

## How should we respond when a church leader is guilty of abuse?

I have been asked to reflect, in the light of the bible and Christian theology, on how we should respond when it comes to light that a church leader has been guilty of abuse. I recently wrote a blog post asking in more general terms, [how we should respond when a church leader falls](#). All that is said there applies here. But this paper addresses a more particular situation involving abuse, and two kinds of abuse in particular.

In 1 Timothy 5:19, the apostle Paul writes, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” Referring back to an Old Testament law, the expression “two or three witnesses” is a bible idiom for careful and independent attestation of the truth of the accusations. This acknowledges that false accusations are sometimes levelled at church leaders. This paper is written for a situation where the facts have been established.

The particular kinds of alleged behaviour to which I have been asked to respond are of two kinds. The first is where a church leader has asked a number of other men, individually one at a time, to join him in private and naked massages. The second is where a church leader has asked men to agree to physical chastisement by beating with a trainer on a naked backside, as a discipline supposedly to help the men in their fight against temptations; the men have agreed, and these beatings have taken place.

If these things are true the effects are likely to be widespread and deeply damaging in many ways. We may consider these in expanding circles.

- a. Those who have participated in the physical chastisements, which have involved both some nakedness and a measure of violence. Although at the time these men appear to have consented to what happened, we may expect them to experience a significant degree of trauma as they look back and realise the extent to which they have been violated.
- b. Those who have participated in naked massages, but without physical chastisement. Again, we may expect that these men, as they look back, will experience a degree of trauma. At the time they may have felt that, although the behaviour seemed a little odd, no harm was done. But the combination of nakedness and physical massage would be considered by many to have an unavoidable sexual dimension. These men also, therefore, may come to feel that they have been, in some measure, violated. For both (a) and (b), there may be a negative impact on their marriages, if they are married.
- c. Those who have been brought to faith, nurtured in faith, or otherwise deeply influenced and blessed through this leader’s ministry. There may be many such people. Some may have been close friends of this leader and perhaps been mentored one-to-one, sometimes over many years. Those in categories (a) and (b) would probably also count themselves in this leader’s debt in this way. The greater the personal debt, the more devastating we may expect these revelations to be.

- d. A wider circle affected might consist of those who have, in a more general sense, looked up to this leader with respect and admiration, and especially those who have belonged to the church where he was the minister. Although the shock may be less intensely personal than for those in (c), it will still be significant.

There are two important responses not considered in this paper. The first, which may need longer and wider reflection, is to ask what lessons can be learned from this sad story, and to ask if there are distorted features in our church culture that may in some way have facilitated these behaviours. This is important but difficult and inevitably in some ways speculative.

The second is to ask what we can do to guard against any repetition of abuse in our churches. While recognising that no church can ever be completely safeguarded, we will want to put in place every possible good safeguarding practice. This too I have not attempted to cover in this paper.

My reflection is in four parts. First, I want to focus on the dangers to our own hearts in even engaging in this response. Second, I hope to open up as clearly as I can just why these alleged behaviours are utterly wrong. Then I shall try to help us come to terms with the disorientation and even disillusion that may result from these disclosures. Finally I seek to point forwards in terms of our corporate lament and prayer life.

### A. We need to guard our own hearts...

In section B we shall express our dismay, shock, astonishment, and utter horror at the behaviours alleged. We shall distance ourselves from them and see how terribly wrong they are. And yet the moment we do this we are in great danger. I want to suggest three dangers against which we must guard ourselves.

#### 1. ...against self-righteousness

There can be no place for self-righteousness (Luke 18:9-14). The danger with expressing our horror and revulsion at these behaviours is that we slip into a pharisaic smug complacency, thanking God that we are not guilty of these sins. We must not do this. We have not, please God, been guilty of, or complicit in, these abusive behaviours. But there are many sins of which we have been guilty. We have been proud, we have been self-centred, we have cherished idols, we have loved the praise of people, we have indulged in lust, we have given space to greed in our hearts, we have been lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, and in many other ways we have sinned. We need deeply to repent. This scandal ought to move us to a fresh and honest repentance of our own sins. We stand before God as sinners forgiven in Christ; we have nothing of which to be proud, and we never shall.

#### 2. ...against an unhealthy interest

In the context of a Christian being “caught in...transgression,” Paul exhorts his readers: “Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). We may not be tempted by the ugly features of any particular abuse. But it is easy to gossip and, especially when abuse may have sexual overtones, there is a terrible danger of indulging a prurient interest and wanting to know more and more. But sinful behaviour of any kind sticks to us like dirt;

knowing about ugly actions is a little like pornography; it lurks in our memories and drags us down in our thoughts and emotions. Rather we need afresh to hear the exhortation, “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).

### 3. ... against a twisted gladness

When Judah came under the judgement of God at the time of the Babylonian exile, the prophets have a special word of condemnation for the Edomites, who cheered on the Babylonians and rejoiced at the disaster that befell Judah. “But do not gloat over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune; do not rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin,” warns Obadiah (Obadiah 12). Schadenfreude is the German word that expresses this twisted delight when something bad happens to someone else. This too is a danger for us, and perhaps especially when a Christian leader falls. While the event of his fall is sobering, the responses to that fall can be darkly revealing about those who respond with something approaching gloating. Hidden agendas, long-nursed resentments, can surface at such a time. We need to guard our hearts against this.

Having prepared our hearts in this way, we now face the sober necessity to consider the evil of this abuse.

## B. We must be crystal clear that these behaviours are evil and abusive

There are four features of these behaviours to consider; two relate to what was done and two to the contexts in which it was done. First the contexts.

### 1. These things were done in secret

Apart from those who participated, it appears that no one had any idea, or even the slightest suspicion, that these things were happening. The revelations have taken the rest of us completely by surprise; we have been shocked and astonished. When we first heard about them, they were so unexpected that we thought they must be false accusations.

But there is about authentic Christianity a translucent openness. The Christian events were “not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26); the Christian message is stated openly (2 Corinthians 4:2). Christians are to speak and act as those who heed the teaching of Jesus that, “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (Matthew 12:2). For the pastor or Christian leader this means that, while they respect pastoral confidences, all their pastoral practices are as open and transparent as is their message. This kind of secrecy must be wrong.

### 2. These things were done in a context of a power imbalance

There is a second feature of the context which is critical for understanding why these behaviours were wrong. The leader who instigated these things was in a position of power. He was powerful by his position as a pastor; he was powerful by his personality; he was powerful by his seniority and influence. It is, I suspect, sometimes the nature of privilege that the holders of it may be blind to its significance. They (we) may be unaware of the

influence they exert over others and the extent to which their suggestions, proposals, or ideas carry weight, especially with those younger or junior to themselves. The more junior men looked up to him, respected him, and trusted him.

This is where the concept of consent is problematical and ambiguous. For minors and for vulnerable adults we are entirely familiar with the idea that an abuse by an adult is inseparable from the vulnerable status of the one abused. But even when the one abused is both an adult and one without particularly obvious vulnerabilities, the power imbalance is of critical importance. A younger or junior man may initially be surprised by the suggestion of a naked massage or physical chastisement; but precisely because the one who suggests it is a man whom they trust and look up to, their agreement reflects his power rather than their full and valid consent.

This means that the guilt rests with the powerful party who instigates these behaviours. It is characteristic of abuse that the victim feels guilty for having consented to what happened. But this feeling of guilt is misleading. The responsibility for instigating the behaviour rests with the senior man; the fact that a junior man agreed to the behaviours reflects the power imbalance rather than the guilt of the one abused. The victims may feel guilty; but the reality of guilt rests with the one who held the power.

These behaviours represent the violation of more junior men by a stronger man – stronger either formally, in terms of leadership position, or informally, by virtue of age, seniority, or force of personality. It is important that we be absolutely clear about this and react with a proper dismay and horror.

### 3. There is no place for physical chastisement in Christian pastoral care

Some men apparently agreed to be physically beaten with a trainer on a naked backside as a chastisement for sins to which they had confessed. Such violent chastisement, albeit of adults, and even if they consent to be punished, is deeply unchristian. This is never even remotely suggested as a pastoral method in the Bible (and if it were Biblically defensible, why keep it secret?). Moreover, Paul is very clear that harsh treatment of the body is of no value in subduing the flesh (Col.2:23). Indeed, one of the qualifications of an overseer or elder is that he is “not violent” (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7); clearly Paul acknowledges the possibility that an elder may use his seniority and power to act violently, and he utterly rejects this.

The reason why there is no place for physical chastisement is this. Sin in the human heart does not arise from outside of a person; “there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him...For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts...” (Mark 7:15-23). And because sin does not arise from outside, it cannot be cured by bodily punishment from outside.

The New Testament does speak of God’s fatherly discipline on his children (e.g. Hebrews 12:3-13; 1 Peter 4:1). And yet it is clear that this discipline comes, not from a pastor’s chastisement, but from persecution or sickness or other such sufferings. There is no place, no hint, no suggestion, not even the remotest plausibility, for the infliction of physical suffering by a pastor as a means of exerting God’s fatherly discipline. The very idea is utterly

repugnant to the bible. The only biblical context for physical discipline is by loving parents bringing up their own children

#### 4. The private nakedness of two people is utterly inappropriate except in marriage

We have seen that the other form of alleged behaviour is when the church leader asks another man to engage in naked massage privately. Here it is helpful to consider the biblical idiom “to uncover nakedness”. This phrase refers to sexual intimacy. For example, in Leviticus 18, a chapter that mostly prohibits incest, this expression is repeatedly used. To take one example, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness” (Leviticus 18:7). This expression speaks of sexual intimacy; the “nakedness” (in this sense) of your mother belongs to your father, and the “nakedness” of your father belongs to your mother; it is for each to enjoy with the other in the good intimacy of their marriage.

But although this idiom speaks of sexual intimacy, it is not a random euphemism. Sexual intimacy is inseparable from precisely this, the uncovering of nakedness. This is not the same as, for example, the removal of clothing for a medical examination or procedure. For a medical procedure clothing is uncovered in the presence of a medical practitioner (often with at least one member of nursing staff or a chaperone), and it is removed only to the extent that is functionally necessary for the examination or procedure. Nor is it the same as, for example, men in a sports team having showers together; here again there is no sexual connotation. Nor is it the same as when a masseur or masseuse gives someone a massage; again, the removal of clothing is only to the extent necessary for the massage to be done.

Context is everything. So when one man suggests to another man, in the presence of no others, in privacy, that one should massage the other, both of them being naked, the associations are unavoidably sexual. This is, at least in a preliminary sense, an uncovering of nakedness, in the sense of the biblical idiom. For a senior man, a church leader, to ask a more junior man to do this with him is an invasion of the nakedness of the more junior man and an abuse of power. It is utterly inappropriate.

#### Conclusion

We can therefore be clear that the behaviours now uncovered were evil. There must be no ambiguity about this. They may not have been illegal. But there are plenty of actions that are not illegal that are nevertheless immoral, ungodly, sinful, and utterly inappropriate for a church leader.

We should respond with horror and dismay when we discover that these things have been done. For the participants, whom we rightly designate as victims, there will also now be a sense of horror. But, as we have seen, while they will probably feel dirty and even guilty for having participated, the guilt lies with the senior man, whom we rightly designate an abuser.

## C. We have to face our deep disorientation and even disillusion and trust afresh in Christ alone.

The shock of such revelations is peculiarly acute when the one whom they concern has been a blessing to many. How can something so good be intimately associated with something so evil, and all bound up in the same person? It is deeply disorienting to find that the man we thought we knew, perhaps the man some looked up to as a father-figure<sup>1</sup>, is not the man we thought he was. It feels that the foundations are being taken away from beneath us. There is a painful sense of loss, akin to a bereavement. How are we to make any sense of this apparently senseless coming together of good and evil in one man?

One immediate response is perhaps to remind ourselves of the depth and extent of our sinful depravity. The heroes of faith in the bible are flawed people; even the great and pious King David committed adultery and was complicit in murder (2 Samuel 11). King Solomon had great wisdom and yet failed spectacularly. We too are deeply sinful even as regenerate people (Romans 7). This is true. Any one of us is capable of committing all manner of terrible sins. And, if we think we are not in this danger, we need to take heed lest we fall (1 Corinthians 10:12).

But while this is true, it does not really explain this tragedy. What I think we need to grapple with is how good things and evil things can be very close. We are talking about the deceitfulness of sin.

Let us begin with a wholesome model of pastoral care, of (in this case) a man for men. A man who is a more mature believer in Christ takes a younger believer under his care. He prays for him. He instructs and encourages him. He keeps in touch with him. He meets with him and, in the context of friendship, exhorts him to keep on following Jesus faithfully. Many a young man has been grateful to God for such pastoral care; I am myself, from those leaders who mentored and encouraged me early in my Christian life.

But then extrapolate from this. Perhaps the loving care is so intense that the friendship becomes a little exclusive. The older believer begins to think of this younger man as 'his' – not only his pastoral responsibility, but his prerogative, so that no one else is really allowed to encourage this younger man in his faith. It is perhaps not difficult to see how a wholesome pastoral care might metamorphose into something much darker, and the younger man ends up being used for the purposes of the older pastor rather than the older pastor sacrificially serving the younger disciple. Who knows what are the thoughts and intentions of the heart in this process? Probably the leader is not fully aware himself, such is the deceitfulness of the human heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the whole concept of a "father figure" is fraught with danger. While it is true that Paul can address Timothy as "my beloved child" (sc. in the faith, 2 Timothy 1:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15), we need to heed the warning of the Lord Jesus to "call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven" (Matthew 23:9). This warning needs, at least metaphorically, to be emblazoned above the office of every pastor.

What might be the warning signs of this dark exchange? Exclusivity might be one. Favouritism might be another. When there is a perception that some are 'the favoured ones' and others are not, danger lurks.

C.S.Lewis<sup>2</sup> makes the point that it is precisely in the human experiences that most closely approach the character of God that we are most at risk of confusing them with God. He uses the analogy of being almost home at the end of a ramble, but finding ourselves at the top of a cliff overlooking our home. On the map we are "close" to home, but in reality we have a lot of walking still to do. Lewis applies this to erotic love and patriotic love for one's country, both of which are "like" God's love and yet very far from it. Perhaps in a slightly similar way, the kind of close and affectionate pastoral care that approximates the care of Jesus our Good Shepherd may begin to arrogate to itself the prerogatives of authority and influence that belong properly to Jesus alone. And so, by a diabolical alchemy, something wholesome and nourishing metamorphoses into something abusive.

But even if we can slowly begin to grasp something of how this might have happened – and such a grasp will be at best tentative, for we cannot see the heart of another – even then we need to face the frightening fear that the blessings we thought we had experienced through this leader might not be true blessings at all. Might they not be in some way invalidated by these revelations, tainted beyond recovery by the sin with which we now know they were associated? These are truly frightening questions, for the blessings we are considering concern salvation and eternal destiny.

Paul encourages Timothy to "continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it," presumably meaning Timothy's godly mother and grandmother, and indeed the apostle himself (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:14). As Timothy remembers the godliness and integrity of those from whom he learned faith in Christ, he is encouraged to continue on the path of faith. But what if we discover that one from whom we learned the things of Christ did not have the integrity and godliness that we thought he had? Is that not deeply disturbing? It is.

And yet we must come back to the fundamental truth that the blessings we have – all the blessings we have – come to us through and in Christ, and Christ alone, in whom there is no sin, in whose life we see pure goodness, unbroken sacrificial service of others, and the polar opposite of each and every kind of abuse.

Repeatedly the scriptures warn us not to put our trust in people other than God and his Christ. "It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes" warns the King in Psalm 118 (Ps.118:9). "Put not your trust in princes," warns the psalmist in Psalm 146, for blessing comes only to the one "whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God" (Ps.146:3-5).

So, while it is a good thing, and an encouraging and reassuring experience, when those from whom we learned the things of Christ prove to be godly and to have integrity, it is not essential. Writing from prison to the church in Philippi, Paul is sad that "Some indeed preach

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977). pages 10-12.

Christ from envy and rivalry”; but he takes comfort that, whatever their motives – whether bad or good – “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (Phil.1:15-18). The channels through whom we hear the good news of Jesus will never be perfect; sometimes they will prove deeply flawed, whether through bad motives (as in Paul’s day) or even through the ugliness of abuse. But the blessing comes from Jesus Christ, and no flaws in the channel can take away from us the sheer goodness, beauty, and kindness of God given to us in Jesus.

The reformers grappled with a similar question. Article 26 of the 39 Articles of the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England is entitled, “Of the unworthiness of ministers”. In it we read this:

ALTHOUGH in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometimes the evil have chief authority in the Ministration of the Word and Sacraments, yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ's, and do minister by his commission and authority, we may use their Ministry, both in hearing the Word of God, and in receiving of the Sacraments. Neither is the effect of Christ's ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God's gifts diminished from such as by faith and rightly do receive the Sacraments ministered unto them; which be effectual, because of Christ's institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.

The article goes on to say,

Nevertheless, it appertaineth to the discipline of the Church, that inquiry be made of evil Ministers, and that they be accused by those that have knowledge of their offences; and finally being found guilty, by just judgement be deposed.

But for our purposes the point is this: the blessings of the gospel (in the preached word and also signified in the gospel sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper) are effective in our lives “because of Christ’s institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men”.

Suppose someone came to faith in Christ through the ministry of this leader, or someone else looks back to a signal time of growth in grace and faith through his preaching, or another is in Christian ministry or cross-cultural mission because of this leader’s encouragement. How are these now to view their conversion, their growth in grace, or their being in Christian ministry?

The answer I think is this: they may be grateful to God for his overwhelming kindness to them, that God appointed a channel through whom they heard the gospel, through whom they grew in grace, through whom they entered ministry. Nothing about any of those blessings is invalidated by the subsequent sad discovery of the flawed behaviour of this leader, for all these blessings rest upon Christ and not one of them rests on the character of this leader or any other leader.

There may need, for some, to be a period of painful readjustment. We may need to hear afresh the admonition not to put our trust in “princes” (including Christian leaders),



perhaps to repent if our trust has become mixed, with some of it focussing unhelpfully on a leader, but in the end to take fresh comfort from all that is ours in Christ

#### D. We lament together, repent together, and are humbled together under the mighty hand of God.

I want to conclude with a final brief reflection. So far I suppose our responses may have been a collection of individuals, each of us responding in perhaps similar but also distinctive ways, depending on our connection, or otherwise, with this leader. But now I want to focus on the church of Christ corporately.

When the Old Testament church, the assembly of the covenant people of God, came under God's judgment in the Babylonian exile, those who were true and even blameless believers were caught up in the judgement with those who were arrogant idolaters. We hear the voices of these true believers in a number of places. In Psalm 79, for example, provoked by the destruction of the temple and the sack of Jerusalem (verse 1), this godly Spirit-inspired psalmist grieves when the surrounding nations taunt them all with the mocking question, "Where is their God?" (verse 10). It is said to him also; it is not said only to those whose idolatry had provoked the exile. In his prayer in Daniel 9:1-19, the godly Daniel laments the "open shame" that has come "to us" (verses 7,8) for we have all "become a byword among all who are around us" (verse 16). The godly Nehemiah laments that, because of the ungodliness of the people, "we are slaves" (Neh.9:36); all of us come under the shadow of this disciplinary judgement of God, whether or not we have individually and personally been guilty of covenant-breaking and idolatry.

When abuse from a church leader is exposed, we must expect that the whole church of Christ will be reviled. We will be taunted as hypocrites. We will be laughed at when we seek to speak of godly virtue and the law of God. We should not be surprised when this happens. Some who are lifelong enemies of the gospel of Christ will use these sad events as a vehicle to make life miserable for the church of Christ. Others – and this is more tragic – who might have seemed to be seeking and to have a genuine interest in Christian faith, will be driven away from a message whose messengers now seem to them to be hypocrites or worse.

All this is desperately painful and we must expect it to be so. As believers did after the exile, we too may learn to lament together for the desperate and sad state of the church of Christ. We grieve for the victims and seek to love and care for them as best we can. We grieve for the honour of Christ.

And yet, even as we lament and repent afresh of our own sins, we still claim and hold on to the promises of God. For Jesus Christ has said he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt.16:18). That promise stands on the darkest day. So let us encourage one another to hold more firmly yet to the gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom is our only hope.

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