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Rape Culture in Sermons on Divorce

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> If it should be the case that nothing of the sinfulness of abuse is warned against in the preaching, that preaching would be responsible for aiding and abetting abuse. But it is inconceivable that the preaching of a true church of Christ would lack warning against abuse. The preaching of a true church would proclaim the calling of a husband to love his nearest neighbor, that is, his wife. Love of the wife prohibits and condemns abuse. Such preaching would warn against hatred of the neighbor/wife, which abuse is. But today, the preacher must become explicit, warning not only against hatred of the neighbor generally, but also against hatred in the form of verbal abuse against his wife specifically. The presence of abuse in our circles demands this explicit admonition. If a minister fails, or refuses, to give this concrete warning, in marital counseling and in the preaching, he makes himself guilty of aiding and abetting the sin.[1] (Engelsma 2017)

Attitudes towards violence against women are closely linked to beliefs about women, gender, and sexuality (Flood and Pease 2009).[2] While many factors influence the formation of these beliefs, few discursive events are as important for the devout Protestant Christian as the weekly sermon. Though biblical texts are undoubtedly viewed as the most trusted and valued sources of truth about how to live as a believer, the sermon is where the Christian audience can have these texts explained to them (cf. Acts 8:30–1). In fact, in addition to the weekly Sunday morning sermon, many Christians download sermons during the week as an extra learning resource, and some attend services on Sunday evenings as well as more informal Bible studies during the week.

[1] Professor David Engelsma is a theologian and pastor in the US Protestant Reformed Church.
[2] This source also contains a helpful overview of three decades of research on attitudes towards violence against women, including a comprehensive discussion of the range of social processes that contribute to these attitudes.

Sermons are therefore a key form of discourse in the lives of believers. And, given the "power of the religious framework" to shape people's beliefs, ideologies, and values (Nason-Clark 1997, p.58), including those concerning gender violence, researching the language of sermons helps us understand how this power manifests itself discursively. It assists us to make sense of how attitudes towards violence are created and perpetuated. Perhaps more crucially, it enables individuals to make informed choices regarding which discourses to accept and which to resist. The work in this chapter extends research on intimate partner violence by focusing on the construction of discourses about violence in sermons on divorce, which either compromise or espouse efforts to combat violence against women.

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence is defined as "physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016). Religious women are among the most vulnerable survivors of this type of violence in the United States (Nason-Clark 2004; Tracy and Seminary 2009; Annis and Rice 2002), as many religious communities practice a patriarchal form of hierarchy in marriage and also discourage divorce, even in cases of violence (Pyles 2007; Annis and Rice 2002). According to Tracy and Seminary, "One fourth to one third of North American women will be assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime. And physical abuse rates in Christian homes are similar to societal rates" (2009, p.287; see also Levitt and Ware 2006; Nash and Hesterberg 2009).

Research on intimate partner violence in religious communities has tended to focus on self-reported data, such as interviews, questionnaires, and/or surveys from victims (most frequently women), perpetrators, and counsellors (including clergy). Research specifically on clergy responses to intimate partner violence has produced often conflicting findings, revealing a range of attitudes and approaches. These findings, however, point consistently to

a clergy who are "conflicted about actions, such as separation or divorce, which they deem threatening to the sanctity of marriage" (Shannon-Lewy and Dull 2005, pp.648–9).[3]

Framework for Analysis

The following sections focus on representations of violence (physical, sexual, and psychological) in a series of online sermons on divorce. I begin by discussing prominent themes within these divorce sermons which refer implicitly to violence, moving eventually to sermons making more explicit reference to this subject. To study the allusions and references to violence within these texts, I rely on a critical discourse analytic framework developed by Linda Coates and Allan Wade, known as the Interactional and Discursive View of Violence and Resistance (2007). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) relies on the understanding that "public discourse often serves the interests of powerful forces over those of the less privileged," and that language choices facilitate and even constitute these exercises of power (Huckin 2002, pp.158–9). Coates and Wade's framework is based on their own and others' research on the nature of violence and resistance, particularly the significance of misrepresentation and partiality in social discourse about intimate partner violence. Specifically, they argue that violence carries the following *interactional* characteristics: it is a social and unilateral act involving two people, one acting against the will and wellbeing of the other; it is deliberate rather than inadvertent; and resistance to violence is ubiquitous, in that "whenever individuals are subjected to violence, they resist. Alongside each history of violence, there runs a parallel history of resistance" (Coates and Wade 2007, p.513).

Moreover, the social discourse surrounding acts of violence stems from the following features of violence acts. First, violence is often misrepresented, primarily due to the asymmetry of power relations between those perpetrating and being subjected to violence

[3] See also Alsdurf and Alsdurf (1988); Bowker (1988); Wood and McHugh (1994); Rotunda, Williamson, and Penfold (2003); Horne and Levitt (2004); Levitt and Ware (2006); Moon and Shim (2010); Nason-Clark (2010); Pyles (2007).

acts. Second, and connected to this, accounts of violence are never impartial, but impact the perception and treatment of both perpetrators and victims; thus, "the question of which words are fitted to which deeds is crucial" (p. 513). Finally, Coates and Wade argue that language can be used within discursive operations to conceal violence, obfuscate and mitigate offenders' responsibility, mask victims' resistance, and blame or pathologize victims. At the same time, language can also be used to expose violence, clarify offenders' responsibility, elucidate and honour victims' resistance, and contest victim blame (ibid.). Through these interactional and discursive understandings of violence, Coates and Wade create a lens through which they examine five accounts of intimate partner violence— from a perpetrator, a judge, a psychiatrist, a government minister, and a psycho-therapist. The linguistic features they explore include: the choice of verbs used to represent acts of violence, the employment of passive voice to conceal the resistance of victims, the use of nominalizations[4] to conceal the offender's action, and the use of modifiers which indicate or conceal force. They conclude that the *problem* of violence is indisputably correlated to the *representation* of violence in social discourse. In other words, the language used to talk about violence within particular socio-cultural contexts has a profound impact on the meanings and significances conferred upon violence within these contexts.

As I demonstrate below, Coates and Wade's framework can be modified to suit the religious context of the texts that I explore. The findings presented here stem from a larger corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis study, which involved linguistic analysis aided by a corpus tool, coupled with close reading of a corpus of thirty-one popular Christian sermons on divorce.[5] Given the increasing dependence of religious organizations on their online

[4] A nominalization is the use of a nominal (noun) form instead of the verb from which the nominal is derived. Like passives, nominalizations can hide the identity of the one who commits an act or otherwise minimize the connection between the actor and their action. For example, compare "He violates" with "There is violation."

[5] The corpus comprises sermons by twenty-seven pastors (twenty-six pastors in the United States, one in the United Kingdom) who come from a number of Christian denominations, including (Reformed) Baptist (twenty-three sermons), Presbyterian (two), Free Presbyterian/Free Reformed (two), Free Reformed (one), Family

presence via blogs, news sites, and sermon libraries such as SermonAudio (see Cheong 1999), corpus linguistics offers an effective means of examining language patterns within public discourses about intimate partner violence among prominent Christian church leaders.[6]

Concealing and Euphemizing Violence

One third (nine out of twenty-seven) of the pastors in the thirty-one-sermon corpus mention violence towards women[7] explicitly,[8] and in all but one sermon, pastors make clear that this violence is not grounds for divorce (Hobbs n.d.). Eight of the nine pastors who mention violence explicitly are from the Baptist denomination of the Christian church. This sample size is not large enough to generalize about the correlation between denominational affiliation and explicit reference to violence. It does, however, raise questions regarding the extent to which a more literalist interpretation of the Bible, commonly found in fundamentalist Baptist circles, results in a greater likelihood that pastors will talk explicitly about violence. Does a strict no-divorce doctrine make pastors more willing to talk freely about problems to which they have "easy" answers? Does a more "flexible" doctrine of divorce make pastors more cautious, or less likely, to talk so openly?

In the other two-thirds of the sermons, pastors do not talk explicitly about violence,[9] even though within the context of divorce, discussion of violence would be appropriate, given

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Integrated (one), United Reformed (one), and Reformed Presbytery in North America (RPNA) (one). These thirty-one sermons, which were downloaded 77,720 times as of September, 2016, were selected out of the one hundred most frequently accessed sermons on divorce available on SermonAudio. The selection process was as follows: identify the one hundred most popular (most frequently downloaded) sermons; include the first sermon by each speaker; include two-part series if both appear in the top 100; exclude longer series.

[6] While few, if any, studies exist which apply principles of CDA to religious leaders' responses to intimate partner violence, relevant research includes analysis of political discourse on violence against women, which examines discursive strategies obscuring intimate partner violence.

[7] Although, as Meyers (2001) notes, the terms "abuse," "domestic violence," and "intimate partner violence" have become "banal and sanitized euphemisms" to some extent, "indicative of the depoliticization of women's issues in general, and violence against women in particular."

[8] By explicit, I mean pastors used some form of the word "abuse" and/or else referred to some specific act of violence (either physical or emotional/psychological).

[9] This is consistent with recent research (LifeWay Research 2014) which found that pastors seldom address domestic violence from the pulpit, despite evidence that one in three women and one in four men experience intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2017).

that intimate partner violence is a common reason for a spouse seeking divorce.[10] Indeed, around one third of pastors do not mention violence of any kind at all, even euphemistically, thereby concealing violence completely. The remaining one third of the pastors use euphemisms for potentially abusive behaviour such as in the following examples (emphasis mine):[11]

1. "When that wife stays in that marriage though that husband at times is *very unlovable,* that glorifies God. When they see her being the patient, loving, caring wife to a man who is *anything but loving* to her they say, 'Man, God's grace is at work in her life.'"[12]
2. "A short word of exhortation to those here who may be married and *in some difficulty*. I hope you're not facing that *difficulty* alone."[13]
3. "The Christians at Corinth were not so firmly rooted in the reality of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit as to give them the stability required to deal with a partner who rakes up a murky past after a *bitter domestic feud, one difficult evening* after a bad week at the office."[14]
4. "Now, the fact that she must seek reconciliation with her husband tells us there is *great enmity* here between them, because the very word at reconciliation has that of being brought back into friendship and union. And so there were apparently situations where there were problems in the marriage, maybe *even serious problems*, but the biblical - the only biblical reasons for divorce were not met."[15]

[10] A national survey carried out by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) indicates that among mid-life divorcees, the top reason women seek divorce, including those who call themselves Christian, is physical and/or psychological abuse.
[11] All quotations come from my own transcriptions of the audio sermons in the corpus, not from transcriptions provided on the Sermon Audio site.
[12] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=51407192031.
[13] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=82509230142.
[14] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=42011110020890.
[15] Ibid.

5. "He [Jesus] goes on to say that if the divorce was not for sexual immorality, meaning just *grave mental anguish*, any remarriage is adultery."[16]

The most obvious implication to be drawn from these examples is that explicit reference to violence is taboo; through their use of euphemisms to refer to domestic conflict or violence, the pastors teach congregants by example not to speak about the violence they might suffer (see Trinch 2001; Djikanovic et al. 2010; Kozu 1999; Koyama 2006; Lazarus-Black 2007). Such vague, euphemistic language conceals violence and, further, obscures and mitigates perpetrator responsibility. Interpretations of "very unlovable" behaviour in example one, or "great enmity" in example four, are left to the imagination of the audience. In most cases, victim resistance to violence is not mentioned. And although example one attributes the ambiguous unacceptable behaviour to the husband, in the remainder, the pastors identify neither spouse as responsible, the implication being that both may be equally to blame for the violence (see Dobash et al. 1992; Johnson 2006). A few pastors went so far as to state this explicitly. For instance:

> And so, I do not believe, personally, that there is any real innocent party. Love must be nourished, love must be provided, I realize there are some parties that seem more innocent than the other, but I really do not believe that there are angels either male or female in the married state … We are sinners and if we are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are saved sinners, but we are still sinners, and I do not believe that any of us can be completely called innocent.[17]

Casting Escape from Violence as a Violent Act

As the previous point explored, only a third of the pastors in the corpus explicitly refer to violence against women in sermons on divorce. Nevertheless, violence was a significant

[16] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=81111953461.
[17] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3901194058.

semantic domain in the sermons on the whole. Pastors used language like "break," "breakup," "fracture," and "violation," not to refer to violence against women per se, but rather to describe the trauma of divorce or its aftermath.[18] The pastors used this language regardless of whether they also referred explicitly to violence against women elsewhere in their sermons. In short, as the examples below illustrate, a common discourse of violence was that divorce itself**,** rather than spousal abuse, constitutes a form of violence that is *worth mentioning* (all emphasis mine):

6. "… every single divorce is *a tearing apart* of what God has put together."[19]
7. "[Divorce] means *breaking* the one that God made out of two."[20]
8. "Divorce is a *violation* of the marriage covenant."[21]
9. "Dear ones, divorce upon the grounds of man's mere whim is not a recent ploy of the enemy to *destroy* marriages but rather is an ancient tactic of the devil."[22]
10. "You're sowing sin and adultery and suicide. Listen, that's what divorce causes. It *destroys* families. *Children of a divorce are prone to kill themselves*."[23]

In short, the violence that women endure is not only portrayed as largely unmentionable but is also further minimized as pastors in the corpus frequently represented *escape* from violence as itself a violent act. Note in particular example ten, which states clearly that the one seeking divorce may ultimately bear responsibility for the death of a child. Other pastors likewise exhibited similar patterns of victim-blaming. For example, one pastor said, "The second reason why you shouldn't get a divorce is because of what it does to children." [24] Some pastors even make connections between a woman's spiritual worthiness and her

[18] "break" is a keyword (LL score = 34.34), and the semantic domain of "damaging and destroying" is likewise significant in WMatrix (LL = 8.96). A keyword is a word that is more frequent to a statistically significant degree in a text or corpus than it is in some (larger) reference corpus. A log likelihood (LL) score above 6.63 indicates 99% significance.
[19] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=614101332325.
[20] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=128141030271.
[21] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=111407135590.
[22] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=52001151217.
[23] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=128141030271.
[24] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6206111747.

willingness to tolerate spousal abuse. Looking back to example one, the pastor not only prohibits the woman from leaving her abusive husband but makes it clear that staying in an abusive marriage is part of what it means for her to be godly and to "glorify" God. In sum, some of the pastors in the corpus concealed violence against women by casting *escape* from violence as an aggressive (and ungodly) act; this form of discourse is ultimately a type of victim blaming.

Exposing Violence Whilst Forbidding Escape

We now turn our attention to the nine Baptist pastors who explicitly mention violence towards women, once again relying on Coates and Wade's analytic framework to evaluate the discourses expressed in their sermons. Out of the nine cases, two make only passing reference to abuse. In these two cases, the pastors' words serve to *obscure* violence:

11. "There are times when the believer may need to separate from their spouse because of abuse or protection. But again, don't make the assumption if you can separate then you can divorce and remarry. That is not what the Bible is teaching."[25]
12. "The Bible here says that God's called us to peace and if someone is in an abusive relationship, called us to peace he says in verse 15 [of 1 Corinthians 7], right? There may be a time where that couple needs to separate, not so you can say 'Good riddance to you, bud'. No, you remain unmarried or you be reconciled to your husband, and dear [saint] of God if you're saying you ought to be actively seeking to restore your marriage. Is that not what the Scripture says? You remain

[25] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=53011201704.

unmarried. If they depart, you remain unmarried or be reconciled to your mate. Pretty clear, isn't it?"[26]

Note that the "abuse" in example eleven and the "abusive relationship" in example twelve are both nominalizations, obfuscating the connection between the one who is violent and the violent act.[27] The pastors further mitigate the perpetrators' responsibility by issuing commands to the victim, rather than to the violent spouse. The victim (clearly female in example twelve) is reminded that there are limits to her protection—that she can separate but not divorce or remarry, and that ultimately, "you" (that is, the victim) should either remain alone or be reconciled to the perpetrator. The victim is therefore the one who bears the burden of violence.

The remaining seven pastors in the corpus not only mention abuse but provide specific examples. Six of these state clearly that such violence does not justify divorce as a means of escaping this violence; in one case, the pastor condemns the violence but fails to refer to any possibility of escape for the abused spouse. And, in the following example, the pastor makes it clear that not even extreme violence opens the door to resistance through escape:

[26] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=10210211927.
[27] See Van Dijk for a discussion of the systematic abuse of discursive power and "the consequences of such discourse properties on the mental models of the recipients" (2008, p.821).

13. “Death alone breaks the marriage bond. The death of the mate, not whatever if someone does, whether the man commits adultery, the woman commits adultery, whether they kill, murder, maim, commit incest, there is nothing that breaks the marriage bond and there is no way that a man or a woman can remarry, according to scripture, without being called an adulterer or an adulteress. The only way that the person can remarry is by the death of that mate. When the mate dies, yes, you may remarry and not until.”[28]

The pastor’s gender-neutral portrayal of domestic violence may seem commendable but ultimately perpetuates the myth that abuse occurs equally to men and women (Behre 2014). This obfuscates the highly gendered nature of domestic violence, mitigating male offenders’ responsibility; studies suggest that for every three victims of domestic abuse, two will be female, one will be male (Flatley 2016). Other research suggests that as many as four in five victims are female (Catalano 2012).

The pastor in the following example also makes clear that violence does not constitute grounds for divorce; additionally, he stresses that it should not be committed in the presence of children. This may sound a reasonable point to make, but ultimately it serves to suggest that such violence is to be expected, and that systems—such as making sure it occurs in private, away from children—should be in place to support it. Moreover, although the pastor starts off with an image of a fairly common “argument” between spouses, his subsequent references to screaming, stomping, and kicking clearly allude to violence. The message is that such violence must be carefully hidden away from those you live with.

14. “And I recognize and I would be hiding under a rock if I didn’t recognize that married couples on occasions have an argument. Of course, Debbie starts them all at my house, but I pray that you don’t do so in front of your little ones. I pray they

[28] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3901212359.

can't hear you screaming and stomping and kicking, like you haven't got any sense in your house. I come to hate to say it like this, but I pray that this is not true. That hurts. That has an effect upon [them]. Your home should be a security place for your children."[29]

This same pastor later extends his message of keeping violence secret by threatening the victim with consequences—a damaged Christian testimony. Again, rather than condemning the abuse itself or the abuser, the pastor condemns the one who makes the abuse *known*.

15. "I don't want to get a divorce because it would reflect back on my God and hurt my testimony as a Christian. After all, Christian marriages should be models, should be models to the laws of the world. Do you agree? And to go out to a court with an unsaved lawyer and put it on public display and fighting and quarrelling is a very poor testimony for God's people."[30]

In the next example, we witness further manifestations of victim-blaming. Here, a different pastor *exposes* violence, referring clearly to rape in marriage and placing the man in the subject position as the one who rapes. In this way, the pastor clarifies the offenders' responsibility.

16. "I don't own myself. This darling little lady on the front pew here owns me, she is my master. She is my wife. I do not say it's all about me, it's my selfish needs, my selfish desires. She owns me and I own her. Wife does not have authority. That's what verse number 4, the word 'power' means, does not have authority over her body, but the husband. That does not allow for a man to make demands of his wife, it does not allow for a man to even rape his own wife saying, I own you, you're nothing but a slave. It does mean there is a respect. Why? Because Paul wrote in Ephesians 5 verse 25 'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also

[29] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6206111747.
[30] Ibid.

loved the church, and gave himself for it; so ought men to love their wives as their own bodies.'"[31]

The pastor further elucidates the husband's responsibility to love and respect his wife, not to treat her as a slave. Nevertheless, although on the one hand, the wife is portrayed as "master" of the husband, as owner of his body, on the other hand she is a "darling little lady" and one who herself "does not have authority over her body"; her husband owns her body. She is vulnerable rather than strong, thereby concealing her resistance. And, although elsewhere in the sermon the pastor offers so-called biblical grounds for divorce, he never mentions spousal rape or violence of any kind as justification for a spouse's escape from marriage. A potential rape, though condemned, has no consequences for the husband.

A similar pattern emerges in example seventeen. Here, the pastor uses a combination of euphemism ("so unhappy") and explicit reference to violence ("striking," "abusive") and at times places the violent one in the subject position, clearly associating him with his acts of violence. Nevertheless, the repeated negative markers (for example, "not striking," "No"), and the direct statements that no escape from violence is possible, mitigate the violent spouse's responsibility. As in the other excerpts, the victim is commanded to remain married, regardless of the perpetrator's behaviour (emphasis mine):

17. "Why is it that the sin of fornication is singled out among various other sins that a wife could commit or a husband could commit in a marriage? I mean, why not nagging? Why not cursing? Why not *striking*? Why not stealing? Why not lying to your partner? I mean all of these are violation of the Ten Commandments. Why is it that fornication is singled out as the one exception, the one thing that can rend the covenant contract of marriage? … Only two exceptions are permitted but there are all kinds of other arguments we hear them all the time … But I am so unhappy

[31] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=102311132405.

> No. But this can't be what God wants because I am so unhappy. No … *But he is not safe*. No … But divorce is no worse than other sins. Yes, it is, some sins are more heinous than others, and divorce is very heinous and wicked. If you play around with the sacred circumstance and union of marriage, God will not be blocked, I warn you. But he is *physically abusive*. I believe in such a case, separation for a time may be legitimate but I cannot say that that is grounds for divorce, because someone says that he *emotionally abuses*. No. But he committed another adultery. No. You see the Bible is quite clear; divorce is not permitted except for the case of fornication and the case of desertion."[32]

Note that, while a temporary separation "may be legitimate," a more permanent means of escaping a violent marriage through divorce is ruled out as unacceptable and unbiblical—"very heinous and wicked." As in examples eleven and twelve above, this pastor directs all his advice to the victim, whom he pathologizes by addressing her as an unidentifiable, nameless, and therefore probably untrustworthy witness—"someone" who "says" her husband abuses her, rather than a woman whose word can be trusted.

In the next excerpt (eighteen), it is the perpetrator who is at times unidentifiable, even invisible, though for different reasons. For instance, the use of the passive form "has mistreated" mitigates the perpetrator's responsibility and distances him from his action. And though the pastor mentions giving "someone" (one victim) advice, he uses the plural "they" for the abusive spouse. This is an instance of a "single they," which conceals the offender's gender (since both men and women can be violent). Paired with the single victim, however, it too has the effect of distancing the violence from any one perpetrator. It isn't him; it isn't her; it's *they*. In sum, the pastor's language choices here disperse and therefore mitigate the responsibility of any one perpetrator:

[32] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3130572956.

18. “Now, listen. We are empathetic people and we should be. And we feel bad when someone has been mistreated and we should. But when we give counsel, we must give ‘Thus saith the Lord’, not ‘I feel really bad, oh, you should really, you know, oh, you have a right to, oh, you really could’. No. No. When we give someone advice, it had better come from the sacred, written Word of God. And so if someone says to you, ‘Oh, my spouse, they are emotionally abusive. They don’t respect me. They don’t love me the way that they should. They are unkind. They stay out at all these hours. They don’t treat me the way I deserve to be treated. They don’t take care of me. They don’t provide me with enough money. They don’t provide me with enough time. They have all the demands for me. They are just unbearable to live with.’”[33]

Note also that the pastor mentions “emotional abuse” and uses additional euphemistic language like “mistreated,” “unkind,” and “unbearable,” which may or may not include violence. The selection of the term “emotional abuse” is particularly significant in this context since it is much less likely to attract sympathy than physical violence (Kurz 1989).

In example eighteen, the pastor also presents an image of a victim who repeatedly complains (almost pathologically) about all her problems. As complaint can be considered a form of resistance, we might see this as the pastor elucidating rather than concealing the victim’s resistance. This reading is undermined, however, by the chronic complainer’s long list of problems, which portrays her as someone who exaggerates. Moreover, a particularly interesting technique—and unique thus far in these examples—is how this pastor blames the victim by introducing his constructed dialogue with a victim with an evaluative “oh” as in

[33] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=82612111352.

"Oh, my spouse, they are emotionally abusive." The use of "oh" to introduce reported speech almost always signals that the speaker is critical of the speech.[34]

We see this again in example nineteen (below), which likewise has victim blaming and pathologizing throughout. Once again, this pastor employs the evaluative "oh," where "many a girl" says "Oh, I know that he drinks." The pastor identifies women as responsible for their husband's violence because of their naiveté and stupidity in believing that they can change the men they foolishly love. Note, for instance, how the pastor refers to a "girl" and "young woman," infantilizing women and thereby signalling their weaker social position. Although the speaker directly connects the husband with his violence, he directs the command to "remember" at the woman, minimizing the perpetrator's responsibility and placing it squarely on the woman's shoulders. The pastor neglects to mention any resistance to this violence, though the language of violence is surprisingly explicit and exposing:

19. "Many sins can wreck a home, the sin of drunkenness, the sin of brutality but … The Bible gives only one sin that can break the marriage vow and give ground for divorce, and that sin is fornication. Drunkenness is not a sufficient reason for divorce. A husband may come home at night drunk and beat his wife or waste his money, make his home a hell, but according to God's Word that's no ground for divorce. I've had many a girl say, 'Oh I know that he drinks. But I'll reform him and marry him because I love him'. But remember one thing, young woman, when he gets drunk and comes home and beats you up, raises hell and puts

[34] See (Günthner 1999; 2002) for an explanation of the use of discourse markers, among other devices, to signal evaluation of reported speech. The interpretation of the pastor's use of "oh" to mark negative evaluation is further supported via examination of concordance lines from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (Davies 2008). Examples include where the speakers are marking reported speech, in some cases reinforcing their negative evaluation with further commentary such as "that wasn't true" and "that's completely unfair" (e.g. "The nurses were very matter of fact about it, 'oh she'll be fine, she'll be fine', and that wasn't true").

> [indiscernible]… [and] leaves you without food, even clothes to wear, you have no ground for divorce."[35]

In conclusion, though the pastors range in the extent to which they conceal violence against women, nearly every pastor in the corpus engages in various degrees of minimization of perpetrator responsibility, victim-blaming, and concealment of victims' resistance.

Appealing to Authority to Minimize Violence

Though all the sermon excerpts which reference violence fit nicely into Coates and Wades' CDA model in many respects, their religious context introduces additional complexity. More specifically, these excerpts all demonstrate an appeal to authority, that is, God's word and God himself.

For example, in one excerpt that explicitly references violence, taken from example 18, the pastor juxtaposes his portrayal of the congregation's sympathetic feelings and intuitions with the counsel that God (allegedly) requires when a victim of spousal abuse asks for help: "But when we give counsel, we must give 'Thus saith the Lord', not 'I feel really bad, oh, you should really, you know, oh, you have a right to, oh, you really could.'"[36] Notice the dramatic change in register in the words "Thus saith the Lord," which references an appeal to the divine origins, and thus divine authority, of the spoken word—a strategy used frequently by the Old Testament prophets to validate their own speech, and indeed affirm their (derived) authority as conduits for the word of God.[37] We also see again the evaluative "oh" used here to introduce and disparage the would-be counsellor's advice. In essence, the pastor is adopting the voice of a prophet here and encouraging his congregants to do the same when they talk to a victim of violence.

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[35] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11501125442.
[36] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=82612111352.
[37] See Abdul-Latif (2011) for discussion of how appeals to divine authority function as affirmation of a religious leader's authority.

Both the appeal to the word of God (and to the pastor himself) as an authority and the switch to a more formal register lend an air of unquestionable finality to the pastor's eventual pronouncement shortly after: "A wife is not to depart from her husband. That is a direct command."[38] Similarly, in revisiting example nineteen, we see the pastor contrasting God's word with dramatic examples of violence, demonstrating that even the most devastating acts of violence cannot alter the requirement to obey commands that are (allegedly) "according to God's Word":

> The Bible gives only one sin that can break the marriage vow and give ground for divorce, and that sin is fornication. Drunkenness is not a sufficient reason for divorce. A husband may come home at night drunk and beat his wife or waste his money, make his home a hell, but according to God's word that's no ground for divorce.[39]

The implication seems to be that God does not consider the suffering of victims of violence to be relevant to his commands. This happens elsewhere in the corpus, such as in the additional excerpt from example thirteen, where the pastor reminds his congregation that even murder or incest are not grounds for divorce "according to Scripture": "whether the man commits adultery, the woman commits adultery, whether they kill, murder, maim, commit incest, there is nothing that breaks the marriage bond and there is no way that a man or a woman can remarry, according to Scripture, without being called an adulterer or an adulteress."[40]

It is, of course, hardly surprising that a pastor would directly appeal to the authority of the Bible, particularly in a conservative, evangelical Christian context. Christians consider it a pastor's calling and duty to direct their attention to God's word. However, the question remains: why this appeal, and why now? These direct appeals to authority suggest, first, that any instinct a listener might have to consider violence against women as grounds for divorce runs counter to the word of God and, second, that congregants therefore require this

[38] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=82612111352.
[39] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=11501125442.
[40] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=3901194058.

correction/exhortation.[41] The use of language to distinguish between the audience's instincts/sympathies and God's word is significant in the religious context and is unaccounted for in Coates and Wade's model.

Exposing the Abuser and Their Violence

Though nearly every sermon perpetuated rape culture in its destructive depictions (or non-depictions) of violence, a single sermon in the corpus defied convention by exposing violence, clarifying offenders' responsibility, and contesting the blaming and pathologizing of victims. This sermon is therefore an example of how some pastors resist rape culture.

We begin with example twenty, where the pastor places the abuser ("the husband") in the subject position, his actions and attributes directly connected to him. The perpetrator is violent, he is uncaring, he is deserting, and he is behaving abominably. Though the pastor begins by using the vague action term "abusing," he does not stop there. Rather, he goes on to specify what that abuse looks like, including a range of actions, both physical and non-physical:

> 20. "This would be a case which perhaps you've heard of, such situations where a Christian couple get married together, whatever, then the husband turns out to be abusing the wife, violent, uncaring in that way, deserting, leaving her, going off and behaving abominably, not following their vows and commitments."[42]

Notice that the pastor presents this case using the historic present tense, which has the effect of bringing this event into the foreground, demonstrating its current relevance.[43] While the other pastors in the corpus also use the historic present, in this case, the abusive acts are not

[41] It would be interesting to track where else such direct appeals to authority occur. When do pastors feel confident enough to state that their interpretation of Scripture is "from God's lips to your ears"? A quick look at my reference corpus of over one hundred sermons on non-marriage-related topics suggests that pastors say "Thus saith the Lord" most frequently when quoting this exact phrase from the Bible directly, rather than when they are offering their own interpretations. Further examination of this question would be of value, however.
[42] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6210381919.
[43] See Brinton (1992) for a discussion of the discursive function of the historical present.

only present but progressive. They are ongoing, they are right now, they could be happening as we speak.

This same pastor further assigns blame to the abuser towards the end of the sermon (example twenty-one), where he asks a series of rhetorical questions, identifying the abuser with an "unbeliever":

> 21. "What Christian is it that beats his wife? What Christian is it that deserts his wife, walks out on her? What Christian is it who acts in such immoral ways and is behaving in a way completely contrary to the Word of God? So, they placed themselves there effectively as an unbeliever and the wife—I'm using it here Moses' illustration of the wife, therefore is not bound in those times."[44]

In addition to clarifying the perpetrator's responsibility, the pastor also challenges anyone who might be tempted to blame the victim of abuse for knowingly entering into a violent marriage. Consider his use of the verb "turns out" in example twenty: "the husband turns out to be abusing his wife." The picture he paints here is not of a woman who knowingly married an abusive man and so was somehow partly to blame for her victimization (contrast this with example eighteen, for instance). "Turns out" indicates the unexpected, the unpredictable.

Also telling is this pastor's use of an evaluative "well" (akin to the evaluative "oh") in example twenty-two and the way he combines this with an appeal to authority (emphasis mine):

> 22. "What happens then? Is the counsel this? '*Well*, sorry, you're married, you're a Christian, he is a Christian, she is a Christian … you have to stay together.' *Well*, actually the situation is far more complex than that."[45]

[44] http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=6210381919.
[45] Ibid.

The use of this evaluative "well" indicates the pastor's negative evaluation of the uncaring adviser, again highlighting its difference to the other sermons. This interpretation of "well" is confirmed elsewhere in the same sermon, as in the following (emphasis mine):

> 23. But the Pharisees were not so interested in that [limiting remarriage of divorced parties].[46] They were rather interested in only certificates that you could sign. Husbands there could say, '*Well*, I detest my wife now, got fed up with her, don't like her anymore … And the Lord's saying, 'No, not at all.'"[47]

The implication here is that the husband who deserts his marriage is the guilty party, and the appeal to authority which follows ("the Lord's saying," a version of "Thus saith the Lord") further condemns him rather than condemning the victim; again, this stands in contrast with the other sermons I discussed above. Unlike the other pastors, this pastor elucidates and honours the victim's resistance by affirming her need to escape ("the wife therefore is not bound").

This sermon is by no means faultless in its response to violent marriage or its implications for the rights and wrongs of divorce. Particularly troubling is the pastor's eventual recommendation that the victim use the principle evoked in Matthew 18 as a first step to responding to acts of violence, which we see in the following excerpt:[48]

> "So, if there is trouble, being treated badly, violently, you speak to your husband, you speak to your wife. But if you will not hear, take with you one or two more that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established. So now you have called the elders of the church to come and speak to your husband. If he refuses to hear them, Verse 17 [of Matthew 18], tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

[46] The pastor is referring here to Matthew 19:7.
[47] Ibid.
[48] See Hunt (2010) for a discussion of the tension between a perspective on conflict resolution rooted in some interpretations of Matthew 18 and an acknowledgement of the long-lasting trauma caused by violence.

It is certainly both cruel and dangerous to require a victim of abuse to confront her offender, and the often lengthy process the pastor details here prioritizes the abuser's right to confront his accuser over the victim's safety. Also worrying is the pastor's emphasis on church leaders' assessment of a marriage rather than that of those *within* the marriage. In this pastor's mind, a woman's escape from an abusive marriage is only possible once church leaders have determined that she has indeed suffered abuse and that her husband is unrepentant. Who decides if her husband has "heard" his wife and/or the elders of the church? Must a wife return to a so-called repentant abuser? The pastor does not deal adequately with these questions, though it seems that the abused wife is indeed bound, so long as her abuser displays remorse. Yet, although far from ideal, this sermon is one of the only ones in the corpus in which the pastor explicitly refers to abuse whilst exposing violence, clarifying offenders' responsibilities, and cautioning against victim-blaming.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored prominent themes[49] in the discourse of violence against women among (primarily American) male pastors who preach on divorce. Such findings are consistent with the findings of Flood and Pease, that men are generally more likely than women to accept myths and beliefs that support or condone violence against women; they are also more likely to recognize a narrower range of behaviours as violent, blame victims of violence and show less empathy towards them, minimize the harm done by physical and sexual assault, and regard violent behaviours perpetrated against women as less serious, inappropriate, or harmful (Flood and Pease 2009).

Studying a number of online Christian sermons using Coates and Wade's analytical framework leads me to a number of conclusions. First, a majority of these pastors do not

[49] Other themes related to the fostering of rape culture emerged from the data, which were not prominent but which warrant further discussion elsewhere. Among these were the portrayal of marital sex as compulsory and the framing of marriage as a form of conflict.

mention violence against women explicitly, though this would be appropriate, given that domestic violence is a major reason for divorce in the United States and beyond. Instead, a significant number of pastors use euphemism for violence, fostering an environment where victims are discouraged from speaking about their abuse.

Second, regardless of whether or not pastors mention violence against women, it is divorce itself and its presumed aftermath that they most frequently cast as "violent." By associating divorce (which is likely to constitute escape from an abusive spouse) with violence, pastors mitigate perpetrator responsibility for their violence and conceal victims' resistance.

Third, pastors' explicit references to violence against women is largely consistent with the categories identified in Coates and Wade's analytical framework, suggesting that this framework is a valuable tool for making sense of pastors' discourse of violence. Indeed, nearly every explicit reference to violence in the corpus minimizes perpetrator responsibility, blames victims, and/or conceals resistance. One notable exception exists in the corpus, where, as shown above, a pastor resists the dominant discourse of violence by highlighting the perpetrator's culpability and refusing to blame the victim.[50]

Fourth, despite the value of Coates and Wade's analytical framework, the religious context of the sermons means that this model is likely to require some adaptation. I have suggested that in religious texts, language is also used to appeal to authority. In the excerpts where we see this linguistic technique being used, such appeals to authority at times override any concerns about concealing violence. For all but one pastor, no matter how terrible the violence, God requires victims to remain married to their abusers.

In sum, these pastors frequently employ a discourse of violence which fosters a "violence supportive context" (Flood and Pease 2009). In light of the role such a context

[50] While this pastor is a Reformed Baptist, as were most of the others who mentioned violence explicitly, he is also the one British pastor in the corpus. This raises the following question which cannot be answered with this data: in what ways do cultural background and context influence pastors' discourses about divorce?

plays in cultivating problematic attitudes towards gender violence, these findings are worrying and indicate a need for members of religious communities to examine closely the ways their own discourses promote rape culture.

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