

# Protecting Children from Abuse in the Church

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Steps to Prevent and Respond

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First of all, you start the grooming process from day one . . . the children that you're interested in . . . You find a child you might be attracted to . . . For me, it might be nobody fat. It had to be a, you know, a nice looking child . . . You maybe look at a kid that doesn't have a father image at home, or a father that cares about them . . . if you've got a group of twenty-five kids, you might find nine that are appealing, then you start looking at their family backgrounds. You find out all you can . . . which ones are the most accessible . . . you get it down to one that is the easiest target, and that's the one you do.<sup>1</sup>

This very disturbing quote is the response of a child sex abuser when asked how he picked out specific children at church to victimize. The child abuser's frank confession of how he operates within the Christian community should alert every Christian to the pressing need to be educated about child sexual abuse and to learn how to respond to this tragic problem in a way that protects children and brings justice to those who victimize them. It is fairly safe to assume that most Christians want to protect children in the church from abuse.

However, wanting to protect children and knowing how to do it are two different things. We should not assume that we understand the extent of child abuse or what must be done to address it. Failure to acknowledge the prevalence of child abuse within the church, and the failure to grasp the many difficult issues associated with this abuse cause devastating and destructive consequences for the victim and the Christian community. Both Christian leaders and laypeople must become better educated about child sexual abuse so that children's lives and souls are authentically protected and loved.

As Christians, our thinking about child abuse should be guided by how Jesus views and values children. Jesus told his disciples, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me” (Mark 9:37). In this one powerful statement Christ communicates the incredible value he and his Father place upon all children, in that our love for God is demonstrated by how we love and “receive” children.

A pastor once remarked, “Something is deeply amiss in the soul that does not descent (or is it really ascent) to love and hold a child.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is impossible to authentically love God and not love his little ones. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “welcome” as to “accept with pleasure the presence of.” In essence, Jesus is saying that we worship him through accepting with pleasure the presence of children—who are also designed to be worshipers of our great God! Loving, protecting, and advocating for children is an essential component of our overall worship of God, and an important tool God uses to raise up little worshipers.

Yet our culture often finds itself overlooking the most basic needs of its children, while adults are busy tending and caring for themselves. This devaluing of children often leaves them exposed to indescribable harm that results in physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences. Wess Stafford, president of Compassion International, puts it all too accurately, “Small, weak, helpless, innocent, vulnerable, and trusting, they are waiting victims for our simple neglect and most evil abuse. No matter what goes wrong, the little ones pay the greatest price.”<sup>3</sup>

In 2009, the United States government substantiated that 10.1 out of every 1,000 children were abused or neglected. An additional 16,676 children died from abuse and neglect.<sup>4</sup> Another study found that 38 percent of women in the United States were molested as children