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AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND &  
UNITED KINGDOM EDITION

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**By Their Fruit:  
Seeing and Responding to Coercive Control**

A Primer about Domestic Violence

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## SEEING AND RESPONDING TO COERCIVE CONTROL

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PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION





## Aim

As followers of Christ, we are called (both individually and as a community) to live in a way that reflects his teaching and example. Christ-like living means loving as he loved, serving as he served, and creating a community that mirrors his compassion and justice.

This primer therefore aims to help us live as the Body of Christ: to recognise and stop behaviours that unwittingly enable abuse, and to respond to oppression as our Lord would. To “pass by on the other side of the road” is not following Christ.

Throughout this document, **repentance is measured by fruit**, not by words or outward appearances.

Long before social scientists named “coercive control,” Jesus and scripture had already honoured the oppressed and restrained the powerful (Proverbs 31:8–9; Micah 6:8; Matthew 23:23). When our Lord modelled the “headship” that the Apostle Paul called husbands to imitate, he revealed a radical, servant-hearted leadership—what we might call “power under.” He made the first last and rejected worldly “power over” (Luke 22:25–26; Matthew 20:25–28).

In publishing this primer, we seek clarity with compassion, following Christ’s Word as disciples. We are grateful when social science affirms what scripture has already named. When authorities lag, we act through a Scriptural lens. When they lead, we cooperate—without surrendering our discipleship or responsibilities for pastoral care.

Above all, we pray that our community may truly reflect Christ. This means we are free from coercion. This means our ecclesias are safe for children and the vulnerable. This means we call those who harm to genuine repentance. This means we show the self-giving love of our Lord Jesus.

## Scope

This primer focuses on coercive control as it most commonly occurs (men against women) consistent with how the idea was first framed and what most data show. But coercive control is a *pattern of behaviour*, not something tied to one sex. Women can perpetrate it, and men, women, and children can be victims. We propose screening, safety planning, and accountability pathways which can be applied to any perpetrator and any victim.

Our scripturally-founded assessment of coercive control as a serious sin calls all who perpetrate it to examine their hearts and change their ways. The approaches suggested should be equally as relevant if dealing with a woman perpetrator.

### First response to disclosure

- Believe the first disclosure and thank the person for their trust in you; avoid demanding details.
- Ask about immediate safety (children included).
- Offer practical help (transport, accommodation, appointments).
- Keep information tightly held; share on a need-to-know basis.
- Explain options (including Police, legal/ Domestic Violence counselling, safe housing), but respect autonomy.

## Safety First

**If someone is at immediate risk**, call Police and do what you can to keep them out of harm's way.

Where survivors are in fear of their controller, resource them with information about how the law provides support for their safety through police or **court issued safety orders**. If they wish to pursue these, provide practical and moral support for them to access that help.

It is important to believe people who disclose. Put survivor and child safety first and protect their autonomy. Survivors are ordinary, capable decision-makers. We ought to respect their choices. Doing these things is love in action (James 1:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). It reflects God's redeeming work. As we each must respond to God's love freely and personally, it follows we must allow a survivor to make their own decisions in their own time without coercion or control. We can call this their "agency"<sup>iv</sup>.

These practices echo good safeguarding principles.

*For Survivors: Your safety and your children's safety come first.*

*Seek trusted help and make a safety plan. Chapter 7 is for you.*

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

# Chapter 1 • Foundations

These scriptures are the scaffold around which this primer is built.

In this primer we will refer to them as “Foundation Scripture”. Please take the time to remind yourself of them.

## Jesus in Luke 6:43-45

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for **each tree is known by its own fruit.**

For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

## John the Baptist in Luke 3:8

**Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.**

## Jesus in Matthew 7:15-20

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will **recognise them by their fruits.**

Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus **you will recognise them by their fruits.**

## Paul in Ephesians 5:6-10

Let no one deceive you with empty words... Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Walk as children of light **(for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)**, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but instead expose them.

***This primer discusses family and domestic violence, and includes descriptions of emotional, physical, and psychological abuse. This material may be distressing for some readers. Please take care while reading and consider whether you need support before proceeding.***

## Chapter 2 • Introduction

Coercive control hides in plain sight, exploiting the ordinary routines of life, generally invisible to outside observers. Research tells us that many think abuse means bruises<sup>1</sup>. But long before bruises, a pattern traps a spouse, and often the children, in fear, confusion, and dependence<sup>2</sup>. Experts call it **a liberty crime**<sup>3</sup>: a direct assault on freedom. It is not a few outbursts. It steadily cuts someone off from friends, family, and support, watching them, micro-controlling choices, putting them down, making threats. The goal is to strip freedom, take power and to harm. It is deliberate, not always in every act, but in the pattern: a purposeful strategy of domination<sup>4</sup>.

Because it hides so well, we often struggle to name it. The modern terminology is not found in scripture. Yet, we can still evaluate coercive control through a biblical lens. Having done that, we can be led to respond to it and confront it as our Lord asks us to. To not do this is to do as the priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan and to act un-Christ-like.

### The Fruit Test

*"Each tree is known by its own fruit"*. Scripture calls us to look not only at what is said or what is witnessed, but at what is produced. Clearly, we are to follow the Law of Christ, but when we cannot witness those behaviours directly, Christ has taught us to examine their fruit. Hidden actions and patterns reveal themselves over time in what they yield. If a relationship keeps producing **the fruit of darkness**: fear, secrecy, and shrinking freedom rather than safety and joy, the fruit is clear. Jesus shows us what this fruit means: they are **works of darkness**. Paul gives the ecclesia its task: "Walk as children of light." Expose "the unfruitful works of darkness."

### Definition

To serve wisely, we begin with a clear definition. This definition we will use is from the UK Government:

**"Coercive control occurs when perpetrators use  
patterns of abusive behaviours  
over time  
to create fear  
and deny liberty and autonomy".<sup>5</sup>**

Coercive control is the core dynamic of domestic and family violence – the system of fear and domination that holds it together.

Some states and countries now define coercive control in law, giving us language we can share with authorities. This language also guides pastoral care: don't just count or investigate single incidents. Look at the **pattern** - its direction and its impact. Especially look at how it limits agency<sup>vi</sup>: a victim/survivor's everyday freedom of choice.

***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... he has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives... to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18)***

## Chapter 3 • Coercive Control

### What Coercive Control Is (and Isn't)

Coercive control is best understood as **entrapment**. The tactics vary. They include isolation from friends and family; watching messages and movements; micro-rules for daily life (clothes, sleep, diet, work, worship); control of money; put-downs and gaslighting<sup>6</sup>; pressure and threats. Together, these squeeze a person's freedom. Ordinary choices start to feel dangerous. This is why counting incidents ("he only did X once") misses the point. Calling it an "anger problem" shifts blame to things a victim did. The core **harm** is the loss of freedom.

In law, several countries and states now define coercive control as a *course-of-behaviour offence* that causes serious harm. In other words, the law is looking beyond individual incidents at the pattern of behaviour over time, and the harm it causes. In pastoral care within the ecclesia, the same lens protects families. It makes the pattern, and its effects, visible. A simple model for thinking helps elders, welfare committees and "people helpers":

- **Pattern:** a repeating, escalating cycle, for instance, love-bombing, rule-setting, surveillance, punishments, pressuring for access, short-lived remorse.
- **Effect:** constricted choices; constant risk-calculation; hyper-vigilance; auto-pilot thinking; isolation; "walking on eggshells".
- **Tactics:** the Power-and-Control Wheel<sup>7</sup> (next page) summarises eight common "spokes" (intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; minimising/denying/blaming; using children; male privilege; economic abuse; coercion & threats). By contrast the Equality Wheel (next page) mirrors what healthy, Christ-like love produces (respect, honesty, shared responsibility, non-threatening behaviour, economic partnership, responsible parenting). Together they function like an X-ray exposing what is really happening.

Control often disguises itself as concern. Isolation is sold as "protecting the marriage". Economic control is called "stewardship". Surveillance is dressed as "accountability". This easily confuses us.

Scripture cuts through these euphemisms and drives us to ask, "Does the behaviour give life or steal agency<sup>8</sup>?" Having assessed that, "Does it reflect Christ's self-giving love (Ephesians 5:25-27) or the works of darkness (Ephesians 5:11)?"

Our task is to recognise and name the behaviour and put safety first. We must not join in coercion dressed in religious words. Also, we need to learn to discern image management from repentance. Performative sorrow, partial admissions, polished apologies, and letters from counsellors or long-time friends often repair the controller's reputation, not their character or heart. Religious language and public compliance often hide an unchanged will to dominate. Repentance is different. It is structural: it **ends** what we will term "The Project of Control". It is patient: it **accepts** boundaries and consequences. It is **verifiable**: it is proved over time. Hence the need to measure by fruit (refer Foundation Scripture).

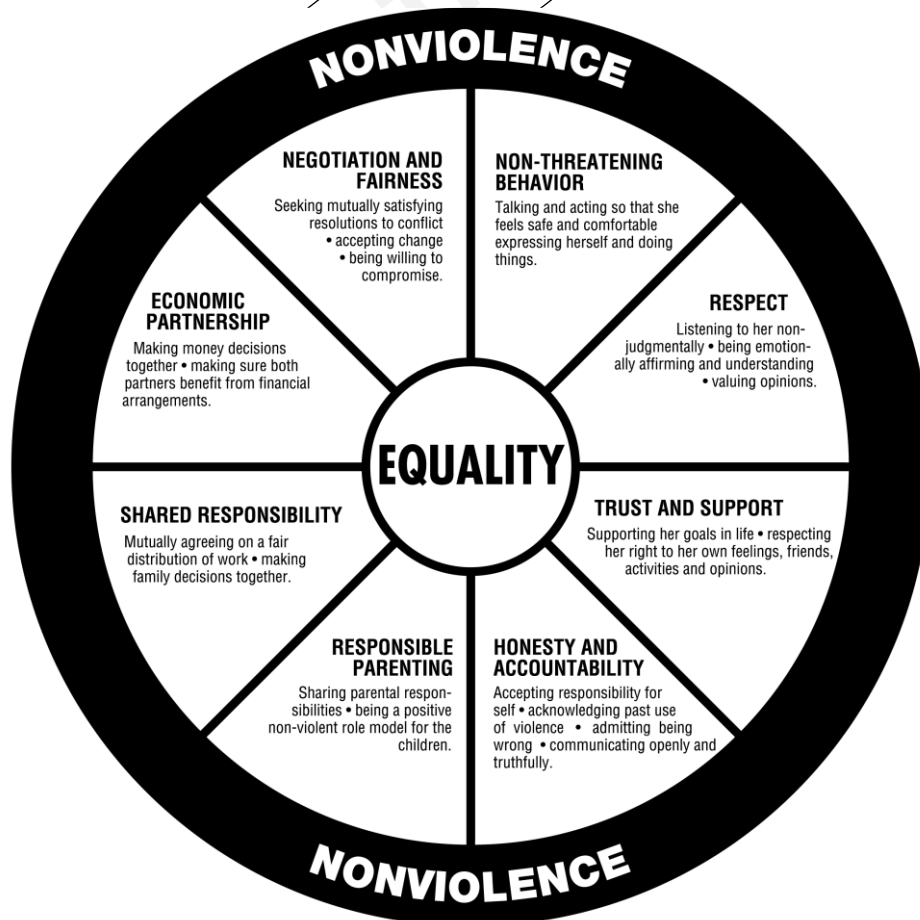
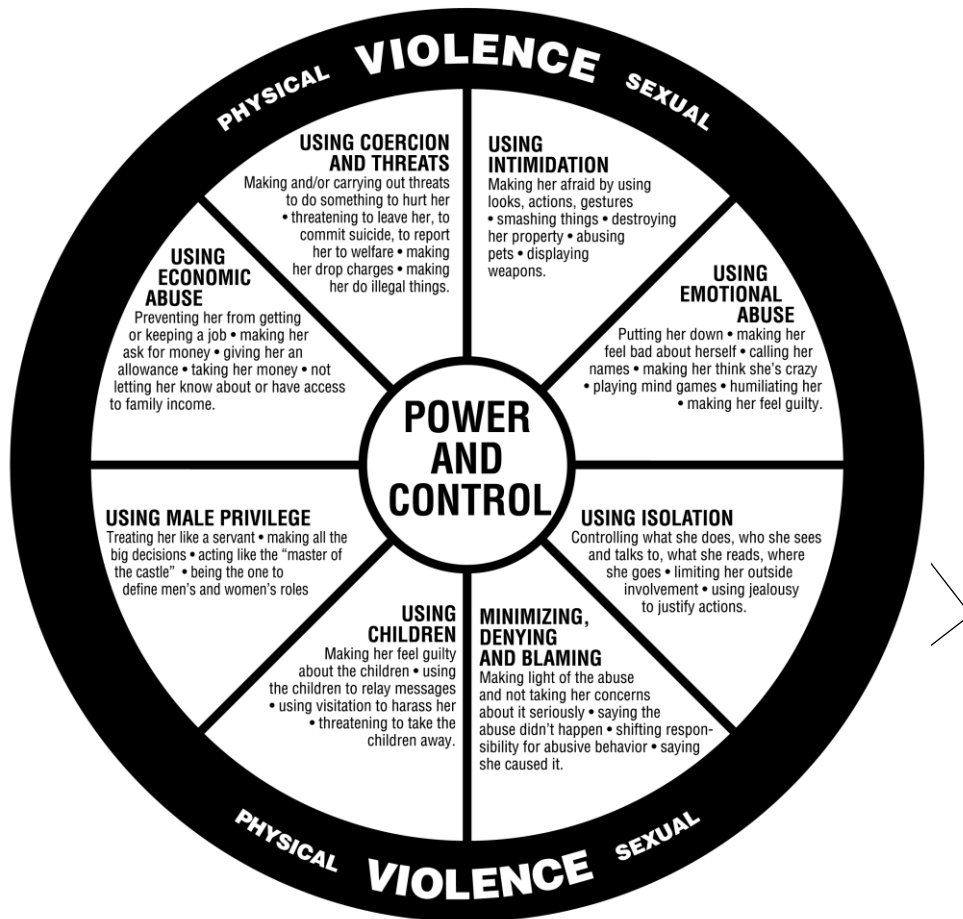
**Coercive control is not a "communication problem".** "The Project of Control" is a deliberate, repeated pattern of domination directed at a victim. We must distinguish a relationship problem from a one-sided attempt to get "power and control". This works alongside the research that reveals coercive control as a liberty crime.

#### *Key distinctions:*

*This is not conflict - this is control.*

*This is not a marriage problem - this is a problem of the sinful behaviour of one person in the marriage.*





## How Coercive Control Works

Coercive control works because it is systematic and camouflaged. Power-and-Control Wheel tactics are not random; they are the architecture of domination. They are not separate and distinct types of abuse as much as they are a system of different tactics that work together.

**Intimidation:** standing over; breaking things; veiled threats; deciding whose voice “counts”.<sup>9</sup>

**Emotional abuse:** belittling; contempt; humiliation.

**Isolation:** cutting a spouse off from friends, family, and ecclesia under the guise of “marital unity” or “loyalty”.

**Minimising/denying/blaming (DARVO<sup>10</sup>):** spinning the story to make light of the concern; counter-accusations; selective confession; DARVO: flipping the story so the person who harmed claims to be the victim.

**Using children:** threats to remove them; pulling in schools or health systems to play people off against each other; weaponising them.

**Male privilege:** claiming the right to “make all the decisions”; using double standards.

**Economic abuse:** vetoing spending; withholding necessities; hiding accounts.

**Coercion & threats:** from “I’ll ruin you” to suicide threats used as leverage.

**Weaponised Spirituality:** these tactics often wear religious language; ecclesial processes and words are common targets.

**Inevitable Escalation:** the pattern often worsens at known times: money stress, pregnancy and postpartum, holidays, and especially separation. Elders and care teams should expect post-separation “lawfare”: vexatious filings, delays, custody games, intimidating court events, “speaking orders”, and reputation campaigns. Research shows how the controller recruits systems including schools, families, ecclesias, welfare, and law into the campaign.

**Clearing the Fog:** case experience has shown how the obscuring fog forms. The controlling spouse may show grief and piety. He may resign roles, go to counselling, do all that is asked of him or quote verses. Elders, eager for peace and harmony, believing the best, may confuse image repair (performances to look sorry without changing) with repentance. But sorrow for consequences is not sorrow for harm. This fog hides the reality.

**What repentance ought to look like:** confession without qualifiers; it centres those harmed (spouse, children); it ends “The Project of Control”; it accepts long-term boundaries; it welcomes outside accountability. This difference is not about words – it is about behaviour.

## Why Coercive Control Is Often Gendered

Anyone can be harmed by coercive control, and care must be case by case. Yet across churches and society, as much as in our community, the main pattern is men controlling women. Men generally hold more power in society. Our community's teaching of "the divine order" and complementarity add to that. Stating this is not ideology. It is observation. In this primer we choose to use gendered language because of this. Regardless, any coercive controlling behaviour by anyone in any setting offends the law of Christ.

Several forces often meet here:

- Appeals to nature and modern ideas of masculinity and male entitlement.
- Economic gaps like higher earning capacity and typical asset ownership.
- Misread scripture that turns servant leadership into a demand for compliance.

Recognising this pattern helps us act wisely and protectively – strengthening safeguarding measures while keeping our hearts open to every victim seeking safety and every sinner needing repentance.

Scripture points to a better way:

- Mutual submission sets the scene (Ephesians 5:21).
- Husbands are called to self-giving love, to *"give himself up"* for his wife's good (Ephesians 5:25–28).
- Leaders are instructed not to *"lord it over the flock"* (1 Peter 5:3) – not to rule as *"rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them"*. They must serve (Mark 10:42–45).

When culture replaces scripture, or "headship" is used as a right to command, the result is not biblical order. It is a counterfeit where power is abused.

Then myths spread, such as:

- Abuse is only physical.
- Both parties are equally to blame, or "anger" explains it.
- *"God hates divorce"* overrides safety.
- Respect is owed even when a husband lives against the Lord's way.

These myths are often used to pressure victims, protect reputations and avoid interventions. Scripture and lived experience break these myths.

What about the claim that a strong stance against coercive control is "humanistic" or "feminist"? Scripture answers by identifying the weightier matters as *"justice, mercy, and faithfulness"* (Matthew 23:23). God hears the cry of the oppressed (Exodus 3:7). He calls His people to defend them (Proverbs 31:8–9; Isaiah 1:17). This is not secular power-talk. It is biblical discipleship.

Recruiting practical counsel from skilled experienced practitioners and researchers is wise, not capitulation. It sheds light on what the Bible already commands. This can include those working directly with survivors. Studies confirm the effectiveness of practitioner interventions<sup>11</sup>. Practitioners explain and expose the motive and impact of the fruit. They help survivors clear the fog.

But here is the key ecclesial point: our culture is not immune. Abuse hides in shame, gossip, misplaced appeals to "love", and fear of not being believed. Many survivors have been taught that endurance is godliness.

Teaching and pastoral care must undo those scripts. Faithfulness for survivors means naming sin and seeking safety, not submitting to domination.

# Chapter 4 • Scripture

## Headship in Christ is Not Control

**John 13; Matthew 20:25-28; Philippians 2:5-11; Ephesians 5:25-33; 1 Peter 3:7**

Paul's own example gives elders three settings for care (Acts 20:20, 31): public teaching, house-to-house care and personal admonition "with tears". The message must match in all three. Christ-like headship works counter to the controller's drive for control. It never permits it. Our Lord models headship through sacrificial, servant-hearted love. It is sacrificial. It is servant hearted. It is ruled by love.

Therefore, coercive control is not headship. We can use scripture's fruit test to show the gap. Coercive control produces fear, secrecy, confusion, and shrinking agency. That is rotten fruit. Christ-like headship nourishes and cherishes. It honours. It understands. It brings peace. Coercive control is un-Christ-like.

**Name the counterfeit.** If "headship" demands fearful and instant obedience and uses coercion, it is not biblical leadership. It is the religious clothing of "The Project of Control". The Wheel's "male privilege" spoke is a textbook distortion. It misuses complementarian<sup>12</sup> language to justify entitlement. Scripture is clear: "*not domineering... but examples*" (1 Peter 5:3); "*love... and do not be harsh*" (Colossians 3:19).

## Teach headship through Jesus, not through culture wars

Debates over words (like the Greek word for headship) cannot hide the simple Gospel model. Jesus kneels to wash feet. He rejects "lording it over". He uses authority to lift, not to dominate (John 13; Mark 10:42–45). We need to make the contrasts clear when teaching Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 3. Do not let controllers hear a "permission slip".

Headship is...	Headship is not...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-emptying action for another's good.</li><li>• First to repent.</li><li>• First to protect.</li><li>• First to give up rights.</li><li>• Committed to mutuality (Ephesians 5:21) and honour (1 Peter 3:7).</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fear, threats, or intimidation.</li><li>• Forced isolation or economic control.</li><li>• Sexual pressure masked as "marital duty".</li><li>• Monitoring devices or using children as leverage.</li></ul>

These abuses of power are sin, including sexual coercion in marriage. Name them plainly.

## Case wisdom protects the flock

Abuse cases are not mutual marriage problems; they are one-sided patterns of sin. Leaders must know the patterns, assess safety first, avoid couples counselling at the start, and work patiently as part of a coordinated team. Our public teaching on headship must match our personal practice (Acts 20). Paul calls experienced carers, "*you who are spiritual*" (Galatians 6:1) and overseers, "*not a novice*" (1 Timothy 3:6 KJV). Elders who lack experience in cases of coercive control need to draw on case wisdom of others who have that experience and listen to professionals with insight, while educating themselves on coercive control.



## Godly Fatherhood is Not Control

*"Fathers, do not provoke your children... bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord"* (Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21). A biblical father self-sacrifices - limits himself for the child's good and puts the child's needs first. He is focused on their welfare. He does not use the child to reach the mother, to punish, to spy, to judge, to pressure, or to advertise "reform". When children express fear or unease, the ecclesia must believe them.

Children who live with coercive control are not bystanders. They are targets. They are also used as tools in the controller's campaign. Many carry harm into adulthood and their adult relationships.

Research shows how coercion saturates children's lives. Daily routines, friendships, school, healthcare, and trust in adults are all affected. After separation, tactics often intensify through contact disputes, surveillance, the effects of financial control on the children and attacks on the protective parent's reputation.

Sister Fiona Bosly's research<sup>13</sup> shows how entitlement reshapes some violent fathers' idea of "fatherhood". It becomes about rights and image, not nurture and duty. These fathers often misunderstand child development, show low empathy, and use parenting arrangements to control. Children are pushed to carry messages, hide their distress, or manage a parent's emotions. Courts may be used to force unwanted closeness. Children describe the impact in stark words: terrifying, shameful, powerless, humiliating, disappointing, unsettling, sad, unsafe. These stand against the fruit of the Spirit and expose adult sin systems (refer Foundation Scripture).

## Adjust practice to protect children

Do not misuse scripture to directly or indirectly relabel their voices as "alienation" and reject that labelling by others. In light of Christ's "millstone warning" (Matthew 18:6) we must listen carefully to children.

Practical steps for elders, Sunday school and youth leaders:

- Listen to children in age-appropriate ways. Record disclosures securely. Do not promise what you cannot keep including non-disclosure or super-human promises.
- Choose stability over optics. Keep routines, schools, and safe friendships steady. Let children opt out of public settings where pressure is likely.
- Do not force joint sessions (parent-child or spouses) to "reconcile" while risk remains. Pressure makes children vulnerable to new manipulation.
- Plan for post-separation. Anticipate court orders, school pick-ups, and ecclesial contact. Pre-commit to policies that put safety before "being neutral".
- Support the protective parent (often the mother) with transport, childcare, money help, and advocacy. Do not wait for "proof" before offering help.

## Applying the fruit test for children

Jesus' test applies to *"the least of these"* (Matthew 25:40). Where Christ's spirit rules, we expect gentleness, patience, and no threats. Where coercion rules, we expect fear, secrecy, and discouragement. Elders must teach this openly. The ecclesia should learn to discern by fruit, not by charisma, gender, or status.

## Chapter 5 • Action

### Learn to Recognise Coercive Control

Coercive control disguises itself as something else: “budgeting”, “concern”, “headship”, or “communication problems”. In this way it can hide in the ordinary. In ecclesial life, controllers often weaponise piety or scripture to distract from the issue or justify their tactics. Fearful of division or of making a mistake, elders can easily be drawn into the controller’s script.

Common traps our experience exposes include:

- false balance (“both sides” because “it takes two to tango”, mutualising- treating a one-sided pattern of harm like a two-sided marriage problem),
- using God to get your way (selective proof-texts),
- image repair vs repentance (prioritising optics over transformation), and
- control disguised as concern (testing survivor boundaries presented as pastoral zeal).

Scripture answers each move: Micah and our Lord’s *“weightier matters”*, John the Baptist’s *“fruits in keeping with repentance”*, and Jesus’ critique of outward religion (Matthew 23). Elders can learn to “hear through” performance and keep the focus on fruit and freedom.

#### Why we miss it (structurally):

- We find it easy to believe confident narrators. A polished, tearful confession can drown out a survivor’s fearful, halting truth or avoidance of anything vilifying their controller.
- Gender bias can leave men less attuned to women’s experiences and the realities they describe. Our processes tend to lack women’s perspectives, input, and wisdom.
- Institutional self-protection. Past endorsements (counselling, platform roles) create pressure to defend earlier choices.
- Misapplied virtues. Zeal for “peace”, “fairness” or “God’s righteousness” that outruns truth and safety becomes complicity.
- Language fog. Euphemisms (“marital difficulty”, “anger issues”) shrink a justice issue into a communications issue.

#### How to stop missing it:

- Map the pattern by default. Build timelines. Use the Wheel. Document effects. Store records securely. Limit access.
- Keep lanes separate. One “pair” of helpers for survivor support (pastoral + practical). Another for accountability (for the person who harmed).
- Halt risky processes. Recognise where an imbalance of power means Matthew 18 model is not suitable. Avoid joint counselling until boundaries hold over time. Avoid “mediation” that assumes equal power and influence. Don’t be pressured.
- Teach the ecclesia. Preach the fruit test. Pair the Wheel with the Word in premarital, youth, and elder training.
- Use external expertise wisely. Bring in abuse-literate professionals or experience. Fund the help. Don’t let the person who harmed control the story with “friendly” counsellors.
- Embed boundaries in policy. Remove a coercive controller from ecclesial duties while risks persist. Set chaperone rules. Share key information among elders. Create clear reporting paths. Review regularly.



When ecclesias take these steps, controllers find the system harder to game or exploit. Survivors gain language and safety; children are believed; the person who has harmed either repents in deeds or loses the cover of pious words. That is pastoral light.

## Teach the Ecclesia to Recognise Sin

**Aim.** To teach the ecclesia so that anyone - controllers, survivors but also elders, parents, teens, can spot the pattern by pairing the Power-and-Control Wheel with the evident fruit and evaluate through the lens of what scripture teaches and prohibits. The Wheel lists eight common spokes. As we said earlier, used together they are like an X-ray for relationships.

Now we propose a **teaching framework** that builds on the way the Wheel illuminates scripture and on the Scriptural references we have applied to the problem, and particularly the Fruit Test.

**Key.** For each spoke of the wheel we pair the tactic and the fruit it yields and then evaluate it through the teaching of the Word that contradicts it.

1. Intimidation → fear & secrecy → *"Let no corrupting talk... only such as is good for building up... put away bitterness, wrath..."* (Ephesians 4:29-32).
2. Emotional abuse → shame, confusion → *"Husbands... do not be harsh"* (Colossians 3:19) and *"live... in an understanding way"* (1 Peter 3:7).
3. Isolation → shrinking agency → God places believers in a body (Hebrews 10:24-25).
4. Minimising, denying, blaming (DARVO) → fog → *"He who justifies the wicked... is an abomination"* (Proverbs 17:15); *"weightier matters"* must not be inverted (Matthew 23:23).
5. Using children → triangulation and terror → *"Fathers, do not provoke... lest they be discouraged"* (Colossians 3:21).
6. Male privilege → entitlement → Jesus forbids the Gentile model of dominion; among us *"whoever would be great... must be your servant"* (Mark 10:42-45).
7. Economic abuse → dependency → Proverbs commends trust and provision, not rationing as leverage.
8. Coercion and threats → captivity → *"Let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No,' no"* (Matthew 5:37).

**Sexual coercion.** We should add this to the Power-and-Control Wheel. It often hides under "marital duty". It opposes love. It is harshness (Colossians 3:19). Unwanted sexual acts are sin—even in marriage (1 Corinthians 7; Matthew 5:28–29). Such violation breaks Christ's law of love. It is the crime of rape in most countries. Whilst it may not be criminal in a particular country, it still is a violation of Christ's law and has no place in a scriptural marriage.

## The Positive Alternative: Galatians 5.

As we have already shown, the fruit of the Spirit and 1 Corinthians 13's love (patience, kindness, truth-telling) is what to look for. Where the Wheel predicts fear and control, Galatians 5 predicts gentleness and self-control. Foundation Scripture call us to test by fruit. We can use this as a positive balance in our teaching.

**Teaching method.** Similarly, teach "spoke by spoke": define the tactic; ask, "What fruit does it reliably produce?"; then read the counter-text from Foundation Scripture and Galatians 5.

**Competence.** "Teaching fruit" can be undertaken in the ecclesia publicly but can also be used as a pastoral tool to engage with a controller. This can also form the basis for how the team working with survivor(s) and controller can communicate plans and progress with the

elder or arranging group. It provides a means of developing shared objectives in engaging with controllers.

## Look for the Fruit, not the Fig Leaves

Jesus gives our community a discerning lens that is both pastoral and rigorous: fruit reveals the tree. Looks and words can fool us. Ways and outcomes tell the truth (refer Foundation Scripture). Paul provides a positive checklist (Galatians 5:22-23): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Ephesians 5 adds our call: Walk in love (vv.1-2), walk in light (vv.8-14), walk in wisdom (vv.15-21), expose the unfruitful works of darkness (v.11).

Applied to coercive control, we should ask:

- What fruit does the relationship keep producing in the weaker party and in the children?
- Do we see fruit of calm, clarity, consent, and growth? Or fruit of fear, secrecy, confusion, and shrinking agency?

In the ecclesia, ask of the person who harmed:

- Do they own their actions?
- Do they accept consequences?
- Do they plan for others' safety?
- Do they submit to accountability?
- Do they make practical repairs (money, logistics)?
- Do they keep changing when no one is watching?

Words matter, but actions prove them.

This is not "humanistic". It is biblical realism. Jesus condemns whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27). He commands deeds that match words (Matthew 21:28-31). Paul calls leaders to protect the vulnerable and rebuke when needed (Titus 1:10-14) and for mature believers to confront sin in the ecclesia (Galatians 6:1). In Ephesians 5:11 he forbids complicity.

Jesus' weightier matters set our priorities: justice, mercy, faithfulness.

**Teaching the fruit test publicly** has two payoffs:

1. **It equips bystanders:** ecclesial members learn what to look for and how to support without being recruited into control.
2. **It stabilises leadership:** elders have a shared checklist, reducing the sway of charisma, tears, compliance or status.

There is a clear message to bystanders, survivors and controllers alike of the path to repentance and what is expected. Over time, communities that live by the fruit test become unsafe for coercion and safe for repentance—because boundaries and truth actually give sinners a real path to change. The practical use of these principles requires **case wisdom**. As mentioned earlier, novices should be introduced to the work slowly and cautiously, and real experience in this process sought out when not locally available. Those without the willingness, skill or patience to use this approach should not be made responsible for it.

*"Fruits in keeping with repentance" is our standard for change (Luke 3:8).  
We must not mistake tears or compliance for transformation.*



## What is the Fruit of Repentance

Why a criteria for repentance? Tears, letters from counsellors or character references, and public compliance can be image repair.

Consider the following aspects when assessing repentance (behavioural, verifiable, long-term):

- **Ownership:** no blame-shifting; full confession without “but”.
- **Empathy:** names the impact on spouse/children; grieves harm, not consequences.
- **Safety choices:** proactively maintains no-contact/chaperone conditions; never pressures for access; accepts survivor pacing.
- **Accountability:** welcomes independent oversight; consents to information-sharing; links professionals to survivor for informed briefing; self-reports setbacks.
- **Structural change:** ends surveillance, economic control, image-games; makes transparent finances, devices, calendars; pays for specialised intervention.
- **Repair:** makes concrete amends (housing, debts, practical logistics) without strings.
- **Time:** sustains change through risk periods (holidays, legal setbacks, post-separation triggers). Time cannot be faked.

The following examples reflect common situations and recommended responses<sup>14</sup>:

### Example A (image repair).

After the abuse was disclosed and his wife escaped, he resigns from roles, posts a contrite note, begins counselling, and asks to meet his wife “just to talk”. He offers selective admissions and a “mutual mistakes” narrative; meanwhile, he quietly pressures through friends and legal filings.

*Assessment: This is performance (and denying), not dismantling “The Project of Control”.*

*Recommended Response: Boundaries remain; accountability intensifies.*

### Example B (early repentance markers).

He accepts no-contact without protest; moves to independent accommodation; hands over passwords and financial data to a third-party; asks elders to choose an abuse-literate program and commits to attend long-term; writes a detailed confession focused on impact and motive, not self-pity; does not pursue platform or proximity.

*Assessment: Early fruit.*

*Recommended Response: Continue boundaries; reassess at measured intervals.*

### Guardrails for spiritual supporters.

Don’t be recruited into a pity play. Don’t allow the controller to dictate counsellor choice or terms. Don’t negotiate. Keep survivor safety central.

Restoration and any steps toward relational reconciliation are appropriate only after long-term, verifiable change; never by pressuring the survivor; never by collapsing boundaries prematurely. Fruits in keeping with repentance is the test. The survivor’s safety is the priority, and then the coercive controller’s reconciliation with God is the urgent matter for them.

## Misused Scripture and Better Practices

**Problem.** Within ecclesias, controllers often hide behind religious language: “God hates divorce” becomes a weapon to punish; “forgiveness” is twisted into access; Matthew 18 and the two-witnesses rule are used to silence or force unsafe encounters.

### Misused texts, clear corrections.

- **Matthew 18:** Jesus’ aim is gaining your brother in contexts where power is roughly equal. Where the context has patterns of coercion, invoking Matthew 18 to compel joint meetings raises risk, and is not the passage’s intent. Importantly, survivors usually have engaged with their controller to endeavour to get them to stop the behaviours. Disclosing to the ecclesia is their next step in the sort of process Christ describes.
- **Investigate both sides:** (Proverbs 18:17) The proverb is explaining the wisdom of not jumping to conclusions; of seeking both sides of a disagreement; of examining the evidence. But we should not have a trite adherence to this as a rule when we must also not let the wicked avoid justice (Proverbs 18:5). The claims of a survivor will almost always be vehemently denied by a person using coercive control. We must be wise as serpents and gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16) in ensuring we do not exacerbate harm. We can identify patterns, corroborate from other sources and expect open-hearted confession about what behaviour and action led to the fruit of harm we see.
- **Two witnesses:** (Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 1 Timothy 5:19) By nature, coercive patterns occur in private. Witness in scripture includes corroborating evidence (children’s statements, documents). Accept corroboration beyond literal bystanders.
- **Forgiveness does not imply access:** Forgiveness cannot be commanded; access must be earned over time through demonstrable safety and fruit; reconciliation is never commanded at the expense of safety and justice.

**Ecclesial interventions.** Do not push joint marriage counselling or other pastoral joint intervention while control is active. It turns a justice problem into a “communication” problem and re-exposes the victim. Delay joint sessions until structural change is shown. Address coercive control before any reconciliation.

**Support survivors first.** Believe first disclosures. Keep confidentiality. Warn that manipulative countermeasures are common. Do not let the ecclesia become a tool of control.

### Work in two lanes:

1. Survivor Care: safety, practical help, advocacy.
2. Accountability: truth-telling, boundaries, discipline for the person who harmed.

This avoids “both-sides” fog and prevents asking survivors to “help” their controller. Provide practical support like housing, transport, finances, steady school routines as Christ-like love.

## Chapter 6 • Counsel

### Be Ready for Escalations and Systems Abuse

**Design.** Coercive controllers often escalate after separation, using procedures and institutions as weapons against their victims. The pattern is well understood and common. Ecclesias must anticipate this pattern and close predictable gaps.

#### Common post-separation tactics (with ecclesial counter-moves)

- **Vexatious filings and delays.** Constant legal actions draining money and time, forcing contact, and exhausting the survivor. *Counter-move: give a steady support person; help file and store documents; avoid public comment; use ecclesial knowledge and evidence to support her case; keep firm boundaries so the ecclesia is not a messaging platform.*
- **Parenting manipulation and “rights talk”.** Using contact to control. Demanding access. Refusing fair cooperation. *Counter-move: put children’s safety, stability and sanity above adult “rights”. Use Ephesians 6:4 to set parenting expectations - care, love and a deep concern for the children’s spiritual well-being. Fund abuse-aware professionals. Keep children’s routines and safe friendships steady.*
- **Courtroom intimidation and “speaking orders”.** Leveraging appearances to loom and to perform repentance. *Counter-move: trauma-informed accompaniment; plan for entrances/exits; no forced greetings.*
- **Reputation campaigns and “flying monkeys”.**<sup>15</sup> Enlisting supporters to discredit the survivor as “unstable” and otherwise vilify her. *Counter-move: pre-brief elders on DARVO; restrict gossip; demand he not vilify his wife or enlist outside support without discussion; keep updates minimal and necessary; name reputation management as not repentance.*
- **Tech surveillance and information theft.** Tracking devices, account access. *Counter-move: help with access to professionals for advice, device checks; new accounts; safe communications plans; limit who holds sensitive details.*

#### Ecclesial-specific steps

- **Avoid proximity.** Make the meeting safe for survivors. Ask him to attend online (with rostered in-person support if needed) or attend another ecclesia for now.
- **Platform signals.** Remove him from visible roles during assessment. This is not discipline by itself, but it avoids making an “all is well” signal.
- **Avoid “both-sides” framing.** Confront the abuse first, always prioritising justice, mercy, and faithfulness rather than equating a victim’s survival responses with control. Once safety and accountability are in place, we can gently address any sins of the victim (Matthew 23:23).
- **Back-channel pressure.** Well-meaning members may push for “reconciliation”. Teach gently: forgiveness does not equal access. Repentance is proved by fruit over time, not tears or third-party supporters of any type. Only the survivor decides if trust can be rebuilt.

**Children as targets.** After separation, children may be used to carry messages, spy for the controller, hide fear, or hold a parent’s emotions. The good pastoral response is listen to children directly; record disclosures; never force “reconciliation sessions”; protect their agency and stability. Children often feel terrified, powerless, and unsafe. Act accordingly.

**Bottom line.** Jesus’ fruit test tells us what behaviours belong to light and what to darkness. When we anticipate these moves, our policies make coercion harder to hide.

## Responding to New Legislation

**What the law recognises.** Many jurisdictions now recognise coercive control as a **pattern of behaviour** that instils fear or severely limits a partner's freedom. **England & Wales** and **Scotland** have established offences. In **Australia, NSW** and **Queensland** have enacted laws, and **South Australia** has passed laws due to commence soon after the time of writing. Other Australian states and countries are doing likewise.

**Why it matters for the ecclesia.** Scripture teaches that rulers are God's servants to restrain evil (Romans 13; 1 Peter 2). We report, cooperate with Police, and follow lawful orders. Yet holiness goes **beyond** compliance: the law is a **floor, not a ceiling**. Even without charges, coercive control remains **sin** and demands pastoral action.

**What the definition clarifies.** The core harm is **loss of liberty**, not incident count, therefore we map **patterns and effects**, and do not focus investigation on corroborating individual events.

### Practice - how we act.

- **Documentation:** Keep precise, confidential notes (dates, tactics, effects). Be ready to provide them if lawfully requested.
- **Boundaries:** Use interim **no-contact, chaperone conditions, and removal from platform** to prevent harm.
- **Reporting:** Where law mandates reporting (e.g., child-risk), we report. Otherwise, we support survivor autonomy, explain options, and cooperate wisely with authorities.
- **Teaching:** Explain briefly that the state now names as **crime** what scripture has long named **sin**. Our loyalty to Christ leads us often to go **further** in restraint, protection, and truth-telling.

**Responsibilities to the law.** Ground cooperation in **Romans 13** and **Titus 3**: assist lawful processes, don't hinder investigations, and never ask survivors to breach or cancel orders for "private reconciliation".

**Law courts and 1 Corinthians 6.** Do not misuse **1 Corinthians 6** to block necessary legal safeguards. Safety and crime rightly involve the state; internal processes cannot provide genuine protection. Authorities recognise the harm of domestic violence and coercive control and have outlawed it. We support that purpose and use the law to secure safety. We counsel all parties to avoid using the law coercively.

**Records and confidentiality.** Keep secure, factual records: incidents, tactics, effects (freedom losses), and risk spikes. Share only on a **need-to-know** basis. Exclude opinion and hearsay.

**Boundaries are for care not punishment.** Interim steps such as 'no contact,' attendance elsewhere, or removal from roles **protect** others—they do not pass judgment. They align with Paul's call to protect the weak and not provoke children.

**Pastoral lane for the sinner (where there is hope).** The **accountability** lane presses for ownership, empathy, acceptance of consequences, and **structural change** over time. Persistent minimising or denial may require ecclesial discipline.

*Real repentance—2 Corinthians 7:10–13*

*Godly sorrow shows itself in earnestness, eagerness to make things right, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, and acceptance of consequences. In short: fruit verifies words.*



## Chapter 7 • For Victim-Survivors: Living in the Light of Christ's Fruit

*"The fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true." –  
Ephesians 5:9*

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In this chapter we speak directly to victim-survivors, but all of us do well to understand this message. In this way we are aware of what a victim-survivor may need to think about.

When we speak about "fruit," we are not talking about outcomes in worldly terms – success, "happy families", reconciliation, or appearances – but about the evidence of the Spirit and the proof of love. The fruit test is how we tell whether something is life-giving or life-taking. For you who have lived or still live under coercive control, the fruit test becomes not just a tool for discernment, but a guide for healing.

Christ calls His followers into liberty. He proclaimed freedom for the captives and release for the oppressed (Luke 4:18). That freedom includes you. The gospel does not call anyone to remain in bondage, to endure coercion, or to preserve appearances at the cost of your soul. Christ calls you into peace, safety, and wholeness.

### Your Safety and Sanity Come First

God is not glorified by your torment or fear. Your safety – physical, emotional, and spiritual – comes before the appearance of unity or the reputation of a marriage. The marriage vows you made were never meant to become a prison.

If staying in contact with a coercive controller places you or your children in danger, you are not sinning by stepping away. You are choosing life. Like Israel, we are called to make this decision: *"Choose life, that you and your children may live"* (Deuteronomy 30:19). No one has authority to tell you that you must meet or reconcile with a person who has harmed you if doing so endangers your safety or sanity.

The Apostle Paul fled persecution (Acts 9:25), and Jesus Himself withdrew when threatened (John 8:59). Self-protection is not faithlessness; it is wisdom. Your body and mind are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Protecting them honours God.

### The Marriage Is Not More Important Than the People in It

Scripture calls marriage a covenant designed for love, not control. When that covenant is broken by domination or deceit, the image of Christ's love is distorted. God's concern is not to preserve an institution at any cost, but to protect the people within it. Jesus reminds us that *"the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath"* (Mark 2:27). In the same way, marriage was made for love, not fear. *"There is no fear in love"* (1 John 4:18). When the structure of marriage becomes a weapon of control, it no longer bears the fruit of the Spirit.

Unless and until there is change and repentance with the potential rebuilding of trust (and this may take *more* than a lifetime) restoring the marriage is likely to put people in danger.

Faithfulness in God's eyes is not blind endurance of evil, but steadfastness in truth and goodness. The fruit test helps us see this. What fruit does the relationship produce? If the result is fear, confusion, or shrinking agency, the tree is diseased. Jesus' command is not to protect the diseased tree but to recognise and name it for what it is.

## Stewarding the Spiritual Safety of Children

As parents, we are stewards of our children's formation: their bodies, minds, and relationship with our Father. Scripture commands, *"Fathers, do not provoke your children... but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord"* (Ephesians 6:4). Discipline means guidance, correction, and instruction aimed at growth, not punishment and retribution. Our Lord's approach with us is patient, instructive, and redemptive, and so we should be with our children.

If a father's presence brings fear, chaos, or moral confusion, that influence cannot be said to lead children toward the Kingdom. You are not defying God by protecting your children from harm; you are fulfilling your duty.

If, on the other hand, you see genuine godly repentance — fruit over time, not merely words — you may discern ways for safe involvement. But this discernment must be yours, made prayerfully, carefully, and free of pressure. Stewardship means you guard the garden of your children's hearts.

## Trust Your Knowledge of Your Own Safety

No one else knows the pattern of control as you do. You have lived it. You have felt the shifts in tone, the tension in silence, the coded threats. We can use God-given discernment and prayer. Seek counsel from experts in domestic violence and trauma-informed professionals. In doing this, remember that you remain the primary decision-maker for your own safety and that of your children. Do that in your own good conscience toward God. Others can support and inform you, but they must not override your sense of what is safe or wise.

Whether you choose to stay, leave, or prepare for separation, do it when you have made your plans, gathered support, and prayed for wisdom. God promises to give wisdom generously to all who ask (James 1:5).

## Be Wise and Guard Your Information

Jesus told His disciples, *"Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves"* (Matthew 10:16). When dealing with coercive control, that wisdom includes protecting your information. Keep records: of incidents, messages, financial actions, or threats. Store them securely, out of reach.

Share information only with people who have proved trustworthy — who understand confidentiality and are not vulnerable to manipulation. It is wise to keep your circle small, perhaps two or three trusted allies. These may include a trained advocate, a domestic violence counsellor, or a trauma-informed elder or friend.

Understand that even well-meaning ecclesial members may not comprehend the dynamics of coercive control. You do not owe anyone your story. You are the steward of your own information. Guarding it is not deceitful; it is faithful self-protection.

## Navigating Systems: Ecclesias, Police, and Courts

You may encounter systems that fail to see clearly. Some ecclesias may respond with confusion or divided sympathies. Some courts may make poor decisions. Some police or counsellors may not understand coercive control. These are painful realities. Scripture shows that unjust judges exist (Luke 18:1–8), but persistence matters.

Good legal help can make a profound difference. Abuse-aware lawyers can help present the pattern of coercion – the full story, not isolated incidents. If possible, seek advocates who understand the nature of coercive control and can help translate your experience into evidence.

The law can be an ally, even if imperfect. Romans 13 reminds us that the role of government is to restrain evil. Use the authorities and legal means to protect your safety and your children's stability. And remember: Police assess fear not only of physical violence but of all forms of intimidation and control. Keep clear, factual notes that demonstrate your fear and the pattern of domination you've endured. Use discernment: there is no place for coercive use of the law, even to protect yourself.

## Managing Ecclesial and Community Pressure

Pressure from within a faith community can be one of the hardest burdens. When others urge reconciliation "for the children" or "for the witness of the Truth," remember that scripture never commands reconciliation at the cost of justice or safety.

Forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same. God calls us to forgive others who confess in truth (Luke 17:3; Ephesians 4:32). It is not for bystanders to direct us when we should forgive, but God knows our hearts. Reconciliation requires safety, repentance, and sustained change. *"Produce fruits in keeping with repentance"* (Luke 3:8). Until that fruit appears over time, no one can demand your presence or participation in unsafe contact. Even though you have forgiven someone, it doesn't follow that you trust them or are obliged to be reconciled with them, as much as that is the outcome that we should strive for.

Do not let others guilt you with "God hates divorce" without finishing the verse: "He hates violence" (Malachi 2:16). God's heart is for peace, not coercion. Those who urge endurance of abuse misunderstand the God of mercy. When you escaped violence you did not destroy the marriage – it is the violence that was destructive of the marriage.

## Healing and the Fruit of the Spirit

You may find that the effects of coercive control linger – confusion, anxiety, shame, hypervigilance (being constantly on edge), or numbness. These are not signs of weak faith; they are the body's natural response to prolonged threat. God understands trauma. The Psalms give language to this: "My tears have been my food day and night... Why are you cast down, O my soul?" (Psalm 42).

Healing begins not by demanding fruit from yourself, but by resting in God's gentleness. The fruit of the Spirit grows where safety, truth, and time allow roots to form. Peace will return as you rebuild agency, reclaim your voice, and rediscover joy in small things.

Over time, you may begin to see the fruit of self-control restored – not the control of others, but the quiet steadiness of your own soul. You may rediscover goodness – the ability to act in love without fear of punishment. You may find faithfulness – the courage to trust again. These are fruits of resurrection, grown in the soil of safety.

## When You Feel Alone

Many survivors describe the isolation of coercive control as spiritual exile. The scriptures are full of exiles who found God in hidden places: Elijah under the broom tree, Paul in prison, Jesus in Gethsemane. God is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18). He knows your

voice. You do not need to perform strength to be seen by Him. Sometimes surviving another day is the victory.

Seek people who bear the fruit of the Spirit. They are patient, gentle, and discreet. Their presence will not make you feel smaller, but safer. Avoid those who rush you, doubt you, or minimise your pain. The Body of Christ is meant to be a refuge, not a tribunal.

## Planning for the Future

As you rebuild your life, your decisions may include new routines, safe housing, financial independence, or new communities. Scripture honours prudence: *"The prudent sees danger and hides himself"* (Proverbs 27:12). There is no shame in planning carefully.

Keep hope alive. The same Spirit who frees captives also rebuilds lives. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in Christ: *"to bind up the brokenhearted... to give them a crown of beauty instead of ashes"* (Isaiah 61:1–3).

Recovery is not linear, but the fruit will come. Every time you choose peace over panic, truth over denial, self-respect over shame, you are walking in the light.

## Reflection: The Fruit Test for Healing

You can use the fruit model not only to identify abuse but to measure growth in recovery. Ask yourself:

- What fruit is growing in me now? (Peace? Strength? Hope?)
- What relationships bear fruit that nourishes me, and which ones drain me?
- Does this path restore my liberty and honour Christ's image in me?

The good tree gives life. Healing is not about proving your worth, but rediscovering that you are already precious to God. His Spirit is the gardener; your job is simply to stay in His light.

*"The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits." — James 3:17*

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## In Summary

- Safety and sanity first: they are sacred.
- Act prayerfully in good conscience to God
- The marriage is not more important than the people in it.
- Guard your information; disclose only to the trustworthy.
- Seek skilled professional support; avoid "quick fixes."
- Protect your children's development as an act of faith.
- Recognise that ecclesial responses may be conflicted and you are not bound by unsafe or coercive advice.
- Use the fruit test: where Christ's Spirit rules, there is peace; where coercion rules, there is fear.
- Trust that healing will bring new fruit in time.



## Chapter 8 • Conclusion

### The True Test of Scripture

Where the Spirit rules, we expect to see the fruit that makes coercion impossible to sustain: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Ecclesial policies: boundaries, support, interventions and legal cooperation are simply disciplined love in action.

### Our Final Call to Action

- **To ecclesial leaders:** Guard the flock; believe the oppressed; measure by fruit; refuse mixed signals.
- **To ecclesial members:** Learn about coercive control; stop gossip; support survivors quietly and steadily.
- **To sinners:** God's mercy is real—but so is His demand for fruits in keeping with repentance. End "The Project of the Control"; choose the path of self-limitation; accept accountability; let the Spirit work in your heart to transform it into the model of our Lord.

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

## Appendix: Screening & Casework Guide

### Purpose & scope

Use this appendix whenever any spouse's behaviour forms a controlling pattern, regardless of sex. It equips elders, pastoral carers and case leads to:

1. identify coercive control,
2. prioritise safety,
3. set clear accountability, and
4. document and review cases with integrity.

It applies regardless of the perpetrator's or victim's sex.

### Caveat

This guide supports pastoral care; it is not legal advice or clinical therapy. Where safety risks exist, contact qualified domestic-abuse specialists and the legal authorities in your jurisdiction.

Use this guide with caution and discernment, knowing your limits, competence and experience - this is a scriptural injunction (reference Section 4). Remember that domestic-violence cases vary widely: "if you've seen one case of domestic violence, you've seen one case of domestic violence". This means you can't read a new situation through the lens of a past case or the lens of your family-of-origin. Seek qualified help early (DV services, psychologists, specialist counsellors), exercise spiritual discernment when choosing providers and weighing their advice, and involve experienced brothers or sisters for direct assistance, mentoring, or counsel. Ecclesias can bring in external experience where available to work alongside the elders and/or ecclesial care team who lack relevant experience. This is a good learning model. It can provide for regular updates and communication. It is safer than "learning by your mistakes".

### Safeguarding foundations

**Do no harm:** Believe disclosures, don't blame the victim, and don't suggest "mutual fault" when there's a pattern of control. Evidence can take time—or may never be available—so don't demand it upfront. Don't expect the full story at the first disclosure; they're sharing deeply painful, shameful and sensitive experiences, so respond with safety and care.

**Confidentiality with limits:** Explain at intake: "What you share is private, except if someone is in danger or a child is at risk—we then must act to keep people safe."

**Two-person rule:** Wherever possible, handle cases with a paired pastoral team (for instance, case lead and safeguarding partner).

**Competence:** Ensure a competent team with relevant experience and case wisdom. Consider the benefit of regular team debriefing and resetting the process as this work tends to get overwhelming.

**Conflict of interest:** Reassign if you have close ties to either party.

**Records:** Keep contemporaneous notes of dates, facts, actions, and referrals in a secure location. Avoid diagnosing or labeling – stick to the facts and the fruit.

## Fast triage (first contact)

Ask these five questions at first disclosure. If any "Yes," treat as urgent and move to the Safety Planning section immediately.

1. Threats to kill self/partner/children or access to weapons?
2. Strangulation or choking ever reported? (even once)
3. Stalking/monitoring (in-person or tech), or repeated uninvited attendance?
4. Escalation during pregnancy/post-partum or around separation?
5. Child risk (injury, exposure to violence, coercion, abduction threats)?

Document the answers verbatim.

## Screening for coercive control (pattern, not one-offs)

### A. Pattern checklist

- ☐ Isolation: cutting off family/friends/ecclesia/work; insisting on secrecy.
- ☐ Monitoring: phone/device spyware, location tracking, interrogations, surprise "drop-ins."
- ☐ Financial control: blocking access to money, debt in victim's name, forced frugality while perpetrator spends freely.
- ☐ Rules & micro-regulation (controlling lots of small everyday choices): dress, food, time, chores, sleep, religious observance policed with penalties.
- ☐ Jealousy/sexual coercion: unwanted acts, refusal of contraception, shaming.
- ☐ Gaslighting: denying obvious incidents, rewriting history, blaming victim/children.
- ☐ Spiritual misuse: twisting Scripture to demand submission, silence, or "forgiveness without change."
- ☐ Threats/Intimidation: property damage, pet abuse, menacing looks, driving dangerously, "accidents."
- ☐ Proxy abuse: recruiting relatives, ecclesia members, or children to pressure, monitor or discredit.

### B. "Serious effect" indicators (impact on the victim)

- ☐ Fear of violence or serious distress; hypervigilance (being constantly on edge).
- ☐ Loss of autonomy: must ask permission, cannot make routine decisions.
- ☐ Health impacts: sleep disturbance, panic, self-doubt, depression, thoughts of self-harm.
- ☐ Work disruption: missed shifts, disciplinary actions due to sabotage.
- ☐ Religious withdrawal: silenced participation, fear at church.

**Interpretation:** Multiple items across "A" and clear impacts in "B" implies coercive control is likely. Move to accountability and safety planning.

### Differentiating conflict from control

- ☐ Ordinary conflict: episodic, both can speak, both compromise, power is roughly balanced, neither fears retaliation.
- ☐ Coercive control: asymmetry of power, one person dictates terms, the other adapts to avoid consequences, fear is a key driver, pattern persists across contexts.
- ☐ When unsure, map the pattern over time (See Pattern Mapping Tool below) and seek a specialist counselling support.

### Safety planning (victim-centred, child-aware).

Do now (same day if risk signs present) but best done with a domestic violence service/counsellor. Online checklists are helpful:

- ☐ Agree on safe contacts and a discreet check-in schedule.
- ☐ Identify code words for "I need help" and "Call police."
- ☐ Plan exit routes and safe places (friend, family, shelter).
- ☐ Technology hygiene: change passwords; check for trackers; create a fresh email; phone.
- ☐ Documents ready: IDs, bank cards, meds, children's items stored with a trusted person.
- ☐ Legal/advocacy referrals: local DV service, legal aid, police family violence unit as appropriate.

### Pattern mapping tool (for the victim and case file)

When the victim seeks to or is willing to discuss, capture three episodes in detail:

1. What happened? (facts only)
2. What led up to it? (rules, triggers, surveillance)
3. What were the consequences? (fear, injuries, lost money/work, spiritual impact)
4. What did you change afterwards to stay safe? (adapting behaviour means control)
5. Use this map to show course of conduct and to inform accountability terms.

### Engaging the alleged perpetrator (any sex)

Proceed only when the victim is safe from retaliation for disclosure and endorses engagement.

#### Opening ground rules (suggest providing this in writing):

- No minimising, blaming, or counter-accusations; we will pause if this occurs.
- We are assessing patterns, not debating isolated incidents.
- We are focused on helping you with your behaviours, your heart and your transformation.
- You must accept no-contact or structured contact conditions including alternative arrangements for attendance at meetings that we set for safety.
- You will comply with referrals (e.g., specialist behaviour-change program, counselling).

#### Early indicators of genuine repentance ("by their fruit"):

- Ownership: "I did X. It was abusive. No excuse."
- Empathy: Able to describe the partner's fear/impact without prompting.
- Transparency: Voluntary disclosure of hidden behaviours (e.g., tracking, finances).
- Self-reflection: "My motivation was [pride, lust, entitlement, power etc]. I will focus on being [humble, faithful, accountable, servant-hearted etc]". Use "homework" on concrete steps to achieve this and to support engagement. Look for completeness and honesty.
- Active repair: Practical steps - stop surveillance, separate finances appropriately and be generous, follow safety conditions, apologise without pressure for reconciliation.
- External accountability: Enrolment and attendance in a specialist program; allow contact with facilitators.

**Red flags (likely ongoing control):** spiritualised blame, selective proof-texting, “mutual” language to mask asymmetry, victim character attacks, urgency for reconciliation, triangulating church leaders against the victim, vilifying the victim.

**Accountability plan (written agreement)**

Include:

- No-violence/no-harassment clause, including tech abuse and proxy contact. In serious cases that have intervention orders, expect compliance with them as “a good Romans 13 citizen”.
- Contact boundaries: interim separation or structured, chaperoned contact (where desired by the victims); all logistics via a designated channel.
- Transparency: device search, location sharing off, disclose all finances/accounts affecting the household.
- Programs: enrol in behaviour-change or make appointment for counseling within X days; consent to the pastoral team checking attendance/participation/progress.
- Consequences: increased separation, loss of ecclesial privileges/responsibilities.
- Have both pastoral leads sign; offer the victim a copy; store securely.

**Pastoral boundaries & referrals**

- Your lane: spiritual care, safety support, accountability, documentation.
- Refer out for: legal orders, criminal matters, trauma therapy, substance misuse, psychiatric risk, specialist men’s/women’s behaviour programs.
- Mandatory reporting: follow your state/territory’s child-protection and serious-harm laws.

**Case review cadence**

- First month: weekly check-ins (victim separate from perpetrator).
- Quarterly review meeting: reassess risk, update safety plan, evaluate fruit of repentance, debrief as a care team (Section 7).
- Close or continue: Cases remain open until safety is stable and repentance is evidenced over time—not merely promises.

**Reconciliation principles**

- Safety first, truth first. No pressure to reconcile; no time pressure; no deadlines.
- Prerequisites: sustained compliance with the accountability plan; verified behavioural change; victim free to choose without fear.
- Gradual careful steps: therapeutic separation then limited contact then supervised time together then practical co-operation then relationship counselling (only when safe).
- At any breach: step back to the last safe stage; reassess risk.

**When the victim is the husband**

- Use exactly the same screening, safety, and accountability processes. Trust takes time and may have been permanently damaged.
- Anticipate under-reporting and shame; validate and support.
- Maintain equal seriousness in language and action with female-perpetrated patterns.

**Spiritual care for victims & families**

- Regular prayer and Scriptural teaching that emphasise God’s protection, truth, and justice (not endurance of evil).
- Practical support: meals, transport, childcare, advocacy at appointments (with consent).
- Guard against isolation: build a safe, small care team of trusted members.



<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies / AIFS – [“What the research evidence tells us about coercive control”](#) (Feb 2024)

<sup>2</sup> [Women’s Experiences of Coercive Control in Intimate Partner Relationships: a Qualitative Systematic Review](#) (Oct 2025)

<sup>3</sup> This is the insightful framing of coercive control in the seminal work on coercive control by Evan Stark, an American sociologist.

<sup>4</sup> Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> UK Home Office (2015), *Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Statutory Guidance Framework*, p. 3

<sup>6</sup> **Gaslighting** is a form of psychological manipulation in which an abuser deliberately causes a person to doubt their own memory, perception, or sanity, to gain power or control over them.

<sup>7</sup> Power and Control Wheel. © and Equality Wheel. © Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs (DAIP), Duluth, MN. Used with permission. [theduluthmodel.org](http://theduluthmodel.org) – the result of research examining the patterns of behaviour seen in domestic violence. We don’t share their worldview, but we do value the insight.

<sup>8</sup> “Agency” describes the ability to initiate and carry out actions and to exert control over one’s environment. Individuals with agency possess a sense of autonomy, self-efficacy, and the belief that they can influence their own outcomes. This aligns with the free will the Father extends to us. It follows that it is our obligation to show Godliness and support the agency of others around us - especially those with less power. It also follows that when supporting survivors we must recognise that they have been stripped of their agency by the coercive controller, and that we must give them the agency and autonomy to make decisions for themselves in their own time without undue influence, coercion or control.

<sup>9</sup> Even having used violence only once, and only a long time ago, the intimidation and threats of violence carry a seriousness and are ominous because the potential for violence is understood. Even others who are not the subject of the violence recognise that the violence could or can be directed at them, and so threats against them have the same effect.

<sup>10</sup> DARVO is an acronym describing a common perpetrator response pattern to being confronted about abusive behaviour: Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender. The term explains how controllers deflect accountability – first denying the behaviour, then attacking the accuser’s credibility, and finally portraying themselves as the real victim.

<sup>11</sup> A systematic meta-analysis of UK domestic violence support services found that ≈ 58.7 % of advocacy intervention participants reported cessation of abuse by case closure, and other evaluations find that IDVA services, safe accommodation, and tailored counselling are associated with improved safety, mental health, self-confidence and access to supports (Carlisle et al. 2025; UK Government Outcomes & Impacts Review 2023; SaferPlaces IDVA Evaluation 2019).

<sup>12</sup> The term **complementarian** refers to our commonly held belief that men and women are equal in worth before God but have distinct, complementary roles – with men responsible for leadership in the home and ecclesia, and women for supportive partnership.

<sup>13</sup> [“I wouldn’t want my kids around him”: How men who use violence in their intimate relationships perceive themselves as fathers, by Fiona Bosly, 2012](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Breaking the Cycle: A Scriptural Approach to Domestic Violence by Andrew & Julie Weller, 2024](#) [Christadelphian Tidings Publishing](#) (Chapter 8 discusses working with abusers.)

Free download from [tidings.org/publications](http://tidings.org/publications) (there is a North American edition also) or printed copies available from your local Amazon store.

<sup>15</sup> “Flying monkeys” refers to people who act on behalf of a coercive controller to carry out their agenda. These individuals may spread misinformation, pressure the target to comply, or attack anyone who challenges the abuser – often believing they are helping or defending someone who has been “wronged.” They are not always malicious themselves; they are often influenced, misled, or emotionally entangled with the controlling person. They may act out of loyalty, fear, guilt, or a desire for approval, becoming instruments of the abuser’s manipulation. The term highlights how abuse and coercion can ripple outward through social networks, with harm perpetuated not just by the abuser’s direct actions, but also by those who, knowingly or unknowingly, enable or enforce their control.