Critical Reflections on Clericalism and Clergy Misconduct: A Sociological Approach

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Abstract

This reflection focuses on patterns of power abuse and dysfunction within the Protestant Church. The analysis focuses specifically on the troubling prevalence of Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse (ACSA). The fields of psychology, trauma-informed therapy, social work, and public policy have contributed substantial bodies of work and research on the context, causes, and impacts of ACSA. Current research argues that this work and research can be significantly enhanced and strengthened given the tools and insights offered by a sociological lens. The methodological approach is participant observation that comes from first-hand engagement in ACSA survivor support groups and advocate networks. In systematically reflecting on this participant observation, the application of sociological theoretical frameworks leads to the following three possibilities. 1. A sociological approach facilitates a transformation in how ACSA survivors are viewed. This perspective encourages moving from the "SUCCUMB" to the "THIEVES" model for ACSA survivors. 2. A sociological approach highlights the tendency for faith-based institutional power to preserve, insulate, and protect itself from transformative structural change. 3. A sociological approach facilitates grappling with and re-imagining an institutional response to ACSA that avoids protectionism and reductionism, leading to a typology of potential institutional responses.

Keywords: Clericalism; Clergy; Sexual Abuse; Misconduct; Barth; Thieves; CSM; ACSA

Introduction

Recent high-profile scandals in the Protestant Church, such as the Zacharias International Ministries abuse and cover up as well as the systemic abuse and cover up within the Southern Baptist Convention, have drawn increasing attention to patterns of power abuse

and dysfunction in the Protestant Church within the United States. While such patterns of abuse are often referred to broadly as Clergy Sexual Misconduct (CSM), this analysis focuses specifically on the problem of *Adult* Clergy Sexual Abuse (ACSA). There is substantive work and research on ACSA within the fields of psychology and trauma-informed therapy, as well as social work, public policy, and Biblical studies (Garland 2013; Langberg 2020; Mullen 2020; Pooler & Barros-Lane 2022). Despite the recent rise in cultural awareness around power, abuse, and sexual misconduct, largely fueled by the #MeToo movement, such research underscores the fact that clergy sexual misconduct perpetrated against adults remains broadly misunderstood and mishandled within and outside the church.

David Pooler, Professor of Social Work at the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, Baylor University, has initiated, carried out, and supported extensive research on this systemic problem within the church and its deleterious effects on the survivors, their communities, and the church (Pooler & Frey 2017; Woolston 2023). Pooler dispels several common misunderstandings and misrepresentations in his brief presentation, "What is Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse?" which can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/@ResistReformandRestoreTr-xp5jg. In it, Pooler offers a reminder that any relationship between a clergy person and someone in their care includes a clearly defined institutional power differential in which the clergy person bears a fiduciary responsibility. For this reason, as with a doctor, therapist, and other helping professions, the clergy person bears full responsibility for any sexual contact or component of the relationship, consent of the person under care is not possible, and such an interaction can never be considered a mutual affair (Pooler 2023). As with a therapy session, this is not to say that a person under care may not act inappropriately toward the caregiver, but that the professional caregiver remains fully responsible for maintaining appropriate conduct and boundaries. Similar to other helping professions, there is always the possibility that a clergy person may face false allegations of sexual behavior where there was none. However, very few survivor stories found in research and in practice involve the clergy person's categorical denial that an inappropriate relationship took place. Moreover, there is very little motivation for someone to bring a false accusation against a clergy person. Indeed, the judgement and condemnation that survivors typically experience after coming forward, as illustrated by initial reactions to Lori Anne Thompson's disclosure of abuse at the hands of Ravi Zacharias, indicates the much higher likelihood that many, many individuals choose to stay silent about their experience.

The multifaceted nature of abusive behavior is another important foundational aspect to understanding Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse. Building on the work of Marie Fortune, Stanley Grenz and Roy Bell discuss three abuser typologies: 1. The Predator; 2. The Wanderer; 3. The Lover. While this typology serves as a broad categorization of complicated and overlapping nuances underlying abusive behavior, it also provides a reminder that grooming and abusive

behavior is not always entirely straight-forward, fully pre-meditated behavior on behalf of the abuser (Fortune 2008; Grenz & Bell 2001). In fact, evidence from survivor accounts suggests that the abuser's self-deception is nearly always involved when clergy groom, manipulate, and abuse those they hurt. Being clear-minded about one's intention to abuse an adult is not a prerequisite for defining it as abusive, grooming, and predatory behavior any more than with someone who exploits, manipulates, and molests a child despite also feeling love, affection, and care for the child. With the possible exception of the most extreme psychopathic behavior, predatory behavior inevitably includes self-deception, pathologic inconsistency, inner conflict, and turmoil.

The Sociological Contribution

The current analysis argues that the existing research and work on the topic of ACSA may be significantly enhanced and strengthened when given the tools and insights offered by a prophetic sociological lens for the following reasons:

1. A sociological approach provides an opportunity to reflect critically on and ultimately transform our understanding of the targeting and grooming process that takes place within adult clergy sexual abuse (ACSA). Current assumptions and incomplete understanding around ACSA may leave well-intentioned institutions vulnerable to abusers and may – intentionally or not – "other" abuse survivors.
2. A sociological approach provides an opportunity to reflect critically on the role that individual and institutional power play in enabling abusive dynamics and perpetuating clericalism. A sociological lens provides insight regarding institutional tendencies to preserve and reproduce power via insulation from change and absorption of calls for reform via satisficing behavior.
3. A sociological approach allows us to re-imagine an approach to abuse perpetrated by those with institutional power and prestige that potentially avoids the pitfalls of "canceling" on the one hand versus "whitewashing" on the other. As an alternative to reductionist approaches, a sociological lens may facilitate a more productive – even restorative – grappling with nuance and complexity in an arena of discourse increasingly given to ideological hyper partisanship and rancor.

A Word about Prophetic Sociology

The Christian sociological perspective may be particularly well positioned to elaborate the three insights above. As Dennis Hiebert argues in "Problems and Possibilities of Sociology as Prophetic," the Christian sociologist tends to be positioned as "one who speaks to the established Christian community rather than for it" (2017:11). This "dual citizenship" situates

the Christian sociologist in a locus where critical reflection is not merely advantageous to research and practice, but a prerequisite for an integrated and coherent worldview (Hiebert 2017).

The Christian sociological tradition, in this sense, must seek to reflect the speaking of truth to power and institutions that we see exemplified in the Biblical text. The prophets speak frequently about the scourge of clericalism and abuse of power. One particularly powerful admonition comes from the Book of Ezekiel.

> Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord God, because my sheep have become a prey and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherd have fed themselves and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God: I am 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.
>
> Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them. (Ezekiel 34:7-10 NRSV).

This admonition speaks to the "shepherds of Israel" who had been abusing and taking advantage of the ones entrusted to their care – feeding themselves – instead of protecting and caring for them.

Methodological Note

Social science methodology spans the emic to etic continuum, with the emic approach analogous to the convert and the etic approach analogous to the Martian. In practice, social scientists must recognize that all research is some combination of the two. All research is infused with bias and impacted by perspective, and yet no one who conducts research and

analysis can be fully divorced from the analytical process that inevitably goes beyond pure participation (Babbie 2020).

The methodological approach of the present research and reflection leans heavily toward the participant side of research. A significant portion of the research, insight, and understanding herein on the topic of clergy abuse and misconduct comes from personal experience. The experience, recovery, engagement, and research is via the lens of the partner of one who experienced grooming, manipulation, abuse, and sexual harassment by a clergy person. It also comes from direct experience as a peer support person for the partners of adult clergy sexual abuse survivors. As such, the participant observer's approach leans into, rather than distancing itself from, the perspective, empathy, emotion, and understanding that grows out of personal experiences and relationships.

Though the present methodology resides on the emic end of the spectrum, it is distinct from storytelling in its application of a systematic analytical approach to observations and interactions, as well as the application of sociological theoretical frameworks.

Transforming How Survivors are Viewed

Clergy Sexual Misconduct (CSM) tends to be associated with priests and other church leaders abusing children – particularly the horrifying abuse and cover ups that have plagued and continue to plague the Catholic Church. However, there are many painful reminders that patterns of clergy sexual abuse and misconduct are limited neither to the Catholic Church nor to the abuse of children. Courageous individuals such as Lori Anne Thompson and survivors of abuse (both as children and adults) in the Southern Baptist Convention, alongside many others, have expanded the fight against abusive individuals and toxic institutional culture into the arena of abuse against adults (Guidepost Solutions 2022; Thompson 2021).

While understanding the similarities between child and adult abuse can clarify the inherent power dynamics, understanding the *differences* is crucial as well. The power dynamic between an adult, especially one with institutional authority, and a child is readily apparent. The dynamics in adult relationships are often more nuanced and often require an understanding of institutional and interpersonal power.

A sociological lens on power helps to describe and explain how power is much more than physical force and even compulsion. There are multiple forms of power: positional power and institutional power; power that comes with intellectual ability, verbal acumen, emotional attunement, and charisma; power that removes the appearance of choice; and power that subtly manipulates. Steven Lukes' work on the multidimensionality of power articulates the

way that manipulation and coercion can be used to distort reality and re-shape the entire landscape (1974).

In exploring the ways that those with power can use that power to manipulate others, it becomes clearer that children are not the only ones vulnerable to abuse. It stands to reason then that much of the research on adult abuse focuses on the vulnerabilities of those who are abused. Past abuse creates a vulnerability to future abuse. Traumatic and tragic events such as severe marital discord, childhood trauma, the death or illness of a child, or past oppression and mistreatment in the church, all potentially make one more vulnerable to abusers. And yet, this focus may paint an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of adult abuse survivors.

The following two vignettes illustrate how the focus on vulnerability can color our image of abuse survivors. Both cases are composite portraits of adult clergy sexual abuse survivors.

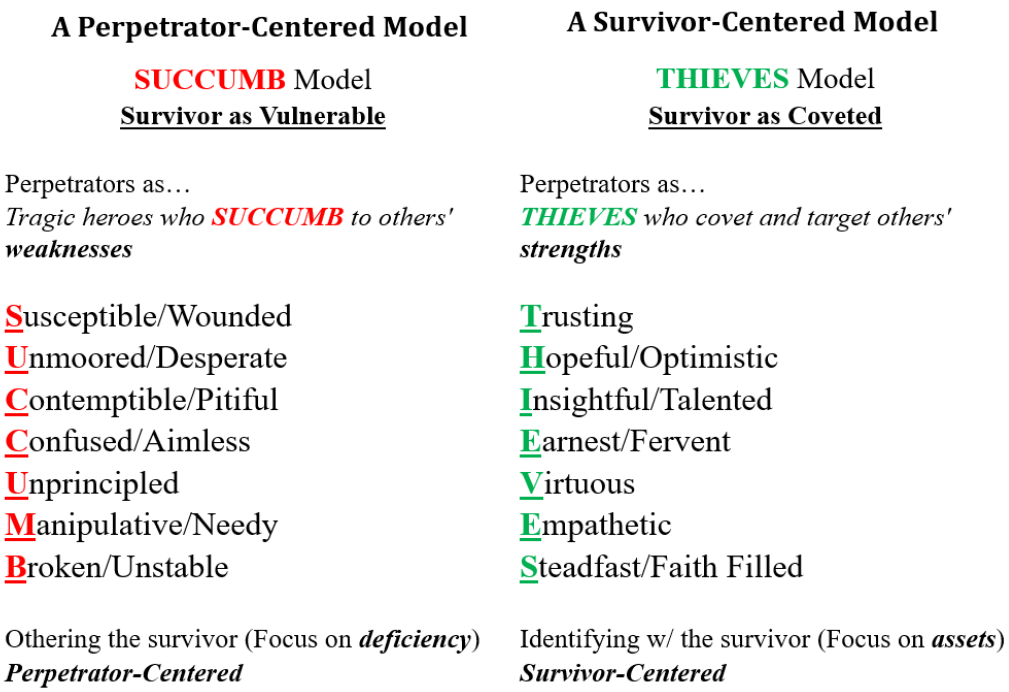
> Maria is a 33-year-old timid but friendly married woman with two young children. After leaving her job as a receptionist to stay at home with her children, her household income grew tight and she began to grow more distant from her husband. Her older child began to act out in school and was diagnosed with ADHD. Maria and her husband decided to send the child to a school where he was more likely to get the help he needed. This meant that Maria needed to go back to work. Having never completed her BA (she left school after becoming pregnant with her first child) she had trouble finding a flexible, well-paying job, and ultimately sought employment at the local church where her family attended a few times a year. The pastor who hired her was kind, caring, and fatherly to her from the beginning – a strong contrast to her actual father from whom she routinely endured verbal abuse as a child. The pay, he told her, was not very much, but the hours were flexible and the work was "God's work." During Maria's time working at the church, she began to seek the pastor's guidance for her marital struggles. He listened, gave her advice, often quoting scripture and praying with her, and lavished her with praise for her ability to hold it together as a mother and wife in such difficult circumstances.
>
> Natalie is a 45-year-old outgoing and empathetic married woman with three children between 13 and 19. Natalie earned a degree in education and spent a number of years as a school teacher, but fervently committed to her faith, she always wanted to work in ministry and jumped at the opportunity when the church she and her family were actively involved in for over 10 years established a nearby church plant. She was asked by the associate pastor who left to plan the church if she would join him as the director of youth and family ministry. She

> happily accepted the role with the support of her husband, and subsequently began attending seminary courses in pursuit of a ministry degree and ordination in the church. The families grew closer. The pastor frequently invited Natalie's family over for cookouts and cocktail hour. Natalie was growing in her ability as a minister in the church and functioned as a sounding board for the pastor's administrative and theological ideas, an editor for his sermons and writings, and increasingly as a relational escape from the pressures of a demanding, often unfulfilling, home and work life.

In both cases their pastors turned out to be predatory and they used the context to begin to confuse, disorient, and obscure the boundaries between friend, pastor, confidant, and intimate partner.

Prior to any first-hand experience with the survivor community, many find the first vignette more resonant with their caricature of an abuse survivor. Maria's "vulnerabilities" to a potential predator are more clearly seen. This is not to suggest that she fits into the SUCCUMB model in Figure 2 below. Rather, because Maria has more contextual factors commonly considered to be "vulnerabilities," her story fits more naturally with a vulnerability-centric perception of survivors. It is tempting for those without first-hand experience to think of targeting, grooming, and abusing as something that, though not the survivor's fault, tends to afflict the "vulnerable victim." Even worse, the SUCCUMB model can even go so far as to suggest the perpetrator's transgression was merely succumbing to *her* weaknesses – *her* deficiencies. I am contrasting that with the "Perpetrators as THIEVES model," in which the perpetrator identifies the strengths and assets of the victim and seeks to possess and feed off them.

Figure 1: ACSA Survivor Models



Having established these contrasting models, the following three points highlight specific problems and dangers with the tendency to apply a vulnerability-centric model.

1. The focus on victim vulnerability misunderstands the way in which targeting and grooming often works. Much like the "stranger danger" from the 80s and 90s (Best 1993), the vulnerable victim model potentially misplaces anxieties in a way that fails to protect institutions and individuals properly. Put simply, clergy abusers may be targeting in their "victims" much of what is typically thought of as strengths, not vulnerabilities.
2. Characterizing an abused individual as a vulnerable victim instead of a survivor of targeting "others" them. In a sense this is a natural reaction because it is easier to believe, even if only subconsciously, that this is someone else's problem, specifically, someone *with* problems and vulnerabilities – the type of thing that those who are not vulnerable do not need to fear. It is a difficult thing for anyone to accept that maybe they themselves could fall prey, miss the signs, and overlook something that seems obvious in hindsight. Unfortunately, it is impossible to truly support survivors if they are viewed as nothing more than their vulnerabilities.
3. Survivors of trauma and abuse will often seek to explain their unexplainable, intolerable circumstances through self-blame, by focusing on, or even inventing personal deficiencies and failures.

Furthermore, the impact of a vulnerability-centric model on survivors is all too predictable. When survivors are probed about their vulnerabilities with questions such as…

> Were you involved in previous damaging relationships?
> Were you abused in your childhood?
> What was wrong in your marriage that allowed this to happen?
> Why didn't you walk out?
> Why didn't you tell someone?

…they typically do not need much convincing that they are the problem and the best thing they can do is accept blame and disappear, sometimes literally. Indeed, survivors of clergy sexual abuse have significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation. Despite an all too common perception that survivors use an abuse narrative to justify and remove all personal culpability for sexual contact with a church leader, research shows that the opposite is true. The most common reaction by far is one of carrying guilt and self-blame for the inappropriate relationship. Researchers and practitioners who work with survivors of clergy sexual abuse confirm that there is no shortage of self-blame among survivors. The identification of a relationship as abusive does not magically free a survivor from guilt as if it were some sort of "get out of jail free" card. On the contrary, survivors tend to speak voluminously about their own culpability, often engaged in an unwinnable mental battle to determine where they went wrong, why they could not wrestle back control in the relationship, and how their confusion led to paralysis (Garland 2006; Pooler & Barros-Lane 2022).

As a final note on shifting from a deficit focus to an asset focus, Diane Langberg, a preeminent psychologist in the field of trauma and clergy abuse, astutely observes that abuse reveals the deficient character of the abuser, *not* the deficiency of their victim (Langberg 2020). However, a survivor-centered approach demands going beyond merely identifying the problems in the character of the abuser. The re-centering of abuse survivors as valuable and visible is particularly important because they are typically cut off from their church communities, and along with disorientation and self-blame, tend to experience alienation from friends, family, and even from self.

Faith-based Institutions: Self-preservation, Insulation, and Protectionism

Much of the thinking around abuse comes from abuse committed by therapists or doctors working in one-on-one settings. However, when abuse occurs in the context of churches, it is profoundly and uniquely devastating for many reasons. Among other reasons…

1. ...when abuse occurs in the church, it occurs within the context of faith and trust in God, scripture, and sacred tradition. As such, it exploits, twists, and defiles a holy space. Its corrosive effect cannot be overstated.
2. …when abuse occurs in the church, it occurs within the context of a community that we liken to a family. More than a mere social group, it is a place of vulnerability, care, and acceptance. The communal ouster of abuse victims, which is by far the most typical result, is often more devastating than the initial sexual abuse.
3. …when abuse occurs in the church, it occurs within the context of an institutional structure that bears a remarkable similarity to other structures, namely, in its propensity to preserve itself by insulating itself from transformative change, and absorbing potential threats through resistance, satisficing behavior, and the preservation of the status quo.

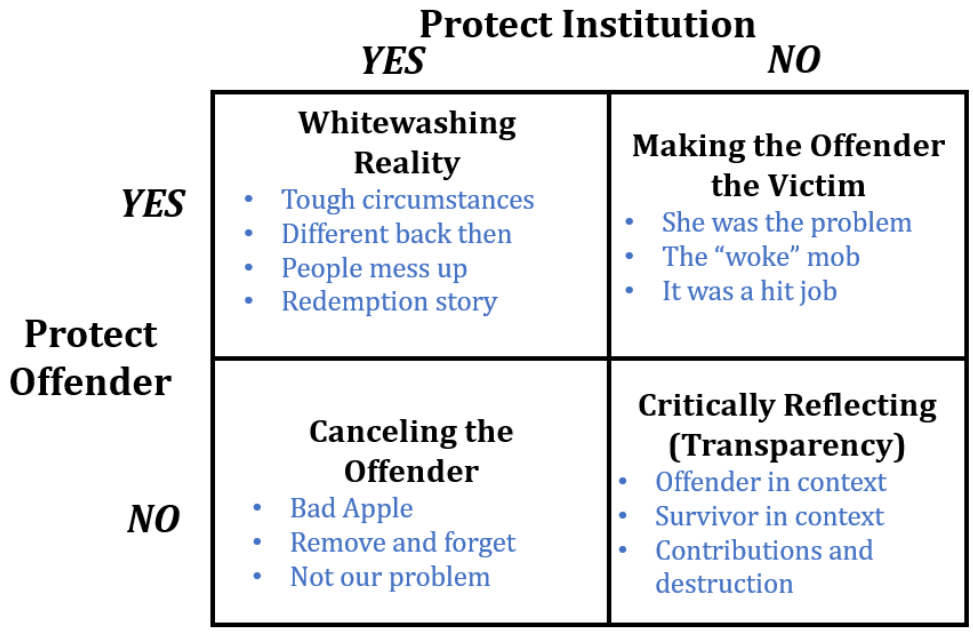
Organizational sociology, studies of social movements, and group dynamics, especially as carried out by critical theorists, have a lot to offer here. Such research identifies and analyzes the way organizations often work to bureaucratize, scapegoat, and preserve the status quo. For instance, there are currently a handful of states that outlaw sexual relationships between church leaders and members. One of the reasons not more states do is that church lobbies in some states have worked to quash legislation that would hold them accountable. The Frankfurt School theorists urge critique and reflection of societal structures, reflection on the motives and actions of ourselves and others, and the imaginative reflection on the context within which human beings operate (Gramsci 1971; Marcuse 1964). The Bystander Effect (Darley & Latané 1968) discusses why abandonment and neglect of survivors and those in peril occur. Studies such as Stanley Milgram's on obedience to authority highlight the extent to which human beings tend to follow the rules of those who express authority to frightening ends (Babbie 2020; Milgram 1963). Studies on the human tendency to conflate charisma and giftedness with character and integrity warn of the destructive potential of an influential individual, let alone the destructive potential of an individual propped up and legitimated by an institutional power structure (Langberg 2020).

Protectionism and Reductionism: Institutional Reactions to ACSA

Continuing the focus on the institutional and structural aspects of clericalism and clergy misconduct, the following typology of responses to abuse and misconduct, especially with respect to engineering and controlling the narrative after the fact, illustrates churches' reductionist and scapegoating tendencies that obfuscate culpability and do a disservice to survivors. It further elaborates the institutional and structural aspects of clericalism that facilitate and exacerbate clergy misconduct.

While no real-life situation falls neatly into a typology, and multiple scenarios can be playing out simultaneously, it is possible to break institutional reactions to misconduct and abuse into a typology. Figure 2 illustrates this typology based on the institutional decision of whether to protect itself and whether to protect the offender. **First** (upper left): To protect the institution and the offender, reality can be whitewashed, attributing behavior to tough circumstances, to different contexts, especially if the abuse occurred years ago, all while acknowledging that everyone messes up – we are all sinners – and celebrating the redemption story for the abuser. **Second** (bottom left): To protect the institution but use the offender as the scapegoat, we can cancel the offender, declaring them a bad apple, removing them and forgetting about them, making it "not our problem." **Third** (upper right): To protect the offender but not the institution reflects the RVO in DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) (Harsey et al. 2017). It suggests that the person with less power was actually the transgressor and the institution scapegoated the clergy person. This often manifests as a narrative that the cleric was a victim of a woke mob who performed a hit job. There is a **Fourth** option (bottom right), but it is a lot more time consuming, does not include scapegoating, and acknowledges institutional and communal culpability. Doing so requires transparency, truth-telling, seeing the offender and the survivor in context, and acknowledging that an offender can have brilliance, charisma, good works, great ideas, along with deficient character and a toxicity that breeds destruction.

Figure 2: A Typology of Reactions to Misconduct and Abuse



With this typology in mind, the following vignette describes the circumstances surrounding the fraught three-way relationship between Karl Barth, one of the most venerated

and influential theologians of the 20th century, his lifelong mistress Charlotte von Kirschbaum, and his wife Nelly Barth. The details of this story are delineated in letters sent between Barth and von Kirschbaum, released by the Barth family in 2008 and systematically reviewed by Christiane Tietz, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Zürich (2017).

> Charlotte was a bright and motivated 26-year-old single woman aspiring to be a nurse. She was also drawn to social work and theology and was very excited when, through mutual acquaintances, she met Karl, a well-respected theology professor and pastor. Karl was 39 years old and married with several children. The two of them hit it off and began exchanging letters about theology. Though both acknowledged they were drawn to one another, they were clear that they could not justify a romantic relationship. However, Karl repeatedly broke his promise to stop sending letters and "set her free for another relationship." He obsessed over her and communicated his fantasy of her visiting him wearing her "nurse's uniform." Karl eventually invited Charlotte to be his secretary and assistant. Charlotte put her medical studies on hold and became completely financially dependent on her work for him. She contributed significantly to Karl's writings, but was never given co-authorship. Karl began to form theological justifications for his "less than ideal situation." He told her that both she and his wife were "ordained to him by God" and his love for Charlotte simply could not be the "Devil's work." Karl defiantly maintained a romantic relationship with her, despite the objections of his friends, his mother, and his wife, Nelly, who ultimately plunges into deep depression and self-blame. Though Charlotte tells Karl at one point, "we simply can't justify our way," she affirmed her trust of him and dependence on him, and her willingness to submit to his decision about the path forward for all of them.

Since the full release of the letters between Barth and von Kirschbaum, his actions and the dynamic have been occasionally addressed and problematized as immoral and even potentially relevant for the reading and analysis of Barthian theology. Barth not only defiantly fostered this dysfunctional family dynamic, he also used contorted theological justifications for his destructive behavior. A close reading of the dynamic reveals that Barth's actions were not only immoral, but constitute a clear abuse of power. The following six dynamics starkly illustrate why Barth's behavior must be considered not merely immoral, but also abusive:

- Their thirteen-year age difference
- Her complete financial dependence
- Her position as employee and assistant
- His position of power as an ordained minister

- His power of coercion as a well-respected scholar
- His theft of her intellectual work

Though Barth's actions are from a different era and accompanied by brilliant theological contributions, their destructive power persists. Within the details of the stories of adult clergy sexual abuse survivors, there exists the occasional recounting that Barth's actions and justifications for misconduct were directly invoked by abusers to rationalize and justify their own abusive behavior.

Concluding Thoughts

Sociological frameworks and methodological toolkits for research and analysis provide a significant opportunity for understanding and diagnosing social problems such as abusive clergy and the institutions that produce, invite, and protect them. And yet, the church is not just a mere institution. It is the institutional manifestation of the body of Christ. As such, the words of Paul's letter to the Ephesians offers a very powerful prophetic admonition to a church that is too often unwilling to face the truth about themselves and their leaders – unwilling to show love and care to those hurt by the very individuals they put in places of power. Paul reminds the Ephesians, and all of us, to be *truth tellers*. He says that we should "live as children of light…everything exposed by the light becomes visible…Therefore it says, 'Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Chris will shine on you'" (Ephesians 5: 8, 13, 14 NRSV). *Christ* will shine on the truth-tellers. *Christ* is the head of the church, and as Diane Langberg reminds us, "a body that does not follow its head is a sick body" indeed (Langberg 2015:9).

When those touched by abuse in the church experience the secondary trauma of their world caving in around them because they decided to tell the truth about the abuse they experienced, they should be able to expect their siblings in the church will rally around them, that they will be celebrated for their courage, and they will be better off for having done the right thing…for being truth-tellers. But based on the reality that most survivors live, that is not the case. Instead, those who disclose have to do so because they know it is right and because it is the only thing that will truly set them free.

The Sheep Are Organizing

As is often the case in the midst of pain and dysfunction, those who have been harmed by clergy abuse and misconduct are increasingly finding one another and forming alliances, support groups, and advocacy organizations. These groups are not only dedicated to taking care of one another, but also to finding their voice, fighting back, and educating others. From within legal, psychological, social, theological, journalistic, and educational arenas – to name a few –

survivors and their allies are growing in their ability to demand institutional accountability for clergy misconduct and to catalyze much needed structural change. (Allendar Center Podcast 2023; Boz Law PA 2022; Blair-Hubert et al. 2018; CSM Information & Resources 2023; GRACE 2023; Hagar's Voice 2023; Restored Voices Collective 2023; Roys Report 2023)

The presence, activism, and growing influence of these groups, working within and alongside the #MeToo movement, the #ChurchToo movement, and others who advocate for those who have been harmed, serves as a formidable challenge to the thieves, the predators, and the power hungry, and should be a startling wakeup call to the institutions who shield, whitewash, hide, or provide safe harbor for wolves in priests' clothing. It should also provide comfort to the broken-hearted, the silenced, the abandoned, the poor in spirit, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sociological frameworks, and prophetic sociology, in particular, provide an opportunity to broaden and strengthen the chorus of prophetic psychologists, social workers, theologians, advocates, and survivors as they deliver the message to the church that it is not enough to whitewash and it is not enough to cancel. Instead, it is time for the church to start being the truth tellers they are called to be.

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