

# 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

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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 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. through the 6<sup>th</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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).

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### ***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.<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

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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:

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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).

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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.” ■



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