



# FALLING AMONG THIEVES

UNDERSTANDING & RESPONDING  
TO CHURCH-RELATED ABUSE

*Andrew Graystone*

TEMPLE TRACTS



# Falling among Thieves: Understanding and Responding to Church-related Abuse

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*Temple Tracts: Book 23*

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# Author

**Andrew Graystone** is an independent theologian, writer, and activist. In 2017 he uncovered the activities of the serial abuser John Smyth QC. Since then he has walked with numerous victims and survivors of church-related abuse. Andrew is the author of *Faith, Hope and Mischief* (Canterbury Press, 2020) and *Bleeding for Jesus: John Smyth and the Cult of Iwerne Camps* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2021). He is a Visiting Fellow of St John's College, Durham and is reading for a doctorate on the theology of touch. You can contact him on [andrew.graystone1@btinternet.com](mailto:andrew.graystone1@btinternet.com) or via Twitter [@andrewgraystone](https://twitter.com/andrewgraystone).

# Dedication

*I am grateful to all those victims of church-related abuse who have allowed me to walk with them over the past five years.*

*Thanks too, to the staff and trustees of Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, who allowed me to enjoy their facilities as I worked on this paper.*

# Commendation

“The most helpful piece I’ve read in understanding my experience of clergy abuse and the aftermath—and the only one providing the theological understanding I’ve lacked. It gives hope—hope based not on ineffective secular strategies; but hope rooted in the gospel of woundedness, repentance and Christ’s healing—for church and victim.”

**Grace**, Survivor of Clergy Abuse

# Foreword

Persistent failings in safeguarding have humbled the Church of England. Of this, there is no doubt. Sometimes, as this tract contests, bishops and clergy and others with a duty of care and positions of influence and responsibility have walked by on the other side. Sometimes, it has been worse than this: they have been guilty of the abuse itself. Sometimes, failure to deal with the abuse properly has had the effect of clambering into the ditch and rubbing salt into the wounds of an already injured person. And then walking by. Sometimes, even protecting the abuser.

Does this mean the whole system is rotten to the core? I don't think so. But walking by on the other side has never been good.

Forty years ago, I was ordained into a Church, and therefore also living in a culture, where there was little understanding or acknowledgement of the nature of abuse, nor how abusers not only groom their victims, but those around them as well. Especially those in power who often enjoyed the flattery that went with being groomed. This enabled abusers to hide in clear sight. They had the unwitting protection of many, as well as the wilful and cowardly protection of some.

I never got any real training in safeguarding until I had been ordained for at least twenty years. But since then, and particularly in the last ten years or so, real change has started to take place. None of this excuses or takes away the force of Andrew Graystone's argument. However, the reason I have agreed to write this Foreword is not that I agree with all his conclusions, nor for that matter, that I disagree with them either, but in writing this, I am able to offer a personal perspective to sit alongside what he has written. Because although I know that the Church has often been guilty of walking by on the other side, I also know that because the culture around safeguarding is changing, and because a younger generation of clergy

and church leaders do receive the training that I never had, there are now many instances where it is the Church who climbs into the ditch to be alongside those who have suffered the horrors of abuse, and this is good.

One of the most painful burdens of my ministry is to be occupying my particular office as Archbishop of York at a time when the failings of the past and—as it were—the birth pangs of a new culture and a new way of doing things are a sharp reality. However, as well as facing many horrors, it also means I have had the humbling privilege of being alongside those who have suffered abuse and helped bring about some redress. Indeed, for me, one of the most powerful bits of this tract is Andrew Graystone’s expanded vision of what redress could be. He speaks about it as “restoring identity and hope” not just “making amends”. He also speaks about discovering Christ “in the wounds of the victim”. I have glimpsed this. It is holy ground. You don’t walk away from it.

But I don’t agree with him that the Church of England’s response *continues* (my emphasis) to be “managerialist, chaotic and ineffective”. Because of what I have said above, I believe that lessons are being learned, even if it is true that sometimes it has been with far too much reluctance. Nor do I think it is true that the National Safeguarding Team and other safeguarding officers in the Church are “well-meaning professionals with barely any concept of the spiritual dimension of church related abuse”. Many who work in safeguarding in the national, diocesan, and local church have a strong and profound faith and a deep understanding of the spiritual dynamics at work. Therefore, this is not like issuing scalpels to hospital administrators. But it is and has been a huge programme of training, as people learn new things. And there is still more to do.

Consequently, I have had the privilege of working with some astonishingly dedicated safeguarding professionals who have helped me enormously—to understand abuse, to meet and come alongside those who have been abused, and to recognise how to deal robustly and fairly with perpetrators of abuse. Furthermore, it has been with their help that I have come to know and receive from victims and survivors of abuse themselves. They have been my greatest teachers; and I pay tribute to Andrew and others who have supported them and enabled their voices to be heard more clearly. I also want to put on record my thanks and appreciation for those survivors of abuse who work with the Church of England, helping us to do better.

It is my experience that change comes about when those of us who need to change receive affirmation as well as challenge, and when those who truly want to bring about change work together and commit themselves to a new future. Andrew's paper certainly provides a challenge. But I am grateful that he has given me the opportunity to write this, which is not meant to replace challenge with affirmation, nor pretend everything is really okay when it isn't, but to affirm the astonishing good work that is done in every parish in the Church of England where, for instance, we now have a safeguarding officer, and where, week in week out, committed safeguarding professionals and literally thousands of parish officers work to ensure that the mistakes of the past do not happen again, and that those who would prey on children and vulnerable adults will never again pass under the radar of the Church, nor ever be protected.

I also believe that reform to Clergy Discipline and ongoing changes and development led by the National Safeguarding Team, particularly around responding well to survivors and victims, and development of other key policies around managing cases will help build a better culture and therefore help us be a safer Church. I even dare to hope—and this is setting the bar of expectation high—that in years to come the Church of Jesus Christ may actually be an example of how we care for each other. We are certainly not there yet.

There is one more thing the story of the Good Samaritan teaches us. It is that help and care come from the most unlikely people, even ones you thought were your bitter enemy. I hope that our pieces of writing sitting alongside each other like this will be a creative surprise. We don't just need to reach out to each other to make the Church and the world a safer place. We need to accept help from each other as well.

**Stephen Cottrell**, Archbishop of York



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# Introduction

For more than a decade, the life of the Church of England has been dominated by the painful unfolding of narratives of abuse within its own ranks. Those who have been wounded by high profile Christian leaders such as Bishop Peter Ball, Bishop Victor Whitsey and John Smyth QC join countless other victims in reciting a litany of pain and shame. The church's response has been, and continues to be, managerialist, chaotic and ineffective. Central spending on safeguarding in the Church of England has risen from around £50,000 per annum when Justin Welby was made a bishop in 2011 to well over £7 million just ten years later.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in spite of countless new posts, debates in the General Synod, vigils, and endless committees and initiatives, and in spite of Archbishop Welby's repeated insistence that "victims must come first", the church does not seem able to grip the issue in a meaningful or effective way. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the church has failed to find a way to make meaning out of abuse and recovery. So, rather than engaging with the problems in order to deal with them, the church is perceived as being dragged reluctantly through it by victims and campaigners, and by the government's Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.

Abuse is a gaping wound in the Church of England. It is like a leak in the church roof through which water is pouring in, even on sunny days. No matter how much money is spent, and how many experts are called in to examine the problem, it seems that no one can work out where the water is coming from or how to fix it. Some have concluded that they just have to learn to live with it. The Church of England joins other denominations that have been beset by similar issues, sometimes

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<sup>1</sup> Figures from Archbishop Welby interviewed in [The Spectator](#), 26 January 2019.

to devastating effect. Whilst the freefall in church attendance is not solely due to abuse, there is no doubt that the narrative of mistrust in the institution has caused immense reputational and spiritual damage to the national church.

The strange truth is that, after all this time, many leaders in the church cannot effectively articulate what abuse is, nor do they know what it would mean to respond to it in a Christian way. In the absence of this understanding, the church treats abuse as a civil wrong rather than a spiritual one, offering only secular answers to profoundly religious questions—perhaps out of fear that if it were to be treated as a spiritual issue, the questions that followed would be too searching. This vacuum of theological diagnosis produces a confusion about what the church can or should do to treat it. Managerialism and delay fill the gap, and victims of abuse complain that this response re-abuses them. Almost no victims of church-related abuse report that they have been helped or satisfied by the church's response.<sup>2</sup> Many say that they regret ever having disclosed their abuse to the church. Many of the church's leaders are exhausted and frustrated by this issue too, some to the point of giving up.

I am a Christian theologian and writer, who long ago rejected an invitation to be ordained in the Church of England, because I feared it would make it more difficult for me to exercise my priestly vocation in the world. That turned out to be correct. For the past several years I have walked with many victims of church abuse as a friend and advocate. The most important qualification I bring to my work is that I am not ordained. This essay draws heavily on what I have learned from victims of church-based abuse, and my experience of engaging with the church alongside them. My intention here is not to diagnose what is at fault in the church's systems and practices, as if some further rearrangement might put things right. Instead, I want to take a step back, and offer a contribution towards a theology of abuse and repair. Painful as it may be, we need to think deeply about what abuse is, and what place it has in the life of the church, as well as thinking carefully about the nature of healing or repair.

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<sup>2</sup> See the *Final overview report of the independent diocesan safeguarding audits and additional work on improving responses to survivors of abuse* published by the Social Care Institute for Excellence on 04 April 2019, which can be accessed [here](#).

# Chapter 1

## Stripping

Abuse is a vague and contested term. A typology of abuse usually sorts it according to the nature of the act: physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse, and so on. There is a debate within the church as to whether spiritual abuse should be included as a distinct category, or whether it is best defined as a sub-set of the others.

One of the drawbacks of this way of thinking is that it constructs abuse as an event (or a procession of events) in which the emphasis is on the actions of the abuser, rather than the impact on the victim. Of course, it is true that in every case abuse involves an individual or organisation using their power to inflict damage on a disempowered Other. Thus, in legal terms, abuse is dealt with according to the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the action of the abuser in the context of their relationship with the victim.

Christian theology constructs abuse differently. The offence is not primarily located in the act itself, nor in the physical, emotional, or spiritual damage done to the victim, but in the violation of the relationship between one God-graced person and another, and its disruptive effect on the wider community. At the heart of a Christian understanding of abuse are four dynamics: the wounding of personhood, the violation of trust in the relationship, the exclusion of the victim from safe community, and the rupture of an appropriate relationship with God. It is important to realise that in each case, the harm is done to both the victim and the abuser. Of course, the abuser may accrue temporal benefits such as sexual or psychological fulfilment, whilst the victim largely suffers detriment. Almost inevitably, the abuser is seeking to satisfy some spiritual or psychological deficiency such as fear, narcissism, or repressed

sexuality. Their abuse of others is an effort to use the power and influence they have to make good the deficit they feel within themselves. Abuse is a lack of faith—faith in God’s acceptance of the individual as they are and trust in God’s ability to meet the individual’s need.

The way that the parable of the Good Samaritan is cast offers an example (Luke 10:25-37). The focus of Jesus’ narrative is not on the fact that a man has been beaten-up and stripped by robbers. The violence of the attack is almost glossed over; it is treated as an inevitable fact of life—just the sort of thing that happens on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The focus of the story is on the relationships between the wounded victim and the passers-by, representatives of wider society, and especially of the religious community. The pedagogical tremor occurs when we observe the inhumanity with which the priest and the Levite treat the victim. Theirs is a one-way relationship, that takes account only of their own needs. In the first assault, by the thieves, the man is robbed of his property, his clothing, his dignity. In the second assault, by the priest and the Levite, he is robbed of his identity, his self-worth, and his hope for recovery. This is contrasted with the grace evidenced in the relationship between the victim and the Samaritan. The Samaritan is not even described as good. This is simply how two people who meet on the road should treat each other: not with the violence of the robbers, or the superiority of the priest or the disdain of the Levite, but with the mutual grace of the Samaritan and the victim, who give and receive care as equals.

That does not mean that there is no cognisance of the outcome of abusive actions, and in particular their impact on the victim. The victim’s wounds matter, and they need to be treated. His or her shame is real and must be addressed. But Christian theology does not suggest that the seriousness of the abuse correlates with its impact, or with the social status of the participants, or with the degree of responsibility of the victim. No one asks why the man was walking alone on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, or whether he was wise to do so. His needs are already complex when he arrives in the story. He is wounded, alone, naked and humiliated. The distinctive of Christian theology is that wounded relationships matter as much as, if not more than, wounded bodies. The priest and the Levite do not simply ignore the needs of the victim. The story makes a point of the fact that they see the victim but make a choice to define themselves against him. They do not just walk past; they cross the road. In these terms, the priest and the Levite, for all their status and privilege, are the pitiable figures. At least the victim knows his own need. The priest and the

Levite never acknowledge their own wounds and their conflicted feelings at seeing a naked, bleeding man. John Smyth, Peter Ball, Victor Whitsey and the others, were all victims too—not necessarily in the conventional sense. Like the priest and the Levite, they all lived with huge privilege balanced on top of grossly distorted self-image.

One consequence is that we cannot create a simple league table of the seriousness of abuse in terms of injury to the victim. Take, for example, a serial abuser such as John Smyth QC, who beat young men with canes in his garden shed. Of the scores of men and boys he abused, some appear to have been barely affected in the longer term, whilst others who were treated in very similar ways have lived with decades of trauma. We are not entitled to say that those whose physical injuries were lighter are any less victims than those who suffered most. If anything can be measured, it is the disjuncture between the victim and the abuser.

There are three dimensions to this disjuncture. The most obvious is the denigration of the personhood of the victim. The second is the idolatry of the abuser who adopts a super-human or god-like status within the relationship. The third dimension is the wounds inflicted on the community. By leaving the victim unattended, the priest and the Levite do not only harden their own hearts; they also make the road from Jerusalem to Jericho that bit more dangerous for future travellers. They hurry to join the faith communities waiting for them to arrive, and not surprisingly, they do not mention the shocking encounter they have just had with a naked victim on the roadside. The impact of the wounding, and their response to it, becomes a secret between the priest and the victim.

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The nature of abuse is to strip the victim of their personhood. It is a conscious invasion by a person with power, intended to violently challenge and destabilise the physical, sexual, cultural, and spiritual identity of the Other. Abuse is an attack on the self. The victim is objectified as a possession to be manipulated into the form of the abuser. The specific ways in which this happens are very varied. It might involve robbing the victim of their dignity, their reputation, their security, or their agency over their own body. It might involve using physical or spiritual force to make them do things they would not choose. In adult victims, it often means making them feel like a child. In children, it often involves taking away the sense of safety or security

that allows them to act appropriately for their age. In every case it involves robbing the individual of their legitimate boundaries, so that they feel unwhole. The victim is stripped of his clothes, beaten, and left alone and half-dead.

Abuse is the deliberate attempt to over-write the personhood of one individual with the identity of another. It challenges the Otherness of the victim and forcefully marks them with the identity of the abuser. In abuse, the abuser appropriates a power that does not belong to them, and uses it to say to the victim, “You are not wholly yourself; you are mine.” It is a profoundly intimate act, the most fundamental form of identity theft. In practice it is not possible to fully overwrite personhood, because it is unique to the individual. What you can do is to devalue or negate it enough to make the individual lose confidence in it. Fortunately, personhood can never be entirely snuffed out while life endures. It is the stubborn endurance of the person that enables victims of abuse to survive at all.

What makes abuse in a Christian context particularly grievous is the espoused belief that the identity of every individual is fully realised only in the wounds of Christ. The scandal of Christianity is that the nature of Christ is not power but humility. For Christians, the wounded victim, not the powerful offender, is the icon of Christ. In the humiliation of abuse, the victim discovers the reality of Christ, just as the abuser loses it. It is in the wounds of the victim that the humility of Christ is revealed. Any sense that a person can mark another with their own identity instead of the identity of Christ is blasphemous. For that reason, a distinctively Christian understanding of abuse needs to take account not only of the distortion of the relationship between two individuals, but also of the relationship between each individual and God. When the victimised individual is forced into a diminished version of their own personhood, the window through which their relationship with God is realised also shrinks. The impact on the abuser is similar. When they appropriate to themselves a status that is greater than that of their victim, their own relationship with God is diminished. For the abuser, this is a form of idolatry – taking upon themselves some of the status that belongs to God alone.

Writing in a much wider context, Miroslav Volf calls into question the appropriateness of the categories of oppressor and oppressed.<sup>1</sup> This, he recognises, is a challenge that must be heard with utmost sensitivity. It seems obvious that we should identify some people, and even classes of people, as victims of abuse, and others as abusers, but, without for a moment wishing to down-play the suffering of victims, I suggest that Christian theology has a more complex, more nuanced and less binary understanding of the realities of power and oppression. Every human relationship is an encounter between wounded people capable of good and evil. Abuse occurs when a broken person misuses their potency to harm another broken person. Repair is achieved not merely by rebalancing the debts thus created, but by restoring both parties to a relationship of dignity and humility before each other and before God. In my experience, many victims of church abuse understand this, and it partly accounts for their enduring longing for the church to return to a place of humility and justice. Victims own their own brokenness and shame, while the church and its agents often struggle to do so. The broken victim crying out for justice is a theologian and a prophet whose voice the church needs to hear. When a wounded victim, robbed of all but the least scrap of their dignity and identity, cries out, “I too am human; and broken as I am, I matter,” she is bringing to the church a profound lived truth that those who feel the need to project strength desperately need to understand. When the victim stubbornly says to the church, “You are better than this,” the church needs to hear what is being said to it.

Thus far I have spoken as though abuse occurs between two persons in isolation. Whilst this may be true in the most tangible ways, it is a mistake to discount the context in which it is enabled to occur. The individualistic focus on the perpetrator—the so-called “bad apple” approach—which the church often relies upon, ignores crucial factors in the culture and theology of the institution that facilitate abuse and cover-up. Any institution in which abuse occurs, be it a church, a sports club, or a family, provides a cultural framework that enables the damaging relationship to be formed and then exploited. More than that, we know that people who have the potential to abuse others gravitate to cultures that facilitate abusive relationships. This is an uncomfortable truth for the church, but it is unavoidable.

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 99ff.



Where an abuser is ontologically identified with an organisation or culture, as in the case of a schoolteacher, a sports coach or a priest, the identity that is marked includes that of the organisation. Abuse that occurs in an institution borrows the authority, culture, and symbolism of that institution. So, an aspiring footballer who is abused by their coach is indelibly marked as a victim of the particular club in which the relationship was rooted. If their deepest identity is telling them to cheer on the team, the contradiction will always be dominant for them. Likewise, a victim abused by a priest is indelibly marked as a victim of church abuse, and the relationship that is damaged is not only that between the victim and their abuser, but also between the victim and the church. Victims of abuse in church contexts are baptised, not into the identity of Christ, but into a false baptism as a worthless object at the disposal of the church.

Christians ought to understand that the capacity for sin is universal. Abuse is not simply a personality type. It is a potentiality realised in a particular context where there is a confluence of human weakness and opportunity. This is why efforts to identify and screen out abusers through psychometric testing, such as in selection for ordination or employment, will always be of limited effect. It is also why we must pay attention to those aspects of the culture and theology of church life that lend themselves to exploitative relationships.

In the orders of the church, functional power is made deliberately congruent with ascribed spiritual authority. The belief is that ordination recognises and affirms a particular calling to leadership in the church, and also conveys the church's authority to give spiritual leadership to others. Those who are ordained by the church are additionally given secular organisational power in parishes, schools, and dioceses. The liturgical practices and cultural signifiers of the church serve to underpin this clerical politics. Some are obvious: the titles, the costumes, the bow to the priest as he enters the building. Some are infinitely subtle: the parking space reserved for the bishop when he visits the parish church. In theory, a kenotic approach to leadership might be possible. In practice, reinforced by centuries of habit, a culture of deference follows as night follows day. The vast majority of clergy at every level either fail to recognise this or decline to reject it. It is inevitable that the relationship between those who accept these indicators as signs of spiritual authority and those who see themselves as 'ordinary' believers is distorted. Rosie Harper and Alan Wilson suggest

that church leadership exists in a culture of high trust and low accountability.<sup>2</sup> Even outside of the orders of the church there are aspects of Christian leadership that do not rely on ordination but still allow spiritual authority to attach to particular individuals through gifting, reputation, or force of personality.

The uncomfortable truth is that this culture of deference renders the church institutionally abusive. The horrific cases of sexual and psychological manipulation that come to public attention are no more than the unacceptable extreme of the continuum of unwarranted privileges embedded in church culture. Mercifully, the majority of clergy and other leaders do not actively abuse the authority they have been given to exploit others, but many do, even in the most subtle ways, and all may. This includes those who might be horrified to see the exercise of their vocation as abusive. ‘Power over’ rather than ‘power with’ is baked into the patriarchal ecclesiology of the church in ways that Christ specifically forbade. Successive generations of church leaders have refused to recognise this, and consequently fail to engage with the social dynamics of abuse. At an organisational level, the centripetal power of orthodoxy means that those who have power in the church feel compelled to say that whatever is done to address issues of abuse in the church must be done without changing anything substantive in its culture, practice, or theology. Consequently, much is done, but little changes.

Some of the key metaphors for the community of faith may be problematic, or even toxic. It is sometimes argued that the use of ‘body’ as a metaphor for Christian community protects the church from overweening hierarchies. However, a perverse effect of the emphasis on the spiritual body of the church is to create a detachment from the tangible body of the individual. If what really constitutes the body is the gathered community of believers, the implication is that physical bodies should be put at the disposal of the church. Physical, sexual, and psychological abuse are not the only ways that people can find themselves contorted by their membership of the Christian community. Some are crushed in other ways, such as being forced into roles that deny their gifts and their hearts. Individual bodies that cannot be adapted or disciplined to fit into the ecclesial body are labelled as problematic and voided like

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<sup>2</sup> Rosie Harper and Alan Wilson, *To Heal and Not to Hurt*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2019), p. 109ff.

a diseased tumour. This explains the common cause that victims of church abuse discover with many who are black, disabled or LGBTQ+. What starts as a metaphor of radical inclusion can soon become a vehicle for excluding the wounded body part.

‘Family’ is another key ecclesiological metaphor that has potential for harm. Many victims of church-related abuse experience their position within the church as akin to one who is abused within the family. Families, like church institutions, create relationships of deep trust and dependency. Families contribute uniquely and permanently to an individual’s sense of identity. For most people, family is so fundamental to their security and self-identity that it is all but impossible to conceive of any future without it. A high degree of loyalty is expected in exchange for the privileges and protections of membership. To be disowned by one’s family is a very specific and highly destructive form of exclusion. The comprehensiveness of the experience of betrayal by a parent, a sibling or a child is often echoed by victims abused by clergy or other Christian leaders. It is deeply traumatising to discover that the institution that explicitly gave you a name and identity in baptism should go on to strip you of the personhood it so fundamentally defined. Abuse within the church creates a powerful inner incongruity—a discordance between the espoused identity of a member of a faith community and the identity that has been inscribed upon them. Those who are abused in other settings such as sports clubs or schools may sometimes be able to find alternative communities of identity (though I would not want to diminish the sense of betrayal there either). For victims of church-related abuse, their identity in the church is as irreplaceable as their birth name. If the church of Christ has abused you, you cannot simply transfer allegiance to another church. That is why, very often, victims continue to cling tightly to the church, just as victims of domestic abuse sometimes cling to their families, hoping and believing that the body that gave them their identity and promised to shelter them will surely make good on its promises, if only it can be made to realise what violence has been done in its name. In return, the church shows remarkably little understanding or gratitude for the tenacity of its wounded children.

The common factor in every case of abuse in a church setting is that the victim’s identity included some element of piety. When this spiritual life is betrayed, that personhood has been shattered in a particularly fundamental way, and there is no obvious process by which the pieces can be reassembled outside the church. All the time that the church refuses to acknowledge its own part in this damage, it continues to load onto the victim the sense of responsibility for change. Many victims feel

trapped in a cycle of calling for the church to be what it has promised to be, so that the victim can begin to recover the identity they have lost. Part of the torture is that, from time to time, like the sporadically repentant partner in an abusive relationship, the church shows signs of understanding, and pleads to be given another chance, only to then betray the victim again by its actions. This is what victims mean when they describe the slow, inconsistent, and adversarial processes of the church as re-abusive. The victim on the Jericho Road watches in horror and disbelief as the figures of the priest and the Levite become smaller and smaller in the distance, willing them to turn back and realise their mistake, unable to comprehend that the institution that shaped their personhood no longer chooses to recognise it. She might run after them to reason with them if her legs were not already broken by the attack. Only when both priest and Levite have finally disappeared over the horizon is the victim confronted with the realisation that they are truly alone.

And then, along comes the Samaritan...

# Chapter 2

## Re-dressing

Today's church leaders find themselves hurrying down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, under-resourced, with busy agendas to fulfil. As they journey, they encounter victims of church abuse, both current and non-recent, lying naked at the side of the road in obvious distress. Neither the church as an institution nor individual church leaders can avoid deciding how to respond. The parable could hardly be clearer. Church leaders have a responsibility to stop and attend to victims, even if that creates an inconvenient or embarrassing interruption to their business. The nature and goal of that intervention is less obvious. What is the role of the church with victims of recent or non-recent abuse? I want to suggest that it is to reverse the dynamics of the trauma and thus “re-dress” the naked victim—to restore the personhood, dignity, and hope they have lost.

We have established that abuse in a church context corrupts the relationship between the victim, the abuser, and the institution. That being so, the goal of the church after abuse must include the repair of its own relationship with the survivor. The priest and the Levite also need to be re-dressed—not because their robes of office have been stolen from them in the attack, but because by ignoring the victim, they have been stripped of their meaning. We are not only talking here about physical or psychological wounds, but about wounds to the soul or personhood of both victim and abuser. Counselling and compensation may be important, but this kind of re-dressing cannot be achieved through secular action alone. The eschatological goal is for victim and church to be able to enfold one another, just as both are enfolded by God. This is the kind of reconciliation that Miroslav Volf characterises as “embrace”.

The immediate difficulty here is that the priest and the Levite have not arrived on the scene equipped for the situation. The priest who meets a victim of abuse might like to see him or herself as a bringer of healing, but first they need to recognise that they belong to the same community as the abuser. Any suggestion that the church can offer a paternal embrace to the victim simply reinforces the self-idolatry that enabled the original abuse. Reconciliation is a gift of God. It can only be received if members and leaders of the church are able to recognise their own nakedness; to enter into their own wounds, and through them into the pain of the community and of the victim. The task for the church is not to organise its business so as to seal up or scar over its own wounds, but to sit with them in the presence of Christ until they are transformed by grace. This sitting with the wounds is the first step to repentance, without which no other steps can be made. To attempt healing or repair without repentance is to take the matter out of God's hands—perhaps even to try to hide it from God. A church that cannot bear to look at its own wounds will never be able to offer the restorative grace of God to anyone else. Many well-meaning initiatives in safeguarding polity are flawed because they stem from a kind of auto-idolatry – the same excess of self-importance that leads to abuse in the first place. Any theology of mending must start with God, specifically the God who has been willingly wounded. The wounds of God, voluntarily accepted in Christ, are the only route to healing for the church.

In the current generation, the church has baulked at this step of dependency. Instead, it has chosen to commit its relationship with victims of abuse to the secular managerialism of safeguarding policies and practices. Well-meaning professionals with barely any concept of the spiritual dimension of church-related abuse, or any overt acknowledgement of the grace of God or the work of prayer, have been charged with organising the church's offer to victims. For example, the members of the Church of England's National Safeguarding Team are drawn primarily from the police and criminal justice system, and from senior levels of social services. It is not deemed necessary or desirable that those who minister on the church's behalf with victims and survivors of abuse should have any personal experience or understanding of Christian faith or spirituality. In most cases they do not even come to the job with a developed understanding of the mechanics of church life. It is as if the National Health Service had taken people with no experience or understanding of medicine and appointed them as surgeons, issuing scalpels to hospital administrators and prescription pads to

personnel managers. This is such a fundamental category error that it almost looks like a tactic to avoid having to engage with the spiritual dimensions of wounding and healing.

It is only out of spiritual brokenness that the church can begin to meet and embrace the broken victim. In fact, it is only alongside one another that abuser and the abusive institution can find healing. In this way, victims of abuse are the premier theologians of a broken church. They hold up a mirror to the church saying, “Look! You too are wounded.” This is categorically different from other types of injury and healing. The injuries of the man attacked on the Jericho Road could be treated so that his physical wounds were healed. If he lost money in the attack, he could be compensated. But the mending of personhood broken by abuse is different. Acts of abuse, once done, cannot be undone. The wounds of abuse cannot be mitigated by medicine, finance or even the abjection of the abuser. An individual whose identity has been radically traumatised by abuse can never be restored to the place they were before the assault. At best they will find a new place of integrity, though the reality is that abuse will have opened them to a lifelong struggle with issues of identity and value. The damage to both victim and abuser is ontological, and this means that any healing from abuse will be categorically different from other kinds of reparation. The aim of healing is not to make amends, but to restore identity and hope for both.

In truth, many church leaders understand this from their own experience, though Anglican culture and ecclesiology leaves little room for leaders to acknowledge their own vulnerability in this area. Church leaders who carry the wounds of abuse themselves often choose to conceal them, or insist that they have had no lasting effects, as if victimhood is a sign of weakness.

A precondition for the church in enabling healing after abuse is the acknowledgement that it is powerless to achieve it. If the church allows itself for a moment to imagine that it can undo the damage that has been done, or heal wounded souls, it will immediately fall into the trap of auto-idolatry. Of course, good people wish to remove pain, especially when that pain has been caused by the church. But the arrogant belief that the church has the power to heal its own victims is in fact an obstacle to that healing.

So, what is to be done? The first step in healing the crisis of abuse is for the church to devote very extended time to self-examination and repentance. This is a painful process, but utterly necessary. The secular rush towards “Lessons Learned” which currently characterises the church’s approach entirely circumvents the most

fundamental lesson, which is that the church is broken beyond its own repair. Until the church is able to cry out to God for mercy to staunch its own wounds it will be continually frustrated. The most urgent need of the church in the face of the abuse crisis is not for improved management or presentation, but for transparency, humility and spiritual leadership that drives it to its knees. Only when the church enters deeply into its own woundedness will it find Christ waiting there to receive it.

The second step towards mending is for leaders of the church to draw very close to victims and devote extended time to listening to them. One might assume that victims do not want to meet with church leaders, but the opposite is usually the case. The priest and the Levite will certainly have some explaining to do when they arrive back on the scene. In practice, it is church leaders who, like the priest and the Levite, seem to find it distasteful to come close to open wounds. The motivation for listening to victims as they show their wounds is not that by doing so, the church can offer some form of healing. It is the very reverse. The church needs to attend scrupulously to the wounds of victims for a long time, until it is convinced of its own helplessness. Although I am speaking of the church in the abstract here, this kind of engagement can of course only be performed by individuals giving consistent attention to individual victims. Embracing the wounded victim is central to the vocation of priesthood, and to the Christian mission of the church—not because the church has power to heal itself or its neighbours, but because it needs to acknowledge that it does not. For individuals called to take on this role on behalf of the church it will be costly and very time-consuming, but it is as high a privilege as attending to the broken body of Christ.

Many church leaders fail to understand this role and act as if, in their dealings with victims, they are being asked vicariously to make good the acts of a previous generation, for which they may feel somewhat grudgingly responsible. The contemporary church and its leaders should take upon themselves the responsibility for the abuse perpetrated by their predecessors, not to assuage inherited guilt, nor because they want to save the church from public disgrace or to reverse its decline, but precisely because Christ is to be discovered in the wounds of the victim. For that reason, the involvement of victims in the process of reconciliation is not a box-ticking exercise but a part of the spiritual journey towards healing for the church. The wounded victim is the closest neighbour to the wounding church, and neither can find healing



without the other. There is no surer route to the heart of Christ than through the wounds of victims. That is why the first clear sign that restoration is dawning is not the returning health of the victim, but the humility of the the church.

It is vital that the church does not imagine that it has anything to offer or to gain by mending broken people. That does not mean, however, that the church has no role to play. The function of the church towards survivors of abuse is simple and profound. It is to “re-dress” the victim by robustly reversing the message of the abuser with the truth of Christ. The goal is the restoration of the personhood of wounded individuals, which is their reconciliation with God through Christ, and which ultimately leads to reconciliation between persons and communities. The key dynamic in restoration is to reverse the impact of abuse on the personhood of the victim. This is what is described in the ordinal as “the cure of souls.” It is at the core of the church’s mission, and it can only be achieved by love. Like the oil and wine poured on the victim’s wounds, the actions of the attentive church affirm the worth and identity of the broken victim. Reaffirming the beauty and dignity of the wounded individual is only possible if church leaders are able to own their own wounds. The church needs to be a body that enables survivors to reframe damaged perceptions of themselves.

Only when the church has entered deeply into its own wounds and the wounds of the victim can it begin to “re-dress” them. Even then it is with the understanding that restorative justice can only ever be partial. Even if the wounds of the past can be healed, the scars will remain. So, the church needs to approach its engagement with victims, not asking how much it needs to do to repay its debts, but with the humility of understanding that it can never do enough.

Re-dressing victims is not intended to be a punishment or a deterrent for the church. If it was, then current church leaders might feel aggrieved that they were being asked to accept responsibility for what others had done, maybe in a previous generation. Of course, the costliness of rehabilitation may well encourage the current generation of church leaders to be even more vigilant to stop contemporary offenders, but re-dress is not primarily intended to be punitive. Nor can it be achieved by the writing of a cheque, however large. The church has a duty of care to its victims that is lifelong. In practice, this means that pastoral care must be long-term and financial support needs to be approached on a stipendiary basis; it is clearer to see re-dress

as a form of pension rather than a redundancy payment. Need and trauma revisit a victim regularly, and the practical and spiritual reassurance that a victim needs will be life-long.

It will be obvious by now that re-dress cannot be achieved in a single event. The damage suffered by a victim might have occurred on a particular day (though in the vast majority of cases it takes place over an extended period), but the trauma suffered by both victim and abuser is chronic. Re-dress comes only through gentle and consistent attention to the other. There can be no simple tariff of damages. Instead, the church needs to look for imaginative and bespoke ways of releasing whatever it is that the victim needs to flourish. That might be information; it might be security in the form of guaranteed housing or sustained income; it might involve public apology or other signs of humility. All of this will be time-consuming and humbling. It will require imagination. It may be costly in ways that insurers cannot comprehend. It will certainly be disturbing for the church and its leaders.

The story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) is a useful illustration. Zacchaeus, a tax collector, is guilty of financial and psychological abuse of his clients. In the first act of the short story, Zacchaeus recognises his own need for healing, and brings that need to Jesus in humility. In the second act he begins to offer reparation to those he has wounded. But the story has an extraordinary and unexpected denouement. Apparently without prompting from Jesus, the tax collector says, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." This is not mere compensation, or punitive damages, but re-dress. It is a sign of the depth of his awareness of his own wounds, and the remaking of his relationship with Christ. This is made explicit when Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house [...] for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost."

The developing dynamic of re-dress between church and victim is likely to be mostly private. It will be marked by symbolic acts such as apologies. Private apologies are important to many survivors if they are sincere and personal, and emerge from a depth of listening and humility that speaks of genuine repentance. Impersonal or generalised apologies or those drafted by lawyers or communications advisors often have the opposite effect. The most painful apology the church can make is to acknowledge its own failings in the management of victims. Sadly, the number of impersonal and public apologies issued by the church over the last decade has meant that their symbolic value is exponentially diminished.

Words of apology by themselves are worthless without tangible acts of repentance. The leaders of the church, who deal in symbols as part of their calling, will want to find potent symbols to truly represent their repentance for the church's sins. In the case of Zacchaeus, the symbol of his repentance was that he gave half of all he possessed to the poor. This was a public symbol of no immediate benefit to his victims, but it was a clear public sign of his own repentance. What might a tangible act of contrition look like in today's church? Would the church dare to give half of all that it possesses to the poor in repentance for its abuses? To do so would be a symbol of the utmost potency in a society framed by acquisition of power and wealth.

Other symbolic actions might relate more directly to the process of re-dress for individual victims. Some, such as a commitment permanently to meet a victim's financial needs will come at the beginning of the process, illustrating intentions. Other symbols, such as the deep listening to a victim's impact statement, will mark the summation of a part of the process. A bishop meeting with a victim might kneel before them, or weep with them and their families, or ask what they need. To do so is to acknowledge spiritual indebtedness. At the very least it involves descending from the bishop's palace or croft to meet victims on their own terms to engage in deep and extended listening. To be meaningful, such symbols will be costly. The cost to the church leader signifies to the victim the value that is placed on their personhood.

It is only when the two parties have established a level of respect for each other's personhood that they can contemplate the second act: the "re-dressing" of the victim in clothes of honour.

Relying on secular polity, the church has assumed that making amends simply meant giving a victim a sum of money. Furthermore, the church has assumed that the appropriate quantum is the amount their insurance company is prepared to pay. (It never seems to occur to church leaders that they might be under-insured, or that insurance companies have an incentive to minimise payments, using means that might go wholly against the church's values.) This focus on money can be demeaning, and may even further insult the victim, if lawyers and church officials engage in horse-trading over the appropriate quantum. In fact, the process of re-dress comes in many forms, and looks different for every victim. In every case, the aim is to turn the original abuse inside out; to restore to the victim the agency, dignity and voice that have been taken from them.

This is not to deny that some victims do need financial compensation for losses they have incurred. Others need money for support services, such as the provision of counselling or paid medical care. For some victims, non-monetary actions like the provision of explanation or information are important. They want to know who knew what, when, or how something was allowed to happen. Some victims might need opportunities for their creativity to be validated, whilst others might need funding for a holiday with their family to start to draw a line under what has happened. There are endless other components that might make up a redress package. Some require funds, but others do not. All survivors require spiritual support—which may need to come from outside the offending church.

There may need to be reparation in respect of the abuse itself. Notwithstanding what I have said about the impossibility of making monetary recompense for abuse, money is one of the ways we can provide some comfort to a victim. Natural justice suggests that if an individual's life has been made unbearable by abuse, we should do what we can in other ways to make it more bearable. This type of compensation can never equate to the abuse itself, but from sheer compassion we owe it to those who have been injured to make them as comfortable as possible.

Then there is compensation for the loss of earnings, savings, or status. Abuse has physical, mental, and spiritual consequences. They may express themselves in mental breakdown, depression, addiction, or loss of confidence. It is common for individuals to lose their job or their business, or to be unable to manage their finances well. As a result, many victims have suffered tangible losses as a direct result of their abuse. Redress needs to take full account of actual losses. This will certainly mean that the church will need to pay off debts or medical bills, or whatever else has left the victim indebted. It may mean repaying the costs of therapy, which sometimes cost the victim many thousands of pounds over many years.

A proper redress scheme might go further and include compensation for the loss of a *potential* future. Imagine that a child suffers appalling abuse and is so damaged that they miss out on much of their education. Perhaps they could have gone to university, or had a significant career, but as a result of the abuse they ended up in much reduced circumstances. Should they be compensated for what might have been, as well as what they actually lost? If so, how can that be measured?

Then there is compensation in respect of the mishandling of the process. For many survivors, a great deal of the pain and suffering associated with their situation comes not only from the experience of abuse itself, but from the ways in which they have

been dealt with by the church. We now know that many have been lied to or discredited; some have been made to wait years or decades for help. Redress needs to include not just the repair of the original abuse, but compensation for this experience too. If compensation in this area does not cost the church dearly, there will be little incentive to get processes in order for the future. Conversely, if failings on the part of the church make a real difference to those who are responsible today, there will be a strong incentive to handle the process of disclosure well and justly.

In all of this, the quantum of compensation does not express the value of the abuse, but the value that the church wishes to set on the personhood of the victim. That is why Zacchaeus did not just return what he had taken from his victims, but four times what he had stolen from them. To give back what has been stolen is mere justice. To give back four times as much is to make a clear statement about the dignity and worth of the victim.

The key question for the church is, what will it take to restore this individual to a safe and healthy place, where they can flourish in the years left to them. How can the church re-dress the victim in clothes of honour? This will be different for each survivor. For some, their overwhelming need is for security. If the trauma of abuse has left you feeling insecure about everything, the restorative process needs to address whatever it is that will make you feel secure. In this instance, a compensation process that is conditional, or that continues to drip-feed resources to the victim at the whim of the church will only add to the abuse. A victim struggling with insecurity needs a sufficient guarantee from the start that they will not be left wanting in the future. Victims who are left with overwhelming shame might need some form of public validation. Victims who have felt excluded from the community of faith might need some explicit signs of inclusion; a recognition of the value of the gifts they bring. Victims who feel that they lost their vocation because of their abuse might need help to rediscover and realise it. All of this is complex, deeply pastoral, and a million miles from the approach that simply looks to sign a cheque and send the victim away. Time and again in the gospels, we see Jesus not only healing people's physical wounds and disabilities, but more importantly, re-dressing them and restoring them to society in ways that allow them to flourish.

The crisis of abuse could well be terminal for the church. Alternatively, the church may resolve to turn around and make the painful journey back up the Jericho Road to meet the victim there, and to begin to re-dress her. If it does so, it may begin to rediscover the love of God in shared brokenness—the brokenness that a victim

of abuse shares with every church leader, the brokenness that the community of the church embodies and shares with the wider community. And in that discovery, the church may find that its own wounds begin to heal, and its own nakedness may be re-dressed.

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