

Evangelicals ‘worse’ than Catholics on sexual abuse

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [October 30, 2013](#) issue

A Liberty University law professor and grandson of Billy Graham has told reporters that he thinks evangelicals are worse than Catholics when it comes to responding to sexual abuse by clergy.

“Protestants can be very arrogant when pointing to Catholics,” Boz Tchividjian, executive director of Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE), told journalists attending the Religion Newswriters Association conference in Austin, Texas.

“The Protestant culture is defined by independence,” Tchividjian said in comments reported September 26 by Religion News Service.

Evangelicals often frown upon transparency and accountability, he said, as many Protestants rely on scripture more than religious leaders, compared to Catholics. Abusers condemn gossip in their efforts to keep people from reporting abuse, he said. Victims are also told to protect the reputation of Jesus.

Tchividjian said too many Protestant institutions have sacrificed souls in order to protect their institutions. “We’ve got the Gospels backwards,” he said.

Advocates for victims of clergy sexual abuse agreed.

“I say ‘thank you’ to Boz Tchividjian for continuing to publicly speak out about the extent of clergy abuse and cover-ups among evangelicals,” said Christa Brown, a blogger who details her uphill battle to report her molestation decades earlier by a Southern Baptist youth minister in a 2009 book titled *This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang*.

“For those of us—and we are many—who were abused by the sexual predation of evangelical ministers and re-abused by the bullying of other evangelical leaders who wanted the abuse kept quiet, Tchividjian’s words of truth are a balm for the heart,”

Brown said.

David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), said it's tough to compare denominations' handling of child sex crimes and cover-ups, since "virtually all of them tend to be secretive."

It's easier to "track" pedophile priests, said Clohessy, because of an official Catholic directory published every year with assignments for most clergy. But over time, he said, bishops are getting "smarter" about concealing the reasons why a child-molesting cleric was moved or simply left out of the directory.

"Many predators do seek out jobs with little supervision and where they'll have access to, and authority over, children," said Clohessy, an abuse survivor who testified before the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2002. "Being able to claim religious status is a bonus."

Amy Smith, a SNAP representative in Houston, said the Southern Baptist Convention has a long history of ignoring abuse and enabling perpetrators by "continuing to elevate and place them in public positions of leadership and trust."

"Predators are master manipulators and use these positions of trust, particularly spiritual trust, to groom kids and gain the trust of parents, preying upon the vulnerable," Smith said.

In her own experience of exposing decades-old abuse that resulted in former Southern Baptist music minister John Langworthy pleading guilty in January to five felony counts in Jackson, Mississippi, Smith said she was rejected by her own parents and chastised by a pastor in her church.

"It is the light of truth and knowledge that is our greatest tool to protect kids," Smith said. "Silence and secrecy only help child predators. It is past time for evangelicals to open their eyes to see the evil within their midst."

Tchividjian said abuse is most prevalent in mission agencies, which often don't report abuse because they fear being barred from working in foreign countries.

The SBC International Mission Board acknowledged in 1995 that their record is "not without blemish" after alleged victims came forward with information about abuse by a longtime missionary to Indonesia that occurred between 1967 and 1973.

A formal complaint in 1973 accused the missionary of fondling two children, but after review, according to a Baptist Press report in 2002, “the matter was resolved among the parties.”

Tchividjian recently launched an online petition calling for greater transparency about sexual abuse occurring in evangelical churches. The July 17 Public Statement Concerning Sexual Abuse in the Church of Jesus Christ was prompted in part by a couple of high-profile Southern Baptist leaders’ defense of a ministry colleague accused in a lawsuit of covering up physical and sexual abuse of kids in what has been called the largest evangelical sex-abuse scandal to date.

A resolution on the sexual abuse of children passed at the 2013 Southern Baptist Convention in June was amended on the floor to urge denominational leaders and employees “to utilize the highest sense of discernment in affiliation with groups and/or individuals” that have questionable policies or practices to safeguard children from sexual abuse. —ABP