



WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS
TO ABUSE SURVIVORS
and Those Who Hurt Them

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Pastors and church personnel often struggle to apply intentional and appropriate doses of both biblical grace and stringent accountability to victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Partly as a result of ignorance, Christians often apply a heavy dosage of law (conviction) to victims and gospel (grace) to offenders. This misguided, sometimes cruel use of theological principles often drives victims away from the church and their personal walk with God and emboldens offenders to remain in their sin, and even to commit such an offense again. This book encourages a deeper understanding of both abuser and victim dynamics so that church leaders can move past ignorance and myth and tackle this devastating issue with the power of grace and truth afforded by the good news of Jesus. Here we will consider the proper biblical response to each party, as well as offer practical suggestions to assist the church in responding to both.

Overview of the Dynamics of Child Sexual Abuse

In order to spiritually counsel or assist sexually abused children in any way, churches need to understand the dynamics of abuse. Unfortunately, many have accepted decades-old myths about child sexual abuse victims, including the most harmful and prevalent: that children's allegations of abuse are inherently suspect. This skepticism toward claims of sexual abuse has led churches to focus heavily (and almost exclusively) on problematic behaviors exhibited by the child—behaviors that, ironically, may be attributable to the abuse. There is no excuse for the body of Christ to apply such a distorted view of blame and culpability to child abuse victims.

Historic skepticism toward victims of child sexual abuse

“The history of psychology in the past one hundred years has been filled with theories that deny sexual abuse occurs, that discounts the responsibility of the offender, that blame the mother and/or child when it does occur, and that minimize the impact.”¹ This damaging trend, coupled with high-profile day care cases from the 1980s in which many believed children were coached into false allegations² spilled over into our mainstream culture, including churches. For example, one Christian publisher printed a book claiming there was an “industry” of child protection professionals manufacturing allegations of abuse to “snatch” children away from parents.³

Although we all need to be mindful of the possibility of false allegations, multiple studies conclude that these instances are rare⁴ and that when children do lie, it is usually done to protect the perpetrator, not to get anyone in trouble.⁵ Indeed, false allegations are not only a statistically remote possibility but especially rare in comparison with actual prevalence of child sex abuse—1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused by the age of 18.⁶ Law enforcement and other professionals have made great strides in conducting abuse investigations over the past 25 years, improving their skills in interviewing victimized children and collecting evidence—further reducing the risk of false allegations. **Accordingly, it is irresponsible for any pastor to automatically dismiss an abuse allegation, even against a respected member of the church.** The church is responsible for protecting the children in the church body, and this sacred stewardship is reinforced by Christ himself (Mark 10:13–16). Familiarity with the dynamics of abuse will prevent such a dangerous response.

The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS)

In order to understand the difficult, sensitive nature of how and when child sexual abuse is typically reported, consider Dr. Roland Summit's work detailing the Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS).⁷ This study identified the dynamics present in child sexual abuse cases that constrain children from disclosing abuse early, if at all. These dynamics include secrecy, helplessness, entrapment and accommodation, delayed, conflicting and unconvincing disclosure, and retraction.

Secrecy

Three dynamics tend to impress secrecy on the victim: 1) The private nature of sexual abuse, which can suggest the child's need to keep quiet. 2) Fear of retaliation by the abuser or ostracism by the church community. 3) A promise of protection or special privileges from the offender.

Helplessness

Child sexual abuse victims typically feel helpless to stop the abuse for reasons of powerlessness, confusion, and adult authority concepts. Their smaller size and their lack of maturity may render them feeling incapable of stopping the offense. Secondly, churches teach children to obey those in positions of authority as an act of obedience to God, and perpetrators can be good at exploiting this dynamic. They will use this teaching to admonish children to honor requests to submit to sexual conduct. Third, most sexual abuse is committed by a trusted, even loved adult, and often offenders will threaten that they will no longer love the child if abuse is revealed.