

A Christian response to domestic violence

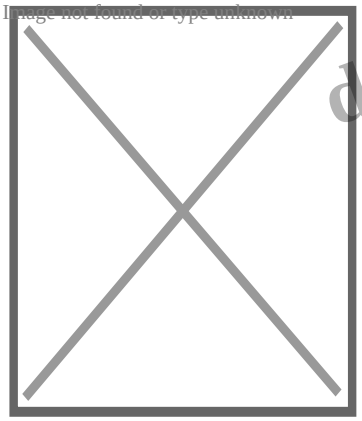
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An address by Bishop John Harrower, Hobart, 29 April 2004 – originally on the Anglican Diocese of Tasmania website, republished by permission.

Bishop John Harrower

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I am more often in the media because of the issue of sexual abuse by clergy, than I am for domestic violence. There are, however, some parallels between the two issues. I believe we can learn from some of the mistakes the church worldwide has made in responding to these issues in the past. Mistakes that led to more children being sexually abused – or in the case of domestic violence, more women and children suffering deep and long lasting damage. (Domestic violence includes physical abuse, psychological and emotional abuse, sexual manipulation and abuse, isolation, economical deprivation and stalking.)

The first response of the church world wide to allegations of sexual abuse by clergy, was ‘not to hear’, because the belief was ‘that good Christian men, who we knew, could not behave like that.’ So the church’s first response was ‘not to hear’ and its consequence, ‘not to believe.’ We face the same tendency when told of domestic violence.

Once the church did finally believe that this bad behaviour had occurred, the second mistaken

response was to treat the abuse as any other one-off moral failure. This underestimates the grip this behaviour has in people's lives, and the layers and layers of self-deception and control involved. (Isn't this another parallel to domestic violence?) Thus, in the early days, offenders of child sexual abuse were handled using time honoured Christian strategies for dealing with moral failure. They confessed to their superiors in tears, promised never to do it again, and were sent off on spiritual retreats, etc., had absolution pronounced over them – and leaders felt that the perpetrators had truly repented and reinstated them.

Unfortunately, they were reinstated to positions from which they could abuse others. A few may have stopped, but others re-offended, and more young lives were ruined. What occurred in Boston occurred in too many places. Can we learn from their mistakes? When we reinstate someone, we need to ask, 'Who are we asking to carry the risk, and pay the price if this doesn't work, if this goes wrong?' It is one thing to risk ourselves, but should we ask children to carry that risk?

Can you see the parallels with domestic violence? Are we also in danger in the area of domestic violence of simplistically applying great Christian principles? Of applying them in a way that colludes with the perpetrator about some watered down version of reality? In ways that do not even begin to address the grip that this has in lives, nor challenge them to the hard work of change that must flow from true repentance. We help neither victims nor perpetrators if we do that.
Some mistakes Christians have made

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1.We have fooled ourselves that domestic violence does not happen in good Christian homes – thus we have failed to hear and failed to believe.

My own experience is that when told of abuse by a man I know, I am inclined to disbelief: how can this be true? He is a Christian; I know him and have even ministered and prayed with him. This discomfort inclines me/us not to hear or believe a victim. This leaves both the victims and the perpetrators in some 'non land' -where their experience is somehow not real. Their struggles are not real. What was happening to them, either as victim or perpetrator, was so far off the Christian radar screen, that they were totally on their own, in a sort of terrifying 'non land.'

I am reminded that Jesus involved himself in the reality of life: including the 'unclean', 'the damaged', the 'messed up' and 'the sinning'. We are to draw alongside those within our flock who were struggling with hidden alcoholism, domestic violence, incest, etc.

Like Jesus, we must be prepared to see what is actually happening and to act on this reality, no matter how messy and seemingly unbelievable it may be. The doctrine of sin challenges our own discipleship and also the possibility of wrong in the other person; no matter how 'Christian' they may appear to be.

2. We have clutched at simplistic tools.

The discomfort and inadequacy we pastors feel when faced with this issue – our own discomfort, often rushes us into suggesting simplistic solutions to both victims and perpetrators. We often clutch at simplistic answers, because of our own discomfort. We can suggest solutions like ‘forgiving others’ or ‘God can forgive you’ as a way of trying to bring people’s pain to an end: to jam the lid back on the box of suffering. Our forgiveness of others and God’s forgiveness of us, are two huge life-changing tools that God has given us to enable us to live in a fallen messed up world – but they are too important to use as some lid to quickly remove a mess from view.

Sometimes we have looked after the victim but failed to adequately challenge the perpetrator. We may believe that because we have had ‘a word with the offender’, wrong behaviour will have stopped. We may even follow-up the victim, but she may have learned from the beatings that followed her last disclosure, not to tell the clergy, so she lies and says it has all stopped. As pastors we may feel self satisfied that we have solved a problem. But the only thing the victim has learned is that you don’t speak up, or seek help. Our fault was that we overestimated the power and influence of our ‘having a word with him’. Long-term violence is harder to shift than that.

3.The tools we have given perpetrators have often been inadequate.

If we have challenged the perpetrator, the tools we have given him may well have been inadequate. **In practice we have assisted him or her to evade reality or the need to do the deep work of change.** We have allowed him to weep about how sorry he is, and that he promises it will never happen again, and plead with us to pronounce God’s forgiveness over his ‘repentance’. We as pastors are utterly convinced that nothing is too hard for God to forgive, and that is true – but we have often short changed on what repentance needs to look like – and that has left women’s and children’s lives in danger.

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What sort of repentance did Jesus evoke? Remember Zacchaeus. He is an example of Jesus’ preparedness to deal with the reality of messed up lives. Zacchaeus met and responded to Jesus, and his repentance was more than ‘weeping and saying how sorry he was, or promising never to do it again, or pleading with the victims to forgive him’. He stood in front of Jesus and the community he had wronged and gave half of his possessions to the poor and paid back to those he had defrauded four times as much as what he had wrongfully taken from them. (Luke 19:1-10)

Those who looked into the eyes of Jesus experienced themselves as ‘fully known’, yet ‘called to come closer’. Being truly seen by Jesus took your breath away. Tragically, some responded by being angry or refusing to let go of their power and control or turning away sorrowfully. Others took up the invitation to follow Jesus. Zacchaeus was experiencing the love and acceptance of Jesus, who he sensed saw all his mess, and yet still called to him. Because of that Zacchaeus could face reality in all its awfulness, address the damage and take responsibility. And Jesus concludes, ‘this day has salvation come to this house.’

An example of true repentance was outlined recently in *The Mercury*, page 31, Saturday 3 April 2004, entitled, ‘Passion for confession’, Houston:

> A Texas man who had gotten away with murder confessed to police after seeing Mel

> Gibson's controversial film The Passion of the Christ and talking with a spiritual adviser. Dan R. Leach, 21, walked into a police station after viewing the film to confess to killing Ashley Nicole Wilson. A coroner had ruled Wilson's death in January by hanging was suicide.
>
> 'Something (the adviser) said, between that and the movie, he felt in order for him to have redemption he would have to confess his sin and do his time,' a police spokesman said. Leach faces up to life in prison.

This man's spiritual advisor addressed the hard issues. This is a fine example for us.

We have too often underestimated the grip wrong behaviours have in lives. How do we challenge perpetrators of violence to do more than just be sorry, but to face reality in all its awfulness, address what they have done, and tackle the hard work of change like Zacchaeus did? Those who engage in domestic violence are inclined to try to do all this with soft options like flowers and gifts and promises and pleadings for the victim to forgive them. But we need to direct them to where they can get help seeing reality, and using stronger methods of addressing the damage. We need to give them better and tougher tools that hold them accountable for the thousand small decisions, not just the final ones about hitting out in violence. If we don't address the deeper issues of power and control, the next time a perpetrator's buttons are pushed he will respond the same way as before. If we don't address the deeper issues of his past hell when he was serving in Vietnam, or her past hell when she was abused as a child, the next time his or her buttons are pushed, they will lash out again.

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Working with perpetrators of abuse is a highly skilled area that generic counselling training does not provide. Centrecare has a program with people skilled in this area to which abusers can be referred. **We must work with other professionals.**

Another down side of handing out an easy forgiveness to a perpetrator is that after feeling bad for a few moments, they then feel that they have done their work. They have done all that is necessary: they have felt sorry. Now they believe the next move is up to the victim. Let me quote you a story about a Christian minister who regularly sexually abused his daughter before he was jailed. After confessing his crime with tears to a minister in prison, he then held very firmly to the belief that it was now his daughter's Christian duty to come to prison and pronounce that she forgave him. He sent her messages to that affect. By his five minutes of repentance, he believed he had done all the work required of him, and then he was firmly putting back all the responsibility for restoration, back on the victim. We have to be very careful as pastors not to collude in loading all the responsibility to change onto the victim.

There is a temptation for pastors to collude with offenders that their behaviour is nothing more than a matter of private morality. This is a temptation for pastors as we feel we have much to offer in the area of personal morality. Unfortunately, it is in the perpetrators interest to reduce his behaviour to 'just a matter' of private morality. If the church colludes in this sleight of hand, it can find itself, as it did in the matter of sexual abuse of children, ignoring the fact [a] that these matters are criminal behaviours; and **that they have very real long term consequences for the victims.**

We must deal with perpetrators of domestic violence firmly, in truth, love and equipping them for true repentance.

4.The tools we have given victims have also often been simplistic.

We know the power that forgiving another has, so **we can advocate forgiveness prematurely as a solution to a victim's problems.** The Bible says forgive seventy times seven. But, does this mean a victim should stay in a relationship and be beaten up seventy times seven? Definitely not!

Let us try putting ourselves in a victim's shoes. Imagine you are a victim coming to the church; your body battered, and your self esteem battered, your boundaries breached time and time again; your sense of personal self and even reality is somewhat shaky; your sense of what you are responsible for and what you are not responsible for has been sabotaged for years by a perpetrator who is an expert in power and control; you have been controlled and manipulated into blaming yourself for years – if when you finally come to the church, your spiritual advisor then says to you, 'The perpetrator has said sorry. Now your very first task and Christian duty is to forgive him.'!!

Tell me, is the very first issue this woman or child needs, a lesson in forgiving others? They have often lost a sense of self. An earlier step is to regain a sense of self-worth, and the corollary, that any offence against them matters enormously and is wrong. Usually a victim of abuse needs help in starting a long journey. This includes gaining the confidence to know she matters, and that therefore any offence against her matters, long before she needs to tackle the forgiveness question.

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When it eventually does come time to deal with the forgiveness question, **we can also make the mistake of implying that forgiveness only has one shape – that forgiveness always means automatic reinstatement.** Thereby placing the perpetrator back in the same position from which they can still harm others. I believe it is quite possible to reach a place of forgiveness, while recognizing that it is not healthy to reinstate certain relationships.

Conclusion

Our first step is to acknowledge that it can be our own discomfort as pastors that can help us collude with perpetrators into slick solutions, and pronouncing a rapid absolution. We also acknowledge that we need to insist that other professionals be called in, so that like Zacchaeus, the perpetrator gives legs to his sorry, by addressing what will help bring about change.

I can tell you some of the dilemmas. I don't pretend to know the answers. I am both grateful for the ministry of Jireh House and confident that through today's Jireh House seminar pastors and church leaders can learn more about our Christian response to domestic violence.

It will help us build a healthy church and a healthy Tasmania.

Summary

A Christian response to domestic violence …
Some mistakes Christians have made

- We have fooled ourselves that domestic violence does not happen in Christian homes – thus we have failed to hear and failed to believe.
- We have clutched at simplistic tools.

- We have wrongly applied ‘forgiveness’
- We have overestimated the power and influence of our having a ‘word to the offender.’
- The tools we have given perpetrators have been inadequate.
- We have assisted him or her to evade reality or the need to do the deep work of change.
- We have short changed on what repentance needs to look like.
- We have underestimated the grip wrong behaviour has in lives.
- We have failed to direct to professionals who may be able to assist in the hard work of change.
- We have been tempted to collude that this behaviour is just a matter of private morality for the offender, under-emphasising the fact that the behaviour is also a crime, and that there are very long term consequences for victims.
- The tools we have given victims have often been simplistic,
- Often advocating forgiveness prematurely.
- Often implying that forgiveness only has one shape – the automatic reinstatement of someone back to the same position from which they can still harm others.

John Harrower, Bishop of Tasmania, 29 April 2004

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