

# BETRAYAL

## THE INTERMINABLE LEGACY OF SEXUAL ABUSE

written by

George Ezell

# CONTENTS

Foreword

Preface

## Part I - Man of God

- 1985 -Funeral Service
- 1969

## Part II - The Truth -Betrayed

## Part III - Elegy

- Why?
- HOW?
- Implausibility
- Misplaced Concern
- Yes, but
- Breaking the Silence

## Part IV - Reflections

Realities

- Misplaced Concerns
- Ignorance
- Myth of Safe Places
- Depth and Breath of Trauma
- Fundamentalism
- Power

Epilogue

Appendix

# FOREWORD

It is an honor to write this foreword to “*Betrayal*”. I have been in ministry for over 30 years and a therapist for much of that time. In that time, I have witnessed the tragic effects of many kinds of abuse including sexual abuse. The traumatic impact of sexual abuse goes beyond description and leaves its victims with permanent scars unseen by those wishing to ignore the trauma. Unfortunately, as the author so clearly portrays, many times Churches and Christian people fall into this trap of looking past the victim’s trauma as a means of self-protection.

George has been a mentor in my faith and a friend for many years. As a former shepherd of God’s people, he has a deep passion for helping people navigate troubling issues. What happens when you run upon things that can’t be fixed, issues that seemingly have no solution? This essay comes out of this painstaking reality and faces head on a problem with no easy solution.

There is plenty of material about sexual abuse and its effects written in a sterile academic manner. However, George writes as a man struggling and sharing his pain with the reader with transparency. He works through the confusion and betrayal of one, he thought was a friend in ministry but was actually, “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” He wrestles openly with the reader about his disappointment in an organization that is supposed to be the healing place and the pain of this not being reality, as well as his own pain of not being able to get a handle on the issue.

Reading “*Betrayal*” is an opportunity to bring understanding to the ways in which the church can avoid being complicit in abuse. Follow along as one man pours his heart into understanding the unimaginable, and come away with eyes wide open, and possibly with an opportunity to make a difference in the life of a survivor.

Mike Welter LMFT

## PREFACE

*...just because you've had an experience, that doesn't mean you're fully ready to write about it. The life experience that prepares you to write likely happens in the years after the dramatic experience.<sup>1</sup>*

This essay, a stream of consciousness, written at age 79, is about sexual abuse. A story which began fifty + years ago. It continues to influence almost every facet of my life; Prima facie evidence of the depth and breath of sexual abuse.

Originally entitled "Betrayed" was to be my story, tragically betrayed by my best friend. Writing, a much different story emerged, one in which victims are the protagonist. Sadly, my original storyline reflected many of today's narratives about sexual abuse where victims are overshadowed by concerns about collateral damage.

I write as a bystander, wounded by the fallout of sexual abuse. I am writing for actual victims, damaged and wounded, some irreparably.

Though personally therapeutic, other purposes prompted this essay.

- A desire to rectify my effusive eulogy for a sexual predator.
- The need to reveal truth about incest and child sexual abuse by a trusted man of God.
- To share victims' painful and treacherous odysseys.
- Join the chorus of revelations of abuse in the church and society.
- Offer reflections from decades of grappling with sexual abuse and its devastating effects.

I hold no illusion this essay will satisfy the scrutiny of scholars and theologians; it is, as I stated earlier, a stream of consciousness , intended to inform, expose, provoke and convict.

This story is about Betrayal... betrayal of victims — betrayal of the Gospel — betrayal of the Kingdom of God — by people like myself.

George Ezell

---

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Rogers

# PART I

## A Man of God

Emaciated by pancreatic cancer the end was near. Laying on a day bed with Opal nearby, Howard strained to raise himself. He looked at me, eyes brimmed with tears. With great effort he said, "I have something to tell you."  
I saw regret in his countenance, but words failed him and he lay back down. We never spoke again.

### 1985

I was completely surprised when asked to conduct his funeral service. Having no experience, I was reluctant, but love and admiration for Howard prevailed and I accepted. Present for many of his last days and with him when he died, I was honored to eulogize my best friend and spiritual mentor. I hurriedly prepared a eulogy and order of service.

It was Monday the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, a record cold month. Numerous people arriving for visitation clearly indicated the funeral service to follow would fill our church building.

The auditorium filled to capacity. A choir from the Newburg Church of Christ, a local African-American congregation, entering from the rear of the auditorium in colorful robes. singing a cappella "I'll Be Listening", at the top of their voices. Their pastor Willie Gray sang a solo "Nearer My God to Thee". The atmosphere in the auditorium was palpable. If there was ever an occasion where the Holy Spirit showed up in a Church of Christ, that was it.

I remember the service that ensued as the most powerful worship experience of my life.

## **Funeral Service**

### Scripture Readings

2 Corinthians 5:1-4 NIV

*For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*

1 Corinthians 15:54-58 NIV

*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

*Vernon Henton, minister and father-in-law to Kathy Wakefield Henton, lead a prayer.*

## **Eulogy**

*"It was in the bright sunrise of a Lord's Day that Howard died. He found victory in life and death. The purpose of this occasion is to offer tribute to, and celebration of, the life of Howard Wakefield.*

*We are deeply aware of the paradox of joy and sorrow. Sorrow like Jesus who wept over Lazarus and the joy that comes with hope of resurrection and eternal life.*

*I want express condolences and deep appreciation for the entire Wakefield family. This audience is testimony to the care concern the Okolona Church of Christ and the community have for you in your loss.*

*Howard Reese Wakefield was born on July 6, 1925 in Gallatin, Tennessee. He Graduated from Gallatin High School. A talented trumpet player, he won a national championship.*

*After completing two years in the Air Force, he and Opal Brizendine were married in 1946.*

*In 1949 he graduated from David Lipscomb College with a BA in Bible and Math .*

*His preaching career began in Monterrey and Cumberland County Tennessee in 1948*

*His teaching career began as an elementary school music teacher. Eventually he received a Masters Degree in Secondary School Administration from Peabody College.*

*He served as principal for Cumberland County high school and Georgia Christian School.*

*Before coming to the Okolona Church of Christ as pulpit minister in 1969, he was superintendent of Happy Haven Children's Home in Cookeville, Tennessee.*

*God blessed Howard and Opal with at least nine children, and twenty grandchildren. Their marriage produced six children: Steve, Judy, Janice, Kathy, Tony and Jon. They have three children by choice, Boone, Judy II and Edna.*

*I believe that Howard Wakefield was a great man. You should not take that statement lightly. I believe he was a rare jewel among stones. The question is, what made Howard a great man? This may be best answered by seeing what did not make him great.*

- *Not perfection*
- *Not his accomplishments*
- *Not his preaching*
- *Not his family*
- *Not the way he faced illness and death*

*What I believe made him a great man was his foolishness. Only a fool would do what Howard did.*

*1 Corinthians 3:18-20 NIV*

*Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."*

*The stories are myriad ,*

- *Boone Eldridge*
- *Leonard Abel*
- *Danny Farmer*
- *marriage after marriage*
- *open doors, open lives*
- *service/ a servant*

*Dedication of 1965 Pine Embers yearbook Georgia Christian School:*

*"When we asunder part  
It gives us inward pain  
But we shall still be joined in heart  
And hope to meet again"*

*We the annual staff, proudly dedicate the 1965 edition of the Pine Embers to Opal and Howard Wakefield, who have given much comfort and spiritual guidance to so many.*

*Because of their wonderful personalities and fine Christian examples, which were constantly set before us, they shall always be near and dear to our hearts no matter where life may guide us.*

*The "Wakefield Wild Life Preserve" and "Catering Service" which were always available no matter the time of day or night, shall always be remembered as the center of "confusion" in "Dasherville".*

*Wherever they may be, we trust that God will always guide them where they are most needed and their outstanding abilities will be used to glorify His name and "carry the light to the world".*

*Because of their undying love for the Christian education and spiritual welfare of "their children", we now show our gratitude by presenting this edition of the Pine Embers to Mama and Papa Penguin.*

*1 John 3:16-18 NIV*

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*

*His life was a struggle because he chose to be a participant, not a spectator. Most of us spectate never making mistakes, just observing and criticizing. Teddy Roosevelt said, "Better to be defeated in the field than sit in comfort in the stands."*

*He constantly struggled to turn his life over to God. I think his last years were troubled as he questioned the value of his life and the measure of success that he had had. He was human and questioned as we question and doubted as we doubt, but he never wavered in his faith, believing that God is faithful and just and rewards those who seek him.*

*Greatness for Howard was the expression of Christ in his life, beyond that he was just an ordinary man. Just as Howard would, I give praise and thanksgiving to God for him and his life.*



*Howard's principal's message to Cumberland County High School 1961:*

*"I could ask for no greater achievement than the knowledge that we have served each other for the betterment of mankind and for the glory of God."*

*Howard Wakefield, by the grace of God, was an unqualified success.*

### **Service concludes with praise and thanksgiving.**

Wonderful, Wonderful - Congregation

I know That My Redeemer Lives - Congregation

*Revelation 7:9-17*

The New Song -Okolona Group

*Romans 8:1-2*

Victory in Jesus - Congregation

An Empty Mansion - Congregation

*Revelation 21: 1-7*

*Revelation 22:1-5*

Hallelujah Praise Jehovah - Congregation (Stand & Hold Hands)

Benediction

Seated on the platform at the conclusion of the service, my attention was drawn to the family sitting together on a front row pew—there were no tears.

## 1969

Leaving Happy Haven Children's Home in Tennessee, the Wakefield family came to the Okolona Church of Christ (OCC) where Howard had been hired as the pulpit minister. His wife Opal along with their five children and two foster children were a bold contrast to their predecessor's family. Actually, they were a contrast to most all families at OCC.

Settling into the parsonage (preacher's home) next to the church building, they opened their home to any and everyone. Our family, my wife, Ann and our four children, were immediately drawn to them. Opal was a much needed mother figure for Ann and Howard the spiritual father-figure I needed.

Energetic and highly motivated, Howard, 5' 4" tall, was a bandy rooster, aggressive, with boundless energy. His charismatic personality was infectious. His sermons reflected his personality, fervor and persistence making up for what they lacked in depth. Evangelistic messages with consistent calls for repentance and confession, produced guilt induced responses. In retrospect, his tenure at OCC could be described as a protracted revival meeting. During his tenure, 1969-1973, OCC experienced its greatest numerical growth, in baptisms and attendance. Howard's influence reached beyond OCC. He actively engaged people in the local community and city. He had a diverse following, from usual to weird, often people on the margin. He was easy to love.

My relationship with Howard deepened as I spent time with him and his family. Taking me under his wing, he became, not only a spiritual mentor but, a good friend and confidant. I often helped him with jobs around the house. Our conversations were filled with Bible and theological discussions. The hours our families were together were filled with joy and laughter and good food. Memories of those times remain sweet.

In the early 70's I was experiencing a spiritual crisis that caused to me consider leaving my job at Ford Motor Company to complete my college degree so I could pursue a career path that supported a calling to follow Jesus. Making a decision to return to college required leaving my job and moving our family to Abilene, Texas. It was primarily because of Howard and Opal's encouragement that we decided to make the move. In the fall of 1972 we left Louisville and moved to Abilene, Texas.

I completed my degree and we returned to Louisville and OCC in 1974. During our absence, Howard had been asked to resign or was fired as pulpit minister at OCC. Opening a shoe store, Howard and his family purchased a home and continue to be a part of the OCC congregation. Our families' relationship picked up where we left off in 1972. For the next decade until his death from pancreatic cancer at age 59, our families remained close.

I was present when he died in bed at home February 4, 1985.

Opal's lament upon his last breath was, "Thank God it is over." Little did I know what "it" was.

The next day, at Opal's request, I conducted the first of two funeral services. That service was, and continues to be, one of the most powerful worship experiences of my life. The eulogy I delivered was effusive in its praise and admiration for my friend and spiritual mentor.

*Greatness for Howard was the expression of Christ in his life, beyond that he was just an ordinary man. Just as Howard would, I give praise and thanksgiving to God for him and his life. Howard Wakefield, by the grace of God, was an unqualified success. George Ezell -Eulogy 1985*

Over the years I have heard and occasionally spoken the phrase, "It was a God thing". I consider Howard's appearance my life a "God thing". A young father with four children, struggling to have a career and engaged in a faith crisis, Howard and Opal and their family were the prototype of the family Ann and I envisioned.

Some years prior, Ann and I, having mostly abandoned our commitment to church after moving to Louisville, made a decision to recommit. As a result, we placed membership at OCC and became active church members. Having two years of Bible classes at a Christian college and willing to teach, I was soon selected as a deacon. Spiritually immature, I was serious about my faith and was working diligently to grow it.

# PART II

## BETRAYED

“If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God” ([Psalm 55:12-14](#))

### The Truth

Nearly a decade later the truth about Howard began to emerge. First came an account of sexual abuse of one young girl in the congregation. My initial response was disbelief and denial, but as the story unfolded it became clear the accusation was true. Slowly but surely in the years that followed, that one incident proved to be only the tip of the iceberg. The depth and breath of Howard's depravity was incomprehensible.

The details and consequences of his abuse on others are not my story to tell, I will leave that to them. This story is about betrayal and spiritual abuse by a "man of God", —preacher, minister, mentor and friend. "Abuse" I suffered is, in no way, equivalent to the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of his victims.

What my experience represents is the opposite side of the sexual abuse coin, collateral damage. Much different, but traumatic and consequential in its own way, collateral damage from sexual abuse is like fall-out from a nuclear detonation, silently contaminating everything it touches. Sexual abuse trauma is baggage that weighs down victims and impedes them for a life time. Such is Howard's legacy and it will continue until the truth is known and the cycle of abuse is broken.

*I am forever grateful for the example Ravi set before us and what a man he was, a man after God's own heart, what a man filled with the Spirit of God looks like. I am honored to pledge myself to follow in his footsteps as he followed the Lord..."<sup>2</sup>*

It would be difficult for me to overstate the influence Howard has had on my spiritual journey. In the beginning, his energy and enthusiasm for leading others to Christ, coupled with an idyllic Christian family, were a living examples of what

---

<sup>2</sup> Margie Zacharias 2021

being a Christian should look like. He reached out to people on the margins, baptizing many. To me, he was Christ personified — *a man of God*. Our relationship was special, and his impact on the church was similar; there were numerous members, mainly women who found deep emotional and spiritual connection with Howard.

Because of the depth of spiritual and emotional attachment to Howard, when the dark side of his life was exposed, the impact was akin to the death of a loved one. As human beings we share an illogical but common failing...our refusal to acknowledge events and experiences that are, in reality, a fact of our human experience. The truth about Howard was so incomprehensible, like most people, my response was denial. His victims, knowing the truth, were silenced by strident voices of denial and affirmation for Howard.

The truth about Howard generated cognitive dissonance.<sup>3</sup>

My cognitive dissonance was consistent with what I had observed in others, an inexplicable refusal to accept truth despite facts. We want to believe such resistance is — "giving the benefit of doubt" — "innocent until proven guilty" or the most reprehensible — "yes, but what about all the good?" Confident we are acting in the interest of fairness to the accused, our concern is to protect ourselves — it's absolutely threatening to admit you're wrong. Ironically, fallible beings fear the possibility of being wrong, inherently providing cover for deceitful perpetrators.

Howard had groomed the church as well. Successful grooming is dependent upon charisma, and reveals the vulnerability of people and organizations to be deceived by the "shiny objects" of culture. Character is often subsumed to more attractive or expedient qualities. Perpetrators gain power and status through grooming.<sup>4</sup>

If I had been simply duped, it would have been painful and embarrassing, but Howard was a "man of God" who used God for his own ends.

---

<sup>3</sup> *"Cognitive dissonance"—the "backfire" which we experience when we encounter some reality that stands in tension with our presumptions—is painful. So, digging in our heels, when faced with contrary facts, is a natural defense mechanism to avoid that cognitive dissonance. (Brendan Nyhan)*

<sup>4</sup> *Grooming behaviors ... often are used to create a trustworthy image and relationship with family and community ...exactly the type of behavior we value in friends and acquaintances.*

*"When abuse is done by a pastor who has a position of power in the church and part of that power is to tell people who God is and what he is like. When those skills and the position are used to sanction what is in God's eyes evil, whether it's sexual abuse of someone in the church or the way he treats people with his mouth and his arrogance it becomes spiritual abuse the way all abuse is, but that also means God has been dragged into it and He is on the side of the abuser. I really don't have words for the kind of damage that does to a soul. "*<sup>5</sup>

*"...when Christians are abused by church leaders it impacts every element of their core identity and causes them to question who they are, what they believe and who they can trust. It breaks their confidence in those communities that were meant to love and protect them.*

*It breaks their trust in authority, and in God, and messes with their ability to trust the church and other institutions."*<sup>6</sup>

*"The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off." Joe Klaas -Twelve Steps to Happiness*

As denial was overshadowed by truth, anger emerged. Anger toward Howard, frustrated by his death, denying me the opportunity to confront and punish. Anger at myself for being deceived and used, embarrassed by the eulogy I had offered, making me complicit in his lies and deceptions.

Most disturbing was my anger toward God and the faith crisis that ensued. For decades my spiritual journey has been, and continues to be, shaped by Howard's betrayal. Michael Frost correctly described, it touched every element of my core identity, causing me to question who I am, what I believe and who I can trust.

The depth of collateral damage of Howard's abuse inflicted on me, and other by-standers, is in no way, equivalent to the depth of damage inflicted on his actual victims. I fear my narrative, whining about a bruised ego and hurt feelings will be white noise, masking real victims' stories whose souls have been wounded and are in desperate need of being heard and believed.

---

<sup>5</sup> Diane Langberg -

<sup>6</sup> Michael Frost <https://mikefrost.net/church-abuse-can-cause-the-worst-ptsd/>

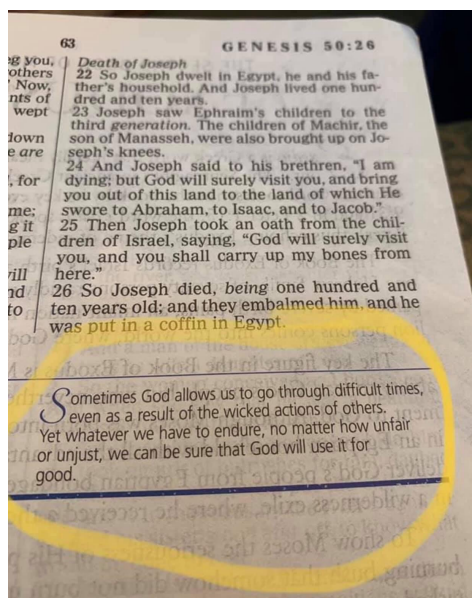
White noise <sup>7</sup> abounds amidst an epidemic of abuse in churches by leaders and others.

There is much commotion about the credibility of the accused and the need to protect reputations of sacred institutions and organizations.

My wounds are real and my story needs to be told but it must not mute or minimize real victims' stories.

The most difficult aspect of telling my story is its paradoxical nature. Despite pain, grief, and anger, Howard's betrayal has been a catalyst for spiritual growth and transformation. I am concerned that my story become another testimonial cliché, declaring "*...all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" Romans 8:28 A "proof text passage" applied casually, without thought to its profound implications. —It is easy for the Christian who was caught in traffic and missed their flight, which crashed and killed everyone on board to assert "—all things work for the good of those who love him..." but it is offensive and damaging to the faith of the grieving.

Whatever "good thing" that has come for me must not mitigate evil perpetrated on Howard's victims. Nor can the prospect of some future good bring healing in the present. One of the most reprehensible and damaging responses of Christian's to victims of sexual and other abuses is to rationalize and minimize, "...it will all work out in the end... .." "he will burn in hell..." ... "we will understand when we get heaven..." all of which may be true but do not heal.



<sup>7</sup> (White noise...a backdrop of ambient sound, creating an indistinct commotion, seamless in such way...that masks or obliterates underlying information.)

Discord created by recognizing the existence of evil in the Church ultimately forces us to wrestle with notions about God and faith, a process essential to spiritual health. Denial and/or mitigation of evil is a symptom of serious spiritual disease. As one who suffered from the "common cold" of fundamentalism — certainty— truth about Howard created doubt — the antidote to certainty. Doubt changed the trajectory of my spiritual journey for which I am grateful. So then, can I say that Howard's betrayal was ultimately for my good? NO! God's purposes are greater than any one individual. The story is still being written in lives of his victims.

My perspective on life and theology has been altered. "Apophatic" faith <sup>8</sup> which describes the shift in my theology.

This is the world in which I now live.

"There is no cure to being human. Finitude is going to be part of this deal, but man do I understand prosperity gospel that says they just want to be able to look back through the details of their life and be able to draw that straight line between “and then things worked out because I have a God who loves me. I no longer live in a world in which God’s reasons are immediately discernible to me. I just don’t.” <sup>9</sup>

The impact of Howard's betrayal on my life can be summarized in one word— humility — that is a good thing.

---

<sup>8</sup> The Orthodox faith has championed “apophatic” theology since its earliest centuries. This is the confession that we stand “speechless” (“apo-phatic” = “apart from speech”) before the mystery that confronts us. We can see the beauty and the wonder of the world in which its well-ordering astounds us while just as easily being crushed under the senselessness of senseless evil. We confess that the Word (Logos, Reason, Meaning of All Things) became flesh and dwelt among us, even as we remain speechless about the fullness of what this means. We confess that He “died for our sins” even as we grapple with what that means (and argue endlessly about it).  
*Fr Stephen Freeman*

<sup>9</sup> Kate Bowler *"No Cure for Being Human"*



FLIP-SIDE

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

I sat enthralled  
by the power  
of my father's sermon.  
Voice booming over the crowd,  
Shaking windows in their panes.  
All eyes on him.

I don't remember breathing.

Songs sung,  
Prayers said,  
People clamored to see  
Dad at the back door.

"Wonderful sermon!"

"Excellent!"

"I wish Roy could have been here  
to 'a heard it."

I watch.  
I see.  
Many hug my dad.  
Shake his hand.  
Encourage His proclamation of truth.

During the quiet ride home  
the transformation subtly unfolds.

"This house is a mess!"

"I want it cleaned up right now!"

"Is this the best you could do for lunch?"

"You've got milk all over the floor,  
ALL OVER EVERYWHERE!"

"No, you can't!"

---

"We can't afford it!"

Hide.

I can hide.

I can clean my room better than anyone.

I'll scratch his back hard

The way he likes it.

I'll scratch his oily head

Until my fingernails are filled with gunk.

"Harder!"

"Harder!"

I scratch.

The skin is nearly raw.

The night will drug him with sleep.

The night will calm

the inevitable

into amnesia.

See, my drawers are straight.

All my panties on one side.

My slips on another.

"Don't do that!

"Don't take them off."

"I don't like this!"

"Leave me alone!"

"I want to sleep.

"Let go!

"I'll go away."

"I'll pretend it's not happening."

Forever cherish -- the flip-side.

Memoirs by-Janice Ann Wakefield

Born, February 6, 1953

# PART III

## ELEGY

### WHY?

To question why is to be human. Every parent has experienced the frustration of a child's relentless insistence to know why. No subject is exempt from inquiry. The most difficult aspect of Howard's betrayal and abuse is why? Faced with humanity's most enduring dilemma— reconciling divine goodness and providence with the presence of evil in the world, I am not alone.

*“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’”<sup>10</sup>*

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>11</sup>*

Whether an intended victim or a collateral victim, the impact of sexual and/or spiritual abuse interrupts lives. Fr Stephen Freeman describes lives interrupted by abuse.

*The great interruptions of life leave us completely disoriented. We become lost. The map of life changes overnight and our sense of direction and purpose goes with it. Life comes to a halt, takes on a new and indiscernible shape. Promise fails us and it is the loss of promise that dries in our throats. What was is no more and what is to come, if anything, is unclear. All the things we depended on to keep us safe, to show us the way, to give us a reason for going on, disappear.<sup>12</sup>*

---

<sup>10</sup> Gideon Judges 6:13

<sup>11</sup> Jesus Matthew 27:46

<sup>12</sup> Joan Chittister "Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope"

With direction and purpose in question, the burden for those who believe in God— as revealed in scripture — is the the same question posed by Gideon and even Christ, Why? We are left to wrestle with the age-old problem of Theodicy.

Confronted with a faith crisis of the deepest dimension, do we choose God or concede to the atheistic, materialistic declaration, "Shit happens"? Ironically, believers, whose faith is certain, unshakable, often default to the latter, choosing the comfort of "whatever" over the fearful prospect of embracing an incomprehensible, mysterious God who proffers no answer to Why?

Where do we turn with our burden of why? The journey begins with confession and repentance, renouncing the god of our imagination, a Golden calf, created out of our desire for answers and certainty.

*What comes into our mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.* <sup>13</sup>

Fr Stephen Freeman writes about understanding God:

*Christ is how we “read” God. We cannot get behind Christ to speak about God as though we knew anything of God apart from Christ. We do not know God “prior” to Christ. When Christ declares that He is the “Way, the Truth, and the Life” and that “no one comes to the Father except by Me,” He is not merely describing the path of salvation, He is making it clear that it is through Him alone that we know God. This is also affirmed in St. Matthew’s gospel:*

*All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. (Matt. 11:27 NKJ)*

*Christ not only reveals God, but He reveals the goodness of God. He is what goodness looks like. Throughout His ministry, every word and action is a revelation of goodness. That goodness is supremely made manifest in His voluntary self-emptying on the Cross. This revelation is definitive and must be always borne in mind when we consider who God is and what kind of God He is. He is the kind of God who empties Himself for our sake, unites Himself to our shame and suffering, and endures all things that He might reconcile us to Himself and lead us into the fullness of life in Him.*

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Hebrews 1a NIV  
“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in

---

<sup>13</sup> A W TOZER

heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30 NIV <sup>14</sup>

Jesus' gentle and humble embrace brings healing and answers our need for safety and love. Having found rest for our soul, we are speechless.

*We confess that the Word (Logos, Reason, Meaning of All Things) became flesh and dwelt among us, even as we remain speechless about the fullness of what this means. We confess that He “died for our sins” even as we grapple with what that means (and argue endlessly about it). <sup>15</sup>*

Faced with incomprehensible truths of God, answers to why remain unanswered. I am speechless.

*“You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.”*

*Psalms 73:24-26 NLT*

Trusting God is hard.

---

<sup>14</sup> Fr Stephen Freeman

<sup>15</sup> Fr Stephen Freeman

## HOW?

How could such evil happen— a preacher— a man of God— in a church— in secret ? Although theodicy remains unresolved, answering pragmatic how and why questions are important in providing insights helpful in identifying/ preventing similar circumstances.

### Implausibility

One compelling question for me in the years following disclosure of Howard's abuse was, how could such conduct go undiscovered in the church, or for that matter, why didn't I see it? The answer, in part, is *implausibility*. The following excerpt from a booklet I wrote concerning child sexual abuse relates to implausibility:

*As human beings we share an illogical but common failing...our refusal to acknowledge events and experiences that are, in reality, a fact of our human experience. Our treatment of death comes to mind immediately as an example. Though not as universal as death, child sexual abuse is also a fact of our human experience. Lamentably, we often fail to recognize it as such.*

*Child sexual abuse is horrible and repulsive, reflecting the darkest side of human behavior. Terrible as child sexual abuse may be, most of us will not acknowledge nor respond to it in an affirmative fashion in the absence of personal experience. As is often the case, only after traumatic experiences are we driven to understand the nature of those events and compelled to act in response. Child sexual abuse has been such an experience for me. <sup>16</sup>*

Implausibility is often displayed in our language when encountering difficult realities — "I just can't believe..." "There is no way that could be true." —Our desire to believe we are omniscient is strong.

*"In churches across this nation, children have said, "Someone touched me," not even understanding what was done to them, and in response, law-abiding citizens of heaven have said, "This doesn't happen in our church... Why? Because*

---

<sup>16</sup> Children No More - George Ezell

acknowledging the truth will completely disrupt the system.”<sup>17</sup>

Howard was seriously ill, hospitalized and undiagnosed. A group of friends from a Pentecostal church came to visit. Entering the room they halted, worried expressions on their faces, they declared, "There is evil in this room".

Beyond the reprehensible nature of sexual abuse, there was a theological element that supported an implausibility defense. I came to understand its prevalence and depth nearly a ==decade later.

It began with a newspaper article published June 13, 1991 in the Nashville Tennessean paper creating a firestorm within Churches of Christ.

## Conservative churches may foster incest, panel says

By RAY WADDLE  
Religion News Editor

Rigidly conservative churches attract power-addicted preachers and encourage incest and pornography at home because they too often teach distortions about sex, a Church of Christ panel said yesterday.

In an unusually frank discussion at David Lipscomb University, four male church professionals said

Christians should re-examine the biblical notion of female "submission," which many men use to demote their wives to second-class status or justify domestic violence.

"We've so distorted the concept of 'headship' and 'submission' that we've produced a pathological family model," Gayle Napier, family life minister at Harpeth Hills Church of Christ, told about 200 people at the annual Lipscomb Lec-

tures.

"The wife is treated second-class, treated like one of the kids. ... Headship in the New Testament had nothing to do with control and power but was seen as the source of love. Guys, love your wives the way Jesus loves the church."

Napier said many marriages among Church of Christ members and other conservative Christians resemble a "father-daughter" rela-

tionship because the husband has become a "power-controlling addict" or dictator, not a loving head of the household.

That distortion, often unwittingly taught by congregations based on New Testament passages commanding men to be the "head of the wife," can lead to "emotional incest" or physical incest, he said. Inevitably, big trouble for the marriage follows.

"The wife will say, 'He sounds like my dad, and I don't want to have sex with Daddy,'" Napier said.

The results are predictable, he said.

After some 15 years of emotional incest, the wife quits having sex with her husband, and after 20 years she's ready to end the mar-

**"We've so distorted the concept of 'headship' and 'submission' that we've produced a pathological family model."**

GAYLE NAPIER  
Harpeth Hills Church of Christ

Turn to PAGE 2A, Column 4

## Churches may foster incest – panel

FROM PAGE 1A

riage. "What do daughters do after 20 years? They walk out of the house," he said.

Sexual incest might follow when domineering fathers turn to their daughters if their frustrated wives withdraw from a sexual relationship, he said.

"The more conservative the church, the more incest you have in families," he told the audience. He said churches should ease their preoccupation with "legal" divorce and concentrate on the "psychological" divorce that silently forms years before.

Napier also said power addictions extend to many ministers and church elders.

"There's one socially approved place for power addicts besides the home, and that's the pulpit," he said.

"We attract people who love to 'beat us up.'"

Another panelist, local psychologist Gary Wilson, said distorted church teachings that paint a negative picture about relations with the opposite sex can drive many Christians to pornography or sometimes homosexuality.

"Pornography is the way Christians have affairs," Wilson said.

"You wouldn't believe the number of people who have sex addictions who are members of the church."

Beset with poor communication skills regarding sex, many Christians are vulnerable to sexual addictions because "we're eaten up with guilt," he said.

"We don't know grace and mercy."

Contrary to one prevalent teaching, Wilson said, God has not ordained that married couples resort

to only one sexual position during intercourse.

"According to some, sex shouldn't be pleasurable. In fact, life, for some, shouldn't be pleasurable. ... But the Bible is silent about how we have sex. It just doesn't talk about it. Anything a couple wants to do is OK — if there's mutual agreement."

Wilson also addressed the problem of physical attraction between two church members who have their own families but get to know each other and draw close through church work.

"There will be a phase where you feel attraction; it's normal and healthy to be aware of that. ... If you enter that phase, you'll probably have sexual feelings. The problem is we haven't taught people to set limits on those feelings," he said. ■

This article came to my attention by virtue of two editorials published in The Gospel Advocate, a de facto official publication for churches of Christ, rebutting the accusations.

<sup>17</sup> Diane Langberg- Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church

Written by Editor Furman Kearley and Guy N. Woods, guest editor.  
Responding to the headlines, Kearley stated:

*"The Tennessean headlines are false. Although many conservative churches may teach some error, I know of no church or religion that encourages incest and pornography. There may be a few little-known and perverted groups that do such but certainly not standard, conservative churches." <sup>18</sup>*

Guy N Woods in his guest editorial, responding to: "The more conservative the church, the more more incest you have in families". wrote:

*"I have preached, I think, in more places and for more congregations than any man living in the churches of Christ today. .. In no instance— not one— in all the meetings I have heard so much as a rumor of any active member of the church being accused of incest. The "family life minister's" statements though distasteful and offensive, are so ludicrous and patently false that most thoughtful people on reading them will smile, shake their heads and dismiss the matter as unworthy of further consideration." <sup>19</sup>*

The following excerpt from Kearley's personal letter written in response to my letter to him further illustrates an implausibility mindset that denies consideration of, much less reaction to abuse allegations.

*While Lewis, Dodd and Tippens report the six percent figure among these teens, The study does not indicate how many of these incidences occurred before they or their parents became members of the church. Certainly, all six percent in all likelihood did not occur while both they and their parents were faithful in the Lord's church.*

Outrage at Napier's assertions within many churches of Christ was swift and fervent. Related editorials, article and letters are available in the [Appendix](#).

Rejection of accusations of sexual abuse is certainly related to implausibility, but as evidenced in the previous documents and responses to abuse in churches and other institutions in recent years ultimately reveals a deeper truth. Those in power will do any and everything to protect their domains. Integrity is the first causality.

---

<sup>18</sup> Gospel Advocate Editorial - Furman Kearley 1991

<sup>19</sup> Gospel Advocate Guest Editorial - 1991 Guy N Woods



*"...when abuse is exposed, when darkness is brought to light: Who will do whatever it takes to overcome a scandal, and who will do all they must to pursue what is right? Those who are governed by integrity will do whatever it takes to establish the truth and correct wrongs, even if it means giving up their power. Those governed by power will do only what is necessary to prevent or quell scandal so as to not risk losing that power. They are crisis managers, first and foremost, not truth seekers. <sup>20</sup>*

*The revelation of sexual abuse is never welcome, certainly not by victims and often not by those who are asked to help, for it's a world we do not want to enter. We would rather cross to the other side of the road, convincing ourselves we are doing so for a righteous and just reason.*

*One of the most difficult moments for a survivor is when their story, told to the leaders of the organization with the expectation that it will be met with light—a listening ear and a compassionate heart—is instead met with darkness—a refusal to listen and a hard, cold heart—and the survivor is sent away still shaking under the weight of an unshakable yoke, still seeking escape from inescapable walls, still in possession of secrets that possess them.<sup>21</sup>*

*Desire plays a particularly complicated role in implausibility. We may desire not to believe a claim because it would separate us from those we love, confront us with painful truths, require a change in our behavior, impose a social cost, or so on. We require more persuasion for claims we do not want to believe, and less for those we do. <sup>22</sup>*

Overcoming implausibility of sexual abuse begins begins with individuals.

*The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself. Thales*

Given our propensity for self deception, the probability of believing sexual abuse accusations is low. Often, such accusations are met with "I cannot believe anyone could do such a thing." declarations. The antidote for self-deception is self-awareness. Truthful self-awareness exposes the painful reality of our depravity. Faced with the truth about ourselves, denial and rejection give way to lament and humility, "There but for the grace of God, go I." Recognizing God's undeserved love, our hearts can empathize with both victim and abuser.

---

<sup>20</sup> "Something's not Right" Wade Mullen

<sup>21</sup> Diane Langberg -*Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church.*

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april-web-only/splintering-of-evangelical-soul.html>

## YES, BUT

At some point, implausibility must surrender to truth. Reinforced by responsibility to protect self-interest, doubters turn to the next line of defense—Yes, but..

A defense which finds its origin in belief that God's judgement is determined by the scales of justice... if good outweighs the bad, we are justified and inherit eternal life.

Accusations are met with "Yes, but think of all the good things he did—baptisms, new converts, increased attendance and contributions. He was a compassionate, caring person." Witnesses come forward with heart rending stories of personal sacrifice and second mile efforts. "If not for him, I would not be a Christian."

Yes, but... is a theological problem. It presumes relationship with God earned by good works, trumping deficiencies. Present in many fundamentalist context, it explains, in part, a disproportional occurrence of sexual abuse in those contexts.

As I look back, good things and the fervency with which they were preformed, were directly proportional to his depravity. As he descended deeper into abuse it was necessary to balance his ledger. Bizarrely, more abuse begat more ministry success. A vicious cycle results, good works have intrinsic reward but they also can conceal sin.

Fanatical religious devotion i.e. superheroes should always be viewed with caution and embraced only after validation through spiritual discernment.

In the following excerpts from a Christianity Today podcast. Kelley Kopic discusses the problem of superheroes in churches.

*Part of what is evangelicalism is this denial of the reality of our finitude and our humanity. We need rest, we can't be superheroes; we shouldn't be able to do and be everything. If we are taking our full humanity more seriously, we probably need to raise some questions about superstars. What does it mean to affirm our humanity and to say maybe you shouldn't do everything that you're doing. Even the little that I could tell from reading these stories, I thought, This guy's exhausted. You can hear him talk about it, how he's manipulating and using people.*

*In our exhaustion, we give into sin more easily. Part of addressing some of this is reaffirming our humanity and the goodness of our limits; stop trying to do so much, stop trying to be so much. We need to capture the goodness of just being human. You don't have to be a star.*

*When I hear story after story about sin and abuse, I think none of these people have good friendships. It's just not friendships, but deep friendships. They have a lot of acquaintances, people who would say, "Yeah, Robbie is my friend." But not friendships that ask the hard questions and part of the deceitfulness of sin is self-deception.*

*...one of the problems is we have so many men who are friends or at least acquaintances with men and they're blind to one another. Often it has been women who've said something is wrong here and they get cut out of the inner circle. Their voice gets silenced.*

*whenever someone says to me, "Boys will be boys," I'm almost positive I'm going to be offended by the very next thing that comes out of their mouth because I know it's going to be code for "Let's overlook this sin. Let's overlook this behavior. Don't worry. They're just boys."*

*Yes, we all are sinners. But that sober realization should not be a way to undermine accountability and the sobriety of what happens.*

*It's a comfort and a grace to know that people are exposing the truth when the utter pain and shame that goes with being on the receiving side of this abuse is so significant. When things are quickly set aside or brushed under the rug, it is very painful for victims. If Christians really care about the truth, let's be wise about how we do it. If you listen to the praise that was offered about Ravi at his funeral, how could we not in equal regard, bring these things to light, given that praise? <sup>23</sup>*

My paraphrase of the concluding sentence expresses the motivation for this writing:

*If I really care about the truth, ... If you listen to the praise that was offered at his funeral, how could I not in equal regard, bring these things to light, given that praise?*

---

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/podcasts/quick-to-listen/ravi-zacharias-sexual-abuse-sin-grace-mercy-podcast.html>

## Breaking the Silence

*When we turn aside from those wounded in our midst, according to Jesus, we have turned aside from him. If anyone is left out, we don't look like the body that will ultimately stand before his throne.* <sup>24</sup>

In the years following his funeral, learning our daughter was sexually abuse by a neighbor boy, and other family experiences, sexual abuse became a defining part of my life. The dramatic consequences on our daughter and ultimately our family were completely beyond my comprehension. I had no tools or ability to respond in a healthy way. Motivated to become educated about child sexual abuse (CSA), in my typical fashion, I began a serious effort to learn all I could about CSA.

Coincidental to our family experience, as an elder in our church I was privy to information about CSA in several families. Those stories were treated as aberrations, never considering them to be red flags warning of deeper theological and institutional issues. Our usual response to information on CSA was to protect the church, quietly expelling the offender or relegating them to special conditions i.e. — no contact with children— referral to counseling— all with good intentions and necessary to fulfill our responsibility to our flock. There was no occasion when outside authorities were contacted. Sadly, there was little attention to victims. I attribute that failure, in part, to ignorance about CSA and its devastating consequences. Unfortunately, education about CSA does not trump leadership's priority to protect the organization.

Truth about Howard first came to light through Sarah's [not her real name] story. The accusation was shocking, it was not rejected out of hand, most likely because of suspicions that have accumulated over the years. Having little understanding of CSA and its devastating consequences, we were concerned but skeptical. Howard was dead but still remembered fondly by the church.

Moreover Sarah was not a sympathetic victim. The black sheep of her family, in appearance and behavior, Sarah was a stark contrast to her two siblings. Her history of promiscuity, an out of wedlock child, and constant responses to altar calls asking for prayers and forgiveness produced little sympathy for her, but there was a great amount for her otherwise perfect family. Leadership and

---

<sup>24</sup> Redeeming Power -Diane Langberg

congregants showered her parents with attention and regrets for their misfortune. Sarah was , mostly ignored. In later years she penned these verses:

God's House  
She stands by the side.  
A hundred people pass her by.  
She is a piece of the wall.  
She blends in.  
She wishes someone would stop and notice  
that she is real-that she's alive - but they don't.  
They go thru her— their eyes never seeing her.  
She is alone in a building full of people.  
Sarah

Subsequent to Sarah's experience, but unrelated,I learned our daughter was a victim of Howard's abuse. That revelation was shared with leadership. CSA has a different face when it is personal.

Although naive about CSA, leadership realized the importance of ministering to victims and resisted calls for silence. A decision was made to conduct a congregational meeting on August 16, 1991. Two known victims were invited and were willing to be identified. The agreed purpose of the meeting was to reveal the truth regarding Howard and communicate to the victims our love for them, that we believed them and they were not to blame.

Two decades later, details of the meeting are vague. None of Howard's family were present, a foster daughter, arriving late, confronted me, vehemently denying the accusations were true. Her conclusions were drawn from the fact that he had never abused her.

Completely surprised by disclosures about Howard, there was little feedback during the meeting. Later some attendees expressed disbelief and a few expressed outright denial. a few blamed his victims. Those responses dampened any positive experience the victims may have had.

Exposing a preacher as perpetrator is a highly unusual event for any church, especially a Church of Christ. An informational meeting, it did not address why or how questions. A decision to conduct the meeting was made for honorable reasons and was beneficial to the extent intended purposes were achieved.

Over the years I have reflected on that meeting with considerable pride, considering it to be milestone in addressing CSA for our church and Churches of Christ in general.

Becoming more informed about CSA, my perspective on the meeting has changed. In retrospect, I have concluded our decision to hold the meeting was consistent with our need to manage theological, doctrinal or moral issues — conduct a class— have a seminar or sermon series — or, in this case, conduct a congregational meeting. We made little effort to understanding possible causes for the presence of abuse. After all, church is a safe place.

Without understanding the breath and depth of the consequences of CSA or its insidious nature in families and organizations, our bootstrap mentality grossly underestimated the challenge we faced. Despite good intentions, we failed victims and our church. When one believes facts and information are all that are necessary to solve every problem, a "just get over it" prevails.

Armed with that mindset, personal experience, serious study of CSA, and being an elder, I assumed de facto responsibility as an advocate for awareness, and prevention of CSA. Subsequent to our congregational meeting, I taught a series of classes on CSA using a booklet I had written "Children No More".

While teaching the classes I began to realize the scope and depth of CSA at our church. An unusual level of interest and participation proved to be more than just concern about Howard. Information shared about CSA and its prevention stimulated dialogue which revealed or intimated personal experience or knowledge of CSA.

During one session, class was distracted by a conversation in the hallway outside, We were unable to understand what was being said, but it was clearly very emotional. The hallway went silent, the classroom door opened and Mary [not her real name] entered and stood in the back of the room, silent and

obviously distraught. We were all dumbfounded. Finally, I asked Mary, "Is there something you want say"? Answering, she blurted out, "My father molested me!". Everyone was speechless. I think I managed to say "I'm so sorry." As I recall there were some women who took her out and consoled her. My mind was racing, Mary and her family, including her father were members of our church. There was no way to un-ring that bell.

She and her mother had attended previous classes. I learned later the hallway conversation was with her mother who was trying to stop her from breaking the silence about her abuse.

Mary's story was disturbing. Her father was not a member of the church, but attended church regularly, along with Mary, her son and her mother who were members. An unremarkable family, generally unnoticed except for Mary, whose life was troubled. Divorced with a son and a questionable lifestyle, she was an easy target for judgement. Her unexplained disappearance to go on the road with a truck driver validated our "concern".

Her son, abused by his grandfather became an abuser and was eventually convicted and imprisoned for sexual abuse of a minor. He attended church regularly before and after his imprisonment. Know to be a perpetrator, we was subjected to strict limitations on contact with children.

I was with Mary and her mother when her father died. Neither shed a tear.

Revelations of sexual abuse in our church, and other context, continued to come forth. Breaking the silence about sexual abuse is vitally important but is only the first step. Our meeting was important but proved to be a Pandora's box [Pandora opened a jar releasing all the evils of humanity] rather than a solution we had naively expected, the reality of evil in our community was exposed.

The catalyst for writing this essay was Howard's betrayal — to break the silence. Unexpectedly, like the meeting and other occasions of breaking the silence about sexual abuse, it open Pandora's box. Rather than closure, whatever that might be, it has exposed realities that demand attention.

**Elegy**, intended to be a conclusion, continues, examining realities exposed when silence about sexual abuse is broken.

# PART IV

## REFLECTIONS

### Reality

*...the world or the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them.*

Writing this essay, or whatever it ultimately becomes, involved many conversations, much introspection and reflection as to why I am writing.

Motivation is complicated, often motivation presented is disingenuous, designed to reflect a righteous image. I want to believe an earlier quote describes my motivation — caring about the truth:

*"If Christians really care about the truth, let's be wise about how we do it. If you listen to the praise that was offered about Ravi [Howard] at his funeral, how could we not in equal regard, bring these things to light, given that praise?"*

In a recent conversation, my good friend reminded me of what I said when learning Howard had abused our daughter— "I'd like to dig the son-of-a-bitch up and redo his funeral." Perhaps subconsciously, I've been motivated by a vengeful desire to redo the funeral.

Writing this essay, has shined a light on truths that demand attention. Truths about myself and the world we live in.

I remember a conversation with Harold after his dismissal from our church. He was always enthusiastic and that day he was particularly so as he told me about his new business venture. He had opened a game arcade in a community nearby. "You can't imagine how many kids come in and I have a back room where I counsel them."



## **Misplaced Concern.**

Reflecting on my responses to revelations about sexual abuse, it is painfully obvious they were akin to a husband who, upon receiving a frantic call from his wife that she has been in car accident, responds by asking, "How bad is the car damaged?" To understand that wife's hurt, provides only a glimpse into sexual abuse victim's crushing disappointment when realizing the concern of those they trusted is not primary for them.

Diligent study of CSA, writing booklets, teaching classes, advocacy, et al, though laudable, are no substitute for unconditional love and concern. Abuse often occurs in what are considered to be safe places by trusted people —families and churches. A victim's decision to reveal abuse requires an exceptional level of courage and trust. When leaders, parents or others receive a desperate "call' about abuse, any response other than loving belief and undistracted concern for the victim is unacceptable. To do otherwise, confirms their sense guilt and worthlessness.

Howard, a rotten apple, a problem, not the problem. Revealing the truth about him is important but doing so must not overshadow his victims and their wounds, nor factors which enabled him. He was an abuser before he came to our church. His victims were abused before they knew him. There was abuse in our church before Howard arrived. Our church was fertile ground and he flourished there. This story is of betrayal. Howard's betrayal of — me, his church and, ultimately, his Lord. Failing or deserting those victimized is, in itself, betrayal. Misplaced concern, even when meant well, is betrayal.

## Ignorance

*“The evil that is in the world comes out of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding. On the whole, men are more good than bad; that, however, isn't the real point. But they are more or less ignorant, and it is this that we call vice or virtue; the most incorrigible vice being that of an ignorance that fancies it knows everything and therefore claims for itself the right to kill.”* <sup>25</sup>

—  
"If I had only known, I would have..."

It is with a clear conscience that I can say I had no awareness of wide-spread sexual abuse or its profound effects on victims and society prior to experiences shared in this writing. Ignorance is like a warm blanket, protecting against bone-chilling truth. The narrative in my head has a heroic answer to "I would have...". But, observing reprehensible and anemic responses of organizations, churches and individuals to revelations of epidemic sexual abuse, I wonder if I would have the strength and courage to act differently today?

In reality, incontrovertible evidence, facts and data, only serve to transform ignorance into an impenetrable shield of denial. <sup>26</sup>

Should you doubt your impulse to deny, think about the last time you heard a horrific report of sexual abuse and your first thought was, "I can't [don't] believe.." Protecting perceptions and beliefs preempts moral obligation.

Pleas of ignorance — "if I had only known..." proclamations — do not provide consolation. Listening with empathy and compassion is the only solace ignorant people can offer — a prerequisite to activism.

*“God save us from people who mean well.”* <sup>27</sup>

Listening with empathy and compassion is a Christian virtue. When empathy and compassion are not demonstrated in response to revelations of sexual abuse, churches forfeit any right to call themselves Christian.

---

<sup>25</sup> Albert Camus, [The Plague](#)

<sup>26</sup>...in 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 1 in 4 women (women make up approximately 55 percent of evangelicals) and 1 in 9 men have been sexually abused. There is no evidence suggesting those numbers are lower inside the church.

<sup>27</sup>— Vikram Seth, [A Suitable Boy](#)

## **Myth of a Safe Place**

“Do not trust in these deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’” Jeremiah 7:4 ESV

I do not know anyone who is unconcerned about children's safety. Safety is paramount in our society. What differs today from past decades is pervasive distrust. In the parenting phase of our life (60-80's) there were places we trusted as safe places for our children — family, church, neighborhood, school — cautious, sometimes suspicious, our default was trust. Social and cultural changes in the intervening decades, shifted parental default, for good reasons, to distrust. Each default has negative consequences. Negative results of naive trust are obvious. Distrust, though less obvious, has negative consequences of a different nature. What both have in common is the misconception that there are safe places for children. Safe places are a myth. Wide spread evidence clearly establishes occurrences of sexual abuse in places thought to be safe. A reality that can produce unhealthy paranoia and paralysis.

Of course, no organization would declare itself unsafe, but it is disingenuous to portray themselves as safe. Establishing policies and procedures to assure safety; all necessary to protect organizations in a litigious society, ultimately fail to achieve a 100% safe place.

Thinking about commercial airlines may be helpful. Flying is a risky business. I've never flown and not thought about the possibility of crashing, but I fly without fear. Airline procedures inherently communicate the possibility of crashing, pre-flight instructions — fasten seat belts — in case of emergency... et al. You can buy life insurance at the gate. Passengers converse about the possibility of crashing. As far as I can tell, no major airline proclaims to be safe (except for COVID 19). No matter how low the probability, there is no question of their concern and awareness of the possibility of crashing. Measures to make flights safe are obvious. Risk is a part of normal conversations, as a result, passengers and employees are aware and vigilant.

Airlines are diligent about safety policy and procedures but do not claim, or imply, no risk. Transparency prompts responsibility which gives passengers confidence in their safety. Risk can never be eliminated but can be minimized.

Sadly, human organizations... communities, neighborhoods, churches, families... cannot eliminate sexual abuse.

Taking cues from commercial airlines, following are suggestions on how churches can become safer communities.

- Educate leadership, staff and congregants on the prevalence of sexual abuse and its impact on individuals and society.
- Create a community ethos defined by concern for safety — offering reliability, honesty, and credibility.
- Eliminate all pretense of being a safe place.
- Understanding their limitations, develop and implement appropriate prevention policies and procedures.
- Cultivate and reward communication that encourages consistent and healthy dialogue about sexual abuse.
- When prevention fails, respond with transparency.
- Always make compassion, safety and justice for victims the first priority.

In the course of thinking about the myth of a safe place and developing a framework for safer communities, there were numerous contributors of ideas and thoughts worthy of sharing for further consideration developing and maintaining safer communities.

*The bigger the church, the less transparency when things go wrong. And the greater the harm done.<sup>28</sup>*

*Language has power. How we speak to each other is the medium through which a more positive future is created or denied. As we engage in conversation the questions we ask and the speaking that they evoke constitute powerful action.*

*The questions we ask will either maintain the status quo or bring an alternative future into the room.<sup>29</sup>*

---

<sup>28</sup>*Matt Redmond*

<sup>29</sup> *"The Answer To How is Yes"- Peter Block*

*More than anything else, being able to feel safe with other people defines mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives. Being validated by feeling heard and seen is a precondition for feeling safe...<sup>30</sup>*

*There is ultimately a (steep) pastoral cost to be paid for being a community that serves individuals and communities only in the aftermath of their wounding. The question that many victims of trauma ask the church is not “where are you now?” but instead ask “why didn’t someone protect me or prevent this from happening to me?”.*

*...ecclesial communities can pivot from being primarily the field hospital [reactive] towards becoming an exponentially impactful agent for the transformation of its own life and the larger society in which it is located.*

*While moral injury is not a clinical diagnosis it is recognized in the clinical literature that there is a concrete need of something akin to forgiveness and remission of the things that to the individual are wrong or sinful.*

*by centering the traumatized and the vulnerable in our communities we are able to better identify with the God who meets us in our woundedness still bearing his wounds, and can come alongside those most susceptible to injury as defenders and interrupters that push back the darkness.<sup>31</sup>*

*Assigning individual blame gives to the public an illusion of safety and preventability, whilst isolating an already often guilt-ridden traumatized individual.*

*The Christian community's own response can socially exacerbate trauma, where, "religious and spiritual beliefs change from a possible source of healing to another weapon in an overwhelming onslaught.*

*A true theology of compassion must embrace a theology and practice of lament, both for the traumatized individual and community.*

*friendship may be refused in the malaise of an individual's trauma, it is better the offer be present than absent. Even from a distance it can be comforting to realize that a special community is orientating its practices because it acknowledges your pain; that fact alone can be immensely winsome for post-traumatic social re-integration.*

*Pastoral sensitivity to the needs of traumatized congregants will give apt direction to a form of worship which duly acknowledges the weight of burden that, some will feel, defies being*

---

<sup>30</sup> *"The Body Keeps the Score" -Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD*

<sup>31</sup> *Theology of Prevention-Micael Hanegan*

*translated into speech. Such sensitivity may avoid the pressure that most Evangelical forms of worship, requiring audible/cognitive participation for the worshipper to feel a co-participant, can create. This can be due either to incessant singing of praise choruses or a demanding cognitive focus on verbal preaching.* <sup>32</sup>

It is apparent to me that the challenge of building safer communities encompasses more than policies and procedures and will necessitate re-thinking fundamental assumptions. Churches will be faced with a need to examine assumptions about every aspect of their faith. Which, in part, explains the continued epidemic of sexual abuse in faith communities.

Silent Screams

Nobody could hear us.  
You'd wait till it was safe.  
You'd make sure we weren't seen or heard.  
So there was no reason to scream,  
No one could hear.  
Sarah

---

<sup>32</sup> "Trauma, Compassion, and Community" - Roger P Abbott

## Depth and Breath of Trauma

*Trauma, including one-time, multiple, or long-lasting repetitive events, affects everyone differently. Some individuals may clearly display criteria associated with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but many more individuals will exhibit resilient responses or brief subclinical symptoms or consequences that fall outside of diagnostic criteria. The impact of trauma can be subtle, insidious, or outright destructive. How an event affects an individual depends on many factors, including characteristics of the individual, the type and characteristics of the event(s), developmental processes, the meaning of the trauma, and sociocultural factors.*

*Initial reactions to trauma can include exhaustion, confusion, sadness, anxiety, agitation, numbness, dissociation, confusion, physical arousal, and blunted affect. Most responses are normal in that they affect most survivors and are socially acceptable, psychologically effective, and self-limited. Indicators of more severe responses include continuous distress without periods of relative calm or rest, severe dissociation symptoms, and intense intrusive recollections that continue despite a return to safety. Delayed responses to trauma can include persistent fatigue, sleep disorders, nightmares, fear of recurrence, anxiety focused on flashbacks, depression, and avoidance of emotions, sensations, or activities that are associated with the trauma, even remotely. <sup>33</sup>*

### Tip of the iceberg

At my core, I am a problem solver. For problem solvers, life is simple.

- define the problem,
- formulate a solution,
- implement the solution.
- move on.

A child of enlightenment thinking, confident of mankind's (my) ability to solve any problem and produce a better world. That was the filter through which I received "good news" that our daughter had been molested by neighbor's son. To describe such news as "good", is clearly reprehensible, unless you are a problem solver.

In the years approaching adolescence, we had experienced an inexplicable transformation of a shy, compliant child to a uncontrollable hellion. Attitudes, appearance, language and behaviors that defied explanation. After all—

---

<sup>33</sup> Chapter 3 Understanding the Impact of Trauma. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

*"Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." Proverbs 22:6*

Filled with guilt, I was at the end of my rope and desperate for answers. Learning our child had been molested was a punch in the gut. Pain and sadness for her was overwhelming. Stunned and struggling, desperately needed unconditional love and belief of her story, was overshadowed by anger and self-recrimination..."if I had only"; followed by "at least we know" — the good news. I distinctly remember a feeling of relief, thinking it was the end of a terrible journey. There was an answer, a light at the end of the tunnel. The problem had been revealed, a solution was imminent.

*Don't mistake a bright star on a dark night for a light at the end of a tunnel.*

Optimism was short lived. There was no dramatic turn around. If anything mayhem increased. Bewildered, I resorted to problem solving skills, essentially throwing gasoline on the fire. A child that needed to be heard and believed was given, well meaning but, counter-productive instructions on proper behavior and the consequences of failing to do so.

What was hoped to be a conclusion was a brief stop on a journey that continues to this day. Our child , as well as Sarah, are protagonists in a story of survival and healing. —

*We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present.<sup>34</sup>*

— a story still being written, but wholeness remains elusive, not for lack of effort or desire, it is the reality of the depth of trauma.

*For real change to take place, the body needs to learn that the danger has passed and to live in the reality of the present.<sup>35</sup>*

*...childhood adverse experiences all seem to have a similar effect on the adult mental health outcomes and that these effects are cumulative: the more adverse experiences the greater the risk of mental health problems. <sup>36</sup>*

---

<sup>34</sup>"The Body Keeps the Score" -Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD

<sup>35</sup>The Body Keeps the Score" -Bessel Van Der Kolk, MD

<sup>36</sup>The Enduring Effects of Abuse and Related Adverse Experiences in Childhood... A Convergence of Evidence from Neurobiology and Epidemiology - Journal compilation © 2006 Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Child: Care, Health & Development, 32, 2, 253–256



Churches' response to sexual abuse often mirror my early response.

Not comprehending the depth of trauma's effects; treating it as just one more problem to be solved, we pretend to be Jesus, telling victims "go and sin no more". Ignoring Jesus' criteria for judgement: *"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* John 8:7, we fail to do the requisite work of self-examination. *"Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye."* Matthew 7:5 NLT.

*When a community denies their sinfulness, victims are demonized and shamed, scapegoats for our own sin.*

*Assigning individual blame gives to the public an illusion of safety and preventability, whilst isolating an already often guilt-ridden traumatized individual. The Christian community's own response can socially exacerbate trauma, where, "religious and spiritual beliefs change from a possible source of healing to another weapon in an overwhelming onslaught. This has occurred in recent major traumatic events when declamations of sin and guilt have been laid at the victims' doors."<sup>37</sup>*

### Feelings

I feel crazy.  
I fell ashamed'  
I fell dirty and worthless.

You are free now.  
You feel no shame.  
You feel no guilt.  
You left me alone with my pain.

I am sentenced to prison.  
But you are the killer.

Sarah

---

<sup>37</sup> "Trauma, Compassion, and Community" - Roger P Abbott

Any occurrence of sexual abuse is the tip of an iceberg. Ignoring or minimizing puts victim and community in peril. The intuitive response is to treat an occurrence as an aberration, when, in fact, it portends a contagious infection of evil; permeating and traumatizing individual and community.

Fear and failure to recognize the depth and breath of trauma's effect produces superficial and ineffective responses, permitting the cycle of abuse to continue.

## Fundamentalism

### CONSERVATIVE CHURCHES MAY FOSTER INCEST

*"Rigidly conservative churches attract power-addicted preachers and encourage incest and pornography..."*

*"The more conservative church, the more incest you have in families."*

*"There's one socially approved place for power addicts besides the home, and that's the pulpit." <sup>38</sup>*

*The Christian church's norms provide the perfect cover for sexual predators—and leave their victims feeling like the sinners.<sup>39</sup>*

The 1991 Nashville Tennessean article created a firestorm in Churches of Christ. Several related documents were referenced earlier. Published before the 2002 revelation of wide spread sexual abuse in the Catholic church, assertions about conservative churches were rejected immediately. Today we know they were prescient. In 1991 there was little data to support the assertions. In 2019 the Houston Chronicle published a report <sup>40</sup> on sexual abuse in Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches. That report was shocking and revealed a side of evangelical christianity that had been overshadowed by the Catholic Church scandal. I strongly believe fundamentalist churches have been, and remain, a fertile ground for sexual abuse.

For me, fundamentalist is synonym for conservative churches. Fundamentalist (conservative) churches are characterized by dogmatism, certain their beliefs are unassailable.

*Fundamentalism has less to do with the contents of belief than the way the believer holds those beliefs. For example, fundamentalism is strongly associated with dogmatism, the degree to which beliefs (whatever they are) are considered to be unassailable and held with fervent, unjustified certainty<sup>41</sup>.*

Fundamentalist churches do not produce abusers. As Beck points out it is more about the way beliefs are held.

---

<sup>38</sup> Nashville Tennessean June 13, 1991 article by Ray Waddle quoting Gayle Napier at Lipscomb lectures

<sup>39</sup> Leslie Goldman October 28, 2020  
<https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a34363222/purity-culture-churchtoo-movement-sexual-abuse-in-religious-settings/>

<sup>40</sup> Houston Chronicle report on SBC sexual abuse [https://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/investigations/abuse-of-faith/?fbclid=IwAR16a8rwctO8XvVN35BfF22X-FU2FzyZD\\_tjX-TGvKflfjDviWu\\_OutVZVc](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/investigations/abuse-of-faith/?fbclid=IwAR16a8rwctO8XvVN35BfF22X-FU2FzyZD_tjX-TGvKflfjDviWu_OutVZVc)

<sup>41</sup> Richard Beck [<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2010/08/psychology-of-christianity-part-13-good.html>]

*A repressive Christian subculture predictably will—and evidently did, in this case—enable abuse, making it harder for abuse to come to light and be dealt with appropriately.*

*Brutal and unbending notions of authority; submission of women to men, and children to adults; a habit of intellectual dishonesty wherein those in authority won't own up to the fact that they're interpreting the Bible rather than just stating "what the Bible teaches us"; "counseling" programs that blame victims, and invite victims to blame themselves; a sense that the church is always qualified to handle its own business, thank you very much, and that public attention somehow damages "the cause of Christ"; and a coercive theology of forgiveness. All of these traits create conditions that abusers can exploit, and they all make it harder for victims to come forward and receive the support necessary to heal. This is not a theology designed to serve the interests of people whom abusers might target.<sup>42</sup>*

An essential characteristic of fundamentalism is blindness. Jesus, condemning Pharisees in Mathew 23 and other passages, repeatedly refers to their blindness. Accompanying blindness is the absence of self-awareness. Fundamentalism, with its undeterred certainty, suffers "attention blindness". The famous "gorilla experiment" from the psychologist Daniel Simons illustrates "attention blindness" powerfully. Watch the U Tube video <sup>43</sup>

At the start of the video, you're asked to pay attention to two teams of people passing a basketball back and forth, with the instructions to count how many passes occur. You dutifully do so. And then, at the end of the video, you're asked if you noticed the dancing gorilla. You're a bit shocked by that question. You've seen no gorilla, only people passing a ball back and forth. But the video rewinds and replays, and lo and behold, there in the middle of the passing teams is a dancing gorilla, as plain as day. How could you have missed such an obvious thing? We miss the obvious, according to Daniel Simons, because when our attention becomes focused on one part of reality, like counting the passes between the teams, we miss other, even very obvious, aspects of life. Like a dancing gorilla. Our attention helps us see, but it also blinds us. Faith isn't forcing yourself to believe in unbelievable things; faith is overcoming attentional blindness.<sup>44</sup>

Abusers are dancing gorillas, unnoticed because attention is focused on other concerns. Being familiar with the video, I ignored instruction to count passes by

---

<sup>42</sup> <https://religiondispatches.org/did-the-duggars-fundamentalism-cause-sexual-abuse-not-so-fast/>

<sup>43</sup> [ <https://youtu.be/vJG698U2Mvo> ]

<sup>44</sup> Hunting Magic Eels - Ricard Beck

people in white shirts, as a result, the dancing gorilla was clearly present, unlike my previous experience.

Reflecting on an earlier quote: "*The Christian church's norms provide the perfect cover for sexual predators—*" while truthful it is not helpful. Addressing the epidemic of sexual abuse in churches must begin with humility.

*...while there are many, many things we can know about God—and many things we can learn—we must approach our faith and our world with a sense of existential humility.*

*And that is exactly the quality that the fundamentalist lacks. It's the fierce existential certainty of the fundamentalist that is so often the root of authoritarianism and illiberalism.* <sup>45</sup>

*The poor in spirit do not commit evil. Evil is not committed by people who feel uncertain about their righteousness, who question their own motives, who worry about betraying themselves. The evil in this world is committed by the spiritual fat cats, by the Pharisees of our own day, the self-righteous who think they are without sin in because they are unwilling to suffer the discomfort of significant self-examination.*

*The major threats to our survival no longer stem from nature without but from our own human nature within. It is our carelessness, our hostilities, our selfishness and pride and willful ignorance that endanger the world.*

*Unless we can now tame and transmute the potential for evil in the human soul, we shall be lost. How can we do this unless we are willing to look at our own evil?*<sup>46</sup>

*The human mind is an overconfidence machine . The conscious level gives itself credit for things it really didn't do and confabulates tales to create the illusion it controls things it really doesn't determine .* <sup>47</sup>

Humility is the only antidote for attention blindness, which when resolved will expose unseen evil — abuse, and a lot more.

You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty. Psalm 18:27  
NIV

---

<sup>45</sup> David French

<sup>46</sup> M. Scott Peck – People of the Lie

<sup>47</sup> David Brooks

## Power

Certainty is the essence of fundamentalism — power is its enforcer.

*Abusive power violates and shatters relationship. It brings betrayal, fear, humiliation, loss of dignity, and shame. It isolates, endangers, creates barriers, and destroys bonds. It destroys empathy, trashes safety, and severs connection. Abusive power has a profound impact on our relationship with God and with others.<sup>48</sup>*

Power, like electricity, properly used is a force for good; unharnessed it is destructive. In the context of sexual and physical abuse, power is usually related to abusers— abuse of power by virtue of position, gender, physicality, or authority. Used to intimidate, terrorize or persuade their victims, that is what abusers do and it is abhorrent.

Unholy power "lording it over" ..

Power has a broad and significant role in the prevalence of sexual abuse in society, churches in particular. While perpetrators' use power as a means to their immoral, evil ends; unholy power in churches is an accessory to their crimes.<sup>49</sup>

*But Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 20.25-28 (NLT)*

Too many churches "are not different". Unholy power — the spirituality of the principalities and powers — is normal. The body of Christ has been supplanted by power structures with hierarchy and power differentials.

Power structures depersonalize power and negate its human and moral elements; giving power a sort of a unconscious, inevitable and automatic nature. *People aren't making real human choices within power structures. They are, rather, behaving automatically, submitting to the norms, policies, procedures,*

---

<sup>48</sup> Diane Langberg Redeeming Power-Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church

<sup>49</sup> My thoughts lean heavily on Richard Beck's blog posts on power.  
<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2014/02/more-on-playing-god-power-force-and.html>  
<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2016/02/the-power-of-powerless-part-2-ritual.html>  
<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2014/04/all-sick-and-twisted-ways-power-and.html>  
<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2013/06/csc-paper-it-should-not-be-so-among-you.html>

*rules, culture, tradition and expectations of the power structure. They are often, quite simply, doing their jobs.*<sup>50</sup>

Unholy power became personal for to me some years ago when, as an elder in our church, teaching an adult Bible class, I intentionally presented a provocative interpretation of a scripture passage. Rather than push back, all I got was silence. Unwilling to accept a non-response, I probed, asking why no one questioned or objected to my interpretation. Finally, one woman spoke up, saying, "Well, you are an elder, and I didn't think I could object to your interpretation."

Stunned, by the power I had as an elder, deeply troubled, and began a re-examination of my role as an elder in the church. That passive exercise of unholy power, innocent as it may have been, had profound implications for leading the body of Christ.

Unfortunately, my experience as an elder included overt—"lording over" power. Not the least of which was the occasion when a a deacon in charge of VBS came to an organizational meeting pitifully unprepared. Incensed, I proceeded to berate and humiliate him in front of everyone. It was shameful behavior on my part. There is never any justification for "lording over". The only legitimate power for church leaders is power bestowed by Christ.

Sinful, misguided leadership, playing God with unholy power under the guise of benevolent care, fails victims, betrays the Gospel, and the Kingdom of God.

During Howard's tenure, a woman seeking God came to our church, confessed her faith in Jesus and was baptized, becoming a Christian and member of our church. Later, after hearing lessons on divorce and remarriage she was troubled, by her past. She was divorced from her first husband and married to her current husband. Seeking counsel from the Elders of the church, she shared her story. Despite the fact that she had been divorced for years, had children and was happily married to her second husband; she was told unless she divorced her current husband and remarried her first husband, her salvation was in jeopardy. Furthermore she could not be a member of the church if she was divorced.

Devastated by the decision and confused by her unsolvable dilemma, she became suicidal, eventually disappearing, to the relief of some.

---

<sup>50</sup> See Beck's references to Havel's "The Power of Powerlessness"

Being certain of Biblical instruction on divorce and remarriage, the Elders, though sympathetic to the unsolvable dilemma their decision created, would not reconsider — they were doing their job. Those elders hired Howard Wakefield.

*...systemic abuse applies when a system that is designed to serve people is instead destroying them, reducing, harming, wasting, and dehumanizing those created in the image of God. Dignity, vibrancy, impact, creativity, building, and producing are silenced and crushed. This distortion results in the parts of the system standing together to serve the system rather than the people.<sup>51</sup>*

Consider a more contemporary example: *John MacArthur Shamed, Excommunicated Mother for Refusing to Take Back Child Abuser<sup>52</sup>*

---

<sup>51</sup> Diane Langberg Redeeming Power-Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church

*Others in the system are not compliant by words or action but by blindness. Sadly, we've all been party to this kind of passivity—the turning of the head, a denial of reality. Surely it cannot be true, we think, and we choose comfort rather than causing a disturbance. Families in which the spouse protects the abuser by “not seeing” are compliant by blindness. In churches across this nation, children have said, “Someone touched me,” not even understanding what was done to them, and in response, law-abiding citizens of heaven have said, “This doesn't happen in our church. It cannot be true because the accused person is so nice, and teaches Sunday school, and would never do anything like that.” Instead of facing the truth, they discredit and ignore. Why? Because acknowledging the truth will completely disrupt the system.*

<sup>52</sup> *A woman at GCC was living in sin, MacArthur alleged. And though shaming her publicly was “sad,” MacArthur said it was necessary to maintain fidelity to God and His Word. So, as men were distributing the elements for communion, MacArthur stated: “I want to mention a sad situation, a person who is unwilling to repent. And the church bears responsibility before God to be the instrument of discipline. . . . This is what the Lord wants. He wants discipline . . . to be put out of the church, to be publicly shamed, to be put away from fellowship. In this case it applies to Eileen Gray.”*

*According to MacArthur, Gray's sin was that she had decided “to leave her husband, to grant no grace at all, to take the children, to go away, to forsake him.” This, MacArthur emphasized, meant rejecting “all the instruction and counsel of the elders, all instruction from the Word of God.”*

*MacArthur then encouraged the church to pray for Eileen and to “treat her as an unbeliever—for all we know, she may be.”*

*He also urged the church to pray for her husband, David Gray, who taught music and Bible to children at Grace Community Church (GCC) from 1994 to 2001. “Pray for David, for the sympathy and compassion and the lovingkindness of God to be his portion.”*

*Hardy [another Pastor] counseled Eileen to forgive David “even if he wasn't repentant,” Eileen testified. “He would teach me over and over ‘the threefold promise of forgiveness’ . . .” she stated, “where you act as though it never happened, and you never bring it up again, and you never tell anyone about it.”*

[https://julieroys.com/macarthur-shamed-excommunicated-mother-take-back-child-abuser/?mc\\_cid=1eac21a092&mc\\_eid=d75fd63e09](https://julieroys.com/macarthur-shamed-excommunicated-mother-take-back-child-abuser/?mc_cid=1eac21a092&mc_eid=d75fd63e09)



The marriage of Christianity and power can result in the worst of both worlds. It brings us zeal mixed with oppression.<sup>53</sup> Concern for the Kingdom of God on this earth, is subjugated to maintenance of power.<sup>54</sup>

Certainty requires unholy power to protect it. Obsessed with protecting foundations of certainty, churches are blinded, to abuse, aka "the dancing gorilla". Blindness is not confined to abuse, there lots of dancing gorillas in our midst. Unholy power betrays the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. There is a reason Jesus said " *"It shall not be so among you."* Matthew 20:26 ESV

Elder abuse:

"When you spoke to me in a way I considered abusive, I felt like a child again, trying to defend myself to my dad."

Letter to me from Sarah's mother

Power in the Kingdom of God serves, brings good news. Unholy power, the weapon of powers and principalities— oppresses. <sup>55</sup>

***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."*** Luke 4:18-19 NLT

---

<sup>53</sup> David French

<sup>54</sup> "Institutions and systems and ministries are not Christ, nor is Christendom the same as the living body of Christ. Christendom, like all threatened institutions, tries to protect itself." —Dr. Diane Langberg

<sup>55</sup> "Fundamentalist evangelicalism participates in the modern-mindset in its emphasis on certainty, and then doubles down on it by positing that only an inherent Bible can give us the certainty we need to fight for."

"The modern-mindset needs certainty so deeply that they're willing to fight for it. Not only that, but the opposite of certainty isn't uncertainty, but deception. *In other words, if you aren't willing to fight for certainty, you're either deceiving others or being deceived.*"

Jared Byas - *The Bible for Normal People*

# EPILOGUE

*Sexual abuse by anyone is a savage storm and subsequent shipwreck to the survivor; the family, and the community.*

*Sexual abuse is the one crime that leaves the victim with more shame than the offender.* <sup>56</sup>

Writing this essay has been traumatic. Revisiting the past revealed betrayal trauma. A term I encountered only recently, betrayal trauma occurs when the people or institutions on which a person depends for survival significantly violate that person's trust or well-being.

Betrayal trauma theory posits two dimensions of trauma. One dimension — terror, threats to life, things that can actually cause bodily harm. The other dimension is betrayal and threats to social relationships. Some situations of abuse involve both dimensions.

Witnesses to abuse are sympathetic to trauma related to terror and threats suffered by victims. Viewing abuse through that single lens, victims are often expected to just "get over it". Betrayal trauma is less obvious, and is often overlooked or discounted; however, betrayal trauma is a toxin that continues to permeate and disrupt lives. As described earlier, it is radioactive fallout.

Understanding betrayal trauma can provide insight into some perplexing realities about sexual abuse and its affect on society. Perhaps more damaging in some ways, betrayal trauma find expression in relationships. There is correlation between a victim's attachment to their betrayer and the depth of trauma experienced. Incest, clerical, institutional abuse are inherently betrayals and resulting trauma is unique.

Victims who experience sexual abuse within an institution, can find themselves "twice betrayed" first by a perpetrator and secondly by the institution. Institution is not limited to churches but any organization, including families.

Betrayal trauma often produces Betrayal Blindness.

*Betrayal blindness is the unawareness, not-knowing, and forgetting exhibited by people towards betrayal. This blindness may extend to betrayals*

---

<sup>56</sup> Lori Anne Thompson

*that are not traditionally considered "traumas," such as adultery, and also to institutional betrayal. Victims, perpetrators, and witnesses may display betrayal blindness in order to preserve relationships, institutions, and social systems upon which they depend.*

### **Institutional Betrayal<sup>57</sup>**

*The term institutional betrayal refers to wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals (e.g. sexual assault) committed within the context of the institution.*

“Institutional centered cultures place institutional reputation over individual value”

Consider the following:

- A. 79% of U.S. adults surveyed by random digit dial, believe that media reports on sexual abuse by religious authorities reflect an ongoing problem in the church.
- B. 44% believe that abuse is equally prevalent across faith persuasions
- C. Only 3% of all known clergy sexual abuse incidents were ever reported to law enforcement, suggesting a dark figure for the prevalence of clergy sexual abuse
- D. Most US adults surveyed (57%) do not believe that sexual abuse of children occurs more often in religious settings. 93% of non-incarcerated sex offenders self-report being religious or very religious

---

<sup>57</sup> The majority of this content comes from "Clerical Sexual Abuse and Trauma: Institutional Betrayal & A Call for Courageous Response by Lori Anne Thompson  
<http://www.georgezell.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Clergy-Sexual-Abuse-as-A-Betrayal-Trauma-Final-By-LAT-1.pdf>

- E. Researchers have found that religious affiliation provided a unique individual and institutional cover, fostering the cultivation of a dual life necessary for the sexual predation
- F. Sex offenders self-report that Christian communities are some of the safest places for sexual predation. Most Christians tend to naively believe the best about others, providing easy access to victims for offenders

Given the ubiquitous nature of child sexual abuse within institutions mandated with child protection, it is plausible that there is something within the nature of institutions themselves that provide cover for criminality

Over and over again institutions protect their own reputations the expense of the very victims they were mandated to protect

Three walls which encourage silence, and discourage disclosure:

- 1) disclosure is labelled gossip which is prohibited in Christian scripture,
- 2) a global lack of reporting to outside officials (child protection professionals/law enforcement), and
- 3) continued view that child sexual abuse is a sin versus a crime

Institutional red flags:

- Poorly defined or non-existent child protection policy,
- a culture of unquestioned obedience to (and trust in) religious authority,
- coercive control of children (or adults),
- unsupervised access to vulnerable victims,
- male sexual entitlement
- institutional efficacy and bureaucracy wherein the end simply justifies the means.
- organizational form which creates a rationality of which cruelty is a likely outcome”

Specific institutional characteristics that cultivate a culture where betrayal blooms:

- exclusive membership to a group with rigorous entrance requirements

- the prestige of the institution
- a culture where productivity is more important than people.
- failure to prevent abuse
- punishing the whistleblower,
- normalization of abuse as a culture,
- inadequate or inconsistent reporting procedures,
- institutional support of abuse cover ups, all play a role in institutional betrayal

These factors combined with

- religious rigor,
- narcissism,
- prevalence of deviant sexual behavior,
- centuries of clericalism,

...create a favorable environment for sexual abuse in faith communities and / or families.

While most faith-based organizations do not condone sexual abuse with their words, neither have they condemned it with their actions. What is absent is "Institutional Courage"

### **What is Institutional Courage?**

*It is an institution's commitment to seek the truth and engage in moral action, despite unpleasantness, risk, and short-term cost. It is a pledge to protect and care for those who depend on the institution. It is a compass oriented to the common good of individuals, the institution, and the world. It is a force that transforms institutions into more accountable, equitable, healthy places for everyone.*

There is no better way to conclude this essay than Lori Anne Thompson's Call for Institutional Courage.

*A call to courage is just that — a call; a call to be answered; a call as yet unheard. Institutional courage is so rare as to be untraceable, unable to be robustly researched or well documented. Small based advocacy efforts appear around the globe; however, they are not linked to any specific denomination or faith persuasion. Institutional courage*

*includes cherishing the whistleblower; creating a culture of transparency, and using institutional power to protect members not molesters. Individual courage includes an acknowledgement that abuse can happen everywhere, because it does. Courage recognizes that while sexual abuse is a sin, it is also a crime and as such should always be reported to child protection. Courage recognizes children (and adults) who are sexually victimized, are victims, not sinners. Courage stands with victims, not offenders. Courage takes the side of the oppressed, not the oppressor. Courage protects the vulnerable over the venerated. Courage treats religious abusers according to the letter of civil and ecclesiastical law while treating victims by the spirit of the same. Institutional courage may be as rare as sexual abuse is ubiquitous. This is a call for the Christian church to hit reverse, and once again (or for once) courageously lead the way.*

### Little Sarah

There's a little girl hiding inside me —  
Need she needs to be held and rocked.

She needs to no its safe to come out.  
That I will protect her.

She needs to know she can trust.  
She needs to no she can come to me and  
I will love and hold her.

She needs love.

Sarah

George Ezell  
Wilmore, Ky  
March 26,2022

## APPENDIX

### **Documents related to Lipscomb Lectures Controversy**

Nashville Tennessean Article Jan 21, 1991

Guy N Woods guest editorial - Gospel Advocate

Furman Kearley editorial - Gospel Advocate

George Ezell letter to Furman Kearley

George Ezell letter to Guy N Woods

Furman Kearley response to George Ezell

Anonymous Response to Editorials

Experts? - Wayne Coats

Go To Lipscomb Lectures to Learn How To Promote Incest

The Real but Hidden Problem of Sexual Abuse

Children No More - Booklet written By George Ezell

Houston Chronicle Series on Sexual Abuse in SBC

Silent C of C - Sexual Abuse in Church of Christ

Clergy Sexual Abuse - Betrayal Trauma

Trauma, Compassion and Community

Lori Anne Thompson

Lori Anne Thompson- Research & Studies







Elder abuse:

"When you spoke to me in a way I considered abusive, I felt like a child again, trying to defend myself to my dad."

Letter to me from Sarah's mother