Chapter 8

Combating gender based violence.
The Bible’s teaching on gender complementarity

Simon Gillham

The Reality of Gender Based Violence

The awful numbers

In research conducted in 2004 under the auspices of the World Health Organisation it was found that in the city where I live (Windhoek, Namibia), 60% of women have suffered physical abuse in an intimate relationship. One in five women in this city lives in relationships where they continue to be physically abused.2 These awful numbers are tragically representative of the situation throughout sub-Saharan Africa. 59% of Zambian women, 43% of Kenyan women, 49% of Ethiopian women and 47% of Tanzanian women also report being physically abused in their marriages or most intimate relationships.3

No-one living in southern Africa is untouched by the reality of gender-based violence or the attitudes which underlie it. Raw statistics or numbers, no matter how awful they are, do not give us a proper appreciation of the reality of gender based violence.

The personal perspective

In other chapters within this volume we share the stories of particular women who have themselves been victims of gender based violence. Their personal perspective brings a depth, intensity and immediacy to the discussion which all of us need to hear. However, even those of us who have never been victims of gender based violence ourselves have a personal perspective and concerns that also need to be heard.

I write as a man married to a wife I love and we are raising a teenage daughter in a city where more than half of the women will be physically abused in marriage or intimate relationships! I am equally concerned for the effect that living in the midst of such widespread violence against women might have on the way my teenage son views himself in relationship to women. No-one living in southern Africa is untouched! We all have a personal perspective, and should have a personal stake in combating gender based violence and the attitudes which underlie it.

The reasons for the violence

There are undoubtedly many reasons for such a prevalence of gender based violence in southern Africa. Some researchers have pointed to cultural factors4 and others to economics and the abuse of alcohol as key reasons for gender based violence5. Economics plays an

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important role – because people in poverty, particularly women, have fewer options or choices.

Governments can make and enforce laws to protect the rights of women. In many of our countries commendable progress has been made in these areas over recent years. In Namibia for example many important pieces of legislation have been passed:

- The Maintenance Act, 1996
- The Married Persons Equality Act, 1996
- The Combating of Rape Act, 2000
- The Combating of Domestic Violence Act, 2003
- The Children Status Act, 2007

Whilst introducing legislation such as this is critically important, legislation alone will continue to prove powerless to stem the tide of violence and discrimination. It is sobering to note that the Married Persons Equality Act had been in effect for almost a decade before the above mentioned survey which found 60% of Namibian women suffering abuse in marriage and intimate relationships was conducted!

Work in understanding and alleviating the plight of women due to prejudicial cultural practices, economic factors and uses of alcohol which put them at greater risk of violence is also critically important. The contention of this paper is that there is an even more fundamental reason for the violence which, like the violence itself, is not defined by or limited to the southern African context.

**A global problem**

Indeed in seeking to address gender based violence in southern Africa, one of the first things that we must come to terms with, is that what we have here is a local expression of a global problem. Whilst there are local social and economic factors at work, this is an evil which crosses all cultural, ethnic and socio-economic boundaries. In that sense we are speaking of a global rather than a distinctly African problem.

This paper seeks to establish that the fundamental cause behind the global problem of gender based violence is sin. It is a simple and as profound as that! This is a problem which crosses all cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic boundaries, because its cause is common to all humanity. Sin!

**The role of the Bible**

This is why the role of teaching the Bible in theological seminaries is so critical. Christians have historically relied on the Bible for their understandings of sin, its effects and its solutions. Teaching the Bible properly in southern Africa is critical because a majority of the men in this part of the world claim to be Christian, and there is a history of men using the Bible to justify their exploitation of women on the basis that wives must submit to husbands.

With this background the temptation is to want to rightly argue for the equality of men and

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7 Prior to entering full time Christian work the author was a Police Officer in multi-cultural Sydney, Australia and served for some years as a Domestic Violence Liaison Officer and trainer in Protective Behaviours.

8 Hubbard, *The Problem of Spousal Abuse*, 3-4. Respondents to this survey who identified themselves as abusers listed amongst their justifications, “the Creation of Adam and Eve, and the fact that wives should submit to their husbands.”
women, but then to ignore the distinctions that the Bible makes. An unfortunate side-effect of this approach is that it further excuses men from a responsibility that the Bible insists they bear.

This paper proposes that a key part of the resolution to the subjugation of women in southern Africa should be the faithful teaching of the biblical notion of gender complementarity in seminaries and churches. The place of Christianity and the Bible in southern Africa means that a change in this area has the very real potential to lead to societal transformation. The focus here will fall on the marriage relationship which is both the centre of gender based violence, and also central to a biblical view of gender. A biblical-theological approach will be followed, tracing God’s progressive revelation in this area of thought from Creation to New Creation. This approach seeks to understand and take account of all that the Bible has to say, expecting to find unity within the diversity of scriptural references rather than sets of competing influences that one must choose between.

A biblical theology of marriage

The man and the woman at Creation

As we reflect on the creation, we see that the two accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, both affirm in different ways that the man and the woman are the pinnacle or highlight of the created order.

Joint image bearers

In Genesis 1:26-27 the man and the woman together bear the image of God. Whatever else is implied in this, it is clear that not only do the man and the woman equally bear the image of God, but that it is the two of them together who bear this image.

Profoundly equal

In Genesis 2:23 the man affirms that the woman is bone of his bones; not just equal but of exactly the same substance as him. The man and the woman are perfectly suited to one another and only after the creation of the woman is the one element in creation which is ‘not good’, the man’s aloneness (Gen 2:18), resolved.

It is clear that men and women are created equal. All attitudes which see women as lesser than men, or less valuable or important than men, must be dismissed on the evidence of creation itself.

Distinctly complementary

It is equally clear in creation however, that there are distinctions between the man and woman. It was not another man that God created as he looked for the suitable helper and companion for the man, but a woman. Maleness is not the image of God, but male and female together (Gen 1:27).

One of these distinctions is reflected in the created order. The man and woman together are to fill the earth and subdue it, and to rule over all the living creatures (Gen 1:28), but the man bears a responsibility that is different from the woman. In Genesis 2 he is given the commands about the two central trees in the garden, before the woman is created.

The man and woman at the Fall; The Order of Creation

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9 It is significant to note at this point that biblical theology denotes an approach to hermeneutics which assumes the inspiration, authority and unity of Scripture. The approach is perhaps most cogently argued for in Graeme Goldsworthy’s, 2006. Gospel-centred Hermeneutics: Biblical-theological foundations and principals, Downers Grove: Apollos.

As we move into Genesis 3, we can clearly see this responsibility in *the order of creation* played out in the way that the narrative unfolds. The serpent, a wild animal, a living creature, takes the lead. It leads the woman who then leads the man.

When God comes back into the garden in verse 8, he calls for the man. The man blames the woman. The woman blames the serpent. God then unfolds the reality of the curse first to the serpent, then to the woman, and then to the man.

We might say that sin and the fall originally came from the serpent, but consistently throughout Scripture it is not the serpent who is held responsible. It is not the woman who is held responsible. It is the sin of Adam! Adam is held responsible.\(^{11}\)

There are only two references in the rest of the Bible to Eve’s role in the fall. (2 Cor. 11:3 & 1 Tim. 2:11-15) Both of them describe her as being deceived and in 1 Timothy 2 the point of the passage seems to again highlight the responsibility of men.\(^{12}\)

**The Curse and the Promise**

In 1 Timothy 2:15 there is also this curious mention of the woman being saved through child-bearing, which should be taken to be a reference back again to Genesis 3:15 where God promises that there would be a day where one of the woman’s descendants would crush the serpent’s head.\(^{13}\) Jesus is of course the descendant, and the crushing of Satan was achieved at the cross.\(^{14}\)

Whilst the effects of the curse are spelt out to the man in terms of the pain that it will cause him in work, for the woman it is pain in her family; pain in child-bearing and pain in the relationship between husband and wife.

> *To the woman he said,*
> “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” (Gen. 3:16, NIV)

The common tendency is to read this desire that the woman will have for her husband as a positive expression of love for him. Following Susan Foh though, it is better to see this desire as an urge for independence, or indeed a desire to dominate her husband. For Foh, “These words mark the beginning of the battle of the sexes.”\(^{15}\) This understanding of the woman’s desire fits better with the context where a positive love or yearning would be an odd effect of the curse in the midst of so many other negatives. It also fits more neatly with the writer’s own use of the same word and the same sentence construction in the following chapter (Gen. 4:7) to describe the way that ‘sin’ desires to have Cain, but he must master it. It also fits more closely with the existential reality of life in a fallen world where tension and conflict mark many more marriages than not.

The husband’s response described in the verse above is to rule over, master or dominate the wife. We must be clear that what is being described here is not the same thing as the

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\(^{11}\) See for example Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21-23, 44-49; Hosea 6:7; Ecclesiastes 7:29;

\(^{12}\) For a detailed discussion on 1 Tim 2, see Elna Mouton’s study in Chapter 10.

\(^{13}\) See for example Witherington, Ben, III. 2006. *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians, Volume I: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John.* Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 230. “Rather, I suggest that although the subject in 1 Timothy 2:15 surely is women in general (which would include Jesus’ mother), “the childbearing” is indeed a reference to a particular birth, that of Jesus. The point is that it was through woman that the fall came, and through woman redemption came as well.”

\(^{14}\) See for example Hebrews 2:14. By extension this is a victory also given to those in Christ; Romans 16:20.

\(^{15}\) Foh, Susan. 1974/5, “What is the Woman’s Desire?”, *Westminster Theological Journal* (37) , 382
responsibility and order described in the Creation narrative of Genesis 2, but a kind of ruling, mastery or domination that is a consequence and expression of sin.

It is exactly this expression of sin that we see played out in the brutal violence and subjugation of women across southern Africa; conflict in marriages that end with men ruling over, oppressing and crushing their wives. This pattern in marriage generates a society where women are crushed and oppressed more broadly as well.

**Men and Women in redemption: A narrative of distorted relationships**

Throughout the Bible from this point on we have the progressive unfolding of God’s plan to deal with sin, redeem a people for himself and reverse the effects of the fall. From Abraham and throughout the history of the nation of Israel, we find examples of both God’s good creative purposes for men and women, and also (perhaps much more commonly) examples of the distortion of these purposes through sin.

Indeed the effects of the fall are painted time and again in vivid colours throughout the pages of the Old Testament. Phyllis Trible’s coining of the phrase, “texts of terror” to highlight the horrific treatment of some women in the Old Testament narratives has been an influential factor in bringing the issue of gender based violence in the Bible to the fore. Some of these incidents are clearly condemned within the narratives, whilst others appear to pass without comment. This again highlights the need for a comprehensive biblical theology which has the capacity to make sense of the parts, within the framework of the whole of Scripture. From such a framework the condemnation of gender based violence is loud and clear so that there should be no confusion between narratives which describe God’s good purposes for men and women, and those which describe the effects and expressions of sin.

**The marriage of God and Israel**

In a way that underscores both the significance of the marriage relationship and also the intimacy of the relationship between God and his people, at several points in the Old Testament Israel is pictured as the wife of God. This is particularly highlighted in the context of covenant fidelity, where time and again the idolatry of the nation of Israel is akin to adultery. Whilst the Bible does not encourage us to try and press this relational analogy in every detail, where it is used it is clear that to be the wife of God is a position of great esteem and value. God as the husband lavishes love, grace, mercy and forgiveness and all good things on his wife – even in spite of her unfaithfulness. To be a wife is to be elevated above all others by your husband.

**Women in the gospels**

As we come to the pages of the New Testament and meet the person of the Lord Jesus, we find the true man, the new Adam who although tempted never sins. Although we do not have any record of his explicit teaching on the equality or distinct roles of men and women, we can clearly see the way that he challenges many of the preconceptions of his day. Women such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Mary and Martha were amongst his closest followers. Jesus responds with compassion and respect when culturally it might have been

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17 See for example Ezekiel 16, Hosea 1-3.
18 See for example Hosea 3:1
20 Evidenced in frequent references and closeness of contact described. eg Luke 8:1-3
expected that he would be dismissive of the value of women.21 Women are the first witnesses of the resurrection. For all this though, he still chooses twelve men as apostles and never challenges the Old Testament notions surrounding the particular accountability and responsibility of men before God in marriage and in the broader life of his people.

**Radical equality**

The trajectory that the Lord Jesus established is reflected in the New Testament epistles. Women are from the very earliest times active participants in the life of the Christian communities. They are numbered amongst Paul’s closest co-workers,22 as hosts of the new churches,23 as hard workers,24 as outstanding among the apostles.25 Women are expected to be learning,26 praying and prophesying27 in church, albeit in such a way that there remains a clear distinction between men and women in each case. Perhaps in stark contrast to prevailing cultural mores both in the New Testament Greco-Roman world and also in contemporary southern Africa, the New Testament derides the notion that women are somehow second-class citizens.28

Indeed because all who trust in Christ find their true value and identity in Him, they are each equally “sons of God” and therefore “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for (we) are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26-29).29 In the context of Galatians 3 the stress is on the equality before God of Jews and Gentiles.30 As the list unfolds in verse 28 however, two other equally common ways of distinguishing between first and second class citizens are provided to drive the point home. Slave or free, male or female; it makes no difference! The identity of those who have faith in Christ, is Christ himself!

**Distinct complementarity**

This is not to say however, that these and other distinctions have no on-going significance in the Christian life this side of glory. People did not cease to be Jewish, Gentile, slave, free, men, women, young old, married, or single by virtue of their faith in Jesus. At various points in the New Testament instructions specific to each of these groups are given.31

In what is perhaps the key biblical reference for the purposes of this paper, 1 Peter 3:7, we find an instruction specific to husbands that incorporates both the profound equality of men and women, and also complementarity of their roles due to differences between them.

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22 Priscilla in Romans 16:3
23 Nympha in Colossians 4:15, Priscilla in Romans 16:3-5,
24 A large list! See for example Romans 16:6,12
25 Junias in Romans 16:6
26 1 Timothy 2:11
27 1 Corinthians 11:5
30 See especially Gal. 3:8,14
31 In Ephesians 5:21–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1 Paul uses the familiar form of a Roman household code addressing different people in various groups, but the content is transformed by the gospel. Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 7:17ff urges his readers to remain in whatever situation in life they found themselves when they became followers of Jesus, except that if a slave had an opportunity to become free they should take it.
Husbands, in the same way 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, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. (NIV)

Husbands are to live with understanding, consideration and intelligence, and honour their wives in light of two things. To take the second point first, wives are co-heirs of God’s gracious gift of life with their husbands. Believing wives are heirs in every sense that their believing husbands are. They are utterly equal in all respects at this point. On this basis, there can be no countenancing of the idea that women are somehow spiritually second rate, or somehow dependent upon their husbands for their salvation.

Secondly, wives are physically weaker. Whilst this may not be true of all married couples in every circumstance, it is sufficiently true of most couples around the world and throughout history to warrant the comment.

The importance of such an instruction is borne out in the gender based violence and the subjugation of women throughout southern Africa that forms the backdrop of this volume. What we witness in our countries is the result of men, who are physically more powerful than their wives, using this power for their own ends. This is precisely what Peter is railing against.

**Love and Submission**

In Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, Paul also addresses husbands specifically and in a way which, if lived out, would transform the gender issues of southern Africa. If we consider Ephesians 5:25-33, the fuller treatment of the issue, we find that husbands are to love their wives in the same way in which Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25). This ‘giving up’ carries the implication of giving up one’s rights or privileges, but if Jesus is the example, it extends even to laying down one’s life for the other. This is the perspective which is to characterise a Christian husband’s attitude to his wife.

As verses 26-28 carry on, we are reminded that Jesus’ love for the church was given for the purpose of presenting her to himself sanctified, pure and spotless – and again the husbands love for his wife is somehow analogous to this. The husband’s love is given in part, because he longs to see his wife sanctified. The husband bears an asymmetric spiritual responsibility within the marriage. That is, the New Testament does not ever speak of the wife carrying a similar responsibility for her husband.

The history of the church is scarred with examples of those who have used the biblical injunctions for wives to submit to the husbands as a justification for the oppression of women. In such a context it is understandable that many people would want to turn their backs on these passages completely. Ironically, in the view of this paper, it is precisely such passages which deliver the clearest biblical instructions to combat the oppression which they have been used to generate or justify.

Two important things must be noted to safeguard the application of such an explosive idea:

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32 Whilst the semantic range of *asthenestero* can include ‘moral weakness’ this rendering must be dismissed on exegetical and experiential grounds. Rather than being morally weak, Peter has an expectation that the wives he is writing to may be the ones who lead their husbands to faith (1 Peter 3:1). When used in combination with *skenei*, as here, it is clear that Peter is referring to a physical not emotional or moral weakness

33 The same is true for the spiritual responsibility of raising children in Ephesians 6:4. Despite the almost universal practise of insisting that mothers are responsible for the raising of children, it is fathers who are to raise their children in “the training and instruction of the Lord.” In neither case does this mean that the wife is not responsible at all or should not be spiritually active and leading, but the husband bears a primary and disproportionate responsibility.
Firstly, the submission of wives is always and only ever mentioned in Scripture in the context of what might reasonably be considered a greater command to self-denial on the part of the husband. To seek to apply one without the other is to abuse Scripture.

Secondly, the man can no more coerce the submission of his wife, than the wife can coerce the love of her husband. A man who attempts to force or manipulate his wife to submit to him, either physically or through any other way, is living out the results of the curse of Genesis 3:16, not the instructions of the New Testament.

Gender complementarity and gender based violence

Submission in a sinful world

Given the background of gender based violence which gives rise to this paper it is important to give a clear way forward for Christian women who are suffering abuse within their marriages right now. The instructions for wives to submit to their husbands do not compel and should not even encourage women to stay or be left in violent situations!

Submission is a fundamental stance to be adopted by all Christian people in a variety of situations. We are to submit primarily to God in everything (James 4:7). We are also urged to submit to our parents (Ephesians 6:1), to those in church leadership (Hebrews 13:7), and to governments and ruling authorities (1 Peter 2:13, Romans 13:1,5). All of these submissions to other people though, clearly have their limitations. Under some circumstances, such as false teaching, church leaders are to be opposed (Galatians 2:11, 2 Timothy 3:1-5). Just as Daniel and his friends found limits to the submission they were prepared to offer the ruling authorities in their day (Daniel 1:8; 3:18; 6:10), so also the early Christians went to their deaths rather than to submit to some of the demands of various Roman Emperors.

Dietrich Bonheoffer’s wrestle with the demand to submit to the Third Reich’s ruling authority provides an even more readily applicable model for women experiencing gender based violence. Bonheoffer argued that there came a point when continuing to submit to an evil regime, made the submitter complicit in the evil. Once we have recognised gender based violence for the evil that it is, it is clear that anything which is done to perpetuate or allow that situation to continue, becomes complicit in that evil.

Love in a sinful world

Women in marriages where there are ongoing issues of gender based violence will often feel a tension between their commitment to love and even submit to their husbands, and concern over their own (or their children’s) safety. Such women must be liberated from feeling any such tension as in fact a commitment to loving their husbands, and a concern for safety both dictate that their husband’s violence must stop! It would be unloving to perpetuate a situation where that sin would go on unchecked. The abused wife should not simply be ‘allowed’ by her Christian friends to separate from her husband, she should be encouraged, supported, enabled and urged to separate – at least until the abusive behaviour is stopped. It is the loving thing to do for her, her children and her husband.

This focus and discussion on the role of women in these relationships however, must not distract us from the fact that it is the men who must bear responsibility for the problem. Gender based violence must be addressed and corrected in the long term, by men who are committed to loving their wives after the self-sacrificial pattern of the Lord Jesus (cf. Ephesians 5:25). Gender based violence must be addressed and corrected in the long term, by men who instead of using their physical strength to oppress their wives, commit

themselves to serving their wives as co-heirs with them of the gracious gift of life (cf. 1 Peter 3:7).

Conclusions
At a time in southern Africa when women continue to be trivialised, subjugated, mistreated and abused – and when sometimes those actions and attitudes are justified by appeals to Scripture – it is critical that theological seminaries teach the whole counsel of God regarding men and women.

This paper has followed a biblical theological approach and has focussed on the marriage relationship as seen in the Creation, the Fall and the Redemptive Plan of God. It is clear throughout the Bible that men and women are of equal and inestimable value as God’s image bearers in creation, and through faith in the Lord Jesus as co-heirs in redemption. Advocates of any view which sees women as in any sense ‘lessor’ than men must be called to account for their ignorance or distortion of Scripture.

This paper has further argued that if the abuse of the physical power differential between men and women is to be addressed, we must embrace the truth that men and women although absolutely equal, are also different. Following from these differences or distinctions, there are specific biblical instructions issued to men as husbands which confront precisely the acts and attitudes that lie behind the detestable treatment of women in southern Africa.

Seminaries in Africa ought to give loud and bold voice to what the whole Bible says about men and women. In our context it is particularly critical at this time that men and women hear of and understand their equality before God in all things, as they each find the heart of their identity in Christ. It is equally critical that men hear and understand that using their physical power over women for their own ends is an expression of pure evil. Instead, taking the love of the Lord Jesus as their cue, they must lay down their lives for their wives, being ready to serve them and present them pure and blameless on the last day.

Legislative changes designed to improve the plight of women in southern Africa must be applauded, but a genuine societal transformation will only flow from the hearts of transformed men and women. For this, the role of seminaries in teaching what the Bible says about men and women, and training others to do the same, is critical.

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