

Why is the Church Often Complicit in Abuse?

Good to see you guys this morning, y'all doing alright? ~~Happy Halloween. I'm glad none (not many?) of you came in costume, because that would've been real weird.~~ So good job on that. But if you have a bible, turn with me to **Ezekiel 34**. I know most of us were probably up bright and early this morning just poring over the book of Ezekiel line-by-line—*wildly* popular book of the bible, that one. But just in case a few of you weren't, feel free to stop by the table of contents. We'll get there in just a bit.

If you're new around here, we've been in **a series called *Question Everything*** for the past month, where we've been addressing some of the most pressing questions and issues people tend to have when it comes to Christianity. We've been doing some work on some of the more common reasons people cite in wanting to “deconstruct,” or even *leave*, their faith. And a series like that wouldn't be complete without addressing our question today: **why is the church often complicit in abuse?** So if you're new, *welcome*. You've picked quite the Sunday to join us.

But the examples of this happening are *many*. **Last year, a four month investigation found that the world-famous Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias leveraged his notoriety and reputation to sexually abuse massage therapists, who were on his ministry's payroll. He reportedly told one of them that she was his “reward” for living a life of service to God.**

Also in 2020, New York City pastor Carl Lentz was fired from his post at Hillsong Church, most notably for having an affair. But it was subsequently revealed that the affair was just the final straw in a longer list of very fireable offenses that had been brewing behind the scenes, including sexual harassment and inappropriate sexual relationships with staff members at his church.

Back in 2014, Seattle pastor Mark Driscoll resigned from the church he started twenty years earlier. His resignation was him *responding* to (and some would say it was actually him *avoiding*) an investigation that was launched into long-running reports of domineering, bullying and arrogant behavior running all the way back to the founding of the church. Evidently he had told pastors that left his church to start another one, that he would “tear down” their new church, “brick-by-brick.”

Now, **those are just a few** of the more recent, more *prominent* examples of abuse committed by church leaders. I'm sure many of us could rattle off several more examples without much thought at all. **Bill Hybels. Jerry Falwell, Jr. Ted Haggard. Jim Bakker. Catholic priests over the past 25 years. Southern Baptists as recent as this past year.**

The list goes on and on. In more recent years, words like “pastor” and “priest” have become strangely synonymous with words like “*scandal*” and “*abuse*.”

And *on top of that*, for a lot of people, stories of abusive religious leaders aren't just on the news or in the headlines. For many people, it's a part of *their own* story, or at least the story of people they know. For instance, my best guess is that somewhere around half of the people I meet who start coming around our church family have at least one story in their life of unhealthy or abusive church leaders.

So this morning, I'm gonna attempt to give a teaching that, to be honest, I'd rather not give. As a pastor, and someone who dearly loves the church, it's not easy to talk about the times when the church has done more harm than good. But I think we need to have the conversation. Because if we don't, we risk doing what the church has so often done regarding this topic, and that's just not talking about it and hoping it goes away. And that response obviously is not working. So this morning, we're going to attempt an honest conversation about the abuse committed by churches and church leaders.

But like always, we want to start that conversation with the Scriptures. And if we do that—if we just take an honest survey of the bible—I think we find that the Bible has quite a bit to say on the topic; both about their existence, and about God's condemnation of them. To name a few: in the Old Testament, we read about two sons of a high priest that use their power and position to steal sacrifices and seduce the women assisting in the tabernacle. They're subsequently judged by God for their sin.¹

We read about David, the king of Israel, who once used his power and position to summon another man's wife, sleep with her, and get her pregnant. He then attempts to use his power to cover it up, and when that doesn't work, he uses his power and position to have her husband killed. God then sends a prophet, Nathan, to expose and rebuke David over it all.²

In the New Testament, Jesus picks up the mantle of confronting abusive religious leaders, rounding out one of his most famous teachings, the sermon on the mount, by telling his followers to “watch out for false prophets” (i.e. leaders who claim to speak for God but don't). He says that these false prophets will come to them “in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” In other words, we should look out for leaders who project innocence and virtue, but are actually out to harm and destroy people.³

¹ See 1 Samuel 2.

² See 2 Samuel 11-12

³ Matthew 7:15.

Throughout the gospels, particularly in passages like **Matthew 23**, Jesus rails on religious leaders who live very differently than they preach. Leaders that elevate themselves by condemning others. Leaders that take advantage of their spiritual authority and use it to serve themselves. And leaders who live hypocritical lives, using external righteousness to conceal greed and corruption and self-indulgence under the surface.⁴

And it doesn't stop with *Jesus*, either. **A majority of the New Testament letters in the bible contain some warning in them about abusive leadership in the church.** Members and leaders of churches were *repeatedly* told to keep an eye out for anyone posing as a spiritual authority, while *using* that authority to harm and deceive. So this idea is addressed, really, *all over* the Scriptures.

But **perhaps the most detailed, extensive passage** about abusive leadership in the bible is found in **Ezekiel 34**. In it, God addresses a group of people simply called the "shepherds of Israel." **Shepherding is a metaphor** used throughout the bible—Old Testament and New—to refer to the leaders of God's people. Shepherds lived *among* the sheep in order to care for them, and were willing to sacrifice comfort, convenience—even life and limb—to keep them safe. *That's* the metaphor we're given for spiritual leadership in the bible.

However, here, in Ezekiel 34, God is going to call out some spiritual leaders who were embodying the very *opposite* of that posture. Let's read v. **1-6** of that passage, and then we'll pause and draw some things out of it. Pick it up with me in **v. 1**:

[1] The word of the Lord came to me: [2] "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? [3] You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. [4] You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. [5] So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. [6] My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

⁴ Matthew 23, specifically v. 3, 5-7, 4, 15, 25-26.

So God wants Ezekiel to *confront* a group of spiritual leaders for how they have led God's people. He starts by accusing them of "eating the curds," "slaughtering the choice animals," and "clothing [*themselves*] with the wool." So follow what he's saying there: rather than caring for the sheep in their charge, these shepherds: 1) ate the food that was meant only for the *sheep*, 2) *slaughtered* the sheep they were supposed to keep *safe*, and 3) used the *wool* off of the sheep they *killed* to comfort *themselves*.

It would be hard to come up with any actions of a shepherd more *opposite* from what they were supposed to be doing. I mean, notice the intense *irony*: The **shepherds were supposed to keep the sheep safe from predators. But in this passage, they have become the sheep's predators.** The one place the sheep were meant to go for *safety* became the most *dangerous* place for them to be. This, so often, seems to be the case in some churches. The people who are supposed to be *protectors*, have become *predators* instead. The leaders who are called to live alongside, and care for their people in sacrificial ways, have become some of the most dangerous people to be around. And the impact that that has can be *devastating*. It's so difficult to reckon with a situation where someone you thought was safe, ended up intentionally harming you. That's the scenario being described in this passage.

He continues, saying that these shepherds have neglected to *strengthen* the *weak*, *heal* the *sick*, or *bind up* the *injured*. They haven't brought *back* the *strays* or *searched* for the *lost* sheep. Again, these were all things shepherds were *supposed* to be doing. After a sheep was attacked by a predator or injured by a fall, the shepherds' job was to *tend* to that sheep until they were healed up. When a sheep *wandered off*, the shepherd's job was to go and find them and bring them back to safety. This is why Jesus tells a story in the gospel of Luke about the shepherd that "left the ninety-nine to find the one." That's the *idea*. These were all tasks and responsibilities *baked into* the job of a shepherd. They were *basic expectations*. But *these* shepherds had neglected to do it.

Instead, it says they ruled over these sheep "harshly and brutally." They tried to *control* the *sheep* rather than *care* for them. And as a result, they *harmed* more than they *helped*. And as a result, the passage says these sheep were "scattered...on every hill." Because they weren't being cared for, protected, or helped—they wandered off. They *left*.

So it is a *metaphor*, but it's not a very difficult one to follow, right? We could fairly easily map each movement of this passage onto our present-day situation within the Church. Pastors and leaders have often used and harmed people rather than helping them, sometimes causing tremendous damage. They have often *neglected* to do the very essence of their job. They've neglected to care for the hurting, protect the vulnerable, and keep the flock safe. And all of this has directly contributed to people being

“scattered.” People walking away from specific churches or the Church at large because they weren’t cared for well, or even because were directly *harmed* by the Church.

And it’s **not just** that this all happens **once in a blue moon**. Like we mentioned at the beginning, it’s that it *keeps* happening. It seems like the problem is a little deeper than just an occasional pastor doing sinful things. **It would seem that the problem is actually that the church often covers for, covers up, or conceals the actions of abusive leaders.** It would seem that we, at times, have created an environment that is ripe for this sort of thing to happen. So *why is that?* How is it that churches keep *allowing* this to happen on their watch? I would say that’s a question that needs answering.

And from what *I’ve* seen, there are **at least three major dynamics** at play that contribute to it all. You could call them “misordered priorities” within churches and church leadership, that contribute to a culture of abuse. And really, they’re all fairly *interconnected*. So I want to walk you through each of these, and help you see how they can contribute to abusive dynamics within the Church. The *first* misordered priority I’ve seen is...

Misordered Priority #1: Career over Calling

First, I think **sometimes, pastors and church leaders are motivated more by careerism, than they are by calling.** They are interested in pastoring more as a *job*, than they are interested in it as a life-long *responsibility*. We get a glimpse of this in the Ezekiel passage, when it says that these shepherds were “only taking care of themselves,” when *good* shepherds would be caring for the flock.

What **would sometimes happen** when you hired a shepherd, just like when you hire for *any* job, is that sometimes **you end up with somebody who is only there for a paycheck.** They’re not there because they love the work, or even because they see the *value* in the work—but simply because they want to get paid.

Now, that can be bad when it comes to *any* job. But it **becomes especially harmful when other people’s faith and spiritual health are on the other side of that transaction.** Because it creates a dynamic where shepherds are inclined to *use* the sheep, rather than *caring* for them. And in fact that’s exactly what happens in the passage. So often, pastors end up using congregations to gain notoriety for themselves, or for praise and adulation, or to land a book deal or a better ministry job in the future, or any number of other things. It creates a dynamic where leaders are quick to harm and use people, rather than sacrificially shepherding them.

I see this so often in how some pastors jump from church to church, job to job, every year or two. It becomes obvious after a while that each church is little more than a stepping stone for them. And as a pastor, if each church you're at is just a holding pattern until you get a job at another one, your focus probably *isn't* most on how to best love and serve that congregation. It tends to be more on how to use them as leverage to gain your next opportunity. And it's not hard to see how that can contribute to abusive dynamics between pastors and their churches. The second misplaced priority I'd put like this...

Misplaced Priority #2: Charisma over Character

This, from what I've seen, is an extremely common one. Far too often in our churches, we put someone in charge because they're *gifted*, or because they're *charismatic*, or because they're a good speaker, or because they've been successful in the business world. **We assume that if a person is talented, they must have the character to back it up.** If a person is *gifted*, that surely means they will make a good pastor.

But contrast that mentality with a passage like 1 Timothy 3—we'll put this on the screen for you:

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer (in other words, a leader within the church—that person) desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Now we don't have time to unpack each one of those this morning. But did you hear how many qualifications for a spiritual leader were in there? It's upwards of fifteen, depending on how exactly you count it. And notice that except for one, every single qualification was character-based, not skill-based (the only skill-based one, arguably, is that they should be "able to teach"). I think that is significant. Evidently, to God, a pastor's character is more important than their skillset. And that isn't to say that skillset doesn't matter—it does—it's just that skillset isn't what qualifies someone to be a pastor.

A person shouldn't be a pastor just because they're *talented* enough to be one. They should only be a pastor if their *character is consistent* with that of a pastor. And when you *put* someone in a position of authority that doesn't have the character to correspond to it, abuse is going to happen more often than not. We need to stop prioritizing *charisma* over *character*. And **third...**

Misordered Priority #3: Results over Faithfulness

(I tried to make them all start with C's but I ran out of good words to use.) Deeply connected to putting *charisma* over *character*, is when we value *results* over *faithfulness*. Another way of putting that is that **we often value the achievements of pastors more than we value their consistency with the Scriptures**. Sometimes when a church overvalues numeric growth or organizational growth or financial growth, they will sacrifice other, more important things to achieve all that.

You see this often in abusive environments when harmful behavior from a leader is pointed out, but **people respond with** comments like "but the church is *growing!*" Or "look at how many people are getting baptized!" "Look at how much good the church is doing!" Sometimes, abusive churches will even demonize the people sounding the alarm by saying that they are trying to "tear down" the good work of the church. **This quickly creates a mentality where the end always justifies the means; where most anything can be excused or justified in the name of "results."** Where churches are hesitant to let a leader go because doing so will decrease the *impact* of that church. And generally, that's the beginning of the end, when that happens.

Instead, we should be valuing more than just *results*; we should value *faithfulness*. We should value going about the right things, *in the right ways*. A way to honor God not just with the outcomes of our actions, but with the actions themselves. That's what it means to faithfully lead a church.

So here **at City Church**, practically speaking, we have put **quite a few safeguards in place** to try and *discourage* abusive leadership dynamics. **For starters, our church is led by multiple pastors, not a singular pastor**. We do that, one, because we see it as the pattern in Scripture. But we also do it *strategically*, as a safeguard for the pastors and the church. We don't think it's healthy for one pastor to call all of the shots in all the scenarios, without ever being challenged by others. Our pastors are all *friends* with one another—not just coworkers. So there is an expectation that we are regularly noticing and calling out things with each other, when that needs to happen.

All of our **pastors are also in LifeGroups**, where church members have a direct, regular view into their lives and their character. Where *those* people are given free reign to engage those pastors on any area of their life that seems inconsistent with the Scriptures. **Our budget is reviewed regularly by an accountant, and twice a year by a Financial Advisory Team**, made up of members of City Church who take a detailed look at how and where we spend money.

We have put into place **these measures** and more to help discourage any type of abusive dynamic among our leadership. Now listen: I don't say all of that to say "bad things can never happen here." I pray they never do, but I can't make you that promise, and you shouldn't believe any church that does make you that promise. **If there's one thing all these church scandals have taught us, it's that no matter how much accountability is in place; an abusive leader will try and find a way around it.** So I'm not going to stand up here and pretend I can make you that promise. I tell you all of that about City Church simply to show you that we 1) understand the gravity of the problem, and 2) try to *discourage* those things happening as best we know how. Does that make sense? We want to do everything we can to help *prevent* anything like this happening.

But all of that said, those measures are just that: **they're preventative.** They are ways to try and avoid the abuse happening in the first place. But unfortunately for many churches and many people, the ship has already sailed. The abuse has already *happened*. So before we're done, I did want us to talk for just a bit about **how we should respond to abuse** from church leaders *once* it *does happen*. For that, I want us to take a look at **God's response** to the bad shepherds back in **Ezekiel 34**. Pick it back up with me in v. 7:

*[7] "Therefore, **you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord:** [8] **As surely as I live,** declares the Sovereign Lord, **because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock,** [9] therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: [10] This is what the Sovereign Lord says: **I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.** [11] "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: **I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.***

So there's a few things I want to draw out from those verses. First: **God is against bad shepherds.** That's in v. 9: "I am *against* the shepherds, and will *hold them accountable* for my flock." If you're in the room today, or listening to this online, and you have suffered

legitimate abuse from an abusive leader, hear me say this: God is *against* that leader. I think that's important for us to know.

Because here's the dynamic that so **often happens** in these types of situations. When there is abuse, they are a church *leader*, and you are a church *member*. They get idolized, while you get vilified. The assumption is that God is on *their* side, since they're a "man of God" or a "minister of the Lord," and you aren't. So what happens, so often, is that they get believed and you don't. That is the way it often plays out. But I want you to hear me say that if you are the survivor of abuse, God is *not on* that leader's side, no matter how *gifted* they are or were; he is *against* them *and* the abuse. That's so very important for you to know.

We're also told in the passage that God will hold those leaders *accountable*. The person who mistreated you, neglected you, harmed you, abused you—it may *feel like* they "got away with it." But **nobody "gets away" with abuse when Jesus is king—nobody**. They will be held accountable for everything they said, everything they did; God *promises* that. So first, God is *against* bad shepherds.

Second, we see in the passage that **God removes bad shepherds**. In the second half of v. 9, God says "I will *remove* them from tending the flock so that they can no longer feed themselves." **Notice: the correct response to abusive leaders is to remove them from leadership.** Not quietly demote them to a *lesser* position of leadership within the same church. Not give them a stellar recommendation to pastor *another* church across town or across the country, where they can repeat the same patterns. The correct response is to *remove* them as a leader. There are processes in place for how that happens, laid out in the Scriptures, but the end result to confirmed abuse from a leader is to *remove them from leadership*.⁵

Now, *some* might say in *response* to that, "yeah, but **what about grace?** What about *forgiveness?*" To that I simply say that grace and forgiveness have nothing to do with continuing in leadership. We can show a person *tremendous* grace and *tremendous* forgiveness, and still not keep them in a position of leadership where they can harm more people. *Leadership* in the church is *earned*, not *given*. **And if taking a person out of church leadership because they were unhealthy devastates them, that's probably a good sign that they needed to be taken out of leadership in the first place.** The response to an abusive leader is to take them *out of* leadership.

⁵ See 1 Timothy 5:19-20.

And then finally, we see that **God replaces bad shepherds**. And **that's true in two ways**. First, notice that **no matter how bad some shepherds are, God never chooses to give up on the idea of shepherding itself**. God continues, in this very same book of the bible, to set up new kings and priests and leaders over the nation of Israel. He continues to send *prophets*: vocal leaders who speak for God, to his people. In the *New Testament*, God sets up leaders in every local expression of the church, and uses this very same language from Ezekiel 34: he calls them *shepherds*. **God doesn't bail on the idea of leadership just because some leaders are bad**. I think that's important for us to realize in our current cultural climate. The solution to bad leadership isn't *no* leadership, but rather *better* leadership.

But second, the passage tells us that **God also replaces bad leaders in another way: he replaces them with himself**. He says "I *myself* will search for my sheep and *look after* them." God insists that he will function as the shepherd that the leaders of Israel failed to be. *He* will look after his people. *He* will care for them. *He* will search for them and bring them back to safety. A few verses later, he says he will "seek the lost, [he will] bring back the strayed, [he will] bind up the injured, and [he will] strengthen the weak."⁶ God himself will be what the leaders of Israel failed to be. He will heal, where *they* injured. He will restore, where *they* neglected.

In **John 10, v. 11**, Jesus picks up on this imagery and reveals *himself* as being the good shepherd God was referring to, saying there:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Jesus would one day come and be the exact *opposite* of the bad shepherds of Israel. He would *embody* what *they failed* to be. And he would do that by *laying down his very life* for the sake of the sheep. That is the *mark* of a good shepherd. A *bad* shepherd, like we mentioned, is simply there to collect a **paycheck**. He doesn't care if he *neglects* some sheep or if he *harms* others—as long as he gets paid, that's as far as it goes.

But the good shepherd doesn't see shepherding primarily as a *career*, he sees it as a *calling*. He lays down his very *life* for the sheep. Jesus showed himself to be the Good Shepherd by going to the cross, giving up his life, so that *you and I* could benefit. So that *we* could be rescued, brought back, tended to, and *healed*. benefit from it. He sacrificed *everything*—his comfort, his convenience, his very body and blood and breath—so that *we* could belong to him.

⁶ Ezekiel 34:16

So **if you're in the room this morning**, or listening to this online—and you feel like your primary experience with church leaders has been with *bad* shepherds, I do want you to know that there is a *Good Shepherd out there*. There is one who can be trusted to do what is right, and not what is wrong. To do what is helpful, and not what is harmful. To do what is healing and not what is damaging.

I think **one of the most *damaging* things** about abuse—especially when it comes from spiritual authorities—is that it becomes really hard to not *project* that abuse onto God himself. In your mind, the name and reputation and person of Jesus becomes very wrapped up in and enmeshed with that harmful experience you had with a church or church leader. Sometimes the abusive church leader has even *encouraged you to see them as the same thing*.

But that's **why it's so important that we have conversations like these**. It's so important that we distinguish between *bad* shepherds, and *the Good Shepherd*. It's so important that we realize that God isn't on the *side* of the bad leaders we've experienced, but rather is the *antithesis of* them. And if you'll let him, he can help you process and heal from the damage they've caused.

So **if** that's part of your story, and **we here at City Church can be helpful** to you in any way in that journey: please reach out to us. As I mentioned earlier, we have a *lot* of conversations with people that have come through abusive and unhealthy churches. So if we can be helpful to you in your journey, we'd love to be able to do that. That said, we obviously understand if you'd rather not talk to a *church leader* about that at this time—and that's *understandable*. If *that's* the case, we'll be glad to connect you to someone who's *not* a pastor, maybe even someone who has been through an experience like that themselves.

But whatever the case, know that **there is a Good Shepherd** out there. He's so much better than what you've experienced. And not only that, but he knows *first-hand* what it's like to be mistreated. To be used. To experience hurt and harm that he didn't deserve to experience. So take it all to him, and let him walk with you through it.

If it's alright, I'd love to **pray specifically for you** in that as we close.

[Pray for those who have been abused]

[Pray for those bad shepherds, that they would repent]

[Pray for God to raise up good shepherds]