
Introduction to This Issue

Child Abuse and the Church: Prevention, Pastoral Care, and Healing

The Gospel writers make clear Jesus was deeply aware of the needs of children and was fully committed to protecting them from abuse and neglect. According to Matthew, Jesus is the descendent of three sexually exploited women (Matt 1:1–7),¹ and was nearly the victim of infanticide (Matt 2:1–21). Although God became flesh at a time when it was both common and lawful to neglect, beat, or sexually abuse children, the words of Jesus were counter-cultural to these practices.²

While other religious and secular leaders marginalized children, Jesus said that children were messengers from our creator and that our treatment of children spoke volumes about what we really thought of God (Mark 9:36–37). Jesus showed his love for children by praying for them (Matt 19:13–14), blessing them (Mark 10:13–16), healing them (Mark 9:27), and by taking them in his arms (Mark 9:36–37; 10:13–16).

In his teachings, Jesus spoke of children as an illustration of faith (Matt 18:1–4), made it clear they should be cared for (Matt 7:9–14), contended that even infants could be given divine wisdom (Matt 11:25), and scolded his disciples for keeping children away (Mark 10:13–16). Jesus said it would be better to be drowned in a sea with a millstone around our neck than to hurt a child (Matt 18:6)³ and promised to hold accountable those who preached in his name but failed to care for the suffering (Matt 7:23; 25:41–45).

Although the early church often distinguished itself through the care of children,⁴ the modern church has been beset with child sexual abuse scandals⁵ and by theological constructs that have contributed to the physical abuse of children,⁶ the withholding of even life-saving medical care,⁷ and that have excused us from reporting abuse or otherwise failing to care for the suffering.⁸ As one victim of child abuse asked, “How can Christians worship a God who was a victim of abuse while failing to care for the victims sitting in our pews?”⁹

There is little doubt that every Sunday, our pews are occupied by numerous survivors of child maltreatment. According to research from Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control, more than one out of four women and approximately one out of six men were sexually abused as children. More than one out of four adults suffered beatings during childhood. Thirteen percent witnessed domestic violence, eleven percent experienced emotional abuse, and ten percent were neglected.¹⁰

The failings of the modern church to consistently respond with excellence to the high level of child abuse and neglect in our congregations and communities may be rooted in our limited knowledge. In a 2015 study of the course catalogues of every

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accredited seminary in the United States, researchers found only 3 percent of seminaries had a focused course on child maltreatment.¹¹ It may also be that we have forgotten or ignored the clear, unequivocal command of Jesus to care for the least of these (Matt 25:40). Whatever the reason, the church needs to improve.

To assist the church in recognizing and responding to child abuse, this theme issue of *Currents* includes a number of articles by leading experts in the fields of child protection and theology. **Amy Russell** gives us an overview of research on the spiritual impact of maltreatment. **Alison Feigh** discusses the importance of child and adult education in preventing abuse. **Shira Berkovits** outlines ten essential policies all congregations should have. **Chris Anderson** addresses the impact of trauma on boys and men. **Pete Singer** offers guidance in coordinating pastoral care with mental health care, while **Victor Vieth** outlines the coordination of spiritual and medical care. In a separate article, Victor Vieth offers concrete suggestions for working with children who have committed a sexual offense while **Cory Jewell Jensen** offers counsel to faith leaders working with adult sex offenders. **Basyle Tchividjian** proposes a process for responding to an allegation of sexual abuse within a faith community. **Troy Troftgruben** debunks the theology that uses the Bible to justify acts of violence or other harm to child and adult survivors of abuse. **Craig L. Nesson** proposes a child liberation theology that would make the cause of children a central tenet of the Christian faith.

In *Listening to Immigrant Voices*, **Nouk Vagh** (with **Gregg Hel-land** and **Jua J. Her**) writes about the identity and history of the Hmong people, including their origin and culture. He explores the roles they played during the Vietnam War and why so many are

now in the United States. In the *Currents Focus* feature, **Kathryn M. Kvamme** explores the lives of adolescent girls, focusing on the unique struggles and challenges they face daily, including the loss of self and voice, the deleterious effects of social media, and violence. She then examines how a theology of the cross can speak into the lives of girls, showing them the presence of the crucified and risen Lord in the midst of their suffering. We are also pleased to offer readers the next serving of *Preaching Helps* prepared by a team of authors coordinated by **Barbara K. Lundblad**.

We pray these articles will spur the faith community to protect the innocent, to seek the lost, and to hold accountable those who hurt children. In the words of Martin Luther, “It is to the little children we must preach, it is for them that the entire ministry exists.”¹²

Victor Vieth, Guest Editor

Craig L. Nesson, Issue Co-Editor

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of the sexual assault of Tamar and the “power rape” of Bathsheba, see Richard M Davidson, “Sexual Abuse in the Old Testament,” in *The Long Journey Home: Understanding and Ministering to the Sexually Abused*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzter (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 144–150.

2. See generally, O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: the Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005).

3. Some scholars believe this was a clear admonition against the sexual abuse of children. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 450; William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 121–123.

4. See generally, O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: the Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005); W.A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004); Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014).

5. Michael D’Antonio, *Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime and the Era of Catholic Scandal* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2013); Kathryn Joyce, “The Next Christian Sex Abuse Scandal,” *American Prospect*, May 4, 2014, accessed June 3, 2018, <http://prospect.org/article/next-christian-sex-abuse-scandal>.

6. See e.g., William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

7. Paul A. Offit, *Bad Faith* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

8. John D Schuetze, “Pastoral Theology Brief: Matthew 18 also Includes Verse 6,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, no 112 (Summer 2015).

9. Victor I. Vieth, “When God Was a Victim: What a Child Abuse Survivor Taught me About Good Friday,” *Religion News Service*, April 2, 2015, accessed June 3, 2018, <http://religionnews.com/2015/04/02/god-victim-child-abuse-survivor-taught-good-friday/>.

10. Vincent J. Felitti & Robert F. Anda, “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare,” in *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic*, eds. Ruthe A. Lanius, Eric Vermeten, and Clare Pain (Cambridge Medicine, 2010).

11. Janine Betz, “Analysis of Child Abuse Training at Accredited Seminaries,” unpublished research, Gundersen National Child Protection Training Center (2015).

12. Charles Daudert, ed., *Off the Record with Martin Luther: An Original Translation of the Table Talks* (Hansa-Hewlett Publishing Co., 2009), 233.

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