



Dying for love

Description

It is International Women's Day on March 8th. Has anything changed for women since last year's International Women's Day? I ask this question because we Australians are reeling under the shock of the horrific murder of Hannah Clarke (31) and her three young children, Aaliyah (6) Laianah (4), and Trey (3). They were killed by her husband and the children's father, Rowan Baxter. He doused them with petrol and set them alight in the family car. They appeared to the world as a glamorous couple with three beautiful children but in the home, Rowan was, his sister in law said, "a monster". He always wanted his own way and was controlling. Hannah lived in fear of him and went to the police for help several times and had a court order out against him. Nevertheless, she is dead and so are the three children. In her greatest time of need no one could do anything. Her husband killed her and their three children in the most appalling way. If this woman would not live with him, or recognise his authority over her, and she wanted to take *his* children from him, he decided to kill them all.

This is almost too much to get our heads around but to make things worse the police inspector in charge of the case, Mark Thompson, implied it was possibly all Hannah's fault. Speaking the day after the murders, he said, "to put it bluntly, we are deciding which side to take. We are opened minded" at the moment. Which side are *you* on? Is this an issue of a woman suffering significant domestic violence and she and her children perishing at the hands of a violent and angry man, or is this an instance of a man being driven too far by his wife who wouldn't do as he demanded? In other words, was this an awful, violent and wilful crime against a defenceless woman and her children, or did this woman deserve it? Had she driven her husband to do this because of her own actions?

The next day, the Queensland Police Commissioner, who happens to be a woman, Katrina Carrol, took Inspector Thompson off the case and apologised for what he had said. No matter what any woman does, no husband has the right to be violent towards his wife, let alone kill her. In this case, Hannah Clarke's "sin" was to leave her dominating and controlling husband because she feared for her own safety and that of her children.

One woman a week in Australia is killed by the man who says he loves her. The prevalence of

domestic violence is staggering. The figures are breath-taking and hard to believe. An unimaginable number of women's lives are blighted by this scourge. In the USA, Europe and Australia, 1 in 4 women will experience physical abuse from an intimate partner in their lifetime. The incidence of abuse is even higher among immigrants, and those of aboriginal and Torres Island descent. No change in these statistics is in sight; they may even be getting worse. The more freedoms women enjoy, the stronger the pushback is by men who believe that as men they should be in charge and make all the important decisions. In the research we have, the incidence of domestic abuse in society seems to be paralleled in church-going families, and possibly elevated in churches where it is regularly taught that the man is the head of the home: that he should make all the important decisions and the wife should be subordinate.

Domestic abuse is a specific phenomenon. It does not refer to an incident of abusive language and possibly a slap; what is commonly called 'situational couple violence'. Domestic abuse refers to the ongoing assertion of power, almost always by the man over his wife or intimate partner, that has as its intent the complete control of the woman. Domestic abuse is always ultimately about power in one way or another; the man feels he must be in control. His male identity as a leader must be asserted. Jess Hill says, 'The unifying ingredient among abusers is a radioactive sense of entitlement'. 'He should be in charge'. Women do kill their husbands on rare occasions but almost always to preserve their own life, and often the lives of their children as well. Women do not pour petrol on their husband and children and set them alight. Domestic abuse always involves control and fear but not necessarily physical violence. Domestic abuse is gender specific. It's a male thing.

Why do some men, and some men who are in church most Sundays, we ask, abuse their wives? We now know the primary reason. It is well-put by professors Lori Heise and Andreas Kotsadam in their 2015 *Lancet* article, 'Cross-national and multilevel correlates of partner abuse', based on 66 surveys, in 44 countries and involving 481 subjects. They found that 'especially predictive' of partner violence are norms related to male authority. In other words, when it is believed that men are privileged and should be in control, women in much higher percentages are abused. Similarly, the Australian journalist and author, Jess Hill in her 2019 book, *See What you made me do: power control and domestic abuse*, says, 'It is indisputable that traditional notions of masculinity particularly male entitlement are at the core of men's violence against women'. Our Watch, the Australian organization set up specifically to combat domestic abuse, says, 'Research has consistently found that men who hold traditional, hierarchical views about gender roles and relationships are more likely to perpetuate violence against women'.

What this means for the churches, is that teaching that men should be real men, and women real women, that men should be in charge, that men make all the important decisions, can be a very dangerous diet for some men - men who are needy and controlling. What we should be hearing in our churches is that God has made men and women of equal dignity, status and leadership potential (Gen 1:27-28); that Jesus in word and deed valued men and women alike and said not one word on male 'headship', and St Paul taught that a husband should love his wife like Christ loved the church and gave his life for her (Eph. 5:25). In a Christian marriage, he added, 'mutual subordination' is what is demanded (Eph 5:21).

If International Women's Day is going to mean anything, we need to unite and say, the abuse of women must stop. We do not want another Hannah Clarke murdered by her husband.

See further, Kevin Giles, *The headship of men and the abuse of women, are they in any way connected?*

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