

Power Differential

IMBALANCE OF POWER

All of the abuses we looked at in the previous chapter occur through a misuse of power in relationships. A valuable insight gained particularly from reflection on the experience of women as targets or victims of abuse is an understanding of the imbalance of power in relationships. In the case of domestic violence, this has been illustrated as follows:



The question is asked, 'If we argue, is this domestic violence?' and the answer is given:

Not always . . . Conflict can be helpful to a relationship when it results in enhanced understanding and communication, and clears the air or gives voice to a previously unheard partner. Conflict is unhelpful when one partner is fearful and stays fearful because of the way in which the strength of the other is used.

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This can have implications for how we might seek to be helpful in such a situation:

The concept of an imbalance of power is important in understanding and addressing domestic violence. It is this power imbalance that renders our normal counselling approaches inappropriate when there is domestic violence. One partner, usually the woman, is fearful of the other partner, who maintains control throughout the abuse.¹

Part of the approach in any abuse situation, especially where the target, victim or survivor has been disempowered, is to help that person see and exercise the power they have, and to affirm and protect them in that. Attempts to help must take care not to further disempower or abuse the suffering person.

In the example given above, where one person clearly uses superior strength to intimidate and keep another fearful, the imbalance of power is fairly obvious. In other situations, the leverage may be more subtle, but no less invidious. Leaders of congregations, for example, who may be secured by stipend, allowances, and official endorsement, need to be aware of the imbalance of power that this can give them over non-accredited 'lay' persons, and they may need to moderate their behaviour accordingly. Sometimes a change in the nature of a relationship needs to consider the potential impact of the power structures that are operating there. In these days, when there is a plurality of value systems around, it is necessary to have in place agreed codes of conduct and pastoral guidelines for clergy and church workers. In one such code it is advised that, in a situation where a pastoral relationship legitimately develops into a romantic relationship (as, say, between a youth leader and a member of the youth group), it is advised that alternative arrangements be made for ongoing individual pastoral ministry, to avoid confusion between personal

¹ *Domestic Violence*, p. 3.

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interest and the pastoral relationship, and possible misuse of the inherent power imbalance present.² We begin to see that ways ahead in this whole area of pastoral or workplace relationships can be fraught with potential uncertainty and difficulty.

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD?

The notion of ‘imbalance of power’ is now becoming the standard interpretive key in addressing abuse situations. It is, as we have said, a valuable and helpful insight, that can alert us to unequal situations of which we may have been unaware, and so can help us to moderate our practice. How we go about that in a way that fits with reality is another question. Some respond by seeking to remove every inequality of power in relationships by corrective action intended to establish equality compulsorily. This can then set up yet another realm of power plays. The question arises as to whether certain inequalities of power in relationships can ever be totally abolished.

Some Christians see all inequality of power as arising from human sin. Now that Jesus has taken sin away, they see it as possible to return to an ideal situation such as they suppose existed before the fall into sin, depicted in Genesis 3, where, it is thought, no one ruled over anyone else. We do, however, find the notion of ruling embedded in the creation account, where the sun and the moon ‘rule’ over the day and night (Gen. 1:16)—a very apt and beneficent form of ruling. Paul the apostle saw the differential ordering of man–woman relationships as stemming from creation, before the fall into sin

² *Faithfulness in Service: A National Code for Personal Behaviour and the Practice of Pastoral Ministry by Clergy and Church Workers*, © The Anglican Church of Australia Trust Corporation, 2004, 2005, 3rd edition–March 2006, section 4.15, p. 15.

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(see 1 Cor. 11:3, 8–9; 1 Tim. 2:12–13). The New Testament also indicates that different levels of power in relationships still rightly operate within the community of those whose sin has been taken away by Christ (see e.g. 1 Tim. 5:17).

Power ‘imbalance’ suggests something out of kilter that needs to be corrected, presumably by seeking to restore a more even balance. This can be needed where power is being exercised without accountability beyond the limits of proper authority, and a well-ordered society will have necessary checks and balances built into it. But it may also be helpful to recognise that a difference of power levels is inherent in the nature of many relationships. Men tend to be physically stronger than women.³ Adults will always be bigger and stronger and more experienced than young children.⁴ Teachers and elders exercise a moral authority over those whom they teach or supervise.⁵ Employers and managers will, by nature of the case, have more responsibility and decision-making power than employees, who may well be glad for that to be so.⁶ Rather than denying the inherent inequality of power in these situations, it may be better to take this into account and allow for it by moderating our behaviour accordingly. Rather than calling it a ‘power imbalance’ in these cases, it may be better to refer to it simply and neutrally as a ‘power differential’.

A realistic recognition of inherent power differentials can be healthy and necessary. It could be that the apostle Peter is

³ As testified to in separate sporting competitions for women and men.

⁴ It would be interesting to know whether this explains the prevalence of giants in many traditional children’s stories. The size difference between people and giants tends to correspond to that between children and adults. Could the story of ‘Jack the Giant-killer’, for instance, relate in some mythic way to children trying to make their way in a world dominated by adults?

⁵ Hence the need for appropriate codes of conduct and pastoral guidelines.

⁶ This is not to deny the necessity for checks and balances in industrial relations to guard against exploitation and ensure fairness.

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facing this reality when he calls the woman ‘the weaker sex [literally ‘vessel’]’ (1 Pet. 3:7). The domestic violence figures cited above—‘95–98% is male to female violence’, where men take advantage of their brute strength—would tend to bear this out. What Peter is saying is that this should be taken into account and allowed for when the husband considers and moderates his own behaviour:

Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers (1 Pet. 3:7).

That the woman, ‘with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight’, can come to a point where she is able to ‘do what is good and never let fears alarm you’ (1 Pet. 3:4, 6), or ‘let nothing terrify you’ (RSV), speaks of the rich resources of the gospel available equally both to her and to her husband.

JOINT HEIRS OF THE GRACE OF LIFE

To understand this better, we would do well to look at the Bible’s account of how the misuse of power in relationships began, particularly between the woman and the man.

The relationship between man and woman in the beginning is characterised by affinity: ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ (Gen. 2:23)—and oneness: ‘they become one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24). There is also present between them a subtle, mutual, but real, power differential: ‘the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man’ (Gen. 2:21–22); she is ‘a

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helper fit for him' (Gen. 2:18, RSV). The way Paul expresses it is:

... man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man (1 Cor. 11:8-9).

Thus Paul says that 'the husband is the head of his wife'. This is in the strongly relational context of 'Christ is the head of every man' and 'God is the head of Christ' (1 Cor. 11:3). We note that Paul here is talking about the man and the woman as created, before the fall into sin. As long as all this is in right relationship with God, there is also a profound mutuality operating:

... in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God (1 Cor. 11:11-12).

The subtlety, strength and tenderness of this relationship and headship is difficult to put into words. Suffice it to say that the man has a responsibility for the woman that the woman does not have in the same way for the man.

It is the fall into sin that disjoints and disorders the relationship between the woman and the man:

... your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you (Gen. 3:16).

The man will seek to use his position now to dominate and control the woman. The woman equally will seek, by whatever means available to her, to exercise control over the man. This is the meaning of 'your desire shall be for your husband'. In Genesis 4:7 the same word is used of sin 'lurking at the door', seeking to take control of Cain: 'its desire is for you'. Just as sin was ready to get the better of Cain, so the

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woman's desire will now be to get the better of her husband, while he seeks to dominate her. This is not a good mix.

With the salvation that is in Christ, the man and the woman, now cleansed from sin and rightly related to the headship and submission of Christ, are restored in rightly ordered relationship with each other—the man in proper loving headship, and the woman in glad and respectful submission (as in Eph. 5:21–33). Yet it seems that, as long as they remain in the flesh, they still have a temptation and a propensity to revert to the separation and rivalry of Genesis 3:16. Recognising this, Paul sees it necessary to exhort them:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly (Col. 3:18–19).

They are to recognise the power differential that is there, and acknowledge their own propensity to misuse it, and in the freedom of 'love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony' (Col. 3:14), they are to moderate their behaviour towards each other accordingly.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

- *What can we see now of harmful power imbalance in relationships that we did not discern before?*
- *What is the difference between this harmful power imbalance and the natural power differential that exists in many normal relationships?*
- *How does the realistic recognition of a power differential in relationships assist us to behave appropriately towards each other?*