; terrors of death sweep over me. Fear and trembling grip me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, “If only I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and find rest. How far away I would flee; I would stay in the wilderness. I would hurry to my shelter from the raging wind and the storm.” (Psalm 55:4-8)

Betrayal is devastating and frightening. It is, as the Psalmist says, overwhelming and emotionally exhausting.

In marital betrayal, a wife’s confusion and dis-integration of mind and emotion clouds every waking moment. The meaning-making functions in her brain struggle to make sense of the reality of this betrayal in the face of every previous experience within the relationship that communicated love and trust. Her culturally and spiritually impressed expectations of an exclusive, faithful relationship were justified, agreed-upon, vowed before God, and have now been shattered. Betrayal by a close companion is bewildering, again expressed by King David:

Now it is not an enemy who insults me – otherwise I could bear it; it is not a foe who rises up against me – otherwise I could hide from him. But it is you, a man who is my peer, my companion and good friend! We used to have close fellowship; we walked with the crowd into the house of God. (Psalm 55:12-14)

This passage captures the confusion, the reach for answers as to how such a thing could happen after shared experiences. This questioning of how and why a close companion would wreak destruction is common in betrayal trauma.



The recent, if small, expansion of Christian psychological resources that understand both the spiritual and psychological impact of sexual infidelity is encouraging. Some Christians in the mental health field are recognizing the trauma of marital betrayal. Christian Boulder Recovery, a Christ-centered clinical treatment center for men with unwanted, compulsive sexual behaviors, defines betrayal trauma on its website:

Infidelity trauma, or betrayal trauma, as it is also known, is a form of trauma experienced when there is infidelity or loss of trust between spouses or those in committed relationships. This trauma can be due to physical adultery, an emotional affair, or other sexual behavior outside the relationship. Betrayal trauma also can occur if pornography use is discovered. Relationships and marriages are about more than trust. They can offer the deepest forms of emotional intimacy. But when a wife discovers her husband betrayed her through affairs or excessive pornography use, this intimacy is broken, and the wound is deep. (Begin Again Institute, 2022, para. 6)

Dr. Doug Weiss, author, psychologist, and founder of Heart-to-Heart Counseling Center in 1995, has long specialized in the treatment of individuals and couples dealing with unwanted sexual behavior, including sexual addiction. Until 2007, he used the 12-step treatment model, which identified the wife of any addict as a co-addict or co-dependent. Because he is a leader in the field of unwanted sexual behavior, the Christian community, including academia, accepted this idea. Co-addiction with co-dependency is the model in all 12-step programs; however, as brain studies in the field of neurology have better informed psychology, Dr. Weiss has come to agree with the trauma model of treatment.

The trauma model shows that sexual infidelity in a committed partner relationship causes deep psychological trauma even in an otherwise healthy individual. The betrayal of trust at the

most intimate level is soul shattering. The betrayed wife is not co-dependent; she is suffering the ramifications of infidelity. She will normally experience complex PTSD symptoms in the 80-90<sup>th</sup> percentile (Weiss, 2023, 1:50). Complex PTSD is distinct from the PTSD suffered by combat veterans, in that it is an attachment wound. A combat veteran's nexus of fear is external, with perceived dangers in the external environment, while complex PTSD is fear in one's core.

In betrayal trauma, the betrayed partner's internal, relational environments are now unsafe and dangerous. Everything that she knew to be true about herself and her most intimate relationship is now in question, and she has no basis of reality in a secure memory or attachment experience. It is a destruction of her past; every memory with her betrayer is now tainted with doubt. The story of her life is so changed that her present reality has no grounding. The future, not just special dreams and plans, but her culturally normative expectations are lost. Her understanding of herself, her rationality, and her value is shattered, with nothing certain to replace them. Her past is made untrue, her present unreal, and her future unknown. She is thrown into an overwhelming chaos, and her brain and body are working overtime to just keep her safe from the uncertainty of her own perceptions.

In speaking about betrayal, Dr. Jordan Peterson explained why Dante put betrayal on the lowest level of hell in *The Inferno*, closest to Satan himself in the hierarchical structure of evil:

If someone trusts you, they're laying their vulnerability open to you...it's you willingly opening yourself up knowing that you could be hurt...you decide to trust, and you say, 'I'll open myself up and I know that I'm laying myself open to you.' If you choose to use that power, you're courageous; it's an act of courage to trust...you open the door to reciprocity and negotiation and cooperation and you entice the best part of [that] person forward...But then if you betray someone, then what you've done is...you've taken the

best part of them, which is the part that will courageously trust...with open eyes...and you stuck a dagger in that, and so you've purposefully damaged the best part of them...that's why it's such an egregious fault. It's often people don't recover from that...if you betray someone badly enough, you can damage them...you can give them post-traumatic stress disorder. (Grabow, 2020, 1:00-2:15)

Modern psychology and neuroscience confirm what King David and Dante recorded about betrayal – it is a treachery that has the force to harm the betrayed irrevocably.

It is not well understood that betrayal can give the betrayed person complex PTSD and result in “permanent neurological alterations,” rendering them more sensitive to negative emotions for the remainder of their life. “Stress,” Peterson says, “will tend to re-instantiate the [complex] PTSD. It is fundamental, physiological damage” (Grabow, 2020, 02:15). Peterson goes on to say that it is uncommon to fully recover from betrayal. There are a growing number of support groups created by and for survivors of abuse and marital betrayal, and what has emerged from research for this project is that recovery is a very long process, individuated by many factors. Support from peers and from one's faith family is essential, as well as therapy and at times, medication.

Dr. Omar Minwalla, licensed psychologist and clinical sexologist, released a paper in 2021 demonstrating his clinical model of Deceptive Sexuality and Trauma (DST). DST discredits the co-dependency model, that which casts the victim as bearing responsibility for her partner's abuse and betrayal. In the paper, he details the impact of sexual betrayal on the partner and the abusive behaviors, that over time, result in complex trauma (Minwalla, 2021):

Deceptive Sexual Trauma (DST) conceptualizes sexual-relational behavioral disorders on a spectrum of both compulsive and abusive conduct. A key part of this model is the concept of deceptive sexuality, which is a form of domestic abuse that involves an ongoing deceptive system of psychological and relational tactics, which is propelled by a psychology of covert domination and control and constitutes a clear, methodical, and organized form of systemic psychological, emotional, and relational abuse and dehumanization. The clinical and technical term for deceptive sexuality is Compulsive-Abusive Sexual-Relational Disorder (CASRD). According to DST, deceptive sexuality (or CASRD) includes behaviors aimed at creating and maintaining a deceptive, compartmentalized sexual reality (DSCR). (p. 7)

What Minwalla calls deceptive might also be called treacherous. This treachery is not a mistake or an accident, rather a design and a pattern of abuse.

A noteworthy aspect of Minwalla's model and his findings is that the primary intimate partner, here being the wife, is experiencing the trauma of her partner's deceptive sexual behavior prior to the discovery of that behavior. She knows that something is off, but his deceptive tactics and her willingness to keep trying prolongs the abuse. This willingness to keep trying is especially true and prolonged in evangelical contexts, the teachings of which vilify divorce and enshrine male dominance and female submission in marriage, the purifying value of suffering, and that forgiveness should be infinite, unqualified, and equates full reconciliation.

Minwalla's model is consistent with findings through the advances in neuroscience, specifically the technological innovations in the last 30 years allowing researchers to see brain functions. Psychologists and psychiatrists studying addiction, PTSD, and other psychological pathologies are able to map the physical effects of psychological and emotional events and

perceptions on the brain. Betrayal trauma is psychological abuse that maps in the brain like PTSD, with many similar symptoms, but is more complex due to the element of interpersonal, intimate relational attachment wounding. The devastation on the self is considerable; the neurological grounding in one's identity via the now-betrayed relationship is wrecked.

There are specific physical repercussions to the trauma of betrayal. On the neurological level, any trauma initiates a series of mechanisms in the brain created for survival. The amygdala is a group of neurons which processes and remembers emotions, primarily fear. It signals danger, sending fight/flight/freeze/fawn signals to the body, flooding it with cortisol, the stress hormone. The pre-frontal cortex, the center of executive function, responds by going off-line, resulting in difficulties focusing, making decisions, and regulating emotions.

When the trauma is relational and ongoing, the brain continues in this survival mode, essentially becoming habituated in it. In a presentation video, Dr. Jake Porter (2019) shows what happens in the brain unique to betrayal trauma. The left hippocampus is the area of the brain that stores memories and sequences experiences. It is the meaning-making center, making sense of all life experiences, including at the subconscious level, including during infancy. Porter compares it to a file cabinet of snapshots, each one an implicit or explicit memory, of all of life up to the moment. The left hippocampus records and organizes every sensory input, each experience, as a memory, placing them into a sequence that tells the story of one's life. He calls it the autobiography of the self. This autobiography is the past on which the brain understands the present and anticipates the future. Betrayal trauma, in effect, chaotically dumps all those stored memory-files onto the floor and scatters them. The left hippocampus then begins rehearsing and rehearsing everything over and over, trying to make sense, trying to organize and recover meaning, but it cannot. What was true of the self, of God, of the marriage,

of the husband, of the past lived experiences, present events, and the predictable future, is no longer certain.

The ability to assess any type of threat or positive good based on knowledgeable memory no longer works, because the past is no longer reliable. The resulting terror is overwhelming. The self is dis-integrated, life is disorganized, and meaning is elusive (Porter, 2019). All of this is happening in the brain of the betrayed wife, along with the amygdala functioning in survival mode and the pre-frontal cortex remaining offline. Now perhaps she is a modern-day widow. Now disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss assail her as well. Her support system, her friends, family and faith community likely blame her for giving up on him, or simply do not believe her, minimizing or criticizing her emotional dis-regulation. She appears unstable because she is, spinning in overwhelm and injured by the neurological effect of betrayal trauma on her brain. The modern-day widow has lost her sense of self and has no trusted memories from which to reconstruct it.

Minwalla suggests that when a husband cheats on his partner, he has created a “secret sexual basement,” Minwalla’s metaphor for a deceptive, compartmentalized sexual – relational reality (DCSR). Minwalla calls this outgrowth of sexual entitlement “integrity abuse.” He asserts that “the minute you have sexual entitlement, you’re abusive” (Blythe, 2021, 21:50), and it is a form of domestic violence. An essential step in finding safety is to name the integrity abuse and entitlement. The tendency of people in a Christian context to mis-label these things as a woman’s ‘cross to bear’ is then replaced by the reality that her husband’s behavior. When the church acknowledges this, the abused wife and the modern-day widow will be seen and cared for as prescribed in scripture.

### **Secondary Trauma: Betrayed by the Church**

Currently, the evangelical church too often does not recognize the modern-day widow and what she has suffered. Too often, evidenced by many accounts across social media platforms and support groups, the church condemns the divorced woman, although her husband broke the marriage covenant through abuse and sexual infidelity. It is not only social media and support groups that recognize this gap in the church's mission to care for modern-day widows. Among the few preeminent voices is Dr. Diane Langberg, author, psychologist, and trauma expert.

Langberg has over 50 years of experience as a Christian therapist. She has found that still today

...many congregations and church leaders have yet to reckon with the damage that has been done to abuse survivors where churches turned a blind eye to the suffering in their midst. "We have utterly failed God," she said. "We protected our own institutions and status more than his name or his people. What we have taught people is that the institution is what God loves, not the sheep." (Smietana, 2023, paras. 7-8)

Langberg represents a still small segment of evangelicalism that recognizes the failure of the faith community to identify abuse in the church.

A 2018 study published by the *American Journal of Community Psychology* explores Protestant Christian religious leaders' response to intimate partner violence, which includes sexual infidelity and the trauma of betrayal. Their findings included the dilemma between protecting the institution of the church with its tenets about marriage and divorce, and ministering to the needs of an abused or divorced woman. Additionally there is "tension between their own leadership roles and responding to intimate partner violence (IPV)" (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019, p. 1).

This tension around ministry to the abused wife or modern-day widow often results in dismissing her as culpable in the situation, essentially blaming her for the choices and even the habitual sin of her husband. Based on the entrenched myth that marriage is always ‘fifty/fifty’ and the accompanying supposition that divorce is also, the scenario in which a Christian husband would abuse his wife, justifying her seeking a divorce, is too often rejected out of hand. While the church is one of the primary places, if not the primary place to which a Christian women would turn when suffering intimate partner violence (IPV), betrayal trauma, or as a modern-day widow, most commonly the church is either unaccepting or too ill-informed and ill-equipped to respond in a way that is helpful. “Congregations and their leaders have been criticized for keeping a ‘holy hush’ or general silence about and inaction regarding IPV within congregations” (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019, p. 2), even though they are situated advantageously – and biblically – to be a significant help.

If her adulterous husband is the pastor or a leader in the church, or he is simply well-liked and respected, an abused woman most often is not believed and feels trapped. It is common for churches to protect its reputation and its promotion of the institution of biblical marriage. Too many evangelical churches apply the widely accepted doctrine of male headship and female submission in all things, even in the reality of a husband’s abusive deceit, lies, and adultery.

Many women who hold positions of leadership in the church or in para-church ministries are either fired or pressured to resign when their husband’s infidelity comes to light or results in divorce. After years in a campus ministry as a couple, the following is an account from a woman who was fired due to her husband’s sex addiction, sexual infidelity, and their subsequent divorce:

Discovery came in like a Category 5 hurricane when I was just 16 weeks pregnant with our first child. I had suspected something was wrong, but every time I asked about it



there was some kind of an excuse. I finally found evidence that he had cheated, his confession confirmed even more than the evidence that I found. I was completely devastated. We separated for a time as I started discovering this was a sexual addiction. I thought the grief would literally crush me. We did intensive counseling, and he did individual counseling. We worked towards rebuilding our marriage and healing. When our son was born...I really believed that this was prophetic for what would happen in our marriage, that God would heal our marriage. But to my horror, when [our son] was just ten months old, I found that he had crossed the flesh line, and so I was divorced before [our son's] first birthday. The ministry that I worked for at the time fired me, believing that since I was divorcing at least half of the responsibility for the demise of my marriage was mine. It was a double betrayal. (Cary, 2021)

These women served in ministry capacities in their churches but lost their positions due to their then-husbands' actions and subsequent divorces.

I was Nursery Director [at my church]. The moment I told them that I was talking to an attorney about divorce, they forced me to resign. I still continued to attend for several more months. There were only about 5 people in the congregation of 200 that would even say hi or even make eye contact with me. I left about six months later. (Anonymous-a, personal correspondence, September 28, 2023)

I was in Children's Ministry as one of the teachers on Sunday mornings. My ex-mother-in-law runs the department, my ex-father-in-law is lead pastor. I was asked to leave the week after I was replaced with [my ex's] secret girlfriend, about two months into our separation. Going against what [he] preached, his father [told] my ex's small group to

leave him alone and not intervene to help us keep our marriage covenant. (Anonymous-b, personal correspondence, September 28, 2023)

These accounts are the few collected in a few days of research for this project. There were too many collected during that time to include.

In one high-profile case, a well-known and respected mega-church in California sided with an abusive husband who was eventually put in prison for child molestation and abuse. The wife had come to the church seeking help, and the counselors there told her to pray more, submit more, forgive, and trust God. After several months with the danger to herself and her children escalating, she went to the police and pressed charges. In response, the mega-church pastor called her out by name in ‘church discipline’ in front of 3,500 congregants. She, of course, left that church. A board member who subsequently confronted the board on this injustice against the abused wife and children was told to either recant or resign. He resigned (Shellnutt, 2023). Years later, even with the former husband serving time in prison, the church has never reached out to her, never apologized.

With a biblical understanding of the word ‘widow,’ by identifying betrayal trauma, and by recognizing the gracious provisions in scripture for divorce, the evangelical community can begin to realize the damage of this form of intimate partner violence and care for its victims. Clarity about culturally normative victim-blaming contrasted with God’s instructions to his people along with a trauma-informed framework are essential to help the faith community recognize and amend this unfortunate gap in their practice of true religion, to “...look after widows and orphans in their distress” (James 1:27). Both clergy and laity can then begin to minister effectively to modern-day widows who need the compassionate, rational care of the Body of Christ, but who are too often overlooked and unheard.

### **Christian Teachings and Attitudes on Marriage**

In order to understand the church's beliefs about divorce and why the church responds to the modern-day widow as it does, it is important to understand what the majority of evangelical churches believe about marriage. There are very few, if any other, practices in Christendom upon which there is as much unity in belief and praxis than marriage. Leaving aside progressivism and liberal denominations currently accepting same-sex marriages, orthodoxy and faithfulness to scripture regarding marriage as a sacred and blessed arrangement for human flourishing is taught and believed across denominational and cultural boundaries.

Christian churches commonly offer, and sometime require, pre-marital counseling. However, pre-marital counseling in a Christian context assumes that both parties are sincere, growing Christians who have and would always have the best interest of their spouse at heart; any mention of abuse, adultery, neglect, and other serious issues are in passing, generally as things that happen to other people (Baskerville, 2022, p. 13). Dishonesty, abuse of any kind, coercive or controlling behaviors, infidelity, pornography – while they may be identified as behaviors which would destroy a marriage and harm a spouse, the signs of such behavior, the 'red flags,' are seldom discussed as viable possibilities while in pre-marital counseling or pre-marital classes. Past or current patterns of behavior of the individuals in premarital classes are not examined. Baskerville (2022) contends that,

If we focus only on the *obvious* reasons [from study results], we can estimate at least 42% of divorces, and probably about half divorces are for very serious problems, the kinds of problems that make the marriages miserable: unfaithfulness, physical or mental

abuse, drug or alcohol abuse, refusing to support the family, or simply walking out the door. (pp. 28-29)

It is inexplicable why the evangelical community does not educate potential marriage partners on these issues, and yet that is the pattern that is overwhelmingly seen in churches.

The studies Baskerville is referencing show that more than 40% of all marriages become dangerous, both in and outside the church. These dangerous marriages will ultimately end in divorce for abuse, control and/or neglect. In a survey of 1,147 divorced people over 40 years old, 50% cited very serious reasons for their divorce: verbal, physical, or emotional abuse, adultery, or abandonment/neglect of duty (Montenegro, 2004, p. 23). A survey of 208 divorced people between the ages of 20-55 found that 42% of divorces in that group were for very serious reasons such as infidelity and physical or mental abuse (Amato & Previti, 2003, p. 14). Another survey of 2,323 divorced people revealed the following major reasons for divorce: 58% stated infidelity and 30% stated domestic violence, where drug or alcohol abuse was not offered as a listed choice (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 20). Another smaller survey of people in premarital counseling asked what factors would suggest divorce, and 59.6% selected infidelity, 34.6% said substance abuse, and 23.5% selected domestic violence (Scott et al, 2013, p. 4).

The recurring factors of infidelity and domestic violence and where they are ranked are notable. In the hundreds of accounts in the records of ministries to and for modern-day widows, these same issues of infidelity and abuse are significant factors in their divorces.

### **Evangelical Teachings that Facilitate Abuse in Marriage**

In 2018, Paige Patterson, a leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, expounded upon the 1998 Convention's statement of faith which directed wives to submit graciously to their

husband's leadership in all things. In the Southern Baptist Convention of 2000, Patterson recounted a situation in which sent an abused wife back to her abusive husband, telling her to pray. In that same audio recording of a Q and A, he stated that he does not ever recommend divorce, and that there are degrees of abuse, suggesting that an authority other than the abused spouse can determine the severity of the abuse she is experiencing.

Audio of Patterson's remarks were leaked in 2018, in which he recommended that abused wives should not divorce, but rather pray more (eaandfaith, 2008, 0:55; Boorstien, 2018, paras. 3-5; Mehta, 2018, paras.11-13; Shimron, 2021, para. 8). Patterson never mentioned that the abuser should stop abusing, or what he might say to the abuser. The prayers of the wife during abusive marriages, even as violence against her would likely escalate, are apparently the solution to domestic violence for Patterson.

A blogger who goes by the nom de plume 'Larry Solomon' has written since 2014 about 'Biblical Gender Roles' in which, professing his conservative Christian faith and belief in the authority of the Bible, he blogs such things as "Why God Wants Wives to be Doormats." In a blog post, he insists that wives and slaves are equal in the household hierarchy, with the only difference being that a wife shares the bed of her master. A wife should not resist nor confront abuse by her husband, because, Mr. Solomon says, as Peter advises slaves to endure abuse (1 Peter 2:18-21), so should wives (1 Peter 3:1-2,5-6), since their husbands are their masters, as Christ is master of the church. "...contrary to modern egalitarian views of what marriage should be, God commands wives to regard their husbands as their masters and like slaves to be obedient to their masters in everything" (Solomon, 2019, para. 20). The husband has, according to blogger Solomon, a responsibility to mold her and teach her how to emulate the church and to be the glorious wife she needs to be. This blogger holds that because God disciplined the Israelites in

the Old Testament through war and enslavement, a husband is necessarily just in disciplining his wife, including corporal punishment (Solomon, 2020, paras. 20-23), financial or sexual withholding, isolation, and more (Solomon, 2023, paras. 1-13). This is infantilization, a form of psychological abuse; it is physical abuse and sexual abuse, as the husband assumes complete control of his wife's body. It is also spiritual abuse, as the blogger invokes scripture in order to codify coercive control over another adult human being.

While this blogger may seem extreme, the reality is that the idea of a husband's authority in the home is too often embraced in evangelical circles such that it leaves wives and women at the mercy of husbands and men in general, regardless of their behavior. The heretical doctrine of subordinationism is commonly used as a means of gaining abusive power and control and is in direct contradiction to the scripture and the character of God. Jesus addresses this in Matthew 20:25-28 and in Luke 22:24-27, telling his disciples not to lord it over one another, but to serve one another. Pastor Jason Meyer, in a 2015 sermon on leadership at John Piper's Bethlehem Baptist Church, supported the concept of how misuse of the doctrine of male headship can often facilitate domestic abuse. In a general application of 2 Corinthians 11:16-21, he asserts that in the Apostle Paul's treatment of leadership, that "false leadership 'makes slaves of;' 'devours;' and 'takes advantage of' others" (paras. 16-18). He then applies the same to the complementarian excess that facilitates domestic violence:

An ethos that does not value women can lead to an environment where sick things slip under the radar... "If wives would just submit better and become more meek and quiet, then husbands would not get so angry." These thoughts must be taken captive, or else we can create a climate in which domestic abuse can take root and grow... Hyper-headship is a satanic distortion of male leadership, but it can fly under the radar of discernment

because it is disguised as strong male leadership. Make no mistake—it is harsh, oppressive, and controlling. In other words, hyper-headship becomes a breeding ground for domestic abuse. (Meyer, 2021, paras. 38-39)

Jason Meyer resigned from Bethlehem Baptist Church in 2021, in large part over the pushback he received from church leadership. He was marginalized for his advocacy of believing the voices of the abused – specifically women. The leadership board feared that such “untethered empathy” (Shellnutt, 2021, paras. 17-18) would compromise the gospel and the strict complementarianism of their church doctrine.

### **Christian Teachings and Attitudes About Divorce**

As Meyer and a minority of other pastors know, Christian marriages are not immune to abuse and treachery. To assume that Christians and those who profess Christianity do not act wickedly is profoundly naïve. To suggest that treachery and wickedness through coercion, control, intimate partner violence, abuse, infidelity, and trauma does not happen in church couples, and is inescapable by divorce, is not only naïve but enables the abusers. Christian language of male headship and female submission compels women to protect the institution of marriage and act as though all is well, sanctifying their suffering and using the concept of forgiveness to excuse abuse and betrayal. “Women in various studies cite language and concepts [in the categories of submission, marriage, suffering and forgiveness] used particularly by their husband and local pastors” (Westenberg, 2017, p. 4) to justify staying in dangerous and destructive marriages.

A 2016 report on divorce in the church published by Focus on the Family only framed divorce as a marriage problem, in that the difficulties in marriage were always fifty/fifty and

solutions would necessarily be found by teaching on healthy marriage and providing marriage counseling (Focus on the Family, 2016). Yet over 40% of marriages are destructive, i.e. involving abuse and/or infidelity (Montenegro, 2004, p. 23; Amato & Previti, 2003, p. 14; Johnson et al., 2002, p. 20; Scott et al., 2003, p. 4). This would not be a marriage problem but rather an abusive situation in which there is an abuser and a victim, and in which divorce is a matter of safety and even justice. In domestic violence cases, including cases of sexual entitlement and infidelity, marriage counseling does not work. The coercive control of the abuser silences the abused, and the abused often minimizes or excuses the abuse when sitting together in a marriage counseling session. A couples counseling session with abuse dynamics present serves only to enable and embolden the abuser. The victim is not safe.

The safety and the welfare of all widows is what God plainly says he wants throughout scripture, including the modern-day widow. Christian wives suffering abuse and infidelity often need to divorce in order to find safety and healing. Many women stay in abusive marriages when biblical teaching on divorce and submission are found to be primary factors in that decision (PonTell, 2011, p. 4). The translation of Malachi 2:16, in which the statement “God hates divorce” has become a mantra which quickly condemns the persons involved (especially the initiator of the divorce), is and has been the functional attitude of the church since the 1611 *King James Version* was released (Figure 1, Appendix A). It is taught regularly across all platforms, media, and materials about marriage across evangelicalism. However, a closer look at this Malachi passage may well mitigate or even put an end to the condemnation and isolation to which faith communities subject the modern-day widow.

The theme of the book of Malachi is God’s anger and disgust about his people’s broken covenantal promises. From the macro level of Judah’s covenant relationship to God, down



through the level where priests were offering impure but convenient sacrifices in violation of that covenant, to the micro level of their own marriage relationships, they were acting selfishly and dishonoring God. They were breaking covenant with God, the community, and with their wives.

What Malachi shows us in chapter two is a picture of God's people acting 'treacherously' in a marriage covenant, and exactly how God feels about those who do so. In verse 16 Malachi expresses God's anger about broken covenants on the micro-level, in marriages. Looking at a correct translation of verse 16, which was common before the 1611 King James version, God is anti-abuse, not anti-divorce. The husband, the man, is the one doing the hating, hating and acting treacherously and violently toward his wife. For 2,100 years the Septuagint, Aramaic, Latin Vulgate, Masoretic Text, Wycliffe Bible, Coverdale Bible, Great Bible, Bishop's Bible and Geneva Bible all agreed on this translation. The 1611 King James Bible mis-attributed the hatred of divorce to God, and that attribution was repeated in most English translations until after the 1996 Dead Sea scroll studies of Malachi were disseminated.

Since that update, in which the hating was correctly attributed as from the husband toward the wife, every reliable new translation has returned to this corrected attribution of the hating by the abusive husband toward his wife (Baskerville, 2022, pp. 224-226) rather than God hating divorce (Figure 1, Appendix A). According to Dr. C. Jack Collins, professor of Old Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary,

The translation of this verse found in the Authorized Version (and most English Bibles since then), with God hating divorce, represents a departure from the translation tradition of the previous centuries. The rendering of the English Standard Version, which has a Judean man "hating" his wife and divorcing her, does the best job of handling the details of the Masoretic Text, with no corrections. It also enables us to see how this fits into the

context of profaning the calling of the people of God. This way of reading Malachi 2:16 allows us to see how the verse fits into the overall promotion of covenant fidelity as the ideal of marriage... (Collins, 2007, p. 19)

It is not God who hates divorce, condemning the widows for whom he made provision. He cares for women who were put away or forsaken and requires his people to do the same.

Walking through the second chapter of Malachi from verse 13 to verse 16, it is treachery and injustice that God hates. This is consistent not only with the theme of Malachi, but of the character of God throughout scripture.

This is another thing you do. You are covering the LORD'S altar with tears, with weeping and groaning, because he no longer respects your offerings or receives them gladly from your hands. And you ask "Why?" Because even though the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, you have acted treacherously against her. She was your marriage partner and your wife by covenant. Didn't God make them one and give them a portion of spirit? What is the one seeking? Godly offspring. So watch yourselves carefully, so that no one acts treacherously against the wife of his youth. If he hates and divorces his wife, says the LORD God of Israel, he covers his garment with injustice, says the LORD of Armies. Therefore, watch yourselves carefully, and do not act treacherously. (Malachi 2:13-16)

Nevertheless, too many churches are acting treacherously alongside the abuser by failing to address intimate partner abuse and infidelity, and by refusing to understand the protective provision of divorce. The singular focus on marriage as an institution to be preserved at all costs, even in the face of all types of violence and treachery, shields an abusive, unfaithful husband. In

this context, when a woman divorces to find safety for herself and her children, she is met with condemnation rather than compassion or even curiosity.

We both attended church. When I told church leadership about the abuse (porn, sexual abuse) in our 21-year marriage, they told me I was wrong for doing the in-house separation and that not giving him sex was not going to help the situation. The pastor also told me I'm not submissive or respectful enough (I later found out he follows Piper/Gothard teachings). Years later, after I had remarried and my new husband was a deacon, our pastor removed him as deacon because my victim advocacy posts showed that I was "obviously not healed and haven't forgiven" my ex-husband. He and the other elder said that my victim advocacy makes the church look bad and is hurting the testimony of Christ. My response? It's the abusers who call themselves Christian who make the church look bad – not the ones who reveal the abuse. (Anonymous-c, personal correspondence, September 28, 2023)

To value the institution of marriage at the expense of the victimized individual is an egregious form of spiritual abuse. In the name of protecting the church, and framing it as protecting God and his reputation, pastors and Christian leaders sacrifice individual persons.

Dr. Langberg calls out such practice in her work, as in this article published by the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention:

A church that follows her Head, the Good and Great Shepherd, is a refuge for the flock, a place of green pastures and clear waters, a place of restoration for wounded sheep and most certainly, a place that fights off the wolves. The secular and religious news media have globally exposed the fact that not only are there wolves in the fold, we have, in the

name of our God, protected their place among God's sheep by complicity, cover-up, and deceit. We have protected the institution of shepherding rather than the sheep. This results in untold damage being done to the body of Christ by those who name his name.

(Langberg, n.d., para. 1)

As Langberg expressed, the exposure in the media of abuse in the church is a positive good, shining a light on dis-ordered priorities in evangelicalism.

In Matthew 23:1-7, the words of Jesus call out the same kind of spiritual abuse by the religious leaders of his day. While they spoke the words of Moses, they did not live them; they oppressed the people with heavy burdens that were hard to carry and they were unwilling to help. This is repeated today when abused wives are sent home to pray and submit, and abusers are excused. They enjoyed the notoriety and honor they got, paralleled today in the culture of celebrity pastors. In verse 23, Jesus condemns their blindness to justice, mercy and faithfulness. Churches today that do not care for the modern-day widow and remain willfully blind to the abuse in their midst are neglecting justice for the modern-day widow, mercy for the abused, and faithfulness to the word and heart of God.

Another paradigm contributing to the dismissal of women's voices and their pain is the idea that women and girls are responsible for the sexual purity of men. Influential teachers in the 1980s and 1990s infused conservative Christianity with a twist on 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6. Here, the Apostle Paul specifically instructs believers to avoid sexual immorality and to control one's own body. Verse six, in which Paul says that no one is to take advantage of a brother or sister in the matter of sexual immorality, was twisted to suggest that "a woman can defraud a man by the way she dresses, talks, or looks at him" (Institute in Basic Life Principles, n.d., para. 14), clearly bypassing any intentionality on her part, clearly placing the blame of a man's own lust on the

woman, and clearly this is a continuation of ancient Greek misogyny as noted in a previous chapter.

The focus here is on the result, not the intention. It is one thing to have the deliberate motive of soliciting consensual sexual activity, and another thing to be held guilty simply because another person has a predatory desire towards you, in mind or in action. Blame and responsibility is then placed on anything a victim does, whether by dressing, talking, acting or simply existing within reach of a predator. Supposedly, if someone is stirred up and you are the object of their lust, you have harmed and lured them. Moving from lustful thought to lustful action, the conclusion often made is that the victim of sexual violence “asked” for and caused the violence. This creates a perpetual loophole for abusers and self-blame for victims who have been groomed into believing he/she could have prevented lust by dressing, talking, walking, or acting differently. Churches who teach this place the guilt of sexual sin on the innocent – including children. (Mui, 2022, para. 8)

The same attitude and teaching is very prevalent in evangelical churches, as accounts, articles, and research shown in this paper demonstrate.

The evangelical community many times continues to blame the victim of marital infidelity and abuse, and subsequently blames her for the so-called ‘marriage failure,’ i.e. divorce. The prevailing presumption is that she is responsible for her former husband’s choice to be unfaithful, or that she did not pray enough, provide enough sex, failed in her household duties, spent too much money, ‘let herself go,’ or have enough faith to save her marriage. She is too often deemed culpable for his sin and is treated as such.

Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s these opinions persisted and grew in conservative evangelicalism (Ingersoll, 2019, para. 4). Women and girls were openly taught that they were sexual stumbling blocks, responsible for the sexual purity of men (Ingersoll, 2019, para. 10) and a threat to a man's relationship to God (Dubick, 2018, para.1, Wray-Gregorie, 2023, paras. 29-33). This posture continues to influence the way leadership in the church responds to the modern-day widow. Most often churched people will assume that she must be responsible for her former husband looking for sexual gratification outside the marriage. She is blamed for her own abuse (Thapar-Bjokert & Morgan, 2010, p. 8) and for the infidelity of her spouse (Otiende, 2022). The western culture is entrenched in the misogyny of its founding voices in ancient Greek philosophy, and those positions, though not biblical, still find expression in the evangelical church as well.

In 2014, an art installation was created at the University of Arkansas displaying the clothing sexual abuse survivors were wearing at the time they were assaulted. The most numerous clothing items were tee shirts and jeans, the most shocking a six-year-old's sundress (Andzelika, 2019). The point was obvious – it is never about what the victim was wearing, rather it is always the intent of the perpetrator. And yet, the most common question an assault survivor is asked continues to be, “What were you wearing?” Unless and until that idea is replaced with the truth, women, the Christian modern-day widow, and any abuse victim, will too often continue to be blamed for what was done to her, even in the case of the husband's infidelity and abuse. The truth is that “...each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to death” (James 1:14-15). The human propensity for casting blame was demonstrated in the Genesis account, as Adam cast blame on both God and Eve (Genesis 3:12) for his sin. God then clearly established personal responsibility

for sin in Deuteronomy 24:16, "...each person will be put to death for his own sin." This blame-shifting is exceedingly common in evangelical circles; the woman quoted below was clearly blamed after reporting infidelity and subsequent separation from her abusive, churched husband:

I was in Christian ministry. No one would let me sing in their churches anymore. My pastor said I could stay at the church, but I knew I would be pressured to move back in with my now ex and continue marriage counseling. I basically had to leave the denomination I was in because you couldn't transfer membership to another church without a recommendation from your former pastor. (Anonymous-d, personal correspondence, September 28, 2023)

While blaming victims is profoundly unbiblical, it is nevertheless the default assumption directed toward the modern-day widow, or toward a woman reporting domestic violence. By refusing to hear her voice, and name the abuse, the church is also simultaneously failing to love the abuser.

In the introduction of this work, the pastors silenced the voice of the wife as she pleaded for help in confronting the adulterous husband. They would not go to or speak with the husband because they did not want to offend him. They would only do so if he reached out to them. They failed to protect her, and they failed to love him. Dr. Robert Gagnon (2015) parses out the silence of the church regarding sin, in this case the sins of integrity abuse and infidelity, as a failure to love:

Loving one's neighbor includes reproving one's neighbor (Lev 19:17-18; Luke 17:3-4), even, if need be, church discipline (Paul loved the incestuous man, not the tolerant Corinthian believers). Acceptance of sinful behaviors abhorrent to God, however, is moral sloth at best, functional hate at worst. Augustine got it right: "If any of you

perhaps wish to maintain love, brethren, above all things do not imagine it to be an abject and sluggish thing; nor that love is to be preserved by a sort of gentleness, nay not gentleness, but tameness and listlessness. Not so is it preserved. Do not imagine that . . . you then love your son when you do not give him discipline, or that you then love your neighbor when you do not rebuke him. This is not love, but mere feebleness. Let love be fervent to correct, to amend. . . . Love not in the person his error, but the person; for the person God made, the error the person himself made" (Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John 7.11). (Gagnon, 2015, paras. 12-13)

The church fails to be who she is called to be in choosing to protect the adulterous abuser's sinful attitudes and behaviors, whether by omission or doctrine. Too often faith leaders make the modern-day widow responsible for her abusive husband's infidelity and shame her for the biblically provided escape by divorce. Excusing the abuser is not loving well and is injustice to the abused.

In Acts 6:1-7 the neglectful church practiced justice not simply by confronting the problem, but by acting to correct it. The contemporary church can choose to do the same. The church is called to be a refuge, a place of safety and healing. By seeking to understand the debilitating trauma of marital infidelity and the psychological violence of a husband's integrity abuse, and of divorce as a provision from God to protect the modern-day widow, the church can move toward authentic practice of true religion by caring for the modern-day widows in their congregations.



### Chapter Four: Proposed Solutions

When church leaders have a more complete, biblical understanding of the word ‘widow,’ the modern-day widow can hope to find help at her church. An informed church community and its leaders can be compassionate, effective care-givers and a true support system when they have identified and understand intimate partner violence, betrayal trauma, and God’s remedy, divorce. A church body will be co-operating with God when they recognize the gracious provisions in scripture for divorced women, the modern-day widow. There are many resources through which pastors and churches can begin to learn the damage of intimate partner violence and betrayal trauma, and to care for its victims. This project will put those resources in their hands and provide instructions and training with the end goal of ministering to the suffering modern-day widow. By creating an attractive and informative website, providing the local church with education regarding intimate partner abuse and betrayal trauma, the objective is to shift entrenched paradigms surrounding divorce and inspire caring action toward the modern-day widow, just as in Acts 6:1.

In the evangelical community, marriage is celebrated as God’s best plan for people. Those who enjoy healthy marriages derive great benefit from that situation, a fact proven in studies and in lived reality across all demographics and time. Yet divorces are also a lived reality in many cases, evidence that healthy marriages are not a given. Studies show that divorces are most often sought for reasons that are identified as serious – for sexual infidelity and domestic violence. Intimate partner abuse in all its forms is the most common causes cited for destroying marriages and leading to divorce. The sad reality is that current data reveal divorce in the evangelical community occurs at essentially the same rate as in the secular culture, and for the same serious reasons. Psychologists and neurologists recognized the damage that abuse and infidelity wreaks

on a betrayed spouse. Statistically, that spouse is the wife. In too many cases, the evangelical community fails to perceive that abuse and betrayal are always the choice of the abuser, resulting in victim blaming and protecting the perpetrators. When an evangelical woman suffering betrayal trauma chooses divorce, in the overwhelming majority of cases she is met with condemnation. The rejection and condemnation from her faith community is extremely traumatic and unbiblical. God hates treachery and abuse (Malachi 2:16); God has provided protection for the divorced woman, who is a widow in God's sight. The full definition of widow is not well-known, as the Hebrew and Greek definitions of the words translated 'widow' are not commonly expanded to inform the church communities.

The research for this project revealed several things. A very few evangelical communities have identified the reality of modern-day widows as defined by scripture and in this project. Most evangelical churches typically do not see nor do they acknowledge that divorce, especially in faith communities, is most probably for serious reasons, and that modern-day widows have likely endured marriages broken by abuse and infidelity, some for many years. They have suffered betrayal trauma more often than not. These churches typically do not see nor seek to understand the debilitating pain of betrayal trauma, and the practical, emotional, and spiritual crises in the aftermath of a divorce. These churches do not allow for the reality of the breaking of the marriage covenant due to what Jesus called "the hardness of [your] heart" (Matthew 19:8), displayed in abuse and infidelity. God allows divorce and makes clear provision for a woman's freedom from suffering in a marriage broken by the hardness of an abuser's heart. This heart hardness is not a marriage issue that can be addressed in marriage counseling, and it is certainly not the fault of the betrayed wife, nor can it be fixed by more prayer, more submission, or more forgiveness. The problem and the responsibility belong to the abusive adulterer. It is a spiritual

problem defined by the word that Jesus used in the above referenced passages, in which the word translated ‘hardness’ is *sklērokardian* shown here with word origin (Strong, n.d., p. 65; Bible Hub, n.d.):

ἄ4641 Σκληροκαρδίαν *sklērokardian* (sklay-rok-ar-dee'-ah); feminine of a compound of (4642) (σκληρός) and (2588) (καρδία); hardheartedness, i.e. (special) destitution of (spiritual) perception: — hardness of heart.

Of the words defining *sklērokardian*, research for this project uncovered the doctrines in the evangelical community that demonstrate a ‘special destitution of spiritual perception’ in regard to women. The lack of spiritual perception to the equal worth of all persons – that all are one in Christ – often creates situations of abuse in some form.

While there is much to be said, learned, and done in regard to addressing intimate partner violence and integrity abuse on the part of the perpetrator, this project is focused on ministry to the victim of those behaviors, a modern-day widow who has sought relief through the biblical provision of divorce. Her needs are well within the scope of God’s expectation of the church’s responsibility to care for widows.

Uncovered in research for this project and consistent with statistical information about intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, and marital infidelity, are the many thousands of modern-day widows whose voices and stories are now available to hear. Also discovered through research are growing number of psychologists and counselors who have practices or ministries specific to women dealing with betrayal trauma. Accessible and immediate help can be found online for the modern-day widow, often for whom financial access to professional help is problematic. There are multiple social media sites of dozens of outreach ministries created by

survivors, modern-day widows in evangelical spaces. Some of these groups are led by accomplished and respected Christian women who have experience in social work, ministry, or mental health. Others, just as helpful, are led by survivors. Some offer coaching, or classes; all offer a wealth of helpful, supportive information. These groups are peopled with thousands of women, and some men, giving and receiving support, telling their stories, and encouraging one another. Most of their experiences, sadly, include the secondary trauma of victim blaming and shunning by their faith communities as a result of their decision to divorce.

A survivor of domestic violence as a child, Patrick Weaver is a certified domestic violence counselor, trauma informed specialist, and consultant to individuals and churches. His ministry helps the victims and survivors of domestic violence in a Christian context. Weaver declares that abusers hide in the church with ease due to the proficiency of their deceit. They are aided primarily by persistent yet incorrect teachings about male authority and female submission in marriage which create a framework for excusing the abuser and shaming victims through spiritual language:

This is why the voices of victims are muffled. This is why, saving for an insignificant few churches, support for abuse victims is nonexistent. This is why most victims of abuse will tell an eerily similar story of leaders in the church coercing them back into abusive relationships with false doctrine to be re-abused. This is why you hear countless abuse victims in the church recount eerily similar stories of leaders in the church telling them, “If you love them more or better,” or, “submit more or better,” they wouldn’t abuse.

(Weaver, 2021, para. 7)

His ministry actively pushes back on the false narrative that excuses the abuser and blames the abused.

When the abused wife finally seeks safety and freedom from marital abuse and the trauma of betrayal, divorcing her abuser who broke the marriage covenant and defiled the marriage bed, far too often she does not find refuge and relief in her faith community. The church and the evangelical community in total must do better in their practice of true religion. She is a biblical widow. The evangelical community must begin to recognize this, and respond biblically by visiting her and providing compassionate, trauma-informed, and wrap-around care to her.

As it is, the evangelical community has work to do. Similar to the event recounted in Acts chapter six, today there is a widow group – a very large widow group – whose care has been not only ignored, but they are turned away empty in the vast majority of instances. Addressing this neglect in seminaries and bible schools, and in pastoral and leadership trainings, is a long-term approach which is beyond the scope of this project. A solution which can be discussed here is a way to educate and motivate the church at the local level. The work of the ministry is person-to-person. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on one way this problem can and should be addressed at the local level. What follows here is a content strategy for a website (Figure 4, Appendix A). This website will provide a biblical framework in which the modern-day widow can be rightly identified. It will define and describe abuse and betrayal trauma, provide tools for becoming trauma-informed, and outline practical ways in which any person, group, or community can step into compassionate practice of true religion.

### **A Proposed Solution: Informative and Practical Website for the Local Church**

The goal of this website is to provide both the pastoral leadership and the congregants with a vehicle by which they are made aware of the scriptural identity of the modern-day widow, of God's provision for this population, and how the church as a body and the extended evangelical community can assist these women, doing justice for them and caring for them in their distress. It is reasonable to predict that a compassionate understanding of the situation will impel the evangelical community to do justly, love mercy, and walk with humility alongside the modern-day widow. Her family of faith can, if they will, "[make] the widow's heart rejoice" (Job 29:13b). The website can be linked to the local church's website, but will have its own homepage, About section, mission statement, guiding values, and a statement of faith that undergirds the expressed goals and purposes contained in the website. Then there are four distinct content areas, each one with a specific goal, learning objectives, and links to resources for deeper understanding. The final content section has suggested applications for the local church, groups, or individuals.

The content will be presented with text, short videos, and graphics designed to engage the user. In keeping with a clean, visually pleasing format, written content will be interspersed with clickable links. Resources for each section will feature hyperlinks to original sources where possible.

#### **Content Area One: A Biblical Framework**

*Goal:* The goal of this content area is to lay the biblical framework for a thorough understanding of God's provision for women marginalized due to becoming a widow. Essential to that understanding is the biblical definition of a widow, which includes those women

abandoned, discarded, and divorced. This understanding and informed awareness will effectively facilitate holistic healing to the modern-day widow.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Define the modern-day widow using biblical criteria; describe what constitutes abuse/intimate partner violence; differentiate trauma and betrayal trauma; and modify attitudes and language toward the modern-day widow.

The first content area on the website is centered on biblical exegesis. The goal of this content is to provide an overview of relevant exegetical findings. The material is presented with clarity and simplicity for the non-seminarian. In each of the sections, links are provided for further study, should the reader want to go deeper. These links are listed by content area and section in Appendix B.

In Acts chapter six, as noted previously in this project, the first church in Jerusalem was confronted for neglecting a specific group of widows in their widow-care support. The situation was rectified when the church leaders were made aware of the situation, as they then delegated tasks to trusted individuals. The evangelical community today needs to hear the similar outcry regarding its neglect of the modern-day widow. The current response of evangelicals to the modern-day widow, in truth, has largely done more harm than good. The content strategy proposed in the overall website solution will both raise awareness and provide a remedy in the form of recommended actions to consider.

### ***Content Area One, Section One: Beginning at the Beginning***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to provide accurate biblical information regarding the definition and identification of the modern-day widow.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Locate scripture passages pertaining to God’s plan for widows; define the word ‘widow’ in the biblical languages; understand the provision for divorce in scripture; and state the biblical criteria for divorce.

Establishing the biblical equality of all people, this first topic is a brief look at Genesis 1:26-30. Here is where God created human beings in the image of the Triune God, male and female. The text of Genesis 2:20 states that God created woman as corresponding to man, from the substance of already created man rather than from the dirt, or in the same manner as all other created things, which God spoke into existence. This portion of the content features two clickable links. One is Marg Mowczko’s paper (2015/2017), “Is a Gender Hierarchy Implicit in Genesis 2?” and the other is to Dr. Philip B. Payne’s (2009) examination of the eleven arguments justifying the idea that God created man as authority and woman as subordinate, with Payne’s evidential debunking of each. The section concludes with references by Payne to Paul’s writings which emphasize the equality of all believers and Payne’s identification of subordinationism as heresy.

Regardless of the differing opinions about gender roles – and the theological camps, each with their arguments – every human is an image bearer and is known, loved, and fully redeemed in Christ individually. Genesis 5:1-2 states that “On the day that God created man, he made him in the likeness of God; he created them male and female. When they were created, he blessed them and called them mankind.” That God created male and female in His image is incontrovertible. All other ideas must be rooted in that truth. Likewise, the redemptive atonement of the completed work on the Cross is also an incontrovertible truth with which all doctrinal considerations must agree:



Genesis 1:26–28 tells us that both men and women were created in the image and likeness of God. It says this without dividing up the Godhead and implying that women are more like one person of the Godhead and men are more like another. Moreover, in the New Testament, both men and women are called to be transformed and become like Jesus (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:18). And all followers of Jesus are given his Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts, regardless of gender. (Mowczko, 2019, para. 14)

This section ends by noting that whether one is complementarian or egalitarian, or does not claim either, the intent is to recognize that women and men are both created in God’s image. Both men and women are fully redeemed by the blood of Christ, both are responsible for their own choices, and both are to be valued, to serve and be served, both to be treated according to scriptural directives. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B.

### ***Content Area One, Section Two: Who is a Widow?***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to correctly place the modern-day widow in the context of scripture. The paradigm which limits widowhood to those who have lost their husband to death is expanded to include the divorced woman, according to scripture.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Articulate the biblical definition of the word ‘widow’; identify the correct translation of Malachi 2:16; and conceptualize the place of the modern-day widow in the evangelical faith community.

The second section in this first content area teaches the definition of the Hebrew word for widow. It is critical to identify the divorced woman as a modern-day widow. Scriptures from the Old Testament which are specific to the provisions and expectations God set for the divorced and discarded wives are listed here, with brief explanations of the context of each. This places the

divorced woman in her rightful and protected place in community. Next comes a synopsis of the Hebrew patriarchal culture within which Christ ministered, specifically the two rabbinical camps around the subject of divorce. The conversation that Jesus had with the Pharisee as recorded in Matthew 19:8 will be reviewed as evidence for divorce as a remedy for the violence of, and a rescue from, a hard-hearted husband, which is connected with the correct translation of Malachi 2:16. Baskerville's chart of the 18 translations of that passage will appear here and contain a link to the findings of scholars after the 1996 Malachi fragment of the Dead Sea scrolls was made available.

Next within this topic, the New Testament Greek word for 'widow' is defined. The ongoing Jewish practice of caring for widows is illustrated in the early church by noting their misstep in Acts 6:1. That passage also demonstrates the correct response of the church upon being made aware of their neglect. This event in the early church brings the Old Testament directives of widow care into the context of the fellowship of Christian believers. The section concludes with Paul's instructions to Timothy in regard to widow-care. The importance of widow care in the context of Timothy's Greek church affirms the Judeo-Christian response to the plight of widows, that of attunement, protection and provision. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B.

### ***Content Area One, Section Three: The Evangelical Community Today***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to recognize current evangelical teachings and counseling practices that facilitate abuse, shields the abuser, and shames the abused.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Contrast the biblical directives for widow care with the current evangelical response to modern-day widows; and evaluate change points to move evangelical thinking about modern-day widow care.

This final section of the first content area opens by illustrating what the data show regarding the evangelical response toward abuse, abuse in marriage, and divorce. The statistics are presented in visually accessible graphics accessed from surveys and studies within Christian and secular contexts. The rate of divorce and, importantly, the serious reasons for divorce are presented, with links to the relevant surveys and studies. A repeat of the biblical definition of widow linking back to the earlier section with the definitions and passages is next, to insure a correct application of the statistics to the person for whom God directs his people to protect and care.

Following this information is a stark look at how, similar to the church in Acts 6:1, the evangelical church is neglecting widows, modern-day widows. The estimated numbers derived from the multiple online and in-person communities of modern-day widows are noted. Hyperlinks to several of these communities are found in Appendix C of this work.

This section will include excerpts from current sermons and teachings illustrating doctrinal positions that tend to elevate the institution of marriage over the well-being of individuals who suffer when the marriage covenant is violated by treachery. Live links to source material are provided throughout. The section will end with information about and links to those evangelical leaders and pastors who are responding to the modern-day widow by acknowledging the wrongful attitudes and speaking against the doctrinal positions that facilitate abuse. Links are provided here as well, for the reader to read or listen to those who are caring for the modern-day widow.

Personal accounts from modern-day widows whose faith communities minimized their abuse and condemned them for divorcing will be in this section. The studies and surveys that quantify the overwhelming percentages of negative, hurtful, or even abusive encounters with faith communities contrasted with the very few positive, helpful encounters demonstrate the proven need for an evangelical attunement to the modern-day widow. The several ministries serving those modern-day widows whose faith communities were sources of secondary trauma will be referenced in this topical section. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B.

### **Content Area Two: Defining Abuse and Betrayal Trauma**

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to provide the user with an awareness of the nature of abuse and betrayal trauma with its effects.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Comprehend abuse as a pattern of behavior and explain/paraphrase the trauma of betrayal as abuse.

The second content area is about abuse and Betrayal Trauma. The findings of neuroscience relevant to non-physical abuse, in brief lay terminology, are in this content area. The several psychologists whose scope of research and practice focuses on the various forms of marital abuse and its impact on a spouse are referenced, with links to their websites. While not all scholarly work has a specific Christian worldview, some Christian psychologists have made major contributions to the understanding of abuse in marriage, and their viewpoints are referenced.

#### ***Content Area Two, Section One: What is Abuse?***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to raise awareness about the patterns of abuse, specifically in an intimate relationship.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Give examples of emotional and psychological abuse in a Christian context; analyze abuse as a pattern; and understand power and control as the central goal of abuse.

The content in this section first supplies the defining characteristics of abuse, or what constitutes abuse. Multiple organizations, government and non-governmental agencies, the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association, as well as those organizations specific to domestic violence prevention – all have similar if not identical lists of what behaviors constitute abuse. All agree that abuse is a pattern, not an incident. There are links to these sources on this content page.

For clarity, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program produced the ‘Duluth Model’ (2017a) of Power and Control (Figure 2, Appendix A) and Christian Power and Control (Figure 3, Appendix A), which are used as graphic visuals in this section. They serve as a point of reference to give language to abusive patterns of behavior. These graphics provide succinct visual identification of what constitutes abuse in a marriage and the justifications used. The vocabulary on the wheels promotes thoughtful consideration of what patterns of behavior are destructive to a marriage. A link is provided taking the user to the video series providing an in-depth explanation of the Duluth Model by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program (2017b).

Alongside the Power and Control wheel graphics on the website, corresponding scripture raises awareness of the sharp contrast between abusive behaviors and Christlike behaviors. One such scripture is Ephesians 5:29, in which the Greek word translated ‘cherish’ indicates ‘to keep

warm' as a bird keeps its young warm. That passage is an allusion to the passage in Exodus 21:10-11, in which the husband is, by contract, to feed, clothe, and love his wife. The Power and Control wheel graphics present examples of abusive behaviors, both in commission and omission, in practical and relational marital terms. The goal of these behaviors is to instill fear and exert dominance. All the behaviors stand in stark contrast to the teachings of Christ.

In an abusive evangelical marriage there are three major teachings that when used to wield power serve to facilitate abuse. It becomes abuse when the teaching on 'headship' is twisted to justify a husband's entitlement; 'biblical authority' becomes coercive control, which is spiritual abuse; and 'submission' becomes subjugated compliance to the unchallenged decisions or actions of another person, adult to adult. Sexual abuse in marriage falls into this paradigm, for example, justified by one portion of one verse, that a husband owns the body of his wife - absent the rest of the verse, that the wife owns the body of her husband (1 Corinthians 7:4). Two contrasting sermons are linked within this portion, the one by Mike Novotny defining abuse from the pulpit (Novotny, 2023), and the other by Burnett Robinson, who endorsed the rape of wives by their husband (Shimron, 2021). These sermons will be linked in this content. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B.

### ***Content Area Two, Section Two: What is Betrayal Trauma?***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to define betrayal trauma and to challenge the user's default assumption about culpability in marital infidelity.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Identify sexual infidelity as abuse; categorize the betrayed spouse as traumatized rather than a co-dependent; recognize the

PTSD/complex PTSD-like symptoms of a betrayed spouse; and outline the neurological injury suffered by the betrayed spouse.

After looking at abuse in its various forms, the content moves to identifying sexual infidelity as abuse. The work of Dr. Omar Minwalla is introduced with a link to his white paper and to his website. His metaphor of “the secret sexual basement” is illustrated with words and graphics and explains how infidelity inflicts trauma on a spouse and on the children of the marriage. This introduces the concept of betrayal trauma. After a brief definition of betrayal trauma, this section includes a short video of Christian psychologist Dr. Jake Porter (Porter, 2022, 13:40) explaining what happens neurologically to a betrayed partner. Then follows another short video of Christian psychologist Dr. Doug Weiss explaining what a betrayed wife is experiencing emotionally. The similarities between PTSD and Betrayal Trauma are shown in graphic form, using one Venn diagram to show overlap in symptoms and another showing the overlap in neurological changes precipitated by both. Emphasis is placed on the neurological aspect of trauma. Related scriptures are listed here, those which are often misused resulting in additional shaming of the modern-day widow.

God’s divorce laws are designed to protect and to provide relief to the spouse who is suffering in the marriage. Reviewing passages about God’s provision of divorce for women whose husbands treat them with treachery, this content area ends with the findings of some of the theologians and biblical researchers confirming the covenant and the contractual properties of biblical marriage and the provisions made for wives whose husbands violate those agreements. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B.

***Content Area Two, Section Three: Becoming Trauma-Informed - What it Means, How it Helps***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to prepare pastors, leaders, and peers to minister effectively to the modern-day widow without causing further trauma.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Understand the process of healing and how to facilitate rather than obstruct it; articulate which harmful words and phrases to avoid; identify what it means to ‘hold space’; and articulate words and phrases that are helpful.

This section is built on the previous section about betrayal trauma. To illustrate the sometime subtle differences between hurtful and helpful interaction with a modern-day widow, this content features a contrast between typical cultural attitudes and words with trauma-informed attitudes and words. The support needed by a victim-survivor during the healing process at the neurological level is not commonly understood, although it is not difficult to understand. An explanation of disenfranchised grief is contrasted with grief that is witnessed. Concepts that may seem foreign or ‘worldly,’ such as ‘holding space’ are introduced with relevant concepts from scripture. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:3) is just one passage that indicates that before comfort there must be a time of grief. Romans 12:15, “...weep with those who weep,” clearly instructs believers to enter into the grief of others. Evangelicals are at times dismissive of the grieving process, especially when they do not understand the loss for which their peer is grieving.

Because learning about abuse and trauma can trigger a possible realization of the destructive nature of a website user’s current relationship, at the end of this section will be information on where, how, and to whom one can safely report intimate partner violence and betrayal. Since a therapist or counselor must be trauma-informed in order to help not hurt, a list of questions to ask a potential therapist is found here. This content section will include links to



any known trauma-informed therapists in the area, and any possible corresponding resources within the local church body. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B.

### **Content Area Three: Traditional Losses, Modern-day Losses**

**Goal:** The goal of this section is to raise awareness of the unique losses and trauma suffered by the modern-day widow.

**Learning Objectives** – The end user will be able to: Identify the ramifications of traumas inherent in intimate partner violence, domestic abuse in all forms, and betrayal trauma; recognize the modern-day widow as a trauma victim/survivor; and revise personal and community response to the modern-day widow.

The third content area compares and contrasts the experiences of a traditional widow with that of a modern-day widow. A brief commentary of the protocols of how traditional widows are supported in the evangelical community is outlined, followed by the need for a protocol to care for modern-widows. Care protocols for the modern-day widow are suggested in the fourth content area of the website.

#### ***Content Area Three, Section One: Similar Losses, Differing Grievs***

**Goal:** The goal of this section is to create a template identifying the similarities and highlighting the differences between a traditional widow and a modern-day widow.

**Learning Objectives** – The end user will be able to: Recognize the emotional, psychological, and spiritual differences between losing a husband to death and losing a husband to sex addiction, adultery, or both; and articulate the existing protocol of caring for the traditional

widow and the need for a protocol for the modern-day widow.

In this section, the losses and griefs suffered by traditional and modern-day widows are compared. Some losses are similar, while many others are not. The differing losses indicate the unique psychological and emotional aspects of IPV, domestic violence, and betrayal trauma with which the modern-day widow suffers. The traditional widow is in no way diminished in this section or in this work; rather the meaning of the word widow is expanded, per its biblical usage, to include the discarded, divorced, and abandoned woman as a widow. This comparison teaches the user about unique issues endured by the modern-day widow, which are rarely identified, such as the neurological events specific to betrayal and integrity abuse by a spouse. The modern-day widow who has been betrayed by her husband's sexual infidelity, whether pixilated, physical, or both, has suffered indescribable trauma. She is not only bereft of a husband, but she has also suffered a psychological injury that has affected her neurologically and physically. She has lost her partner, her marriage, her security, and all or a typically large percentage of her income. She has lost her identity, many times the family home, psychological and relational stability for her children, her future, her sense of self and her self-worth. The role of the faith community is emphasized, noting that 75% of victims turn to pastors and their spiritual support systems (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019, p. 2).

While there is a cultural understanding of how to respond to a traditional widow, there is not a cultural protocol for a response to the modern-day widow. This section will serve to bring the actual distresses and needs of the modern-day widow into the consciousness of the church, then suggest healing responses. The stories of specific women are included here, enumerating their material losses, emotional and psychological losses, and the loss of essential spiritual fellowship and community. The organizations created to meet the modern-day widow's material

and possibly her legal needs are mentioned with contact information, but with the caveat that God has called his people to care for widows, that it is not the function of the state. Testimonials suggest that, overwhelmingly, government agencies provide inadequate protection and recourse, and are generally not compassionate relationally, nor do they offer spiritual comfort. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B, as well as a bulleted list of losses experienced by both the traditional widow and the modern-day widow.

***Content Area Three, Section Two: Disenfranchised Grief and the Gift of Witness***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to educate the user regarding the need for grief in its right place and time and to engender respect for grief in self and others.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Describe the nature of grief; define disenfranchised grief; recognize the importance of community in the healthy grieving process; and identify the fear related to encountering grief in another.

This content builds on the understanding that the modern-day widow is grieving losses that may be difficult to articulate and hard to understand. However, grief needs to be shared; it needs to be witnessed. This unwitnessed grief is known as disenfranchised grief. It is grief that is not supported by one's community. It is grief which is not acknowledged nor for which there is shared mourning (Rush, 2022, para. 1). When it is not witnessed and shared, the magnitude of the loss is being grieved only deepens and is stored in the psyche and in the body, unresolved.

Grief is ubiquitous, but understanding how to grieve is less so. Resources such as those of bereavement caregiver Alan Wolfelt are linked in this section. His article in particular, "The Companionship Philosophy of Grief Care: Being Present to Pain" (2016) gives language to the idea of holding space. This section includes quotes from his article as well as from others who

have studied grief and grieving, in order to teach the website user how to witness the grief of the modern-day widow, even if it is not a grief common to that user. The griever simply needs someone who will exist with them, not to minimize, compare, or judge. “If their grief is a wave, you are the rock upon which it breaks. And when it inevitably surges back to them, maybe, for one precious, sacred moment, it will have lost some of its force” (Driscoll, 2022, para.10).

Scripture is replete with grief and the grieving. Jesus is the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3). As Immanuel, he exemplifies ‘being with’ the grieving. He remains with, and he promised never to leave nor forsake his people. Jesus heals the brokenhearted (Psalm 147:3, Isaiah 61:1, Luken4:18), and there are a number of passages in which his people are instructed to weep with those who weep, to lament, to cry out, to meet needs, and in many ways minister to one another in times of despair. This is one way by which his followers join in the fellowship of his suffering. It is in witnessing grief and in the grieving, the lament, that healing is found.

Finally it is noted in this section of content that God’s people are called to care in times of trauma and loss. It focuses on the importance of hearing the lament of the modern-day widow. The recorded experiences of Job, Naomi, and Hannah serve to illustrate the way in which they told their stories, naming their pain and bitterness. They were each heard by others, and they each survived and were blessed by God. Lament and grief are often avoided by evangelicals and labeled as a lack of faith, when in fact it is a part of healing and growth. Suggested resources for this section are in Appendix B.

**Content Area Four: True Religion, or the Practice of Active Caring**

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to inspire the user toward compassionate, informed, and gracious action toward the modern-day widow.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Identify modern-day widows with compassion; generate actionable plans to care for the modern-day widow; and articulate a protocol for individual and community response to the modern-day widow.

The final content area is the call to action. In this section, the specific needs unique to the modern-day widow are addressed with accompanying ideas or recommendations for action. The goal of this section is to answer the question, “What can we do?” and “How can I help?” with practical steps. Guidelines and response plans are outlined. Providing physical and emotional safety, prayer suggestions, non-intrusive meal trains (meaning she may prefer meals left at the door rather than trying to entertain a guest), age-appropriate child/adolescent care needs, housing concerns, legal needs, and financial support and assistance, are a few of the areas of care that are listed. Each sub-content section in this area will provide downloadable PDFs for individuals to reference as they seek to meet enumerated needs. The church has a critical role to play in the recovery of the modern-day widow. It is essential to visit, to comfort, to defend and to provide for her needs just as for the widow-by-death, and with trauma-informed sensitivity to the additional kinds of support the modern-day widow needs.

***Content Area Four, Section One: Visit Her in Her Distress***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to change the paradigm of church benevolence from a place for the suffering to come in, to that of carers who go out (James 1:27).

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Understand the definition of ‘visit’ as a physical action incumbent upon the carer; identify a visit to the sufferer as a visit to Christ as in Matthew 25:40.

This is a very short content section, essentially to define the word ‘visit.’ It serves as a reminder that the responsibility is on the community member or minister to physically visit the modern-day widow. She is certainly in distress. Understanding the nature of trauma, as the previous content explains, will help the user understand that their role is to actually physically go to where the modern-day widow is. A cautionary note is important here, that of being sensitive to the trauma of betrayal and the shame that attaches itself to that trauma. This is when being trauma-informed is essential; take care, when visiting, to be aware of signals of emotional exhaustion, and exit gracefully. The important thing is a caring presence, without agenda.

A symptom of trauma is to isolate; however, isolation is counter-productive to the healing of trauma. To isolate when traumatized can be lethal. To emerge from isolation when traumatized is extremely difficult and unlikely without support. By visiting the widow in her distress, a Christian person is practicing the true religion of caring for the widow, often at the personal cost of convenience and comfort. Just as Jesus was moved with compassion so his followers are to also be. In 1 John 3:17, the love of God responds in very practical and tangible ways: “If anyone has this world’s goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from [them] – how does God’s love reside in him?” One may feel sympathy for another due to a perceived life difficulty such as divorce, but that is not enough. Compassion is, as defined by Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1974), “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it” (p. 229). The difference between sympathy and compassion is emphasized at the beginning of this section, to encourage individual and community response. The scripture

further specifies the directed response to those bereft of a husband, which includes the divorced, betrayed, and abandoned.

In James 1:27, the Christian is instructed to visit widows in their distress. The church must not wait for the modern-day widow to come to them; the visiting is done by the Christian. This is compassion – an action towards her. The first thing required in that passage is on the part of the one doing the visiting, not on the one who is to be visited. In this section the user is encouraged to facilitate the formation of a safe group within which the modern-day widow can find support. Local domestic violence shelters will be listed here, as well as any church-based divorce support groups already available. Simple actions like making sure the modern-day widow does not sit alone at church are important. Move to sit with her. Connection is essential.

#### ***Content Area Four, Section Two: Comfort Her***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to illuminate the process of comforting another person.

*Learning Objective* – The end user will be able to: Realize the importance of learning how to effectively and biblically comfort a sufferer; understand that there is a time for silence in comfort; the negative impact of pushing the process; and regulate self-focus.

This portion of content is an application of previous content regarding how to become trauma-informed. Attuned listening will comfort her, validating her deep pain and confusion without judgement. While not all grief carries trauma, recognize that all trauma carries grief. Grief must be witnessed by a safe other in order to heal. When the grief in trauma is diminished and couched in scriptural admonitions, such as “you need to forgive him,” or “you shouldn’t feel that way, because Jesus...” or “just give it to God” it is spiritual abuse, even if unintentional. Minimizing or discounting grief is ‘disenfranchised grief’ and though not deliberate, is a form of

gaslighting. The suffering of the griever is cast as shameful when she is told that she should not feel as she does, in fact, feel; recognize that this is the brain in survival mode, not petulance or unforgiveness.

Romans 12:15 says that we are to weep with those who weep. Do that; recognize and allow her confusion, grief, and anger to flow. “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted” is a familiar verse (Matthew 5:4). Who does the comforting? In the case of the modern-day widow, the comfort is to come from her family of faith. Pastor Neil Schori (2022) advises comforters to validate victims, as only 2% lie about being abused, and the 98% are more likely than not to downplay the severity of the abuse and of the damage done (Domestic Shelters, n.d., paras. 9, 12). They have been dis-empowered by their abuser. Be a good listener and learn to be comfortable with silence. Be curious, not about what happened, but rather about what is happening inside them.

Being comfortable with silence is important. A compassionate hearing of her story, without offering advice, analysis, or correction, is what it means to ‘hold space.’ To hold space is to metaphorically hold the emotion of another in relational safety and validation, even if the hearer cannot understand the emotion, even if the expression of emotion moves from raw to withdrawn and everything between. Holding space, patiently and compassionately, validates the experience of the other, which is a necessary step in healing. The hearer, by holding space, assists the modern-day widow in her grieving process. Holding space without judgement is providing the first necessary comfort for her in her distress (James 1:27).

Comfort does not condemn, compare, or critique. Comfort waits quietly with respectful presence. Comfort expresses empathy and reflects back with clarity. Comfort stays curious to her and about her, sensitively inviting expression and helping to name traumatic memories and



emotions previously denied or suppressed from fear of retaliation or condemnation. Comfort is not cheery encouragement and positive platitudes. King Solomon writes in Proverbs 25:11, “A word spoken at the right time is like gold apples in silver settings,” and in 25:20, “Singing songs to a troubled heart is like taking off clothing on a cold day or like pouring vinegar on soda.”

If the hearer feels anger at what they are hearing, acknowledging and naming the injustice or abuse as such empowers the abused to move through their own anger and find some resolution. The hearer enters into the other’s suffering by feeling their own feelings – and naming them. That the ex-husband used veiled threats that made the modern-day widow fear for her safety should generate anger in the hearer, and she, the divorced woman, needs to know this. Her anger is real, and it is just. Only by naming it and sharing it can she process through it.

The hearer must be courageous in order to enter into the suffering of another while being careful to keep the focus on the other. Now is the time to join in the suffering of Christ as he suffers with the abused, the cast-off, the broken hearted. And you will suffer. Be brave (Beise, 2022).

#### ***Content Area Four, Section Three: Defend Her***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to facilitate the understanding of the modern-day widow’s disadvantaged position.

*Learning objectives* – The end user will be able to: Formulate practical ways to provide protection to the modern-day widow; anticipate and mitigate ways in which abuse may continue during a divorce proceeding and after; and recognize the need for emotional and psychological protection.

This area of content will contain a new and perhaps challenging idea. Scripture says to defend the weak (Psalm 82:3); the emotional and psychological damage the modern-day widow has suffered has her in survival mode, draining her internal resources. While she may not seem to need defense, there are several areas in which defense will be necessary.

Sometimes defending her means reminding her that his infidelity, deception, and abuse was not her fault (Matthew 15:19, James 1:15). She did not deserve the abuse. Sometimes it looks like blocking the door so the ex-husband cannot get to her or the children, or screening her calls and texts for only the necessary information to shield her from additional abuse. Sometimes it looks like going with her to court, as an active, though silent, presence. Often, it looks like providing finances so she can get adequate legal representation in court. It always looks like protection.

The church is responsible to step in and defend the modern-day widow, in the name of the Christ who loves her. How else will she know that she is loved? That construct – that she is loved, and lovable – has been shattered at the deepest level. The widow-by-death can call to mind the love she had; the modern-day widow is crippled with doubt that she was ever loved (Beise, 2022). Defending her can look like encouraging her to tell her story, in writing, in person, or making a video. Telling one's story facilitates healing but also creates a record that can be notarized and used in the legal proceedings as evidence, should she choose to do so. In the telling of her story she will begin to regain her voice, her sense of self, and find restorative justice, moving toward an understanding of God's justice, which is a setting to right what was made wrong.

God is a God of justice; the Psalmist writes that "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of [God's] throne" (Psalm 89:14a). A single foundation of justice and righteousness

together form the basis of God's authority, indicating that justice – the setting right of wrongs – is holy as righteousness is holy. The church is to seek justice for the modern-day widow.

Isaiah is direct: “Learn to do what is good. Pursue justice. Correct the oppressor. Defend the rights of the fatherless. Plead the widow's cause” (Isaiah 1:17). Pleading the cause of the modern-day widow necessarily includes a legal defense. Divorce proceedings can be exorbitantly expensive, and without financial assistance, a modern-day widow is far too often legally defrauded. Statistically, especially in evangelical spaces, wives do not make as much income as husbands, as ‘gender roles’ are emphasized. These ‘gender roles’ puts wives, notably those who are working mothers or stay-at-home moms, at a crippling disadvantage in terms of legal representation. There are no Miranda Rights in divorce; no attorney is provided. Isaiah 1:17 admonishes God's people to plead the case of the widow, indicating an active role for the faith community to play.

Modern-day widows need an advocate in the courtroom, and the church must make sure that she gets adequate legal representation. If a final judgement includes having sufficient financial resources from the ex-husband, that will alleviate some of her needs going forward. Having a financial base will facilitate a sense of security and allays a portion of the overwhelm of the new situation she faces. This sense of being financially cared for by her community, being seen and heard, is a powerful step in healing for the modern-day widow.

#### ***Content Area Four, Section Four: Provide For Her***

*Goal:* The goal of this section is to specify the financial need of the modern-day widow.

*Learning Objectives* – The end user will be able to: Comprehend the necessity of effective legal representation; formulate ideas by which the faith community can sustain the

modern-day widow through the legal process; and assess the advantage to the modern-day widow and the faith community when the legal outcome is favorable for her.

God's laws made specific economic provisions for widows. This portion of content reminds the user that a divorced woman is also a widow by biblical definition. When the evangelical community shames and shuns a modern-day widow, they are acting the antithesis of God's heart for them. His provision would have all widows receive what they need from the faith community. Women have always suffered disproportionately from the effects of divorce, most measurably around finances. They are three times more likely to be impoverished than are divorced men. Writing for *Kiplinger*, Stacy Francis, President and CEO of Francis Financial, Inc. states that:

As we know, women already face many financial obstacles, including earning less than men, starting retirement with smaller amounts saved, and living longer. When coupled with divorce, the economic outcome can be disastrous. Research suggests that women usually do not fully recover from the financial consequences of divorce. After divorce, the average woman's income falls by more than a fifth and remains low for many years. (Francis, 2022, para. 7)

If the divorced woman is in her mid-life, finding work that will adequately provide for her and any children in her care is very difficult. If she returns to school, upon earning her degree, there may still be only entry-level openings for her, should the prospective employer look past her age.

There will be no life insurance disbursement, only legal fees. She may be faced with vindictive financial abuse from her ex-husband. She may lose her home, and she could well become food-, income-, and housing-insecure. She often must fight continuing legal battles,

hoping just to receive what her state's laws provide, which likely will not happen without proper representation. If she is in her middle age she may not have time, due to her age, to recover a livable income. Turning to the church, especially if that particular church may have championed her choice of being at home, and finding no substantive financial help, is yet another betrayal. Thousands of women in support groups on social media have shared their painful experiences in this regard. Churches that place value on the stay-at-home mom, the homemaker, perhaps the home-educator, are particularly responsible to then help her complete her missional mothering, minimizing the loss of lifestyle and purpose as much as possible (Beise, 2022).

### **Summation of Proposed Website Resource**

Sincere Christ followers desire to become more like Jesus; the church and the evangelical community is, as a whole, doing its best. There are blind spots and there are uncomfortable issues; intimate partner violence, domestic abuse and divorce are some of those uncomfortable issues. These same matters are also glaring blind spots. Research for this project revealed the difficulties and trauma experienced by the modern-day widow, and that most of the evangelical community either avoids, diminishes, or denies the reality of that trauma and those issues in their midst. It is imperative to increase awareness and provide guidance such that sincere evangelicals can begin to provide care for the many suffering as modern-day widows, especially as God has made clear in scripture what he would have his people do.

The website outlined in this chapter offers information and guidance for those who wish to care well for the modern-day widow in the evangelical context. The content areas described are designed to inform with succinct definitions and biblical references, providing links for further study should that be desired. The text content will be interspersed with short videos, with

descriptive graphics, and with personal accounts where applicable. The intention of the website is not only to inform, but also to suggest an active response, a compassionate move toward the doing of justice for modern-day widows. To that end, the final content area of the website is a very practical trauma-informed applications designed to meet the known needs of the modern-day widow.

Christ-followers are called by God to be agents of grace and love, and love is active. The hopeful expectation of this project is that when informed and given guidance, the evangelical community will act on the information presented. Modern-day widows will be graciously folded into their faith family, The journey toward post-traumatic growth for the modern-day widow will not be in isolation and disenfranchised grief. Instead, the oft-expressed ‘walking alongside’ – companioning with modern-day widows in their distress – will become a reality rather than a platitude offered as a means of avoiding personal discomfiture. Raising awareness, as this project proposes to do, is the first step.

### **Chapter Five: Evangelical Care for the Modern-day Widow**

The church is designed by God to be a family. Infused with love, resting in the righteousness and justice of a good Father, it is meant to be a place of sharing burdens and joy, looking forward together to a forever place free of tears and sorrow. In the now, the church is expected to be a refuge, a place of safety and healing. For many, for most, it is. But misunderstanding about God's loving provisions for the modern-day widow has produced a demographic of women whose post-abuse and post-divorce experience with the church has left them doubly traumatized. Researchers of the experiences of the modern-day widow suggest that there are a million or more divorced women who are ostracized by the evangelical church (Wray-Gregorie, 2023, para. 2). It does not have to continue this way. Yet the modern-day widow continues to be overlooked, in part because it is difficult for the evangelical community to own the reality of abuse and betrayal in church marriages and at the same time maintain a veneer of "not in my church!"

But the church must open its eyes. The debilitating trauma of infidelity and the psychological violence and treachery of a husband's integrity abuse in the evangelical community is a statistic that cannot be dismissed. The information is available, from scholarly papers and studies to journal articles and books, from survivor organizations and ministries to online communities (Sample list in Appendix C). Divorce as a provision of a loving God to protect the abused and abandoned wife is well researched, though commonly suppressed, with evangelicals asking wives to suffer abuse rather than find relief and safety by leaving destructive marriages. Intact marriages are considered better for the evangelical brand; women who leave treacherous husbands are far too often blamed for his choices. She is routinely shamed and shunned by the faith community. However, the biblical definition of the word 'widow' is

obviously inclusive of the divorced, and provisions for her well-being are at the feet of God's people. The current blindness to the identity of the modern-day widow in the evangelical community need not be permanent.

This project offers the evangelical community the biblically researched definition of widow, supported by respected, published theologians. It has provided a literature review on the modern-day widow, the abused and betrayed wife, in the contemporary evangelical community. Information on intimate partner violence, domestic abuse, and the betrayal trauma commonly experienced by this demographic has been reviewed through differing lenses – the academic, the psychological and neurobiological, and in the lived experiences of Christian women.

In order to facilitate ministry to the modern-day widow, the website proposed in this thesis is designed to inform and guide individuals or groups in a Christian context. It can be adapted and implemented with relative ease such that its usefulness is not limited by the relative size of a church, organization, or group. Most existing resources are not well-known, and the website proposed in this thesis will provide information about and access to those resources.

Moving forward, the key to raising significant awareness lies in developing curriculum for use in bible schools and seminaries. Currently, pastors and those in church leadership express that they are not trained nor prepared to respond to intimate partner violence, abuse, and betrayal trauma (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019, p. 6). In the future, I hope to collaborate with survivors, psychologists, and theologians to develop a curriculum for pastors training in academic settings. An online course of study for church leadership outside of the that setting is another goal. Pastors can and should lead in caring well for the modern-day widows in their congregations.



The United States federal government has designated October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month. A pastoral staff can use this designation to preach and teach about abuse and about intimate partner violence on a Sunday morning in October. Safe reporting portals can be integrated into church websites and apps. Women's groups reach out to members of the congregation who are facing domestic violence, creating a safe space for them. Community resources can be identified from the pulpit; the church can partner with local shelters. Simply by recognizing the reality of IPV, the grace of divorce, and the biblical identity of the modern-day widow, pastors and church leadership can become agents of healing rather than sources of secondary trauma and rejection.

Women whose lives and hearts have been shattered by betrayal trauma and infidelity can and should find that the fellowship of believers and spiritual leadership see them and will provide compassionate care for them in the aftermath of a divorce. Jesus calls all who are weary and heavy laden to come to him, assuring that there is rest for their souls in his care. While most evangelical churches have not extended the same invitation to the modern-day widow, this can begin to change. The creation of training materials for the local church, such as the website suggested in this project, is a beginning. Going forward, online resources and printed matter for local church leadership will be a valuable asset to create. Most importantly, an academic course of study for seminaries and bible schools will better equip potential pastors to practice true religion (James 1:27), and the modern-day widow can at last find help and healing in the Body of Christ.

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Appendix A

Figure 1

Figure Showing Changes in Translation of Malachi 2:16

Malachi 2:16 – Hasn’t the Bible *Always* Said, “God Hates Divorce”? No!

ANCIENT, EARLY and MODERN TRANSLATIONS	Who does the hating?	What does he hate?	Text
Septuagint LXX 3 <sup>rd</sup> -1 <sup>st</sup> Century BC (Brenton)	The husband	his wife	But if thou shouldest hate thy wife and put her away, saith the Lord God of Israel,
Septuagint (LXX) 3 <sup>rd</sup> -1 <sup>st</sup> Century BC	The husband	his wife	But if having hated you divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel,
Qumran 4QXII* 2 <sup>nd</sup> Century BC	The husband	his wife	"For if you have hated (and) divorced," [says the LORD] God of Israel,
Aramaic (AD 2 <sup>nd</sup> Century)	The husband	his wife	But if you hate her, divorce her, says the LORD God of Israel,
Latin Vulgate AD 382	The husband	his wife	"When you have hate, divorce!
Masoretic Text (AD 10 <sup>th</sup> Century)	The husband	his wife	For the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel,
Wycliffe Bible 1395	The husband	his wife	when thou hatest her, leave thou her, saith the Lord God of Israel.
Coverdale Bible 1535	The husband	his wife	Yf thou hatest her, put her awaye, sayeth the LORDE God of Israel
Matthew Bible 1537	The husband	his wife	Yf thou hatest her put her awaye sayeth the Lorde God of Israell
Great Bible 1539	The husband	his wife	Yf thou hatest her put her awaye sayeth the Lorde God of Israell
Luther Bible 1545	The husband	his wife	Indeed, he who bears her ill will and repudiates her,...
Bishop's Bible 1568	The husband	his wife	If thou hatest her, put her away, saith the lorde God of Israel:
Geneva Bible 1587	The husband	his wife	If thou hatest her, put her away, sayeth the Lorde God of Israel,
Douay-Rheims 1582	The husband	his wife	When thou shalt hate her put her away.
King James Bible 1611	God	divorce	For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away
Young's Literal Translation 1862	God (I)	divorce	For [I] hate sending away, said Jehovah, God of Israel,
English Revised Version 1881	God (I)	divorce	For I hate putting away, saith the LORD, the God of Israel,
American Standard Version 1901	God (I)	divorce	For I hate putting away, saith Jehovah, the God of Israel,
Revised Standard Version 1973	God (I)	divorce	"For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel,
New International Version 1984 (later updated 2011)	God (I)	divorce	"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel,...
New American Standard Bible 1989	God (I)	divorce	"For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel,
New Revised Standard Version 1989	God (I)	divorce	For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel,
New Living Translation 1996	God (I)	divorce	"For I hate divorce!" says the Lord, the God of Israel.
Christian Standard Bible 2003	The husband	his wife	"If he hates and divorces [his wife]," says the Lord God of Israel,
New International Version 2011 update	The husband	his wife	"The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel
English Standard Version 2011	The husband	His wife	"For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel,

Table based on articles by Dr. C. Jack Collins (Malachi 2:16 Again) and Kyle Pope MA ("God Hates" or "I Hate")

Note: From "18 Bible Translations of Malachi 2:16: Does God Hate Divorce?" by Gretchen Baskerville, 2020, November 16, *Life Saving Divorce*, (<https://lifesavingdivorce.com/malachi/>) Copyright 2020, Gretchen Baskerville. Used with permission.

**Figure 2**

*The Duluth Model: Power and Control Wheel*



**DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROGRAMS**

202 East Superior Street  
Duluth, Minnesota 55802  
218-722-2781  
www.TheDuluthModel.org

*Note:* The graph shows language and actions identified as abuse when they are a pattern of behavior. Graph used with permission Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/>



**Figure 3**

*The Duluth Model: The Christian Power and Control Wheel*



**Naming Violence with Christian Men**  
CHANGING MEN, CHANGING LIVES  
A Supplement to  
Creating a Process of Change for Men Who Batter:  
The Duluth Curriculum

**DOMESTIC ABUSE INTERVENTION PROGRAMS**  
202 East Superior Street  
Duluth, Minnesota 55802  
218-722-2781  
www.TheDuluthModel.org

*Note:* The graph shows language and actions identified as abuse when they are a pattern of behavior. Graph used for thesis with permission from Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels/>

**Figure 4**

*Site Map for Proposed Website*



*Note:* Author-created in Canva, this is a mock-up of how the suggested website may be organized. Each tab is represented by a rectangle, in the order of the content areas. Navigation from the homepage will take the user to a content area (darker blue) and from there to a menu of sections (shown in lighter blue) in that content area. This is subject to change as the website develops.

## Appendix B

*A list of resources suggested in the content areas of Chapter Four.*

### **Content Area One: A Biblical Framework**

#### ***Section One: Beginning at the Beginning***

Instone-Brewer, D. (2002). *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*. Eerdmans.

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<https://www.psalms82initiative.org/community/public/posts/167316-me-submit-to-her>

Silva, P. (2012, May 16). A Plea to Pastors. [Blog post] Focus Ministries.

<https://www.focusministries1.org/?s=plea+to+pastors>

#### ***Section Two: Who is a Widow?***

Instone-Brewer, D. (n.d.). Divorce and Remarriage – Dr. David Instone-Brewer [Video series] YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFp4JQAnybA&list=PL7740BFE40202311E>

Instone-Brewer, D. (2006) *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church*. InterVarsity Press.

#### ***Section Three: The Evangelical Community Today***

Baskerville, G. (2020, July 28). *Adultery, Abuse, Abandonment are Biblical Grounds for Divorce*.

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## **Content Area Two: Defining Abuse and Betrayal Trauma**

### ***Section One: What is Abuse?***

Blythe, A. (Host). (n.d.). Betrayal is abuse: Here's why. [Audio podcast episode]. In Betrayal Trauma Recovery. <https://www.btr.org/betrayal-is-abuse-2/>

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Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. (2023). What does emotional and mental abuse look like? With guest Leslie Vernick. [Podcast]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Quer4IRyCtg>

Focus on the Family (Host). (2021). Friends helping friends: Identifying abuse in marriage – Darby Strickland [Video podcast episode].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fKQGu7OHw8>

Minwalla, O. (n.d.) *Deceptive sexuality and trauma resource library*. Institute for Sexual Health.

<https://minwallamodel.com/resource-library/>

### ***Section Two: What is Betrayal Trauma?***

Crossroad Christian Counseling. (n.d.). *Betrayal Trauma*.

<https://www.crossroadchristiancounseling.com/betrayal-trauma-recovery-1>

Minwalla, O. (2021, November). *The secret sexual basement: The traumatic impacts of deceptive sexuality*. Institute for Sexual Health. <https://minwallamodel.com/resource-library/>

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APSATS/Exposed Conference, Pure Life Alliance.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb6LPNd4OpI>

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQyggw1\\_iWs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQyggw1_iWs)

Weiss, D. (2023). *What betrayal trauma does to the brain: The impacts of partner betrayal trauma*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgSNuZlnarc>

### ***Section Three: Becoming Trauma Informed***

*A listing of websites for church information and training*

Called to Peace Ministries - <https://www.calledtopeace.org/>

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship: Becoming a Trauma-Informed Faith Community -

<https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/becoming-a-trauma-informed-faith-community>

Christian Trauma Healing Network - <https://christiantraumahealingnetwork.org/>

Christians for Biblical Equality: Booklist - <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/15-books-domestic-violence-pastors-believers-and-survivors/>

Church Cares: Becoming a Church that Cares - <https://churchcares.com/>

(The) Exodus Project - <https://www.patrickweaver.org/tep/>

Faith Trust Institute - <https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/>

*Seminary Education Webinar: Preparing Future Faith Leaders to Respond to Intimate Partner Violence*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=120QKFe7gEU&list=PLTWkWVNslIGxkSC4hUWHL89idc0tnbVBs&index=19>

Healing the Healers, Series 2: Domestic Violence <https://healingthehealers.org/series-2-domestic-violence/>

Focus Ministries - <https://www.focusministries1.org/>

Mike Novotny - "Abuse: What does God Say To the Abused"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PplqezEaK-A>

"Abuse: What does God Say To the Abuser"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUOInUhTzNs>

*More Resources on Abuse:* <https://timeofgrace.org/?media=articles&s=abuse>

Neil Schori - Podcast Guest: Domestic Violence and Evangelical Churches

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/79-domestic-violence-evangelical-churches-guest-neil/id1561001170?i=1000612437402>

Podcast Guest: What Pastors Should Do When They Hear About Domestic Violence

Interview: Pastor Neil Schori <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyWHjYj9iqg>

Domestic Violence Awareness Sermon and Training Tips

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyWHjYj9iqg&t=9s>

Spiritual Director and Domestic Violence Coach

<https://www.facebook.com/SchoriCoaching/services/>

Not in Our Church - <https://www.notinourchurch.com/safechurch.html>

Patrick Weaver Ministries - <https://www.patrickweaver.org/>

*Masterclass:* Lifting the Burden: Relational Trauma [www.theexodusproject.com](http://www.theexodusproject.com)

Psalm 82 Initiative - [Psalm 82 Initiative](#)

*Course:* The 4 Tools Framework – Identifies the most common abusive behaviors and their effects. <https://www.psalms82initiative.org/4-tools-framework>

*Mini Course:* Scholarship for 4 Tools Course

<https://www.psalms82initiative.org/scholarship-for-4-tools-course>

*Free Resources:* Dangerous Fences – a brief allegory about how even well-meaning religious legalism can foster abuse (pdf) <https://www.psalms82initiative.org/dangerous-fences>

Restored: Ending Violence Against Women - <https://www.restored-uk.org/>

Ending Domestic Abuse: A Pack for Churches (Digital Download)

<https://www.pressresources.org/product/ending-domestic-abuse-a-pack-for-churches/>

Safe Haven Ministries - [SafeHaven Ministries](#)

Spiritual First Aid - <https://www.spiritualfirstaid.org/>

Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center -

<https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma-informed-care/>

<https://phys.org/news/2021-04-domestic-abuse-difficult-subject-churches.html>

Trauma Informed Churches – <https://www.traumainformedchurches.org/>

(The) Trauma-Informed Pastor - <https://www.thetraumainformedpastor.com/>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: When I call for help: A pastoral response to domestic violence against women - <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/when-i-call-help-pastoral-response-domestic-violence>



**Content Area Three: Traditional Losses, Modern-day Losses*****Section One: Similar Losses, Differing Grievs***

*Example information for Content Area Three, Section One: Similar Losses, Differing Grievs*

**Traditional Widows (Widow by Death)**

- She has the comfort of knowing her husband would have chosen to stay with her.
- She doesn't go to bed at night knowing her husband is alive and choosing to be with another woman.
- She can share the grief of losing her husband with her children.
- She will be surrounded by friends, family, and community. Instead of shamed she will be supported, loved and shown compassion.
- In most cases, she will be able to live comfortably off her husband's insurance and other benefit plans set up to protect his family should something happen to him.
- If she has a home, one that they shared as a family, more than likely she will remain in that home with loving memories of the man she loved.
- If, however, she struggles financially, she will be surrounded by loved ones willing to help her get back on her feet instead of viewing her as the cause of her own problems.

**Modern-day Widows (Widow by Abuse/Divorce/Abandonment)**

- She has to live with the pain of knowing her husband no longer wants her or the life they had built together.
- She has to live without the one she loves and with the societal attitude that she should "get over it" and "move on."
- She has to face the husband she lost in court as they battle over who gets what of any assets they have accumulated.
- She has to face him every time he comes to pick up the children for visitation. Yes, he is, at least, still alive and he lets her know every opportunity he gets that he finds her detesting.
- She has to live with the angst caused by knowing her children are being introduced to and encouraged to care for the woman her husband left her for.
- She has to do all these things with very little family support and no community support. She is on her own with her pain.
- She has to sell the home she enjoyed with her husband and children and, more than likely, move into a small apartment.
- There are no insurance policies, no financial security, just an ex-husband fighting to keep her from getting what she needs to remain financially secure.
- And, she gets to raise her children as a "single mom." Vastly different from the widowed mom who isn't blamed for a broken home or possibly causing trauma in her children's lives.

*Note:* Whileas these listed points are personal to Abercrombie, the general application is consistent with this author's research. Specific experiences may vary. Sourced from: Abercrombie, K. (2019, March 7). *Death or divorce: Which is worse?* Divorced Moms. <https://divorcedmoms.com/death-or-divorce-what-does-one-have-to-do-with-the-other>

Abercrombie, K. (2019, March 7). *Death or divorce: Which is worse?* Divorced Moms.

<https://divorcedmoms.com/death-or-divorce-what-does-one-have-to-do-with-the-other>

Auld, L. (Ed.). (2023, February 1). *A guide to what the bible really says about divorce.*

Crosswalk. <https://www.crosswalk.com/family/marriage/a-guide-to-what-the-bible-says-about-divorce.html>

Grice, J. (2018, October 25). *Should divorced people receive care like widows?* iBelieve.

<https://www.ibelieve.com/relationships/should-divorced-people-receive-care-like-widows.html>

Kitson, G. C., Lopata, H. Z., Holmes, W. M., & Meyering, S. M. (1980). Divorcees and widows:

Similarities and differences. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 50(2), 291–301.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1980.tb03291.x>

### ***Section Two: Disenfranchised Grief***

Driscoll, A. (2022). Bearing witness to grief. *Annals of Family Medicine*, 2022 Nov-Dec; 20(6),

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9705028/>

Rush, I. (2022, November 7). What is disenfranchised grief? *Psycom*.

<https://www.psycom.net/disenfranchised-grief>

Wolfelt, A. (2016, January 12). *The companioning philosophy of grief care: Being present to pain*. Tragedy Assistance Programs for Survivors (T\*A\*P\*S).

<https://www.taps.org/articles/2016/companioningphilosophy>

Zoll, L. (2019). Disenfranchised grief: When grief and grieverers are unrecognized. *The New*

*Social Worker*. <https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/practice/disenfranchised-grief-when-grief-and-grieverers-are-unrecogniz/>

## Appendix C

*A sampling of resources for the modern-day widow: Web-based ministries, social media communities offering coaching, information, resources, and the fellowship of peers.*

**Anne Blythe** - <https://www.btr.org/>

*Individual* <https://www.btr.org/individual/> *and Group sessions*

<https://www.btr.org/group/>

*Workshops:* <https://client.btr.org/workshops/>

*Podcast:* <https://www.btr.org/recovery-podcast/>

*Book List:* <https://www.btr.org/books/>

**Dr. David E. Clark, Ph.D** - <https://www.davideclarkephd.com/>

*Book:* [Enough is Enough](#)

*eBook:* [Stop Feeling Guilty for Your Divorce](#)

*Phone Advice*

**Gretchen Baskerville**, The Life-Saving Divorce <https://lifesavingdivorce.com/>

Private Facebook group

**Heather Elizabeth**, Held and Healed - <https://heatherelizabeth.org/>

Private Membership Facebook Group – Held & Healed: Christian Women Rebuilding

After Abuse <https://www.facebook.com/groups/616663178999357> (3600+ members)

Online Retreat – Held & Healed Online Retreat Videos: Rest, Regulate, and Reset

Video Course and Facebook Community – Rebuilding: Finances

<https://heatherelizabeth.org/page/rebuilding-finances>

Coaching: Twelve Truths Videos; Holiday Help Workshop

Non-Profit:– Honor Project Movement: Empowering Women Who Are Rebuilding After Abuse

Blog: <https://heatherelizabeth.org/blog>

Podcast: Held & Healed with Heather Elizabeth

<https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/heather-elizabeth.org>

**Jess Nagy**, Mosaic Motherhood - <https://mosaicmotherhood.com/>

Private Membership Facebook Group – Full Hands, Fierce Hearts, A Community of

Warrior Mamas <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fiercehearts/>

Blog – <https://mosaicmotherhood.com/blog/>

Free Resource - <https://mosaicmotherhood.com/four-keys-to-resilient-kids/>

Coaching – <https://mosaicmotherhood.com/coaching/>

**Leslie Vernick** - <https://leslievernick.com/>

*Coaching:* <https://leslievernick.com/coaching/>

*Membership:* Conquer <https://leslievernick.com/nav-conquersignup/>

*Facebook:* [Leslie Vernick - Enriching Relationships That Matter Most](#)

*Resources:* Quick Start Guide <https://leslievernick.com/free-resources/>

*Books:* [The Emotionally Destructive Marriage](#) [The Emotionally Destructive Relationship](#)

[How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong](#) and more

**Mary Ellen Dykas**, Hope for Hurting Wives - [Hope for Hurting Wives](#)

Blog: <https://hopeforhurtingwives.com/blog/>

Recommended Resources: <https://hopeforhurtingwives.com/resources-about-abuse-in-christian-marriages/>

Private Facebook Membership Group: <https://www.facebook.com/hopeforhurtingwives>

**Natalie Hoffman**, Flying Free - <https://www.flyingfreenow.com/>

Private Membership Facebook Group - [Flying Free](#)

Podcast – Flying Free: Christ-centered Perspective on Emotional and Spiritual Abuse  
<https://www.flyingfreenow.com/flying-free-podcast/>

Book and Workbook: Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage: A Christian  
Woman’s Guide to Hidden Emotional and Spiritual Abuse

More...

[Andrew J. Bauman](#)

[Author Misty Terrell](#)

[Cole Arthur Riley](#)

[Hannah Hollander](#)

[Jeff Crippen](#)

[Ngina Otiende](#)

[One Moms Battle](#)

[Path To Freedom](#)

[Rebecca Davis—Untwisting Scriptures](#)

[Sarah Jackson Coaching](#)

[Sarah McDugal](#)

[Spiritual Sounding Board](#)

[Thriving Forward](#)