According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, twenty-four people in the United States fall victim to some sort of abuse from an intimate partner every minute. 1 in every 4 women and 1 in every 7 men in the United States have been a victim of physical violence from their significant other at some point in their lives. Nearly half of all Americans, women and men alike, have experienced some sort psychological aggression from an intimate partner (“Statistics”).

With each day, more horror stories of how people—mostly women, but some men, too—are being abused by those who should be their best friends. One woman, Katherine, recalled how her husband used to kick her, slap her, trip her, throw things at her, and yell all kinds of demeaning things at her. Sometimes he threatened worse. “He would threaten to run us all off the road in the car and kill us,” Katherine said, “The violence became a daily occurrence if not several episodes a day” (“Katherine’s Story”). According to another testimony, a Scottish man left his wife of sixty years after receiving endless abuse from her: “I was getting black eyes, I was getting bruising,” he said, “I got battered, I got my tooth knocked out, I had my knee hammered and incidents like that ... My nose was bleeding, my shirt was ripped” (“My Abusive Wife”). Each one of these abusive marriages ended in divorce. It’s not difficult to see why these individuals eventually decided to leave their spouses when the relationships became detrimental to their physical and emotional health. What is a bit more challenging, however, is to determine whether these divorces would be allowed from a Christian ethical perspective? In this essay, I will use Scripture, the writings of theologians, as well as church history and traditions, to argue that God does allow a husband or wife to divorce his or her spouse in the case of abuse.

Before making this argument, the definition of an abusive marriage must first be established. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services defines “physical...
abuse” as “non-accidental use of force which results in bodily injury, pain, or impairment” (Tracy). For a definition of emotional abuse, Dr. Barbara Shaffer states that emotional abuse is to treat another person with “profound disrespect or with an attitude of entitlement that discounts the abused’s dignity, separateness, and autonomy.” Shaffer, who holds a Ph.D. in Christian counseling, continues: “Out of entitlement and disrespect spring various overt behaviors that use anger, violence, and/or contempt to induce fear, guilt, and shame. The other person is controlled, punished or demeaned” (Corcoran). Chad Ashby, pastor of College Street Baptist Church in Newberry, SC, provided a sufficient definition for this writing when he wrote fort Christianity Today that an abusive marriage is one that “crosses the line from relationship to enslavement” (Ashby).

Though marital abuse is an undeniably painful and heart-breaking situation in which to find oneself, Scripture seems at first glance to condemn divorce under circumstances of abuse. The only acceptable grounds for divorce that Jesus gives is when one spouse has been sexually unfaithful. He says in Matthew 5:32, “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” The Apostle Paul broadened this view slightly, allowing a believer to divorce an unbelieving spouse if the unbelieving spouse desired to leave the relationship in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15:

To the rest I say this (l, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

Neither of these passages directly address the issue at hand, and in all other cases, Scripture makes it clear: “For I hate divorce,” says the Lord, the God of Israel” (Malachi 2:16). Though it may seem at first glance that God does not consider abuse as legitimate grounds for divorce, one might draw a different conclusion upon further study into the intended meaning of both these Scripture passages and the traditional views of the global church.

Though it is not the ideal situation, it has been mentioned above that Scripture does allow for divorce under certain circumstances. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, God says that a man may divorce his wife if he finds adultery or another form of vile sin in her. He also mentions that it is adultery for the same man to remarry her once he has divorced her:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man’s wife, and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

By the days of Christ, however, the religious leaders had begun to taken this passage to mean that a “certificate of divorce” was all that was required for a man to divorce his wife. If they had the paperwork, a man could divorce his wife for whatever reason he saw fit, and that was perfectly fine in those days (MacArthur).

Then Jesus steps on the scene with His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, in which He elaborates on His views on adultery and divorce. In verses 31 and 32, He addresses the popular teaching of the Pharisees in His day when He says, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Jesus demonstrates here that He is passionately against women being tossed to and fro by the will and whim of a society dominated by men. Sexual purity is important to Him, but this Scripture also clearly shows how passionate Jesus is about respecting women. Jesus’s mandate was intended to protect women who were divorced without defense based on the
improper application of Deuteronomy 24. To paraphrase, Jesus is saying, "If you divorce your wife for any reason other than sexual unfaithfulness to you, you force her to commit adultery with whoever she may wind up marrying next, and that adultery will be on your head, not hers." The great Christian leader and Protestant theologian John Calvin paraphrased Jesus' teaching like this:

That man ... who puts away his wife, and gives her a bill of divorcement, shelters himself under the pretense of the law: but the bond of marriage is too sacred to be dissolved at the will, or rather at the licentious pleasure, of men. ... The man who, unjustly and unlawfully, abandons the wife whom God had given him, is justly condemned for having prostituted his wife to others. (Ashby)

A few hundred years after the life of Jesus, His passion for the care and respect of women was continued in the Christianized Byzantine Empire. This empire ruled the Western world from 330 to 1450 A.D. The Byzantines had their own unique set of guidelines about divorce, which included provisions for the divorce rights of women as well as men. A man was only allowed to divorce his wife in one of six circumstances: adultery, treason against the empire, plotting against the life of her husband, spending the night away from her husband (if she was not sent away and she spent the night somewhere other than her parents’ house), or if she “attends horse races, theatres, or hunts, in order to be seen, without her husband’s knowledge or against his prohibition” (Viscuso). Women also had a list of circumstances under which they could legally divorce their husbands. These were similar but not identical to those for men: adultery, accusing the wife of adultery without proof, treason against the empire, and most interestingly, plotting against the life of the wife or offering her up to other men to be debauched by them. Though this law does not directly address an abusive marriage, it does certainly seem to imply that women had the right to divorce their abusive husbands in this ancient Christian society, especially with its addressing of sexual exploitation on the part of the man as grounds for the wife to file for divorce (Viscuso).

Ashby gives his thoughts on the issue in an article written for Christianity Today's website. Ashby admits that God does indeed say “‘For I hate divorce,’ says the Lord, the God of Israel" in Malachi 2:16, but he reminds us that the verse continues, “and I hate him who covers his garment with wrong,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.’” The Old Testament says repeatedly that God hates injustice and oppression, and He pronounces judgment on the nation of Israel time and time again for their practice of these sins. Ashby says that the pain and suffering of those being abused by their spouse should never be taken lightly by church leaders. “The primary message an abuser should experience from the minister of Christ is that the eternal wrath of the Lord burns hot against those who heap up violence and oppression,” Ashby says. “Their abuse has not escaped the watchful eye of the One who declares, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’ (Romans 12:19)” (Ashby).

Calvin seemed to agree with this train of thought. He taught that it would be cruel to force an abandoned spouse to remain in the marriage if his partner became ill and unable to control his or her urges to sexually or physically harm the other spouse. He also allowed for a couple to separate (not necessarily divorce) if one spouse contracted a sickness or disease that could prove to be dangerous for the other spouse or their children (Calvin). Theodore Beza, a disciple of Calvin and a Protestant theologian in his own right, took Calvin’s thoughts a step further. Similar to the Apostle Paul’s views (see 1 Corinthians 10), Beza allowed divorce in the context of abandonment of the marriage by either spouse. Interestingly, Beza believed there were two kinds of marital abandonment: one of the body, and another of the soul. He taught that a spouse could either be physically abandoned (in the case of one spouse maliciously leaving the home of the other), or the abandonment could be spiritual, if one spouse chose to leave the Christian faith. In either case, Beza said it was up to the spouse who had been wronged to decide whether or not to attempt to reconcile the marriage or to seek a divorce. Beza also did not consider it immoral for an abandoned spouse to remarry (Witte).

The Roman Catholic tradition has an interesting method for resolving this conflict. Before a couple can marry in the Catholic church, their marriage must be declared “valid” based on a number of criteria. First, the man and woman must be free to marry. Second, they must be able to pledge their lives to one another in marriage. Third, they must freely exchange their consent. Fourth, the couple must intend to marry and be faithful to one another for life, as
well as being willing to have children. Fifth, they must intend the best for each other. And, finally, the marriage must take place in the presence of at least two witnesses, as well as a church minister. A Catholic marriage can be annulled if evidence is presented that a marriage, which was once declared valid by the church, was actually invalid from the start ("Annulment").

Contrary to popular belief, an annulment does not mean that the marriage never existed. Instead, it simply means that the marriage was missing one or more of these requirements at the time that it began (presumably unknown to the witnesses), and that the church did not perform a valid marriage on the original wedding day. If a spouse wishes to receive a declaration of nullity for his or her marriage, he or she must write a petition to this end and present it to the church. This petition must include whatever grounds the petitioner wishes to obtain the divorce based upon, as well as providing the church with a list of friends or family who can witness to these problems. Proceedings within the church continue from here similar to a secular court of law. If this court, called a Tribunal, agrees that the marriage ought to be annulled, both parties are allowed to remarry within the Catholic church ("Annulment").

There are, of course, several arguments from Christians who believe that divorce is not an acceptable alternative for believers, even in the case of abuse. Scripture does not specifically address domestic violence, and many passages call for women to be submissive to their husbands, such as Ephesians 5:22, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” One could argue that this command, in tandem with God’s hatred of divorce and His call for unconditional love in marriage, means that women cannot seek divorce unless their marriage suffers from infidelity or abandonment; abuse is not considered legitimate grounds for divorce. This is a trend that is being rejected today by most ministers, but, according to a LifeWay Research survey of 1,000 evangelical pastors, 4% of pastors still believe this way (Randall).

Wayne Grudem, a professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary and General Editor of the English Standard Version Bible, used to share this belief. He said in an interview on his website, “In brief, that position is that marriage is a life-long commitment, but that divorce is morally justified, and is not sin in God’s sight, if the other spouse (a) has committed adultery, or (b) has abandoned the marriage and all attempts at reconciliation have failed.” Grudem said that an abused Christian spouse should seek help from the church, and could possibly seek separation from their abuser in dire circumstances, but divorce was not an option unless the abuser decided to abandon the marriage by leaving (Randall).

Grudem published these views in his 2018 textbook called *Christian Ethics: An Introduction to Biblical Moral Reasoning*. However, Grudem recanted his own teachings in 2019 in favor of supporting divorce in the case of an abusive marriage. He and his wife saw firsthand several abused spouses who continued to suffer when their abusing spouses did not abandon their marriages. Searching for answers, the Grudems found that 1 Corinthians 7:15 ("But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace") supported this new, adapted view. Upon deeper study of this passage, Grudem found that the original Greek words “in such cases,” usually refers to multiple scenarios, not just one. Grudem believed that this left room for the Scripture to be interpreted as allowing divorce not just for physical abandonment, but in “any cases that similarly destroy a marriage,” which could include abuse and allow for divorce from an abusive spouse (Randall). In a subsequent paper published on his website titled, “Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There are More than Two,” Grudem made his change of beliefs public.

Another Pastor and teacher, John Piper, agrees with Grudem’s new interpretation. The founder of the popular *Desiring God* teaching website, Piper is currently the chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church (also in Minneapolis) from 1980 to 2013. Citing Ephesians 5:22, Luke 6:46, and Romans 13:1, Piper teaches on his website that, while a wife is called to live in submission to her husband, both husband and wife are called, as believers, to live in submission to both Christ and whatever human government Christ allows them to live under. Piper goes on to cite Minnesota law which states that physically harming a spouse or family member is a crime punishable by fines, imprisonment, or both. “In expecting his wife to quietly accept his threats and injuries,” Piper says, “he is asking her to participate in his breaking of both God’s moral law and the state’s civil law... A wife’s submission to the authority of civil law, for Christ’s sake, may, therefore,
overrule her submission to a husband’s demand that she endure his injuries.” Piper does believe that men and women of the church ought to intervene and attempt to bring the abuser to repentance and the marriage to reconciliation, but whether this venture is successful or not, the abused spouse should never be left to suffer alone. If needed, Piper allows for an abused spouse to “escape” the marriage, mentioning that many biblical heroes also fled in certain instances rather than suffer unjustly apart from the will of Christ, including when Moses fled the wrath of Pharaoh (Exodus 2:15), when David ran away from King Saul’s attempts to murder him (1 Samuel 19:12), and Christ’s withdrawal from the crowds in John 9:10 (Piper).

Finally, some believers would argue that the abused spouse ought to remain in the marriage and attempt to save the soul of the abuser. Those who hold to this view cite 1 Corinthians 7:16, which continues Paul’s discussion of marriage abandonment and reads, “For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?” Ashby concedes that some abused spouses may choose to do this after seeking godly counsel. “It is a valiant, humbling display of gospel love when a woman chooses to fight for her marriage despite her husband’s sexual immorality, abuse, or abandonment,” Ashby says, “However, that is a choice she alone must make.” He assures readers that Paul’s words do not enslave an abused spouse to remain in a marriage, even if there is a possibility that the abuser will come to repentance. “If God is determined to save a spouse,” Ashby concludes, “he is more than capable to accomplish it without the degrading of His beloved daughter” (Ashby).

Though Scripture does not directly address the issue of divorce in the case of an abusive marriage, it is clear that Christ’s emphasis on treating women with respect and dignity, combined with the teachings and traditions of church leaders on the issue, would almost certainly allow a husband or wife to file for divorce in order to escape an abusive spouse. It is important when discussing this issue to also bear in mind that both the abused and the abuser are people created in God’s image, men and women that God loves and desires to see come to salvation in Christ. The question goes beyond whether God allows abusive marriages to end in divorce. Once the divorce has taken place, the church’s responsibility must be to care for and assist the abused in both physical, mental, and emotionally recovery, as well as joining in prayer for the family of the abused in hopes that the abuser, too, will one day be rescued and reconciled to God and family through Christ. For God desires that abused and abuser alike “should not perish, but ... reach repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

Works Cited
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