

Domestic and Family Violence: Theological Reflections

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The following sheet summarises a paper prepared by Rev Nigel Hanscamp with theological reflections on domestic and family violence. The JIM Cluster found that while many Christian denominations had produced resources on domestic and family violence, there was minimal theological reflection contained within such resources. The paper prepared by Rev Hanscamp aims to fill some of that gap. The full paper can be accessed from here:

<https://justact.org.au/inclusive-equal-society/reports/>

We hope readers will bring these reflections to bear on their particular contexts through care, advocacy and activism. At the end of the full paper, various pastoral, ethical and theological resources are offered for further engagement.

Trigger warning. *This paper contains references to domestic, family and intimate partner violence, including physical, emotional and spiritual abuse. These can create triggers for some people about their own lived experiences or those of people close to them. Readers are encouraged to take appropriate steps and seek support if these references are disturbing.*

Domestic and family violence (sometimes referred to as “domestic abuse”) is a form of oppression that breaks the human spirit and relationships, preys on people in their vulnerability, violates the safety of home life and attacks a person’s most basic human values of trust, love, hope and self-worth.

Through theological reflection, the Christian faith can and should challenge cultural assumptions while at the same time being humble enough to admit its contribution to oppression.

Violence in family settings is a major social issue in Australia. Family violence is all around us, with one in six women directly impacted in some way and children and young people witnessing it or being victims.

The Life of God as love

Christian belief and practice are centred on an understanding of God as love. That love is seen expressly in Jesus Christ, whose life, death and resurrection form the core of Christian belief. Connected with God’s love are concepts such as justice and righteousness, which are opposites of oppression, injustice and sin. An outworking of justice is peace (shalom) and salvation (i.e. being saved from oppression, injustice, sin, etc). Any mistreatment of those with less power is an injustice.

In the New Testament, God’s love is expressed for Creation, especially humanity. In these ways, the love of God is both something that God does AND part of who God is.

A second element of God’s love in scripture is the frequent references to responsiveness to God’s love: Because God is Love, God’s people are called to love others in relationships and justice.

God’s people, including the Christian community, are called to follow, model and articulate this love in their gatherings, practice and mission. In fact, this practice of love is a witness to those not in the community that these are God’s people: ‘By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.’ (John 13:35) This love always acts with the best intentions for the other.

These understandings of the love of God and love for other (including justice against injustice and salvation from oppression) has implications for the way we address DFV.

God, Love and Justice

Justice is a characteristic of Divine action. In the face of oppression or violence, God acts for justice or looks for justice to be done. The prophets and Jesus both expect a response of justice from those with power or wealth. This requires paying attention to oneself and those around us and their needs rather than living for oneself.

In the Christian tradition, love is inseparable from justice and an awareness of power dynamics. Any action (or inaction) that diminishes the other is not love.

Theologically, love and justice are framed not in rights but in common humanity. It is essential, therefore, that any conversation about domestic abuse begins with an acknowledgement of the full humanity and equality of women, children and men before God. In the light of full and common humanity, there is no room for abuse of power, control or violence.

The nature and character of humanness and the human community

A theological examination of gender stereotypes must include questions of equality, power, honest exegesis of scripture, and culture (including an exegesis of that culture). This includes careful examination and use of marriage liturgies, as well as sensitivity when preaching on scriptural texts of abuse and violence or some of the household codes in the New Testament.

Domestic and family violence contradicts the bible's view of true humanity and a good society – that is, a society marked by equality, love, care and respect. Therefore, the Christian community should be a place where DFV is named and addressed, where perpetrators are challenged, and survivors are given a safe place.

Thinking Theologically – Interpreting the Community and Scripture

An outcome of thinking theologically about DFV should be liberating action and empowerment, not simply skill enhancement or abstract reflection. We must also recognise that while domestic violence is most often carried out in private, our theology must be examined and lived out in private and in community – for this is where we can be accountable to live out our calling with those who are most vulnerable.

It is also crucial that difficult biblical texts are thoughtfully considered and not avoided. Sensitivity is required when examining problematic passages, as opening these passages can be triggering for those who have experienced abuse, as well as those whose identity may be threatened or challenged by an alternate reading of the text. Thinking theologically, listening to the lived experience of those around us should make us aware that there are many ways of interpreting scripture - and 'discerning the body'.

Allowing honest questions to emerge gives a genuine place to explore difficult texts – like Paul's words about husbands, wives and marriage in the New Testament (e.g. Ephesians 5:22-24). Reading the wider scriptural context, understanding the setting, discerning the writer's perspectives and allowing questions to be unanswered can all help in the task of thinking theologically in community.

Theological engagement on its own is not a 'fix' for DFV. Still, it can helpfully use the tools already available to a community to open the subject alongside resources provided by churches and community groups.¹ As churches, we are often uniquely placed to address issues of justice, oppression and human relationships in our public worship and liturgy.

¹ e.g. <https://safechurch.ucavictas.org.au/family-violence/> ; <https://www.saferresource.org.au/>