

towards▶belief

Church Abuse

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

When it happens, church abuse, especially of children, is horrific and deplorable. Critics of the Church point to the sexual abuse scandals as a huge reason to call the Christian faith into question.

The ongoing Australian Royal Commission into child sexual abuse has uncovered case after case of broken trust, attempted cover-ups and gross system/organisational failure within the Church, especially the Catholic Church. This has left many critics and victims of abuse feeling like they can no longer trust the Church or its message. The Church's own moral teaching is about protecting the most vulnerable so when abuse happens the Church has been called hypocritical and worse. To many this is the number one blocker to Christian faith. The vast majority of people deplore this kind of abuse and are rightly shocked at the Church when it happens. This is a major belief blocker.

WATCH THE DVD

Q1. What is your reaction to the stories told in the DVD?

JESUS AND CHILDREN

Mark 10:13-16

Q2. Why did the disciples rebuke the parents for bring children to Jesus? What did his response indicate about his attitude to children?

Any reading of the Gospels, however quick, would leave even the toughest critic with the distinct impression that Jesus would never have tolerated abusive behaviour towards anyone, let alone a child. He would have advocated a severe self-sentence rather than 'cause one of these little ones to stumble'. See Luke 17:1-2.

Q3. Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the non-violent independence movement in India famously said, 'I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.' What do you think he meant?

Q4. Could abuse by a church leader prompt someone to argue that faith in Jesus is a sham and the Church full of hypocrites? How would you respond?

After realising that he had been sexually abused by a Pastor as a boy Dale Kuehne said: *"What I can say is that I never equated that pastor's actions with Jesus Christ and I never equated it with the church. And so while I can understand why people would be angry at the church and angry at God for these things that happened to me or to anybody else, this is not what God wants. This was an abomination. When the Scripture speaks about hell I have no problem with hell. Maybe I should but I don't..."*

He adds, *"But the reality is that it's never changed my understanding of the fact that I need God, that this world needs God and this world needs Christ. For all of us that are in the midst of this, we do need to find a way forward because it just eats us alive. I'm not shaking because I'm cold. I want to come to the place where I forgive because I'm the one that's suffering until I do. But I probably would beat up the pastor if I ever had the chance. And it would probably give me more delight than it should. And I need to let it go. I don't know how yet but I need to let it go. It's not going to do any of us any good to beat up on God and beat up on Jesus when they're our only hope."*

STAY AWAY FROM ABUSIVE PEOPLE

Proverbs 5:1-9 Ephesian 4:17-24

Q5. What advice is given in these passages about godly behaviour?

JESUS AND HYPOCRITES

Matthew 23:23-32, Mark 7:5-8, 17-23.

Q6 What is hypocrisy? What was Jesus' attitude to hypocrites? How does it operate in churches today?

Q7. What should we do if we discover a case of child abuse in our church?

'I think that you should always be involving the police... They've got to face up to their crimes. They've got to face up to their accusers. They got to take the penalty for whatever that may be. And I think forgiveness is at the end of the process, not the beginning. There may be forgiveness - there is for the worst of us. But it's not to be given lightly. And I think forgiveness can follow from repentance, a change of life. (And) reparation, which is saying now what can I do for the victim or the victims, because often there are many victims.' (Patrick Parkinson)

'The church must adopt a zero tolerance attitude to abuse within its ranks. Speaking truth and seeking justice for victims is now a vital ingredient of the Church's attempts to reconnect with the community and win back people's trust.' (Karl Faase)

JESUS AND FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 23:34, Colossians 3:12-14.

Q8. How does forgiveness operate for an offender and a victim of abuse?

Reparation and repentance are key ideas when considering how to deal with an offender. Forgiveness must be hard-edged and robust for offenders. For forgiveness to happen they must honestly face up to their wrongs, repent and seek reparation for the victim(s). Truth must be revealed and justice must occur.

'I think one of the big issues has been forgiveness. That's one of the great things about Christianity – that whatever you have done, however badly you have lived – there's the possibility of being forgiven. There's that possibility that your guilt can be taken away. But at the same time it's a bit dangerous when you say that to an offender who hasn't repented, who hasn't changed life, who will continue to do these things. There's a big difference between remorse and repentance. Remorse is when you feel sorry about something. Remorse is what happens in the back of a police car. Repentance is when you agree to change your life and turn around and not do it again. Christ demands of us repentance, not remorse.' (Patrick Parkinson)

The Christian message is a message of forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. Even the worst of sinners is loved by God and Jesus died to deal with all sin. As the hymn Amazing Grace, written by John Newton, an abusive slave-trader, reminds us: *'Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.'* Victims can, and should for their own sake, forgive repentant offenders – as God forgives us all.

SUMMARY: WHAT TO SAY TO THOSE WHO CLAIM 'CHURCH ABUSE' CALLS THE WHOLE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE INTO QUESTION?

- i. 'In that situation I just want to say what I have said: 'I'm so, so sorry that this occurred under our watch and it's a terrible evil.' (Keith Kondie) Be repentant for church abuse.
- ii. All organisations dealing with children have some offenders. Sadly the church does also.
- iii. All such abuse is not Christian. Jesus abhorred violence and abuse.
- iv. All sexual abuse should be reported to the police and appropriate Church authorities.

- v. Offenders can change, can repent, and when reparation happens can be forgiven and reconciled to God and to a victim. That may take a long time to happen.
- vi. Jesus forgave those who abused him. Luke 23:34.

SHARING & PRAYER