

Domestic Violence Biblical and Theological Resources

Domestic Violence is big news, and in some ways that is good news. Football stars, politicians and celebrities can no longer assume that the way they treat women will remain private. In the last few weeks a prominent union official has been in the media and in courts over what has been revealed to be abuse of his wife.

Yet, women continue to die at the hands of their partners. The deaths make headlines as the most shocking evidence of a still hidden horror. Rosie Batty has been the most prominent face of the campaign to deal with Domestic Violence, and there are significant resources invested into that. The figures are not changing all that much, certainly not as quickly as most people would wish.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one in six women and one in sixteen men have suffered physical and/or sexual violence from a current or previous partner, more than half of women who faced violence from their current partner have experienced more than one incident. Rates of report have not changed significantly since 2005, which means that increased publicity and programs may have had little impact on prevalence (though unreported violence is always the unknown factor in these statistics).

All of this has come home to churches, through our own scandals of providing cover, and perhaps even encouragement, for perpetrators.

When the church addresses any issue, we need to think about it theologically, and see how the gospel casts light on it. In the case of DV, that has to be coupled by wise advice and skilled helpers.

In May this year, the Presbyterian Church in NSW ran a training day on responding to DV. These are some notes from the day. I know they are not comprehensive, even of the theology, but they aim to summarise some of the key theological issues. These notes aim to provide a framework for a biblically informed response to DV. In session I presented, I did not cover all this material. It did seem useful to collect it in one place. On the day, we spent more time thinking about practical responses.

Remembering the reality

The headlines and statistics about Domestic and Family Violence only begin to tell the story of its impact: broken lives, destroyed confidence, terrified children, psychological crippling, physical scars, ruined careers.

Jo Swan (her *nom de plume*) attends a Presbyterian Church in Sydney and has written a yet to be published book reflecting on her experience of Domestic Violence as a child. Let me share one of her poems.

THE WIND

Cold Night of Winter,
The Wind flies and sees a small house;
she hears a thumping knock.
Through the window, the Wind enters;
her eyes widened with state of Shock!

A Little Girl Cries.
A Man strikes his wife in anger—
face transforms into Mr Hyde.
The Wind can sense the great danger.
Woman soaked in blood and bruises.

The Woman Pleads.
She quivers from shameful violence.
The fearful fate she must cede
as her Husband wants obedience.
Tension escalates in silence.

The Man Strikes Again.
The Woman spirit; crushed in pain.
A fist full of fury
like tyrannical typhoon rain.
The Girl cries at her sad story.
Her Father beating her Mother!

The Wistful Wind Weeps.
She tries to sing sweet lullabies—
knowing the Girl's scars will run deep.
Pure innocence lost in her eyes
as memories will haunt in sleep.
From Jo Swan, *Daughter of Shadows*.

1. DV and the church

We lack definitive figures, but there is no basis for assuming that the prevalence of domestic violence is any less in church families than in the general Australian population.

A recent study investigated DV in Australian religious communities by interviewing leaders, members and people addressing DV in a range of Christian church as well as Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish communities.¹ Its finds are that in many religious communities

- DV is a taboo topic and discussions are met with denial and defensiveness;
- DV is assumed to be defined as physical violence;
- religious beliefs and practices can promote victim-blaming attitudes including an overemphasis on forgiveness, acceptance and endurance;
- beliefs about gender roles and female submission may influence attitudes to DV;
- many leaders and communities had limited capacity to address and prevent DV.

A survey of leaders and members is only indicative of the situation. It is more than enough to remind all churches and especially church leaders that we need to serve Christ and his Christ's people better in this area.

¹ Mandy Truong, Bianca Calabria, Mienah Zulfacar Sharif, Naomi Priest, "New study finds family violence is often poorly understood in faith communities", *The Conversation* April 18, 2019 <https://theconversation.com/new-study-finds-family-violence-is-often-poorly-understood-in-faith-communities-115562>. The final results of "Faith Communities & Family Safety Project" is due to be released soon and will be available on <http://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications>.

2. Family

Often our discussions of domestic and family violence focus on the ‘violence’, and of course we have to think about that. First, though, Christians should reflect on the fact that marriage and family are part of God’s created order and are foundational for human life — for individuals and as a society.

The Bible is a book about families, full of stories of men finding wives, couples longing for children, births, family rivalry and tensions and death and mourning in families. It is punctuated by genealogies, tracing the connection and development of families. Two of the ten commandments deal with marriage and children and parents. Chris Wright identifies “family law” as one of the major types of Old Testament law and observes that “the integrity and stability of family” is one of the key themes of the legal material.² The “household codes” (Col. 3: 18-4; Eph. 5: 22-6: 9; 1 Tim. 2: 9-15; Tit 2:2-10; 1 Pet. 2:13-3: 7) are key elements in New Testament ethical instruction.

Even more foundationally, the ‘plot-line’ of the Bible is about a promised child and blessing through a family. Redemptive history begins with God’s promise to Eve that one of her offspring would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). The key to that history is the promise to Abraham that the Lord would bless his family and grow it into a great nation and that all families of the earth would be blessed through that (Gen 12:2-3). The expectations become more focussed with the promise that David’s son would be the Lord’s son and his throne would be established forever. The restoration of the house of David and the expectation of a Davidic messiah is an important theme in the prophets (Isa 9:7; 16:5; 22:22; 55:3; Jer 17:25; 23:5; 30:9; 33:15, 17, 22; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Hos

² C.J.H. Wright, *Old Testament ethics for the people of God* (IVP, 2004). 288-314.

3:5; Zech 12:8, 10). All of this this comes to climax with the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph, God brings the Saviour of the world to a family in Judah, from the house of David.

So, Christians see that marriage and family are written into God's design for human life. And the Bible presents a vision of marriages as an exclusive, lifelong covenant relationship between a man and a woman in which they find a special intimacy and communion (Gen 2:20-25; Prov 2:17; Ezek 16:8; Mal 2:14; Matt 19:4-6; Eph 5:28-33; 1 Tim 3:2,12; Tit 1:6). The Bible celebrates the joy and intimacy of married sexual love (e.g. Prov 5:15-19, Song of Songs) and has stories which show the importance, blessings and comfort of marriage (Gen 23:2; 24:67; Ruth 3:10; Prov 18:22; 19:1; 31:10-31).

Marriage is, then, the foundation of family life; and marriage and family together provide the key environment for human flourishing and social stability.

In God's image we are relational (we are to love God and others), ethical (we are morally responsible), religious (we are to worship God) and viceregal (we rule for God). Each of these aspects of our relationship with God is developed in family life. The family provides and nurtures the most intimate human relationships; our responsibilities to others begin with family relationships (Ex 20:12,14) — we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers (Gen 4:9b; 1 Tim 5:4, 8). Religious life has its roots in family life, as seen in the worship of the patriarchs (Gen 4:3-4; 8:20; 12:7-8; 13:4, 18; 22:9; 26:25; 33:20; 35:1,3,7; Job 1:5). The cultural mandate (Gen 1:27-28; 2:23-24) was to be fulfilled through families as husbands and wives worked together, raised children, developed human culture in God's world and passed it on to successive generations. So as human culture develops Jubal is noted as "the *father* of all who play the harp and flute" (Gen 4:21).

There are other settings in which humans live out their calling to be image bearers and in fact each of the aspects of human flourishing needs to be expressed beyond immediate family life. Even when people are isolated from family they can flourish. Joseph and Daniel are biblical examples of young men who flourished away from their family and their home land. Nevertheless, where family life fails, human flourishing is inhibited.

3. Violence

Domestic violence and abuse assault human life at one of its most vulnerable points. The Latin phrase *corruptio optimi pessima* (“the corruption of what is best is the worst”) captures what happens to marriage and family because of the Fall. Just because marriage and family are so foundational to human flourishing and such a blessing from God, their corruption is devastating.

The Bible shows, quite frankly, how marriage and family are affected by sin. The most immediate result of the original sin is that Adam and Eve fear being naked before each other, trust, peace and fellowship have been lost (Gen 3:7). Adam turns against Eve and accuses her of leading him astray (Gen 3:12). In God’s response to sin he announces that childbirth will be difficult, and the man and woman will compete for control in marriage (Gen 3:16).

Old Testament law deals with some of the failings of human marriage. It provides regulations for divorce, recognizing the realities of human relationships (Dt 24:1-4: Matt 19:8). It also regulates polygamy (Lev 18:18) which, like divorce, was a cultural

practice which needed to be regulated though it is a corruption of God's pattern.³

3.1. Old Testament Narratives

The Bible records several instances of Family and domestic violence. All of these are condemned in the narrative, either explicitly or implicitly.

Cain killed Abel in anger over the Lord looking with favour on Abel's sacrifice but not his. His plot was to ask Abel out into the fields and to kill him there. The Lord condemned both his anger and the killing. The implication is the Cain was "his brother's keeper", he had a particular responsibility to care for his brother (Gen 4:1-12).

Lamech (Gen 4:23-24) was a bigamist and thug. He deliberately tells his wives, Adah and Zillah, about his violent vengeance: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." The implied threat is that they face the same vengeance if they wrong him.

Ham mocks his father Noah for his drunken nakedness (Gen 9:20-23).

Twice Abraham (Abram) required Sarah (Sarai) to pretend that she is only his sister and not his wife (Gen 12:11-20; 20:1-17). Not only does he direct her to lie, but this action places her in sexual danger when both rulers, Pharaoh and Abimelek king of Gerah, take her as a wife. Isaac makes the same pretences with Rebekah,

³ A.J. Kostenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010, 2nd ed.) Kindle Edition. loc. 547-587.

also in Gerah, though she is not taken by the king, the same risk is present (Gen 26:6-11).

Abraham (Abram) and Sarah (Sarai) abused Hagar. Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to give him children. When she was pregnant with Ishmael, Hagar despised Sarah, and Sarah complained to Abraham (even cursing him), and Abraham allowed her to do as she wanted to Hagar. So, Sarah “mistreated” (or oppressed her), till Hagar fled (Gen 16:1-6).

Joseph’s brothers hated him because of Jacob’s favouritism toward him (Gen 37:3), which Joseph exacerbated by thoughtlessly recounting his dreams so stirring up their jealousy (Gen 37:5-11). None of this is presented as excusing the terrible actions of brothers who planned to kill Joseph (Gen 37:18-20). Only Reuben resisted the plan (Gen 37:21-22). After stripping Joseph of his robe, they threw him in an empty cistern and then sold him to Midianite traders (Gen 37:28). Ironically, when Judah proposes this as alternative to killing Joseph, he acknowledges the moral responsibility they have for their brother: “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood” (Gen 37:26-27). The lie they concocted to tell Jacob that Joseph had been killed only deepened their wrong, as they abused their father (Gen 37:31-33). Jacob’s deep grief was result of the evil actions of his sons (Gen 37:34-35), and as a result he was highly protective of Benjamin, maybe even obsessively so (Gen 42:4, 36-38; 43:11). The brothers recognise their past wrong (Gen. 42:21–22) and Judah, presumably representing all the brothers, is ready to sacrifice himself so that the same thing should not happen to Benjamin (Gen. 44:18–34). On this basis, Joseph and his brothers are reconciled (Gen. 45:1–15).

In Judges 9, Gideon's son, Abimelech, killed seventy of his father's son — his half-brothers — to establish his rule (Jdg 9:5) and exercised terrible revenge against those who resisted his rule (Jdg 9:39-50). He oppressed the people of Shechem, who were his kin.

In Judges 11 we meet Jephthah the Gileadite who as the son of a prostitute was driven away from the family by his brothers, the sons of his father's wife (Jdg 11:1-3). (Perhaps he was adopted by Gilead).⁴ He lost his inheritance but became "a mighty warrior" leading a band of "outcasts and social misfits" (NIV has a "gang of scoundrels").⁵

Yet Jephthah is not only a victim of DV. In false zeal, before the great battle of his career, he vowed that if he was victorious, he would dedicate to the Lord whoever or whatever greeted him on his return home (Jdg 11:30-31). Perhaps he was planning an animal sacrifice, though even in his vow there are suggestions that he intended human sacrifice. He was horrified when his only child, his daughter greeted him (Jdg 11:34-35). Perhaps he devoted her to the Lord as a perpetual virgin, bringing his own line to an end, that is at least a possibility from the end of the story ("and she was a virgin", v39). More shockingly, perhaps the traditional reading is correct, and trapped in what he considered an unbreakable vow, he sacrificed his daughter.⁶

⁴ G. M. Schwab, *Right in Their Own Eyes: The Gospel according to the Book of Judges*. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2011), 141.

⁵ A.E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*, IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1968), 137.

⁶ See A. Logan, "Rehabilitating Jephthah" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 4 (2009): 665-85; though I am not convinced by Logan's argument that Jephthah is viewed positively because he "performed as custom demanded of its royals despite the enormous personal cost" (683).

Judges 19 tells the horrifying story in which a Levite, and his host, save themselves by throwing the Levite's concubine to a crowd of "wicked men" who rape and kill her (Jdg 19:25-28).

David uses his power to rape Bathsheba and has her husband Uriah killed (2 Sam 11:1-16). While Bathsheba was not a part of David's immediate household, as king he had power which should have protected her. He then brought her into his household (2 Sam 11:26-27). Nathan's parable shows David that action was a terrible oppression (2 Sam. 12:1-14) which leads to the death of his son (2 Sam. 12:15-18).

David's son Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar, with the advice of his 'shrewd' cousin (2 Sam. 12:31-13:19). He then turned on her and sent her away. Tamar's desolation is heart-breaking. She protests that being sent away is an even greater wrong, and leaves weeping, tearing her rich robe, putting ashes on her head with her hands on her head in sorrow. She lives in Absalom's house "desolate", isolated, ashamed and lost. David's failure to discipline Amnon opens the door to Absalom's revenge, his revolt against David and civil war (2 Sam. 13:26-29).

When Jeroboam's son was sick, he sent his wife in disguise to Abijah the prophet to find out the boy's fate. Abijah see through the disguise and reveals both the boy's impending death and also disaster for the house of Jeroboam. The moment she returns, her son dies (1 Kings 14:1-18). Branch argues that she is presented as an abused wife: isolated, passive, silenced and compliant; and Jeroboam is an abuser: commanding, uncompassionate,

controlling, insecure, violent (1 Kings 13:4–6) and evil (1 Kgs 14:9).⁷

This appalling set of case files of DV in the Old Testament Scriptures is the kind of material critics of the Bible point to as evidence that it condones abuse. In fact, much of the biblical narrative is an illustration of the reality of sin and its terrible consequences in human life, and of the Lord's incredible patience with his people despite horrendous sin.⁸ These episodes are not included because they are acceptable, but because they illustrate in shocking ways the devastation of sin.

3.2. Women in Greco-Roman world

The New Testament does not include similar narratives. It does, however, address a community in which women were vulnerable (as often in ours).

There has been considerable discussion of the place of women in Roman families, especially in the ruling class. In patrician families the head of the family, the *pater familias* was to protect the honour of the family and discipline any members who disobeyed him — slaves, children and wives. The *pater familias* possessed *patria potestas* (Latin: “power of a father”). In law, this gave him extensive power over the household, he led religious observance, held all property, including, often, that of his wife in many circumstances. It is often claimed that he possessed *ius vitae necisque*, the right to life and death. That is, in theory, he could

⁷ Robin Gallaher Branch, “A Case for Domestic Abuse in 1 Kings 14? A Look at the Marriage of Jeroboam I”, <https://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?ArticleId=821>

⁸ See for instance the discussion of Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), esp. 109-27.

have members of the household, including his wife, executed on just cause. In fact, it is not clear that this was the case, and certainly there is little evidence for cases where this power was used.⁹ In late Roman republic (2nd-1st C. BCE) the legal arrangement changed so that a daughter remained part of her father's household even after marriage, and so did not come under her husband as *pater familias*.

Even though *patria potestas* probably did not usually allow a husband to execute his wife, it does indicate how vulnerable wives were. It does seem that husbands felt free to discipline their wives. In upper classes Rome there are some notorious examples of abuse of wives (e.g. Emperor Nero probably had his first wife tortured and killed and then killed his second wife while in a wild rage). Not long before the end of the 1st century CE, Emperor Augustus introduced laws which prohibited husbands from killing their wife for adultery.¹⁰ (It allowed the wife's father to kill her and her lover if they were found having sex and he acted immediately to kill them both). 1st century CE authors Valerius Maximus (*Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 6.3.8-12) and Pliny (*Natural History* 14.14) comment on husbands disciplining their wives. Husbands along with other male relatives were expected to discipline a wife for an affair or for participation in some religious

⁹ S. Thompson, "Was ancient Rome a dead wives society? What did the roman paterfamilias get away with?" *Journal of Family History*, 31.1(2006): 3-27. J. Kok, "Why (suffering) women matter for the heart of transformative missional theology perspectives on empowered women and mission in the New Testament and early Christianity", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72.4 (2016), offers a succinct summary of the situation of women in the Greco-Roman world, though he seems to accept claims of the broad scope of *patria potestas* too easily.

¹⁰ Serena S Witzke, "Violence against Women in Ancient Rome: Ideology versus Reality" in *Topographies of Ancient Greek and Roman Violence*. G.G. Fagan & W. Riess, eds. (University of Michigan Press, 2015), 256.

cults. In the third Century BCE Tertullian reported that Christian women faced such violence from pagan husbands (*Ad Uxorem*, 2.4-5). Reeder thinks that “verbal and physical violence against a wife was a common and, for the most part, unremarkable element of household life and social expectation in the Roman Empire”.¹¹

We know little of the experience of women from lower classes. A skeleton found in Rome in 2002 is probably from a lower class woman who lived between 1st C BCE and 3rd C CE, it shows signs of repeated injuries to her head and face, her clavicle and her right radius (the latter probably the result of a defensive action).¹² Without being definitive, the authors suggest that this may be evidence of the domestic abuse, which may have been quite common for women of her social standing.

In this context, early Christianity seems to have been particularly attractive to women, even from the days of the New Testament (Acts 1:12–14; 5:14; 8:5, 12; 9:36, 39; 12:12; 16:14-15; 17:1, 4, 34; 18:1–3, 18–19, 24-26; 21:9; Rom 16:1,3, 6, 12-13, 15; 1 Cor. 11:5; 16:19; Phil. 4:2–3; Col. 4:15; 1 Tim. 5:3–4, 8–10, 16; 2 Tim. 1:5; 4:2, 19; Phm 2; 1 Pet 3:1).

It is commonly argued that Christianity grew in the Roman Empire especially as it was adopted by women of aristocratic families.¹³ Stark argues that Christianity offered women a fuller

¹¹ C. Reeder, “1 Peter 3:1-6: Biblical Authority and Battered Wives” *BBR* 25.4 (2015), 528.

¹² S. Minozzi, F. Bianchi, W. Pantano, P. Catalano, and G. Fornaciari. 2012. “Ill-Treatment of Women in Ancient Rome: Contribution of Paleopathology to the Reconstruction of Violence. A Case Report.” *Journal of Biological Research (1826-8838)* 85 (1): 250–51. doi:10.4081/jbr.2012.4129.

¹³ See R. Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion* (Harper Collins, 2011), 121-36; R. Stark “Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women”, *Sociology of*

recognition than any other group in the Greco-Roman world. Christian women were commemorated in the catacombs as frequently as men. Christian families did not rid themselves of infant girls and they marked the loss of daughters as often as they did sons. Women were involved in church life and had far greater security and equality in marriage. Christian families gave their daughters in marriage at an older age than did pagan families. Christians rejected divorce and did not endorse the double standard which required wives to be sexually faithful but allowed husbands license. Pagan husbands in patrician families often forced their wives to undergo brutal abortions, which cost the mother's life as well as the child (both Plato and Aristotle considered abortion necessary for population control). Christians, since the early text the *Didache*, prohibited abortion.

3.3. DV as oppression

Darby Strickland helpfully highlights the fact that DV comes under the biblical category of “oppression”.¹⁴ This terminology, not unique to Christian discussion, helps to highlight the nature of domestic violence and gives an appropriate theological category in which to consider DV.

The Bible often observes and protests “oppression”. Ecclesiastes 4:1 is particularly striking.

“Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed— and they have

Religion, 56.3 (Autumn, 1995): 229-244. M.R. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire* (Harvard UP, 2002), 138-77, summarises the consensus and the evidence, though she rejects the interpretation.

¹⁴ Darby Strickland, *Domestic Abuse: Recognize, Respond, Rescue* (Philipsburg: P&R, 2018).

no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors— and they have no comforter” (Ecc 4:1).

The Lord protects the oppressed (Dt 10:18; Ps 9:9; 10:17-18; 12:5; 68:5; 72:4; 146:7-9; Jer 50:33-34) and delivers them (Ex 3:7-9; Dt 6:21; Job 5:15; Ps 35:10; 107:6; Ps 107:13; Ps 107:19; Pr 20:22; Isa 14:3-4; 49:26; Ac 7:34).

The Law calls Israel to protect the vulnerable in society from oppression — the poor (Ex 23:6; Dt 15:7), widows and orphans (Ex 22:22; Dt 24:17), foreigners (Ex 22:21) and hired workers (Dt 24:14-15).

The Biblical concept of oppression contrasts with its vision of justice in which each person can fully express their humanity in ways implied by law, especially the Decalogue — worshipping God faithfully, working and resting, in secure family relationships, with physical safety, rights to possessions and access to justice and truth.¹⁵ Oppression robs people of the kind of life which God’s law provides, if it is applied. DV often robs victims of physical safety, but destroys family relationships and trades in financial manipulation, lies and deception and spiritual control.

Following the Law, Israel’s prophets frequently condemn social injustice and oppression (Isa 5:7; 10:1-3; 33:14-15; Jer 7:5-7; Hos 4:1-2; Zec 7:10). They call for justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tzedaqah*). Birch says that justice “relates to the claims of life and participation by all persons in the structures and dealing of the

¹⁵ See J. McClean and with Mark Glanville “Justice in the City” *CASE* 18 (2009): 12-16; J. Muis, “Human rights and divine justice”, *HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 70.1 (2014), Art. #2740, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2740>.

community”, specially to legal equity; while righteousness is more personal referring to maintaining “wholeness of relationship”.¹⁶

The Bible highlights economic oppression, motivated by greed (Ecc 5:8-9; Isa 1:23; 10:2; Jer 5:27-28; 22:17; Am 4:1). Even more relevant to domestic violence is the portrait of oppressors exercising power, apparently for its own sake (2Ch 10:14; 16:10; Pr 28:15). Strickland highlights Abimelech violent oppression (Jdg 9).

Lack of power creates the conditions for oppression. When one person (or group) has control, it is particularly easy for them to dominate and control others and rob them of their needs and of their self-respect and self-determination. Not that all relationships of unequal power are oppressive. God himself, the All-powerful One, uses his power to defend the weak and the vulnerable; and the ideal king acts in the same way (Ps 72:12–14). Relationships of unequal power provide the circumstance of service or abuse.

DV is not simply a conflict between two sinful people but is a situation in which one person controls and dominates the other. It may not present as conflict, since the oppressed person knows that resistance will have worse consequences. It is not always easy to discern the difference between conflict and oppression, but that is a key question to understand a relationship and determining how to respond.

The Bible views oppression and abuse as sin (Mal. 2:16-17; Ps 11:5; Col. 3:19). This includes verbal abuse (Prov. 12:18; 18:21; Col. 3:8). God’s protects women by calling husbands to provide for the physical and emotional needs of their wives with sensitivity and

¹⁶ B.B. Birch, “Old Testament Ethics” in L. G. Perdue (ed) *The Blackwell companion to the Hebrew Bible* (Blackwell, 2001), 260; and see S.C. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, (New York: OUP, 2011, 2nd ed), 3-91.

gentleness, encouraging them to become all that God created them to be (Mark 10: 42-25; Eph. 5:1-2; Eph. 6:21-29). Any form of abuse is unacceptable and defies God’s calling for Christ-followers to relate to each other in love.

Domestic and family violence are particularly heinous sins for three reasons. First, as I’ve been outlining, they corrupt a foundational ordinance of God. Second, the perpetrator has an immediate responsibility to care for and protect the victim, especially when they are a husband, a parent, or a child of an elderly parent. Third, the impact of DV is particularly devastating (more on this below).¹⁷

The person who abuses is sinning, the victim is not sinning by avoiding abuse and escaping the relationship. God’s people are encouraged to protect ourselves from violent people (1 Sam 20; Prov. 11:9; 22:3; 27:12; Matt 18:15-17; Lk 4:28-29; Acts 9:23-25). While not everyone has the ability to leave an abusive partner, it is not wrong to attempt to do so if possible, the Bible encourages victims to seek safety.

4. The impacts of DV

DV is particularly devastating, because it involves oppression in the very institution which is meant to be the foundation for human life. Betrayal and abuse in the relationships which are foundational for identity and flourishing has immense negative impact on victims.

An Australian study which used a wide range of data looked at Intimate partner violence as a contributor to the total “burden of

¹⁷ On the concept of “greater sins”, see M. Foord, “Are all Sins Equal?” 24th April, 2019 <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/are-all-sins-equal/> and Westminster Larger Catechism Q.151.

disease” for Australian women. The burden of disease measures the contribution a particular condition makes to the total loss of years of life and the total number of years with which people live with disability caused by a condition. This 2011 study found that intimate partner violence was the most burdensome risk factor for women aged 25-44 years. That is, DV makes the single largest negative impact on health of young women in Australia. It remains a significant factor for health of 45-64yr old’s as well.¹⁸ DV is implicated not only in deaths and injuries from physical violence, but also in mental illness, including resulting suicides as well as substance abuse, chronic disease and perinatal, maternal and reproductive conditions. This does not start to analyse other psycho-social impact that may not show up as ‘disease’ but has a profound effect on the life of victims.

4.1. Forms of DV

A biblically informed understanding of human flourishing highlights the impact of DV. Human life, as designed by God, flourishes in various dimensions; and victims of DV often face assault in several of these. What follows is short consideration of the breadth of the impact of DV.

4.1.1. Verbal abuse

Words are basic for human life. Humans are made for communication. God has created us by his word, and his relationship with us is given in his word of promise and command. Our covenant relationship with him is guided by his words in Scripture. Words and language are basic to who we are

¹⁸ J. Ayre, et al, *Examination of the burden of disease of intimate partner violence against women in 2011: Final report* (ANROWS Horizons, 06/2016). Sydney: ANROWS. <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/examination-of-the-burden-of-disease-of-intimate-partner-violence-against-women-in-2011-final-report/>

and how we relate to God and one another. Good words bring blessing and life — “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body” (Prov 16:24). Evil words are deeply scarring and have great power for evil (Ps 10:7; Jam. 3:5-8). Proverbs highlights the contrast: “The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Prov 12:18).

We cannot underestimate the impact words have — for good or ill. All of us could think of words directed to us which continued to hurt years later; and also, times when words brought great blessing and healing. Abusive language in a family setting over a long term will bring incalculable damage.

4.1.2. Sexual abuse

Like words, our society often takes the significance of sex lightly; though it does generally recognise the terrible impact of sexual abuse. The biblical view recognises that sexual activity touches us at the deepest level. In the positive, the sexual act in marriage can be the deepest expression of love binding a couple in unity as they serve one another, giving and receiving pleasure (Gen 2:24; Prov. 5:15–19; Song 1:2-4; 4:16; 7:11-13; 8:10). It is an act of intimate trust and self-disclosure. Grenz describes sexual acts as the ‘sacrament of marriage’: “the physical act of sexual intercourse can become a visible expression and symbolic sealing of the marriage bond uniting husband and wife.”¹⁹

When the intimacy of sex is used to hurt and control someone else — it has the reserve effect. Instead of affirming the other person, it degrades and destroys them. This is the reason why rape is often

¹⁹ S.J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: an evangelical perspective*, (Louisville: WJK, 1997), 82.

used as a weapon in war, because it is so devastating to the victim and her or his family.

Reflecting on incest, that is sexual abuse against a child in the family, Schmutzer comments that “incest ... the most common form of sexual abuse, wrenches a family apart” and traces the deep shame that arises from it.²⁰ The same is true for other forms of sexual violence. Rape and forced sex inside marriage or demanding forms of sex when a partner does not want them are degrading. Other forms of sexual abuse can include the perpetrator threatening to have sex with someone else if their partner doesn’t cooperate; or telling the victim about sex with other people as a form of punishment or control. Conversely refusing sex as a form of punishment can also be a dimension of sexual abuse. All of these undermine a victim’s sense of self and security.

4.1.3. Physical violence

Physical violence is probably the most obvious form of domestic violence. Peter instructs husbands to “be considerate as you live with your wives and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life” (1 Peter 3.7). Physical violence is the misuse of a God given gift. Strength that is intended to be used to serve and protect is turned to terror. Physical abuse produces far more than physical pain. It robs the victim of self-confidence and self-esteem.

4.1.4. Social isolation

Social isolation has a devastating effect on anyone. We are made to live in relationships with other people, that is an important part

²⁰ A.J. Schmutzer, “A Theology of sexual abuse: a reflection on creation and devastation” *JETS* 54.2 (Dec, 2008), 802.

of flourishing. We don't simply need a spouse and children, we need to have contact with a wider community, including extended family and friends. When a family member is isolated from their community it has a disabling effect on them.

4.1.5. Use of children

The Bible recognised the power of parental, and especially maternal, bonds (Gen. 44:20; 1 Kings 3:26; Isa 49:15; Jer 31:20). For parents, access to and a positive relationship with their children is crucial to their identity. To lose contact with their children, or to feel that their children are turned against them, is deeply painful.

I think of one man who has not been able to contact his children for twenty years. Often when I speak to him, he asks if I have any idea about how he could restore the relationship with them. The loss of contact with children is devastating for parents.

4.1.6. Financial abuse

Christians might be tempted to think that money is not important — we have heavenly treasure (Matt 6:19-22). Yet God opposes the oppression of the poor (Isa 58:3-4; James 2:1-9, 15-16; 5:1-6). He has made us to own. We need possessions and money not only to provide for immediate daily needs (Pr 30:8; Matt 6:11; 2 Th. 3:10-12) but also to be generous to other (Eph 5:28) and to participate in community life. Poverty is a plight. Proverbs observes that "The wealth of the rich is their fortified city, but poverty is the ruin of the poor" (Prov. 10:15).

When an adult is unable to access funds or use them at their own discretion, they are severely limited in their ability to live a fruitful, satisfying and productive life. When Scripture calls for us to care for the poor (Isa 58:6-7) that includes people who may live

in comfortable settings but whose family refuses to allow them to direct their own spending.

4.1.7. Spiritual abuse

Spiritual abuse adds another layer of impact to domestic violence and abuse. Christians will inevitably see their marriage and family as key area in which they seek to serve God, and so will see 'failure' as serious spiritual issues. That makes it very easy for an oppressive family member to exercise spiritual control, especially when the abuser claims spiritual authority or insists that the behaviour they demand is God's will. Spiritual abuse might involve constantly reminding someone of their sin, including invented sins, instead of pointing someone to Christ and his forgiveness. It might also include insisting that the victim offer forgiveness and continue to accept the abuser, as a spiritual responsibility. Since our relationship with God is the most foundational and formative, abuse which manipulates someone spiritually can be devastating.

4.1.8. Secrecy and deception

Family abuse and violence almost always involves secrecy and deception. This is part of the shame cycle, as often both the abuser and other family members do not want others to know. The abuser, and other co-dependent family members, can often appeal for and demand secrecy. They will warn other family members not to tell anyone and threaten consequences if the secret is shared.

5. Exacerbating factors

While DV is a problem throughout the Australian community, there are factors which exacerbate its impact in the church.

5.1. Shame

People who face domestic violence and abuse, as well as the abusers, often feel great shame, and this can be exacerbated by a Christian setting. Because Christians set such a high value on marriage and family, it can be very difficult for someone to tell others that things are wrong in their marriage and family. This can feel as if it is an act of betrayal and an admission of failure and even sin for the oppressed person.

Nicky Lock offers a penetrating description of shame and its impact.²¹ She identifies it as an attitude to self, not simply to an action: “the personal experience of our innate unworthiness”. It is usually evoked when a person recognises that they fail to attain the standards to which they hold, and by which others in their community will assess them. Shame is, almost by definition, a hidden emotion. Lock explains that “a Christian person suffering domestic violence in their marriage ... will be all too well-aware of the unacceptability of this situation, and the shame they feel will foster the hiding of their suffering”. Shame will reduce a person’s sense of self-worth and their competency in relationships and roles. The person often becomes isolated as they seek to hide their shame. People often respond to their own shame by expressing anger at others.

5.2. Complementarianism

Many churches in Australian evangelical circles, including Presbyterian churches, teach a ‘complementarian view’ of marriage. This holds that the husband and wife are created by God and are equal in dignity and value; and are distinguished in their role in marriage. The husband is the head of the wife, a husband

²¹ Nicky Lock, “The church facing its shame over domestic violence in its midst: a pastoral counsellor’s response” *St Mark’s Review*, No. 243, March 2018

is to love his wife as his own body as her head and a wife is to submit to her husband (Ephesians 5:22–30).

Parallel to this, most complementarians hold that church leadership should be qualified men. The PCA is, officially, committed to some version of this, since we ordain only men as ministers. Most states also only ordain men as elders (NSW and SA are the exceptions). A majority of PCNSW churches have only male elders and few have female ministry staff. About 30 PCNSW churches have a woman on the pastoral staff (though some of these are designated as children and/or youth roles).

While I affirm that this is the teaching of Scripture, we need to face the fact that male abusers can use complementarian teaching to justify abuse to themselves and to their wife and/or family. We can protest that this is a misuse of the doctrine, we cannot deny the possibility, even likelihood that it will be misused.

It is not clear the extent to which complementarian teaching increases the risk of DV. There is no available data on this question in Australia. Some studies suggest that sporadic church attendance, or sporadic attendance at a conservative evangelical church, increases the risk of a husband abusing his wife. It also seems that regular church attendance is somewhat protective for abuse.²² This statistic became the focus of much debate after the ABC/SMH reporting on the issue in 2017.²³

In many ways, the statistical debate is an irrelevant distraction. It is far more important to notice that men have used

²² Steven R. Tracy, “Patriarchy and Domestic Violence: Challenging Common Misconceptions” *JETS* 50:3 (Sep 2007): 581, n44.

²³ See J. Baird, “Data thy neighbour” *St Marks Review*, No. 243, (March 2018): 8–24.

complementarian teaching to justify abuse, and that several other factors in a complementarian church can make it harder to respond to DV.

Complementarian teaching can make Christian women less likely to report DV, more likely to feel guilt over abuse and reticent to leave a marriage. Women can also feel that they won't be believed, especially if their husband is in a leadership role in the church. Women may also be reluctant to report the abuse to male church leadership, and so have no one in authority to whom they can turn for help. They may feel that if they seek help for abuse, they will lose their own roles in the church and/or have to leave the church themselves.

5.3. The value of marriage and family

Even apart from complementarianism, most churches place a premium on marriage and family. In that context, abused partners often feel that they cannot ask for help. Looking from the women's point of view one group of researchers report,

“women report that they sometimes feel a tug of war between what they perceive as the teachings of their congregation on the importance of marriage, the undesirability of divorce, and the celebration of family unity and their own personal safety and mental health”.²⁴

5.4. Forgiveness and change

Christians believe in forgiveness and change. We have experienced both, and we believe that God offers both in Christ, and that we should, therefore, offer forgiveness and hope for

²⁴ S. McMullin *et al*, “When Violence Hits the Religious Home: Raising Awareness about Domestic Violence in Seminaries and amongst Religious Leaders” *Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 69.2(2015):117.

change. This conviction, based in the gospel, can complicate our response to DV.

On the one hand, an abused person can feel that they have a responsibility to forgive their abuser, and that forgiveness implies reconciliation and restoration of the relationship. Churches can imply this in our teaching, or even state it directly to an abused person.

Similarly, the Christian who is facing abuse in their family longs and prays for the abuser to change. They are often inclined to take commitments to change at face value and may be encouraged to do so by well-meaning Christian friends.

5.5. Views of suffering

Christian can take a stoic or fatalistic view of suffering. In the midst of DV, they feel that is their God appointed lot and that faithfulness to Christ means submitting to abuse. A passage such as 1 Peter 2 can be read this way when it commends those who continue “under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God” (1 Peter 2:19). This is reinforced by the presentation of Christ as the example: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23).” Again, preaching and pastoral advice might reinforce the view that the proper response to unjust suffering is simply to endure it.

5.6. Abuse of Scripture

Each of the factors listed above can be reinforced by appeals to Scripture. Texts such as Proverbs 21:9 “Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife”, can be misused, even in jest, to justify mistreatment.

In each case, there is a wider context for texts which must be taken into account. Submission does not give a husband any right to abuse, the importance of marriage and family implies how important it is for those relationships to be wholesome and loving; forgiveness is offered to genuine repentance, and restoration is not automatic. Suffering is part of following Christ but that does not at all require us to remain in a situation where we are abused and where we and our children or other family members face violence.

5.7. The complexity of sin

In the wonderful variety and complexity of God's creation, there is an order in which the world promotes and protects life. This order exists at the biological level, in which eco-systems provide structures in which life, including life can flourish (Gen 1, Ps 104). It is also true of the social world. The creation ordinances of marriage and family, church and government should relate harmoniously, function well and provide a setting in which people could work together to care for God's world and develop it to his glory.

Sin brings disorder. It fractures relationships and distorts the created ordinances so that they do not work as they should. God's curse on sinful humanity in Genesis 3 states this: humanity now lives in spiritual conflict, childbirth is painful, marriage is distorted, work is difficult, and we face death (Gen 3:14–19).

Living outside of Eden, under the ongoing effects of the curse, means that we often face situations which are frustrating, confusing and terrifying. DV highlights this. So often it presents us with situations in which there is no obviously good outcome or even a predictable one, and in which victims and carers are not sure what to do.

It is important to recognise that Christian ethics is not perfectionist or idealist. We deal as broken, sinful people with others who are broken and sinful in a disordered world. We struggle with our own selfishness and fear (or fail to struggle); we lack wisdom to know how to act; and even our best intentioned and wisest responses can lead to terrible outcomes.

There is an ongoing debate in Christian ethics as to whether there is always a good action in every situation.²⁵ There is no need for us to resolve this as a theoretical question. The reality is that it is often difficult, even impossible to determine “the right” action. J.I. Packer says that in such cases “love’s task ... is to find how to do the most good, and the least evil; doing nothing is rarely the answer”. He reminds us that “doctrinaire decisions in such cases will not make the best of the bad job ... unwillingness to face the situation’s full complexities, and insensitivity to the variety of rules and claims that apply, will lead straight into ironclad Pharisaic legalism”. He concludes that in these cases “we shall insist that evil remains evil, even when, being the lesser evil, it appears the right thing to do; we shall do it with heavy heart, and seek God’s cleansing of our conscience for having done it.”²⁶

The recognition of moral complexity in a disordered world is an important backdrop to dealing with DV. The admission that we often struggle to know the right thing to do helps us to remain humble and to listen to various points of view; it provides some spiritual protection for us, by stopping us from taking on a

²⁵ David W. Jones, “Rescuing Rahab: The Evangelical Discussion on Conflicting Moral Absolutes”, *STR* 7/1 (Summer 2016): 23–42.

²⁶ J.I. Packer “Situation Ethics” <http://www.the-highway.com/articleJan02.html>

‘saviour’ role in which we expect to have solution; it helps us to live with the disappointing complexity of the outcomes.

The victim may be paralysed by fear — fear of remaining in the relationship balances fear of the consequences. Even having left the relationship, a victim often feels disempowered and unsure of what to do. The abuser may offer some regret, but no real repentance; and the victim is left wondering how to respond. They may have to continue to share parenting with the abuser or have to face them at family gatherings. Professionals and people seeking to offer pastoral care, often feel at a loss to know how to act in response to DV. They may fear that intervention will put the victim at greater risk, and the victim may refuse help.

Packer is right that “doing nothing is rarely the answer”. Recognising that we will not be able to understand or control situations and that we are not the “solution”, helps us to prayerfully take some action.

6. The Gospel and DV

6.1. The law and sin

The gospel is accompanied by the law, in which God shows how people should live, and on the basis of which he convicts humanity of sin (Romans 2:1-12). God’s law condemns violence and oppression.

The PCNSW GA statement on DV from 2015 summarised this.

God is opposed to abuse and violence in marriage and in the family. He particularly warns husbands to be considerate to their wives and treat them with respect (Eph 5:28–30; 1 Peter 3:7).

The model of love in the Bible is Jesus' suffering for others, the very opposite of abuse.

Any attempt to use the Bible's teaching as a pretext for abuse is a distortion of its message. The Bible's teaching that a wife should submit to her husband is not a basis for a husband to force submission or to seek to control his wife or to dominate her or cause her to fear. Acts of domestic violence and abuse are heinous sins.

Humans are prone to distort God's good ways into evil, and this can happen with the Bible's teaching on marriage. If this is happening in churches, then leaders should actively teach against it and do all they can to protect victims.

In particular, marriage is a covenant in which the husband and wife promise to love, care for, cherish and protect each other. While no one does this perfectly, the continued breach of the covenant can, and often should, bring it to end; especially when this involves a pattern of oppression. Just as adultery and abandonment are grounds for divorce, so too is violence and abuse.

The use of Scripture and church teaching to justify or reinforce DV is a form of spiritual abuse and must be resisted.

6.2. Redemption

The gospel proclaims God's redemption in Christ. For the victim of DV, it brings the assurance of a heavenly Father who truly loves them and a Lord and husband who lays down his life for his bride. It offers adoption into the family of God and promises a secure

inheritance which will never perish and protection through all trials (1 Pet. 1:3–6). It declares that God will bring justice and an end to evil, violence and oppression. The gospel declares that in Christ God meets all the needs of human life.

The gospel must not be offered as a simplistic answer to DV. Under Christ, we face evil and violence, and our struggle is not just with human oppressors but “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). The Church is called to engage in this struggle. It is not *enough* to simply affirm the promises of the gospel

On the other hand, it is only Christ, offered in his gospel, who provides ultimate answers and a basis on which we can, with hope, respond to DV. For most victims of DV, it will take a time before, by the work of Spirit, the promises of Christ begin to free them from the terror of DV. As we think about responding to DV, it is important to remember the Christian pastoral care that is needed, not only finding accommodation and offering emotional support; but also applying Christ’s gospel of life and freedom to deep spiritual scars.

Christ’s gospel also offers redemption for abusers. Paul himself admitted that he was “a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man”, the “worst” of sinners. But “grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” so the Lord might display in him “his immense patience” (1 Tim 1:12–17). Christ’s life, death and resurrection provide the basis for redemption from any and all sin, even the most horrendous. The work of the Spirit is sufficiently powerful to bring any sinner to life and to restore them to the image of God in Christ.

Again, the gospel must not be offered naïvely to offenders. It calls for repentance, which will be a long and difficult process and must demand some form of reparation. (See further below).

7. The tension of the Christian love ethic

Christians are called to love, that is the central element in Christian ethics. Creation is God's gift of love and Scripture is the story of his redemptive love. So, our moral vision is grounded in God's love for his world and his people. The great commands are "love God and love your neighbour", all other commands are specifications of love in relation to various domains and concerns. Love is the great virtue which binds the other virtues into unity. Each of the Christian virtues is an expression of love — hence love is greatest virtue (1 Cor 13:12–13).

Christian love, patterned from Christ, is sacrificial and vulnerable. We are called to "turn the other cheek" (Matt. 5:39; Luke 6:29), to seek the interests of others, following Christ's pattern of becoming obedient to suffering and death (Phil 2:4–11). Christ's example is that "when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet 2:23).

This aspect of the love ethics may seem to be deeply problematic in DV situations. As I noted above, this teaching can lead Christians to believe that they should remain in an abusive relationship and simply "bear it". So how do we think about the love ethic in the context of DV?

7.1. Allowing an abuser to continue to abuse is not an act of love

First, it is important to recognise that allowing an abuser to continue the pattern of abuse is not for *their* best. To remain an abuser, has terribly social, psychological and spiritual consequences. While leaving repayment of evil to God and the final judgement, Christians are to seek to bless our enemies and overcome evil with good (Rom 12:19–21). The Christian ethic is not simply passive acceptance of suffering and abuse, but to respond with blessing. As an act of love, not vengeance, it is right to name and resist evil and to seek release from oppression. Framing resistance as an act of love will help to direct the ways in which the Christian resists; we do not meet violence with violence. Nevertheless, love does not mean simply accepting abuse.

1 Cor 7:17-24 is an important text in this regard. It is part of a wider discussion of marriage, including the maxim that a believer should remain married to an unbeliever, as long as the unbeliever wishes to remain, though “if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so” (1 Cor 7:15). Paul turns to the more general question of changing life situations and gives another principle (he says it is his instruction in every church): “each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them” (1Cor. 7:17). His first example is circumcision — there is no need for the circumcised to become uncircumcised (!); nor for the uncircumcised to be circumcised (1 Cor 7:18-19).

Then he turns to those in slavery. This maybe because it is simply another relevant ‘life situation’ for some of the Corinthian congregation. It may also relate to marital and sexual ethics since “slaves could neither legally marry nor exercise any significant control over their own sexual purity”.²⁷ Many of the slaves in

²⁷ R. E. Ciampa & B. S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 317.

Corinth, may have lived under a form of domestic violence, especially involving sexual abuse.

In the case of slavery, Paul's approach is different to the case of circumcision. He encourages Christian slaves not to worry that they are slaves — his next point is that in Christ the slave is free, and the free person is a slave (1 Cor 7:24). But there is a very different qualification — if an enslaved Christian can gain freedom, then they should make the most of their freedom. (The phrase is stronger than the NIV's "do so").²⁸ He concludes the discussion with another instruction with a basis in the gospel "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings". Most commentators take this as a more general instruction "to live as free people demands a special temper of mind and spirit. It is easy to accept unquestioningly what others lay down, to subject oneself to some man-made system, and thus display the mentality of a slave".²⁹ This would certainly apply to anyone literally considering entering slavery and would also reinforce Paul's encouragement to leave slavery if possible.

The implication of the discussion of slavery in 1 Corinthians 7, is that the Christian love ethic does not require believers to remain in an oppressive situation. It is not only permissible to seek freedom, that is preferable and commendable.

7.2. Christian will seek to free others from oppression

The second point to make about the love ethic and DV is that Christian love will seek freedom from oppression for others. As we love our neighbour, and especially as we love sisters and

²⁸ Ciampa & Rosner, 320.

²⁹ L. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 113 cited from IVP/Accordance electronic ed.

brothers in the Lord, we should seek to see them protected from violence and released from oppression. In the case of DV, victims are often unable to fully comprehend their position let alone to act for their protection and freedom. Christian love calls us to act for victims, where we can.

7.3. The love ethic presumes agency

Third, the love ethic presumes agency — that the believer acts for the good of others. Christ ‘became obedient’, he willingly gave himself for his people. By contrast, DV denies agency and self-direction. Remaining a victim of DV is not usually an act of Christian love, but a reflection of the inability of a person to act in the situation.

8. Response

God hates oppression and loves and cares for the weak and vulnerable. The church must reflect God in this area, as far as we can.

8.1. Leaders as shepherds

Christian leaders (minister and elders) are regularly described as “shepherds”. Witmer summarises the task of God’s shepherds under Christ as being to “know, feed, lead, and protect” the flock.³⁰ This protection includes dealing with false teaching (Acts 20:29-30), it also involves exercising discipline (Mt 18:15; 1Co 5:1-7; 2Th 3:14) — see further below. The prophet Ezekiel accuses the leaders of Israel of failing to be shepherds. His accusation includes that they have not “strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured” and they have allowed them to be taken by wild animals (Ezek 34:1-6). When the Lord comes as shepherd he

³⁰ T.Z. Witmer, *Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010), 102.

will “bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” and “shepherd the flock with justice” (Ezek. 34:11–16).

So, the elders of the church are responsible to deal with an abusive member and to protect members who are being abused. Even if the situation is one in which a member is abused by a non-Christian family member, the elders have a role in protecting the sheep.

8.2. Church and family

One objection to this might be that DV is a family matter, and perhaps a matter for civil authorities, but *not* one for the church. This misunderstands the relationship of family and church. There is a proper overlap between church life and family life. This was the case in the Old Testament, and the law, the prophets and the writings all address family life. The New Testament church includes families, as households turned to Christ (Acts 11:14; 16:31–34; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16; 16:15). There are instructions for family life (Eph 5:22–6:8; Col 3:18–4:1; Tit 2:1–10; 1 Pet 3:1–7). Family life is a key arena for Christian discipleship. Households were a mission base (e.g. Acts 16:11–15; 18:7; 20:20; 21:8, 16) and hosted churches (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phm 1:2). So, church life and leadership rightly take an interest in family life.

It is important to add a general caution here. Church life should not overly intrude into family life; church should not take over from family and supplant it. God has placed people in the creational structure of families and this needs to be respected. Churches should not control or dictate family life. Nevertheless, church life should connect with and include family life, Christians should be taught and encouraged to live for Christ in their families.

When families experience violence or abuse, church leaders should intervene. Their first responsibility is to provide protection and support for the victim.

8.3. Civil authorities

God has appointed governments to protect people, they are part of his common grace (Rom 13:1-4; 1 Pet 2:13-14). They have a particular role of stopping and punishing wrong doers. Christians, and church authorities, should recognise the proper role of the police and legal system and welcome and co-operate with that. When we suspect or know that a crime has been committed, we should encourage a victim to report the crime, or report it ourselves if appropriate.

Church leaders are sometimes tempted to deal with DV “in house”. Yet, where there is a crime, it falls into the responsibility of the civil authorities and should be reported to the police.

8.4. Common grace

Common grace is the term used to refer to the many provisions which God makes for the good of society, apart from his work of redemption. The civil authorities are an instance of common grace, but there are many others. In the area of DV God has given wisdom and skills to many people who are not believers, and to non-Christian agencies. It is very appropriate to make use of these and to encourage victims and abusers to access various forms of support and professional help.

It is wise for each congregation to have someone, or be aware of someone, who is aware of local services and can help people to access appropriate ones. The Presbyterian Counselling Service may be able to offer suggestions of appropriate counselling services.

8.5. Church accountability

Church life includes the need to be accountable to each other, we are to 'admonish' each other (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16; 1 Th. 5:14; 2 Th. 3:15). In particular this is the role of the elders of the church (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:17).

Often our processes of church discipline are slow and deliberate, and that is often appropriate. However, in the case of DV, it is important to act as quickly as possible. In the first case, a victim of abuse needs to be heard and protected.

If the police are involved, Church action should usually be delayed until the police investigation is concluded.

It is important to remember that a church discipline process is not a civil law court. The PCA makes provision for a formal process in the "Code of Discipline". If an accusation is made against a minister, it must be referred to the Presbytery and it will be dealt with under the Code of Discipline. In the case of most church members, church discipline does not require such a formal process.

Dealing with DV accusations is complex and almost inevitably messy. I will not try to outline a discipline process here, because each case is so different. Some key principles are:

- Protect and support the accuser/victim as first priority.
- If church leaders have any reason to suspect abuse, then they must not treat the issue as simple 'marriage conflict'.
- Any discipline process should only commence once there is good pastoral support in place for both the accuser and the accused. The same person cannot provide support for both parties.

- Even in an informal process, decisions should not be made by a single person (such as the minister) but by a group of appropriate leaders and there should be a record of discussion and any decisions.
- The accused needs to be informed of the accusations in sufficient detail that they can offer a response.
- The accused should be removed from all leadership roles in the church, at least until an investigation is completed.
- It is wise to seek outside advice and professional support.
- The accuser must never be expected to confront the accused.
- The accuser must not be pressured into participating in a reconciliation process.
- The accused should be able to present a response to relevant church leaders.
- Leaders need to remember that abusers are often deceitful and manipulative and may seek to recruit the church leadership to their “side”. They may make accusations about the victim or claim that they have a mental illness.
- During any process, it is important to set boundaries for the accused about church attendance, so the accuser is safe to attend. This may involve helping the accused find a new church home and ensuring that appropriate people at that church are aware of the situation.
- There will should be appropriate public transparency about whatever decisions are made, this helps to protect the reputation of the accuser and stop gossip, as well as reassuring church members that the church takes accusations seriously.

8.6. Working with perpetrator

Supporting a perpetrator of DV is a challenging work in pastoral care. There is evidence that support from church leadership can make a significant difference in outcomes for the preparator.

In one of our studies, where we analyzed over 1000 closed case files of men who had participated in a faith-based batterer intervention program, we learned that when a religious leader encourages a violent man to follow through and attend regularly his court-ordered batterer intervention program until he has graduated, his completion rates are higher than if a judge alone mandates his attendance.³¹

9. Forgiveness

The gospel says to us: “Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Col 3:13). Yet, even on the basis of the Lord’s forgiveness, it is confronting, spiritually and emotionally, to deal well with someone who has hurt you deeply, perhaps in ways which can never be undone. The categories below are helpful ways of thinking about the process, but none of them are straightforward for victims of DV. It requires careful thought and prayer to work with someone through this process. As noted above, a victim must never be pressured to take any of these steps. It may be appropriate to raise the topic with them gently and listen carefully to what they are ready for and want to do.

³¹ S. McMullin *et al*, “When Violence Hits the Religious Home: Raising Awareness about Domestic Violence in Seminaries and amongst Religious Leaders” *Pastoral Care & Counseling*, Vol. 69.2 (2015): 119.

Here are the categories I've found helpful when looking at a situation from the view point of a someone who has been wronged.³²

9.1. Love

Love is the great virtue and foundation of all Christian living (Col 3:14). Loved by God, even when we were his enemies, we come to love him; and in his love we learn to love our brothers and sisters, and even to love our enemies.

Love seeks the best for others and desires communion. When we have been deeply wronged, love directs us to serve the wrong doer rather than to repay wrong with wrong. Love directs us to turn from a search for revenge, leaving that to God, and that is the first step toward forgiveness. This is a work of God's Spirit who applies the riches of God's grace in Christ so we can view someone who has wounded us, as one we are called to serve. This work of the Spirit often takes time and usually demands much of the wronged person.

9.2. Forgiveness

Love orients us to forgive, but forgiveness is not automatic. We are not required to offer unconditional forgiveness. Forgiveness is the declaration that we release the wrong doer of burden of their guilt. This declaration is for someone repents. Genuine love will make us eager to offer forgiveness, but it is right to wait till the wrongdoer acknowledges their actions and seeks forgiveness. In love, we might seek to present them with this opportunity. Where

³² See further, Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical answers for complex questions and deep wounds* (Crossway, Wheaton, 2008); K. Barker, "Psalms of the Powerless: A Theological Interpretation of Imprecation" in *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*. A. G. Shead, ed. (Nottingham: IVP, 2013), 205-229; P. Halstead and M. Habets. eds., *The Art of Forgiveness*, (London: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2018).

the person is seeking forgiveness for a great wrong, or for an extended pattern of wrong, then it is right for the wronged person to expect evidence of repentance.

Forgiveness is on the basis of repentance and restitution³³. In the case of abuse this is likely to involve:

- Genuine acknowledgement of the harm done to the victim, with no minimisation or attempt to explain away abusive behaviour;
- Appropriate public acknowledgement (as permitted by the victim) and the end of secrecy.

It is very important for church leaders and people offering pastoral care to recognise that it may take a long time before someone is able to forgive. Personal forgiveness does not remove the need to a perpetrator to face the justice system, or other consequences of behaviour.

9.3. Reconciliation

Forgiveness may open the door for reconciliation. A relationship which has been damaged may begin to be restored. Fellowship is re-established. This will often require risky steps from the victim and from the perpetrator. It cannot be required of the victim, and they must be able to determine the form and extent of any reconciliation.

9.4. Restoration

A reconciled relationship may not be the same as full restoration. Restoration is a further step — returning to a prior pattern of relationship. This could be in family life, church fellowship,

³³ See Marie M. Fortune “Forgiveness: The Last Step”
www.faithtrustinstitute.org/resources/articles/Forgiveness.pdf

shared service or common work. It won't be possible without forgiveness or reconciliation; and should not be presumed even with these.

10. Separation and divorce

I have implied above that DFV is valid reason for separation and divorce. I hold that this is the case because DV is a denial of marriage vows and so breaches the covenant. We need to be clear with a victim that leaving the home is not being unfaithful but is likely the best response available to them in the face of an abusers faithlessness.

Similarly, if there is no prospect of repentance, reconciliation and restoration (and often there is not); then divorce is simply a recognition that the marriage is dissolved by DV.

Christians will not rush to reach this conclusion, because we know the fact of redemption in Christ and we hope and pray for that redemption to be applied in every marriage and family. Yet, in most cases, a Christian who is a victim of DV needs encouragement and support to seek a divorce.

After divorce on the basis of DV, I believe that a Christian is free to remarry.³⁴

11. Conclusions

³⁴ See: D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2002) and D. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Paternoster, 2003). For an alternative view see, A. Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice* (Mentor, 1993).

- DV is an evil which corrupts one of the most precious blessings of God and brings terrible consequences. Churches are in a position where they can and should provide help and seek to free people from oppression.
- DV should be on the 'radar' of pastoral care in our churches.
- Preaching and teaching should deal with DV from time to time, both incidentally and with specific preaching and seminars.
- DV is almost always messy and confusing, we need to pray for wisdom and live with ambiguity.
- Dealing with DV will be strengthened with a clear theology of marriage and family, humanity and sin, forgiveness.
- Christ offers the restoration and hope which victims and perpetrators need. This must be accompanied by church care which reflects the gospel of hope.

Jo finishes her memoir with a poem about redemption. (Just in case you miss it, note the sun/Son word play).

I Rise with the Sun

I rise with the Sun
as a phoenix flying across the sea.
The brilliance of Day,
I inhale the breath of truth,
I inhale the breath of life.
My spirit is set free.

Shame shall not stain me,
terror shall not trample me.
Like arrows shooting across the plain,
I rise from the ashes of abuse,
I rise from the phantom of pain,
I rise from the shadows.

The miracles of Heaven,
with the wind of wisdom,
with hope as my emblem,
I rise,
I rise,
I rise with the Sun.

From Jo Swan, *Daughter of Shadows* unpublished.