

“#MeToo and Evangelicalism: Shattering Myths about Sexual Abuse and Power”

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Introduction

In the 1960s the so called “sexual revolution” created cataclysmic shifts in sexual beliefs and practices in the United States and much of the western world. In the ensuing decades we have continued to witness huge cultural sexual controversies and societal changes. This past year marked the inauguration of what appears to be another seismic sexual shift with the birth of the #MeToo movement. At the core of this unstructured crusade is the assertion that sexual abuse and harassment, particularly of women, is widespread and destructive. Furthermore, one of the dominant, reoccurring themes of #MeToo is the role that power plays in the sexual abuse and harassment of women. This essay will briefly survey and note the impact of the #MeToo movement in secular society and in the evangelical church. It will then explore several common evangelical misunderstandings regarding sexual abuse and harassment unveiled by #MeToo. It will close by suggesting a few action steps for the church.

I. Explanation of the #MeToo Movement

A. History

On October 15th, 2017 Alyssa Milano, an American activist and actor, bombarded by messages and articles detailing sexual assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey

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Weinstein, tweeted: If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted reply to this tweet with "metoo." Over the next 24 hours Milano's tweet received 55,000 replies. Milano wasn't simply speaking for herself, she was speaking for the countless men and women who, up to this point, had been silently carrying toxic abuse trauma.

The widespread reach of sexual assault allegations against the powerful and prestigious is astounding. Vox, an American news and opinion website founded in 2014, reported a list of 252 powerful individuals, including celebrities, politicians, CEO's, and evangelical leaders, who've been the recipients of sexual assault allegations. Since, April 2017, 250 additional leaders have been added to this list.² What appears to be most shocking is the sheer quantity of these sexual assault allegations. Four men—Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein, actor Bill Cosby, USA gymnastics team doctor Larry Nassar, and actor Kevin Spacey—have amassed a staggering 450 separate accusations. The vast majority of accusers have been women. Several of those on the accused perpetrator list were subsequently convicted of sex crimes. A high percentage of those on the list had multiple accusers. Many of the accusations were supported with corroborating evidence from other witnesses, phone logs, emails, and even incriminating photographs. The fallout from many of the high profile #MeToo allegations has been dramatic, leading to industry shake ups, lawsuits, and firings/resignations of many well-known and trusted leaders, including NBC news anchor Matt Laurer, founder of Wynn Resorts Steve Wynn, president and CEO of the Dallas Mavericks Terdema Ussery, US senator Al Franken, and Fox News Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes.

In addition to sexual assault allegations, #MeToo has also highlighted widespread sexual harassment. For instance, research by Crimson Hexagon and George Washington University

² <https://www.vox.com/a/sexual-harassment-assault-allegations-list>.

showed a consistent and rapid increase in tweets related to sexual harassment between 2016-2018. 35,000 tweets in early October of 2016 grew to 75,000 in late October, and ultimately reached a pinnacle in late 2017 and early 2018 with 125,000 tweets.³

It should be noted that while the hashtag #MeToo became popularized in late 2017, the origins of the movement reach back nearly 10 years.⁴ This movement has become more than simply a bullhorn to the widespread and pervasive nature of sexual violence. It is a collective effort to communicate that survivors are not alone. #MeToo movement founder Tarana Burke states, “What the viral campaign does is, it creates hope. It creates inspiration. People need hope and inspiration desperately.”⁵ This cry for hope is beginning to be heard, though not without significant pushback.

B. Impact on the Church

Amidst the wake of the #MeToo Movement, the evangelical church was not able to vaccinate itself from the disease festering invisibly within its own body. On November 20, 2017 Hannah Paasch and Emily Joy, former students of Moody Bible Institute, a conservative Christian College, launched the hashtag #ChurchToo, calling those in the church to share their stories of sexual abuse. A 24-hour surge resulted in thousands of tweets. In only a few days following the launch, Paasch and Joy were on TIME, Bustle, Vox, Ebony, and a dozen other national media outlets. Shortly afterward, in December of 2017, Belinda Bauman and Lisa Sharon Harper established the #SilenceIsNotSpiritual campaign, backed by 140 prominent

³<https://gspm.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2286/f/downloads/2018%20RD18%20MeToo%20Presentation.pdf>.

⁴ Through her own experience of sexual assault, Tarana Burke, a black woman who spent her last 25 years as an activist for people within marginalized communities, created the “Me Too” campaign in 2006. Milano credited the #MeToo movement’s origin to Burke.

⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/?utm_term=.3418412ad370.

Christian women, including Lynne Hybels, Ann Voskamp, and Beth Moore.⁶ Their statement, which calls evangelical churches, pastors, elders, and parishioners who have been silent to speak up and stand up for those who experience abuse, has increased from 1,000 signatures to over 6,000.⁷ While thousands of individuals shared their stories of abuse at the hands of pastors and evangelical leaders, layers began to peel back, revealing pervasive patterns of denial, coverup, and abuse of male power. Turbocharging the impact of the #MeToo movement on the evangelical church has been a series of investigative articles documenting abuse allegations against several prominent evangelical leaders in influential newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Two of the highest profile #MeToo allegations to impact the evangelical church demonstrate the breadth of the problem of abuse of male power against women. On June 1, 2018, the board of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary issued a statement saying they had fired former seminary president and long-time Southern Baptist icon Paige Patterson and stripped him of his retirement benefits. This was said to be due to Patterson's lying about his account of rape allegations at another seminary as well as his response to a different rape in which he tried to "break down the victim."⁸ Patterson had already been demoted to president emeritus, apparently in large part due to controversy created by the release of a sermon he had preached years earlier advising an abused woman to stay with a husband who ended up assaulting her. Patterson is known for his very conservative "complementarian" gender role theology. But abuse of male power against women is not limited to powerful gender role conservatives.

⁶ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/december/women-speak-up-in-silenceisnotspiritual-campaign.html>.

⁷ <http://www.silenceisnotspiritual.org/statement>.

⁸ Statement by Kevin Ueckert, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, June 1, 2018; available at: <https://swbts.edu/news/releases/statement-kevin-ueckert-chairman-board-trustees>.

For decades Willow Creek Community Church in the suburbs of Chicago has been the most well-known and influential egalitarian church in the evangelical world, led by its founder and senior pastor Bill Hybels. Between its numerous multi-site churches, Hybels sustained a reputable and powerful persona to nearly 26,000 attendees, ranking Willow Creek the fifth largest church in the United States. Garnering him greater levels of influence and power, Hybels started the Global Leadership Summit—an annual training event for church, ministry, and other leaders—over two decades ago, attracting nearly 120,000 leaders every year.

In early 2018 multiple sexual assault/ harassment allegations came against Hybels, reaching back to the late 1990's, including behavior such as sexually suggestive comments, unwanted kisses, and multiple invitations to hotel rooms. Hybels vehemently denied the allegations and attacked his accusers. The elder board of Willow Creek aligned with Hybels and accused his critics of making a “coordinated effort to undermine Bill’s reputation.” On August 5th 2018, however, a *New York Times* article broke claiming that Pat Baranowski, a previous employee of Bill Hybels, was on the receiving end of nearly two years of sexual assault at the hands of Hybels. Steve Carter, Willow Creek’s lead teaching pastor, upon reading the article was so upset that he became ill and was unable to preach. Within hours he tendered his resignation.⁹ Shortly afterwards, lead pastor Heather Larson, as well as the entire church elder board stated that they would step down by the end of 2018. On behalf of the elders, Missy Rasmussen apologized to Hybel’s accusers and stated, “[w]e have no reason not to believe you. We are sorry that our initial statements were so insensitive, defensive, and reflexively protective of Bill. We exhort Bill to acknowledge his sin and publicly apologize.”¹⁰

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/us/bill-hybels-willow-creek-pat-baranowski.html>.

¹⁰ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/august/willow-creek-bill-hybels-heather-larson-elders-resign-inves.html#storystream>.

Willow Creek fractured the commonly held belief that only conservative, gender traditional pastors misuse their power against women. Abuse is not a conservative or liberal issue; it is a deeply human one that every person and institution must come to terms with and fight against.

I. Common Evangelical Misunderstanding Regarding Sexual Abuse

A 2018 survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors regarding their attitudes and actions around domestic violence and sexual abuse revealed that “more pastors than ever before” (ninety-five percent) reported being familiar with local resources to assist parishioners experiencing abuse. Furthermore, a major finding of the study was that there is “an increase in awareness among Christian pastors that abuse and harassment are problems in their communities” which must be addressed.¹¹ However, half of the pastors stated that they had received little or no formal training to guide them in understanding and responding properly to abuse. So, it is not surprising to find many common sexual abuse misconceptions among evangelicals. Four categories of misconceptions are particularly significant.

A. The Prevalence of Sexual Violence against Women in Society and in Christian Communities.

The #MeToo movement has shocked many Americans with the reality that sexual violence is prevalent in virtually every segment of society. As we saw in the discussion above about the movement’s impact on the church, evangelicals have also been forced to confront the prevalence of sexual violence in their communities. Al Mohler, the president of Southern

¹¹ “Broken Silence 2.0: Pastor’s Attitudes and Actions around Domestic and Sexual Violence in the #MeToo Era,” September, 2018; available at: <https://wewillspeakout.us/broken-silence>. The original study was commissioned by IMA World Health and Sojourners and conducted by LifeWay Research.

Seminary, one the largest seminaries in the world, made a staggering #MeToo acknowledgment.

Mohler states:

The last few weeks have been excruciating for the Southern Baptist Convention and for the larger evangelical movement. It is as if bombs are dropping and God alone knows how many will fall and where they will land. America's largest evangelical denomination has been in the headlines day after day. The SBC is in the midst of its own horrifying #MeToo moment...

Sexual misconduct is as old as sin, but the avalanche of sexual misconduct that has come to light in recent weeks is almost too much to bear... We thought this was a Roman Catholic problem... I did not see this coming. I was wrong. The judgment of God has come.¹²

Indeed, "the avalanche of sexual misconduct that has come to light in recent weeks is almost too much to bear." But bear it we must. Countless research studies have validated the prevalence of sexual violence, particularly against women. For instance, a 2011 study of sexual violence conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Department of Justice based on interviews with 14,155 individuals revealed that during their lifetime approximately:

- 44% of women (and 23% of men) had experienced sexual violence other than rape

¹² Al Mohler, "The Humiliation of the Southern Baptist Convention," *Christianity Today*, May 23, 2018; available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/may-web-only/al-mohler-humiliation-of-southern-baptist-convention-metoo.html>.

- 27% of women (and 11% of men) had experienced unwanted sexual contact
- 20% of women (and almost 2% of men) had been raped.¹³

Experts estimate that one in three U.S. women and one in six men experience some form of contact sexual violence in their lifetime.¹⁴ It should be noted that whether the sexual assault victim is a male or a female, the vast majority of victims were assaulted by males. Few studies have been conducted to ascertain sexual abuse rates among evangelicals, but one large scale study of 2,000 Christian women is quite revealing. The researchers found that fifty percent of the women surveyed reported they had experienced unwanted sexual touch.¹⁵

And sexual harassment and noncontact sexual crimes, particularly against women, are even more prevalent. An extensive study of data on sexual harassment in the workplace released in 2018 concluded that: “[D]espite decades of attention, legal action, and advocacy...sexual harassment remains a serious and pervasive problem across virtually all industry sectors and workplaces. We found that no sector remains untouched by sexual harassment, nor unaffected by its impacts.”¹⁶ Task Force testimony and published research reveal that 25% to 85% of women report having experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.¹⁷

Another 2018 study quantified prevalence rates of sexual harassment based on interviews with 2,000 women and men. The researchers discovered that:

¹³ Matthew Breiding et al., “Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence, Stalking, and Intimate Partner Violence Victimization — National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, United States, 2011,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 63, September 5, 2014, p. 4.

¹⁴ S. G. Smith et al., “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report,” Atlanta: Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; available at: www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NISVS-StateReportBook.pdf

¹⁵ Archibald Hart, Catherine Hart Weber, and Debra Taylor, *Secrets of Eve: Understanding the Mystery of Female Sexuality* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998), p. 181.

¹⁶ Alieza Durana, et al., “Sexual Harassment: A Severe and Pervasive Problem,” Washington, DC: New America, September 26, 2018, p. 52; available at: www.newamerica.org/better-life-lab/reports/sexual-harassment-severe-and-pervasive-problem.

¹⁷ Chai Feldblum and Victoria Lipnic, “Report of the Co-Chairs of the EEOC Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace,” Washington, DC: Equal Opportunity Commission, June 2016, p. 7.

- 81% of women reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime.
- More than 3 in 4 women (77%) experienced verbal sexual harassment.
- 1 in 2 women (51%) were sexually touched in an unwelcome way.
- Around 4 in 10 women experienced cyber sexual harassment.
- Close to 1 in 3 women (30%) experienced unwanted genital flashing.¹⁸

We should also note that according to Centers for Disease Control and U.S. Justice Department research, sexual assault is the most underreported type of crime, with less than 23% of victimizations being reported to police.¹⁹ Furthermore, in spite of common misperceptions, false allegations are exceedingly rare. A survey of the research on false sexual assault allegations published by The American Prosecutors Research Institute concludes that “when more methodologically rigorous research has been conducted, estimates for the percentage of false reports begin to converge around 2-8%.²⁰ Two of the most recent studies conclude that only 5% of all sexual abuse allegations are false.²¹ Having said this, we should acknowledge that lying about such a serious offense as sexual abuse is a grave offense (Prov 19:9; 25:18). False allegations of sexual abuse, while rare, can have severe consequences for the one falsely

¹⁸ Holly Kearn, “The Facts Behind the #MeToo Movement: A National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault,” Stop Street Harassment, Reston, VA, 2018.

¹⁹ Breiding et al., “Prevalence and Characteristics of Sexual Violence,” p. 7.

²⁰ Kimberly Lonsway, Joanne Archambault, and David Lisak, “False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute NonStranger Sexual Assault,” *The Voice* 3 (2009), p. 2.

²¹ A meta-analysis of research found a 5.2% rate of verifiably false reports—Claire Ferguson and John Malouff, “Assessing Police Classifications of Sexual Assault Reports: A Meta-Analysis of False Reporting Rates,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 45 (2016): 1185–1193. An analysis of rape report data from the Los Angeles Police Department found false reports to be about 4.5 percent—Cassia Spohn, Clair White, and Katharine Tellis, “Unfounding Sexual Assault: Examining the Decision to Unfound and Identifying False Reports,” *Law & Society Review*, 48 (2014): 161–192.

accused. Joseph suffered many years in prison due to Potiphar's wife's false rape allegation (Gen 39:7-20).

For Christians who affirm the doctrine of pervasive depravity, the overwhelming prevalence of abuse, including sexual assault and harassment, should not be surprising. In fact, the Apostle Paul cites the ubiquity of physical and verbal abuse to confirm universal human depravity (Rom 3:13-17). Sexual abuse and harassment, particularly perpetrated by males, is described in numerous biblical texts, sometimes in graphic detail.²² For instance, sexual assault/ harassment was apparently so common in Israel that Naomi advised Ruth to stay near Boaz' men "lest in another field you be assaulted" (Ruth 2:22). In other words, women in ancient Israel had to factor the possibility of sexual assault into their daily lives, as do modern American women.

Unfortunately, research among evangelicals shows a propensity to greatly under-estimate rates of physical and sexual abuse, particularly in their own congregations.²³ For instance, a 2014 survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors regarding physical and sexual abuse conducted by Lifeway Research found that two out of three pastors preach on abuse only once a year or less. The researchers concluded that the scarcity of abuse sermons is the result of pastors dramatically underestimating the prevalence and seriousness of physical and sexual abuse in their congregations. Many protestant pastors simply don't believe abuse is a significant problem in

²² One of the best concise surveys of sexual abuse in the Old Testament is Richard M. Davidson, "Sexual Abuse in the Old Testament: An Overview of Laws, Narratives, and Oracles," in *The Long Journey Home: Understanding and Ministering to the Sexually Abused*, ed. Andrew Schmutzer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 136-54. Key biblical texts on sexual abuse include: include Deut 22:25-29, Gen 34, 2 Sam 11, 2 Sam 13, Judg 5:30, and Judg 19.

²³ See for instance Katie Brennan Homiak and Jon E. Singletary, "Family Violence in Congregations: An exploratory Study of Clergy's Needs," *Social Work & Christianity* 34 (2007): 18-46 and Sharon G. Horne and Heidi M. Levitt, "Shelter from the Raging Wind: Religious Needs of Victims of Intimate Partner Violence and Faith Leaders' Responses," *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 5 (2003): 83-97.

their churches. The authors of the Lifeway Research report noted how dramatically pastors underestimate abuse rates:

Given the consistent finding that one in three women (and one in four men) in the U.S. will experience sexual and physical violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives—and given that about 70% of Americans say they attend a worship service at least monthly/yearly—pastors’ estimates are very low: 17% [of pastors] estimate [that] 11%-20% of their congregations have been victims of sexual or domestic violence, 21% estimate the number at 6%-10%, and fully 37% of pastors estimate less than 5% of their congregation have been victims of sexual or domestic violence.²⁴

It is essential that evangelical leaders recognize the prevalence of sexual abuse and respond appropriately. Our frequent underestimations and denials have created the current #MeToo crisis. Only by recognizing the painful reality that abuse and harassment against women are rampant, including in our own congregations, can we be the safe, healing communities God intends the church to be.

B. The Reality and Role of Power Disparities in Sexual Abuse

The role that power disparities play in sexual abuse/harassment is widely misunderstood in society and in the evangelical church, particularly by men. Those who have always possessed and benefited from having greater power are often blind to the injustices experienced by those with less power. For instance, Phil Robertson, the reality television star of Duck Dynasty, and an outspoken evangelical Christian, suggests that from his experience growing up in the pre-civil

²⁴ Sojourners and IMA World Health, “Broken Silence: A Call for Churches to Speak Out Protestant Pastors Survey on Sexual and Domestic Violence,” June 2014, p. 4; available at: https://imaworldhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/PastorsSurveyReport_final1.pdf.

rights South, racial injustice was all but nonexistent: “I never, with my eyes, saw the mistreatment of any black person. Not once.” He went on to say that he always saw Whites and Blacks working and living together in great harmony, with the Blacks never complaining about mistreatment by Whites. Furthermore, Blacks were always happy.²⁵ It is inconceivable, however, that one could find a single southern African American during this period who had the same racial justice experiences. And it is also exceedingly rare to find women today who have not experienced sexual abuse at levels few men can relate to.

Men hold the reins of power in virtually all major domains of society, including the media, politics, business, technology, sports, and journalism. Thus, it is overwhelmingly men who create corporate policies, report on, create entertainment about, and pass laws regarding the sexual assault and harassment of women. For instance, The Women’s Media Center in their 2017 *Status of Women in the U.S. Media*²⁶ document these gender power disparities. Among evening prime time broadcasts on major networks such as ABC, CBS, and NBC, men report 75% of the news. Regarding stories and editorials on the issue of campus sexual assault, women were only behind 31% of these articles. Within film and entertainment, of the 250 top-grossing domestic films of 2015-2016, only 17% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers, combined, were female. The numbers are only slightly higher in U.S. high tech industries, where only 20.44% of women held senior officer and manager positions. In terms of the top executive positions in business, men overwhelmingly dominate. For instance,

²⁵ Justin Ravitz, “Phil Robertson on Southern Racism: I Never Saw the Mistreatment of Any Black Person,” *US Magazine*, December 19, 2013; available at: <https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/phil-robertson-on-southern-racism-i-never-saw-the-mistreatment-of-any-black-person-20131912>.

²⁶ <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/reports/the-status-of-women-in-u.s.-media-2017>.

only 5% of Fortune 500 companies have a female CEO.²⁷ In terms of political power, in the fall of 2018 women made up 20% of the 535 members of the U.S. Congress.²⁸

These gender power discrepancies are quite significant in facilitating sexual assault and harassment. The allegations surrounding Harvey Weinstein, once one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, vividly exemplify this dynamic. Over and over the eighty-plus women who have accused him of sexual assault and harassment have reported how he used his economic and social power to overwhelm, intimidate, and silence them. Many reported that Weinstein threatened to blackball them in the entertainment industry if they refused his sexual advances. Laura O'Connor, a former employee of the Weinstein Company, is one of his accusers. O'Connor was reportedly involved in multiple discussions with actresses after they had been invited to “private appointments” with Weinstein. In a memo, O'Connor quotes a young woman who reflects upon her destructive experience with Weinstein: “I am a 28-year-old woman trying to make a living and a career. Harvey Weinstein is a 64 year-old, world famous man and this is his company. The balance of power is me: 0, Harvey Weinstein: 10.”²⁹

In fact, all forms of abuse result from the misuse of power—physical, social, economic, spiritual, verbal, etc. Abusers leverage their power against the vulnerable (Ps 10:8-10; Ezek 22:6). The prophet Micah affirmed this dynamic, saying that evil doers scheme to physically and economically abuse “because it is in the power of their hand” (Mic 2:2; cp. Eccl 4:1). The role male power plays in sexual abuse is particularly stark. For example, Amnon “being stronger,” was able to rape Tamar in spite of her protests” (2 Sam 13:14). As the #MeToo movement has

²⁷ Mark Abadi, “There Are Only 25 Women CEOs in the Fortune 500 — Here's the Full List,” *Business Insider*, August 13, 2018; available at: www.businessinsider.com/fortune-500-companies-women-ceos-2018-8.

²⁸ <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-us-congress-2018>.

²⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>.

spotlighted, abuse against women often involves a collaboration between various powerful individuals or even institutions. Abuse facilitated by collaborations of the powerful has existed long before the #MeToo movement. The Hebrew prophets repeatedly condemned alliances of spiritual, political, and civic leaders who misused their power to oppress and abuse the vulnerable.³⁰

Physical power is particularly relevant to sexual abuse/harassment. Men have ten to twenty times more testosterone than women, resulting in much greater physical aggression and strength. For instance, men have on average 40% greater upper body and 33% greater lower body strength than women do.³¹ These biological differences help explain women's dramatically increased vulnerability to male perpetrated sexual aggression.

And when men do experience noncontact, nonviolent sexual mistreatment, they are typically far less traumatized. For instance, one major study of sexual harassment among college students, which defined sexual harassment in a strict and narrow manner as, "*unwanted and unwelcome* sexual behavior which interferes with your life," found that almost two-thirds of college students had experienced sexual harassment, less than ten percent reported it, males and females were equally likely to be harassed, but females were significantly more likely to be upset by it.³² This discrepancy largely reflects females' greater sense of threat when sexually harassed.

One of the most glaring ways evangelicals fail to understand the role of power in sexual abuse relates to pastoral sexual misconduct (PSM). Most often when a church leader has sexual relations with a parishioner under his spiritual care, this is understood solely as a sexual sin, i.e.,

³⁰ Cf. Isa 1:23; Jer 2:26-34; 5:25-31; 6:13-15; 7:3-11; 17:11; 19:1-5; 22:1-4, 13-17; 23:2-5, 13-17; 30:10-12; 32:32-35; Lam 2:14; 4:13-14; Mic 3:9-12.

³¹ Ian Janssen, et al., "Skeletal Muscle Mass and Distribution in 468 Men and Women Aged 18–88 Years," *Journal of Applied Physiology* 89 (2000): 81-88.

³² Catherine Hill and Elena Silva, *Drawing the Line: Sexual Harassment on Campus* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 2005), p. 2, 3, 6, 16.

as adultery (an affair) in which the pastor and the parishioner are equally to blame.³³ In fact, this is a gross misconception. Pastoral sexual misconduct with a parishioner is sexual sin but it is much more than that because it typically involves a great power discrepancy. Thus, *pastoral sexual misconduct is a hideous form of spiritual abuse for which the pastor bears greater responsibility, culpability, and even divine judgment*. This is true for three reasons. (1) Pastors are entrusted with spiritual authority from God (1 Tim 2:12; 5:17; Titus 2:15). In very real ways, pastors represent and speak for God. Thus, parishioners do not have the same spiritual power as their pastors whom they are to obey (Heb 13:17). When a pastor has sex with a parishioner, he is egregiously misusing his greater power and hence committing spiritual abuse. Thus, PSM is a “betrayal of a power trust.”³⁴ Making matter even worse, PSM often involves specific leveraging of “spiritual power resources” against the parishioner to manipulate her—misusing Scripture, asserting one’s potency as a spiritual leader to know what is right and best, etc.).³⁵

(2) Pastors, are, by definition, to be shepherds. This means they are to sacrificially serve, feed, and protect the flock (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Pet 5:2-3; cp. 1 Thess 2:5-8). Scripture repeatedly pronounces divine judgment on “shepherds,” i.e., spiritual leaders, who abuse those under their care.³⁶ Some of the harshest divine judgement is meted out to shepherds who, instead of feeding their sheep, feed *on* the sheep (Ezek 34:1-10; Zech 11:4-5; Jude 12). This judgment is particularly relevant to pastors who satiate their own erotic/emotional hunger by sexually consuming members of their own flock.

³³ This is not to imply, as some nonevangelicals do, that a woman who has sex with her pastor bears little moral responsibility and has not sinned, but rather that the pastor bears much greater responsibility.

³⁴ Stanley Grenz and Roy Bell, *Betrayal of Trust: Confronting and Preventing Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 86-108.

³⁵ See for instance the clergy “pick-up lines” described by a ministry leader who has counseled fifty nine individuals who experienced PSM, Margaret Kennedy, “Sexual Abuse of Women by Priests and Ministers,” *Feminist Theology* 11 (2003), p. 231.

³⁶ Jer 12:10-13; 23:1-2; 25:34-38; Zech 10:3; cp. Matt 23:4, 13.

(3) Closely related to the previous two points, parishioners typically come to their pastor in moments of great need, such as times of loss, family stress, personal struggle, etc. Thus, they are emotionally vulnerable.³⁷ It is an outlandish abuse of power when a pastor takes advantage of a parishioner's vulnerability to meet his own sexual/emotional needs.

In light of a pastor's greater power and the parishioner's frequent vulnerability, most experts assert that in cases of PSM, the parishioner's ability to truly and freely consent to a sexual relationship is seriously compromised.³⁸

C. The Destructive Psychological Impact of Sexual Abuse

All forms of trauma, but especially sexual trauma, shatter God's intended shalom—human flourishing, wholeness, and delight, amidst our most vital relationships. As one of the gravest deviations of God's holy character, sexual abuse often fractures one's faith and ruptures any relational trust and intimacy with God and others. "Trauma of all kinds—but especially of the types that shatter or obstruct the concept of a merciful, just, and loving God and that call into question the goodness and trustworthiness of other humans—have special capacities to interfere with systems of meaning"³⁹

Psychological Impact

The lifetime prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is roughly 6.8% for adults, with an estimated 36.6% of these adults experiencing serious impairment and 33.1% experiencing moderate impairment in the previous year.⁴⁰ By comparison, 50% of women who have been sexually assaulted, experience PTSD. To further highlight the gravity of sexual

³⁷ Cf. Marie Fortune, *Is Nothing Sacred: The Story of a Pastor, the Women He Sexually Abused, and the Congregation He Nearly Destroyed* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), p. 18-42.

³⁸ Ibid., 41. Diana Garland, "Clergy Sexual Misconduct: Don't Call It an Affair," *Family and Community Ministries* 26 (2013): 66-96.

³⁹ D. Walker, C. Courtois, and J. Aten, *Spiritually Oriented Psychotherapy for Trauma* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2015).

⁴⁰ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd.shtml>.

assault, it is helpful to compare its impact with the psychological impact of military combat—12% of Gulf War veterans and 11-20% of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans have PTSD in a given year.⁴¹ Thus, women who are sexually assaulted are 250-400% more likely to develop PTSD than soldiers returning from combat.

Furthermore, there appears to be a high correlation between sexual assault and other mental health issues, the highest being suicidal thoughts and behaviors. A 2017 article in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology Review* analyzed nearly 200 independent studies spanning a 40-year period, involving more than 230,000 adults. The researchers discovered that sexual assault victims had a 74% higher risk of suicide, a 60% higher rate of depression, and a 53% higher rate of anxiety than those who had not experienced sexual assault.

Disconnection and Avoidance

At the core, sexual trauma fragments one's ability to connect. As a result, victims are often left feeling disconnected from themselves, others, God, and the world around them. This disconnection is played out in numerous ways. For instance, emotions—especially fear, anger, sadness, and even pleasure—as well as bodily sensations—become constant reminders of the abuse. As a result, avoidance ensues, leading to the conscious or subconscious attempt to become emotionally numb or flat. As avoidance increases, survivors turn to behaviors and substances as a form of emotional regulation and psychological repair. Alcohol becomes a way to numb and calm the nervous system, stimulants alter a sense of powerlessness and offer an increase in vitality.⁴² Additionally, relationally disconnected, promiscuous sexual behavior often results

⁴¹ <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/ptsd-overview/basics/how-common-is-ptsd.asp>.

⁴² On the correlation between sexual abuse and alcohol and drug abuse, see Cathy Spatz Widom, Naomi R. Marmorstein, and Helene Raskin White, "Childhood Victimization and Illicit Drug Use in Middle Adulthood," *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 20 (2006): p. 394-403 and "Christopher Rice, Cynthia D. Mohr, Frances K. Del Boca, et al., "Self-Reports of Physical, Sexual and Emotional Abuse in an Alcoholism Treatment Sample," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 62 (2001): p. 114-123.

from a subconscious attempt to regain control. This is sometimes labeled “re-enactment.”⁴³ As a painful counter-punch, re-enactment often fosters self-blame, powerlessness, self-condemnation, and unresolved bereavement. Emotional disconnection and re-enactment also dramatically increase the likelihood that a sexual abuse victim will be revictimized. Numerous studies have reported that those who experience childhood sexual abuse had 2 to 13.7 times the rate of re-victimization in adulthood.⁴⁴

Additional relational problems also begin to surface as survivors search for a sense of safety amidst relational pain and confusion. Because sexual assault most frequently occurs by someone close to the victim, survivors consciously and subconsciously develop protective shields of excessive self-sufficiency, social isolation, and disorganized attachments. This is further bolstered by a continual fear of intimacy and vulnerability. Misusing power to take advantage of another is at the core of sexual abuse, and therefore, survivors stop believing that those in power will use their resources to support them, care for them, or protect them. In addition, many survivors maladaptively pursue positions of power and influence. If unaware of these patterns, survivors can abuse their power in similar ways as their perpetrator, all in an attempt to always be on top—never in a position of need or vulnerability.

D. The Seriousness of Sexual Abuse/Harassment Allegations

Tragically, evangelicals often minimize the seriousness of sexual abuse allegations. For instance, in the fall of 2017 when Roy Moore was running for the US senate, nine different

⁴³ Bessel A van der Kolk, “The Compulsion to Repeat the Trauma: Re-enactment, Revictimization, and Masochism,” *Treatment of Victims of Sexual Abuse* 12 (1989): 393-395. On sexual abuse and promiscuity see Theresa E. Senn, Michael P. Carey, and Peter A. Vanable, “Childhood Sexual Abuse and Sexual Risk Behavior among Men and Women Attending a Sexually Transmitted Disease Clinic,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 74 (2006): p. 720-731.

⁴⁴ http://nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_NSVRC_ResearchBrief_Sexual-Revictimization.pdf. See also Catherine C. Classen, Oxana Gronskaya Palesh, and Rashi Aggarwal, “Sexual Revictimization: A Review of the Empirical Literature,” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 6 (2005): p. 103-129.

women accused him of sexual misconduct. Several women accused him of sexual assault. In spite of ample witness testimony and corroborating evidence, 57% of evangelicals continued to support him and 37% said the allegations made it *more* likely that they would vote for him.⁴⁵ Similarly, when it was revealed that megachurch pastor Andy Savage had in a previous pastorate, had sex with a seventeen-year-old girl in his youth group, he was given a standing ovation when he said he was sorry for the consensual “sexual incident.”⁴⁶ Clearly, many evangelical churches and pastors do not understand the seriousness of sexual assault. Sexual harassment allegations are even more likely to be overlooked or trivialized. For instance, on a syndicated radio talk show Congressman Jason Lewis, a Roman Catholic who has championed religious rights⁴⁷ mocked women experiencing sexual harassment. He stated:

How many women at some point in their life have a man come on to them, place their hand on their shoulder or maybe even their thigh, kiss them, and they would rather not have it happen, but is that really something that's going to be seared in your memory that you'll need therapy for?"...Come on! She wasn't raped.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Mark Galli, “The Biggest Loser in the Alabama Election,” *Christianity Today*, December 12, 2017; available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/december-web-only/roy-moore-doug-jones-alabama-editorial.html>.

⁴⁶ Matthew Haag, “Megachurch Pastor Admits to Illicit ‘Sexual Incident,’” *The New York Times*, January 9, 2018, A11. Savage was later forced to resign after much negative publicity and did acknowledge that his actions were abusive. Unfortunately, this “confession” was seriously undermined by his reported severe criticism of the very movement which held him accountable. An interviewer reported that he characterized the #ChurchToo movement as “very aggressive and very attacking.” Becca Andrews, “As a Teen, Emily Joy Was Abused by a Church Youth Leader. Now She’s Leading a Movement to Change Evangelical America,” *Mother Jones* May 25, 2018; available at: www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2018/05/evangelical-church-metoo-movement-abuse.

⁴⁷ Jason Lewis, “SCOTUS Masterpiece Cakeshop Ruling Cuts to the Core of Free Expression and Religious Liberty,” Alpha News July 25, 2018; available at: <http://alphanewsmn.com/rep-jason-lewis-scotus-masterpiece-cakeshop-ruling-cuts-to-the-core-of-free-expression-and-religious-liberty>.

⁴⁸ Tim Marcin, “Republican Congressman Jason Lewis Mocked Women Saying Sexual Harassment was Traumatizing: Report,” *Newsweek*, October 19, 2019; available at: www.newsweek.com/republican-congressman-mocked-women-sexual-harassment-traumatizing-cnn-report-1179003.

Jason Lewis, like many other powerful men, fails to understand the fundamental reality of male perpetrated sexual harassment: it flows from a power discrepancy. And such power discrepancies generally create fear and anxiety which can lead to significant long term psychological and relational harm. Ironically, it is Lewis' political and social power which allows him to ridicule and revictimize women with apparent impunity. Scripture repeatedly affirms that even if one is not physically or sexually assaulted, the mere threat of abuse by powerful men can be very traumatic.⁴⁹ Furthermore, we do well to remember that abuse is on the short list of sins singled out in Scripture as most hated by God, primarily due to its destructive impact and assault on the image of God (Gen 9:5-6; Js 3:8-9; cp. Prov 6:16-19). God declares that he hates/abhors abusers (Ps 5:6; 11:5). Of the 613 commands in Torah, only two dozen are capital offenses, and of these over a third relate to some form of abuse.⁵⁰ Finally, we do well to remember God's severe response when Eli failed to act on reports he had heard of his sons' physical and sexual abuse in the temple (1 Sam 2:16, 22-24). God struck Eli dead because he did not "restrain" his sons who were egregiously misusing their power over the worshippers under their spiritual care (1 Sam 3:13).

II. Action Steps for the Church

A. Listen to Women and Repent

Surely one of the most salient lessons we should draw from the #MeToo movement is that failing to listen to women is very costly—costly for abused women, costly for non-abused

⁴⁹ Note for instance, the numerous instances in the Psalms in which the Psalmist experiences great anxiety, even somatic trauma symptoms, regarding what appears to be potential, not previous, abuse. For instance, see Ps 38:9-22; 55:1-8; 69: 1-21; 109. The potential abusers would have been, with few exceptions, men.

⁵⁰ Seven capital offenses which expressly involve abuse of another person include: murder (Gen 9:5-6), rape of a betrothed woman (Exod 22:25-26), kidnapping (Exod 21:16), fatal ritual child abuse (Lev 20:2), being a false witness to a capital crime—heinous verbal abuse (Deut 19:15-21), verbal abuse against one's parents (Exod 21:17), and some cases of negligent homicide (Exod 21:28-32).

women, and costly for society. Because, by definition, the powerful have a voice and are hence much less likely to experience having their voice ignored or discounted, it is incumbent on male church leaders to make listening to women a true priority. This should begin by getting candid feedback from women regarding their experiences and perceptions of the church's responsiveness to the voices of women. It should include reassessing previous abuse allegations to insure they were dealt with properly. When it becomes apparent that church leaders have harmed women by their failure to listen or their minimization of sexual abuse/harassment, this should be quickly acknowledged and publicly repented of. A recent example of such repentance appears to be the letter the pastors of Immanuel Baptist Church sent to *The Washington Post*, apologizing for their failure to listen to Rachael Denhollanders's concerns about the church inviting Sovereign Grace Church leaders to preach at their church.⁵¹ The apology letter was sent the same day *The Washington Post* published an article about the evangelical church's failure to address sexual abuse, specifically discussing Sovereign Grace Ministries and Immanuel Baptist Church's negative response to the Denhollanders.⁵² While public apologies such as this are biblical and helpful, they generally come after incalculable harm has been done. J. D. Greer, megachurch pastor and the 62nd president of the Southern Baptist Convention poignantly comments regarding recent leaders (including himself) who have begun to recognize and address abuse, "Is it better to wake up later than never at all? Absolutely. But I believe we are only beginning to see how profound this 'lateness' is, and how damaging its consequences."⁵³ It is infinitely better to listen to women's wisdom and concerns in the first place.

⁵¹ "Our Pastors Statement to the Washington Post," May 31, 2018; available at: <https://immanuelky.org/articles/we-were-rachael-church>.

⁵² Joshua Pease, "The Sin of Silence: The Epidemic of Denial about Sexual Abuse in the Evangelical Church," *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2018.

⁵³ J. D. Greer, "Better Late Is Still Late: Advocating for Victims of Sexual Abuse," J. D. Greer Ministries, June 14, 2018; available at: <https://jdgrear.com/blog/better-late-still-late-advocating-victims-sexual-abuse>.

B. Listen to Women and Create Healing Resources

Since abused women have experienced the abuse of power, it is beautifully redemptive for church leaders to use their power to mobilize robust healing resources. The best way to begin this process is for church leaders to “courageously listen” to survivors. Courageous listening involves patiently and boldly listening with the goal of entering into the other person’s experience so that you are changed by what you hear. Courageously listening to abuse survivors will involve listening until you feel and carry their pain (cp. Rom 12:15 and Gal 6:2). As leaders do this, it will become increasingly clear what healing resources are needed by the survivors in their congregation. In our extensive work with abuse survivors, some of the healing resources we have found most helpful for churches to provide include: abuse healing groups; abuse education through sermons, seminars, and written resources; professional counseling; trained lay counselors or mentors; an abuse trauma committee which can educate the congregation and advocate for abuse survivors.⁵⁴

C. Develop Policies Regarding Pastoral Abuse of Power/Sexual Misconduct

As noted earlier, evangelicals often fail to recognize power disparities in sexual abuse/harassment particularly when perpetrated by a spiritual leader. Most evangelical churches have policies articulating acceptable sexual practices for their leaders and guidelines for the violation of those guidelines. But relatively few evangelical churches, particularly nondenominational churches, have specific policies regarding the abuse of power, sexual or otherwise, by church leaders. For instance, a 2018 study of twenty denomination-level church policies or guidelines from approximately twenty different denominations found that 70% of the policies focused on

⁵⁴ Mending the Soul Ministries offers a broad range of abuse education and healing resources on its website at: www.mendingthesoul.org. These include numerous books and workbooks in several languages for abused children, adolescents, and adults as well as webinars and facilitators’ guides designed to train church leaders and lay people in best utilizing those resources to assist abuse survivors.

sexual misconduct solely as an expression of sexuality not as a misuse of power.⁵⁵ Until the evangelical church recognizes the role power plays in abuse in general and pastoral sexual abuse in particular, and takes it seriously enough to create policies to guide church responses to abuse, we cannot say that we are taking abuse seriously.

D. Develop Strategies to Truly Empower Women

If we affirm pervasive human depravity and recognize that sexual mistreatment of females is very common and very damaging, we simply must empower women. We must teach and equip them that they have a God-given right to have their convictions, needs, and bodies respected. We must teach and model to women that they have a right to stand up to males who refuse to respect them. And we must stand with women in this process. Unfortunately, evangelicals have often placed such emphasis on the “God ordained” limits of female behavior that many evangelical women lack a sense of healthy empowerment.⁵⁶ For instance, a study of several popular Christian dating books revealed a minimization or denial of female autonomy over their own bodies as well as conspicuous absence of discussions regarding what constitutes sexual consent.⁵⁷ Furthermore, a common evangelical approach has been to assert the potency of adherence to hierarchical gender roles to protect women against mistreatment by males. John Piper, for instance, goes so far as to assert that egalitarian assumptions in our culture as well as in much of the church have “forfeited a great God-ordained restraint upon male vice and male

⁵⁵ Tormod Kleiven, “Sexual Misconduct in the Church: What Is It About?” *Pastoral Psychology* 67 (2018): 277-289.

⁵⁶ A detailed discussion of the failure of complementarians to qualify marital submission so that Christian wives are empowered to stand up against husbands’ misuse of power is addressed in: Steve Tracy, “What Does ‘Submit in Everything’ Really Mean? The Nature and Scope of Marital Submission,” *Trinity Journal* (2008): 285-312.

⁵⁷ Sarah Moon and Jo Reger, “‘You Are Not Your Own:’ Rape, Sexual Assault, and Consent in Evangelical Christian Dating Books,” *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences* 1 (2014): 55-74.

power,” namely, “complementarian” gender roles.⁵⁸ Regardless of what one believes Scripture teaches about gender roles, the fact of the matter is that in this pervasively sinful world, males will frequently abuse their power. Thus, women cannot simply rely on men to “do the right thing” and protect them. Women need and deserve the church’s blessing and assistance in preparing for that post-Edenic reality. For instance, in one of the few specific research studies on pastoral sexual misconduct conducted by evangelical social scientists, the researchers identified five factors which most contribute to PSM. They found that one major etiological factor in PSM is “a culture of niceness” in which Christians, particularly Christian women, are ill-equipped to break the “niceness” culture and firmly respond to inappropriate pastoral sexual behavior.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The #MeToo movement has had a dramatic impact on our society and on the church. It has shown us that sexual assault/harassment of women is very prevalent and damaging. It has also shown that power discrepancies fuel sexual assault/harassment. The evangelical church must learn from its mistakes, self-correct, and become a place of safety for women. To do any less is to forfeit our divine mission.

⁵⁸ John Piper, “Sex-Abuse Allegations and the Egalitarian Myth,” John Piper interview, March 16, 2018; transcript available at: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/sex-abuse-allegations-and-the-egalitarian-myth>.

⁵⁹ Diana Garland and Christen Argueta, “How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts,” *Social Work and Christianity* 37 (2010): 15-16.