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

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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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