



Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations
Diane Langberg, PhD.

“We must oppose every form of alienation, liberate people from every kind of oppression, and denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.” From The Lausanne Covenant, The Lausanne Congress, 1974.

We have spoken about global violence against women and both international and domestic sex trafficking. We see those as alienation, oppression, evil and injustice and resonate with the words from the Lausanne Congress that I just quoted. Do you suppose those same words are applicable to our prized and loved Christian organizations as well?

The title of this presentation is “*Sexual Abuse in Christian Organizations*”. The very stringing of such words together into a coherent title is appalling. It is horrifying that such words should work together. It is horrifying that such words make sense to us. They should not. Consider the words with me – compliments of Webster. Sexual: of or pertaining to sex. Abuse: to use wrongly; misuse; to treat in a harmful or injurious way; to deceive; to commit sexual assault upon. Christian: pertaining to the teachings of Jesus Christ; living based on the teachings of Jesus Christ; exhibiting a spirit proper to a follower of Jesus Christ, as in having a loving regard for others. Organization: the state or manner of being organized i.e. coordinated parts for united action; persons organized

for some end or work; conforming completely to the standards set forth for the organization. So what do we have when we string it all together? We have persons organized as the body of Jesus Christ, doing a work for Him in this world, ostensibly for His glory and rather than demonstrating loving regard for others as one might expect, using or allowing that which is sexual to misuse, injure or harm others. How can such things be?

Now listen:

Michael was eight years old when he first went to Christian summer camp. He was scared and did not know anybody. He was homesick. His counselor paid him special attention and that helped a lot. Then the counselor started taking him for walks outside in the woods after devotions at night. He started touching him in weird ways and doing other things Michael did not understand. He tried to tell the nurse that something was not right but she told him he was saying bad things and that his counselor was “a great kid and the son of the camp director and he would not ever do anything to hurt one of the kids.”

Sara’s parents were missionaries in Asia. When she was seven they took her on an airplane to another country and left her at a boarding school. She missed her parents and her home very much. She lived in a dorm with lots of other girls and a man and his wife who took care of them. The man came in the room she shared with another girl at night to pray with them. They had to kneel next to him and he would touch them on their bottoms for a long time. He told them after prayers that if they told their parents it would

force them to leave the school and then their parents could not tell people about Jesus anymore.

Melissa went to see her pastor about her marriage. Her husband was an alcoholic and very abusive. He would keep her up at night sitting in a chair screaming and cursing at her and then he would fall asleep until the afternoon. She would pull herself together to get the kids to school and go to work because they desperately needed the income. She haltingly told the pastor some things about the marriage. He was kind and invited her to return. He wondered if maybe her husband was abusive because their sex life was not great and said he thought he could help her with that. Her husband often said things about her failures in that area so she thought maybe that would help. It began slowly and subtly at first – just a hug at the end of the session. Then longer hugs, then a kiss. Then he began touching her, undressing her, telling her he would teach her how to do things right. She could not think; she was so confused. He started having sex with her. Eventually she tried to tell one of the church leaders' wives who told her husband. Then some of the men in leadership sat her down and told her what she was doing was immoral, and the pastor had said she was very seductive. She was not to tell anyone else because it would hurt the church and his ministry and people would leave. Perhaps it was best if she just quietly went away. That would be best for the church.

Sexual abuse in Christian organizations – such a phrase should be the king of oxymorons. Sexual abuse covered up in Christian organizations in order to protect “God’s work” – so-called. Sadly, though the examples are adapted and tweaked – they

are all basically true stories. I have spent several decades working with such scenarios and devastated lives. Many of them lives sacrificed on the altar of secrecy “for the sake of the church or the mission”. Also sadly, there are those who have been placed in positions of power in the Christian world – pastors, missionaries, teachers, professors, camp counselors, coaches and counselors - whose job was that of shepherding the sheep but who instead have fed off the vulnerable sheep in their care. Compounding that is when some of those ravaged sheep have tried to tell the truth of that abuse, so-called “Christian” organizations have closed ranks and protected the organizational structure rather than the sheep. People in power are protected because they are gifted, important, and successful or considered necessary to the furtherance of the work of the kingdom of God. Vulnerable sheep, who have not found it safe to graze, have been thrown out, silenced, slandered and frankly, abused yet again by the power structure of the body that is clearly not following its Head.

Review of Facts

We have already discussed throughout this conference some of the facts about sexual abuse. We know that at least one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused in this country prior to the age of eighteen. One in five women in the US experiences rape or attempted rape.

Sexual abuse can take many forms: verbal, visual and physical. Verbal sexual abuse includes sexual remarks about a person’s body or sexual comments. Visual sexual abuse includes being forced to watch pornography, exhibitionism or voyeurism and photographing someone in sexual poses. Physical sexual abuse includes touching sexual

parts of the body, being forced to touch another, putting objects or body parts in another's orifices. Most sexual abuse – of both children and adults – is committed by someone known to the victim. We are all appalled at the news reports of serial rapists or stranger rape on a city street, however, most of the time the offender is known to the child or the adult who is victimized.

Impact of Sexual Abuse on the Victim

Sexual abuse can have many long term effects in the life of a victim. The intensity, duration and range of effects is dependent on many factors: age of the victim, previous experiences of abuse, frequency, the violence level of the abuse, response to a cry for help, personality and support system for the victim and so on. Victims experience depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, self injury, alienation, sleep disturbance, distorted thinking (I am evil; I am trash; it is my fault) and loss of faith. Studies have documented that when the abuser is a leader in the faith community the damage is particularly pronounced. Needless to say, the victim's understanding of God and many precious truths in His word is twisted and frightening.

Listen to some thoughts written by a survivor of clergy sexual abuse in response to words written to her by a well-meaning friend about God's love:

“I do not believe you intended to inflict any hurt on me, and to the contrary, I expect you intended to offer some comfort and hope. But from my perspective, it is as though your email brandished in front of me the very weapon that was used against me. It is as though you are telling me that I should pick up that very same sword that was once used to eviscerate me and should fall on it all over again. I can't do that. My love

of God, my faith, my extraordinary desire to live the will of God...those are the very parts of me that were transformed into weapons that savaged and destroyed me. As a result, that part of my brain, that part of me that was once able to turn to God, to surrender to God, to pour out my heart to God, to put things in God's hands, to believe God would take care of me...all that part of my brain is inaccessible. It is electrically charged and it is the land of the predator...it is a ravaged land that is there within my own head (Christa Brown, *This Little Light*).

How Does It Happen?

How can these things be? How does the sexual abuse of a child or adult occur in a Christian home, church, school, or camp? And if it occurs, how is it that the victims are not protected but in fact, often re-victimized by the larger system in order to preserve what is typically called God's work? How is it that a woman is told by church leaders not to tell her husband that the pastor raped her? How is it that eleven year old girls are forced to sign a confession of *their* sin of seduction for causing a 35 year old missionary to molest them? How is it that a high school athlete has his college possibilities threatened if he tells on his Christian school coach? More importantly, how is it that God's name and honor and work and yes, even God's Word, are used as weapons to silence victims, first by the predator and second by the system, as if somehow our God was actually invested in protecting structure and form regardless of substance; or as if His work required protection through stepping on the necks of the oppressed, the victims and rendering them mute?

There are many factors contributing to this heinous problem. I want to consider a few of them with you today. We will have to do so briefly due to time but hopefully this seminar will open your eyes and ears and hearts to some of the issues involved so that if you are ever confronted with abuse within a Christian organization, home or community you will be better equipped to call the body of Christ to respond with *His* likeness by demonstrating truth, justice and mercy rather than fear, secrecy and ultimately destruction. We will consider the culture of systems, deception, the abuse of power, response to an offender and a few governing principles.

The Culture of Systems

A system consists of things or people so closely connected as to make an organic whole. A system has power significantly greater than any one of its parts. All of that power is brought to bear when the system is threatened. That is a good and often life saving response when a system is threatened by disease or injury. It is life endangering when all that force is used to hide something that is not right or that is poisonous to the system.

Think of the system of the physical body as an example. If I experience pain in one of my eyes it gets immediate attention. It waters automatically. I close it and my other eye takes over seeing for me. My hands participate by getting water to flush it out. My brain processes what is happening and makes the decision of whether or not to call an ophthalmologist. Something is wrong and the system unites all its power to get it made right and protect the injured part in a way that is healing.

Conversely, suppose I find a lump on my body and decide to ignore it. I am fearful of what it might mean; I do not want to go through all the appointments and tests and possibly treatment that could be required. I know if it is cancerous the treatment is likely to make me sick or even cause some damage to my body. So I hide it and even attempt to “hide” it from myself. You would tell me my response was foolish and that my efforts at denial could cost me my health or my life.

You would of course, be correct, but do not systems of many kinds hide signs of potential illness all the time? Families of addicts do this with regularity. They cover for the alcoholic or drug abuser. Families with incest do the same. The system uses its power to such an extent that the victim knows not to speak and even works very hard to present a healthy face to the world. Those of you who are counselors work with sick systems that revolve around addiction, sexual abuse or domestic violence. You have felt the power that rears its head when anyone from within or without the system tries to drag the truth to the light and names the real problem and asks for help. An entire family will deny the truth and alienate a victim or truth-teller rather than face the fact that there is a cancerous lump that is metastasizing and destroying the system from within.

We also know that this occurs with regularity in much larger systems – systems that bear the Name of Christ. We have seen it in the church, in missions, in Christian organizations or communities around the world. There is the cancer of immorality, theft, corruption or sexual abuse and all the energy of that system goes to maintaining itself and a good appearance while ignoring the disease. Thinking they are preserving the system, called God’s, they fail to see and deal with the disease hidden within. They actually think that if they acknowledge the presence of disease and work to stop it, they will in fact,

destroy the work of God. It is however no step towards the recovery of a sickly system, to disguise the worst symptoms of that system to itself.

We *say* it is the work of the Lord and that we are using the power of the system to protect that work. In Jeremiah we read that the Israelites used to say, “The temple of Jehovah” while they were worshipping idols. God’s response to them was a call to righteousness. He called them to make healthy their ways and their doings and not to tolerate sin in their midst – no matter what they called what they were doing. We are told in Jeremiah 26 that the prophet spoke to the sick, sinful system all that God had commanded him to speak, and the system’s response was to say he must die. They wanted to render him mute. Go back to our examples of Michael and Melissa. The camp nurse and the church leadership wanted to render them mute.

No system – family, church, community or institution – is truly God’s work unless it is full of truth and love. Toleration of sin, pretense, disease, crookedness or deviation from the truth means the system is in fact *not* the work of God, no matter the words used to describe it. I fear we have a tendency as humans to submit ourselves to some command or idea of men, of the past, of tradition, of a systemic culture and in so doing, refuse to listen to and obey the living and ever present God.

Some of us have faced the power of systems that name God’s name yet look nothing like Him. That power can be formidable. It is hard to fight an organic whole, particularly when that system is full of people you love or those important to you and your future. We have seen in large, bold letters the power of such systems in Nazi Germany, Rwanda, Burma and Bosnia. The system seems to easily sweep others along into participation in its corrupt ways. How much easier it is to keep quiet or be swept

along, especially when the system has been about good work done in the name of God. We forget however that anything done in the name of God that does not bear His character throughout is actually not of Him at all. In our forgetting we are more loyal to the commandments of men than the commandments of God.

God thought up systems. He created family; the people of Israel; the church. He intends for them to be vibrant and full of the health of likeness to Him. They are to bless this world and be a force for righteousness, which is simply Christ-likeness, among men. When they are not, His people who are called by His name are to humble themselves and seek His face and give the call to repentance and righteousness that He might be truly glorified in His work even in its hidden, folded up corners.

Deception

Sexual abuse requires both deception and coercion or an abuse of power. The deception must first be of the self and then of the victim and the community. If it is to be covered up then that deception and coercion must also be carried out by the system – which then is in fact mimicking the perpetrator. The camp nurse, the church leadership was mimicking the perpetrators in their choice of deception and coercion of the victims. Sexual abuse cannot exist without these components. Deception is clearly involved in the perpetrator's relationship with the victim but first and foremost, the perpetrator is *self*-deceived. Deception of others is inevitably preceded by deception of the self. We as human beings have a seemingly unlimited capacity to hide truths that are painful to us. We have an uncanny ability to suppress knowing what we know. As a result self-

deception can be the root of terrible evil. Self-deception is not the worst thing that you can do but it is the means by which we do the most terrible things (T. Keller).

Deception then goes another step because the abuser, having deceived himself, now uses deception to lure and control his victims. When you study the concept of “grooming” as used by sexual predators– you see the ways in which an abuser seduces a victim and you see that deception is the foundation, first of the self; then of the other. The buying of gifts for the victim, the victim’s feelings of being special or important (we learned about that from our look at pimps), taking the victim to special places, or the use of words that hide something’s true nature (“I’m loving you,” “You are special to me”, etc), all are deceptive – first of the perpetrator, then of the victim. Then deception is urged or forced on the victim – “Don’t tell anyone. Bad things will happen to you if you tell. No one will believe you. I know how to present things so no one will believe you. You will go to jail”. These are classic statements for a pedophile but they are also used by pastors, missionaries and counselors who engage in sexual behavior with parishioners and clients. And they are used by leadership as well when it is attempting to silence a victim and protect the system. There are also the more subtle deceptions heard not only by the victim but also when the abuse is exposed in an attempt to deceive the public: “I never had intercourse with her i.e. it was not *really* sex or, “it would be so hard on the church to expose this” or “I was seduced into giving him/her what they said wanted” or “We really need to consider the impact on the organization if this gets out (ignoring of course their own failure to do just that)”. Sadly, one of the most powerful weapons of deception is the use of spiritual language. It does, after all, carry the seeming weight of God behind it.

Power

A second aspect of sexual abuse is the abuse of power. Power is simply the ability to make something happen. It is the capacity to have impact or influence. All of us have power. It is important to note that the one who has power does not always feel powerful. You can hold tremendous power and not *feel* powerful. You can feel tired, needy, weak and even powerless and yet wield tremendous power. Fragilities and weakness do not necessarily remove our power. They do, however, make us more likely to use our power destructively. The weaker and needier we feel, the more dangerous we are in our use of power because we are far more likely to use the vulnerable to feed ourselves. Those who feel powerless or inadequate often abuse power. In other words, those people in power compelled by their own anxieties, fears and weaknesses, all too often abuse the power with which they have been entrusted. Sadly, power used in conjunction with deception results in people using their power destructively while telling themselves that it is for the good of those under them. Melissa's pastor told himself and her that he was "helping" her marriage. However, Scripture says *all* power has been given to Christ and so any power we hold is derivative. We are called to the stewardship of any gift we have been given and power is no exception. We are to steward power for the glory of God, never for the glory or feeding of ourselves.

We cannot talk about power without also discussing its flip side, which is vulnerability. When someone is vulnerable it means that they are susceptible to attack or injury. The word vulnerable comes from the Latin meaning, "to wound". A woman with a man is physically vulnerable. A client in a counselor's office is vulnerable. A

parishioner in a pastor's office is vulnerable. A child with an adult is vulnerable. Whenever power is used in a way that wounds the vulnerable, that exploits trust; abuse has occurred. The word abuse basically means to use wrongly. When a person with power uses another for his own ends, abuse has occurred. The more powerful has used the vulnerable for food.

There are many different kinds of power. Physical power, the most obvious kind, is when the bigger and the stronger have power over the smaller and the weaker. Another kind of power is verbal. People who have a command of words can dominate a room, a relationship or a group. We use words to sway others, to persuade. Words can be used to humiliate, deceive, maneuver and control. Think of a child with much less knowledge and life experience and their vulnerability to persuasion – through words of comfort and love as well as threat and manipulation.

A third kind of power is emotional power. All close relationships wield that kind of power. I have emotional power over my clients. People in power can easily gain emotional power over a child, or over anyone who is on the fringe, neglected and starving for love and attention. Knowledge can also be a kind of power. If I know more or have more skill in something, then I have more power in those arenas. Those with a theological degree have “theological power” over others. Many of us experience this imbalance of power regarding knowledge when we are ill and need to rely on physicians to tell us not only what is wrong but also how to fix it. Think of a grown man with a young boy – the man knows more about life, perhaps has knowledge and skill in sports or music. The boy is drawn in and admiring of that knowledge. He is vulnerable to the

adult's power in his life. Think of a depressed, confused adult in crisis with an articulate, theologically knowledgeable leader.

There is also power of position. Position can be literal, such as the position of president, pastor, teacher, coach or parent. Position also extends to the power of reputation or status. Those who are determined by others to be brilliant or godly or successful are accorded power by virtue of the power of their reputation. They can simply walk into a room and because of their reputation people give their words and actions a certain weight or power. Think of a child and a well-known coach. Attention from that coach is desired by both the child and his/her parents. The power of the coach's reputation gives him unquestioned power in and access to the child's life.

It is critical to note that multiple kinds of power can be combined in one person. Position, combined with a commanding physical presence, verbal skill, knowledge and the capacity to sway people emotionally is a phenomenal combination. For example, let's take a strong physical presence, an articulate voice, emotional sway and special knowledge or skill and roll it all together in the position of a pastor with verbal skill, with an excellent reputation in the church and put it in the room with a female parishioner struggling with theological issues and emotional pain (less powerful physically, less credibility, less knowledge and less power in position), and you have a set-up for an abuse of power. Words, knowledge, skill, position and emotion can all be used in concert to convince or demand that a vulnerable person participate in some sexual act.

Certainly some perpetrators use power in overt ways – brute physical force for example. However, the far more common abuser is one who uses the power of persuasion, seduction or deception. He or she seeks out the vulnerable ones and looks for

ways to pull them in – through kind words or deeds, gifts, special attention, or praise – all the while assessing the reactions he gets. Every positive or passive response results in moving in closer. He wants the person to trust him. If he can gain the person’s trust his power over them is ensured.

It is always the responsibility of the shepherd or the one with power to maintain the integrity of the relationship – the boss, the counselor, the pastor. You also know without question that no pastor-parishioner, teacher-student, coach-player, counselor-counselee, adult-child relationship is to have a sexual dynamic. The *world* says it is unethical to do so. The Word of God says a shepherd is under no circumstances, to feed off the sheep. The Word of God is clear that vulnerable, sickly or broken sheep are to be fed, protected, healed and bound up. When the shepherd feeds himself rather than the sheep under his care God says, “Behold, I am against that shepherd and I will demand my sheep from him...so the shepherd will not feed himself anymore but I will deliver my sheep from his mouth” (Ezekiel 3:4, 10). When a shepherd feeds off one of the sheep the word of God is honored *when the shepherd is removed*. God is also honored when we call things by their right name – clergy sexual abuse is *not* an affair; pedophilia is not about struggling with difficult circumstances; molesting adolescents is not about a struggling marriage. Such things need to be called by their right names and the abusive person needs to be held responsible for his/her abusive behavior. God’s word calls us to open our mouths for the silenced; to rescue the oppressed; to care for the afflicted and needy.

Offenders and Repentance

This is a complex and important topic. I can only skim it today. Listen to a quote from a youth pastor who abused about 100 boys before he was caught:

“I considered church people easy to fool...they have a trust that comes from being Christians...they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people...I think they want to believe in people. And because of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words” (Anna Salter, *Predators*, p 29). As Christians we love words like forgiveness, redemption, and transformation. The use of such words does not a transformed soul make. Nor are such things accomplished by a few words, tears and little time.

One thing that has always puzzled me about the Christian community’s response to sexual abuse in its midst is its naïveté about sin. The Scripture is clear that our capacity for deception is incomprehensible to us. It is clear that when we keep sinning we actually become a slave of that sin and slaves cannot free themselves. It is clear that we hate the exposure of sin and will deny, justify and blame in order to escape responsibility. The Scripture is also clear that *sin* is the worst thing in the world – not exposure, not getting caught, not the loss of all things. It seems we do not believe what we teach. If we did we would know that an abuser is a slave and cannot simply stop. We would understand that the narcotic of self-deception has become so powerful in his life that he not only cannot stop lying; he does not even know when he is and has lost his capacity to tell truth from lies, good from evil. We would know that habituated sin has roots and tentacles and has long done damage to the soul so it is not easily routed out. And we would know that exposure, consequences and treatment are necessary if there is ever to be freedom from the cancer that has sent out tentacles all through his life.

A second thing we need to understand is that neither grace nor forgiveness means letting people do what they want, giving them what they feel they must have, or what will immediately alleviate their suffering. Grace is not a lack of restrictions (P. Monroe). In fact, sometimes the thing that is most grace-filled *is* restriction. When our God says, do not murder, do not commit adultery – is He not being full of grace to try and prevent us from engaging in those things that will eat us alive? We do so with our own children when we say, do not play in the street. The restriction is full of love and grace. Abusers need that grace extended to them. They have spent years playing in the street of deception, evil and abuse damaging both their victims and themselves. To say to the abuser, no, you cannot stay in the pulpit; no, you cannot simply transfer to a different ministry is not an assault on their dignity; it is not an accusation; it is not even a failure to trust (though not trusting them is wise) – it is a keen awareness that their sensibility to sin has been so deadened that they cannot see clearly and are in great danger of further destroying their own soul, not to mention other vulnerable sheep. Of course, we need to protect the vulnerable – our God calls us to that over and over again, but we are also protecting the abuser from his own habituated sin and deadness.

Thirdly, *repentance of habituated sin is never immediate*. It is not possible for it to be immediate. Discernment of good and evil, conscience or any desire to obey God have all been trampled and killed. Such things are not awakened and strong and consistent simply because someone has been caught. Repentance is not seen in tears; it is not seen in words; it is not seen in emotion. Repentance is long, slow, consistent change over an extended period of time because it is from the heart outward. Heart change is supernatural work. We all know that sinful humans do not turn into godly ones quickly –

our own lives attest to that. The bottom line is that you *cannot* tell if repentance is genuine for a long, long time. If you think you can you will have not only fooled yourself but you will risk vulnerable people. Any abuser who insists he is fine and needs no oversight is not safe because he still has no awareness of his capacity for self-deception. Any abuser who insists he is trustworthy has not understood the Scriptures teaching about self-deception and how it results in not being able to tell good from evil. Any abuser who thinks saying, “I am sorry” readies him for a return to ministry has no grasp of his heart’s capacity for deceit, his abuse of power, his assault on the sheep and his tragic dishonor of the Name of Christ.

Finally, we think we know people. God says we do not. He says we do not know ourselves. We tend to believe the externals; we believe success; we believe growth in Christian organizations means godliness in hidden places. Think about it: A man, who is the head of a multi-million dollar global Christian organization you believe in, is accused by a child who simply says, “That man touched me”. Or, closer to home – the child says it about someone on the pastoral staff of your church, about someone who has eaten in your home. Who do you want to believe? A simple, little, confused child whose four words, unbeknownst to the child, have the capacity to bring down a leader or even a system? Or the leader – the one you “know” and respect and give money and allegiance to? Instinctively we will move to protect (or so we think) our family, our organization or our community. We move to protect the system. God would have His people instinctively follow Him in ways that are full of truth, holiness and give honor to His name which means being willing to follow the trail and allow the work to be done to discover what is true before the eyes of God, not before the eyes of man.

Some Governing Principles

1. Sexual abuse of a minor, sexual assault and rape are illegal. They are felonies in all fifty states. There are authorities and professionals trained to handle such things. When Christian organizations think they are wise enough, discerning enough, knowledgeable enough or skilled enough to manage such complicated issues in-house they are disobeying the law of the land, further hurting the victims, colluding with the perpetrators, and arrogant. They are also giving credence to the perpetrator who said that church people are easy to fool. Many tend to think they should first determine the truth of the accusation. Christian organizations are not trained to determine such things. It is outside their purview and needs to be done by trained law enforcement, lawyers and trained mental health professionals.
2. The treatment of sex offenders is still not well understood and is highly specialized. Many well-meaning Christian organizations have extracted a confession, seen tears and apologies, read Scripture and given counsel only to release a predator back into the body of Christ. Sexual assault is a crime. The one who committed it is a criminal. Crimes need to be tried in courts and then followed up with treatment that understands the complexities and difficulties of working with an offender so that change truly occurs.
3. Clergy sexual abuse is not a crime in most states. Let us be clear, however, it is an abuse of power and a desecration of the name of Christ. It is *not* an affair, nor is the victim equally culpable. The safety of God's sheep results

from *His character* not theirs. And so it should be for the broken, confused, wounded sheep in our communities. They should be safe because of the shepherd's character and where they are not, a shepherd's character is exposed as being abusive of power, deceptive and clearly unlike the character of the one he calls Master.

4. Our God demonstrates again and again in His Word that His kingdom is the kingdom of the heart, not the kingdom of institutional structure. He makes utterly clear that He does not desire form over substance. When Israel was running into the Temple, following the rituals while worshipping other gods – when they followed form and the substance was rotten – God destroyed them. God hates sin wherever He finds it and has gone to death to destroy it. Do we really think He wants us to avoid the death of an organization or institution by hiding sin, by failing to drag it into the light? He would rather see every human organization and institution fall down than see such things preserved full of sin.
5. What is the primary call of the church today? Is it to evangelize, to hold to pure doctrine, to increase in numbers, to be big and successful, to help the sick and suffering of the world? When Jesus first called His disciples, to what did He call them - a profession, a creed, a task? No, He first and foremost called them to Himself. I fear sometimes we have lost that call. Our ears have been seduced away by others things, carrying our hearts with them. We are not only hurting the sheep as a result; we are breaking the heart of the Shepherd. He desires our primary allegiance to be love and obedience to Him no matter

the cost. He does not want primary allegiance to ministry, or service, or to institution, system or organization. He does not want our goal to be knowledge, or growth, or money or reputation or success or tradition. He wants us to love and obey Him. When we pursue Him above all else, the Body of Christ will be the safest place on earth for the most vulnerable of sheep.

If we understand this, then we will pursue love and obedience to Christ in our own lives, both public and private. We will understand that He is pleased when we are conformed to His image, not when we are successful or our system is thriving. We will know that hidden sin in our lives grieves Him more than any other failure. We will know that He cares far more that we look at the mirror He holds up to us so we can see ourselves in truth, than He does for the image we project to the world.

My father was a colonel in the United States Air Force. He graduated from a military school, went on to flight school and then headed for Europe and World War II. He returned home with medals he never displayed. When I was thirteen, the man who flew for Strategic Air Command and was a superb athlete, was retired due to a debilitating illness no one could diagnose. He spent the next thirty-two years becoming increasingly disabled and lived out the last years of his life in a nursing home.

As my father's disease progressed in his system he went from coordinated athlete to a man who could not tie his own shoes or get him self up out of a chair and was eventually unable to get his feet to walk down a hallway. I learned many lessons from

my father's life. Here are two primary ones: First, a body that does not follow its head is a sick body. My father was a very bright man who knew many things. He certainly knew how to tie his shoes and how to walk. However, he could not get his body to do what his head knew how to do. His body would not follow his head. The church of Jesus Christ has a head. Our Head has called us to follow Him. Where we do not, we are very sick.

Second, unchecked, untreated disease – whether due to denial or lack of treatment options – will eventually infest, strangle and destroy the entire system. It will become less and less able to function as it was meant to. Initially my father's body continued to follow his head; the deviations were small and could even be hidden. Over time, it gradually and more obviously failed to do so. At the end it turned that coordinated, 6 foot 4 body into a wreck of its former self. The brilliance, the capacity of his head no longer directed his body and eventually, his body died.

Listen to the word of God – this is from Ephesians 5 and I am quoting from a translation of the book by Bishop Handley C. Moule:

“All impurity, by which we mean that class of sin of the soul against the body, all of that is unworthy of the children beloved of the All-Pure...sin directed toward the ruin of another's purity should not even play upon your lips. True, those lips may sometimes need to refer to them, quite explicitly, to expose, condemn or warn. Any “lighter” naming of them as mere incidents in human life always carries a sinful motive and the “lighter” naming reacts upon the motive, to develop and quicken it...Such sin, without exception is a dreadful and debasing worship of the creature...Let no one deceive you with empty

words, empty of the eternal facts of the horror of sin and *that divine love will never bend divine holiness aside*...do not become sharers with them, allowing acts to grow into habits...Let not empty, deceitful words allure you into complicity. *No, nor let holy words do so, misused to the purposes of the enemy*...For you were once darkness...but now you are light...So, now, as Light's children, walk, live out your real life...Have no part with, no complicity with the barren works of darkness....while you watch and pray against infection from the darkness, *shine into it*...let the Lord's light into it so that the inhabitants of darkness may become light too."

Our Head puts before us a choice: the preservation of our systems – our families, churches, organizations and cultures – or love and obedience to Jesus Christ no matter the cost. Will I be complicit with the sin of abuse, in so doing align myself with the abuser and with darkness in order to preserve my world? Will I say I do so for the sake of the mission, the church, and God's work? Or will I ever and always be faithful to the name and character of the Head I follow though the earth shake and the mountains fall into the sea?

Our Head is the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world, to take away the sin of the world. Do we not know that following that Lamb means protecting all of the little lambs, both children and adults, who live in our churches, schools, camps, mission fields and homes and communities? These institutions bear His name – should they not also bear His likeness? May we, who are already in positions of power and influence, lead the way by falling down on our faces, imploring God to make us like Himself no matter the cost to our positions, our programs, our organizations, our ministries, or our traditions so that His precious sheep may safely graze.