

Letter to Fellow Pastors

Dear Pastor:

The evil of domestic and sexual abuse is in our midst. By “our,” I mean our conservative, Bible-believing churches. Churches just like the one I have pastored for nearly 20 years now. We are not doing well in confronting the perpetrators nor in effecting justice and kindness for their victims.

None of us learned about this evil in seminary. As a result, we are largely blind to it. Lest you think that you surely would see it if it were in your church, and that for the most part your church is free of it, let me assure you that those very thoughts reveal our blindness. The evil of domestic and sexual abuse either was – is – or is going to be in your church. And even more frightening is the confirmed fact that when it comes to your congregation, you (like me in the past) will not deal with it rightly, if you even see it at all. None of us would like to think that we would ever be an ally of evil against an oppressed victim. Yet this is what will indeed happen in your church and ministry unless you prepare yourself.

Permit me, if you will, to share my story with you in the hope that you can learn from it, and that we might all then bring the glory to Christ which we desire to.

How Our Church Did Things

First, let me share with you some of the lessons the Lord has had to teach me over the years, and which I am still learning. It took some really hard “knocks” from Him to get my attention. In seeking to reform this church, myself and our elders wrote a new book of church order (bylaws). In what we believed to be faithfulness to Scripture, we instituted the following practices:

1. Women could not vote. The men, as the head of their families and wives, voted.
2. Women could not pray aloud in prayer meetings. Only the men.

Our church was, and still is, virtually entirely home school families. Men were to be the head of their homes and women were to be in submission to

their husbands. Books such as “Me Obey Him?” and child-raising materials from ultra-conservative organizations circulated among us (the kind that basically say: homeschooling is God’s will for every Christian family, etc).

We truly desired to do “better” in following Christ than all the other typical local churches around us that were, in our opinion, largely compromised with the world. No one sat down and mapped this all out. We embraced these things over time.

The Lord Arrested Our Attention

And then the Lord blew the lid off of our pride. I won’t give the details, but a terrible incident of sexual abuse of a child occurred among us. At the same time we found ourselves being recruited by an abusive man as allies against his wife. These are the things that divide churches!

These events propelled me into the study of abuse, domestic and sexual, in an effort to better understand how these things had crept up on us and what we needed to repent of. I wanted to know if there were signs we could look for that would help us detect abusers and their victims much earlier. And so I began to read.

Over time, and by no means at my own doing, we came to realize that we had created an environment in our church that was abuser-friendly. Evil-friendly. We, as leaders, had encouraged our men to lord it over their wives and families rather than loving them. We had created an environment that was unbiblically oppressive to women. Myself and our elders, over some period of time, began to realize this – by the Lord’s mercy in showing us – and we began to make some changes.

Implementing some Positive Changes

Women in the church can now vote. Women can pray aloud in prayer meetings. In the course of preaching my sermon series on abuse, I acknowledged to our church (and I have continued to do so) that we had not done enough when teaching and preaching on the subjects of marriage, headship, and submission.

We had failed to clearly describe what *headship is not*, and what *submission is not*. We came to the realization that abuse – a pattern of coercive control employing any one or more of emotional, verbal, sexual, spiritual, physical, financial and social mistreatment of the other spouse – is indeed biblical grounds for divorce and that we would no longer insist that a husband or wife was required by the Lord to remain in a relationship in which the marriage vows had been habitually broken.

We rejected what we consider to be unbiblical and exaggerated patriarchy that is promoted so widely by books and organizations within our conservative Christian circles. We still cling solidly to the position of the inerrancy and infallibility of God's Word and thus are by no means getting on some liberal "band-wagon" to make everyone happy.

We are calling upon other conservative, Bible-believing churches and pastors to do the same things and to stop creating abuser-friendly cultures in our churches. It is important to become educated and wise in regard to the mentality and tactics of abuse.

My first steps

My first step in this process in our own church, with the support of our elders, was to preach a 21 part sermon series entitled "The Psychology of Evil." Why that title? Because you will not find any more fruitful field of study to help you understand evil in its bare, essential form than the study of the psychology and methods of the abuser. Behind his deceptive facade, the abuser is a living, breathing textbook on evil.

I highly recommend to you the following books: *Why Does He Do That?* by Lundy Bancroft. Our own book, *A Cry for Justice: How the Evil of Domestic Abuse Hides in Your Church. Not Under Bondage*, by Barbara Roberts; and the two fine books by George Simon Jr., *In Sheep's Clothing* and *Character Disturbance*.

Getting a Grip

I would like to make a suggestion to you that may well be as hard for you to hear as it was for me, originally. It is simply this – if you have been dealing with a marriage in your church in which one spouse has been claiming to

have been abused, and if that situation (as it so often does) has come to the point of threatening the unity of your church, or at least being something like a thorn to you that just won't go away, then the source of the problem may very probably rest with you and your leadership rather than with the marriage partners themselves. I have had to face up to this personally and as I said, it took the Lord giving me some pretty hard blows to get my attention.

What do I mean that the real problem very likely rests with you? I mean that if your church is characterized by any or all of the following mentalities and philosophies, then evil, abusive individuals will find it a friendly place for them, and victims will suffer. Injustices will be done to victims, all the while the leaders believing they are handling things scripturally.

Taking Stock

Therefore, if your church:

1. Embraces a theology that presumes a church member/professing Christian really is a Christian, regardless of how they are living,
2. Emphasizes the headship of the husband and father and the submission of the wife and mother without getting right down to the "nitty-gritty" of what abuse of headship actually looks like, so that the men in the church even "squirm" in the pew if they are guilty,
3. Does not, like we used to, permit women to vote or to pray aloud,
4. Teaches that the marriage covenant is not to be broken, that divorce is wrong. That sounds biblical, but what it usually translates into is the clear implication that abuse is not grounds for divorce. That abuse victims, normally women, are pleasing God and suffering for Christ by remaining in a marriage to an abuser,
5. Discourages (in some cases forbids) a wife from saying anything negative about her husband,

...then I suggest to you that it is not fundamentally the troubled marriage that is threatening the health of your church, but it is the climate that has been created which inevitably deals injustice to victims.

Injustice Destroys Unity

As more and more people in the congregation begin to realize this injustice, unity is destroyed. As we, pastors and leaders, dig our heels in further, all the while telling ourselves that we are standing faithful for Christ in this, we only add fuel to the fire.

There was still another hard thing that I had to face: just what do we think of women? The fact is that most conservative, Bible-believing pastors like ourselves actually look down upon women. We see them as inferior beings. We object to this charge, but our actions betray our real attitudes.

I had to ask myself, “Jeff, just exactly what is it that is going on in your head when a woman walks into your office and asks for help?” The answer I ultimately saw was “I see her as an inferior being and I talk down to her.” Really, and with ruthless honesty – “What does Pastor _____ think about a woman who walks into his office?” “What does he think about his wife?” Don’t rush to answers. The first responses we give are usually wrong.

Pastor, if you and your church are dedicated, Bible-believing Christians who have been working to do your best to serve Christ, the chances are quite high that you have made some of the very same errors we did. From my study of the growing number of cases of abuse uncovered in our churches, from hearing case after case of victims who have been terribly treated at our hands, I venture to say that you are not immune to these errors.

Seeking a Remedy

This means that, as in our case, the remedy for the threatened division or injustices rendered in your church lies mostly with you and your leadership, not with any one situation you are dealing with. That is to say, my prescription is that you and your leaders plead with the Lord to show you things that need to be repented of and changed.

What would happen in your church if you went before your people, after some genuine self-examination, and confessed to them that you have not done well in this matter. If you stated that you have created an oppressive

environment for women. State that by God's grace you are resolved to set about making it right? What if you went to any specific woman in a particular case you have handled, and confessed these things to her? And then set out to re-tool the culture of your church?

Many times we tell ourselves that these abuse victims (sometimes men, but usually women) who come to us asking for help have a "log" in their own eye and are just looking for the speck in their spouse's eye. But, brother, I tell you that I had said the same thing about people in those kinds of situations many times. I am afraid that now I see there was an even bigger log in my own eye.

Persecution for Christ or Oppression of the Weak?

In order to do that, I had to put aside my oft-repeated argument that I was "standing for Christ's truth and was being persecuted by sinful people." Yes, persecution is going to come if we stand for Christ. But when we are doing wrong, when we are oppressing the oppressed and being duped by evil, the fallout is not persecution for Christ. It is the bad fruit of our own crippled thinking and wrong-doing.

I trust you take these words in the spirit they are given. They are meant to do good to Christ's church, to your ministry, and to the souls of those you oversee. I realize that in some cases these things are calling for radical change on your part. All I can say is that we have made those radical changes here and are still working on them – and we aren't looking back.

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Jeff Crippen, Pastor
Tillamook, Oregon