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Clergy Sexual Abuse*Diane Langberg*

The topic of sexual abuse as perpetrated by members of the clergy is relatively new. I do not believe that the occurrence of such abuse is new, but rather the disclosure and discussion of that abuse is new. I do not want simply to repeat what has already been written, but rather to build on it. I would like to step back a little and consider this topic through a broader lens.

I come to this subject with a heart that is heavy for the body of Christ, as well as for both the perpetrators and the victims as they are very, very broken indeed. And if you believe God's Word to be true as I do, then you and I are profoundly affected by that brokenness. God's Word says, "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26 NASB). Therefore, it is for the sake of the church of Jesus Christ that I approach this sad and complex subject, with humility and with dependence on God's Spirit for wisdom, for we are talking about something very near to his heart.

We would be naive to assume that this is simply a male problem. Women are just as fallen as men, and when placed in leadership positions are just as capable of abusing their followers. For the most part, women have been protected from the abuse of power

because we have not held positions of power. Still, we must not assume that women are immune to those abuses.

Good physicians do not assume that the part of the human body that is experiencing pain or failing to function properly is necessarily the cause of the difficulty. Medicine has realized that focusing on symptoms alone, or on a dysfunctional part in isolation from the rest of the body, will, at best, bring short-term relief. Aristotle pointed this out many years ago when he suggested that many diseases escape us because we never see the whole.

We are in danger of making a similar mistake of being so focused on the clergy who abuse their congregants that we miss those larger contributing factors of which clergy sexual abuse is symptomatic. The abuse is so devastating and horrifying to most of us that we run the risk of jumping in to deal with the perpetrator and his victim (who obviously need our immediate response) while excluding those factors that will breed yet another repetition of the problem.

In my own field of psychology, family systems theory says that to try to "cure" a person in isolation from his or her family is as problematic as transplanting an organ into a body whose chemical imbalance will destroy the new one as effectively as it did the old. If the church is repeatedly experiencing abuse by its shepherds, certainly something is wrong with those shepherds who perpetrate such abuse. However, to stop there is naive and ultimately damaging to the church, for the church that produces and breeds such shepherds is also sick.

Several factors help create a fertile environment for sexual abuse to occur within the body of Christ, and so I think we need to consider what we might call the components of that environment. When plants fail, there are many points along the way that need to be evaluated as possibly contributing to that failure. To find sexual abuse perpetrated by a shepherd in the church of Jesus Christ toward some of the sheep is indeed a crop failure. Many things must be wrong for such an appalling, heartbreaking phenomenon to occur. I believe one of the problems is poison in the soil. As we look at three factors of that poison that I believe make clergy sexual abuse more likely, keep in mind that there are many other valid angles from which we might approach this problem. It is my hope that what is said in this paper will be enlarged upon

and worked into the broader topics of abuse, incestuous family dynamics, and other closely related areas.

The three areas that I would like us to consider are: first, how we in this society have come to define the role of leader; second, how our current understanding of power coupled with our definition of leadership fosters pathology; and third, how a scriptural understanding of leadership and power are safeguards against clergy sexual abuse. And finally, because I believe that the ultimate victim of clergy sexual abuse is the church itself, I want to challenge the body of Christ.

Defining the Role of the Leader

We live in a society that has certain expectations for those in leadership, and sadly, much of the church has adopted the world's definition of a good leader. Edwin Friedman (1985) maintains that good leadership is defined by two qualities today: expertise and charisma.

Expertise

We will first consider expertise, which is the quality that forces those in leadership positions to define themselves in terms of their abilities. A good leader is someone who is an expert, who is perpetually acquiring more information and demonstrating it by ever-increasing proficiency. A pastor, then, is one who demonstrates expertise in teaching, preaching, counseling, budget planning, administrating, socializing, and mediating. The more adequate he appears in these areas, the more he is declared a success. Leadership is reduced to a never-ending treadmill of acquiring better and better skills.

Again according to Friedman (1985), this definition of leadership as expertise creates a secondary problem. If the person in the position at the top is the expert, then the followers tend to abdicate much of their own power. To be an expert, by definition, means to know more than others. This seduces both the leader and his followers. The leader functions as though the followers do not know what they are doing and probably would not change but

for his or her efforts. The followers function as though it is only the leader who "knows"; they therefore become passive participants who lean heavily on the leader. Both parties assume that if change or success is not forthcoming, it is because of a problem with the leader. When success does not occur, the leader (with the assent and even encouragement of the followers) responds by trying harder. The pressure on a leader in such a position is obvious.

Charisma

The second quality good leaders are expected to demonstrate is charisma, that strongly magnetic personality that certain people have. Leaders with charisma can unify divided bodies, infect others with enthusiasm, and galvanize others to action. In short, charismatic leaders produce a "high" in their followers.

Like the quality of expertise, charisma results in secondary problems. Magnetic leadership is most appealing to followers who need to rely on a motivator outside themselves. Such followers demand that their leaders "move" them. So again, we are breeding passivity in the body. At the same time, charismatic leadership is not healthy for the leader. The leader is perpetually forced to over-function, and so lives in a chronic state of stress.

Both expertise and charisma give unhealthy power to an isolated person at the top, breed passivity in those who follow, and result in the leader being responsible for the entire family—a heavy load indeed. What a breeding ground for abuse! Given such a scenario—which I believe is an accurate portrayal of much of today's church—it is amazing to me that the problem of clergy sexual abuse is not even more rampant than our worst fears believe it to be.

Understanding Power

It is not hard to see that a leader in a position such as we have described would desperately want power. To feel responsible for an entire system, never to feel adequately prepared, to feel isolated, and to exist in a chronic state of stress produces many reactions. Such a leader would feel overwhelmed, inadequate, in fear of being discovered a fraud, alone, and anxious. A sense of impo-

tence, a feeling of chaos, and the need to deceive all grow readily in such an environment.

Passivity

On the one hand, God our creator called us to rule and subdue. We are by our very natures called to have impact on this world and on each other. But like all other things said by God to be good, this created aspect of who we are has been twisted, distorted. Some have been twisted in the direction of excessive passivity. We do not act on our world or others for good; indeed, we do not act at all. We have abdicated our responsibility, and we meet our need for influence or significance by putting ourselves into the hands of someone who appears to be in control.

Power-Seeking

Others of us have been twisted in the direction of power-seeking. In our frenzied efforts to quell our feelings of impotence, we are driven toward omnipotence. The goal is never achieved, of course, and that failure produces greater isolation, which causes our need for omnipotence to increase. Marguerite Shuster defines power as "the ability to produce desired, intended effects in the world" (Shuster, 1987, p. 156). To live under the demand to be expert and charismatic creates a strong push toward power-seeking. Power-seeking is a natural response to felt powerlessness.

Hidden Anxiety and Psychopathology

The drive for power is often a cloak for terrible anxiety. Anyone who has studied introductory psychology has come across studies demonstrating the high anxiety produced in subjects whose actions have no effect in achieving a desired goal. Unmanaged anxiety leads to pathology. The more isolated, insignificant, and ineffective one feels, the greater the need for power.

Dr. Shuster (1987) points out that both loneliness and grandiosity are characteristic of psychopathology. Let us consider that statement for a moment in light of what we said earlier about leader-

ship. How much lonelier does it get than to be the person at the top who is expected to carry the entire family, motivate them, galvanize them, and inject them with enthusiasm? And what is better fodder for grandiosity than demanding expertise in myriad areas? The leader is to be the one who knows, the carrier of truth, the decider of right and wrong, the holder of all important information. It was Alfred Adler who said, "The loftiest goals are to be found in the most pathological of cases—that is, in the psychoses" (quoted in Shulman, 1968, p. 170). Failure becomes intolerable, and the psychotic responds to it by denying one's finitude or limitations.

Certainly one way evil appears in those who are isolated and seeking omnipotence is in the form of sexual abuse of a parishioner. Often, because of the excessive demands and expectations leaders buy into, they end up consumed by the aim of hiding and remedying their felt deficiencies. Failure is intolerable, for failure means to be thrown out. To achieve, or never to disappoint, is to succeed, but to succeed requires deceit, a denial of reality. Reality says that the leader has limitations, deficiencies, and weaknesses—all of which are threats to his or her existence as leader. Our most successful leaders (at least by the definition of this paper) are often our most pathological. As long as we continue to define leadership as the world does—a position demanding expertise and charisma—we will breed leaders who feel isolated and desperately seek omnipotence. Leaders such as these will be broken off from a reciprocal relationship with the body they are called to serve. Once reciprocity has broken down, then good is defined not as what is good for the body, but rather what is good for the isolated self. This climate is a perfect set-up for the abuse of others.

How often I have found that clergy who have sexually abused women in their congregations are attempting to remedy a terrifying sense of isolation and powerlessness by resorting to violence. Violence is defined as the abusive or unjust exercise of power, and so when one who is in a position of authority abuses one of his sheep, then we must name it violence.

What is the remedy for a disease that is both systemic and individual in nature? If we deal with the individual aspects of the problem, we are in great danger of inadvertently maintaining a system that is sick. Without question, we need to deal with the individual clergy who perpetrate such abuse against their parishioners,

and we need to deal with the individual women who are abused. I think we also must be alert to the fact that we do not want to foster a system that encourages women to be passive and find power only by aligning themselves dependently on those who appear to be in leadership. But we must go even further. We must consider the church as a whole.

A Scriptural Understanding of Leadership

Many of us have not brought the Word of God to bear on the idea of leadership. We are turning out leaders in the world's mold. We have bought the "separate and above" concept of leadership. Many of us in the pews have quit thinking and instead demand to be taught. We have quit serving and demand to be taken care of. We have quit relentlessly pursuing God for ourselves and demand he be given to us on Sundays with feeling. We put leaders up above and far apart from the rest of us and then wonder why they don't follow the rules. We teach systematic theology (and we should), but we forget that our Lord thought his disciples needed to be taught how to pray. We teach church growth and forget personal repentance and confession. Is it any wonder that the shepherds are hurting the sheep and the sheep are hurting the shepherds? If we want to prevent sexual abuse of the sheep by their shepherds, then we must go back to the Word of God for an understanding of what it truly means to lead, and what it truly means to follow.

Leadership as Personal Example

According to the Word of God, the practice of leadership is mainly a matter of personal example, of living out the qualities that make for Christian leadership. In response to the disciples' dispute about who among them was to be the biggest and the best, Jesus' response was emphatic—"It will not be so among you!" (Matt. 20:26 NRSV). Christ said that the rulers of the Gentiles (those who do not know him) lord it over those they rule. To lord it over is to domineer, to tyrannize, to oppress. To lord it over someone is to use authority so as to weigh heavily upon them, to overwhelm them, to crush them, to put them under a yoke. According to Luke

22:25, this tyrannical power was cloaked by calling those who exercised it by the name "benefactors." The name "benefactor" means one who gives aid, who helps. But in this case the name is given to one who oppresses, who lives in a fashion diametrically opposed to the name of benefactor. It is a situation very much like what we are considering, for to pastor, to shepherd is to be one who tends, guards, and cares for his sheep. In the case of clergy sexual abuse, however, the name "shepherd" is given to one who abuses, oppresses, and lives in a fashion diametrically opposed to his name.

Leader as Servant—the Organic Model

Christ went on to reverse the whole conception of leadership: The leader was to serve. Those who wish to be chief are to be as those who serve. Christ demonstrated the only model of leadership that will result in healthy leaders and equally healthy followers. It is an organic model, a reciprocal, connected model. It does not breed isolation or omnipotence. No domineering, oppressing, seeking to profit, competing for place or position, or striving for power are found here. It is also a model that does not foster unhealthy dependency, mindlessness, or passivity in its followers. For if the leader is to practice leadership by example, then it follows that those who are being led are to emulate that example. Hence, the shepherd tends, guards, and cares for his sheep, while the sheep tend, guard, and care for each other *and* their shepherd.

Another beautiful illustration of this reciprocity is in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, where Paul says that though he and his associates might have asserted their authority, instead they proved to be gentle as a nursing mother. If that is not a model of connectedness, then I don't know what is. Paul goes on to say in verse 11 that they exhorted, encouraged, and implored as a father would his children—again a model of care and connection. Paul then says that the purpose of such a leadership was "that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you" (1 Thess. 2:12 NASB). Sheep who walk worthy of God love their shepherd, hold him to the highest, tend his wounds, and seek to minister to him. This living, breathing reciprocity is stated simply and beautifully for us in John

10:14, where Jesus says: "I am the good shepherd, and I know My own, and My own know Me" (NASB).

A family systems perspective also does not create this polarity between leader and follower. The family systems concept of leadership looks at how leader and follower function as part of one another. Paul says, "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body" (1 Cor. 12:12 NASB). This concept of leadership says that the responsibility of the leader ceases to be for the entire family. Instead the leader must focus on responsibility for self. The basic concept is this: If the leader will take primary responsibility for self, while staying in touch with the rest of the body, there is a more than reasonable chance that the body will follow.

Friedman (1985) describes the concept as an organic one. For any part of an organism to have a continuous or lasting effect, it must stay connected to the organism as a whole. However, it must be connected without being swallowed up. It is a differentiated, yet connected position. How like the body imagery in Scripture. The hand is not the eye is not the foot. Each is differentiated one from the other and yet vitally connected. Christ is the head, "from whom the whole body [leaders and followers], being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16 NASB).

A Scriptural Understanding of Power

Power as Derivative from God

What does Scripture say about our second area of focus, power? First and foremost, we are told that all power is derivative. There is nothing that can continue except it do so by the power of God. Jesus said at the close of his earthly ministry, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:18 KJV). Anyone in leadership only exercises delegated authority. It is by virtue of this fact that the leader is not only connected to the body he or she serves, but also to the one who is sovereign over all. The leader is not isolated, but connected, not omnipotent, but subject to God's power.

Whenever a leader is disconnected and not subject to God, the resulting search for power will have devastating consequences. To search for power in any place other than from God is to find and exercise power that is destructive. Shuster says, "Any power not in active communion with God is not neutral or harmless but demonic" (1987, p. 112).

Power in Acknowledged Weakness

Power that is sought for the purpose of eliminating felt deficiencies and weaknesses leads to a denial of rationality. Leadership that is not subject to God is irrational. To understand power from God's point of view is to live within the constraints of reality, to honor one's weaknesses and limitations. To live outside that reality is to fight against what is true. It is to despise and deplore weakness, to deny failure and impotence. It results in being lured by a false power that devours what it hooks and never delivers what it promises.

The pursuit of such power and its accompanying denial of weakness has devoured many leaders of the church today. While many of us cheer them on to their destruction, giving them the message that weakness is unacceptable in the pulpit, we, like them, live in denial of that truth which says that "power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9 NASB). We live as if weakness were cured by the pursuit of power. In doing so, we are at variance with the truth of God, and our victims, both perpetrators and abused, are many. The problem is that we are weak and limited. Leader or follower, we cannot escape this truth. Have we forgotten that the God of the universe, with whom resides all power, has chosen this very weakness in which to manifest his glory? And if we remember this, then why do we demand that those who lead us be without weakness? And having demanded the impossible, why are we shocked at the abuses?

All who lead are weak. Some of that weakness is simply due to finitude, some is due to sin. Whether we lead or follow, weakness due to human limitation is cause for rejoicing, for it is the arena in which God manifests who he is. Weakness due to our own sin is cause for repentance, for we serve a God who brings life out of

death. True power in the church of God will come from acknowledged, not denied weakness.

The world says that leadership is demonstrated by expertise and charisma. Jesus says that leadership means to be the servant of all, to wear the mark of the girded towel. To rule then, is to be unlike Christ himself. To serve in truth and grace is to be like Jesus.

Challenge to the Body of Christ

The problem of clergy sexual abuse is not simply about sex, or about men and women and their cultural roles. It is not even just a problem of violence, though admittedly sex, gender roles, and violence are all pieces of this difficult and complex issue. Ultimately, it is about a church whose members have abdicated their responsibilities. It is about a body whose parts have atrophied. It is about a people who have been blinded by the gods of expertise and charisma. The result is a demand for leaders who are not godly, but pathological. The position of leadership, as it is often defined by the church, has the potential to attract those who are not connected with God or with their people. Leadership of this sort often appeals to those who see themselves as above others, unaccountable, ambitious, and full of knowledge, or else to those who feel beneath others and want the self-enhancing benefits of title and position. We then end up with those who are in a position of authority but possess little spiritual authority. We have leaders who are so terrified by their own impotence that they strut and puff and use clever gimmicks to deceive those who follow. Their feelings of impotence and isolation leave them desperately hungry for connectedness. It is fertile ground for the abuse of power in search of intimacy.

Does this excuse those who so horrendously violate their sheep? No! Are they responsible for the terrible abuse of their power and position? Without question! When that abuse occurs, should the church seek justice and a conformity to the truth? May it never settle for less. But we, the church, are not off the hook. God has called each part of the body to function interactively.

Those of us who lead are called to mutuality and weakness. We are to be under the authority of the one who has all power in every

arena of our lives, public and private. We are to be present as one who serves. We are earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not of ourselves. We are not to deceive ourselves, but are continually to confess, repent, and be taught to pray by the one who emptied himself for our sakes. We are to know our sheep and be known by them. If we follow this way, abuse of a sheep will be out of the question, for the slightest stirring of selfish interest will send us to our knees and to our sheep for accountability and support.

Those of us who follow are no less called to be imitators of God. Paul says we are to walk in love, and that immorality, impurity, and greed should not even be named among us. This is not just about leaders; it is about all of us. Where, then, have the followers been when one of their own was suffering abuse at the hand of a shepherd? Paul's words to us in Ephesians 5:6 are relevant: "Let no one deceive you with empty words" (NASB). How we have swallowed the empty words defining what a leader should be. As Paul goes on to say, "Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them" (Eph. 5:11 NASB). Do we know of abuse and pretend it is not there, saying, "After all, it is up to the leadership to handle"? In the words of Paul again, "All things become visible when they are exposed by the light" (Eph. 5:13 NASB). It is just as much the responsibility of the follower to bring light where there is darkness. "Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Eph. 5:14 NASB).

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