

COVER STORY: It's Time for an Honest Apology to Women

When I first heard about the sexual scandal involving Mike Bickle and the International House of Prayer in Kansas City back in December, my initial reaction was defensive. I'll admit I didn't want to believe the charges made by "Jane Doe," one of the alleged victims. My thoughts went in this direction: "Maybe this was a false accusation? The church doesn't need another embarrassing scandal. The devil is a liar!"

But I cringed on Dec. 12, 2023, when Bickle released his own confession. His victim had suffered for years, but she finally mustered the courage to speak out. Then we learned there were more victims, revealing a sick game of manipulation and control. My heart sank when details surfaced about another woman who had been involved with Bickle in his earlier years as a youth pastor.

It became obvious that there had been a disturbing pattern of sexual abuse at IHOP, and with it, a pattern of hiding that abuse.

Details are still being sorted out at IHOP, and it remains to be seen whether that ministry will survive this crisis. (*Editor's Note: IHOPKC has announced the closure of all associated ministries other than the 24/7 prayer room; see this article for details.*) Meanwhile, those of us who are leaders in the global charismatic/Pentecostal movement have some serious issues to settle with God. The IHOP scandal is a harsh reminder that we have a much bigger problem. The worst thing we can do is go back to business as usual when the IHOP investigation ends. We need to stop, mourn for the victims, grieve for our own hardness of heart and publicly repent for the sin of sexual abuse.

In the past few years, Baptist women who endured various forms of sexual abuse from pastors, youth leaders or children's workers in the Southern Baptist Convention risked ridicule by coming forward with their embarrassing stories of abuse and harassment. It became obvious that leaders in that denomination at times refused to believe female victims of abuse, even those who were suffering from the trauma, depression, humiliation and suicidal thoughts that sometimes accompany sexual exploitation.

But before we throw stones at our Southern Baptist brothers for their mistakes and cover-ups, we need to examine our own hearts and remove the log in our own eye. We charismatics are certainly not without sin in this matter. Our reputation has been stained for decades because of blatant sexual scandal.

I began my job as a news editor at Charisma magazine in 1992. That was the year a female member of the 10,000-member Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Atlanta sued the church, claiming that she had been pressured into a sexual relationship with staff pastor Don Paulk. Eventually other women came forward to say they had been coerced into sex with Don's brother, senior pastor Earl Paulk, who founded the ministry in 1960.

Over the next few years, it became sickeningly obvious that this respected megachurch had become a nest of immorality. Rumors were confirmed that Paulk routinely preyed on female staff members, while at the same time wearing his trademark clerical collar and preaching his signature messages about the kingdom of God on earth. And just when we thought the reports couldn't get any worse, it was revealed that Earl Paulk's nephew, Donnie Earl, was actually Earl Paulk's son—the child of Paulk and his brother's wife, Clariece.

Another serious scandal erupted at The Tabernacle, a prominent charismatic church in Melbourne, Florida, where author and former Charisma columnist Jamie Buckingham had pastored for

years before his death in 1992. His successor, Michael Thompson, led a protracted revival at the church from 1995 to 1997 that drew 65,000 people. But in 2000, it was revealed that Thompson had engaged in affairs with multiple women in the church during the revivals.

Thompson was removed from the ministry, and the elders of the church were so disgusted by the scandal that they destroyed the Plexiglas pulpit Thompson used to deliver his popular sermons. But the damage was done. Victims had to seek long-term counseling, and the church lost most of its members.

Similar failures continued into the next decade. I can remember times when there were four or five moral failures happening simultaneously, all involving high-profile ministers in our movement. Those scandals involved Word of Faith preacher Robert Tilton; popular author and pastor Larry Lea; pastor Clarence McClendon of Los Angeles; Nigerian pastor Sunday Adelaja; prophets Paul Cain and Bob Jones (both were given a platform by Mike Bickle and IHOP); Colorado pastor Ted Haggard; Bishop Eddie Long of Atlanta (who was accused of abusing young men); preacher and Pentecostal historian Roberts Liardon; and revivalist Todd Bentley.

More recently, Charisma had to report on scandals involving charismatics as well as non-charismatic evangelicals. These included Christian comedian John Crist (who admitted to sexually harassing multiple women); apologist Ravi Zacharias; Chicago pastor Bill Hybels, founder of the Willow Creek church movement; and Hillsong pastors Carl Lentz and Brian Houston.

Be a Safe Place for Victims: 5 Things You Should Say to a Victim of Sexual Abuse

There are probably people in your church who have experienced the same type of traumatic sexual abuse, and they need love and support. When you minister to a victim of abuse, they need to hear encouragement and affirmation, not suspicion or

judgment. Here are five things you should say in this situation:

1. **I'm really sorry that happened.** Galatians 6:2 says we are to "bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." When someone goes through something traumatic, he or she needs to know we are there to support them. Victims of abuse are tempted to think no one will believe their story. You can say, "That must have been horrible." You can also tell them you believe them.

2. **You are not alone.** Remind the person you are part of a faith family that offers love and healing to people in their situation. Abuse victims are tempted to hide their experience because it is so embarrassing—yet true healing only comes when we bring our darkness into Christ's light. If you are counseling them, stay in touch and set up another time to meet—or get the victim connected to a support group.

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3. **That was not your fault.** The most common lie an abuse victim believes is, "I must have done something to deserve this." The devil is an accuser, and he uses abuse to destroy a person's identity and self-worth. Use your words to counteract those lies. Every victim needs to know he or she did not invite the abuse and are innocent.

4. **Can I pray with you now?** Jesus Christ has the power to heal an abused heart, and any follower of Christ has the anointing to pray for abuse victims. Isaiah 61:1 says: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted." You can pray for the victim to experience healing after they have shared their painful story. Jesus can remove the emotional stain that abuse brings. (Some abuse victims may feel uncomfortable being touched when you pray, so

be sure to ask their permission before you lay hands on their shoulder.)

5. Can I help you find counseling? Prayer ministry at an altar can be powerful, but most abuse victims need additional follow-up. Do not just pray and then announce, “Now you are healed!” Encourage the person you are praying for to seek more counseling, preferably from a professional who has Christian values. Most abuse victims have layers of hurt piled on top of their pain, and they will need time to process their healing. Sexual abuse is like a serious car accident—it may require extended time for healing. If your church has a counseling ministry, refer them to that resource immediately.

Jesus brings Good News to the abused, not shame, condemnation or put-downs. When victims of sexual abuse come to your church, make sure it is a safe place for them to find total transformation.

Maybe We Should Ask Women How They Feel?

In 2017, Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein was accused of sexually exploiting numerous women including actresses Rose McGowan, Ashley Judd, Gwyneth Paltrow and Mira Sorvino. The New York Times published a report claiming that Weinstein forced actresses to perform sexual favors for him in exchange for movie roles or auditions. Other women came forward to accuse Weinstein of rape.

It took years for Hollywood executives to take the accusations seriously because a culture of sexual abuse had been tolerated in Hollywood for years. Even after female actors had gained more clout and higher salaries, they were still objectified by the studios, and by the men who viewed them as props.

The Weinstein scandal opened a can of worms—revealing that a similar acceptance of sexual abuse existed in corporate America. Since 2017, companies large and small began reexamining their policies about sexual harassment. Finally,

women felt they could speak up. And many women began to feel safer.

But do Christian women feel safer today in the church? When we look at the current situation at IHOP, it appears that sexual abuse was excused or covered up for decades. I've read or listened to the testimonies of women who were manipulated into inappropriate relationships with Bickle, and it is horribly sad that they didn't feel the freedom to challenge the predatory behavior. In most cases, the men around them were not their advocates or protectors.

A while ago I did an informal poll on social media to find out how Christian women actually feel about sexual attitudes in the church. I asked my female friends on Facebook and X to share what behaviors they had endured from men in church settings. Reading their answers (some were posted publicly, and many privately) was overwhelming. I divided their responses into eight categories:

Blatant sexual abuse. Many of the women I polled were victims of abuse that happened on church property. One woman was raped in a church parking lot by a man who professed to be a believer, and no one on the church staff intervened or offered pastoral care. Another woman from Alabama said she was groped and fondled by a church leader when she was a teenager—and she never went back to church until she gave her heart to Christ at age 30.

Come-ons and inappropriate touching. Numerous women I contacted experienced this. One said that two married men reached over and kissed her, but she refused their unwanted advances. Another woman said a pastor looked down her shirt while standing over her. A female missionary said she was terrified after an ordained minister groped and fondled her. Several women said they felt uncomfortable when men from the church ogled them, stalked them, made sexual comments or tried to hug them too closely.

Bizarre gender bias. One woman told me a man in her church told her during a counseling appointment that she shouldn't have an epidural during childbirth "because pain is part of a woman's punishment for sin." Another woman was told that she was in sinful violation of 1 Timothy 2:15 if she did not immediately start having babies regularly after getting married.

Demands for "submission." One woman from Texas said a pastor advised her that she must stay in her marriage regardless of her husband's physical and verbal violence. "I stayed in a very abusive marriage for 20 years," she said. By the time she did divorce, her children had grown up. "Unfortunately, the abuse had ruined their chances of a healthy home life by that time," she added.

Insensitivity to single women. Several single women told me they were shamed publicly by men in the church with comments like "Why aren't you married yet?" or "What's wrong with you? Why are you still single?"

Comments implying that women are always to blame for sexual sin. One woman from Georgia needed a ride to the airport during a Christian conference, and she asked a male minister for help. He refused, saying he was not allowed to be in a car alone with another woman. "This wasn't harassment, but it was sexist in that I am a sister in Christ, a fellow minister," she told me. Other women recalled being told in church that the reason men struggle with pornography is because women don't dress modestly. "I grew up feeling that I was to blame for men's porn addiction," one woman said.

Blatant condescension. A 30-year-old ordained woman from Georgia said she encounters subtle sexism when male ministers call her a "girl" after she preaches. "Men who are my age are not spoken to that way. They are treated as peers," she said. "Some people may not think twice about, and I know it's never meant in a bad way, but I feel it reveals how some people view

a 30-something woman in ministry versus how they view a 30-something man in ministry.” Other women said they felt invisible because church leaders regularly referred to them as “John’s wife” or “Bill’s wife” rather than by their first names.

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Refusal to affirm a woman’s spiritual gifts or callings. The majority of responses to my question related to this topic. Women have been told they should never preach or lead in the church, and some who stepped out in their leadership gifts were labeled “Jezebel” or worse. Others were told that the only time God uses women in leadership “is when a man refuses to step into his rightful place.” (Almost all women called to full-time ministry shared stories of an uphill battle.)

The women who shared their comments with me aren’t resentful. They don’t share the same values as angry feminists looking for revenge. They aren’t grinding an axe or looking for ways to punish men. I know many of these women personally, and they are godly sisters with strong character and gentle, loving attitudes. Some of them hesitated to share their pain because they don’t want to be perceived as whiners or complainers.

They have tended to be quiet about these injustices, and they only talked about them because I asked. They simply are asking for dignity and a seat at the table. Yet in so many cases, we men have treated them with arrogance, disdain and disrespect. Our pride and insensitivity are dishonorable to God, and I don’t think He’s happy about it.

I believe it’s time for godly men to offer a sincere apology. The devil wants to divide men and women, and he has manipulated the secular feminist movement to trigger a nasty gender war. But I believe we can diffuse this tension with

true repentance.

There are many instances of public repentance in Scripture. God often called Israel to gather for days of public repentance (see Lev. 23:33-36); Ezra called the people to gather while he “wept bitterly” in public to repent for the wayward nation (Ezra 10:1); the prophet Joel issued a command to “gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land ... and cry out to the Lord” (Joel 1:14); the Ephesians publicly renounced their witchcraft and burned their occult books (Acts 19:18-19).

What has been happening in our churches today demands a radical show of repentance. We must change our macho attitudes. We have offended God. We must publicly apologize to women for any instances of sexual abuse.

Words are so important. That’s why James 5:16 says: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” It’s not enough to repent privately; we need to rend our hearts from the church altar and make a public declaration of repentance so that women can hear us.

When I listen to women, especially those who have been abused, they say they never heard the words they longed to hear from a Christian leader after they were violated. If we are silent in the aftermath of abuse, victims feel judged, devalued and ignored. Women need to hear an apology—from leaders of IHOP, from the Southern Baptist leadership and from any charismatic ministry that has covered up or trivialized abuse in the past.

Our sisters need to know that the church is a safe place for them. Right now, many women have walked away from church because they know we haven’t done what is necessary to protect them.

An Open Apology for Sexual Abuse in the Church

For more than two decades I have been confronting the abuse of

women and girls in developing countries where gender-based violence is common. I work in communities where rape is common, sexual violence is normal, polygamy is legal and forced marriage of underage girls is considered a man's right. I've built domestic violence shelters, counseling centers, girls' homes and women's vocational training centers in 11 countries in order to lift women out of poverty and help them survive in cultures where women are dangerously vulnerable.

When I start working in a country where men consider women inferior, I always begin with the pastors. I teach them how Jesus elevated women—how He healed bleeding women, defended women who were falsely accused, brought ignored women into the spotlight, and empowered women to be vocal witnesses of His Resurrection. Then, I always challenge the men to repent for their hard hearts.

It's a beautiful thing to watch when men from countries such as Congo, Tanzania, Bolivia, El Salvador or India kneel in front of women and repent for cruelty, domestic abuse, polygamy, marital rape, pornography and other forms of male superiority.

In one case in 2019, the men from a village in Uganda wept as they renounced a saying their forefathers had passed down to their sons for hundreds of years. That saying was: "Our cows are more valuable than our wives." The men repented of promoting that idea, and they broke free from centuries of male domination. And the women listening to the public confession wept for joy. They never expected to hear those words in their lifetime.

I believe it's time for American men—led by our pastors—to make a similar public confession. I'm recommending that churches issue a bold statement that denounces sexual abuse. I've written this "Declaration of Repentance" for Christian leaders to pledge their support. Read this publicly and post it on your church's website to send the clear message that we

as God's people are taking this sin seriously.

DECLARATION of REPENTANCE: A Sincere Apology to Our Sisters in Christ

As pastors and leaders representing various Christian denominations and church networks, especially from the charismatic and Pentecostal community, we acknowledge that too often women have been exploited sexually by men in Christian congregations, and this predatory behavior has been at times ignored, minimized or even covered up.

We repent on behalf of all abusers, and we ask for forgiveness from our sisters.

In some cases, men in the church—including pastors and other ministers—raped women, lured women into sexual relationships, touched women inappropriately, made sexual comments to women or requested sexual favors. We recognize that this immoral conduct is totally against the Word of God, which commands us to “flee immorality” (2 Tim. 2:22). God calls men in the church to treat Christian women as our sisters and mothers “in all purity,” according to 1 Timothy 5:2.

We repent for viewing women as sexual objects instead of valuing them for their character traits, personality, intellect and spiritual gifts. We ask for forgiveness.

We recognize that in some cases, women who came to church seeking help after being sexually abused or violated did not receive the compassion and care they deserved. In some cases, we minimized their pain, trivialized their trauma and blamed them rather than praying for their complete healing.

We repent for not listening to women's pain or feeling compassion for their loss. We ask for forgiveness.

We also recognize that in some cases, church leaders created an atmosphere of secrecy to enable abusers to continue in

their sin. Some pastors or leaders even knowingly allowed abuse to continue, because they did not have the courage to confront the abusers. Jesus was a defender of women, even when they were falsely accused—but we have not always been bold enough to defend the women who came to us for help.

We repent for our unwillingness to speak out on women's behalf when they felt voiceless. We ask for forgiveness.

We also acknowledge that in some charismatic and Pentecostal ministries, abusers mis-used prophetic words or other spiritual gifts to manipulate women into sexual relationships. We view this as a clear violation of the second commandment: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain," (Exod. 20:7). This is spiritual exploitation of the highest order. We believe any servant of Jesus Christ who uses Scripture or a prophetic message to lure a person into sexual sin should not be in ordained ministry.

We repent for any instance of spiritual exploitation or deception to manipulate and control. We ask for forgiveness.

We acknowledge that God created male and female in His image (Gen. 1:27), and that men and women are equal in His sight. Yet because of male pride, many men view women as inferior—and as a result they believe they can coerce, dominate, demean and abuse women physically, emotionally and spiritually. We affirm that husbands are commanded to show wives honor, and treat them as "fellow heir(s) of the grace of life," according to 1 Peter 3:7.

We repent for all cruelty and abuse associated with male domination, and we repent for any pain we have caused.

Acts 3:19 says: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." It is time for a new day. We look forward to a season of greater harmony and cooperation between men and women in all of our churches. We set aside the pain,

mistreatment, suspicion and competition of the past, and we pledge to build churches where all of God's people feel safe from sexual abuse.

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