
 FAITH BLOCKERS: CHURCH ABUSE

I have been reading through 1 and 2 Samuel over the last months in my own quiet time. A few weeks ago, I spend the best part of a week on the story of David and Bathsheba. If you are not familiar with the story, David is the king of Israel. One day, instead of being out with his troops, he is on the palace roof. He spies a very beautiful woman, orders her to come to the palace, has sex with her, and then when she becomes pregnant, has her husband killed. This is not a story of an affair. This is a story of sexual abuse. David was 40. Bathsheba was a teenager -possibly as young as 16. Like all abuse this is about a leader misusing power.

So, as we look at abuse in the church today, let's not pretend this is a new issue. Or that the Bible somehow doesn't speak of such things.

We have all read the stories of abuse within the church. Often the headlines have focussed on the Catholic church, and the huge level of abuse that has been carried out by priests. The figures are appalling and the Catholic church has actively resisted investigation and covered things up. This has led to a deep distrust in the church as an institution. People don't distinguish between denominations.

The Royal Commission into abuse within care has just been released and makes profoundly disturbing reading. But that care is not just state based care but also faith-based care.

If you follow the media, you will be aware some of the mega churches of Australia and NZ have been in the spotlight recently for treatment of interns and for covering up sexual offending.

But it is very easy to hear all this stuff and say; well, it's not us. It's the Catholic Church. It's those big mega churches. Abuse doesn't happen around here. Let me disabuse you of this notion. I can tell you of many stories from my time in ministry, including here at Central. This is an issue for us.

Please don't think that somehow this bad stuff is confined to other places and other churches and that when people say that all this stuff about abuse in the church is a block to their faith, that somehow it is not a real issue. It is a profoundly real issue. Because even just with the examples I have given you, the ripple effect of that behaviour is profound. It spreads out to family and friends and deeply impacts the credibility of the church.

The stories I have just told are around physical and sexual abuse. And today we have a much better idea of what this kind of abuse looks like. But spiritual abuse is equally an issue, and if we are talking about abuse today, then we also need to understand the reality of spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse is when we use the Bible or a position of authority to control and manipulate a person

- It can be in a marriage: "well I am the head of the house so you need to do as I say."
- It can be in a church: "God has told me that you should do this"
- It can be in a friendship. "Well if you really loved God, you should be supporting this ministry."

Some of the warning signs in a church are

- Shutting down of questions
- Lots of teaching on authority, honour, loyalty
- Elitism: our church has the whole truth while others don't
- Isolation: people are discouraged from mixing with certain groups and cut off if they don't conform
- Leadership using guilt, shame, and threats to achieve their goals.

Spiritual abuse is common in all denominations and churches can have normal theological beliefs but be operating more like a cult.

Let me make some general comments about abuse.

Abuse of power, and abuse of children is all around the community. This is not a church issue, it is an issue within every aspect of society. It seems like every day we are reading of this being exposed: doctors, lawyers, schools, the music industry, the film industry, the ports industry to name but a few have all been in the headlines in NZ.

The tendency within any organization has been to minimize the issue and to not believe those who complain.

But surely, you say, the church should be safe place? The answer is Yes, absolutely and there are no excuses. This is what makes it so difficult - people understand that Christianity is about love – and yet this is happening, and so leads to the accusation of hypocrisy.

Firstly, as I start talking about this significant faith blocker - Abuse in the church - I want to say "I am sorry. While I was not responsible for your abuse, I want to say as a leader I am sorry. I am sorry - what happened to you should not have happened. I am sorry, - you should have been listening to and believed I am sorry – the matter should have been dealt with promptly and properly. "

Why does abuse happen within the church, which should be this safe place?

1. Everyone one of us has areas of brokenness and darkness within our hearts. We can be too quick to minimize this, or claim that now we are Christians, we are new creations in Christ and then we are healed and whole. Read Jeremiah 17:9 Romans 7:18-20



2. Churches are often placing where those who are attracted to kids can get easy access to children. Often there is a grooming of both kids and church leaders. By that I mean the person works to be trusted by church leaders.
3. Children can't process abuse and will often blank it out. And so, when abuse happens, it often remains hidden. While not explaining why it happens, it does explain why it remains secret.
4. Too much power is given to a pastor or church leader. Two reasons this happens. One reason is the structure of the church creates such positions of power where the leader has no real accountability. The person is seen as speaking for God. What they say is equated to God. When this happens, the chance of spiritual abuse and sexual abuse is far greater. Matthew 20:24–28 The other reason it happens is the people place pastors on pedestals. They are seen as somehow "god like" and are not seen frail and sinful humans. It is sometimes easier for people to look to a pastor than it is to God.
5. A theology of male headship and leadership has reinforced issues of misogyny. Now, I am fully aware this is controversial. But the evidence is really clear that this theology is a breeding ground for domestic abuse, spiritual abuse and sexual abuse. Now, before I get stoned let me be super clear here. You might hold the view that the Bible teaches the men are the head (as in "leader") of the home, and that males should be in leadership in church and never have abused anyone or hold any misogynistic views. But it is also undisputable that such theology often breeds harmful attitudes towards woman.
6. The church has often been naïve and too trusting. We have freely offered forgiveness without seeking repentance. When abuse has been uncovered, the abuser is deeply ashamed. Why, because their behaviour has been uncovered. We have been quick to offer forgiveness when we see remorse. But without repentance, forgives is shallow. And repentance from patterns of abuse takes deep and hard work. It involves profound change. Repentance means that we are not only sorry but we are committed to going in a very different direction. If you steal 1000 dollars from the church, we can choose to forgive you. You can work to change your life. But that forgiveness does not mean we put you in charge of the offering. The church has often been naïve as to the depth of darkness that lurks within us and the journey to deal with it.

Does any of this make abuse within the church ok? No, absolutely not, but we have been asking the question "why." Why does it happen within the church of all places?

It is fair to say the church is a safer place than it was 30 years ago. But we will never be able to illuminate abuse. The church is not a perfect place because it is made up of broken individuals. And in saying that I am not talking about others. But you and me. But we need to be clear. It is not what God wants.

Bottom line. While we can be appalled at abuse within the church, we are all broken and in need of a saviour. It is not the church that is the saviour of the world. It is Jesus Christ's

But let me come back to church for a minute. Many of the stories of abuse within the church have uncovered a deeply unhealthy culture. When you are choosing a church to belong to, you are choosing as much as anything a culture.

Can I suggest the kind of culture you should look for in a church?

1. A Christ centred church, not a pastor centred one.
2. A church that is open and transparent. Decision making, finances, how appointments are made.
3. A leadership structure that has strong accountability for leaders.
4. A place where people are valued, as people not as doers or givers
5. A place where there is a strong culture of grace
6. A strong culture of service others, community

Some of these thought I got from a book called "a church called TOV", a book written in light of some of the scandals in the mega churches of the USA but very applicable across culture3s and church sizes.

How does all this apply here at Central re Abuse and culture? I realize this is not the kind of thing normally spoken about on a Sunday morning

1. We have very clear procedures for the appointment of children and youth leaders, including regular police vetting
2. We have a policy called serious offending policy, which is for those in the church who have a history of serious offending. Abuse, fraud, etc. The policy that has strong grace elements because the gospel is for all, no matter what we have done. and strong accountably elements to ensure that the congregation is safe. In case you ask, it is not currently in operation.
3. We have a clear complaints procedure. Outlined in a pamphlet at the help desk. Two types of complaint. 1. General complaint. 2. Sexual offending by someone in leadership. For this there are two people outside of leadership - Chris Brewer and Clive McArthur who you can approach if you don't feel comfortable talking to the elders or



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myself. The Baptist Union has very clear policies, including the involvement of external parties. There will not be any minimization or coverup.

4. Any suspected abuse will be reported to the police or appropriate authorities.
5. Our leadership structure has a series of checks and balances in it to ensure everyone is accountable. Check out our leadership booklet
6. Our finances are an open book.

I hope I am leading the church to focus on Christ, not myself. Handsome and good-looking as I am, 😊 I have tried to be as real about my humanity as I can and I hope you don't put me on some spiritual pedestal. If you have been, talk to Ros my wife and she will put you straight. 😊

I hope we are a church that values people for who they are. I know that I am someone who is very task orientated and so don't always get this right. If you have not felt valued I am profoundly sorry.

We want to be a grace focused church. And we strongly value service. I can confidently say that the leadership of this church model servanthood. And we work to serve the community we are in.

When abuse is hindering faith, we have to keep pointing back to Jesus Christ. We have a God who understands abuse. It was the religious authorities of the day who led to him being abused and crucified. We have a God who identifies with our abuse. We have a God who wants to bring us to healing and wholeness. We have a God who has the power to help transform our lives and give us hope. Keep pointing people to Jesus. Not to the church.

But as attendees and partners of this church, let's work to create the very best culture that we can. A good culture. A good community. And we are all responsible to make that happen.

Each of us is responsible for shaping the culture here.

- Being open with each other about our struggles
- Speaking well of each other
- Involving ourselves in the decision making of the church. Don't sit back.
- Praying for the church, leadership, recognizing their humanity
- Speaking truth to each other in love. Eph 4:15

All this might leave you wondering if any church is safe. Or if you should ditch the church altogether. And if you have been abused by a Christian leader I totally understand why you would feel like that.

But actually, God designed us to be in community. The church is not a human idea but God's idea. Whether it be a mega church, ordinary old church, or a house church all forms of church have the ability to go wrong and cause harm.

The church is always imperfect and flawed. And yet God loves the church. There is no plan B. One day the church will be made perfect in Christ. Meantime we are called to be the most Christ honouring community we can be.

Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. Ephesians 5:25-28

And despite its flaws the church has and is doing a tremendous amount of good. God is at work in and through the church, bringing healing, changing communities and bringing hope. Let's not give up on the church. But let's always keep pointing back to Jesus Christ.

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www.icbc.org.nz

REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

1. *If you didn't see the Dave Mann video on sharing faith, watch it here.*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMbgUbBoxwQ>

Practise in your group telling your story in 2 minutes. Help each other if you think you don't have a "story"

Pray that God would give each person a chance to share their story this week.
2. *Have you seen, heard of or experienced abuse in a church setting? What impact did it have?*
3. *How can the accusation of spiritual abuse by a church be inaccurate, and the hurt is caused by other things?*
4. *Discuss each of the reasons given as to why abuse happens in the church. Do you agree with them? Are there other reasons you can think of?*
5. *How much responsibility does the leadership have for creating the culture of the church vs the church members.*
6. *What areas of church culture at Central need work? What would help bring long term change?*
7. *There are 100's of people in Invercargill who believe in Christ and yet have dropped out of church. What would you say to someone who has become deeply disillusioned with the church?*



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