ADVISOR

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A Little Child Shall Lead Them:

A Special APSAC Advisor on the Need for Faith and Child Protection Leaders to Collaborate in Addressing the Spiritual Impact of Child Maltreatment

GUEST EDITOR:
Victor Vieth, JD, MA



Association of Professionals Solving the Abuse of Children

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A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Special APSAC Advisor on the Need for Faith and Child Protection Leaders to Collaborate in Addressing the Spiritual Impact of Child Maltreatment

Victor I. Vieth, JD, MA; Theodore P. Cross, PhD, FAPSAC

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them." – Isaiah 11:6 (NIV)

A significant and growing body of research documents that many maltreated children are not only physically and emotionally impacted by abuse, but also spiritually wounded (Russell 2018; Vieth and Singer 2019). The spiritual impact of abuse has been documented among Christian (Pereda, et al 2022), Jewish (Krinkin et al, 2022), and Muslim (Chowdhury, et al, 2022) communities. As an illustration of the spiritual torment some maltreated children face, consider these words from one survivor:

> Why did God let me suffer the agonies of [child abuse]? Why did God not intervene when I cried out to him night after night for relief? I have imagined at times my guardian angel pulling on God's sleeve and saying 'Don't you hear little Wesley? Don't you see his pitiful tears? Can't you do something to deliver him from this monstrous evil?' (Stafford 2010).

The spiritual impact of abuse is particularly pronounced when the person who abuses the child is a member of the clergy or another faith leader (Pereda, et al, 2022). These perpetrators typically incorporate religious themes into the abuse of the child (Vieth, 2025). The piety of a religious leader engaged in the impious act of abuse creates spiritual confusion in and of itself. Consider, for example, these comments from a boy who was sexually abused by a rabbi:

> Once, after we were together, we got dressed and he put on his shoes like you do according to halacha [Jewish law], first right, then left, then he tied the left shoe and the right one. And I remember myself standing there and looking at him, and for a split-second feeling like I was hallucinating. We just did really forbidden things and now he piously observes the halacha about shoes? It seemed surreal to me (Krinkin, et al, 2022).

At the same time, spirituality and religiosity can be a significant sources of resilience which that mitigate the physical and emotional impact of child abuse (Gower et al, 2020; Jouriles, et al 2020). Maltreated children who are in spiritual distress may display more severe trauma symptoms than other maltreated children and thus require expedited mental health services (Jouriles, et al, 2025).

Maltreated children frequently raise religious or spiritual questions during a forensic interview (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017) and at other points during an investigation and prosecution of child abuse. Unfortunately, very few forensic interviewers, investigators, mental or medical health providers, or prosecutors are fluent in the research on the spiritual impact of trauma or know how to apply this research to an individual case (Cross, et al., Vieth & Cross 2025).

There are hopeful signs that child protection professionals are realizing the critical importance of addressing the spiritual impact of child abuse and empowering, or at least not inhibiting, a victim's access to spirituality as a source of resilience. Some CACs have implemented chaplaincy or spiritual care programs (Vieth et al, 2020). The Association

of Professionals Solving the Abuse of Children (APSAC) has developed a membership section for faith leaders and has a track at its annual colloquium for faith and child protection leaders to grow their skills in addressing the spiritual needs of maltreated children and their families.

The articles in this special issue

In this special issue of the APSAC Advisor, Matthew Belser, a judge who formerly served as a child abuse prosecutor, addresses some of the cultural and religious factors that aid some offenders in violating children and inhibit religious communities in responding with excellence to instances of abuse. Although Belser's article focuses on the Christian community, much of the content can be applied to other faith communities as well.

One of the religious factors contributing to child maltreatment is the belief in some faith communities that God requires parents or other caregivers to hit a child as a means of discipline (Vieth, 2013). Researchers Cindy Miller-Perrin and Robin Perrin summarize several studies finding that a culturally humble approach to this challenging topic can change attitudes and corporal punishment practices in religious communities.

Dr. Donald Walker penned an article offering concrete guidance for clinicians in treating children who are spiritually impacted by child maltreatment. Alissa Ackerman and Guila Benchimol offer guidance for healing in faith communities through a restorative justice model. Lastly, Victor Vieth discusses the critical importance for faith leaders to theologically engage with the subject of child abuse as a means of preventing abuse and, when it cannot be prevented, to respond with excellence.

A tribute to Pete Singer

This special issue of the APSAC Advisor ends with a tribute to Pete Singer, the first recipient of APSAC's Faith Leadership Award. This award will be presented annually to an "individual or organization within the faith community whose leadership, advocacy, and action have advanced child protection and maltreatment prevention. Recipients use their platform to create safe, supportive, and trauma-informed spaces for children and families."

Although Pete Singer died from cancer in 2025, his 30-year career left a lasting mark on both the faith and child protection community. Pete's remarkable work is remembered in a eulogy from Victor Vieth at Pete's memorial service, which is reprinted in this special issue.

An openness to learning from children

As faith and child protection leaders work to address the spiritual needs of maltreated children, these professionals may gain a deeper appreciation of their own values and sense of morality. Indeed, there is a growing "child theology" movement in which scholars are doing a deeper dive on the many accounts of children in the Bible and what we can learn from the wisdom, courage, and theological insights of youth (Bunge, 2021; Stollar, 2023).

In his research on the religiosity of children, David Heller writes: "In their simplest phrases and play actions, [the] lives [of children] sometimes offer educational and religious lessons more profound than the prepared curricula and sermons of the adult world. We need to provide a forum for the children to express themselves, and we need to listen to their words with an open, religious heart" (Heller, 1986, p. 4).

This special issue of the APSAC Advisor is a call to listen to the words of children with an open heart. In so doing, we may not only be able to help these children, but we may also gain valuable lessons from their spiritual struggles and from their often prophetic voices. ■

About the Authors



***Victor Vieth, JD, MA**, is Director of the Center for Faith & Child Protection at Zero Abuse Project. He is a former child abuse prosecutor who received national recognition for his work addressing child abuse in rural communities. He went on to serve as Director of the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse. Mr. Vieth spearheaded the implementation of 22 state and international forensic interviewing courses. He was also instrumental in developing Child Advocacy Studies (CAST) undergraduate and graduate programs now implemented in more than 100 colleges, universities, law schools, medical schools and seminaries in 30 states. Mr. Vieth has published numerous scholarly articles related to the investigation, prosecution, and prevention of child abuse and neglect. He has also written secular and theological works addressing the intersection of religion and child maltreatment including the books* On this Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus *and* Here We Stand: A Lutheran Response to Child Abuse *(co-edited with Craig L. Nessan). Mr. Vieth has received numerous awards including the Victim Rights Legend Award from the United States Department of Justice, the Pro Humanitate Award from the North American Resource Center for Child Welfare, the Heritage Service Award from the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence (NPEIV), the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Institute on Violence, Abuse & Trauma (IVAT), and the Change Maker Award from the Academy on Violence & Abuse (AVA). Mr. Vieth holds degrees from Winona State University, Hamline University School of Law, and Wartburg Theological Seminary.*



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Betraying the Faith: Understanding "Unchristian" Culture and Socialization that Contribute to Child Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations

Matthew S. Belser, JD, MSCJ

Abstract

As more and more scrutiny is placed on youth-serving organizations, it is important to understand the organizational factors that contribute to child sexual abuse within such organizations. Providing access to children to those who would do them harm makes youth-serving organizations at a higher risk of child sexual abuse occurring within their ranks. Greater access to children, however, is not the only factor that makes youth-serving organizations at a higher risk of child sexual abuse. There are various internal cultural factors that also contribute to this higher risk. The purpose of this article is to guide researchers and practitioners in exploring how certain cultures and viewpoints within churches and other Christian institutions can influence child sexual abuse within their ranks. For purposes of this article, only Christian churches and organizations are in view.

Keywords: *child sexual abuse, institutional sexual abuse, youth-serving organizations, religious organizations*

It is an all-too-familiar headline to read of yet another incident of a priest or scoutmaster being accused of child sexual abuse or of yet another youth-serving organization mishandling such allegations. A series of investigations by journalists in the 1990s unveiled decades-long incidents of abuse within the Catholic Church (Harris & Terry, 2019). In the decades since, the Catholic Church has been the subject of a litany of journalistic and governmental investigations, legal actions, academic articles and other studies across the globe (e.g., Boyer, et al., 1992; Kinney & Bishop's Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, 1994/1995; Hanson, Friedmann, & Lutz, 2004; John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004; Terry & Smith, 2006; White & Terry, 2008; Ryan, 2009; Deetman, et al., 2011; Keenan, 2011; Terry, et al., 2011; Royal Commission, 2017; Office of the Attorney General, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2018; Parkinson, 2018). Other youth-serving organizations have also come under censure as a series of high-profile cases has brought attention to child sexual abuse in the Boy Scouts of America, Pennsylvania State University, and USA Gymnastics. The Southern Baptist Convention also recently came under scrutiny for its mishandling of child sexual abuse among its member churches (Wood et al., 2022). The governments of Australia and the United Kingdom commissioned investigations into institutional responses to child sexual abuse (Palmer, et al., 2016; Foley, 2019; Hurcombe, et al., 2019; Jay, et al., 2021; Zammit, et al., 2021).

As more and more scrutiny is placed on youth-serving organizations and their failure to prevent or properly respond to child sexual abuse within their ranks, it has become imperative to better understand the correlates and dynamics of abuse within an organizational setting and to develop better strategies for prevention and response (Harris & Terry, 2019). Scholarship into this area, however, remains nascent and much of what is known about child sexual abuse within youth-serving organizations "has been generated outside the realm of peer-reviewed empirical scholarship", mostly from journalistic or governmental investigations (Harris & Terry, 2019, p. 639). White and Terry (2008) sought to explain sexual abuse within the Catholic Church through an

adaptation of Kappeler, Sluder, and Alpert's (1998) "rotten apples" explanation of police misconduct. White and Terry (2008) noted that future research "must go beyond examination of individual offenders and victims and view the phenomenon in the universe of the organization" (p. 674). If child sexual abuse within religious institutions is truly to be understood, then future research must consider it in its organizational context. One important aspect of that organizational context is the culture that exists within Christian organizations and guides their behavior and that of its members. Drawing on the available literature and the author's own experiences engaging with churches, the purpose of this article is to examine several cultural factors that are unique to Christian churches that have influenced how they have responded to child sexual abuse. In examining each of these factors, this article will also explore how Christian scriptures are used or misused to aid advocates and practitioners in engaging with Christian communities.

Organizational Culture and Socialization in Christian Organizations

Organizational culture refers to the patterns of thoughts, emotions, and actions of an organization.[1] Organizational culture is involved in shaping how an organization processes information and responds to challenges, problems and opportunities. Organizational socialization refers to how an organization initiates newcomers to the organization's culture, instructs them in that culture, and reinforces it throughout their tenure with the organization. "When leaders are brought in as change agents to turn around unproductive, dysfunctional agencies," as Mastrorilli (2022) correctly notes, "we often hear that the way to handle such a massive undertaking is to produce culture change within the organization. Culture change begins with socialization" (pp. 222-223). As an organization raises up leaders from within, such leaders are often shaped by an organization's culture and socialization. Nevertheless, an organization's leaders can also shape its culture (Westrum, 2004). Religious organizations and their leaders are unique in that they generally take positions on a vast array of religious, social, and political issues, which are frequently broadcast through various media (e.g., sermons, homilies, vlogs, livestreams, policies, etc.). This means that their organizational culture is easily displayed and open for examination. The question is how that culture influences its response to child sexual abuse.

Religious Viewpoints that May Contribute to Child Sexual Abuse.

Reviews of institutional responses to child sexual abuse in Australia and the United Kingdom found characteristics of cultures within organizations that increased risk of child sexual abuse within those organizations (Royal Commission, 2017; Zammit et al., 2021). These cultures normalized (1) a lack of understanding or awareness of child sexual abuse, (2) a failure to listen to and educate children about healthy relationships, (3) prioritizing the reputation of the institution over concern for victims, and/or

1 Giorgi, Lockwood, and Glynn (2015) propose five dominant models of organizational culture: (1) *values*, (2) *stories*, (3) *frames*, (4) *categories*, and (5) *toolkits*. *Values* refers to what is preferred, held dear, or desired in an organization; encompassing desirable goals that direct behavior and give it meaning; and focusing on the socialization, leadership, and rituals that perpetuate consistent cultural values (Giorgi, et al., 2015). *Stories* refer to narratives that help to construct identity, share knowledge, convey vision, reflect shared values and norms, and influence others to achieve favorable outcomes (Giorgi, et al., 2015). *Frames* refer to those filters that direct attention or define a situation, influencing its meaning and actions of the organization (Giorgi, et al., 2015). *Categories* are social constructions or classifications that define, construct and reconstruct the conceptual distinctions between objects, people and practices within an organization (Giorgi, et al., 2015). Toolkits refers to the concept of an organization's culture being a resource or toolkit (Giorgi, et al., 2015). According to this model, rather than there being a unified system of values or norms, there is a repertoire of various stories, categories, frames, rituals and practices from which actors can draw upon, mix and match, or take action to solve everyday problems (Giorgi, et al., 2015). Palmer and Feldman (2017) argue that these five conceptualizations of culture "can be integrated into an overarching framework for analysis, in which organizational culture is understood to possess both content and form" (p. 24).

(4) secrecy and isolation (Royal Commission, 2017; Zammit, et al., 2021). In his review of sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations, Boyle (2014) noted the following common patterns: (1) staffers' faith in the organization generally blinded them to the likelihood of abuse; (2) the organization frequently kept their staff ignorant about the problem; (3) when accusations of abuse did arise, staffers often gave the benefit of the doubt to the adult; (4) when accusations were confirmed, staffers generally did not know how to respond; and (5), when in doubt as to how to respond, staffers usually prioritized protecting the organization over the victim(s). These patterns do not happen in a vacuum. The following sections will examine the cultural factors unique to Christian organizations that influence the attitudes and behaviors of Christian churches in how they respond to child sexual abuse.

Clericalism and Views on Challenging Leaders

Priests are an essential part of the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic priests are consecrated to hear confessions, grant absolution, prescribe penance, and administer the sacraments (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997, art. 6). In so doing, priests act *in persona Christi capitis* ("in the person of Christ the Head").[2] It is similar in Eastern Orthodox churches, except that in Orthodox churches, one confesses directly to God with guidance from the priest, and penance is considered an act of personal repentance. This consecrated status can lead to feelings of ontological superiority or clericalism (Doyle, 2003/2006). According to Plante (2019), clericalism "does not allow for general checks and balances and corrective feedback" and "nurtures narcissism and authoritarianism" (p. 225). Clericalism is frequently cited in the literature as a factor that has enabled child sexual abuse to occur in the Roman Catholic Church and hindered an effective response to it (Doyle, 2006/2007; Barth, 2010; Gomez, 2021). As John Jay College of Criminal Justice (2004) bears out, the vast majority of cases of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy occurred between 1966 and 1986, with the peak number of cases occurring between 1974 and 1982 (Terry et al., 2011, p. 8). Survivors reported the abuse decades after it occurred, with the peak number of reports occurring in 2002. Since that time, the Roman Catholic Church has taken strides to address the culture of clericalism and to improve its response to child sexual abuse (Barth, 2010). Pope Francis (2018) described clericalism as "an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation, that interprets the ministry received as a power to be exercised rather than as a free and generous service to be given" and has condemned its practice.

Clericalism is not a uniquely Catholic problem, however. It can also arise among Protestant ministers in the form of feelings of moral superiority by virtue of being God's anointed or pride of position and purpose. The bulk of the research on clericalism and child sexual abuse has centered on the Roman Catholic Church. Still, as Plante (2019) has noted, further research is needed to explore clericalism not only in the church, but also across the religious spectrum and to explore its influence on child sexual abuse in religious organizations. While scripture calls for ministers to be above reproach in character (1 Timothy 3:2), clericalism as a culture within a church can lead to feelings that members of the clergy have unquestionable authority and are not accountable to lay people or even civil authorities. Some Protestant ministers have taught their congregations that scripture proscribes challenging leaders. Two passages are usually cited to support this. I Chronicles 16:22 (KJV) says: "Touch not mine anointed and do my prophets no harm." Here, "anointed ones" refers to the nation of Israel. In I Samuel 26:9 (KJV), David warns Abishai not to "stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed," referring to Saul, Israel's king

2 Vatican Council II (1965) extended the term *in persona Christi* to *in persona Christi capitis*. The belief that a priest becomes the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*) in administering the sacraments can reinforce feelings of ontological superiority, as it means that the priest takes on the same divine and moral authority of Christ and is above reproach (Gomez, 2021, p. 10). By extending the term to include *capitis*, the Church is reminding priests that they serve under the authority of Christ who is the head of the Church (Ephesians 4:15; 5:23-24).

and David's nemesis. Citing these passages, Benny Hinn, for instance, has taught that to "touch" or speak against God's anointed spiritual leaders is sinful, even if that leader is wrong, and will result in God's curse upon that person (Mwasongwe, 2017). According to this view, God's anointed is answerable to God alone – not to other men.

Countering this view, however, in Galatians 2:11 the Apostle Paul opposes the Apostle Peter and in Acts 17:11, Paul commends the Bereans for wanting to examine the scriptures daily to test whether his teachings are true. These passages stand for the proposition that Christians should hold their leaders accountable to the dictates and principles of Christian scripture. While Christians are called to submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21) and to submit to those in authority in the church (1 Peter 5:5), that submission is ultimately a moral obligation to God and God alone (Leeman, 2023, p. 71-73)—one that those in authority owe as well. As Leeman (2023) points out, to submit to another's authority is an act of faith and a posture of trust. To betray that faith or exploit that trust by anyone in authority in a manner that violates scripture is a failure to submit to the ultimate authority of God.

Tied to this view are the beliefs in the authority and inerrancy of scripture. As Feinberg (2018) writes, "Scripture is both the hallmark and foundation of evangelical theology. This is so because evangelicals believe that it is the word of God" (p. 17). Roman Catholicism also holds to the authority of scripture but places it on equal footing with the traditions of the church to ensure that it is "read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997, para. 111-113). Claims of ontological superiority by clergy and claims that only they can properly understand and interpret scripture can be used to justify or reinforce their misuse of scripture. Yet, just as Paul called Peter to account and the Bereans tested Paul using scripture, so too should churches hold accountable spiritually abusive ministers who seek to justify or cover-up child sexual abuse.

In confronting clericalism in a church or ministry, practitioners and advocates should keep in mind that they are confronting a deep-seated mindset or existential attitude that will not be easily dissuaded—certainly by someone outside of the church or denomination. When advocates and the media denounced clericalism within the Roman Catholic Church, many within the Church saw it as yet another secular "anti-clerical" attack and an existential threat to the Church and its influence (Doyle, 2002, pp. 211-212). To them, it was no different than the anticlericalism seen during the French and Bolshevik Revolutions (Doyle, 2002, pp. 211-212). Attempts should be made to calm fears of such an existential threat, while maintaining focus on confronting the harm done by child sexual abuse and its cover-up.[3] To change a culture of clericalism within a church or to hold a particular church leader accountable will require leaders from within who are willing to bring about change. Multi-disciplinary teams and other practitioners and advocates should seek to cultivate relationships with churches and faith leaders in their community to find allies and to help educate them on the dynamics of child sexual abuse and how faith communities can be safe havens for healing for those who been victimized. The remainder of this article will suggest ways practitioners and advocates can not only seek to hold faith leaders accountable, but also to engage with faith communities and enlist them in becoming allies in the fight to protect victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

3 Doyle (2006) found that narcissism exacerbated or hardened clericalism among Roman Catholic bishops and priests until an organized response from Catholic laity and the non-Catholic public demanded "that credible answers be found" (p. 200). Up to that point, "the immense power of the clerical establishment and the hierarchy in particular had shielded the institutional church from vigorous criticism and the related demands for accountability from the laity and secular society" (Doyle, 2006, p. 200). While the Roman Catholic Church has made efforts to root out offending clerics, critics continue to find the Church lacking in its responsiveness to victims (Doyle, 2006; Gallen, 2016).

Views on Forgiveness and Repentance

Frequently, the concepts of forgiveness and repentance have been misunderstood and/or weaponized by child sexual abuse offenders and religious leaders who have defended or shielded them (Arms, 2002; Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, 2019). The following are red flags that one should be looking for when analyzing allegations of child sexual abuse within a religious organization or when considering that organization's response to such allegations:

- Minimizing the gravity of the sin(s) committed against a victim/survivor;
- Demanding forgiveness from victims/survivors without demanding repentance from the offender;
- Demanding victims/survivors repent of their own sin(s), while ignoring the sin(s) of the offender;
- Privatizing forgiveness/repentance without institutional truth-telling about its own contributions to or collusions with the abuse (Arms, 2002)[4]; or
- Insisting on intra-organizational conflict resolution or church discipline (i.e., Matthew 18:15-20; see next subsection) without involving civil authorities.

These represent ways that church leaders (and even religious offenders) have weaponized the concepts of forgiveness and repentance against victims. For there to be true reconciliation, forgiveness and repentance must both be present. To demand forgiveness without repentance, or to demand repentance from a victim but not the offender, not only minimizes the harm that has been done, but also minimizes the value and dignity of the one who has been truly harmed.[5]

The Christian doctrine of salvation from sin concerns the issue of man being reconciled to God and to each other. According to this doctrine, all sins are first acts of rebellion against God and his sovereignty – "the de-Godding of God, the de-throning of God" (Carson, 2016) – and an affront to any person wronged, requiring reconciliation with both. True reconciliation requires both forgiveness of sin(s) and repentance from sin(s). Forgiveness is commanded in Matthew 6:14-15 and Matthew 18:22. Likewise, repentance is commanded in Ezekiel 18:30, Luke 13:3, Acts 3:19, and Acts 17:30.

Biblically, forgiveness is a turning over of one's rights to hold another's sin(s) against them to God as supreme judge (John 5:22, 27; Acts 17:31) and a submission to his justice and mercy. Forgiveness, thus, is not relieving a sinner of any responsibility for their sin(s) or a means of escaping the natural consequences of sin. There are many stories in the Bible of persons being forgiven by God or another person and still suffering the natural consequences of that sin. Repentance, likewise, is a submission to God's justice and mercy and an acceptance of the consequences of one's sin(s), be they natural or divine. Repentance is not a means of escaping or minimizing one's responsibility, nor is it just one act, but an ongoing and continuous attitude of contriteness about one's sin (Roberts, 2002, p. 108). True repentance is not a turning from what you've done, but a turning from what you are (Roberts, 2002, p. 113). True repentance should be open and seen, not secret (Roberts, 2002, p. 127), and it should certainly be seen by the one aggrieved. Furthermore, it is essential to understand that forgiveness does not mean the restoration of trust. Of all the injuries

4 Institutional truth-telling, as used in this article and in Arms (2002), refers to the institution absenting itself from the process of truth-telling about its own contributions or failures regarding the abuse (p. 110).

5 Christian teaching is quite clear that all persons have been created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) (Gen. 1:26-28), from which every individual draws their dignity and worth. To deny this dignity or worth in another person is what Gary Haugen (2008), founder and CEO of International Justice Mission, refers to as the "sin of injustice" (pp. 46-48). Not only is this a denial of the dignity and worth of the person created in God's image, it is also a denial of the dignity and worth of the One in whose image that person was created. It is also a violation of biblical precepts to love one another (Lev. 19:18; Luke 6:27-36; 10:29-37; John 15:12; 1 John 3:16). No matter how one looks at this, it is sin according to Scripture.

caused by child sexual abuse, it is the betrayal of trust that often leaves the deepest wounds. Trust can never be demanded; it must be earned and proven with time.

The weaponization of forgiveness and repentance arguably is a form of spiritual abuse[6] that leaves the most lasting sense of betrayal among victims and survivors of a faith persuasion. Of course, further research is needed to verify this. It is important for practitioners and advocates to understand Christian views on forgiveness and repentance to help child sexual abuse survivors who share that worldview to heal and confront the ways forgiveness and repentance have been weaponized. The above commentary is offered to practitioners and advocates to aid them in helping victims and survivors of child sexual abuse at the hands of clergy offenders or those who have suffered from the weaponization of forgiveness or repentance to do just that.

Views on Church Discipline and the Authority of Government

Church discipline is "the process of correcting sin in the life of the congregation and its members" through private admonition or by more formal means (Leeman, 2010). The church discipline process will vary among churches and denominations, depending on their respective leadership structures and ecclesiology.[7] Just as the concepts of forgiveness and repentance have been weaponized by church leaders, so too can church discipline in the following ways:

- Privatizing forgiveness/repentance without institutional truth-telling about its own contribution or collusion (Arms, 2002);
- Insisting on intra-church conflict resolution (i.e., Matthew 18:15-17) without involving civil authorities;
- Minimizing the gravity of the sin(s) committed against a victim/survivor;
- Insisting on forgiveness without demanding repentance; and/or
- Attempting to shield an offender from the natural or legal consequences of their sin(s), while ignoring the harm done to the victim/survivor and failing to minister to his/her emotional, spiritual, or psychological needs.

When dealing with a particular church or congregation, it is important to understand their views on ecclesiology, church discipline, and the relationship of the Church with the State. In certain situations, the weaponization of church discipline may be the actions of certain individuals, while in other situations, this weaponization may be more systemic as it becomes part of the culture of a particular church.

Most churches accept that Matthew 18:15-17 sets forth the biblical guidelines for resolving interpersonal conflicts within the church, as follows: The parties should seek to resolve their issue(s) privately first. If that fails, then the injured party should take one or two others as witnesses. If that fails, then the matter should be presented to the church. If that fails, then the offending party should

6 Spiritual abuse is a term coined at the end of the twentieth century that has received increasing attention over the last couple of decades (Roudkovski, 2024). Oakley and Kinmond (2013) define spiritual abuse as the coercion and control of one individual by another in spiritual context experienced as a deeply emotional personal attack by the target. According to Oakley and Kinmond (2013) and Roudkovski (2024), spiritual abuse can include coercive, exploitative, or manipulative methods of controlling a person, such as through enforced accountability, censorship of decision-making, pressures to conform or to keep silent, misuse of scripture or the pulpit, requirements of obedience, suggestions that the abuser has unquestionable authority, and/or isolation from other support persons or structures.

7 Ecclesiology is a branch of theology dealing with the doctrines of the church, its nature, governance, ordinances, and ministries (Allison, 2012, p. 33).

be disfellowshipped.[8] There are certain public sins, however, that require church leadership to take a more proactive approach. This is what the Apostle Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 5**.** In that passage, Paul is addressing a member of the church at Corinth who has been having an open sexual relationship with his father's wife. Paul directs the church to remove him from the fellowship of the church (i.e., excommunication). For Paul, sin is cancerous. As Leeman (2012) writes: "Sin, like cancer, loves to hide. Discipline exposes the cancer so that it might be cut out quickly" (p. 33). Sometimes only the cancer itself (i.e., the sin) needs to be removed; while at other times, the organ the cancer is destroying needs to be removed (i.e., the unrepentant sinner) so that the cancer does not spread to other parts of the body (i.e., the church).

Many in the covering up of child sexual abuse have argued that it is a private matter that should be dealt with internally (i.e., within the family or within the church), and that the government should not be involved. Perhaps even more dangerous is a pastor or other spiritual leader who teaches that the church's role supersedes the authority of government because they serve a law higher than that of the government. Such a teaching would be a clear misinterpretation or blatant disregard of Romans 13:1-7. While Paul commands the Corinthian church to take on a judicial function in upholding the ethical demands of scripture (1 Corinthians 5), Paul states in Romans 13:1-7 that civil authorities have also been instituted by God for the maintenance of order and good conduct and the punishment of wrongdoing. Church discipline is, therefore, not a derogation or an abrogation of the government's role envisioned in Romans 13:1-7. One must also bear in mind that scripture repeatedly states that God expects his covenant people to pursue justice[9] and demands justice for children and orphans.[10] Scripture does not give the Church the authority to relieve an offender of the natural or legal consequences of sin, and it certainly does not permit it to do so at the expense of the dignity and worth of countless survivors of child sexual abuse.

Practitioners and advocates are advised to confront directly the weaponization of church discipline, along with any attempts to cover-up child sexual abuse within a Christian congregation or attempts to avoid government intervention. Such attempts are not just an affront to biblical teachings, they are misguided, dangerous, and can cause further trauma to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. Multi-disciplinary teams are also advised to enlist chaplains in helping the team to understand not only the spiritual impact of child sexual abuse and spiritual abuse, but also in helping victims and survivors navigate the tangled web of distortions and manipulation involved in the weaponization of church discipline, attempts to cover up child sexual abuse, and avoidance of institutional truth-telling (Vieth et al., 2020).

Views on Gender Roles in the Church, the Family, and Society

Palmer and Feldman (2017/2018) highlight how societal views on gender differences influence youth-serving organizations and child sexual abuse. While churches are often influenced by the culture around them, here the focus is on the culture within the respective churches and their respective views on gender roles. As Palmer and Feldman

8 Jonathan Leeman (2012) notes: "Matthew's Jewish audience would have understood 'pagan' to represent those who were outside the covenant community and 'tax collector' to represent those who had betrayed the covenant community (and were therefore also outside the community). Church members should live differently than the world. And if, after a series of gracious warnings, they don't, a church should exclude them from its fellowship" (pp. 28-29).

9 See Genesis 18:19; Deuteronomy 16:20; 24:17; 27:19; Psalm 9:7; 10:18; 82:3; 89:14; 94:15; 97:2; 99:4; 106:3; 140:12; Proverbs 1:3; 2:8; 8:20; 28:5; Isaiah 1:17, 23, 27; 9:7; 42:1-2; 51:4; 56:1; 59:15; Jeremiah 4:2; 9:24; 21:12; 22:3; Lamentations 3:35; Ezekiel 45:9; Hosea 12:6; Micah 6:8; Amos 5:15, 24; Habakkuk 1:4; Matthew 12:18, 20; 23:23; and Luke 11:42; 18:7-8.

10 See Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:28-29; 27:19; Job 29:12; 31:16-18; Psalm 10:14, 18; 72:4, 12-14; 68:5-6; 94:6; 146:9; Proverbs 23:10-11; 31:8; Isaiah 1:17; 58:7; Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:10; Matthew 25:31-46; and James 1:27.

(2018) highlight, views on gender differences can undermine an effective response to child sexual abuse if women are afforded fewer opportunities to speak or are seen as less credible than their male counterparts (p. 31). Furthermore, since allegations of child sexual abuse are more likely to be reported to females, a male-dominated leadership may fail to quickly respond to such allegations made by lower-level female employees or members (Palmer & Feldman, 2018, p. 31).

Within Christianity, there have been four main views regarding gender roles within the church, the family, and society: patriarchy, feminism, egalitarianism, and complementarianism. Of these historical four views, egalitarianism and complementarianism remain the most mainstream. At issue in this debate is the meaning of certain key passages in Scripture: Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 5:21-33; 1 Corinthians 11:2-6; 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11-15; and 1 Peter 3:1-7. Except for maybe a few extreme patriarchal or feminist pastors or scholars, most Christians would interpret Galatians 3:28 as meaning that everyone stands equal in dignity and worth before God and that all believers are equal in redemption. Where the four views differ is on the roles that scripture would have men and women play in the family, in the church, and in society. Egalitarians argue that there are no longer distinctions in roles between the sexes, while complementarians would argue that men and women have different, but complementary roles to play. At issue in this debate is also whether women may serve as pastors in the church.

This debate recently received national attention when the Southern Baptist Convention narrowly rejected a proposition to oust Southern Baptist churches that have women pastors (Smith & Meyer, 2024). Many conservatives within the Southern Baptist Convention view compromising on women in the pastorate as compromising on the authority and inerrancy of scripture—essential doctrines among conservative evangelicals—and a slippery slope that has, in their view, led other denominations to drift away from the core tenets of Christianity. Many conservatives may also see social justice movements within the church as engines for this drift. Unfortunately, the issue of child sexual abuse within the church can get caught up in these views, such that any discussion of child sexual abuse is seen as a distraction or being used to undermine primary doctrines of the church. While there may be little practitioners and advocates can do to change such views from the outside of such organizations, they can be powerful allies to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse in sustaining public attention and insisting on institutional truth-telling. Practitioners and advocates would also do greater service to victims and survivors by helping keep public attention on the main issue—that is, child sexual abuse—and dissuading both religious organizations and the public from being distracted by broader cultural debates. Such debates can easily become red herrings offered by organizations or individuals to deflect attention away from their own responsibility concerning child sexual abuse.

Views on Child Abuse in the Church and in Society.

In the Guidepost report on the Southern Baptist Convention's response to child sexual abuse, Executive Committee General Counsel August "Augie" Boto is reported as saying: "This whole thing should be seen for what it is. It is a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism. It is not the gospel. It is not even a part of the gospel. It is a misdirection play" (Wood et al., 2022, p. 6). He goes on to describe certain survivors and advocates for reform as having "succumbed to an availability heuristic because of their victimizations. They have gone to the SBC looking for sexual abuse, and of course, they found it. Their outcries have certainly caused an availability cascade…. But they are not to blame. This is the devil being temporarily successful" (Wood et al., 2022, p. 6). It is a central

tenet of Christian theology that God is both just[11] and loving[12] and demands justice[13] and love[14] from believers. Faithfully and lovingly responding to child sexual abuse and caring for victims is a gospel issue.[15] It requires displaying the love of Christ impartially (see James 2:1, 8-13), lest church leaders become guilty of defiling their witness by making spiritual orphans of victims/survivors in their failure to care for them (see James 1:27).

When it comes to views on child sexual abuse in the church and in society, do not be surprised to see any of the following views expressed by clergy:

- Child sexual abuse exists, but is greatly exaggerated by attention-seekers, advocates, or the litigious;
- Child sexual abuse is a problem in society, but not in my church;
- Focus on social justice issues is a distraction away from the gospel or from my church's mission;
- Victim-blaming or victim-shaming; or
- The integrity of the family is more important than any harm that may have been done by the abuse.

Advocates and practitioners should pay attention to how clergy deal with such biblical passages as Joseph being accused of rape by Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39), the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19-21), David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12), and the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13). One can discern a pastor's stance on many of the issues discussed in this article in how they handle each of these passages in their sermons. Practitioners should also pay attention to how church leaders address other issues—such as sexuality in general, singleness, clergy celibacy/sexual morality, relationship boundaries, and intimacy between adults and children. Attitudes about sexuality can lead to a cultural reluctance to talk about sex and child sexual abuse or lead to the belief that it is not the organization's responsibility to deal with child sexual abuse (Saul & Audage, 2007, p. 30).

In this author's experience, most pastors today are sympathetic to the issue of child sexual abuse and do see it as a problem. However, they have received very little, if any, education and preparation for how to deal with child sexual abuse when it presents itself in their church. More engagement with churches in addressing child sexual abuse is needed. Local multi-disciplinary teams would be wise to provide training to churches in their community regarding the nature of child sexual abuse, the dynamics of victimization, trauma-informed care, mandatory reporting requirements, and prevention policies and practices. Multi-disciplinary teams are also encouraged to engage chaplains either to serve on or to advise the team on how to engage with and educate religious organizations and leaders in the community and to

11 See Deuteronomy 10:17-19; 27:19; Psalm 33:5; 68:4-5; 103:6; 146:7-9; Proverbs 14:31; 31:8; Isaiah 42:1-7; and Jeremiah 9:23-24; 22:3.

12 See Exodus 33:19; 34:6-7; Deuteronomy 4:31; 7:9; 10:15; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:31-32; Psalm 25:6-7; 32:10; 36:7; 51:1-2; 84:11; 106:1; 145:7-8; Ezekiel 33:10-11; Daniel 9:9, 17-19; Joel 2:13; Micah 7:18-20; Matthew 5:43-48; 9:27-31; 18:23-35; 23:23-24; Luke 6:35-36; 10:36-37; John 3:16; 15:13-14; Romans 5:8; 8:38-39; 12:8; 1 Corinthians 13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4; 13:11; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 2:4-7; 3:17-19; Titus 3:4-5; James 5:11; 1 John 3:16; 4:7-16; and Revelation 1:5.

13 See Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 14:28-29; 27:19; Job 29:12; 31:16-18; Psalm 10:14, 18; 72:4, 12-14; 68:5-6; 82:3; 94:6; 146:9; Prov. 23:10-11; 31:8; Isa. 1:17; 58:7; Jer. 7:6; Micah 6:8; Zech. 7:10; Matt. 25:31-46; and James 1:27.

14 See Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 6:27-36; 10:29-37; John 14:21; 15:12; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8; and 1 John 3:16.

15 To say that something is, or is not, a "gospel issue" or "a part of the gospel" means that it is related to the good news of Jesus Christ and his salvific work in bringing reconciliation between God and mankind. Christianity teaches that Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of man's bondage to sin, that God's wrath for sin has been poured out on the cross of Christ, that a sinner's debt for his/her sin has been paid by Christ, and God is redeeming mankind from the effects of sin, in all its destructiveness. For any pastor to say that bringing healing and redemption to victims or survivors of child sexual abuse from the sin committed upon them is not a "gospel issue" is an anathema to the gospel. Mr. Boto, in his reference to the gospel in the quote above, is a reference to the sharing of the gospel or evangelism. In other words, he is saying that advocates for reform in the SBC are distracting the SBC from its mission to evangelize.

help them understand the spiritual impact of child sexual abuse and spiritual abuse (Vieth et al., 2020).

Organizational Socialization and the Rationalization of Corruption

Socialization is an integral part of the organizational process, through which organizations train newcomers and new leaders. Churches are no exception to this process, as new leaders are frequently trained at seminaries or within individual churches. Through this process new leaders are accustomed to the cultures of individual churches and denominations. It is when this socialization is directed at perpetuating or even justifying corruption that organizations have serious issues to address, particularly when such corrupt practices are rationalized in several ways. This socialization and rationalization, which are mutually reinforcing, are the processes through which corruption becomes routine in an organization.

Rationalization Tactics and Moral Disengagement

The literature on corruption within organizations frequently speaks about the "rationalizing tactics" used by employees perpetrating corrupt acts and how often these individuals tend not to view themselves as corrupt (Anand, et al., 2004, p. 10). In their seminal work on the subject, Sykes and Matza (1957) theorized that individuals employ neutralization techniques to counter feelings of guilt associated with delinquent behavior. Building on Sykes and Matza (1957), Anand, et al. (2004) describe certain neutralization techniques or rationalizing tactics that are common to corrupt practices within organizations:

- Denial of responsibility – actors minimize their behavior by believing/proclaiming that they had no other choice than to participate in such activity;
- Denial of injury or harm – actors believe/proclaim that no one was harmed by their actions, so their behavior was not really corrupt;
- Denial of victim/moral exclusion – actors deny blame by arguing that the victim deserved or wanted what happened to them and are not really victims;
- Appeal to a higher authority/loyalty – actors argue that their actions are justified by higher moral authority or that they owe loyalty to a greater authority;
- Condemn the condemner – actors deflect moral blame by arguing that condemner has no right to criticize or judge;
- Social weighting – actors deflect or minimize moral blame by arguing that others are worse or no better than them; and
- Metaphor of the ledger – actors rationalize their behavior or believe they are entitled to indulge in such behavior because of the otherwise good they have done.

They further found that such rationalizations, when normalized and excused through socialization processes, "allow perpetrators of unethical activities to believe that they are moral and ethical individuals, thereby allowing them to continue engaging in these practices without feeling pangs of conscience" (Anand, et al., 2004, p. 10).

Often, these processes are abetted or reinforced using euphemistic language, "which enables individuals engaging in corruption to describe their acts in ways that make them appear inoffensive" (Anand, et al., 2004, p. 17) or other forms of moral disengagement. Albert Bandura and his colleagues (1990/1996/2002/2016) have proposed eight mechanisms through which individuals disengage from self-regulations of moral control (i.e., moral disengagement):

- Moral justification – behavior is justified in the service of valued social or moral purposes (i.e., doing it for the greater good);
- Euphemistic language – couching actions in harmless or sanitized terminology;
- Advantageous comparison – a form of personal exoneration whereby actions are considered unharmful compared to what others have done/are doing;
- Displacement of responsibility – harmful actions are justified because a higher authority has ordered it;
- Diffusion of responsibility – absolving oneself from blame because others in the group are also to blame;
- Disregard, distortion, or denial of harm – minimizing, disregarding, or disputing the harmful effects of actions[16];
- Disengagement by observers of harmful conduct – turning a blind eye to immoral or harmful conduct, usually through the justification that such actions are no one's business (a pervasive problem within organizations); and
- Dehumanization of the victim – a process of maintaining beliefs that strip people of human qualities or investing them with demonic, bestial, unsavory qualities.[17]

Such rationalization tactics or moral disengagements aid individuals in committing corrupt practices, while maintaining their belief in their own moral integrity or self-image (Anand, et al., 2004, p. 14).

These rationalization tactics or moral disengagements can easily be seen in religious organizations when they argue they were pressured to cover up sexual abuse by superiors or were only given the choice to go along with it (*denial of responsibility*). Some may even believe that protecting the credibility of the church or their ministry is more important than holding an offender accountable or admitting the church's responsibility for the abuse (*appeal to higher loyalty*). Some may even convince themselves that the harm that would be done to the ministry if such allegations were made public would be far greater than any harm done to the victim (a combination of *denial/distortion of harm/victim* and *social weighting*). Church leaders may try to deflect blame by arguing that children lie about sexual abuse or that such allegations are just demonic or unmerited attacks against the church and attempts to distract the church from its real mission (*denial of victim*). Or they may argue that they are no worse than other organizations dealing with the same problem, so why should they be singled out (*social weighting*). They may also argue that, even though they have a few bad apples, this does not outweigh all the good that their church has done (*balancing the ledger*).

In cases where the offender was clergy, they may argue that all they did was love on the victim and that the victim was not really harmed (*denial of harm/victim*) or may even try to convince the victim or others that the sexual activity was special or divinely approved (*moral justification* or *appeal to higher authority/loyalty*).[18] Clergy offenders may also argue that only God has the right to judge them because of their consecrated status (combination of *condemn the condemner* and *appeal to higher authority*). All of these are attempts to minimize or shift blame, rather than take responsibility or repent of one's actions or failure to act.

Socializing Corruption and How to Address It

As problematic as this may be on an individual level, because of the nature of organizational culture

16 Bandura (2016) says this can be a cognitive process of "selective inattention to harmful effects, construing them in ways that make them look less harmful, and not remembering them" (p. 666).

17 In effect, the person harmed is seen as not "human" and once dehumanized, no longer possessing feelings, hopes, concerns, dignity, etc. (the very things that make us human (Bandura, 2016).

18 Doyle (2006) describes this as a particularly narcissistic form of moral justification tied with clericalism (p. 154).

and socialization, such attitudes and actions can incubate and spread within the organization or even develop as groupthink among its leadership.[19] Within a corrupt working environment, there are three socialization processes by which individuals are inducted to corrupt practices. The first is *cooptation*, in which rewards are used to induce attitude change toward unethical behavior (Anand, et al., 2004, pp. 44-45). This is often subtle, and an individual may not realize the lure to moral ambiguity. The second is *incrementalism*, through which individuals are gradually introduced to corrupt practices; "climbing the ladder of corruption" and eventually engaging in acts that previously would have been rejected outright (Anand, et al., 2004, pp. 44-45). Lastly, there is *compromise*, by which individuals "back into" corrupt practices through attempts to resolve certain dilemmas, conflicts, or problems (often in good faith) (Anand, et al., 2004, pp. 44-45). These processes are not mutually exclusive and may exist simultaneously (Anand, et al., 2004, pp. 44-45).

Socialization is an integral part of the organizational process, through which organizations train newcomers and new leaders. It is when this socialization is directed at perpetuating or even justifying corruption that organizations have serious issues to address. If rationalization and socialization are the processes through which corruption becomes routine in an organization, then how can this process be prevented or corrected? Because these processes are mutually reinforcing and make corrupt practices appear less unethical, and because the corruption can become deeply entrenched, even if unethical practices are exposed, the organization is likely to stonewall and deny the accusations because of these processes (Anand, et al., 2004, p. 17) – patterns too often seen in church responses to child sexual abuse.

As Anand and associates (2004) illuminate, in many instances, "corruption is widespread among the employees in a subunit rather than being limited to one or two individuals" due to social cocoons working in tandem with the rationalization and socialization processes described above (p. 16). A social cocoon is "a micro culture created within a group where the norms may be very different from those valued by society or even the wider organization" that "emerge when groups develop idiosyncratic solutions to the problems they face and actively seek to compartmentalize themselves from external influences" (Arnand, et al., 2004, p. 16). Once a social cocoon has formed, corruption can be facilitated through the mutual support of rationalization and socialization.[20] Eventually, newcomers will find the discontinuity between the norms of the cocoon and that of society or the organization less problematic due to compartmentalizing the two (Arnand, et al., 2004, p. 16). An example of such social cocoons can be seen in the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention or at various levels of the Roman Catholic Church in their respective responses to child sexual abuse.

To prevent such corrupt socialization and rationalization processes from developing in churches, Anand and associates (2004) would urge such organizations to focus on prevention, to foster awareness of the problem among staff, to nurture an ethical environment within the organization, and to have top leadership model ethical behavior for the organization. Practitioners and advocates should engage with churches and help them to adopt prevention measures—for example, offering trainings to their leaders and staff on the dynamics of child sexual abuse, mandatory reporting requirements, the development of child protection policies and

19 Groupthink is a term coined by Irving Janis (1982) to refer to "a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" and "a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures" (p. 9).

20 Anand, Ashford, and Joshi (2004) outlines how this process can occur: "(1) veterans model the corrupt behavior and easy acceptance of it, (2) newcomers are encouraged to affiliate and bond with veterans and develop desires to identify with, emulate, and please the veterans, (3) newcomers are subjected to strong and consistent information and ideological statements such that they view corrupt acts in a positive light, and (4) newcomers are encouraged to attribute any misgivings they may have to their own shortcomings (particularly naiveté) rather than to what is being asked of them" (p. 16).

procedures, and the dynamics of trauma and trauma-informed care. This, of course, takes time and building trust with such organizations. Multi-disciplinary teams, as well as community advocates, are encouraged to enlist allies within religious organizations and across the community they serve to build a network of those who can aid in prevention efforts. Should a church or denomination be confronted with the horrible truth that child sexual abuse is occurring or has occurred within their organization, practitioners and advocates should work with them to avoid denying the problem and moving quickly to address it (Anand, et al., 2004, p. 20). Utilizing external agents to investigate the abuse and to make recommendations on how to prevent it and provide a more effective response to abuse in the future is also advisable (Anand, et al., 2004, pp. 20-21).

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse in any context is a tragedy. For it to occur at the hands of, or to be tolerated or overlooked by, those who are supposed to be ambassadors and imitators of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 5:1-2), is a betrayal of the faith and a blatant sin against those who should be cherished and protected. The purpose of this article has been to describe cultural factors for practitioners and advocates to consider in evaluating and understanding child sexual abuse within Christian churches and institutions. The cultural factors discussed herein are based on the litany of journalistic and governmental investigations, legal actions, academic articles and other studies that have evaluated child sexual abuse within religious and other youth-serving organizations—in addition to this author's own experience prosecuting offenders and engaging with churches. However, empirical research in this area remains nascent and this article cannot speak to the extent to which these various cultural factors exist or contribute to child sexual abuse within religious organizations. Hopefully, future empirical research will begin to fill this void, not only as it applies to religious institutions but all youth-serving organizations.

To date, "[t]here are no comprehensive large-scale studies on the frequency of child sexual abuse across the full range of youth-serving organizations" (Palmer & Feldman, 2018, p. 5). Though its focus was on various religious organizations, researchers and practitioners should heed the warning of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017b): "it is now apparent that across many decades, many of society's institutions failed our children" (p. 3). A greater understanding is needed in assessing the organizational factors that contribute to child sexual abuse in all youth-serving organizations. Providing access to children to those who would do them harm, makes youth-serving organizations high-risk organizations for child sexual abuse. Yet, greater access to children is not the only factor that makes youth-serving organizations at a higher risk of child sexual abuse. Future research should seek to understand the various individual and organizational factors that provide gateways for child sexual abuse across the range of youth-serving organizations.

Understanding the internal cultures of youth-serving organizations, such as those suggested here for Christian institutions, is important, but far from the only factors that should be considered. Organizational structure and leadership styles are also important, though beyond the scope of this article. For instance, church autonomy within the Southern Baptist Convention was frequently cited as a reason why the Executive Committee could not take action in cases of child sexual abuse within member churches (Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, 2019; Wood et al., 2022). Future research should also focus on large scale studies on the frequency of child sexual abuse across the various youth-serving organizations and seek to understand what factors are common and which are unique to specific types of youth-organizations. Whether and why certain youth-serving organizations may be more at risk for child sexual abuse than others should also be considered. Only by fully understanding the scope of the problem can we hope to find lasting solutions! ■

About the Author



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Research Initiatives Designed to Reduce Positive Attitudes Toward Spanking Among Conservative Christians

Robin Perrin, PhD; Cindy Miller-Perrin, PhD

Abstract

Social Science research has concluded that children should never be hit or spanked. However, in the United States, especially among conservative Christians, spanking remains normative. The present article summarizes intervention research conducted by the authors that attempts to challenge and change pro-spanking attitudes among conservative Christians. This research suggests that when Christians are presented with the empirical evidence on the potential harm of physical punishment, alongside progressive interpretations of the Biblical passages that are often interpreted by Christians as a mandate to spank, Conservative Christians are amenable to attitudinal change. Theological and secular resources on the physical punishment of children are offered.

Keywords: *corporal punishment, spanking, prevention, physical abuse*

As we began work on this paper, we started where, we assume, our students and most of our colleagues typically start when researching a popular cultural topic. We asked the internet: "Should parents spank/hit their children?" The results of our search were, at least to us, somewhat surprising. Ninety-two out of the first one hundred websites our search produced recommended *against* corporal punishment.

The first 10 websites recommended *against* corporal punishment, and were from Psychology Today (e.g., Bredehoft, 2022; Cummins, 2024), TheHealthSite.com (Arora, 2015), The American Psychological Association (Glicksman, 2019), Healthyplace.com (Peterson, n,d.), Harvard Health (McCarthy, 2019), Raising Children Network (n.d.), Stanford Medicine Children's Health (2025), and UNC Health Talk (2022), and Webmd.com (Taylor, 2023).

We expected more pro-spanking websites. Why? Because pro-spanking attitudes and behaviors are normative in the U.S. The General Social Survey (2022) indicates that 56% of Americans agree or strongly agree that "It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking" (NORC, n.d.). Other research suggests that as many as 90% of toddlers are spanked or slapped at some point in their lives (Stark, Douglas, & Medeiros, 2014).

None of the above websites was from a Christian organization. In contrast, ALL eight websites that recommended spanking for childhood misbehaviors were from Christian organizations. This observation is consistent with the research literature, which demonstrates that conservative Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, are more likely to spank (Beller, Kroger, & Kliem, 2019; Hoffman, Ellison, & Bartkowski, 2017; Ellison, Musick, & Holden, 2011; Vieth, 2014).

On the first website we found, which was supportive of spanking, Dr. Jared Pingleton (2014), a clinical psychologist and former Director of Counseling at the religiously conservative advocacy organization, Focus on the Family, cautiously supports corporal punishment. "Generally speaking," he writes, "we advise parents that corporal discipline should only be applied in cases of willful disobedience or defiance of authority—never for mere childish irresponsibility. And it should never be administered harshly, impulsively, or with the potential to cause physical harm." Pingleton acknowledges that his support for corporal punishment is tied to his Christian

beliefs, citing Hebrews 12:11: "No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the fruit of peace and righteousness to those who have been trained by it." ScriptureSavvy.com (n.d.) similarly concludes, "Using discipline, such as spanking, *when appropriate*, can help steer children away from folly and toward wisdom."

Two posts by Danny Huerta (2024a), Vice President of Parenting and Youth at Focus on the Family, also *cautiously* endorse spanking. His posts were among the more nuanced of all the website material we consulted. In the post "Is Spanking Biblical?" Huerta states that Proverbs passages do, in fact, endorse spanking, but encourages readers to be cautious: "Focus on Love," "Look for Other Discipline Options Before Choosing to Spank," and "Maintain Self-Control and Avoid Anger."

In a separate Focus on the Family post from Huerta (2024b) entitled "How to Spank: To Spank or Not to Spank?" (2024), Huerta argues that spanking should not be the "go-to discipline," should not be "done in anger," and should not be "used during the height of emotion." Spanking, he argues, should be "the most infrequently used tool in a comprehensive discipline toolkit." He concludes that spanking "may be appropriate" when the child is (1) in an extremely unsafe situation, (2) deliberately defiant and disobedient, (3) severely disrespectful.

Other websites more strongly recommended that parents physically punish their children. The website faughnfamily.com, for example, in a March 2016 post by Church of Christ minister Jeremy Tatum, concludes, "My children are depending on me. I have to answer to God and I have to answer to them when it comes to my part in their development. I am not interested in being "PC." I am not concerned about cultural changes or public opinion when it comes to their raising. I am interested in the truth. The truth is that spanking is a part of parenting and is, at times, necessary. At least, it is if we are parenting God's way."

Similarly, a post on Christianity.com, in November of 2023, entitled "What's Wrong (and Right) with Spanking," author Jen Thorn encourages the reader to "ignore the hype but don't trust your heart either. Instead, defer to the 'authority of the word of God,' as recorded in Proverbs 22:15: 'Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of correction will drive it far from him.'"

And finally, GotQuestions.org, in response to the question, "How should Christians discipline their children?", affirmed physical punishment as biblical (n.d.). "How to best discipline a child can be a difficult task to learn, but it is 'crucially important.' Some claim that physical discipline (corporal punishment), such as spanking, is the only method the Bible supports. Others insist that 'time-outs' and other punishments that do not involve physical discipline are far more effective. What does the Bible say? The Bible teaches that physical discipline is appropriate, beneficial, and necessary."

GotQuestions.org (n.d.) poses the question: What does it mean to "spare the rod, spoil the child"? In response to this question, the writer is somewhat contradictory. The website's article entitled, "What does it mean to 'spare the rod, spoil the child," indicates that Proverbs 13:24 is a "modern-day proverb on the wisdom of discipline." The rod in this case is a "thin stick" or "switch" used to inflict a "small amount of pain with no lasting physical injury." However, using the rod is also a sign of parental "wisdom, foresight, and love."

In a lengthy September 2024 post entitled, "Biblical Parenting: 'Spare the Rod' in Proverbs 13:24 Explored," ChristianPure.com articulates a culturally progressive interpretation of the "rod of discipline." The Biblical reference to the "rod" of discipline, we read, is not actually a reference to a literal 'rod.' According to this website, "To understand this proverb's true meaning, we must look beyond a literal interpretation and seek its deeper spiritual wisdom. The 'rod' in this context should not be understood simply as an instrument of physical punishment. In the ancient Near East, the shepherd's rod was a tool for guiding sheep, not just for striking them. Similarly, this proverb speaks to the need for loving

guidance and correction in raising children." The 'rod' is instead a "biblical symbol of guidance, authority, and discipline." The "rod of correction" is a metaphor representing the necessity of "nurture through discipline, boundaries, and accountability." According to this article, the Proverbs passage is intended to promote "active correction of a child's wrong choices and behaviors as a form of love and care."

Despite the progressive rhetoric, ChristianPure.com stops short of recommending that parents NOT hit their children. The website warns that "we must be very careful not to use this proverb as justification for harsh or abusive treatment of children. Such an interpretation goes against the overall biblical message of God's love and the value of every human being, including children. Jesus himself said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14). However, it approves of physical punishment, even if only as a last resort: "Physical discipline, if used at all, should be a last resort, employed sparingly and with great caution. It should never be the primary means of correction or instruction."

While a significant proportion of the Christian world in the United States, especially the conservative Christian world, has concluded that to "spare the rod" is to "spoil the child" the academic community has, for the most part, reached an entirely different conclusion. Corporal punishment is an act of violence that likely causes more harm than good (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff et al., 2018). But how do we share this message with Christians, especially conservative Christians? How do we convince this group that disciplinary practices that "spare the rod" are likely equally effective, and healthier, for children?

The answer is that we do so with respect and patience, and with *evidence* that the "spanking scriptures" can, and should, be interpreted very differently. We point out, for example, that the phrase "spare the rod, spoil the child" does not actually appear in Scripture. Rather, it is a paraphrase of a few passages in the Bible, primarily in the Old Testament book of Proverbs (e.g., 13:24, 22:15, 23:13-14). Proverbs 13:24, for example, states: "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them." We offer a reminder that these passages were written at a time when violence was understood as the *only* way to discipline a child. We indicate that discipline can, and should, impose costs on a child. But these costs need not, and should not, be physical. Time-outs, removal of privileges, and even verbal reprimands can be effective, and hitting is *never* the answer. We should not hit our friends, we should not hit each other, and we should *not* hit our children.

Research Designed to Reduce Positive Attitudes Toward Spanking Among Conservative Christians

Our interest in the empirical relationship between corporal punishment and Christianity began relatively early in our careers. Our first book together, along with our co-author, was *Family Violence Across the Lifespan: An Introduction* (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, and Perrin, 1997, 2005, and 2011). Our interest in violence directed toward family members, and in particular children, ultimately led us to studies of corporal punishment. Having grown up in Christian households and having been educated in the social sciences at a Christian university, we were well aware of the corporal punishment passages in the Bible and their presumed impact on high corporal punishment rates in the United States. We were also well aware of the potential harm caused by spanking, including behavioral, emotional, and interpersonal sequelae (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff et al., 2018). We wondered whether we could offer a different way to interpret the corporal punishment passages by addressing and explaining them in a historical context, in an effort to change pro-spanking attitudes among Christians.

Professionals have developed a range of creative interventions designed to change positive attitudes and behavior related to physical punishment. Interventions vary based on both the content

of the intervention and the targeted outcome. The vast majority include measures of attitude change and behavioral intentions and focus on the research establishing the harm and ineffectiveness of physical discipline (Perrin & Miller-Perrin, 2020). Interventions that focus on changing positive attitudes toward physical punishment are a particularly important strategy for both reducing physical punishment and potentially preventing its use in the first place. In one study, an interactive multimedia intervention that teaches alternatives to physical punishment, known as the Play Nicely program, decreased parents' positive attitudes toward spanking and intentions to use spanking as a disciplinary technique compared to a control group (Chavis et al., 2013; Scholer et al., 2010). In another study, first-time mothers received baby books that educated them about effective alternatives to physical punishment and also about typical child development. Compared to mothers who received non-educational baby books or no books, mothers who received the educational baby books reported significantly less favorable views toward physical punishment, and these effects were strongest for African American parents and parents with low levels of educational attainment (Reich et al., 2012).

As discussed above, Christians, especially conservative Protestants, are significantly more likely than other parents to support and practice physical punishment (Ellison et al., 2011; Vieth, 2014). Therefore, it is important to offer alternative interpretations of Biblical scriptures that are often interpreted by conservative Christians as a mandate to spank. The intervention that we created, therefore, focused on two factors: 1. The research evidence on spanking, as compared to other disciplinary techniques, and 2. A progressive biblical interpretation of Proverbs passages that influence many Christians.

Our intervention was based, in large part, on William Webb's book, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (2011). Webb, a conservative Protestant himself, reminds the reader that the Bible must be read within the cultural context in which it was written. He describes an ancient world in which the weak and powerless, including women, children, ethnic minorities, and slaves, were sometimes violently mistreated. Proverbs passages relevant to the spanking debate, he argues, were directed towards a people who understood "blows and wounds" as the *only* way to "cleanse evil away" (Proverbs 20:30). These passages, he argued, should actually be understood as an attempt to reign in violence.

The first empirical intervention study we published, "Changing Attitudes About Spanking Using Alternative Biblical Interpretations," was based on a sample of 121 students at our University (Perrin et al., 2017). Students were randomly assigned to participate in one of three intervention conditions. In the first condition (Research Only), students read a summary that described the research evidence showing a link between spanking and a number of negative outcomes, including noncompliance, aggression toward others, anxiety and depression, negative parent-child interactions, and delinquent behavior. The summary concluded by stating that "the preponderance of evidence suggests that spanking causes more harm than good." For the second condition (Research and Religion), students read the summary from the Research Only condition as well as a summary describing a progressive Christian interpretation of biblical passages about discipline. The summary addressed the importance of viewing biblical passages within a cultural context that suggests that such passages are actually meant to place restrictions on violence in a culture where violence was common. The summary also emphasized that many current Christian interpretations of these biblical passages are not literal interpretations, such as Focus on the Family's "two smack max" policy (Ingram, n.d.). The summary concluded by suggesting that, although the biblical passages address the importance of child discipline, non-violent disciplinary practices are likely more effective and that Christians need not, and should not, spank. For the third condition (Control), students read a summary of

research on the link between daycare and various child development outcomes such as cognitive development, child behavior problems, child health, quality of family functioning, and social competence.

For each intervention condition, a 30-40-minute intervention session of approximately 5-20 students each, was conducted by the authors in a classroom setting. Students in all conditions were exposed to their condition's intervention, as described above, designed to influence attitudes toward spanking. In each of these conditions, students read the respective summary, followed by a brief oral summary of that information and a time to clarify any questions about the information. Students complete an assessment of attitudes toward child discipline both four weeks prior to the intervention sessions and then immediately following the interventions.

Findings indicate that both the intervention conditions decreased positive attitudes toward spanking compared to the Control condition. In addition, the combined Research and Religion condition demonstrated a greater decrease in favorable attitudes toward spanking compared to the Research Only condition. Although the students in the Research and Religion condition were exposed to both the empirical research on spanking as well as alternative interpretations of biblical scripture, this study demonstrated that *additional change* is possible when religious convictions are also addressed.

The second empirical intervention study we published, "Changing Attitudes About Spanking Among Conservative Christians Using Interventions that Focus on Empirical Research Evidence and Alternative Biblical Interpretations," was based on a sample of 129 students at our university (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2017). Students were randomly assigned to participate in one of three intervention conditions: Research Only, Religion Only, and Research and Religion. Similar to our earlier study, students in the Research Only condition read the same summary used in our initial study describing the research evidence showing a link between spanking and a number of negative outcomes. For the Religion Only condition, students read the same summary used in our initial study describing a progressive Christian interpretation of biblical passages about discipline. In the third Research and Religion Condition, students read both summaries included in the two previous conditions.

For each intervention condition, a 30-40-minute intervention session of approximately 5-20 students each was conducted by the authors in a classroom setting. Students in all conditions were exposed to their condition's intervention as described above. In each condition, students read the respective summary, after which the researchers provided a brief oral summary of that information and answered any questions about the information. Four weeks prior to the intervention sessions, students completed an assessment of attitudes toward child discipline as well as two measures of conservative religious orientation, including denominational affiliation and religious fundamentalist attitudes. Students completed the attitudes toward discipline measure again, immediately following the intervention sessions.

Findings indicated that the intervention conditions decreased positive attitudes toward spanking and that the impact of the intervention condition was influenced by whether or not participants had a conservative religious orientation. In particular, the students with a more conservative religious orientation evidenced greater change in their attitudes toward spanking. The greatest change occurred in those participants who heard both the research evidence and the alternative biblical interpretations. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of the various intervention conditions depends upon religious orientation, with the greatest decrease in positive attitudes toward spanking among those with a conservative Protestant affiliation and those high on religious fundamentalist beliefs among those exposed to both the research evidence and the progressive biblical interpretations.

The third empirical intervention study we published, "Changing Physical Punishment Attitudes Using the Alternative Biblical Interpretation Intervention (ABII) Among First-generation Korean Protestants,"

was based on a sample of 60 Korean adults, including both parents and non-parents, attending a theologically conservative Protestant church. (Perrin, Miller-Perrin, Bayston, Song, 2023). All participants participated in an intervention designed to decrease positive attitudes toward spanking that included three main informational components comprised of a written and oral summary: (a) the latest research on spanking, (b) what the Bible says about spanking, and (c) non-physical disciplinary methods.

The first intervention component (latest research on spanking) included a modified version of the Research Only condition written summary used in our previous research, updating the research evidence on the link between spanking and a number of negative outcomes. The oral summary that followed the reading of the written summary briefly described the research evidence on the ineffectiveness and negative outcomes of spanking and concluded by stating that "there is no compelling evidence that it is more effective than other methods" and that "the preponderance of evidence suggests that spanking causes more harm than good." The second intervention component (what the Bible says about spanking) included a modified version of the Religion Only condition written summary used in our previous research, presenting a progressive Christian interpretation of the Proverbs passages most commonly cited by Christians as a mandate to spank and modified to additionally include New Testament scriptures that focus on the way Jesus interacted with children, to potentially improve the intervention's effectiveness. The oral summary that followed the reading of the script described this progressive interpretation of scripture and concluded by suggesting that these progressive interpretations simply have not gone far enough and that "Christians need not, and should not, spank." The third component of the intervention (non-physical discipline) included a written summary that acknowledged and emphasized the importance of child discipline, but also emphasized the fact that there are many ways to discipline other than hitting a child. This component described the distinction between positive reinforcement and punishment, stating the superiority of the former, and providing examples. The section ended by stating the importance of recognizing developmentally appropriate behavior in children. The oral summary that followed the reading of the written summary emphasized these main points.

Participants attended three sessions: a pre-intervention assessment session, an intervention session, and a post-intervention assessment session, all of which were conducted in classrooms during designated Bible class times at the Good Stewards Church. All sessions included a professional interpreter who translated the presenters' English presentation into Korean. In addition, all measures and materials included both English and Korean translations of each item. In the pre-intervention assessment session, participants completed a measure of religious fundamentalism and a measure of attitudes toward child discipline. In the intervention session, which occurred five weeks after the pre-intervention session, participants attended a 30 to 40-minute session in which participants read each component of the intervention written summary, followed by an oral summary of the information the participants had just read. Participants were then allowed to ask questions directed at clarifying any of the information presented in that section. The post-intervention assessment session took place immediately following the intervention session, in which participants completed the measure of attitudes toward child discipline a second time.

Findings indicated a significant decrease in positive attitudes toward spanking from pre- to post-intervention, for both parents and non-parents. In addition, our findings suggested that the majority of our sample of Korean Americans endorsed religiously fundamentalist Christian beliefs, even more so than the general U.S. population. In particular, our findings indicated that the intervention was just as effective at changing attitudes among parents as it was with non-parents.

Limitations

Our research, however, is not without its limitations. One significant limitation of the research described above is that intervention outcomes focused on attitude change and/or behavioral intentions rather than actual behavior. This limitation is consistent with other studies in this research area (e.g., Chavis et al., 2013; Reich et al., 2012). Although there is potential value in targeting attitudes and intentions, the ultimate measure of an intervention's success in reducing corporal punishment would be to assess actual change in spanking behavior. One approach to reducing the frequency of physical punishment among parents who use physical punishment is the Adults and Children Together against Violence educational program (ACT: http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/), which was created by the American Psychological Association's Violence Prevention Office (2016). The intervention provides group-based parent education in nonviolent discipline, child development, anger management, and social problem-solving skills in school and community-based settings. Several evaluations have indicated that parents who participated in ACT reported using physical punishment significantly less often (e.g., spanking and hitting with an object) and using positive parenting practices more often (e.g., nurturing behavior) than parents in control groups (Knox, Burkhart, & Cromly, 2013; Knox, Burkhart, & Hunter, 2011; Portwood, Lambert, Abrams, & Nelson, 2011).

Future Research

Additional research should examine specific religious beliefs and behaviors, as previous research has found significant differences in attitudes and behavior with regard to spanking depending on whether religious affiliation or religion-related behavior, such as attending religious services, is examined (Petts, 2012). Indeed, some research has identified several benefits of Christian parenting, sans physical punishment. For example, the belief that the Bible is God's true word and that it has answers to important human problems is associated with parents using more praise and hugs. The sanctification of parenting, or the belief that parenting holds spiritual significance, is also associated with positive aspects of parenting. These include more consistency in responding to child misbehavior, less use of verbal aggression, more praising of child behavior and character, more emphasis on the importance of moral responsibility, greater investment and intentionality in parenting, sharing more positive memories with one's child, and having a greater emotional tie to one's child (e.g., Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006; Murray-Swank et al., 2006; Volling et al., 2009; Wilcox, 1998).

Additional research is also needed that focuses on targeting professionals who are in a position to influence conservative Christians, such as ministers and teachers. We are currently working on two relevant projects. One project focuses on an intervention to educate teachers and ministers in training at the undergraduate level that utilizes Victor Vieth's *When Faith Hurts* workshop. We assessed 95 students at a conservative Christian midwestern university at three time points: prior to the workshop, immediately following the workshop, and three years post workshop. Our preliminary findings suggested that the workshop was successful at changing positive attitudes toward spanking and in increasing the likelihood of advising parents against physical discipline and positive attitudes toward child protection. Changes were observed from pre-to post-test assessment, and these changes were maintained at the three-year follow-up. We are conducting a similar evaluation of Victor Vieth's *Keeping Faith* seminar, which he has conducted with over 200 religious leaders across the U.S. Our previous research, along with these continuing research projects, provides hope that we can reduce parental use of physical punishment and thereby protect the lives of vulnerable children.

Theological and Secular Resources

In addition to the William Webb book discussed in this article, other scholars have addressed this subject in a way that is theologically sensitive to the concerns

of conservative Protestants. The Academy on Violence and Abuse has published guidelines for working with parents who sincerely believe God requires them to discipline their children by hitting them (AVA, n.d.), and APSAC has also published guidance for a culturally humble approach to this challenging issue (Vieth, 2019). APSAC has also developed a membership category for faith leaders, and we are hopeful that expanded dialogue between faith and child protection leaders will be fruitful.

With respect to theological engagement, it may be helpful to provide accounts of those who grew up in theologically conservative communities, have painful memories of physical discipline, and have left these communities because of their experiences. As one example, Sarah McCammon writes about her experiences growing up in an evangelical community and recounts the physical and emotional impact physical discipline had on her:

> I had purple and green bruises the next morning. I also remember hearing my younger siblings screaming down the hall as they were disciplined in the same way. I will never be able to erase the sound of their cries, or the sound of wooden implements repeatedly swatting their little bodies, from my memory. At 41, I still have flashbacks and have spent significant time in therapy discussing these events. Based on my research, I know I'm not alone. (McCammon 2024, p. 192).

It would be intriguing to pose a case study such as this to an evangelical audience and lead a discussion on ministering to someone wounded in this way. A discussion with real-life experiences such as this may create a deeper understanding of the physical, emotional, and spiritual harm that can result from striking children as a means of discipline. It is perhaps an additional consideration for future research.

Conclusion

Research and popular evidence suggest that many conservative Christians believe that the Bible, at minimum, supports spanking, and may actually mandate that parents use physical punishment to discipline their children. However, social science research suggests that spanking is ineffective and may result in negative developmental outcomes. Our research on interventions to reduce positive attitudes toward spanking provides evidence that a culturally sensitive intervention approach that challenges traditional Biblical interpretations of scriptures can be effective at changing positive attitudes toward spanking. These findings further provide support that such interventions can be particularly effective with those holding conservative Christian beliefs, especially when such individuals are provided with both an empirical research perspective and alternative interpretations to scripture traditionally viewed as supportive of physical discipline. Although additional research is needed, there is reason to believe a more culturally humble approach to corporal punishment practiced in theologically conservative communities may reduce both corporal punishment and the physical, emotional, and spiritual risks associated with this form of discipline. ■



About the Authors



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A Guide to Spiritually Informed Care for Child Abuse Professionals

Donald F. Walker, PhD

Abstract

Religion, spirituality, and child abuse are often intertwined. This is particularly the case when the abuse itself involves religion, such as a physically abusive parent justifying their abuse by referring to Scripture. Separately, religion and spirituality may serve as resources for healing and coping following trauma. As demonstrated in this article, survivors of childhood abuse often experience complicated changes in religious and spiritual faith following abuse. In this article, I present a rationale for child abuse professionals who are mental health providers to provide spiritually informed care following childhood trauma. Then, I discuss spiritually oriented care in treatment for childhood trauma as a form of culturally sensitive psychotherapy for children and their families from various religious cultural backgrounds. Afterward, I provide a model for assessing the potential relevance of religion and spirituality to treatment for survivors of childhood abuse. I conclude by offering examples of spiritually informed, culturally sensitive care in the context of treatment following child abuse.

Keywords: child abuse, religion, spirituality, spiritually informed care

If a child or teenage client who had been physically or sexually abused asked you why God allowed their abuse to occur, how would you respond? Would your response be different if the client told you that they had stopped attending church but continued to pray to God for help working through their abuse? Or would you consider responding differently if the client told you that they never wanted to darken the door of a church again? In considering your potential response, what information would you need to respond in a way that is both culturally sensitive with respect to your client's religious and spiritual faith, as well as simultaneously trauma-informed? In this article, I present a rationale for spiritually informed care following childhood trauma for child abuse professionals who are mental health providers. Then, I discuss spiritually oriented care in treatment for childhood trauma as a form of culturally sensitive psychotherapy for children and their families from various religious cultural backgrounds. Afterward, I provide a model for assessing the potential relevance of religion and spirituality to treatment for survivors of childhood abuse. I conclude by offering examples of spiritually informed, culturally sensitive care in the context of treatment following child abuse.

Rationale for Spiritually Informed Care Following Childhood Abuse

Consider the following case examples, previously presented by Walker, Reese, Hughes, and Troskie (2010). To protect client confidentiality, Walker et al. (2010) used an amalgamation of previous clients and changed identifying information, including client names and ages. First, consider Kristy, a 7-year-old Caucasian girl who was sexually abused by her father, a deacon within a Baptist church. To intimidate her into silence, her father told her that she would "go to Hell and God would hate her" if she ever reported the abuse. Kristy was removed, placed into foster care, and referred for psychotherapy. She subsequently viewed God as angry and frightening.

Second, consider Isabel, a 17-year-old Hispanic girl referred for psychotherapy because she was a rape survivor. Isabel was raped by an older adolescent who was not a member of her family or her church community. Isabel had been raised from her early childhood in a religiously committed family. Besides individual psychotherapy, Isabel coped with her sexual assault by praying and by reading Scriptural

passages in the Bible that referenced God's love and protection of her.

Finally, consider Lamar, a 10-year-old African American boy. Lamar's mother sought psychotherapy for Lamar because he had survived a rape by an older teenage boy in his neighborhood approximately a year before. Lamar's mother was concerned about his increased angry outbursts and defiant behavior at home. These were problems that Lamar had not experienced prior to the rape. Furthermore, although Lamar and his mother had been active in church for years, Lamar had refused to attend church since the rape occurred. Nonetheless, Lamar's mother continued to actively attend church. Additionally, she reported frequently praying for strength and for God to help Lamar.

As Walker et al. (2010) suggested, for each of the above children and adolescents, religion and spirituality are central parts of the clinical presentation. However, each case differed with respect to the potential role of the parents' religiousness, the potential for religion and spirituality to be a resource for healing, and the effect of the abuse on the client's personal religious and spiritual functioning. As illustrated by these examples, religion and spirituality are multidimensional. Additionally, children and teens often experience complicated changes in faith following childhood physical or sexual abuse.

Indeed, previous research has identified multiple ways that survivors of childhood physical and sexual abuse often experience complicated changes in faith afterwards. Walker, Reid, O'Neill, and Brown (2009) reviewed 34 studies of child abuse as they relate to spirituality and religiosity that included information on a total of 19,090 participants. The majority of studies were conducted using research participants from monotheistic belief systems. The studies were classified according to both the form of abuse and the form of religiousness or spirituality that were examined. Several key findings emerged.

First, most studies identified damage to one's religiousness or spirituality (N = 14) following childhood abuse. When abuse damages personal religiousness/spirituality, it appears to do so by specifically harming the individual's view of and relationship to God. Walker et al. (2009) reviewed several studies that found that adult participants who experienced childhood abuse report having more distant relationships with God and are less trustful of God than non-abused participants (Kennedy & Drebing, 2002; Reinert & Edwards, 2009; Rossetti, 1994). In addition, adult survivors of childhood abuse also report believing that God is punitive, unfair, wrathful, distant, and less loving than individuals who have not suffered abuse (Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993; Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincellette, & Penk, 1998; Hall, 1995; Pritt, 1998).

Second, several moderators emerged for the link between physical or sexual abuse and spiritual decline following childhood abuse. For instance, several studies have suggested that the degree to which the abuser symbolically or actually represents a religious institution or deity is a significant factor in spiritual decline resulting from abuse. Rossetti (1994) studied adult Catholics in the United States, comparing those who had not been victims of childhood sexual abuse (N = 1376) with those who had been sexually abused as children but not by a priest (N = 307), and with those who had been sexually abused by priests (N = 40). Those who were sexually abused by priests were more likely than those in the other two groups to report difficulty trusting priests and, by extension, difficulty trusting God. Additionally, participants who were sexually abused as children showed a decline in trust in the priesthood, church, and God compared to those who were not abused; however, this decline was less than those who had been abused by priests.

In addition, there is some evidence that physical or sexual abuse by a father or father-figure is particularly damaging spiritually when compared to abuse by some other family member or by a non-relative. Kane et al. (1993) examined the impact of incest committed by a father figure upon 33 adult women survivors' perceptions of God. Father figures included a biological or adoptive father, biological

or adoptive grandfather, a stepfather, or a long-term live-in boyfriend of the survivor's mother. 61% of the incest survivors had left the religious faith community of their fathers. In comparison to a control group of 33 adult women, survivors of childhood incest were also more likely to report that God had negative or ambivalent feelings toward them.

Third, some studies (N = 12) suggested that the participants experienced a combination of simultaneous increase and decrease in different aspects of their personal religion and spirituality. In studies that reported on simultaneous damage and increase in personal religion and spirituality, most participants reported less frequent participation in organized religion with an increase in personal spirituality (such as prayer). For instance, Ryan (1998) interviewed 50 women who survived childhood maltreatment. Almost half reported no current religious affiliation. The others endorsed Judaism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and pagan circles. Three fourths of the women who were raised in an organized religion reported that they left the religion of their childhood. Half of the participants (25) reported questioning a God that could allow abuse to occur. At the same time, 64 percent reported that their spirituality was stronger after their experience of abuse (as opposed to before or during the abuse that occurred). Sixteen respondents (nearly one-third) specifically reported that God had been an agent for survival and healing.

Finally, seven studies gave preliminary indications that religiousness/spirituality can moderate the development of posttraumatic symptoms or symptoms associated with DSM Axis I disorders. In those studies, participants who maintained some connection to their personal faith (even if it was damaged from abuse) experienced better mental health outcomes compared to adult survivors of abuse who did not. For example, Doxey, Jensen, and Jensen (1997) surveyed 653 adult women who had been sexually abused as children as part of a larger sample. Emotional functioning was measured using several items designed to assess symptoms of depression. Personal religiousness was measured with three survey questions asking about the importance of religion in their lives. Doxey et al. found that religion moderated the relationship between abuse and depressive symptoms. Doxey et al. also found that women who were abused self-reported having better mental health than non-abused women, if they were religious. Among victims of childhood sexual abuse, those who were highly religious were less depressed than participants reporting moderate or low personal religiousness.

Spiritually Informed Care as a Form of Culturally Sensitive Therapy

Across professions, psychologists, counselors, and social workers are all ethically mandated to respect and support clients' individual differences, including religious and spiritual differences (American Counseling Association, 2014; American Psychological Association, 2017; National Association of Social Workers, 2021). We encourage child abuse professionals to carefully consider what respect for individual religious and spiritual differences looks like when client changes in personal religiousness and spirituality are expected following exposure to trauma.

As Walker, Courtois, and Aten (2015) pointed out, psychotherapists, on average, tend to report participating in organized religion less than the American public that they serve. Additionally, psychotherapists, more than members of the public generally, tend to gravitate toward individual spiritual practices without an organized religious context. Despite this, most Americans practice their personal spirituality in the context of organized religion without differentiating between religion and spirituality (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Walker, et al., 2015).

Therefore, Walker et al. (2009) suggested that, when psychotherapists work with clients from religious and spiritual backgrounds that significantly differ from their own, they may unwittingly or even intentionally "push" them away from organized religious

participation toward personal spirituality. This pull to encourage client movement from previously held religious values, beliefs, and behavioral participation in organized religion may be particularly strong in trauma psychotherapy. As indicated earlier, changes in personal religion and spirituality are expected following childhood abuse. When traumatized clients experience movement away from organized religion toward personal spirituality or ambivalence about different parts of their faith, this may serve to reinforce previously held therapist beliefs about how spirituality should be practiced. Walker et al. (2009) suggested that psychotherapists seeking to provide culturally sensitive trauma therapy should, at a minimum, be able to recognize their own countertransference to client religion and spirituality.

Additionally, psychotherapists might also consider that "persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world" is itself a DSM-5 symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 72). As I will discuss later, such persistent, exaggerated, negative beliefs are typically targeted for intervention in trauma-focused treatment for survivors of childhood physical and sexual abuse. In the context of evolving religious and spiritual beliefs following trauma exposure, psychotherapists need to carefully create a "holding environment" for child and adolescent clients, as well as their non-offending parents, to explore and resolve changes in religious and spiritual beliefs and values. As part of such a therapeutic holding environment, psychotherapists should carefully assess client and non-offending parents' pre-trauma religious and spiritual functioning. Then, psychotherapists should evaluate changes to such functioning following trauma. Finally, they should continue to monitor and then formally reassess changes to religious and spiritual functioning during and after treatment.

Child abuse professionals should also recognize and support pre-abuse religious and spiritual functioning to the extent that such functioning would be considered healthy *within their clients' organized religious backgrounds*. To assess whether that was the case, psychotherapists may need to consult with other psychotherapists from an individual client's religious background, a trusted clergy member from their client's religious background, or published online resources. An example of an online resources is a series of publications from the American Psychological Association on religion and spirituality as well as individual journals devoted to this topic. Journals from the American Psychological Association include Psychology of Religion and Spirituality as well as Spirituality in Clinical Practice. With respect to potential clergy members, psychotherapists should take care to avoid consultations with clergy that might reinforce abusive aspects of religion. For example, it is Biblically supported to avoid a clergy consultation from a clergy member who suggests the physical abuse of children or women is acceptable. Ideally, clergy consultation is best accomplished by having relationships with several clergy members in the community. If a therapist does not know any clergy personally or professionally, the therapist can consider consulting with multiple clergy members from the same religious background as their client, aggregate those responses, and consider the aggregate of those responses against published resources to get an idea of whether a child or family's pre-abuse religious and spiritual beliefs and practices were considered normative and healthy by their own religious community.

Assessing the relevance of religion and spirituality in treatment with traumatized children

As alluded to earlier, psychotherapists need to assess whether and how religion and spirituality is meaningful to a particular client's presentation. To do so, psychotherapists should begin by applying what Richards and Bergin (2005) refer to as a Level 1 versus Level 2 assessment of religion and spirituality to childhood physical and sexual abuse survivors. As Richards et al. (2014) explain, a Level 1 assessment is a broad assessment of clients' religious and spiritual background, their current religious

and spiritual functioning, and their own report of the potential importance of spiritual issues to their treatment. A Level 2 assessment is a more detailed, multidimensional assessment of client religiousness and spirituality. This part of the assessment can include client and/or parent completion of specific measures of varying aspects of religiousness and spirituality.

In completing a Level 1 assessment, psychotherapists should begin by obtaining basic information about whether a client considers themselves to have a religious background, and, if so, what their background is. The nature of a client's religious and spiritual beliefs and practice will vary depending on whether the client considers themselves Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or a member of another religion. More importantly, psychotherapists should learn about what kind of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or Buddhist client they have. In other words, what their faith means to them and how their religious and spiritual faith is practiced and lived out. In the context of treatment of child abuse, child abuse professionals are additionally tasked with trying to understand this information for their clients prior to abuse occurring and then afterward.

Additionally, Walker et al. (2009) rightfully point out that trauma psychotherapists need to carefully consider whether client religiousness and spirituality is a resource for coping and healing, has been damaged by abuse, or is both a resource in some parts of the client's faith and damaged in other parts of their faith system. To accomplish this, psychotherapists need to understand the degree to which clients considered themselves to have a religious affiliation prior to the abuse. Psychotherapists then need to assess whether and how client religiousness and spirituality has changed since the abuse.

As Walker et al. (2010) demonstrated, applying a Level 1 assessment of religion and spirituality involves initially asking several broad, open-ended questions related to religion and spirituality during the initial assessment. Depending on the client's responses, or if the psychotherapist suspects that client religiousness is related to their presenting problems, the initial broad Level 1 assessment is then followed up with additional, more detailed Level 2 assessment questions. Returning to the notion that spiritually informed care following child abuse is also culturally sensitive psychotherapy, asking Level 1 assessment questions about religion and spirituality need not be intrusive or unnatural. Such questions can be asked as part of an initial intake or during an extended assessment prior to beginning psychotherapy. During the Level 1 assessment, I encourage psychotherapists to ask basic questions, starting with the parent or legal guardian, such as "Do you have a religious or spiritual background?", "What is it?". If the parent or guardian answers affirmatively, additional Level 1 assessment questions that are still basic can be added. These include "How often do you and your family attend religious services?" as well as "Are there any religious or spiritual issues that you want to discuss as part of your child's treatment?" When meeting with the child separately, the child abuse professional can ask the child the same questions modified for their age and developmental level (e.g., "Is there anything about religion or God that you think is important for us to talk about in therapy?")

From the above set of basic questions, child abuse professionals can get a basic sense of whether a child, parent, or their family adheres to a specific religious tradition, and how often they participate in it (and by proxy, how committed they are to it). Psychotherapists should be careful to assess both parent and child response about the relevance of religion and spirituality to treatment against information about the index trauma itself that they are collecting during the assessment. In Kristy's case, presented above, she would likely have said that she didn't want to discuss religion in therapy despite the obvious relevance of needing to do so.

At this point, I wish to point out that for clients who are not religiously committed, for whom the nature of the abuse does not involve religion or spirituality, and who do not wish to discuss religious or spiritual issues in trauma treatment, culturally sensitive psychotherapy would involve no further inclusion

of religion and spirituality in treatment. I say this to also emphasize that spiritually informed care does not involve attempts to proselytize or impose one's own religious and spiritual beliefs and values on one's clients. Some assessments will identify non-religiously committed clients and families for whom religious and spiritual issues are not pertinent to treatment. In these cases, therapists demonstrate their cultural sensitivity to religion and spirituality simply by assessing its potential relevance and then providing treatment without further reference to it.

Conversely, some Level 1 assessments of religion and spirituality will undoubtedly identify clients for whom additional Level 2 assessment is warranted. In those instances, in addition to asking broadly about client religious background, therapists should consider obtaining additional information. Such information includes whether clients engage in personal spiritual practices. Then, if clients endorse engaging in spiritual practices, assessing the nature and frequency of those practices. This information should be assessed for both pre-abuse and post-abuse functioning. So, for example, therapists might ask child clients "Do you do anything like pray or read the Bible (or Torah or other sacred writings)?" Then, ask "Did you do anything like pray or read the Bible (or Torah or other sacred writings) before the abuse happened"? Depending on their response, therapists can then ask separately about how often clients prayed and how often they read the Bible before and after the abuse as separate behaviors. Additionally, therapists should assess public, corporate religious behaviors prior to and following the abuse. So, psychotherapists could ask "How often did you attend church (or synagogue, or mosque) before the abuse?" They can also ask "How often do you attend church (or synagogue, or mosque) since the abuse?" Similarly, psychotherapists should assess for the presence of spiritual struggles involving client relationships with God or the Divine. This can be done asking directly "Have you had any problems in your relationship with God (or Yahw-h, or Allah) since the abuse? Tell me about that". All these questions can be modified to allow parent or guardian reporting for themselves as well as for their child.

For example, Walker et al. (2010) applied this process to the case study of Lamar, the 10-year-old African American male, and his mother. Lamar's psychotherapist met with Lamar's mother prior to meeting with Lamar individually. The psychotherapist asked open-ended questions such as "Is your religious faith important to you?" and "Are there any religious and spiritual issues that you would like to discuss in therapy?" Lamar's mother indicated that her faith was important to her, and that she was concerned that while she continued to attend church, Lamar had refused to attend church since the rape occurred. This provided Lamar's psychotherapist with valuable information regarding Lamar's psychosocial as well as religious and spiritual functioning.

Later, Lamar's psychotherapist asked Lamar additional Level 2 assessment questions. Specifically, his therapist asked if he had talked to God about the abuse. Additionally, the therapist asked Lamar if he wanted to talk about God or about his faith during psychotherapy. Lamar responded by saying that he wasn't sure that God could help him, and that he didn't want to talk about God or religion in treatment. Given that Lamar's mother had reported that both she and Lamar frequently attended church prior to his rape, Lamar's self-report of his religious and spiritual functioning after the rape represented a significant change. In the next section, I provide examples of addressing religion and spirituality in treatment after the assessment process is completed.

Incorporating religion and spirituality into treatment following childhood trauma

Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2016) is arguably the single gold-standard, evidence-based treatment for children and adolescents who have suffered childhood physical and sexual abuse. Over 50 published studies with over 4,500 participants have found TF-CBT to be effective in treating post-traumatic stress symptoms resulting from childhood abuse (Thielemann et al., 2022). I have previously published an extensive approach to addressing religious and spiritual issues in TF-

CBT (Walker et al., 2010). In the present article, I highlight individual treatment modules from TF-CBT to demonstrate the importance of addressing religious and spiritual issues in TF-CBT. Specifically, I review religious and spiritual considerations in the Cognitive Coping and Processing I, Trauma narrative, and Cognitive coping and processing II modules. My rationale for doing so is that these three modules represent the heart of treatment in TF-CBT. TF-CBT progresses generally from helping clients and their non-offending parents to understand client symptoms, then to cope with them. Afterward, clients are taught to recognize their non-trauma related cognitions in Cognitive Coping and Processing I. Then, they are helped to integrate the experience of trauma into their lives during the Trauma narrative module before challenging trauma-related cognitions in the Cognitive Coping and Processing II module.

Cognitive coping and processing I

In this part of treatment, building on the previous module, psychotherapists help clients to understand the relationship between their thoughts (demonstrated through their own self-talk), feelings, and behaviors (Cohen et al. 2006, 2016). This is also referred to and demonstrated as the Cognitive Triangle (Cohen, et al., 2006, 2016). After learning the Cognitive Triangle, children and adolescents are then taught to replace maladaptive thoughts with alternative thoughts that can generate positive feelings as well as more adaptive behavioral outcomes. Cohen et al. (2006, 2016) encourage focus on non-trauma-related cognitions during this treatment module. Later, psychotherapists identify trauma-related cognitions during the telling of the trauma narrative. Finally, therapists challenge and correct trauma-related cognitions in the Cognitive Coping and Processing II module.

However, as Walker et al. (2010) pointed out, sometimes children and adolescents have cognitive distortions rooted in religion and spirituality that must be addressed during Cognitive Coping and Processing I before they can discuss their trauma or access religious or spiritual resources for coping. As Walker et al. (2010) presented, in Kristy's treatment, her psychotherapist needed to address her father's religious threats before she could even discuss her abuse. Due to her father's threats, Kristy came to believe that God would abandon her and be angry with her if she discussed the abuse with anyone, including her psychotherapist. To challenge these cognitions, her psychotherapist engaged Kristy in a collaborative process whereby the psychotherapist helped identify incongruities between the God her father described and the God she had learned about in church. This process then provided a foundation for challenging other damaging statements that her father had made.

Trauma Narrative

Prior to the actual trauma narrative, Cohen et al. (2006) encourage psychotherapists to first talk with child and adolescent clients about the therapeutic rationale for discussing the abuse and resolve client ambivalence about doing so. Afterward, therapists and clients typically read a psychoeducation book together before creating the trauma narrative itself. Next, children construct the trauma narrative, often by writing a book about the trauma. This frequently begins with non-traumatic events in a child's life, followed by disclosure of the least threatening parts of the abuse before building up to the worst moments of the abuse. Cohen et al. encourage therapists to consider asking clients to include in the book parts of the trauma that they thought they would never tell anyone. Then, clients are taken through a process of identifying what they were thinking and feeling during different parts of the traumatic event(s). Although a book is often made to tell the trauma narrative, the trauma narrative format is flexible. Children can also create a song, a poem, or construct a book as a series of pictures rather than written chapters.

Walker et al. (2010) suggested that because the primary purpose of the trauma narrative is to help

clients integrate the traumatic experience into their lives, psychotherapists might explore parallels to client narratives in stories from their own religious traditions. This could be done using sacred texts from clients' religious faith traditions as a guide. As Walker et al. pointed out, most religious traditions have stories involving making meaning of suffering and overcoming adversity with faith. Connecting spiritually and emotionally with those stories might help clients of various ages to make meaning out of their own experience of suffering when done in a developmentally appropriate manner. For example, Walker et al. suggested that to help resolve spiritual struggles, the story of Job might be particularly beneficial for Jewish and Christian clients to discuss in psychotherapy. The book of Job is an ongoing discussion of Job's experience of suffering between Job and God. Similarly, Walker et al. (2010) pointed out that therapists treating Buddhist children and teens could consider encouraging them to meditate on the Buddha's Four Noble Truths in relation to their trauma. In a related vein, Islamic clients could reframe their suffering as a temporary condition that will later be rewarded by Allah.

Elsewhere, I have repeatedly suggested that rather than trying to answer for clients why God allowed their suffering, the role of psychotherapists is to bear witness to client struggles related to meaning, purpose of the trauma, and suffering (Walker et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2010). Rather than answering those questions for clients directly, I have suggested psychotherapists help clients process their feelings about God by encouraging clients to ask God directly their questions about the abuse, and by inviting clients to write down their thoughts about how God might respond to their questions. Psychotherapists could also ask clients where Yahw-h, God (or Jesus), or Allah was during the abuse, and how Yahw-h, God, or Allah feels about it. This could be accomplished in several ways. First, psychotherapists can use an empty chair technique, helping clients to alternate between asking God questions before then stating what they think God's responses would be. In addition, this discussion could occur while creating a book during the construction of the trauma narrative. Clients could draw their idea of Heaven and/or God and have an ongoing discussion with God in the trauma book itself. Walker et al. (2010) presented the case of Kristy completing a trauma narrative in this manner. While completing her trauma narrative, the psychotherapist wrote what Kristy described while Kristy drew pictures in her trauma book. While completing the trauma narrative, Kristy's psychotherapist asked her where she believed God was when the abuse occurred. In contrast to her fears about God abandoning her prior to Cognitive Coping and Processing I in TF-CBT, when completing her trauma narrative, Kristy decided that God should be represented as a star in the sky helping her during the abuse.

Cognitive Coping and Processing II

In this TF-CBT module, psychotherapists identify, explore, and correct trauma-related cognitive distortions. Cohen et al. (2006) describe common cognitive distortions, such as children believing that they should have been able to prevent abuse. Additionally, children often believe their world will never be safe again following trauma.

In engaging spiritually informed care following trauma, I encourage psychotherapists to identify and explore trauma-related cognitive distortions with religious and spiritual content. For example, in asking about what God believes about their abuse, some religiously committed clients might discuss cognitive distortions with religious content, such as "God was punishing me" or "I sinned, so I deserved this". I believe that clients are more likely to discuss religious and spiritual issues in the trauma narrative and subsequent cognitive processing if they were subjected to religion-related abuse as part of their traumatic experience. As I have previously noted, some children or teens may experience abuse committed by a parent or clergy member who used sacred writings to justify the abuse itself. In those instances, it is particularly important for psychotherapists to explore and directly challenge such cognitions. For example, children who have experienced physical abuse might be directly told,

"The Bible doesn't say that your dad can hit you – we have laws against that".

Walker et al. (2010) discussed these considerations in the context of the case of Kristy, presented earlier. As indicated earlier, Kristy's psychotherapist had to challenge and correct Kristy's cognitions related to her image of God before she could even disclose the abuse to her psychotherapist. Walker et al. also noted that Kristy had subsequently been placed in foster care. Thus, she also wondered if God knew where she was and if God continued to love her. Kristy's psychotherapist challenged these cognitions by asserting that God was everywhere and knew everything that she did. Kristy's psychotherapist also reflected to her that God was always with her, and that she could talk to God whenever she wanted by praying. Challenging her religion-related cognitive distortions in these ways helped her cope with being in foster care.

Conclusion

Years ago, Dalenberg (2000) reminded child abuse professionals that abuse is simultaneously profoundly difficult for clients to discuss out loud and for psychotherapists to empathically hear. Similarly, religion and spirituality are also deeply personal. As has been demonstrated multiple times before, "spirituality and trauma are often inextricably intertwined" (Walker et al., 2015, p. 3). Spiritually informed care involves acknowledging the complex ways that religion and spirituality can be both harmful parts of traumatic experiences as well as resources for healing. ■



Author Bio



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Facilitating Restorative Justice in Faith Communities Where Sexual Harms Occurred

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Abstract

This paper outlines our work facilitating restorative justice processes with survivors and institutional leaders in faith groups or communities where sexual harms occurred. It explains why and how we turned a faith lens on restorative justice (RJ) cases in the Jewish world and in some Christian communities, and how we have engaged RJ with survivors of childhood sexual abuse in historical cases. We outline where and how we apply a faith lens in each phase of our five-phase model. We also outline some benefits and challenges facilitators must consider when using a faith lens to work with survivors harmed in faith communities.

Keywords: *restorative justice, institutional betrayal, sexual abuse, secondary victimization, faith, restorative practices, accountability*

The impacts of sexual abuse that take place within institutions such as schools, synagogues, churches, and camps are often exacerbated by institutional betrayal. This occurs when institutions engage in harmful behavior that impacts individuals dependent on the institution (Smith & Freyd, 2014). This might include a lack of support for someone who has been harmed or a failure to prevent future harm from occurring. When child sexual abuse (CSA) occurs in a faith institution or organization, there may be a spiritual component to both the abuse and the betrayal that ensues (Hurley, 2004). Those who perpetrate sexual harm sow chaos in the lives of those they victimize. Those who have enabled perpetrators contribute to that chaos. For those who experience it, CSA has rippling impacts throughout their lives and relationships.

When CSA is enabled or covered up by an institution, the responsibility lies both with the individual perpetrator and the institution. This is especially so when the institution disregards the harm or moves a harm-doer elsewhere. These actions were revealed to have occurred in response to years of sexual abuse committed within the Catholic Church (John Jay College, 2004, 2006, 2011). Given the many revelations of CSA within faith spaces (Raine & Kent, 2019), we must seek remedies that ensure the safety of survivors and the wider community; address structural, cultural, and systemic issues conducive to sexual abuse; and prevent future sexual abuse, (Ackerman, McMahon, & Benchimol, 2025). One promising remedy or approach is restorative justice (RJ).

Why Restorative Justice?

Restorative justice is a framework and a value set (Zehr, 2015). It is a way of being in relationship with others and an approach to addressing harm. While RJ has various definitions, we see it as a human-centered approach to repairing and preventing harm. This definition is particularly relevant in faith-based restorative processes and the Jewish spaces where we primarily conduct our RJ work. The Jewish tradition teaches that we are all made *betzelem elohim,* or in the Divine image (Genesis 1:27; Stein, 2006). Regardless of the harm we cause or have endured, our humanity should never be doubted. Seeing one's humanity does not excuse or justify sexual abuse or even forgive it. Instead, it enables us to build relationships that foster active accountability for the harm in service of survivors and their unique needs. This can help us create safer communities rather than

ignoring the harm and harm-doers or moving them to another community where they may perpetrate again. For survivors, victimization can feel like a stripping away of one's inherent dignity. This can be reinforced by how survivors are perceived and treated in the public, media, and their communities. Restorative processes can be a tool to help remind all parties of the human dignity of each individual, even after they have been harmed or have caused harm, in an effort to restore and heal.

Restorative justice refers to a framework of practices or a value set that guides practitioners as they create unique and individualized processes. These processes differ from typical criminal justice or ethics processes. For example, criminal justice and ethics processes typically focus on the statute or code that was violated, who violated the code, and what the punishment or consequence should be for violating the statute or code. There is very little space in such processes for the needs of the person who experienced the violation. Restorative justice processes focus on who was harmed, meeting their needs, and determining whose obligation it is to meet those needs (Zehr, 2015). As such, practitioners ask a specific set of questions to address harm. Practitioners ask: Who has been harmed? What are their needs? Whose obligation is it to meet those needs? They focus on addressing the causes of the behavior, engaging relevant stakeholders, and attempting to make things as right as possible (Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice addresses harm and its impacts, not law or code violations. There can still be consequences for such violations, but that is not the primary purpose of restorative justice. Importantly, no two processes will look the same because restorative processes focus on stakeholders' unique needs. We are two criminologists and restorative justice practitioners who have dedicated our careers to understanding sexual harm. One of us studies victimization, and the other studies perpetration. We are also both Jewish women who are ourselves victims of sexual abuse. One of us was a Jewish educator for over a decade, and the other led a synagogue community. Our Jewish faith values inform how we live our lives and how we conduct our work. It is why we imagined what it might look like to utilize a restorative approach to creating bridges between survivors and those who harmed them in Jewish spaces. We believed we could address several unique challenges through such a lens.

We began this work in the Jewish world, working with Jewish survivors of sexual harm, Jewish harm-doers, and Jewish institutional leaders under whose watch or care abuses had occurred. Upon request, we have expanded our work to church communities. Several of the cases we have worked on involved adults seeking accountability and repair from the faith institutions where they were sexually abused as minors. Among the challenges, we noticed that survivors in faith communities were equally or more aggrieved by the institutional leaders who failed them than they were with their primary harm-doers. Simultaneously, institutional leaders were looking to understand why survivors held them accountable and to do right by survivors responsibly. Additionally, survivors and institutional leaders were often living and functioning within the same faith community, frequently seeing one another and having mutual friends or colleagues who were also impacted by the abuse and its aftermath.

We also found that individual harm-doers were not taking accountability for their behavior. Some harm-doers were unable or unwilling to do so. Others were part of faith communities unprepared to accept their repair or did not believe it was genuine. While faith communities spoke about repentance and self-improvement, community members sought to excommunicate harm-doers from their Jewish spaces. To be clear, there are times when the most appropriate action for the community's safety is the removal of the harm-doer. This is especially so in cases of CSA. However, harm-doers were not going anywhere. They remained in the faith community with no accountability or support to take necessary steps for change. Meanwhile, the harm ricochets on individual lives and on that of the faith community.

Survivors shared with us that they had little interest in dialoguing or engaging with those who directly harmed them in any way. They were far

more concerned with the institutional harm they experienced and wanted accountability from the leaders of those institutions. For example, the majority of CSA survivors we have worked with sought answers from those to whom they reported the abuse and about what was done following their disclosures. They also wanted information about whether and how their records related to the abuse, disclosures, or interventions were kept. However, in many cases, records of the abuse were not made, or maintained, mandated reporting was neglected, primary harm-doers were no longer alive or reachable to take accountability, and institutional leadership had changed over the years since the abuses were committed. Nevertheless, survivors abused as children were seeking redress.

The same was true for the parents of CSA survivors who wanted to confront and get accountability from those to whom they entrusted their children. They, too, have been impacted by the abuse their children endured, and they are "secondary victims" (Karmen, 2019). We believe that RJ offers a framework to bring survivors and institutional leaders in faith communities together for accountability and repair processes that could also include members of their communities.

Research shows that RJ is an effective approach to addressing violent crime for both survivors and those who cause harm. For example, survivors who go through restorative processes are more satisfied with the process than those who go through a traditional criminal legal process (Latimer, Dowden, Muise, 2005). They are also more satisfied with how their cases are handled (Sherman, Strang, Barnes, et al., 2015). Importantly, restorative processes are effective at reducing the fear of repeat victimization and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Angel et al., 2005; Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, et al., 2015). Restorative processes are also effective at reducing recidivism among those who perpetrate violent offenses (Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, et al., 2015).

Restorative Justice Following Sexual Harm

While the literature on RJ and sexual harm is not as robust as the literature above related to violent offenses, the literature that does exist is promising. Satisfaction rates among survivors of sexual harm who participate in restorative processes are high (Koss, 2014). This is true among survivors of sexual assault (Koss, 2014), child sexual abuse (Julich & Landon, 2017), and incest (Klar-Chalamis & Peleg-Koriat, 2021). These studies also find that restorative processes meet survivors' justice and healing needs in ways that traditional criminal legal processes do not. The literature on restorative justice in cases of child sexual abuse is small, though Cross and his colleagues (2020) reviewed the existing literature and found that restorative justice options do exist for children who have experienced sexual abuse (for example, see Bolitho & Freeman, 2016; Gal, 2011). As in adult cases, there are best practices for facilitating and necessary conditions to be met that make restorative processes safe for everyone. Facilitator skills, proper suitability and readiness assessments, and flexibility and responsiveness are integral to successful processes (Cross et al., 2020, citing Bolitho & Freeman, 2016). These best practices are similar to those articulated by Burns & Sinko (2023) for adult sexual assault cases.

Still, there are concerns about using RJ in cases of sexual harm, including CSA, in individual and institutional settings. Concerns include fears of reinforcing power differentials, prioritizing the needs of the (mostly) men who perpetrate sexual harm over (mostly) women who experience it, and secondary victimization (Acorn, 2004; Daly, 2006). Power differentials are a distinct concern in child sexual abuse cases (Cossins, 2008), especially those that occur within faith-based institutions. Indeed, Cossins (2008) further argues that the RJ process can recreate relationship dynamics of power, control, and manipulation. We, too, have found this to be the case in some situations where the RJ process exacerbated

"existing power differentials between survivors and organizational leaders" (Benchimol & Ackerman, 2024a, p. 20).

Still, one crucial reason why we believe RJ is a path toward healing, justice, and prevention is that it re-humanizes the individuals involved . In their seminal book *Sexual Citizens,* Hirsch and Khan (2020) discovered that sexual encounters on college campuses involve one party to the experience viewing the other as an object in their sexual project, not as another person. This is most certainly also true in CSA cases, as children cannot consent and are used as objects at the disposal of the harm-doer. Survivors often see harm-doers as monsters, and harm-doers fail to see those they harm as fully human. RJ brings our inherent humanity back to the center and serves as the impetus for change. While we caution against putting a child who has experienced sexual abuse in an RJ process with an adult who harmed them, the literature shows that there are programs around the world that do engage in these practices with success (see Bolitho & Freeman, 2016; Gal, 2011). In our practice, we address historical cases where the victim-survivor is now an adult. We can explore restorative options more fully if it is the survivor's will.

Faith and Relationships in the Restorative Justice Triad

Restorative processes seek to engage all relevant stakeholders in a given harm. In institutional processes, this can create a complex web of people with whom practitioners must engage. A simplified way to think about the parties to a restorative process is the "restorative justice triad," which includes the person or people who were harmed, the person or people who caused the harm, and members of the harmed and harm-doer's community. Using the concept of the triad recognizes that harm inflicted on individuals ripples across their relationships and communities. Secondary victimization by community members and to them must be addressed in addition to addressing the harm to the survivor. Restorative processes create opportunities for repairing these relationships or creating accountability where it has ceased to exist. Indeed, the Reverend Dr. Danielle Tumminio Hansen (2024), drawing on the work of Susan Brison (20002) and Judith Herman (1992), writes that healing and meaning-making happen in the presence of others. Similarly, in speaking about her experiences of vicarious restorative justice, Ackerman (2018) notes that "healing from intimate harm requires connection."

Martin Buber was a Jewish philosopher, author, and activist who argued that life has meaning because of our connections to other humans. His most famous writings on the "I-Thou" relationship are paramount to understanding the importance of relationships in restorative processes (Buber, 1937). When two people fully and authentically show up for one another, a new dimension, "the between," is created, and the relationship "becomes greater than the individual contributions of those involved" (Martin & Cowan, 2019). I-Thou relationships require mutuality, respect, and authentic presence. These are the essential ingredients to an RJ encounter as well. Mutual, respectful, and authentic encounters drastically differ from "I-It" transactional encounters, characterized by seeing other human beings as objects or a means to an end. As we noted, sexual harm often occurs because those who abuse view those they victimize as objects to use to meet their needs. Using Buber's approach, RJ processes can be the lens and the container through which all parties can truly see the full humanity of each participant in the moments of the 'in-between'—the listening and learning that lead to the RJ encounter.

We have worked with almost 20 faith institutions in the Jewish and Christian worlds, including large denominations, seminaries, religious non-profits, and large and small congregations. Because every survivor's experience and response to it is unique, in cases with multiple survivors, we have seen a range of choices about whether and how to stay connected to one's faith community. We have worked with survivors who disconnected from their faiths or faith communities due to the abuses they endured

or to the poor responses from the faith institutions or communities they turned to afterward. We have also worked with survivors who have remained deeply connected to their faith communities. These differing views of faith by survivors harmed in faith institutions (Vera-Gray, 2023) mean we must be sensitive, careful, and discerning about whether and how to apply RJ through a faith lens. Indeed, Vera-Gray (2023) writes that some survivors who were sexually abused within faith institutions experience a profoundly negative impact on their spiritual well-being, while others find that their faith provides comfort.

Language of Faith

One does not need to use Buber's faithful language to help survivors and institutional leaders understand how paramount relationships and relationship building are to RJ. This is because the language of faith can be helpful or harmful in RJ processes in faith communities. Using the language of faith with those who have left religion behind or for whom religion was used as a tool to abuse can cause more harm. Survivors who were sexually harmed within faith institutions tell us that more harm is caused when faith leaders and community members use the language and practices of faith as spiritual manipulation or to silence them. For example, using the language of forgiveness without any true accountability causes further harm. Harm also occurs when faith leaders fail to live up to the values they espouse or that their organizations adopt. Silencing survivors for "the good of the church" or faith group is a form of spiritual gaslighting that has severe implications (Gavrielides & Coker, 2005). This can remind survivors of the initial abuse and requests to stay silent because of faith that were asked of them. Therefore, care should be taken when speaking to survivors to ensure that the language of faith does not alienate them from the RJ process.

That said, Buber provides a valuable framework for understanding the language used by faith leaders and practitioners. We have found that using faith-related language or terminology with institutional leaders can help RJ processes along. For example, using the language of faith and lessons from biblical texts has allowed us to connect with faith leaders, build trust, frame RJ concepts in a familiar language, and guide them toward true accountability. Interestingly, we have found that the Jewish faith institutions we have worked with do not necessarily understand institutional sexual abuse through a faith lens. However, their work with us helps them to see the connection between institutional sexual abuse and faith and institutional responsibility and faith. We connect faith to our work with them by teaching Jewish texts and values about abuses of power, sexual harm, accountability, repair, and restoration and asking institutional leaders to reflect on the parallels. We also remind them of their stated institutional mission, vision, and values and ask them where they align or misalign with restorative justice. This helps them integrate their accountability and restorative work with their larger mission.

It is clear that the language of faith is much more important to and effective with institutional leaders than it is for survivors. This makes it easier or more natural for them to understand that RJ and meeting survivor needs are part and parcel of what they should do as a faith institution. Ultimately, however, the parties to a process guide our decision-making about applying a faith lens.

Faith and the Model

Faith can be applied to restorative justice accountability and repair work in several ways and at several moments if appropriate and desired by all parties. We adopted a five-phase model consistent with best practices (Burns & Sinko, 2023). We modified and updated that model over time to address the increasing complexities of institutional cases. The below phases generally occur in chronological order, although sometimes phases occur concurrently.

- Phase I: Initial Contact and Institutional Readiness
- Phase II: Request for Listening Sessions/Survivor Readiness
- Phase III: Preconference Work
- Phase IV: RJ Process(es) and Encounters
- Phase V: Follow-up and Debrief

Below, we outline how we apply a faith lens to each phase when survivors and institutions desire it. We also discuss the challenges we face at each phase and the risks that arise.

In Phase I, we hear from institutional leaders seeking restorative processes. We learn more about the institution, the abuses that took place, whether and how faith played a role in the abuse, and the institutional response. This helps us determine the learning we must cover with them in later phases, including how much of that curriculum we will base in faith. We also determine whether institutions are prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to engage in restorative processes with survivors and whether we believe they will persist in the challenging work ahead.

Our work typically involves historical cases of sexual abuse that were handled inappropriately or not dealt with at all. In some instances, institutional leaders reach out because a fact-finding investigation recommends restorative options for survivors or because their community is asking them to respond to the abuse. Most of the sexual abuse cases we encounter involve a member (or members) of the clergy who sexually abused members of the faith community. However, some have included faith leaders who are not clergy members but worked for faith institutions and used their position and authority to abuse. Understanding the faith community and the role of primary and secondary harm-doers in the community is an integral part of this phase. This helps us determine whether or not we are the right fit for the process or whether we should be referring to facilitators who would be better suited to meet the needs of the faith group. Based on what we hear, we assess whether or not the institution is ready to engage in a process. Sometimes, we recommend steps an institution can take to become prepared.

This does not come without challenges and risks. Because the institution is the one paying for restorative justice processes, this can also lead survivors to believe that the client is the institution rather than the process itself. An additional challenge is that it is hard to truly know whether an institution is ready to engage in a process before being able to identify survivor needs or even whether restorative justice is something they are seeking. Exploring a process by initial conversations with an institution can lead to mistrust with survivors. Another risk is that, because of these challenges, we may be unable to build trust with survivors and advocates. A lack of trust stalls progress in a process.

In Phase II, we assess whether survivors are interested in participating in a restorative justice process. We listen to them talk about the harm they experienced, who they feel is responsible, and how the institution might meet their restorative, healing, and justice needs. We seek to understand how faith may have harmed them and how a faith lens needs to be embedded in the curriculum we will develop for Phase III. It is in these listening sessions that we commonly hear about the impact that the abuse or its aftermath had on survivors' relationships with their faiths, faith communities, or God. This is important to understand because survivors explain why they hold the institution and its leadership accountable for the harm that befell them or for its aftereffects on their lives. They are often seeking repair for the impact of abuse with which they continue to live. Some want to return to their faith communities or institutions. Others never left but want to be more comfortable interacting with the people in them or with the leadership. Still, others wish for restorative processes with the faith institution but do not wish to continue their relationship with the faith group. We often issue a public report or letter outlining what we heard from survivors and our recommendations for the next restorative steps (see Benchimol & Ackerman, 2023, 2024b).

Facilitating Restorative Justice

The challenges and risks in Phase II include engaging with survivors who may not understand the goals of restorative justice or those who seek outcomes that are antithetical to restorative justice. For example, some survivors want civil suits or criminal justice responses outside our purview. Similarly, another challenge involves working with groups of survivors whose needs and goals differ or are even contradictory. Survivors may be capable of sharing their needs and goals but are not prepared or ready to participate in restorative processes. Therefore, a risk is engaging with survivors who are not emotionally or otherwise ready to participate when even expressing this to them may cause harm. Additionally, there is a challenge in balancing the assurance that survivors' voices are heard with the confidentiality that institutions want to maintain.

While we meet regularly with participants throughout the process, Phase III is where most of our face-to-face and education work occurs. In Phase III, we create and deliver tailor-made curricula that prepare all parties for larger restorative processes where they sit together and hear from one another. We talk about the values of restorative justice, the faith group we are working with, and the institution. We discuss the similarities between their faith values and RJ values. Sometimes, we use biblical texts to illustrate how power can be abused or used for good. For example, we have drawn upon the biblical stories of Dinah's rape (Genesis 34:1-31) and Joseph's experience of sexual harassment (Genesis 39:1-20) in our teaching to discuss gendered responses to sexual harm as well as how bystanders and others respond to victims. We have also asked faith leaders to bring their examples from religious texts that speak to RJ and accountability. Additionally, we have expanded more broadly on texts about hypocrisy, communal responsibility, and gender as they relate to religion. Survivors have appreciated knowing that institutional leaders are learning this way. Some have even recommended how to deliver the message to faith leaders that RJ and faith values are tied.

In this phase, we also work to prepare survivors for the RJ encounter with institutional leaders. We teach survivors about what RJ is and entails and, when appropriate and desired, will do so using a faith lens as we do with institutional leaders. Indeed, survivors have shared that the learning they have done with us using a faith lens has brought them the "spiritual healing" they have sought. We also take the time to make the necessary inquiries about whether and how they want faith to play a role. For example, we ask whether they want prayer to be included and whether they want the process to occur in a religious setting. In one case, we ran the encounter in a chapel. We also ask which faith leaders they want present and who they prefer to speak first. These inquiries help give survivors agency and help us create the questions that will be asked, which may include questions about the spiritual impacts the abuse had on their lives.

One of the challenges we faced in this phase was recognizing the need to develop a curriculum for survivors too. We teach faith leaders that faith responses may harm survivors; likewise, we risk losing survivors' trust in us and the process if we rely too heavily on faith sources or language or if we include materials they do not want to learn about in our curriculum with them. Another challenge is when each party wants to know what takes place in the other's learning sessions with us and what they share. At the end of this phase is where we determine whether the parties are ready to move forward with an RJ encounter. This is a risky decision because the learning that we do in this phase can be triggering and lead people to become dysregulated prior to the encounter. We must, therefore, tread carefully and have had to pause processes at this stage.

The RJ encounter takes place in Phase IV. These encounters can be made up of varying constellations of the RJ triad and can take many forms, bound only by how creative all parties are willing to be. They provide opportunities for survivors to talk openly about the abuse they suffered and the impact it had on their lives. These may be survivor-only circles, small circles involving faith leaders and survivors where community members and partners watch and listen, or meetings of institutional leaders to process their accountability work. We have also led a process where

survivors were in circle, and institutional leaders listened. This was followed by a circle for institutional leaders where survivors watched and listened. We have also led 1:1 encounters between individual survivors and faith leaders. Each of these encounters has been powerful for both parties directly involved and those serving as witnesses and support people.

In encounters where survivors and faith leaders sit together, it is essential that faith leaders listen and, using the material they have learned about with us in previous phases, respond in restorative and healing ways to survivors. For example, after we issued a report outlining survivors' harms and the needs from a faith institution highlighting the need for a full-throated apology taking accountability, the institutional leader issued a public video apology naming the harms within the institution. His apology was rooted in the liturgy of the High Holiday service outlining harms committed between people. In another situation, we led a restorative conversation between parents of survivors and faith leaders. In these conversations, we co-created restorative options and accountability measures with participants. Those restorative measures became the basis for our recommendations for the faith institution more broadly. Parents of survivors expressed feeling heard and seen in those meetings.

Faith leaders must lean into their values as they share with survivors what they have learned and want to say in response. Where appropriate, we may begin or end the encounter with a prayer or poem, and there have been instances where survivors have asked everyone in the circle to pray together before we start. We give much thought to setting the right tone for the encounter. We invite everyone to name their intentions for our time together and write them on cue cards, which we place in the middle of the circle. Often, in cases with faith institutions, those values are faith-based.

Rabbi Jill Berkson Zimmerman wrote two prayer poems that we have used in the past. Both recognize the importance of sacred relationships and how sexual abuse damages these relationships. One blesses those who speak the unspoken and asks that we create safe, sacred, and accountable communities that can hold difficult truths while seeing the Divine in each person. The other asks for strength for those who speak up and that each community be emboldened to "examine itself" and "shine the light on abusive power" (Zimmerman, 2017a; 2017b). Whether in Jewish or Christian spaces, these poem-prayers have resonated with survivors and institutional leaders.

One challenge is ensuring that the encounter has been adequately co-created while the parties have still not come together. A risk is that they do not prepare themselves, using the tools we have provided before they walk into the encounter. Additionally, while we work with survivors on telling their experiences of harm at the encounter and with faith leaders on responding appropriately and empathically to those experiences, we ultimately have no control over what they choose to say in the moment. This can cause harm, and we have seen this happen. An important risk to note is that a process can unfold, everyone can be prepared, and yet it does not meet the needs of the survivor or the institution.

Phase V is where we debrief the process with each party, which might mean helping institutions figure out what and how much to share with their wider faith communities about the process they underwent. It may also mean helping them privately process the entire experience through their faith lens. For survivors, it is here where we learn how and whether the RJ process met their needs and expectations and how that impacted them more broadly. We have heard from survivors about wanting a spiritual guide or enrolling their children in faith-based spaces after the process. Sometimes, the RJ process leads survivors to re-engage with their faith or faith group. Re-engagement sometimes occurs when survivors have been recognized, acknowledged, heard, and offered what they feel is true accountability, apologies, and amends by the institution. However, by no means is re-engagement with the faith community the goal of RJ in faith-based spaces.

While the debrief may be understood to be the end of a process, it can be a place to explore further

accountability measures. A main challenge is ensuring institutions follow through with their commitments to survivors during the encounter. This often requires the inclusion of other stakeholders and decision-makers with competing goals and interests. Additionally, survivors are often left out of these post-encounter decisions, which causes them additional harm. While it may feel risky for institutions to include survivors in these decisions, the debrief process allows them to continue engaging restoratively with survivors.

To mitigate the challenges and risks we face throughout each phase, we work diligently to co-create each process and tailor it to the needs of the individuals involved. For example, we create leadership teams for processes with multiple survivors and have a survivor be part of that team. We continually refer to our iterative assessments of each party to ensure they continue being ready. We engage in active listening and pivot as necessary. We are transparent and honest with those we work with, even when what we have to share may be difficult to hear. We remind everyone of the goals of restoration, healing, and justice. We honor the humanity and dignity of each individual before us.

Conclusion

We have been facilitating faith-based RJ processes for six years. Each case has provided meaningful learning and growth opportunities for us as facilitators. We have heard it has done the same for those we have worked with. We have asked survivors about their experiences with us as facilitators. Four themes emerge from this question. First, most survivors feel seen and heard by us. They believe we are working in their interest to achieve institutional accountability by teaching institutional leaders, pushing for organizational change, and asking for specific needs to be met. Second, some survivors become disillusioned by the process because they do not see institutional leaders moving as quickly or as far as they would like. They can separate their satisfaction with us as facilitators from their feelings about the process. Third, however, some survivors become frustrated or angry with us. Some have provided helpful and constructive feedback on how we can improve our process or our communication. Others feel angry and hurt by decisions we have had to make in service of the larger project and the people involved. Fourth, some survivors never come to the table in the first place, as their distrust of the institution that harmed them remains high.

Institutional leaders have also provided feedback. Most are grateful for the learning we have provided that has helped guide them toward institutional accountability or to see survivors of historical abuse with more empathy and compassion. Most feel equipped to handle future disclosures. Some have been frustrated by the time it takes to get through a process but recognize that taking the time leads to better outcomes. One client was concerned that there was little communication after the debrief process for us to help them through decision-making and implementation. There have been instances where institutions have decided not to continue through a process because of the cost, the backlash in the community, or the inability to follow through with recommendations. There have also been cases where we chose to end the relationship because the institution was not prepared to engage restoratively or continued to harm survivors. In the few instances where our engagement ended, it has always been on professional terms with the option for the institution to reach out when they are better prepared.

We learn from every individual and institution with whom we work. Each case helps us adjust and refine how we co-create meaningful and effective processes. Similarly, each case helps us to apply faith lessons to our RJ practice more robustly. However, it is essential to remember that every case will be different and unique, as no two people or communities are the same. We must be humble as we begin and move through a case, as people within a given community or organization are the experts in their community. We must learn from them throughout the process. We must also be nimble. The needs of participants change throughout our time together. We must be willing and able to move with them as needs develop

and change. Notably, there are many other ways a faith lens can be integrated into RJ; this paper reflects how we have applied it.

Still, cases of historical child sexual abuse in faith settings present challenges for RJ. We are mindful of the harm that can come from participating in a process like this, regardless of an individual's role. It is one of the reasons we use iterative assessments. We continually check in, approach all work in survivor and human-centered ways, and co-create processes to promote participants' agency. Still, despite our best efforts, sometimes harm occurs. In some instances, we must pause processes because a party to the process has had setbacks, and this can be frustrating and disempowering. We must remind participants that we do not "side" with any one party. Our allegiance is to the overall process, ensuring everyone is safe and prepared to move forward. Sometimes, the institutional leadership lacks preparation, goodwill, and the ability to execute the necessary steps to meet survivor needs. Other times, the survivor(s) goals and desires are not aligned with restorative values. Both instances require us to reassess whether a process can move forward.

Whether or not we use a faith lens in our RJ work with those harmed in faith-based settings, for a process to be successful all parties must have faith in themselves, one another, the facilitators, and the process itself. Just as healing after abuse is not linear, neither is the RJ process. Participants have to weather the ups and downs; it can be challenging for them to persist. Our faith in survivors and institutional leaders has only grown over the years we have watched them do so. While we recognize that institutional RJ is not for everyone or every situation, we hope our model offers a modicum of restoration, healing, justice, and accountability to survivors seeking it.

Faith is powerful. When used appropriately and as desired in restorative justice processes it can also be healing. Participants have expressed that encounters have felt "phenomenal," "profound," and miraculous. We know that this is because of how they showed up for the process and all of the difficult work they did to get there. We are always honored to be afforded the opportunity to watch this happen and be a part of such holy work. ■

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A Voice is Heard in Ramah: The Critical Importance of Theological Engagement with the Topic of Child Maltreatment as a Means of Providing Spiritual Relief to Survivors

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Abstract

A growing number of scholars contend that theological engagement with the topic of child abuse is critical to reduce the maltreatment of children in their homes and houses of worship. Theological engagement is also necessary in addressing the spiritual impact of child abuse and can help mitigate the physical and emotional impact of trauma. This article defines theological engagement, details research showing the misuse of sacred texts in the abuse of children and offers a concrete illustration of replacing toxic theology with trauma-informed theology.

Keywords: *theological engagement, theological distortions, spiritual impact of abuse, seminary reform*

"This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'"
– Jeremiah 31:15 (NIV 2011)

The need for theological engagement with the topic of child abuse is increasingly finding its way into the academic literature. This is because theological distortions are often employed by offenders to justify their crimes and by religious leaders to excuse limited action or no action at all in response to revelations of abuse. These theological distortions contribute to the spiritual wounding of many maltreated children, and these wounds further impair the ability of these children to cope physically and emotionally. When theological distortions are replaced with a trauma-informed reading of sacred texts, survivors are more likely to develop a healthy spirituality which operates as a significant source of resilience and mitigates the medical and mental health consequences often accompanying maltreatment.

To illustrate the spiritual pain of toxic theology and the spiritual comfort of trauma-informed theology, this article gives an overview of research as well as case examples of theological distortions utilized by offenders in Jewish, Islamic and Christian communities. The good news is that a deeper, more enriching theology is already contained within the four corners of the sacred texts of many of the world's religions and is waiting to be mined.

Achieving the goal of healthy spirituality among survivors of abuse is likely dependent on seminaries to teach a trauma-informed theology. Unfortunately, very few seminaries prepare faith leaders for this task, thus leaving survivors of abuse to fend for themselves theologically in seeking spiritual relief from trauma. However, a handful of seminary professors have recognized the need for theological engagement with the topic of child abuse and have taken steps in this direction. The work of these professors is highlighted in the hope these fledgling efforts will blossom into widespread seminary reform.

This article begins with a discussion of what is meant by theological engagement with the topic of child maltreatment. It ends with a concrete example of

how this can be done. Utilizing the account in the Hebrew Bible of the sexual exploitation of Bathsheba by King David, the reader is provided an illustration of transitioning from a toxic interpretation of the Bible to a trauma-informed, spiritually comforting reading of sacred texts.

Defining Theological Engagement

The words and actions of children as well as the obligations of adults to children are plentiful in the sacred texts and other writings from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and other religious traditions (Browning & Bunge, 2011). Unfortunately, "scholars of the world's religions have generally neglected these themes" and have devoted "far more attention" to what "adults have done and said within a religious tradition" (Browning & Bunge 2011, p. 1).

When theologians interpret sacred texts, two terms are commonly employed. Hermeneutics is the "study and theory of interpretation" and "biblical hermeneutics focuses on approaches, principles and guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture" (Stone & Duke 2013, p. 137). Exegesis is the "analysis and explanation of the meaning of Scripture drawn from close, careful, thoroughgoing study of the texts" (Stone & Duke 2013, p. 137).

Theological engagement with the topic of child abuse does not mean a particular faith tradition needs to change its hermeneutical or exegetical approach to interpreting a sacred text. Instead, theological engagement means a deeper dive on all a sacred text has to say about abuse and communicating God's word to victims, offenders, parishioners, and the society at large in a trauma-informed manner (Vieth, 2024).

Case Examples of Theological Distortions

To better understand the critical role of theology in responding to abuse, it is helpful to examine the role theological distortions have played in Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities. With respect to Christian communities, there is significant scholarship analyzing both the Catholic and Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) child abuse scandals and the spiritual damage resulting from these distortions. Given this voluminous scholarship, scandals within these two Christian denominations are addressed at greater length. An overview of the role of theological distortions contributing to child physical abuse is also presented.

Theological Distortions Contributing to Abuse Within Jewish Communities

Judaism encompasses not only the Hebrew Bible but the "work of the classical Sages and Rabbis of the Jewish tradition, who from the 2nd century B.C.E. through the 6th century C.E., interpreted and applied the Torah and the rest of the Bible" (Dorff, 2014). These sacred texts make clear that "[c]hildren are especially vulnerable, and so in addition to the general provisions that the Jewish tradition made for protecting all people, it made special provisions" to "protect them from harm" and to "provide for their welfare" (Dorff, 2014, p. 569). Although the sacred texts of Judaism emphasize the obligation to protect children, rabbis who abuse children use a "discourse on spiritual and mystic topics" to create a "certain aura" around the offender (Krinkin & Dekel, 2023, p. 5). As one victim noted:

> The rabbi would talk about all kinds of spiritual things that need to be done. He would tell me to read all kinds of verses from the Bible and in the meantime he would close his eyes and mumble. It was, Wow! I felt that I was helping the rabbi to do holy and important things, helping him to save people (Krinkin and Dekel, 2023, p. 5).

Another victim of sexual abuse by a rabbi described the incorporation of religious concepts with these words:

> The abuse started from a religious place. The rabbi told me that according to the halacha he could not let me participate in the religious acts he was doing without determining that I was considered an adult which meant that I had at least two pubic

> hairs. I felt that he was all about the facts, and that all he was interested in was the halachic obligation (Krinkin & Dekel, 2023, p. 10).

Theological Distortions Contributing to Abuse Within Islam

The Prophet Muhammad was an orphan who "understood the vulnerability of orphans" and thus there are "many passages in the Qur'an that emphasize the duty to treat fatherless children with kindness, to defend them, and to seek justice for them" (Giladi 2014, p. 589-590). A collection of Islamic writings from the 9th century "includes several chapters devoted to the Prophet Muhammad's treatment of children and how parents are to express compassion, love, and mercy to their children" (Giladi 2014, p. 588). In the context of child abuse, the Qur'an is distorted by offenders to justify maltreatment. In a qualitative study of four men and two women sexually or physically abused as children by imams or religious teachers in the Islamic faith, survivors said offenders "used their knowledge of the Qur'an and religious text to construct a narrative by which sexual abuse was deemed acceptable. This was reinforced through the assumption that they were entitled to privileges and exemptions by virtue of their religious position" (Chowdhury, et al. 2022, p. 206). As one victim describes:

> So, he took me to the room and I was hysterical and he wiped my tears and he said words 'just remember every part of your body that gets struck by a teacher that part of the body will never go to… hell, the hellfire' (Chowdhury, et al, p. 207).

Theological distortions contributing to Abuse within the Assemblies of God

In 2025, investigative reporters from NBC News published a report in which they "identified nearly 200 Assemblies of God (AOG) pastors, church employees and volunteer leaders accused of sexual abuse over the past half century" (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025, p. 2). The number of victims exceeds 475 and nearly all of them were children (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025). The NBC investigative reporters documented the role of theology in abusing children. In one case a victim "recalled a leader in her congregation praying for lying, demonic spirits to leave her after she reported abuse by a church elder" (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025, p. 3). Another child was sexually assaulted "with a statue of Jesus plucked from a mantle" and told to repent (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025, p. 6). One offender told boys who resisted his sexual assaults that "real Christian men…weren't afraid to cry—or to touch each other" (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025, p. 16).

Theology was also employed to shield sex offenders and to keep or return them to the pulpit or other positions of authority—conduct that contributed to additional victims at the hands of these perpetrators. The Assemblies of God repeatedly "extended grace to abusers rather than pursue justice for victims" (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025, p. 7). AOG leaders created a disciplinary framework that "emphasized mercy" citing a verse in Galatians which reads "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should resort that person gently" (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025, p. 7). As one example of theological leniency, AOG church leaders learned in 2004 of a youth pastor secretly filming naked children but gave him nothing more than a two-week suspension. In 2016, the offender pled guilty to sexual assault and received a lifetime prison sentence (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025).

In addition to the proactive use of theology to abuse children, the failure to employ theology to protect children was also evident. In 2021, AOG defeated a measure for stricter standards to protect children because their lawyers concluded this would play "right into the hands of plaintiff's attorneys" (Hixenbaugh & Chuck 2025, p. 26). Apart from the fact that many attorneys would disagree with this advice (Clark 2009), AOG was elevating the advice of lawyers concerning liability above the unequivocal teachings of Jesus to protect children from abuse (Vieth 2018).

Theological Distortions Contributing to Abuse Within the Catholic Church

The John Jay College of Criminal Justice researched the extent of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy during a sixty-year period (1950-2010) and concluded that the sexual abuse of children was widespread with every region of the United States averaging between 3% and 6% of their priests accused of sexual abuse (Terry et al., 2004). By 2012, American Catholic Bishops counted more than 6,100 priests as credibly accused of sexually abusing children since 1950, which accounted for 5.6% of the total priests serving during that period (D'Antonio 2013).

The John Jay researchers documented a number of theological distortions priests employed to justify their crimes. Some priests said they were only responsible to God and could not, or at least should not, be judged by others, and that, to the extent they did anything wrong, their sins were already forgiven by God (Terry et al, 2011). Since they had been absolved of their sins through the sacrament of reconciliation, the slate was "wiped clean of sin" (Terry, et al, 2011, p. 108). Moreover, they had already been punished for their sins and this "should be enough to end the process of condemnation" (Terry et al, 2011, p. 112). In referencing their potential sins, the priests nonetheless "failed to recognize any harm to the victim." (Terry et al, 2011, p. 112).

In her analysis of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, Marie Keenan (2012, p. 66) writes "religious offenders use religion-related beliefs prior to the sexual acts to enable them to overcome inhibitions to offend, and after the offense to reduce guilt and maintain a positive self-image." Even so, Keenan writes that religious justification or minimization of the abuse by priests "may not be evidence of cognitive distortions" so much as "evidence of an institutional logic that is acted out by these men." (Keenan, 2012, p. 66). For example, Keenan notes that priests who engaged in "less intrusive abuses" told themselves "[t]ouching, although harmful, was lower on this sin scale than the more intrusive sexual acts, which were regarded as more serious and, therefore more 'sinful'" (Keenan, 2012, p. 66). According to Keenan's study, an "internal logic applied, accompanied by rationalizations and justifications that 'fitted' with their clerical perspective" (Keenan, 2012, p. 168).

In response to the sexual abuse scandal, the Catholic Church has implemented a series of reforms (Giardino et al., 2021). This includes personal safety education for children in Catholic schools, training for church workers, policies designed to limit opportunities for abuse, and seminary reform. The last consisted of a revamped "human formation" component of seminary education designed to assist priests in remaining celibate (Terry et al, 2011, p. 3).

Although these reforms are positive and likely have contributed to a decline of sexual abuse within the Catholic church (Assini-Metytin, et al, 2025), the need for theological engagement with the subject of child abuse has not yet been addressed. In one recent analysis of the child sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic church, Wheatley and colleagues (2023, p. 31) write:

> [W]e must resist the understandable temptation to suggest that the primary way of responding to Catholic sexual abuse ought to be the implementation of safeguards for children, at least as that has been understood in the U.S. The only way to adequately address the causes and legacies of clergy sexual abuse is through deep and sustained structural and theological reform.

Hans Zollner, widely regarded as a leading ecclesiastical expert in safeguarding children from sexual abuse within the Catholic Church, has also emphasized the critical need for theological engagement with the topic. Although Zollner finds some "helpful theological reflections" on the sin of child abuse, he says it "bears repeating that, 'particularly in systematic theology, there is still an enormous need for further reflection and research. Essential religious and church-related facets of the sexual abuse of minors have not yet even started to be theologically addressed'" (Zollner 2019, p. 692-693).

Zollner finds the lack of theological engagement "surprising as there is hardly any topic that concerns the church that has been discussed and reported so often and that impacts the faithful…" (Zollner 2019, p. 693). Zollner believes the results of the failure to engage theologically with the subject of child abuse "are devastating and the cost is huge: lack of orientation; paralysis of inner spiritual, intellectual, and emotional resources; and smothering of the spiritual, educational, and charitable mission of the church" (Zollner 2019, p. 693).

The most recent annual report of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors contains helpful language connecting the protection of children to Catholic and Christian doctrine. As an example, the report noted: "Victims/survivors and the betrayal of Christ's love are intertwined, because Christ, as victim and priest, is intrinsically close to victims. One cannot harm one of Christ's precious 'little ones' (Matthew 18:6) without betraying, harming, and, indeed, angering Christ" (Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors 2025, p. 21).

The challenge now is to deepen theological engagement with the topic of child abuse at the seminary level and in Catholic pulpits around the world. Theological engagement must also expand to address physical abuse, psychological abuse, neglect and other forms of maltreatment.

Theological Distortions Contributing to Abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention

In 2019, the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News published a series of articles documenting 380 SBC clergy and other leaders abusing over 700 victims. According to these journalists:

> Many of the victims were adolescents who were molested, sent explicit photos or texts, exposed to pornography, photographed nude, or repeatedly raped by youth pastors. Some victims as young as 3 were molested or raped inside pastors' studies and Sunday school classrooms. A few were adults—women and men who sought spiritual guidance and instead they were seduced or sexually assaulted (Downen et al., 2019).

At the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in 2018, the SBC president at the time (J.D. Greear) formed a "Sexual Abuse Advisory Group" to examine how the SBC was currently responding to issues of abuse and to develop recommendations (Vieth, 2023). After a year of study including "listening sessions" with survivors of abuse, the "Caring Well" report was released in 2019 (Vieth, 2023).

The SBC Caring Well report noted how often abusers "used theology as a way to manipulate and silence" victims (Vieth, 2023, p. 63). Utilizing the Biblical account of David and Jonathan, one pastor told his victim the sexual abuse was ordained by God (Vieth, 2023). Another pastor claimed God had spoken to him and informed his victim God desired the two of them to have a "special relationship" which resulted in a year of sexual abuse (Vieth, 2023).

The SBC Caring Well report discusses at length the need for theological reform or at least an awareness of the role theology often plays in the abuse of children. Specifically, the report states: "We must all be constantly examining how we may have wrong theologies, but just as much examining how predatory people can use 'right' theologies too for awful ends" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64).

The SBC Advisory Group noted several areas in which poor theology contributed to the abuse of children and adults.[1] First, the Caring Well report noted that the Biblical teaching that all are created in God's image was undermined as a result of "neglect

1 This summary is taken from a previously published analysis of the Caring Well Report findings found at Victor I. Vieth, *Lessons from the SBC Sexual Abuse Crisis,* 15(3) Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly 61, 64-65 (2023). For a deeper dive, readers are encouraged to read the Caring Well report itself.

to properly care for women, children, and the least of these as modeled by our Savior" (Matt. 18:6, John 4:26)" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64).

Second, the report noted the failure to "grasp the depravity of sin and its consequences" and concluded this failure resulted in "minimizing sin" and labeling sexual abuse as mere "mistakes" or "mess ups" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64). This resulted in "[b]laming those who suffered abuse" through insensitive, even cruel inquiries such as "What were you wearing?" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64).

Third, the report noted a "misapplication of confession, repentance, and forgiveness of sin" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64). In an effort to "restore peace and harmony," the report found SBC clergy and others had "rushed through" the need for repentance and that this often served "the interests of the perpetrator over the person who has suffered abuse at his or hands" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64). As a result, there was a failure to "ask hard questions of the perpetrator" and a failure to "require him or her to address and take steps to repair damage as a demonstration of repentance" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64). Moreover, the theological misapplication of confession and repentance resulted in a failure "to go straight to civil authorities" and allow them to conduct an investigation (Vieth, 2023, p. 64).

Fourth, the report stated the SBC had "failed to understand the distinction between the authority of the church and that of the state" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64). Rather than adhere to the Biblical command to "submit to the authorities (Rom 13:1-5)," the report found that some in the SBC had tried to "cover up or silence allegations of abuse" out of fear this would "damage the reputation of the church or of Christ" (Vieth, 2023, p. 64-65).

Fifth, the report notes that church leaders "often" responded to allegations of sexual abuse as if they were merely a "sin", such as "having an affair", as opposed to the crime they are (Vieth 2023, p. 65). As a result, child victims were required to "confront the abuser" and were asked or made to "accept an apology and 'forgive and forget'" the crimes committed against them (Vieth 2023, p. 65).

Sixth, the report noted that the SBC doctrine of church autonomy "has been misunderstood in the context of sexual abuse within the church" (Vieth, 2023, p. 65). The report noted that "leaders in some churches have provided cowardly cover for perpetrators and have claimed to be dispensing mercy while withholding it from victims…" In terms of reform, the report stated that church autonomy "is a valid reason that some things can't be done, but it is not a valid reason that nothing should be done" (Vieth 2023, p. 65).

Although not as detailed in its analysis of the role of theology in contributing to sexual abuse within the SBC, the Guidepost report released in 2020 included a chilling e-mail suggesting the devil was using sexual abuse allegations to stem the true work of the church. This e-mail states:

> This whole thing should be seen for what it is. It is a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism. It is not the gospel. It is not even a part of the gospel. It is a misdirection play. Yes, Christa Brown [a survivor] and Rachel Denhollander [a survivor advocate] have succumbed to an availability heuristic because of their victimizations. They have gone to the SBC looking for sexual abuse, and of course, they found it. Their outcries have certainly caused an availability cascade…but they are not to blame. This is the devil being temporarily successful (Guidepost Solutions 2022, p. 6).

Both the Caring Well and Guidepost report aid in understanding that when pastors and other church leaders fail to address abuse appropriately, they embolden sex offenders and other abusers to use theological distortions to justify their crimes (Vieth, 2015) as well as emboldening church leaders to use theological distortions to justify inaction.

Theological Distortions Contributing to Child Physical Abuse

In the United States, some theologically conservative Protestant communities influenced by popular Christian parenting books have adopted the view that the Bible *requires* parents to hit their children as a means of discipline (Burt & McGinnis 2025). Many Christian advocates for physical discipline push back on research documenting the risks of physical discipline, with one leading advocate saying he would rather go to jail than abandon his belief in corporal punishment (Burt & McGinnis 2025). This "brash insistence, and the fact so many evangelical pastor-teachers were speaking in unison, misled parents to believe that pushback against spanking must be religious persecution" (Burt & McGinnis 2025, p. 141).

In addition to instructing parents God requires corporal punishment, many Christian parenting books recommend the use of instruments including "Rods, switches, glue sticks," wooden spoons, and "plumbing line" (Burt & McGinnis 2025, p. 140). One survivor of physical abuse whose parents adhered to these books writes:

> I had purple and green bruises the next morning. I also remember hearing my younger siblings screaming down the hall as they were disciplined in the same way. I will never be able to erase the sound of their cries, or the sound of wooden implements repeatedly swatting their little bodies, from my memory. At 41, I still have flashbacks and have spent significant time in therapy discussing these events…I know I'm not alone (McCammon 2024, p. 192).

Since parents disciplining their children in this way may sincerely believe God requires them to do so (Vieth, 2014), these "parents must first be persuaded that the Bible does not, in fact, require parents to 'spank' their children" (Burt & McGinnis 2025, p. 144). A growing number of theological writers employing a conservative approach to interpreting the Bible conclude that there is not a strong Biblical basis for requiring corporal punishment (Vieth, 2017; Webb, 2011).

When theologically conservative Protestants are given sound Biblical reasons God does not require them to hit their children with hands or instruments, there is a significant change in their attitude toward corporal punishment (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2017). Research and the lived experiences of children abused under the guise of "Christian" discipline make clear "that doctrinal and theological preferences have real-life impact; they are never theoretical" (Burt & McGinnis 2015, p. 176).

The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse

A significant and growing body of research documents that many abused children are spiritually impacted because of child abuse, and this impairs their physical and emotional recovery from trauma (Vieth & Singer 2019). The spiritual impact of child abuse may be particularly pronounced when the offender is a clergy person or another offender who incorporates a religious theme into the abuse of a child (Pereda, et al, 2022; Lusky-Weisrose 2021). The spiritual damage resulting from abuse within a faith community may also be greater if the faith community fails to respond in a trauma-informed manner (Yih, 2024). A survivor of sexual abuse by a rabbi describes the resulting spiritual confusion this way:

> Once, after we were together, we got dressed and he put on his shoes like you do according to halacha [Jewish law], first right, then left, then he tied the left shoe and the right one. And I remember myself standing there and looking at him, and for a split-second feeling like I was hallucinating. We just did really forbidden things and now he piously observes the halacha about shoes? It seemed surreal to me (Krinkin et al., 2022).

At the same time, research finds spirituality/religiosity may be a significant source of resilience for maltreated children (Jouriles et al., 2020; Gower et al. 2020). Two scholars summarize the research this way:

> The research around religious and spiritual coping shows strong and convincing relationships between psychological adjustment and physical health following trauma. Spirituality provides a belief system and sense of divine connectedness that helps give meaning to the traumatic experience and has been shown over and over to aid in the recovery process (Gwinn & Hellman, 2019, p. 180).

The Potential Value of Theological Engagement in Providing Spiritual Relief to Survivors

A trauma-informed faith leader can draw many critical lessons from sacred texts that may benefit those who have been maltreated as well as those who care for the suffering. Describing the church's failure to preach on the many accounts of abuse in the scripture, and the impact of her own discovery of these texts, a Christian survivor writes:

> It is not as if sexual abuse is new to Christianity. Indeed, the Bible includes many texts in which rape and sexual abuse are explicit, and other texts where such behavior is implied. Yet such texts rarely find themselves included in lectionaries, or when they are, the abuse tends to be overlooked by preachers by placing the focus elsewhere. As a result, for people of faith these texts tell stories with which they might resonate, but they are texts which are unfamiliar. Discovering these biblical texts for myself was in some ways a #MeToo moment, in that I saw myself not on the periphery of the faithful but as one whose experiences were shared with the women and men of faith recorded in Scripture (Crisp 2021, p. 250).

Christian scholar Beth Crisp contends the "church needs theologians to actively engage with the theological questions of those who sit in the pews and may have no formal theological education" (Crisp 2021, p. 253). To this end, she quotes former Anglican bishop Alison Taylor who said, "Ordinary non-academic Christians need to hear how they can place the tragedy of institutional child sexual abuse in churches into the story of God and his people and their ways in the world" (Crisp 2021, p. 253).

Bishop Taylor's comments about fitting experiences of child abuse "into the story of God" is an astute observation applicable to all faith traditions and supported by research. We know from research that trauma impacts the body and the brain at multiple levels. As a result of abuse, memories of trauma may not be encoded like other memories but are "frozen and wordless" (Herman 2015, p. 37). When survivors of trauma were asked to describe their experiences while receiving an MRI, researchers found the speech areas of the brain were impacted, thus impairing the ability to "put thoughts and feelings into words" (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 43).

The Christian scholar Timothy Bourman (2021, p. 208) explains that, since it is "difficult for survivors to make meaning of their trauma because of the non-narrative, plot-less form their memories take", sermons about "the story of Jesus, his death and resurrection" may provide a framework for processing experiences of abuse and promote healing and otherwise coping with trauma. Echoing this sentiment, Professor Beth Crisp writes:

> One of the powerful moments in dealing with my own experiences of sexual abuse came as I listened to the passion narrative on Palm Sunday more than 20 years ago…The abuse suffered by Jesus was not the same as what I had endured, but at that time I could see in him an ally who understood some of the consequences of sexual abuse. In particular, Jesus was someone who had experienced repeated rejection and denial of his humanity, rather than being treated with the respect which one might contend is a human right (Crisp 2021, p. 251).

The Need for Seminary Reform and Continuing Education of Clergy on Child Abuse

If the "stories of God" are to be helpful and not triggering to survivors, clergy will need to grow their knowledge of trauma research and incorporate these studies into how they speak of abuse (Vieth, 2024) as well as in their church policies (Singer, 2024). This, in

turn, will necessitate implementing seminary courses on child abuse (Vieth, 2023/2024) and requiring continuing education on this subject.

There is some movement in this direction. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is the largest Lutheran denomination in the United States. At the 2022 Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA, the delegates approved the Memorials Committee's recommendation that "the Church Council consider authorizing development of a social message on child abuse and protection." (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, 2022, p. 74) In recommending this action, the ELCA Memorials Committee acknowledged "there has been no comprehensive address or guidance across the ELCA" (p. 74) on responding to child abuse and that it "seems clear that few rostered ministers or congregations are aware of or require best practices" (p. 74). The Memorials committee also suggested the need for better education, asking "what percentage of seminarians have received education on recognizing and responding to child abuse, including appropriate spiritual care? Likewise, how many rostered ministers have received continuing education on child maltreatment?" (p. 74). In November of 2025, the ELCA approved a "social message" on child abuse in which they make clear that all leaders, including volunteers, are expected to report all forms of abuse to the appropriate authorities even if they are not in a state requiring such reports (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, 2025). If information is received in the context of pastoral care or a confession, the ELCA also tips the scale in favor of reporting. The document contains strong language discouraging corporal punishment, expresses concerns about withholding lifesaving medical care on religious grounds, and calls for annual training and improved seminary education. The ELCA statement calls upon its congregations to meet the SAMHSA standards for trauma-informed care and lists minimal child protection policies each congregation should have in place. The statement also laments the church's failing to protect children and recognizes the potential value of specially trained chaplains to meet the spiritual needs of survivors. Throughout the document the ELCA makes a theological case for these and other reforms.

Other hopeful signs are that one Southern Baptist Convention seminary has implemented a mandatory child abuse course (Vieth, 2023) and the Center for Faith & Child Protection, a program of Zero Abuse Project, has developed resources for implementing courses at seminaries from all faith traditions (Zero Abuse Project, 2024). An additional promising practice is the growth of chaplains or spiritual care workers at accredited Children's Advocacy Centers to assist in addressing the spiritual impact of child abuse and to coordinate spiritual care with medical and mental health care (Vieth, et al. 2020).

An Illustration of Trauma-Informed Theological Engagement

In the Hebrew Bible, King David is described as a man "after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). Nonetheless, the Bible records an episode in which David sexually exploits a woman named Bathsheba and engineers the murder of her husband. In a scholarly analysis of how theologians have discussed this text, seminary professor John Schuetze examined 25 Bible commentaries. Fourteen of these commentaries placed some of the blame on Bathsheba for David's offenses, another six were deemed "neutral" even though all but one of them used terms such as "adultery," which would suggest a mutual sin (Schuetze 2025). Only five of these commentaries—a mere 20%--recognize "Bathsheba as the victim of David's desires" (Schuetze 2025, p. 133). Although 80% of "commentators portray Bathsheba as everything from a consenting partner to a seductress," Schuetze finds nothing in the text itself to justify this conclusion. On the contrary, the text informs the reader that while all the other kings are at war, David stays behind and from the roof of his palace lustfully gazes at Bathsheba bathing privately in the inner courtyard of her home.

In contrast to David's voyeurism, Bathsheba was "purifying herself after her monthly period" in accordance with Jewish law (Schuetze 2025, p. 135).

David's lust leads him to inquire about the woman and even though he learns Bathsheba is married he summons her to the palace, violates her sexually and returns her home. Schuetze points out it is "unlikely that Bathsheba knew David's evil intent" because of David's "stellar reputation as a man of God and person of integrity" (Schuetze 2025, p. 136).

Schuetze also takes issue with those who say that, since the text does not tell us whether Bathsheba cried out or resisted, she must have been partially to blame. Noting this is an "argument from silence," Schuetze cites the "huge power differential between David, the mighty warrior and king of Israel, and one of his female subjects" (Schuetze 2025, p. 136). Even if she had cried for help, Schuetze points out she was "in the inner chambers of the king's palace" and thus realistically had no recourse (Schuetze 2025, p. 136).

When David's exploitation results in a pregnancy, David engineers the murder of Bathsheba's husband and takes her as his wife. When God intervenes by sending his prophet Nathan to confront David, Nathan tells a parable in which Bathsheba is described not as a seductress but as "one little ewe lamb" (Schuetze 2025, p. 137). As if this were not enough to cast exclusive blame on David, Nathan boldly tells the king "You are the man" and at no point casts blame on Bathsheba. It doesn't have to be this way. If Bible scholars writing about the account of David and Bathsheba were more trauma-informed, they might recognize the powerlessness of Bathsheba and be better equipped to apply this account to cases of trafficking or other instances in which children and adults succumb to sexual exploitation as a means of survival. More trauma-informed clergy would be better equipped to note the courage of Nathan in confronting a powerful abuser. This lesson could then be applied to modern day child sexual abuse scandals in which very few chose to confront those with power who preyed on the flock.

Noting how David's misconduct began by shirking his kingly duties and instead engaging in voyeurism, a trauma-informed clergy would be better equipped to recognize the danger of ignoring child protection policy violations or other seemingly "small" misconduct. Faith based institutions have repeatedly seen how lesser infractions often set the stage for what has mushroomed into national scandals.

Conclusion

The prophet Jeremiah's account of Rachel weeping for the children who "are no more" (Jer 31:10) is also quoted in the Gospel of Matthew in reference to King Herod's murder of children in and around Bethlehem (Mt. 2:16-18). A prophetic voice warning us that children are in danger and the fulfillment of this warning through a mass killing is one of many accounts in sacred texts that speaks to us today. How might a member of the clergy connect these accounts in the sacred texts to the mass shooting of children in schools, churches and synagogues? What lessons could be drawn from these texts to protect children in places of education, worship, and in their own homes?

In these same accounts, for example, we are told the Magi as well as Joseph and Mary heeded God's warning and acted to protect the child Jesus from homicide (Mt. 2:1-21). One scholar used this lesson from the Bible in contending that faith communities should be proactive in implementing both adult and child education on the prevention of abuse in faith communities (Feigh, 2018). It is one illustration of how theology can be applied to protect children and to bring spiritual comfort when they nonetheless fall into harm's way.

Although faith communities have been slow to engage theologically with the subject of child abuse, there is a growing recognition among Catholic, Protestant and other faith leaders of the urgency of this reform. Some seminaries have begun to make incremental changes and there is an encouraging growth of theological scholarship on this topic (Nessan & Vieth, 2025). There is also a growing "child theology" movement (Stollar, 2024; Bunge, 2021) which includes scholarly application of the teachings of Jesus to instances of abuse (Vieth 2018).

Although child protection professionals should not advocate for any particular theological or religious worldview, these professionals must recognize the importance of faith to many survivors of abuse and support any research-supported reform that may bring spiritual, emotional and physical relief. In the absence of meaningful and sustained theological engagement with the topic of child maltreatment, Rachel will always be weeping for the children who "are no more." ■



About the Author

Victor Vieth, JD, MA *please see bio on page 6.*

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What a Difference One Life Makes: The Faith-Filled Journey and Child Protection Legacy of Pete Singer

Victor I. Vieth, JD, MA

In keynote addresses and workshops across the country, Pete Singer spoke of an experience from his childhood that deepened his understanding of suffering and influenced the trajectory of Pete's life.[1]

When he was a boy, Pete had a friend named Bobby. One day, after spending time at Pete's house, Bobby's mother came to pick up her son. Pete's mother commented on how well-behaved Bobby was and how she wished she could keep him. Taking the comment literally, Bobby's mother said, "Only if you can take all my children. You have to take them all."

What Pete didn't know at the time was that Bobby's father was a child abuser who was violent to Bobby, to Bobby's siblings, and to Bobby's mother. Bobby's mother sought refuge from her church, but her pastor told her the obvious problem was that she was not adequately submitting to her husband, and so she returned to a violent home. Seeing no other recourse to save her children, Bobby's mother killed her husband, becoming one of first women in the United States to successfully assert Battered Women's Syndrome as a defense (Hagen, 2024).

In the aftermath of this tragedy, Pete's mom told him, "This is what happens when churches and child protection communities fail to work together." It was a lesson Pete never forgot.

Pete dedicated his life to helping children like Bobby. For more than 30 years, Pete served children as a social worker, therapist, foster parent, consultant, teacher, writer, and eventually the national director of GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment)—an organization that works to improve the skills of faith leaders in recognizing and responding to abuse.

As a mental health provider, Pete encountered a sea of spiritually wounded children who struggled to find God amidst their anguish. Pete and I wrote an article on the spiritual damage caused by child abuse (Vieth & Singer, 2019). In that article Pete wrote about a seven-year-old child who was beaten, locked in closets, witnessed domestic violence, and was eventually abandoned. This child reached the following conclusions about God: "There's lots of bad things in the world. That's just how God created the world. Murderers. Kidnappers. He [God] pressed a button, and he made a mistake…He shouldn't have let those people do those things! [God] made a mistake" (Vieth & Singer, 2019, p. 1222).

This is what happens when churches and child protection communities fail to work together.

Pete came into my life 20 years ago. I was giving a keynote address at a child abuse conference here in Minnesota and mentioned an initiative in South Carolina called HALOS (Helping and Lending Outreach Support)—a coalition of churches and synagogues working with child protection professionals to meet the needs of maltreated children. Pete Singer was in the audience that day and he was moved by the work that was being done in South Carolina. Just as he was troubled by the knowledge of what happens when faith and child protection communities fail to work together, Pete was now emboldened by the possibility of what could happen if faith and child protection communities *did* work together.

Pete reached out to me to learn more, and I connected him with the leaders of the HALOS program. From there, Pete worked with faith and

1 *See e.g.* Pete Singer keynote at the Global Health Summit of the Academy on Violence & Abuse, St. Paul Minnesota, 2019, available at: https://vimeo.com/1084834080

child protection leaders to form a program called Care-in-Action, a program that developed faith and child protection collaborations in several Minnesota communities.

In one case, a mother and her three children fled an abusive partner, but their only housing option was a mobile home with a large hole in the floor covered with a loose piece of plywood. The danger was heightened by the harshness of a Minnesota winter. A social worker explained the crisis to Care in Action, a church member who installed floors professionally donated the labor, and the church paid for the materials. While working in the home, the church member noticed other needs—such as the need for a refrigerator—needs the church now offered to help with as well.

This is what happens when churches and child protection communities work together.

In another case, three children were removed from their home because of repeated abuse and neglect, but there wasn't a foster home that could take all three children. During regular sibling visits, one of the foster families grew to love all three children and inquired about adopting them. The county denied the request because their home wasn't big enough for three children. If, though, the family could convert an attached garage to living space, the county would approve the adoption. Unfortunately, the family lacked the money to do this. Care in Action found members of the faith community to pay for the materials, church workers performed the labor and all the children were reunited in what became their forever home.

Care in Action eventually served over 2,000 maltreated, neglected, and suffering children. This is what happens when faith and child protection communities work together.

As a result of his labor with Care in Action, Pete began to receive national attention. My organization and others began to invite him to speak. As a result, similar faith and child protection collaborations began to blossom. Eventually, Pete was hired to serve as the executive director of GRACE where he implemented and expanded multiple pioneering initiatives to improve the lives of children in need.

This is what happens when churches and child protection communities work together.

Pete also began to write, and his articles influenced thousands. Allow me to give two examples. In the United States, there are some investigators who believe it is acceptable when responding to a case in which a child is depicted on film being sexually abused to show the child a cropped image of themselves to verify that they are the victim in the film. Although this may quicken the investigation, it may also produce trauma to the child. Pete was the lead author on a 49-page scholarly article with 161 footnotes that meticulously walks the reader through the danger and offers concrete suggestions for interviewing a sexually exploited child without showing them an image of their abuse (Singer & Farrell 2022).

Shortly after Pete went into hospice care, I was teaching in Rochester, New York at a regional child abuse conference for 1,500 professionals. In the opening keynote, Dr. Sharon Cooper, one of the world's foremost experts on the sexual exploitation of children, began by displaying Pete's article on a screen and telling everyone in the room that this is the path forward and there is simply no need to risk re-traumatizing a child by showing them an image of their trauma. Dr. Cooper is repeating that message at other conferences to both a national and international audience. Pete's one article will reduce the suffering of countless children.

In 2024, Pete wrote a scholarly theological article entitled "Toward a More Trauma-Informed Church: Equipping Faith Communities to Prevent and Respond to Abuse" (Singer 2024). More than any other article before, Pete meticulously walked the reader through what it means to be a trauma-informed church. Equally important, he walked the reader through the many accounts of trauma in the Bible and showed us that caring for the abused and oppressed is not a peripheral obligation of the church, it is at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

In the closing paragraph of this article Pete writes:

> The world at the time of Christ was filled with trauma. War, oppression, sexual violence, child abuse, clergy abuse, spiritual abuse, and more left deep scars on many lives and communities. Into that world of despair came an unquenchable hope. Jesus proclaimed his purpose to create a way to God, to bring healing to those who suffered, and to call for justice for the oppressed. Jesus' focus remains unchanged, and he calls the church to reflect his heart, to be salt and light in a world of tribulation, and to be a source of hope and healing. If Jesus calls his church to this mission, we have no choice but to follow (Singer 2024, p. 76).

Through his decades of service to children, Pete followed Jesus into all the places where boys and girls suffer. Through his long battle with cancer, Pete also understood personal suffering and he faced this disease with courage and hope. After his death, I spoke to many people around the country who said Pete had reached out to them in his final days and they were struck by how much he was focused on comforting *them* in this time of departure. Simply stated, Pete remained a social worker to the very end.

A few days before he died, I visited with Pete in his home, and I asked him what he thought heaven was like. Pete became reflective, his eyes filled with tears and then, with all the strength a dying man can muster, Pete said:

> There is so much suffering in this world, so many hurting children. Heaven won't be like that. Heaven is a place where we won't need child protection policies because all the children will be safe. And all the children who had a distorted view of God because of the abuse they endured and the failure of the Christian community to care for them will have new eyes and for the very first time, they will see the love of God.

Pete Singer followed Jesus into a life of service to hurting children. On the other side of his last earthly breath, Pete followed Jesus into a world where fear and tears and pain no longer exist. A land where, in the words of Isaiah, the "wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them" (Isaiah 11:6). ■

Endnotes

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