

POWER IN RELATIONSHIPS

Issues of Love and Control

Study One

OBLIGATION AND LOVE

ROMANS 13:8

In Romans 13:8, the apostle Paul makes a powerful statement:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another.

The Greek word ‘owe’ (ὀφείλετε, *opheilete*) means, literally, ‘be in debt to’, but also ‘be under an obligation to’, and so ‘have a duty towards’.¹ At first sight, the statement may appear to contradict itself, as if to say: ‘Owe *no one anything*—except to *love* one another—which is *everything*’! It may have something of that force.

Commentators are divided on the meaning of the word ‘except’ (εἰ μὴ, *ei mē*), as to whether it opposes the owing to the loving, or relates them to each other in some way.

The most common interpretation is that ‘to love one another’ is the ultimate form of obligation that far surpasses all others. Attention is drawn to the previous verse, where Paul has said, ‘Pay to all what is due [τὰς ὀφειλάς, *tas ophailas*]’. So, ‘Owe no one anything’ means have no outstanding debts. But Paul then goes on to imply that there is one debt that can never be repaid, and is always outstanding—the debt of love towards others. Origen (c. 185–254 AD) is commonly cited:

The debt of charity is permanent, and we are never quit of it; for we must pay it daily and yet always owe it.²

To speak of love in terms of debt, even inexhaustible debt, may be an interesting way of playing with words, but a certain heaviness can descend on our spirits when love is spoken of in this way. While our fleshly selves may welcome the opportunity to rise to such a challenge, yet at the same time we sense within ourselves a dull despair that we could never fully bear such a burden.

C. K. Barrett in his translation uses an adversative ‘but’ to make a contrast between owing and loving: ‘Owe no man anything, but you ought to love one another’. This is strongly argued against on the grounds of textual detail by C. E. B. Cranfield;³ though James Dunn

¹ See Matthew Black, *Romans*, New Century Bible Commentary, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 161.

² C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Collins, Fontana Books, London, 1959, p. 212.

³ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1979, pp. 674f.

doubts ‘whether Paul formulated the phrase with such precision in mind’.⁴ John Murray translates it: ‘Owe no man anything; only do love one another’, in a way that does ‘not state an express exception to what precedes but only another consideration or reservation relevant to what has been stated’. In this, he says, *contra* Origen, ‘love is not regarded as a debt unpaid, nor is there any reflection upon the inexhaustible debt which love involves’, though he does say, ‘the apostle is simply reminding us of what we owe in the matter of love’, and ‘love is a perpetual obligation’.⁵

Others see the two—owing and loving—as juxtaposed or thrown together by Paul to make a telling point. James Dunn, backed up by Matthew Black’s research into Aramaic equivalents, observes: ‘the exhortation has the force of an epigram (with an epigram’s formal ambiguity)’.⁶ This at least does not try to say that love and obligation are the same thing.

Could it be that Paul is contrasting obligation and love, and is saying that the believer in Christ is no longer subject to the normal human expectations of tit-for-tat obligation, but is made for a love that is on an altogether different plane? Could it be that Paul knows of a love that leaves all of those human considerations for dead, and goes way beyond them into something of a different order that is much more wonderful, and yet at the same time very homely and natural: ‘No longer be bound and constricted by the ties of mutual obligation; do something much better and more free than that: simply love one another’!

If that is so, then a ‘love’ that still depends on any sense of obligation for its force and validity is not the love of which he speaks here.

A FATHER, AND A FAMILY

If this is what Paul is saying, then he would be taking after his master Jesus, who said:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12–14).

Thus Jesus broke through the endless cycles and rituals of mutual obligation with something far richer, more generous, and of a much larger (eternal!) dimension. This is not a love that arises from human arrangements. It has another source:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:32–36).

God is under obligation to no one; He just loves, and gives:

he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:25, TNIV).

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B, Word Books, Dallas, Texas, 1988, p. 776.

⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICOTNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, vol. 2, p. 159.

⁶ Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, p. 776, and Black, *Romans*, p. 162.

This love Paul has already spoken of earlier in his letter to the Romans: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5). This love is nothing other than the love God has for us ‘in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8). As the apostle John wrote:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:10).

It is with this ‘great love with which he loved us’ (Eph. 2:4)—that we are now in the reality and full flow of—that we are to love one another. As we love one another in this love:

God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12).

As we love one another in this way, God’s active, practical love reaches its goal—comes into its own—in us!

LOVE AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINT

Very different from this is what passes for ‘love’ or relationship in most human societies. We may be aware of the often unspoken but nonetheless potent expectations and conventions that go with relationships in various cultures. We may not be so willing to recognise in our own culture the elements of ‘you owe me’. There is a hold that those in relationship with us can have over us, which we may seek to pay off in order to free ourselves from the obligation. Underlying this is a preferred sense of being separate and independent from the other person in some measure—to be our own person. This is the way of the world, as conditioned by human sin. Emil Brunner, in his commentary on Romans 13:8, calls it the way of justice:

To owe no one anything—that is the principle of justice. ‘To everyone his own’ . . . Yet this ‘owing no one anything’ is not separate and independent, but is embedded in something still greater. Whoever owes nothing to anyone parts from the other once he has done his duty.

To this Brunner contrasts the way of love:

Love is greater than justice; it does more than justice demands. The demand of justice ends with the individual; love alone is all-embracing because it does not keep its eye on ‘something’ that one owes the other but on the other himself and myself. I owe myself to him and therefore I am never done with him.⁷

Paul was prepared to talk of relationships in terms of ‘owing’ in this sense:

I am a debtor [ὀφειλέτης, *opheiletēs*] both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome (Rom. 1:14–15).

This is entirely a matter of gospel-love, constrained by ‘the love of Christ’, by which ‘one has died for all’ (2 Cor. 5:14).

LOVE AND THE LAW OF GOD

One of the most deadly ways human obligation can manifest itself in relationships is through the misuse of the law of God. The fact that it is the law of God does not safeguard us from

⁷ Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1959, p. 111.

this misuse—it only makes the effects of it more perilous. People and their impositions can be resisted, but to put the law of God on a person as a heavy thing is almost unanswerable. This is a difficulty Jesus had with the law-abiding scribes and Pharisees of his day:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (Matt. 23:4, 15).

Paul took no less exception to the actions of the Judaizers in Galatia, who sought to impose the religious practice of circumcision as an item of the law:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! (Gal. 6:12–15).

We see how Paul comes back again to the action of the cross, which has brought us into a whole new reality.

For this reason Paul was keen to show, in Romans 13, that the love of which he spoke more than fulfilled the law of God, and was indeed the very heart of it:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8–10).

Dunn describes this love:

a realistic and active love which seeks the good of the other without necessarily being bound by convention meets the requirements of God’s law more than a love constrained by legal precedent and conditional on acceptance of ethnically limiting customs and rituals.⁸

Paul is not saying just, ‘See—we Christians keep the law too’; nor is he reverting to any law-based justification. He has moved from that to a Christ-forged relationship with God who Himself is love. Brunner aptly comments:

God’s commandments, rightly understood, always declare one thing only: love your neighbour . . . In the commandment of love the whole law is summed up; yet the commandment of love can be neither correctly understood nor rightly fulfilled as law. To fulfil it we must have love, of course, but we cannot bestow this love upon ourselves! It is the nature of love that it must ‘flow’ freely, as Luther said. That which springs from one’s own effort is certainly not love. Love is either present, because ‘it has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ after we have been united with God by faith in the reconciliation through Jesus Christ—or it is not present at all. But if it is present, then it fulfils all that the law demands. It is pure good-will towards the other, and therefore does only good, and not evil. That this love is now present, so that one only needs to remember it, is the gift of God in Jesus Christ, the fruit of faith ‘which is working through love’ (Gal. 5:6).⁹

Can we begin to see what this loving would be like in practice, particularly in relation to obligation and freedom?

⁸ Dunn, *Romans 9–15*, p. 783.

⁹ Brunner, *Romans*, p. 112.

PAUL THE FREE MAN

Paul displayed a remarkable freedom, and also commitment, in his relationships with others. Firstly, he was not constrained by what anyone else thought of him. Since, through the justification that is in Christ Jesus, he had ‘praise . . . from God’ (Rom. 2:29), and ‘God’s approval’, now ‘pleasing people’ or ‘seeking human approval’ had no place in his life as a servant of Christ (see Gal. 1:10; compare John 5:44; 12:43). This made him proof against any judgements others might pass upon him, or even that he might pass upon himself:

with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me (1 Cor. 4:3–4).

So also Paul’s ministry of the gospel had no eye on what people might think of him. It was never Paul’s intention that he should ‘lord it’ over anyone’s faith (2 Cor. 1:24), and he refused to bring any improper pressure to bear on others:

we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God . . . For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 4:2, 5).

Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? . . . Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? (2 Cor. 12:17, 18).

In this freedom of the love of God, Paul made himself available widely towards others:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:19–22).

Paul’s capacity to love was without limitation, even towards those who did him despite, and even when this made him appear weak in the eyes of others (as in 2 Cor. 10:10: ‘his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible’):

our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections . . . you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together (2 Cor. 6:11–12; 7:3).

Paul’s exercise of leadership was especially instructive. Paul was clear on his authority as an apostle, and expected this to be plainly acknowledged by others:

Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord (1 Cor. 9:1–2).

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Cor. 12:12).

Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor. 3:1–3).

We see here that Paul looked for that acknowledgement to come, not via any ‘official’ channels, but in the context of personal relationships. In this, Paul was also clear that his apostleship was not dependent any human arrangement or endorsement, but came from Christ himself:

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead . . . For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:1, 11–12).

Paul did not refrain from exercising this spiritual authority when he needed to for the good of the church and its members, even from a distance:

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Cor. 5:3–5).

Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized (1 Cor. 14:37–38).

Even so, there were times when Paul refrained from wielding this authority, in the interests of operating out of love. Paul insisted on the right of an apostle to be materially supported by those he served. But, in the case of the Corinthians, he made no claim to this right:

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case . . . What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel (1 Cor. 9:15, 18).

Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God’s good news to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! (2 Cor. 11:7–11).

This practice of Paul was in contrast to some who used what spiritual authority they had to demean and control others who, for some reason, readily submitted to such abuse:

For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face (2 Cor. 11:20).

So we turn now to consider ways in which the power some have in their relationships with others can be abused.

ABUSE OF POWER IN RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are crucial to human beings. All other physical needs may be supplied to us, but without love we fail to thrive. Our very need for love, and the importance to us of those with whom we are in relationship, constitute an inherent power, for good or evil, that others who are in relationship with us can exercise towards us, and the potential for massive damage

that can be done when that power, and that trust, is abused. Widespread instances of such abuse, inside and outside the church, are coming to light in our time.

Domestic Violence

Violence in the home between spouses or partners has been prevalent in many societies, including our own. ‘While domestic violence occurs across all types of relationships, 95–98% is male to female violence’.¹⁰ According to a Personal Safety Survey made by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2005, ‘5.8 per cent of women in Australia had experienced violence in the 12 month period preceding the survey’.¹¹ Other studies show that ‘up to one third of all women will be the victim of domestic violence at some period in her life’.¹²

Domestic violence can include physical violence (physical and sexual abuse, object damage), emotional violence (threats and intimidation, put downs), social abuse (isolation, smothering, put downs in company), economic abuse, and spiritual abuse, and results in injury, a sense of guilt and failure, fear, and humiliation.¹³ Effects on children can be damaging and long-lasting, including fearfulness, depression, frustration, sadness, guilt, helplessness, withdrawn or aggressive behaviour, relationship inability, and poor school performance.¹⁴

Child Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse happens in the community every day. It can take the forms of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, and the failure to provide for a child’s basic needs. It issues in a range of emotions, including a sense of guilt, shame, confusion and fear.¹⁵

Particularly damaging in the long term is child sexual abuse. A recent study in Australia has found that one in three women and one in six men are subjected to some form of ‘unwanted sexual experience’ during childhood. The incidence among men may be under-reported. In at least 10% of all cases for both men and women, this abuse was considered severe.¹⁶ This can lead, to mental health and personality disorders, such as anxiety disorders, depression, post traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, disordered eating, and suicidal behaviour.¹⁷

The grooming behaviour of many perpetrators focuses on building a relationship of friendship and trust with children and their parents, and their abusive actions are a betrayal of trust and a misuse of power,¹⁸ taking advantage of the imbalances of age, size, physical strength, status, knowledge, experience, and cognitive and emotional development.¹⁹ Most child sexual abuse takes place within families.²⁰

¹⁰ *Domestic Violence: Handbook for Clergy and Pastoral Workers*, Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Programme, c/- Anglican Community Services, North Adelaide, 1995, Introduction.

¹¹ <www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom_violence.htm> (accessed 23rd October 2007).

¹² *Domestic Violence*, Introduction.

¹³ *Domestic Violence*, pp. 1, 2.

¹⁴ *Domestic Violence*, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Child-Safe Environments: Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect: Participant Workbook*, Government of South Australia, Department for Families and Communities, April 2006, pp. 4, 19–20, 23.

¹⁶ Fergusson & Mullen (1999), cited in *Recognise and Respond to Disclosures of Rape and Sexual Assault*, Yarrow Place Rape and Sexual Assault Service, North Adelaide; course attended in 2006, notes p. 8

¹⁷ Yarrow Place, 2006, p. 9.

¹⁸ Anglican Diocese of Adelaide Training, ‘Being Aware of the Grooming Perpetrator’, *Safety and Screening/Version2/April 2006*.

¹⁹ Power, Authority, Trust & Respect’, Yarrow Place, 2006, p. 15.

²⁰ Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse’, Yarrow Place, 2006, p. 10.

Rape and Sexual Assault

‘Rape is not primarily a sexual act; rather it is a crime of violence, terror and humiliation . . . Rape victims are violated and rendered helpless by someone else’s need for power and control’. More than one in every thousand persons in South Australia suffered rape and sexual assault in 2002. In 63% of cases, the perpetrator was already known to the victim²¹—it was the abuse of an already existing relationship.

This issues in a wide range of damaging emotional, psychological, physical, social, and ideological/spiritual effects,²² that are deep-seated and can be long-lasting.

Bullying

Bullying occurs not just in the schoolyard, but also in the workplace. According to British research: ‘Up to one in four people are currently being bullied at work . . . an estimated 18.9m working days are lost annually. Costs to individual companies are between 8–10% of annual profits, plus the threat of costly litigation.’²³ Definitions of bullying include one or more of these incidents happening at least weekly:

- being humiliated in front of colleagues
- being undermined
- regularly being the subject of gossip
- constant public or private criticism
- having opinions or comments ignored
- having responsibilities removed
- being shouted at
- being overloaded with work with unreasonable deadlines.²⁴

In some settings, bullying can become a cultural norm. Bullies want to make themselves feel more powerful, sometimes out of a sense of personal inadequacy. They can be motivated by anxiety, fear, ignorance, jealousy or misunderstanding.²⁵ Bullying typically happens in private, and thrives on secrecy and silence. ‘When confidentiality prevents targets from seeking help, it becomes abusive.’²⁶

Bullying can be very disempowering and disabling. Those experiencing bullying may:

- be less productive
- be less confident in work
- feel scared, stressed, anxious or depressed
- have other areas of life affected
- want to stay away from work
- feel unable to trust superiors and colleagues

²¹ Understanding Rape’, ‘Prevalence of Rape and Sexual Assault’, Yarrow Place, 2006, pp. 12, 13.

²² Yarrow Place, 2006, pp. 16–18.

²³ Anne Lee, lecturer and tutor in social psychology, University of Oxford, ‘Bullying in the Church’, a letter to the *Church Times*, 22nd June 2007, used by permission. She cites Andrea Adams Trust (2006), *Ban Bullying at Work Day 7th November 2006: A Minute for Your Thoughts* (from <www.banbullyingatwork.com> accessed 6th November 2006; also <www.andreaadamstrust.org>).

²⁴ Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’.

²⁵ The Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, Safer Ministry Education, Power and Trust Seminar, 2006, version 1, pp. 4–5.

²⁶ Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’.

- lack confidence and self-esteem in self and work
- have physical symptoms of stress such as headaches, backaches, sleep problems
- feel isolated
- begin to believe what the bullies are saying
- feel unsafe.²⁷

Bullying can occur in the church. ‘Lay people, church officers, church workers or clergy can behave abusively to other lay or ordained people . . . One third of the cases before the Director of Professional Standards in the Diocese of Melbourne, Australia, are allegations of bullying.’²⁸

And so we come back to the words of Paul the apostle: ‘you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face’ (2 Cor. 11:20). With irony, Paul dissociates himself from any such action, or submission to such treatment, when he says, ‘To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!’ (2 Cor. 11:21). Anne Lee comments: ‘An organisation which allows bullying behaviour to continue unchecked is compromised in proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Whenever a church or church organisation refuses to answer questions, punishes those who express concerns, abuses confidentiality, covers up, coerces, threatens or deceives, gospel values are being directly undermined.’²⁹

IMBALANCE OF POWER

All of these abuses 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:

²⁷ Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, ‘Bullying’, p. 5.

²⁸ Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’, citing <<http://www.media.anglican.com.au/tma/2006/02/bullying.html>> (accessed 17th July 2006). After five years of operation, the incidence is down to 25%. See also <www.balmnet.co.uk>. Not all bullying is perpetrated by leaders: see Hannah Petersen, *Power in the Pews: The Impact of Abuse and Bullying of Ministers Perpetrated by Members of the Congregation* (Bethel Pastoral Centre, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia, 2004).

²⁹ Anne Lee, ‘Bullying in the Church’, citing Marcus Beale (April 2002) SLIM paper ‘Workplace Bullying’.

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.

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.³⁰

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. Attempts to help must take care not to further disempower or abuse the suffering person.

Even so, a realistic recognition, rather than a denial, of inherent power imbalances is healthy and necessary. It could be that the apostle Peter is 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’ or ‘let nothing terrify you’ (1 Pet. 3:4, 6, RSV), speaks of the rich resources of the gospel available both to her and to her husband.

Similarly, leaders of congregations, who may be secured by stipend, allowances, and official endorsement, need to be aware of the imbalance of power that gives them over non-accredited ‘lay’ persons, and moderate their behaviour accordingly.

In these days, when there is a plurality of value systems abroad, it is necessary to have in place agreed codes of conduct and pastoral guidelines. For instance, 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 interest and the pastoral relationship, and possible misuse of the inherent power imbalance present.³¹

JOINT HEIRS OF THE GRACE OF LIFE

We will conclude this study with a 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 bone and flesh of my flesh’ (Gen. 2:23)—and oneness—‘they become one flesh’

³⁰ *Domestic Violence*, p. 3.

³¹ *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.

(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 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. While all 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 (understanding ‘your desire’ in the light of the same word used in Gen. 4:7 of sin ‘lurking at the door’, seeking to take control of Cain).

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. 5:21–32). 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.

In the next study we will look more closely at what God has done to bring us to this freedom of His love, and how we are to handle it. In that, we will also look at how God Himself handles His power over us.