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The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem

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Church between 1957–1990, in which case the reader outside this tradition may be bored with unnecessary particulars.

The section on the Cultural Construction of Gender Relations (160 pages) deals with male power and position, the body, language, and dress (complete with the only [20] pictures in the book) which extends over the last 800 years! The next section deals with Social Institutions and Gender Relations. The public life of the husband and the private life of the wife within the family are challenged. Biblical justice is seen where both parents share home and childrearing responsibilities. Current expectations of a wife and mother being a financial provider and the one with the major domestic responsibilities is clearly identified as unequal and unjust. Women's pay as being less than men's pay is documented, and the case is reinforced with sound sociological theory.

The book offers much that has been written in sociology, psychology, family studies, women's studies, theology and development studies over the past ten years. For readers who already have an understanding of feminism, this book will be wanting. However, if such exposure has not been the experience of the reader, we have a good resource of contemporary feminism between the covers of one book. More than this, we have a Christian consciousness throughout the book that integrates the concerns of these more secular concerns. These Reformed writers urge us to think and act in a holistic manner on these very deep-rooted social and economic problems in our global community. They see hope in reconciliation.

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The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem

James Newton Poling
Nashville: Abingdon Press
224 pp.

Poling courageously provides a healing space for the "silent voices" of victims and survivors and for the stories of those "few men trying to recover from the addiction to power".

The strength of the book is the use of personal testimonies of victims, survivors, perpetrators and the author's own personal story. The case studies honour the experiences of pain, tension and ambivalence. The author at the same time challenges the reader to examine her or his own beliefs, values and myths about the use of power as expressed in relationships found in societal and church communities. His use of living human testimonies provides the backdrop for theological reflection on the central issue—the abuse of power.

Locating power and the abuse of power within the context of relationship, the author explores the different types of power in relation to other persons and critically names the abusive form of unilateral power, social power inequalities and patriarchy. In doing so Poling stretches the concept of power from the narrow perspective of possession and systemically identifies the evil ideologies, the structures of dominance and control, and the all pervasive patterns of evil interactions. Old images of self, others and God are allowed to crumble. New images are acknowledged with authority and truth and are embedded in the resilient hope that Poling found in his interaction with victims and survivors. His book accomplishes what he promises—"voices of victims and survivors must be given priority". The denial of the perpetrator must be challenged so that a transformative reconstruction of old images of self, other and God may emerge.

It is Poling's own personal story as a Christian psychotherapist working with incestuous families that reveals the isomophoric process that further challenges us to reflect on our own history of socialization and pastoral response psychosystemically. How prepared are we to deal with our own affective responses to those stories that highlight (1) the dangerous and disturbing attitudes and behaviours categorically symbolized in the actions of the perpetrator, (2) the ethical responsibility to work on all levels socially and legally, (3) the complexity of establishing an accountability that is adequate in churches and in society, (4) the denial and rationalization of the individual perpetrator and collective bodies of society, (5) the cognitive distortions which culturally encourage violence as a legitimate form of interpersonal behaviour, (6) the lack of social control over men who choose to be violent in the home, and (7) the stubborn inequality of women and children in relation to men? There is not a stone left uncovered. This reader found that as she read key metaphors that have shaped and defined the relational patterns of her life (socially and culturally, politically and economically, theologically and spiritually) her metaphors became more identifiable. A new metaphor began to surface providing the parameters for a revised narrative about the use of power that is just, regardless of gender, race, culture or faith.

Poling's book is informative and formative! His qualitative research embraces the relational stories of the victim and survivor and the perpetrator; the relational stories of churches and societies; and the relational stories of God and people. His work provides us with a strong resource—a practical theology for the examination of power and the abuse of power.

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