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For Whom Will the Church Be Safe?

a sermon preached on July 3, 2022

RUTH BARRON

The LORD is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life—
of whom shall I be afraid?

² When the wicked advance against me
to devour me,
it is my enemies and my foes
who will stumble and fall.

³ Though an army besiege me,
my heart will not fear;
though war break out against me,
even then I will be confident.

⁴ One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple.

⁵ For in the day of trouble
he will keep me safe in his dwelling;
he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent
and set me high upon a rock.

Psalm 27:1–5 (NIV)

Fight or Flight

Years ago, I sat in church in Nairobi, Kenya, listening to the pastor talk about our need to do more for Christ. I had given up my home in my own country. I had learned a new language. I had worked to serve God in every way from my teens to that very day, yet I was still drowning in a sense of disappointing God. In fact, I had recently prayed and confessed to God that I was not serving as a missionary because I loved God. I admitted that I was serving God because I was afraid of hell.

Oh, I don't mean that I didn't have any other reasons for serving as a missionary. When I was a college student, freshmen were required to write a research paper on a career we were considering. I wrote my paper on missions because missions was the career which best fit my fascination with understanding cultures and languages and my heart for ministering to people.

What I mean is that, as people, we all have complex motivations for everything we do, and of all my motivations, fear was still my strongest motivation as a missionary. When I prayed and confessed that I feared God more than I loved God, I remembered that the greatest commandment was to love God with all my heart and all my mind and all my strength and all my soul. Something was not right. As I sat, quietly listening after my prayer, I felt God inviting me to learn to know God more deeply and to truly learn to love God.

Not long after that invitation from God, however, I sat in church in Nairobi nauseous and longing to run away. I was being triggered.

Asthma, for example, has its triggers. There is a certain week of the year when the most deaths from asthma occur; ragweed pollen fills the air and the fallen leaves begin to decompose and feed mold. Ragweed and mold are high asthma triggers. Other examples are celiac and Crohn's disease; they have their triggers too. Celiacs cannot eat gluten. Those with Crohn's often have multiple triggers. There is no sin in a person with asthma having a flare-up because they were exposed to pollen. There is no sin in a celiac or Crohn's flare-up.

By the same token, *trauma has its triggers* that produce consistent, specific flares of flashbacks, emotional flooding, fear, anxiety, and dissociation. Most of us are at least somewhat aware of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and its impact on those who experience a severe threat to their lives, such as combat veterans. There is a second type of PTSD known as complex PTSD or C-PTSD. Complex PTSD has another name which reveals its primary trigger: shame-based trauma. "Shame" here refers to the shame associated with the initial traumatic event(s). Acts of abuse are inherently shameful, but the shame which rightly belongs to the abusers becomes transferred to the victims of abuse. This shame becomes entangled with the victim's sense of identity. Abusers and observers alike reinforce this through victim-blaming and various shame messages (e.g., "You're not good enough." "You deserve this.").

Those with C-PTSD are triggered—not by pollen or gluten—but by shame messages. I sat in church that morning and felt my anxiety rising. I felt nauseous and had an overwhelming urge to run away. In short, my brain recognized a message which, throughout my childhood, was regularly followed by severe abuse, so it diverted energy from my digestive system and the logical portion of my brain and instead sent that energy to the God-designed flight or fight portion of my brain to help me escape abuse.

Always before, I had forced myself to sit and override my body's God-designed system of protection. PTSD is caused by that very override. A person's body produces energy to rescue them from danger, and it sends that energy to the flight or fight system, but because that person is trapped and unable to use that energy for its purpose, that energy itself becomes trapped in their body, trying to complete the task of rescue it was sent to do. And so, the traumatized person continually relives the trauma as an ever-present event that their body feels they could still prevent if they could just find a different way. Researchers have noticed that trauma memories are unique, compared to other memories, in being present experiences rather than past remembrances.

That Sunday, I could not override my body's fight or flight system. Instead, I leaned over to my husband and said, "I need to leave." He told me to go, and I fled to the courtyard. There I found a number of women sitting in the courtyard outside of church, and there was a common trait among us: we were all abuse victims. That was a pivotal experience for me. Why were so many of the most vulnerable members of our culture finding it safer to sit outside the church rather than inside the church? That question has only become stronger over time as I have seen that scenario play out repeatedly. Jesus said he came *for the most vulnerable*.

Awareness?

This past Monday, June 27, was National PTSD Awareness Day in several nations. Three years ago on June 27, I posted on social media that "One thing I would love to see is churches talking about this in sermons and Sunday schools, explaining the unseen injuries that are there in PTSD. We need to listen to those with PTSD to learn what is going on, rather than shaming them for the brain changes caused by PTSD. We need to learn how to ease their burdens rather than add to them." I was already working on this sermon last Monday, as I read that three-year-old memory. I believe the need for sermons like this has grown more desperate in those three years.

In May 2022, *Guidepost* released the Southern Baptist Convention task force's "Report of the Independent Investigation."¹ The report reveals that, for years, the SBC had lists of reports of alleged sexual abuse, including the names of hundreds of pastors, and that these lists were not public and were known to very few people.² Keeping the lists of alleged abusers confidential, however, was likely a factor in pastors being repeat offenders, sometimes in more than one congregation.³

Over and over in the past several years, church after church and ministry after ministry has been exposed for covering up abuse rather than addressing it. The rollcall of such situations is long and continues to grow. It includes well-known names and obscure names alike.

God of the Present

Recently, my husband and I were asked what we think of America being called a post-Christian nation. My answer was that the Bible tells us we are to pay attention to the signs of the times. Too often we are looking for signs of the future: is Jesus coming soon? But our God is not only God of the Future. God's name is not I WILL BE. Our God is God of the Present: I AM. That is not to say that God has nothing to do with the future, but it means that we are to seek and find God in the present: "the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21b NIV).

I answered that, instead of looking for Christ's future second coming, we must look for where God is at work right now, in our midst, and we must join that work. Christ told us, "when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13a NIV). Where truth is being brought into the light, that is the Spirit of Truth at work among us. The signs of the times tell us that now is the time when God is at work in

the midst of the church revealing truth regarding the church's failure to address abuse.

Jesus said in John 5:19, "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (NIV). Today, we see God at work addressing abuse within the church. We need to be doing what we see the Father doing. But how do we do the work the Father is doing? How do we minister to the abused so that they feel safe to come into our churches rather than gathering in church courtyards? Proverbs 18:10 says, "The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous [or "the just"] run to it and are safe" (NIV). How do we make our churches places where the abused can run and be safe, where they can say with Ps 27:10, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (NIV)? Where they can say, "The church will receive me"?

No Space for Injustice

There are many suggestions I could make, but I want to focus on three today. First, be sure the church is not a safe or comfortable space for the unjust, the unrighteous. When there are predators in the sheepfold, the sheep are not safe. I mentioned the *Guidepost* report on alleged clergy sexual abuse in the SBC. The SBC's Executive Committee initially opposed doing an investigation. The report came, primarily, because the representatives of the individual churches who attended the 2021 Annual Meeting overrode the Executive Committee and voted for an investigation to be done. Men and women who sit in the pews every Sunday said, "We want our churches to be safe."

Unlike the SBC, not all congregations or groups of congregations have an Annual Meeting or General Assembly. Not all have a denominational hierarchy. What can independent and autonomous congregations do? Well, for years the SBC claimed *it* could not address abuse because their churches are technically autonomous,⁴ yet, during those years, they already were maintaining such a system.

Throughout history, humanity has demonstrated the *imago Dei*, the image-of-God within us, by refusing to be limited to the already and instead pushing toward the not-yet. We can indeed move past the status quo, "the already," and do new things in anticipation of "the not yet."

As an example, my own movement, the Restoration Movement or Stone-Campbell Movement, was only formed a little over 200 years ago. We were once a "new creation." As a movement, we have two yearly conventions, the ICOM (International Conference on Missions) and the Spire Conference. In November 2021, ICOM focused on abuse. One of the lead speakers, who himself had been mentored by Ravi Zacharias, told attendees, "Those of us in leadership who are on the wrong path are depending on the fact that you don't want to know about it. Any organization in this day and age that does not create systems of accountability will eventually come to ruin." It is our responsibility to act in response to comments such as this, to push for systems of accountability, to stand for justice.

Let us learn from others' mistakes. At the 2021 ICOM, certain organizations offered themselves as mentors to other organizations facing allegations. Yet, as *Christianity Today* reported, the woman who helped Ravi Zacharias International Ministries as a conciliator during its 2017 investigation into the sexual abuse allegations against Zacharias had serious allegations of abuse against herself, and she used her role to silence the victim and support the abuser.⁵ So we must push for any organization or individual who takes leadership regarding abuse to *first* submit to investigation of their own ministries.

We must also work together—whether as a denomination, the Christians of a city, the congregations of a region—to hold our churches and organizations accountable. Let's encourage each other to report allegations to the authorities. Let's develop systems so that those who are hiring new pastors know whether there are allegations against the applicants. Let's tell the stories of those who were not reported and who went on to assume other positions of authority. Let's talk openly about abuse rather than remaining silent. The Maasai Community Christian Churches in Kenya and Tanzania, among whom I live and minister, are leading the way in this. Rather than maintaining strict individual autonomy, neighboring churches work together as communities to hold church leaders accountable. It can be difficult for a church with abusive leaders to hold those leaders accountable, but other community church leaders can intercede.

Space for Lament

Second, we must make space for lament in our churches. I remember a moment in 2019 when I sat in the worship service of our congregation in Kenya, sobbing while everyone around me danced and sang, "If God be for me, who can stand against?" All I could think was, "Does that mean God is not for me, because my abusers have stood against me, and the church has protected them?" I wrote a poem, titled "Songs of Sorrow," about that experience. It begins:

I stand weeping alone
'Midst their rejoicing songs.
Shouts of praise surround me,
Calling "Come and worship."
But my heart will not lie,
Will not give empty words.
How can I sing of joy
From a heart of sorrow?

Those who are listening to the words of my poem may hear another poem echoing within it. Psalm 137 says:

There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

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—Paul Chilcote, Ashland Seminary



How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land? (Ps 137:2–4 NIV)

The songbook of the Bible is filled with lament and even anger, yet our Sunday morning worship services rarely include lament. Even in God’s throne room, in John’s vision known as Revelation, John saw souls under the altar crying out in lament, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10 NIV). Paul tells us in Rom 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (NIV). If God has space in heaven itself for lament, then shouldn’t we make space in our own worship for lament?

Space for Stories

Third, we also need to make space to hear the stories of victims of abuse. As an example, an automobile mechanic relies heavily on the sounds cars make when determining where the problem is. I still remember my dad listening to “Car Talk” and hearing Click and Clack make car sounds. Similarly, doctors would find it difficult to make a correct diagnosis without hearing the complaints of their patients. We cannot minister well to the abused without truly listening to their voices. Yet when victims speak about abuse, too often we are silenced.

Abuse victims are told we are gossiping, though if that is true, the Bible itself must be a gossip column, because the Bible does not cover up the abuses of its heroes. We are told we are bitter and need to repent, and we are told God can’t be near us because of our bitterness. Yet the Bible tells us the story of a woman named Naomi. Naomi’s name meant “Pleasant,” yet in her grief after years of trouble, Naomi cried, “Don’t call me Naomi. . . . Call me Mara [Bitter] because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me” (Ruth 1:20–21 NIV). Did God draw away from Mara for her bitterness? No! God drew closer and, through her wisdom, made her the great-great-grandmother of David. In fact, the names Miriam and Mary also come from the Hebrew word for bitter. And it was to those bitter women that God sent Moses and Jesus. Throughout Scripture, God’s deliverance has been preceded by an acknowledgement of the bitter need for that deliverance. God always draws closer to those who acknowledge the bitterness of their lives to Him. Let us be people who say, “Let the bitter come to us.” Let us draw closer to them. Let us hear their stories.

Conclusion

My poem, mentioned above, ends:

What better place for grief
Than in the warmth of love?
What harder place to grieve
Than in the cold outside?
Let songs of sorrow rise
Within the worship space.
Let Christ enfleshed in Church
With keening Mary weep.

Millenia ago, biblical Joshua stood before the people of Israel and declared, “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Josh 24:15 NIV). Today, I believe the Spirit is standing before the church and saying, “Choose for yourselves this day for whom you will be a safe space.” Will you be a place where abusers run to you and are safe, or will you be a place where the victims run to you and are safe? As for Christ, we know whom he has chosen. Christ has told us that when he returns he will divide us, not by our great deeds in his name, but by this choice we make, by whether we choose to care for the least of these.

Notes

1. <https://sataskforce.net/updates/guidepost-solutions-report-of-the-independent-investigation>.
2. See, for example, pgs. 163–64 in the report cited in endnote 1.
3. See, for example, pg. 167 in the report cited in endnote 1.
4. See, for example, pgs. 161–62 in the report cited in endnote 1.
5. <https://christianitytoday.com/news/2021/november/judy-dabler-creative-conciliation-abuse-lapm-unfit-ministry.html>.



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