

Jesus Doesn't Ignore Sexual Abuse—He Confronts It

Catholic leaders will meet for four days this week at the Vatican for an unprecedented summit on sexual abuse. The meeting comes just days after Pope Francis took the surprising step of defrocking Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C.—after proof that he abused both minors and adults and even solicited sex from parishioners during their confessions.

The Vatican meeting seems like too little, too late for the hundreds of thousands of victims of sex abuse by Catholic clergy. Pope Francis already admitted in January that the scandal has undermined the church's credibility. Some critics are calling for the pope's resignation because they claim he knew about the allegations against Cardinal McCarrick for years—and did nothing.

But clergy sex abuse is not just a Catholic problem. Last week, a bombshell report in the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News* revealed that leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have been asleep at the wheel while pastors, church staff and volunteers abused many church members. The newspapers reported that there have been 700 reports of sex abuse in SBC churches since 1998. Most of the victims were children.

Thankfully, the leader of the Southern Baptist Convention, J.D. Greear, did not drag his feet before responding to this crisis. He told CNN on Monday that he will deal with the problem forcefully.

"Our churches ... ought to be safe places for the vulnerable, and predators ought to have no place in our midst," Greear said. "Our goal here is to put on display what we believe about God, that our God is a God who gave His life to protect

the vulnerable.”

I’m grateful for a leader like Greear, who showed us what courageous leadership looks like. I’m tired of hearing that church leaders are “studying” sex abuse, hosting seminars about it or forming committees to “explore” the problem while victims are bleeding. Jesus didn’t “study” abuse. He confronted it head-on.

In fact, J.D. Greear quoted Jesus’ words in Luke 17:2 during his CNN interview, saying, “It would be better for [abusers] to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.”

If the Catholic Church had adopted that aggressive policy several decades ago, many lives would have been spared unspeakable anguish. As both Catholics and Protestants devise policies on how to deal with this problem, I hope we will include these important points:

We must stop avoiding the topic. What we avoid from the pulpit will thrive in darkness. We can’t sweep this ugly issue under the rug. Christians need to feel free to admit that sexual abuse happened to them, and churches should offer the counseling and healing needed. And all churches today must have carefully worded policies on how to address abuse when it happens.

Our policies must be swift and tough. The Catholic Church’s sluggish response to its own abuse crisis is a recipe for disaster. If a church does not act swiftly and decisively to protect victims and punish abusers, we send the signal that we care more about our reputation than about showing Christ’s compassion. The apostle Paul taught that when the church tolerates gross immoral behavior, the sin spreads like an infection (see 1 Cor. 5:9-13). We must never, ever tolerate proven sexual abuse.

We must stop blaming victims when sexual harassment happens.

When a Christian woman is raped or abused, the conversation often turns to how she was dressed. I've even heard believers blame a woman who was abused by accusing her of having a "seducing spirit." Let's make it perfectly clear: Abusers, not victims, are guilty of abuse.

It's sad that many Christian women won't come forward to talk about their rape or molestation experience because they know a tribunal of Pharisees will point a bony finger at them. I also know a man who was criticized for not fighting back when he admitted to being sexually molested by another man. Why do we kick people when they are down? We need a crash course in godly compassion.

It's past time to reexamine our policies on women in ministry. When you look at sexual abuse statistics, you'll find that the vast majority of victims are women. Yet in many denominations today, women are excluded from leadership positions. Are we surprised that the perpetrators of abuse can so easily cover their tracks and continue their abuse with no accountability?

While we continue to argue about whether women should preach from a pulpit, Christian women are being raped, abused and harassed—and then their cries are muffled or they are paid to be quiet. There is something insanely unjust about that. The issue of sexual abuse will not be fairly addressed until women are seated at the table and given the equal right to speak as prophetic voices. Women have something very important to say about this!

We must launch a revolution in Christian men's ministry. Evangelical men's ministry often focuses on how to be strong husbands, fathers and leaders. That is commendable, but in our effort to restore "godly manhood" we focus too much on power and not enough on humility. We don't realize that one of the reasons Christian women suffer so much is that their husbands or boyfriends are so focused on wielding male power that they become brash, domineering, insensitive and even abusive.

Pornography has taught men for decades to look at women as inferior objects to be used and abused. Our corporate culture has taught us that women can be manipulated, seduced and played to our advantage. Locker rooms have taught us to be sexist and vulgar. No wonder we have an epidemic of abuse and sexual harassment.

When a man comes to Christ, he should renounce the culture of exploitation and learn how to respect women and treat them as equals. Let's get honest and repent. Let's get all sexual abuse and harassment out of the church now.