Becoming Faith Communities That Resist Abuse, Pursue Truth, and Care for the Wounded

When the Church Harms God's People Diane Langberg

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Introduction

Why I Write

I write because my work as a psychologist and a lover of Jesus has broken my heart. I have entered into the lives of human beings, sitting with and listening to those who have been crushed and terrified, longing for but not believing in safety. They have not found safety in their homes, their schools, their country, or, grievously, their churches and sanctuaries. I have watched many "Christian" places destroy lives, saturate people with twisted teaching, and break the heart of our Father.

Though my heart has been broken and my anger and grief have rolled in like ocean waves, I have learned much over the years about the love of our God and the great depths of our Lord's suffering on our behalf. I have seen glimpses of God's anger when his name and his Word have been distorted. I have seen his love for the lambs of his

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flock and watched him draw them near and begin to bind up their wounds.

I write because our Lord bears scars on our behalf—scars that speak to us and teach us. His are scars that heal. No scarred human is beyond his reach or his love.

For readers who have been wounded, trashed, and left on the side of the road, I want you to know that parts of this book may be hard to read and may stir up things you'd rather forget. As you read, I encourage you to take care of yourself. Read a little bit at a time. Take breaks. Give yourself time to grieve and to acknowledge the truth of what happened—exactly what your experience of abuse denied you.

I understand that you carry a heavy burden and likely have believed many lies about yourself. It's particularly painful when lies and wounds have come from those who claim they are part of the household of God. Clearly, they are not, for they look nothing like him. Calling a place a "house of God" doesn't make it a sanctuary.

Listen to what Jesus says: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. . . . Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:15–16, 21 ESV).

"I am the good shepherd," he says in John 10:11. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And in verses 14 and 15, he says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." This image of the Good Shepherd is one I will return to frequently in this book. It's a picture of

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care and self-giving that sets the ultimate standard for pastoral care.

The profession of shepherd of the people of God has no value, and in fact is harmful, if church leaders do not reflect, in character and actions, the likeness of Jesus. A wolf comes to devour the sheep. A wolf disguised as a shepherd will harm, even destroy. Deception is how the wolf gets in. A wolf who knows how to look like a shepherd can easily gain access to hungry, needy sheep.

Part of a shepherd's work is to humbly and continually ask God to enable them to care for his lambs—and never to feed on them. He has entrusted his lambs to shepherds who would guard them well. "Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture" (Ps. 100:3). Shepherds ought to represent him well. The church is to be a place where sheep can safely graze. To fail the sheep is to fail our Lord.

I write to remind shepherds that they too are his lambs. He has called you to his flock because he made you and loves you. He has called you to learn his ways so you can then walk among his sheep, many of them trampled and broken, and bring them his love and safety and healing. This work is his work, in your own lives first, then in the lives of others. Listen for his voice. Run to him so he can work in you and in the lives of those you touch.

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Excerpt from the poem "Calvary's Elucidation" by Amy Carmichael

Yet listen now,

Oh, listen with the wondering olive trees, And the white moon that looked between the leaves, And gentle earth that shuddered as she felt Great drops of blood. All torturing questions find Answer beneath those old grey olive trees. There, only there, we can take heart to hope For all lost lambs—aye, even for ravening wolves. Oh, there are things done in the world today Would root up faith, but for Gethsemane. For Calvary interprets human life; No path of pain but there we meet our Lord; And all the strain, the terror and the strife Die down like waves before His peaceful word. And nowhere but beside the awful Cross, And where the olives grow along the hill, Can we accept the unexplained, the loss, The crushing agony, and hold us still.

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Encountering Sickness in the Body of Christ

I have worked in the field of psychology for more than fifty years. My colleagues and I have learned a great deal in that time. It has been a hard road, a blessed road, and a challenge—one that has brought me much joy. This work has continuously taught me much about human beings, myself included. It has also taught me about suffering and evil, even in what we call the church.

I have worked with precious and wounded lambs on six continents. I have sat with people who suffered from many kinds of trauma and evil. I have learned from them about the crushing damage of war, sexual abuse, domestic violence, prejudice, hatred, and human trafficking. I have witnessed damage caused by an utter disregard for those created in the image of our God. I have met them in the United States, Brazil, Rwanda, Ghana, South Africa,

Cambodia, Eastern Europe, and many other places. Not only have they broken my heart, but they have also taught me much about the wounds of our Lord and the love of our great God.

They have also drilled into my heart God's call to his people. He calls us to live and look like him. To speak truth, bring light, and intervene when those who use his name look nothing like him. In failing to protect the wounded and discarded, we have often failed him. We have covered up evil, abuse, and violence of many kinds in the institutions of Christianity. In doing so, we have failed to be salt and we have failed to be light.

I want to remind us of our true calling, which is to bear the character of Jesus Christ in our own flesh and blood, to call human beings to his light, truth, and abounding love.

In my early years as a therapist, I sat down with a young woman in her twenties who bent her head down and threw her long hair over her face. For the first time in my life, I heard the words "my father used to do weird things to me." I had no idea what she meant. There were no books or teachings on childhood sexual abuse. She painfully, slowly taught me what she meant. I listened and learned.

One day someone asked me about my work. When I described what I was hearing and struggling with, she suggested I read literature on the Holocaust in an effort to understand what I was observing and the impact of such evil on human beings. Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi became my teachers. I learned about the violence of war and how it alters human beings. I learned about evil and suffering unlike anything I had ever imagined. I began to understand sexual abuse as a form of violence, an abuse of power, both

traumatic and oppressive. I found myself plunged into unspeakable sufferings and evil before my thirtieth birthday.

I continued to counsel women who had suffered from chronic, cruel abuse at the hands of fathers and mothers, grandfathers, uncles, husbands, teachers, and pastors. A young student I was helping to manage depression missed her appointment one day; I later learned she had been murdered with the cord of her hair dryer, a crime that was sadly never solved. An adolescent girl I was counseling was being abused by her father. With her permission I called the police—this was in the early 1970s—and the police believed what I told them. They instructed me to bring the father in for a session with his daughter and said they would be in the waiting room. The father was taken out of the session in handcuffs.

Sometime later, a pastor's wife called and said she wanted to bring a young woman to see me. The woman was terrified and didn't speak. I led her to my office, opened the door, and invited her to go in. She froze. I asked if she preferred that I go first, to which she nodded yes. After we sat down, I said a few things about appointments and then said I wanted to hear from her about why she was there. Silence and no eye contact. I tried again. Nothing. At the end of the time, I got up and opened the door. She returned of her own volition a week later, motioned that she wanted me to enter the office first, and then sat down without a word. I tried talking to her but received only silence. She continued to come faithfully and on time. I eventually was silent also. One day, six months later, I said I wanted to ask her some questions. She could answer with a vertical nod for yes and a horizontal one for no. Was that

okay? She nodded yes. Are you afraid of me? Yes. Are you afraid I am not safe? Yes.

As she slowly began to trust me, her nods became written notes, then a few spoken words. Little by little, I learned that after she was born and brought home from the hospital, her father put his cigarettes out on the bottom of her feet because she had the audacity to be born a girl. He trafficked her every summer across state lines to a large farm where she was sold to one man after another until he returned to collect his money and take her home so she could show up for school. She was terrified of human beings. But she was very bright and gifted in many ways. It was a joy to see some of those gifts develop over time. When I moved my office to another state, she followed me there and got a job. I continued to see her until she died many years later.

A Body That Doesn't Follow Its Head

My father graduated from Virginia Military Institute with a degree in chemistry. When World War II broke out, he was sent to North Africa for cargo aircraft flight training. While there, he contracted a serious case of malaria and had to be flown to London for medical care. A fellow soldier went with him, concerned he might die in transit and not wanting him to die alone. My father recovered and went on to become one of the lead pilots dropping paratroopers over Normandy, releasing supplies over Holland (for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross), and serving in a mission known as Operation Market Garden. He returned home and fell in love with my mother. During

the following years, our young family moved with him multiple times across the nation and to Japan.

Somewhere along the way, his body began to deteriorate. The man who played tennis, rode horses, and performed midair refueling gradually became unable to make his body do what he wanted it to do. Ultimately, he had to retire and was diagnosed with Parkinson's. I learned important lessons from him about another kind of suffering, its impact on human beings, and what is required to offer dignity, care, and respect.

Some years later, I was home from college and talking with my father. He asked for a glass of water. I went into the kitchen and paused in the doorway before going back into the room. I watched my six-foot-four father trying to get his body to obey him, to lift him out of the chair. His body did not follow his instructions and was unresponsive to his intentions. The thought that crossed my young mind was *a body that does not follow its head is a very sick body*.

I had no idea how profound a statement that was until many years later when I was working as a psychologist with churches and Christian organizations. I learned that there was another body that was extremely sick and was failing to follow its Head. I saw terrible damage done to members of the body of Christ.

God brought me weary pastors, weighed down with the demands of ministry—some of them suffering from depression and anxiety. Many of them had been chewed up and spit out by their church communities, tossed aside by people of God who considered them no longer useful. They needed a safe place to unburden themselves. He also brought me missionaries who had crawled home after too

much work and too little support, divisions in the field, and their own traumas, such as rape or kidnapping by terrorists. I tended shepherds who were victims, and I was saddened by what I saw.

Then one day I waded into the murky waters of shepherds who had made sheep their victims: missionaries who had raped the nationals they had gone to serve, and pastors who had abused their power to meet their ego needs by feeding off the people in their pews. I encountered enablers who ignored abuse in an effort to preserve the church and its ministry, that closed ranks to protect the abuser rather than the victim, using God's name to sanction the coverup. I saw evil hidden and ignored rather than exposed. Shepherds and churches were predators. Prized institutions and organizations were prioritized and protected rather than the people God had called them to serve. In essence, I learned about wolves in God's house.

I met a Christian leader who beat his wife black-andblue, repeatedly twisted the truth, and told me I was young and didn't understand that sometimes a little force was necessary in order to accomplish God's will in the home. I made a phone call to a pastor about a woman in his church whose life was in danger. He sent her home because that is, after all, where women belong. I met a young girl who was sexually abused by her youth pastor. Leaders at the church helped him move on so he could continue his "dynamic ministry" elsewhere. "We wouldn't want a little mistake to destroy such a gifted man, would we, Diane?"

I struggled with disbelief, anger, cynicism, and judgment. A subtle sense of superiority crept in. I, who judged others for being whitewashed tombs full of abuse and immorality,

became a whitewashed tomb full of pride and bitterness. I knew I could no longer do the work that was in front of me. I was at the end of my skills, my endurance, and my willingness. I did not see how I could go into one more dark, poisonous place. I was catching the disease I was trying to remedy.

One day I got down on my face before God, told him I was finished, and asked him what I should do next. He began to teach me. He taught me that this is not my work but his. I am merely invited to participate in what he is doing in the world. The burden is his. Over time I learned that he did not simply want me to see and understand suffering or to see the truth about his church; he also wanted me to grasp his heart for victims, whether they be victims of sexual abuse, troubled churches, or the stress of ministry. Grasping his heart for shepherds who make victims out of sheep was more difficult. But he gently insisted that embedded in his teaching was the giving of his heart for what he reveals. Without his heart, information can corrupt and disfigure the one who holds it. There is a terrible poison in this world; we call it sin. We cannot work closely with that poison in our own lives or the lives of others without being contaminated and marred unless we are saturated with the words and heart of our God, who has borne it all.

God continues to give me his heart for suffering people and for his church, his body, which is clearly still in distress—the body for whom Christ died in order to redeem it and make it well. He has said that loving him means loving his body. One cannot love the Head and despise the body, for they are one. He has said that if I love him, then I will love people. A failure to love people, even those who

are predatory, is a failure to love him. He taught me that loving as he does is always a call to truth and light.

To ignore, hide, or excuse sin in an individual or the body of Christ is to work against him, for he came to vanquish the death-dealing sickness. Any pretense that sin is somehow tolerable infects and poisons the body of our Lord. We feed the cancer growing in his body every time we ignore, excuse, or hide the truth of sin in a person or an institution. We contribute to the damage of those made in his image when we justify what God calls evil in ourselves, in others, and in our systems.

God's invitation to me—to let him show me how the suffering of humanity reveals the sin sickness in his church was really an invitation into the heart of the great World Lover. He sees suffering humanity and invites us into the vast wilderness of hurts and hardships with him. Presbyterian Scottish pastor Samuel Rutherford said, "He delights to take up fallen bairns [children] and to mend broken brows: binding up of wounds is His office."¹ He is the one we work with and for.

Our Lord calls us to see the sickness in this world: rampant abuse, racism, and how those knit together by his hands in their mothers' wombs have been alienated and crushed. He calls us to see how those he calls precious are abused through domestic violence and misuse of spiritual power. He calls us to see how the least of these are cast aside in order to preserve systems on which we have slapped his name. He calls us to see those who mourn the lives stolen from them by Christian leaders.

He says, "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a

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stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me" (Matt. 25:42–43). Do you suppose we leave people hungry and thirsty when we cover up abuse? Do you suppose that when we push aside those who are considered "less than" we are in fact rejecting him? Are the naked those we turn away from because they somehow threaten what we call God's work? Are the sick and imprisoned those we have kicked out or put away so a leader we revere can be honored?

What we have done to the most vulnerable we have done to him. When we squash someone else, we squash him (Matt. 25:40, 45). Scripture says this is the King speaking, the one who sits on the throne and who is higher than all.

Do you understand that our work in this world—our patience with those who struggle, our entering into unimaginable suffering, our truth telling to those who deny or scorn the truth—is all done for him? Knowing Jesus, seeing the world as he does, and bearing his image are our primary work. We are to reflect his likeness wherever we go. The body is to follow its Head and always obey the Father. Obeying the Father was Jesus's primary mission while he was on earth. If we are truly his body, it will be ours as well.

We easily deceive ourselves and follow false ways, often in the name of Jesus. We follow a Christ made in our image, one who agrees with us and would never destroy our temples or high places. But the real Jesus did not walk with Rome, or with the religious leaders of his day, or even with his disciples when they failed to do the will of his Father. Think of his gut-wrenching words in John 14:9: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such

a long time? *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*" (emphasis added). If you and I truly follow our Head, we will look like him. If we truly obey our Head, those around us will see bits of him in us.

God has entrusted us with keeping his honor. That work is not measured by external trappings. Believers were first called Christians at Antioch. The word *Christian* means "Christ one," someone who looks like Christ. Our God longs to see the likeness of his Son made visible in us. May we bring him joy no matter the cost. Like him, may we always seek to please the Father.

Incarnating the Presence of God

We must ever and always manifest Christ's likeness with humility. Do we really think we have what it takes to understand complex and deceptive humans? We rarely understand ourselves! How will we know when to speak and when to be silent? How will we love when we are tired or be patient when we are weary? We can't walk the long road of healing and transformation apart from the work of the Spirit in our own lives. The life-giving power of Christ crucified cannot be released into others' lives unless we have allowed the cross to do its work in us.

To walk with suffering sinners is to confront lies, darkness, and evil. Sometimes the suffering is unspeakable and runs unbearably deep. Apart from the work and Word of God in our lives, what have we to offer sufferers? We cannot fight the litter of hell in a life unless we rely on the Spirit of God. The suffering is overwhelming enough, but there are also layers of deception and lies in the lives of hardened

souls. We cannot bring life to dead places or light to darkness apart from the Spirit of God.

Caring for and ministering to others requires a servant of God, steeped in the Word of God, loving and obeying God in public and in private, to sit across from a suffering sinner at a crossroad and bring knowledge, wisdom, truth, and love while being utterly dependent on the Spirit of God. That work, no matter what we call it, will be used by God to change us into his likeness; that work will result in his redemptive work in the person sitting before us; that work will bring glory to his great name.

I can recall a time I had an infection and fainted, resulting in a need for stitches. I viewed a trip to the emergency room as an interruption, an annoyance. My day had been planned. Three stitches and seven hours later, I returned home having experienced a parable about the God of all power caring for the weak and the vulnerable. Now I am grateful for the interruption.

As I lay in a hospital bed with the curtain partially open, I could observe all the activity in the hall of the emergency room and around the desk. I listened to calls for rapid response teams and alerts for trauma-level crises. In the meantime, many patients with various problems needed assessment and tending. The staff members were all respectful and kind but also exhausted and harassed by angry patients, frightened patients, and those needing immediate care. I watched. I witnessed hard work, patience, kindness, and meticulous care in the midst of great stress.

Then the back of a man's head caught my eye from a room across the hall. There was no ER room available. A doctor spoke with him: "Do you know where you are?"

He asked the question over and over. No movement; no response. The nurse came and was given orders. I watched for an hour as she spoke gently, announcing each thing before she did it. She cared for this man with gentleness, dignity, and wisdom. He did not move as she tended to him. An hour later, I watched them wheel him down the hall. I saw his face—his blank, nonresponsive face. My eyes briefly met his glassy stare before he disappeared out of my view.

The nurse and the patient were different genders, different races. They had vastly different capacities. The nurse held all the power over this significantly vulnerable man. Her use of that power taught me a great deal about who she was. The man was an image bearer, knit together in his mother's womb by our God. The earthly differences were not central. The nurse illustrated the essence of the incarnation; she showed the presence and character of God in flesh and blood.

That is what the power of the Almighty does. He who sits on the throne descends to the sick and the broken and shows us the character of our God in flesh and blood.

Whoever we are, and whatever our role, our brilliance, our skills, our theology, our position, or our notoriety, the nurse in the ER demonstrates for us what the presence of our God looks like. I learned something about the man his limitations and incapacities—though I know nothing about how he arrived in such a damaged state. I also witnessed the power of humility, of kindness and gentleness, of regarding the other as important, of needing to be seen and honored, and of value beyond that of any system or organization.

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If it is true that our God came in the flesh to the brokenhearted, the small, the afflicted, the ruined, and the vulnerable, then that truth needs to be lived out in our flesh and blood—yours and mine—so that the world might know that he, full of love and justice and truth, is real.

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What the Church Is Called to Be

What do we mean when we speak of "the church"? A building? A group of people? A particular denomination? A global organization?

Christians have established many theological positions and introduced many interpretations of Scripture throughout the centuries. We have erected beautiful buildings devoted to worship all over the world. We have created stunning music. We have raised up theology schools and trained theologians. Such things are not inherently wrong. But these things are not the church. All these things can be externally beautiful yet become a den of thieves. We know this from the news, and, sadly, many of us know it through experience.

The word *church* derives from the Greek *ekklēsia*, meaning "called-out assembly." That brings up two questions: Called by whom? Called for what? *Ekklēsia* clearly suggests

that the church is made of human beings, not ultimately places, formats, traditions, or creeds. The church consists of human beings created in the image of God and called by God to bear his likeness in our flesh. The church is the body of Christ—the embodiment of his character. In construction, the cornerstone is the first stone set. The cornerstone becomes the reference point. It is the measure by which we know whether other stones are straight and true. Christ is the cornerstone of the church, and his people, called by his name, are to bear his likeness.

The body of Christ is called to be like Christ as individuals and as a gathered body of those who are one with him. Anything that does not look like Christ is *not* the church, even if it purports to be. As I learned from my father, a body that fails to follow its head is a sick body. We, the body of Christ, are called to follow our Head, be like our Head, carrying his light and truth into the world. Outward success, fame, wealth, and large numbers are not the fruit our Lord demonstrated during his earthly ministry. God's purpose is to create a living body in which God is over and within each of its members as well as its corporate life. The church is to be a body of diverse individuals united by a love for and likeness to Jesus Christ to show forth "the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9 ESV). We, as his body, are to display his beauty, his compassion, his truth, his purity, and his great love. These words describe character traits seen in our God and made manifest in the incarnate Christ. They are to be visible in us as well.

Church leaders and their followers often point to popularity, number of congregants, growing bank accounts, and

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particular political views as signs of God's presence and blessing. None of these are listed in Scripture as signs of Christlikeness. If we are part of a successful, thriving church but we ignore abuse in our church, including abuse carried out by those in the pulpit, we are not following Christ. The sheep of God's pasture should be free to safely graze, but too often they are in danger. Do we not see that we are protecting wrongdoers and minimizing the very evils that put our Lord on the cross? We ignore and cover up that for which he bears nail scars, all the while using his name to sanction our deeds. When evil is discovered, our response too often is to hide misdeeds in the name of protecting the reputation of the church. In doing so, we stray even further from our Lord. In allowing and hiding such evil, we are not protecting the church at all; instead, we are destroying it and simultaneously breaking God's heart.

God sent us his Son. He came, as do we, in the flesh, and his life here on this earth was a walking, breathing manifestation of the character of our God. Humans saw and knew who God is by seeing him manifest in the flesh of Jesus Christ. He has called his body, the church, to do the same. The body of Christ is to ever and always follow its Head and thereby be a medium, a manifestation, and a vehicle of illumination. We are to be a people of God's own possession who exist in order to reveal God in this world. That is our primary purpose. Any other likeness is ungodly.

Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost for His Highest*, says this: "Acts 1:8 means a life of unsullied, uncompromising and unbridled devotion to the Lord Jesus, a satisfaction to him wherever he places us. Beware of anything that competes with loyalty to Jesus Christ. The greatest competitor

of devotion to Jesus is service for him."¹ Chambers highlights that we Christians often engage in activities "for God" while looking nothing like him.

We are the children of God, the kin of Jesus Christ. We share his life. He is our Head. We are to live out a likeness to his character. But walking in the footsteps of our Lord is a staggering task! We can do such a thing only when our love for him outweighs everything else in our lives. Consider 1 John 5:1–3: "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands." This is a scorching test and makes two things very clear. First, our Lord has called us to personally live out our likeness to Jesus Christ. And second, unlikeness to him does damage to us and to others and breaks God's heart.

Chasing Worldly Success

Building a worldly kingdom is not the goal of the church. Love of money, even when that money is meant to serve the church, can run counter to God's intent for how we should live. Only God's character shown forth in us will nurture his people and proclaim his name.

Worldly success is addictive. When our first love is power, prominence, an exalted rank, or fame, even when we tell ourselves that these trappings are on behalf of serving God, we have strayed from the path. We focus on numbers and talent, often blind to the dark and unhealthy forces working in our churches and individual lives. We love the chief

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places and highest seats and the salutations in public. Sadly, if we hold positions of power, we often feed ourselves rather than the lambs God tells us to feed. We feed our egos, our pride, our fame, and our bank accounts. We have been called by God to guard his lambs, to protect them. They are his. They are vulnerable. They will die without constant care. We are called to guide them and keep them safe for our God's sake. In doing so, we exhibit his great love.

Moses warned the Israelites not to listen to prophets who enticed them to follow after other gods; rather, he said, "It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere" (Deut. 13:4). I suggest we are prophets of another god when we protect a church system rather than the lambs. John says that we will love God inasmuch as we keep his commandments: "But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did" (1 John 2:5–6). And Paul teaches us that we may have a strong faith and hope, but the greatest is love (1 Cor. 13:13). He also says that if we do not have love, then we are nothing. Do you think we have love when we cast aside a victim and protect or take the side of the perpetrator? Paul says our God is love. Sit with that-our God is love. Our status, our eloquence, our brilliance, our power, our fame—without love, these things are nothing. The greatest of these is love. All the other things we seek shrink in the face of love.

The love of Christ is to be the cause, the origin, the source of our love. We love because he first loved us. To truly know him is to love him. To love him is to become like him. Paul singles out love as the supreme possession. Fame

is not primary. Numbers of followers, knowledge, degrees, a seat of power, and financial fortune are not central. Faith will someday no longer be needed, for we will see God face to face. Hope will be unnecessary, for hope will be fulfilled beyond anything we can imagine. But love? Love is to be the great object of our lives. *Love is the character of Christ*, and our character is to mirror his. Love is the one everlasting gift, and the name of love is Jesus.

Henry Drummond's book *The Greatest Thing in the World* presents love as having nine characteristics: patience, kindness, generosity, humility, courtesy, unselfishness, good temper, guilelessness, and sincerity.² If indeed love is the greatest thing in the world, as Paul says, then these characteristics are worth serious study and consistent seeking.

Now consider the characteristics I have encountered. A woman stood up in my office and lifted her skirt so I could see the black-and-blue marks on her thighs. They were inflicted because her husband was displeased with something and used a shovel to let her know. He was known and respected in the Christian community, and she was terrified to leave and expose him. I know women who kept their little ones home from church and school lest the evidence of abuse in their home or church be noticed by others. Though they did not see it as such, the women were in effect protecting the abusers. Love does not cover up evil. I have come alongside many adults who as children were trafficked on Saturday so they could "recover" on Sunday and return to school on Monday. I learned early in my career that many of the abusers were men who held some kind of position in the Christian world and were therefore excused for heinous behavior so their well-known ministry

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would not be damaged—so that more souls could be saved or so-called fruit could be produced. Grievously, over the years I have worked with many men and women who were never cared for and never found it safe to tell their stories. Jesus said we are to let the little children come to him and not get in their way (Matt. 19:14). Our failure has crushed and broken many precious lives.

The church is a body. Its members are to have the same care for one another that they have for themselves (1 Cor. 12:25). If your face is about to be hit, your arm and fist work to ward off the blow. If you see danger headed toward you, your feet move you to safety. In the church, we are to be concerned about *all* the members of our body and not just seek our own well-being. We are called to weep with those who weep, to share the sorrows of those who have been wounded (Rom. 12:15). Hebrews 13:3 says, "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, *since you also are in the body*" (ESV, emphasis added). That is what we call empathy.

Amos 6:3 warns us, saying, "You put off the day of disaster and bring near a reign of terror." Do you suppose we do that when we send women and children back to a violent husband or father? "You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves" (v. 4). Are we not consuming lambs when we ignore abuse in Christian homes, churches, camps, and schools?

Hiding abuse is not an act of love. God abhors the covering up of evil, for he is the God of light. There is *nothing* of Christ in these actions. He hates evil. God's response

in Amos is clear. God abhors pride; he hates the palaces, the lofty places. There is nothing of his character in these places. They do not match God's actions or words. Whether churches, families, schools, or ministries, they are not his unless they live out his truth and love. Where those things are not present, neither is he. We protect things that have his name on them but do not bear his heart and character within them. His response? I will destroy that which you have built that looks nothing like me.

Amos prays, "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:24), and may we pray with him.

We are Christ's and not our own. We are called to love him with heart, soul, and mind. And as we love him and he dwells in our hearts, we are rooted and grounded in love, knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge and being filled with the fullness of our God (Eph. 3:17–19). By truly loving him, we promote his honor and glory. We destroy his honor and glory when we ignore, injure, or devour his people. Our goal is to bear his image in our lives. His reign is achieved when we, parts of his body, follow our Head and obey his commandments. When we do not follow our Head, we go our own way and prove ourselves to be sick.

Our Lord says that if you love him, you will obey his commands (1 John 5:3). If you love God, you will not seek wealth, fame, and power for yourself. If you love God, you will seek him and will reflect his character in this world. Socalled shepherds of God's people, using the name of Jesus, have fed on the vulnerable in many ways, gaining great wealth and securing stardom. They are wolves in sheep's clothing, blaspheming the name of Jesus.

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As Paul says, we are to be blameless, harmless, and without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom we are called to shine as lights in the world (Phil. 2:15). Think about these words in light of the multitude of news reports exposing hideous acts throughout Christendom. Then sit with the following words from Andrew Murray: "Humility is the only soil in which the graces root; the lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure. Humility is not so much a grace or virtue; it is the root of all, because it alone takes the right attitude toward God, and allows him as God to do all."³

The character of our Lord grows in our lives when we place ourselves in the soil of humility. That is utterly unlike what we have been witnessing in much of Christendom, with its riches and fame and self-seeking pride. We are witnessing many things that are unlike Christ, who emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and took on our likeness (Phil. 2:7). The Lord of the universe came to earth, gentle, humble, meek, lowly, of no reputation. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

Contrast Christ's actions with the following:

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (James 3:16)

When pride comes, then comes disgrace. (Prov. 11:2)

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. (1 John 2:16)

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. (Phil. 2:3)

Ponder these Scripture passages. Then sit down with some of the news reports about the damage and demise of church leaders and Christian organizations. Many people have been seduced by the fame, the words spoken, and the emotions stirred, and God's Word has been used to sanction it all. Many sheep have been devoured, deprived, controlled, or manipulated through financial abuse, sexual abuse, and spiritual abuse. That abuse has been covered up in order to preserve the leader and the system. In fact, it is often said to be done "for the sake of the church." All of this has broken the heart of the Father. All of this has misrepresented the Father.

Our Father is both love and truth. He demonstrated that by becoming small, frail, human, and finite. He demonstrated that by becoming the Man of Sorrows. He wept while he was incarnate as a man, and he weeps over us now. He demonstrated that while he was here by boldly speaking truth, turning on the light, and calling things by their right name. He became like us *so that* we might become like him.

"This is love for God: to keep his commands" (1 John 5:3). The word *keep* means "to maintain, to preserve." To maintain something is to enable it to continue, to preserve it in its original state—to allow something to stay as it is meant to be. The body of Jesus is not loving God by saying they are his people yet doing nothing when abuse of any kind happens. Concealing or denying the existence of child sexual abuse, clergy sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence,

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and raging tempers on the parts of leaders serves to destroy his created and loved people and bring shame to his name. They are preserving something, but it is not our Lord's commands. We love God when we live out his character in flesh and blood. We love God when we love the abused.

Two things are clear. First, the church has been called to embody Christ. To do that, we, the body of Christ, must follow our Head. Any other likeness is false and therefore ungodly. The character of our God is to be manifest in human flesh yet again. Building worldly kingdoms is not the goal of the church. Second, we know we are true to God when we are obedient to him and bear fruit in his likeness. Any unlikeness to him does damage to others and breaks his heart.

How Should the Church Respond to Abuse?

So how should we respond to the scourge of abuse in the church? What steps can we take to learn how to prevent it? Responding to alleged or exposed abuse requires humility and care. We must face the facts, acknowledge them to ourselves, and make clear publicly that the problems of abuse are present in churches, not just "out there in the world" or in churches unlike our own. They are also here with us.

We need to talk about sexual abuse and domestic violence. Most churches spend little or no time educating leaders or laypeople about such matters. We haven't been taught about offenders and how they operate. We have not developed clear policies and safeguards for children in our care.

Abuse exposes the abuser's heart, not the heart of the victim. It's easy to assume that when the sin of abuse occurs

in a relationship, it is a 50-50 proposition. We look for a reason, an external cause, for abuse, ignoring what Jesus says about evil coming out of our hearts.

We must be concerned with not just protecting the vulnerable but also protecting offenders from themselves. Abusers have habituated deceit and can eventually lose the capacity to discern truth from lies. We make it easy for the offender to continue in deception under the guise of "grace" when we listen to words that sound spiritual but instead lead us astray. We must not be deceived by the lies they tell themselves and then feed to others.

Victims need safe people to walk with them for an extended time, to be with them in the midst of confusion, fears, and suffering. Instructing and teaching victims is good, but it won't heal the damage of abuse. They need trusted companions to be with them on the journey.

Protecting all vulnerable people should be part of a church's DNA.

When abuse is alleged or exposed, the church is called to tend the lambs, not the institution or system. Covering up sin—or a crime—is failing to make God's priority our own. We honor him by caring for the wounded, dragging abuse into the light, often at great cost, and calling it by its right name.

If a child discloses any form of neglect or abuse—physical, sexual, verbal, or emotional—the first and immediate response must be to call the civil authorities. Failure to report abuse is a crime and subject to fines and/or jail time, depending on the state your church is in.

The investigation of a report of any kind of abuse requires an experienced, independent investigator or organization.

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Choose someone who has no investment in hiding whatever truth may be found. Ask about their training and experience. What were the outcomes of their investigations, and how did they support the victims? They should have documented experience handling abuse investigations and a multidisciplinary team that includes law enforcement, lawyers, and professional counselors. Also ask about previous recommendations they made and how they were implemented. An investigator must know when and how to confront alleged perpetrators without further damage or risk to victims. It's best to hire those who understand the complex dynamics of a faith-based institution or church.

Victims and their families or caregivers need to recognize and understand the dynamics of abuse and the benefits of professional counseling. Pastoral staff should look into training before a crisis occurs. Local professionals with experience in trauma can provide valuable help. The work of healing from the damage sustained by abuse is difficult and often protracted. Trained and licensed counselors play a critical role so as not to create additional damage.

Finally, the people of God are called to name things in truth, sorrow with the sorrowing, help free the oppressed, and comfort the grieving. Sadly, we often fail to follow our Lord in these ways. But we must lament, pray, and learn how to demonstrate in the flesh before a watching world that our God loves truth and is a sure and certain refuge for his sheep.⁴

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