

Tough love for sexual abusers

Outrage, accountability, forgiveness, potential reconciliation

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [April 24, 2002](#) issue

How do we handle clergy sexual misconduct faithfully and compassionately? The issues and challenges extend far beyond any one crisis, and indict all churches that have failed to recognize the complexity of those issues and faithfully engage them.

My wife served for four challenging years on the committee that dealt with clergy sexual misconduct in her United Methodist Church conference. The committee tended to oscillate between two extreme postures: sweeping the offense under the rug as if nothing had happened, or adopting a harshly punitive stance that seemed to ignore any prospect of forgiveness and reconciliation. How, my wife wondered, can the church offer a distinctive witness to the importance of taking sin seriously—thereby ensuring accountability—while also embodying the power of costly forgiveness?

Unfortunately, we have often failed to handle the situations appropriately, let alone to demonstrate a distinctive witness. This failure has become even more troubling as we hear about horrifying sexual misconduct by Roman Catholic priests and cover-ups by church officials. The number and gravity of the offenses make it clear that these are systemic problems that must be addressed.

Some of the problems are peculiar to pedophilia, a problem that is resistant to cure and typically results in repeat offenses. Medical and mental health professionals on the one hand, and church officials on the other, have failed to take appropriate steps to protect people—and especially children and teenagers—from pedophiles and ephebophiles. People are rightly angry and outraged.

When criminal wrongdoing is apparent or even suspected, the appropriate civil authorities need to be notified and engaged. Further, we ought to ensure that victims (or potential victims) of misconduct are protected and supported. This will

involve removing offenders from positions of public authority and sacred trust. Our first concern needs to be to care for those who have been sinned against, even as we honor the possibility that persons may be wrongly accused.

At the same time, we need to keep in view a larger horizon. That horizon is not a cheap and distorting sense of forgiveness, in which perpetrators are let off the hook and set free to commit sin again. But neither is it a nihilism, one that presumes that once you fall there is no redemption.

Rather, the horizon is shaped by the costly forgiveness of Christ's cross and resurrection. Several Catholic bishops asked parish priests to address the crisis in their Palm Sunday services. Ironically, the timing of this request seemed to have a lot to do with how events were unfolding in the media. But situating this reflection at the beginning of Holy Week was uncannily appropriate, for the drama of Christ's betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection is key to a coherent and faithful response to clergy sexual misconduct.

There are at least six lessons to be learned from these crises. First, sin must be confronted—not ignored. Sin is too pervasive and subtle for us to be able to evade its reality. We must grapple not only with isolated cases of wrongdoing, but with sin as a reality that grips us in our thoughts and desires as well as our actions.

Second, we learn that the past can be redeemed. We do not worship Christ uncrucified; we worship Christ crucified and risen. When the risen Christ returns to the disciples, he does not forget the past, but he does redeem it as he calls them to new life.

Third, the means by which the past is redeemed is costly. We cannot afford cheap grace, nor can we trivialize the difficulty in unlearning sin and learning how to live differently. The risen Christ returns with a judgment that offers new life. Yet it is still judgment.

Fourth, while Christ's death and resurrection offer us forgiveness, the only way we can appropriately receive that forgiveness is by undertaking repentance. We learn the true liberation of forgiveness when we commit ourselves not to replicate the past but to live into a different future. This repentance also leads us to turn to our own victims and to live in solidarity with victimized people everywhere.

Fifth, we need to be able to claim that we are all sinners without claiming that all sins are equivalent. Betrayals of trust, especially in the midst of power differentials and by people in whom sacred authority has been vested, are especially grievous sins that call for clear accountability and expectations of true repentance.

Finally, Christ calls us to love our enemies—even without their repentance. This “tough love” will provide clear accountability and a policy of “zero tolerance” for wrongdoing. But it is love nonetheless. Yes, to presume that the fullness of forgiveness and reconciliation is possible without authentic repentance is to cheapen grace. But to withhold love and close off reconciliation is, as Jonah discovered, to isolate ourselves from God.

Can we respond to clergy sexual misconduct in ways that hold together outrage, accountability, forgiveness and the possibility of reconciliation and new life? Can we “love enemies” in ways that avoid the nihilism of unforgivable wrongdoing and unredeemable wrongdoers?

There are daunting challenges, but they urgently need to be confronted. Even more, they embody a distinctive witness to the power of Christ’s cross and resurrection—with all of its costly love and pain and hope and forgiveness.