



What Would Walther Do?
Applying Law & Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of
Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

Counselors and theologians failing to understand the dynamics of child sexual abuse cases often apply the concept of law and gospel incorrectly. When this happens, perpetrators are emboldened to offend again and many victims leave the church. To assist spiritual counselors in avoiding this pitfall, the article provides an overview of the dynamics present in many cases of sexual abuse and the impact this has on children physically, emotionally and spiritually. The article also includes a discussion of the characteristics of many sex offenders and the efforts offenders make to manipulate both the victim and the church. In determining the proper application of law and gospel to victims and offenders, the article includes a discussion of the law and gospel treatise of C.F.W. Walther. The article includes examples of Walther's application of law and gospel in cases of domestic violence and sexual exploitation. Finally, the article includes practical suggestions for counselors and theologians in applying law and gospel to victims and to perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

What Would Walther Do?

Applying Law & Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse

“You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you preach the Law to those who are already in terror on account of their sins or the Gospel to those who are living securely in their sins.”

--C.F.W. Walther

Members of the clergy, church elders and lay Christians often struggle with the application of law and gospel to victims and perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Partly as a result of ignorance of the dynamics involved in these cases, Christians often apply a heavy dosage of law to victims and gospel to offenders. This misguided, sometimes cruel application of theological principles often drives victims away from the church and emboldens offenders to remain in their sin, if not to offend again.

To assist the church in better responding to instances of child sexual abuse, this paper includes an overview of the typical dynamics present in cases of child sexual abuse from the standpoint of the victim. The paper also discusses the impact of abuse on children physically, emotionally and spiritually. The paper also includes an overview of the mindset of child molesters, whether or not they meet the DSM-IV criteria of pedophilia, and the extraordinary steps taken by many offenders to manipulate not only their victims, but also the church as a whole.

In applying law and gospel to victims and offenders, the paper includes a brief biography of the legendary theologian C.F.W. Walther, whose seminary lectures on law and gospel delivered in 1884-1885 have influenced protestant pastors and church leaders for over a century. More importantly, the paper includes an analysis of one of Walther’s central thesis—that the gospel should be pronounced to “crushed” sinners and the law pronounced to “secure sinners.” I examine Walther’s use of this thesis in a case of domestic violence and in another case of sexual

exploitation by a clergy. Finally, I also provide practical suggestions for pastors, church leaders and the laity in applying law and gospel to victims of sexual abuse and to perpetrators of sexual abuse. Although I focus on instances of sexual abuse, much of the principles discussed will also be pertinent to cases of interpersonal violence and to other forms of child maltreatment.

Overview of the Dynamics of Child Sexual Abuse

In order to spiritually counsel or assist sexually abused children in any way, both clergy and the laity needs to understand the dynamics inherent in cases of familial sexual abuse, as well as many other forms of abuse. Unfortunately, many in the clergy and laity have accepted decades-worth of myths about child sexual abuse victims. These myths include the belief that children fantasize about incest and that children's allegations of abuse are inherently suspect.

Sigmund Freud and the historic skepticism of the mental health field toward victims of child sexual abuse

In 1896, about a decade after Walther's law and gospel lectures, Sigmund Freud gave an equally monumental lecture entitled "The Aetiology of Hysteria" in which he discussed 18 male and female patients victimized by child sexual abuse and the profound impact this had on their mental health. By the close of 1897, however, Freud abandoned his theory partly on the basis that "surely such widespread perversions against children are not very probable." Instead, Freud postulated the theory of infantile sexuality, which evolved into the Oedipus complex theory and the concept that children may fantasize about incestuous relationships and violence.

Freud's abandonment of the reality of numerous instances of child sexual abuse, and his subsequent assertion that such abuse is rare at best, was instrumental in fueling a dark chapter in the history of psychology. Dr. Anna Salter describes this history with this sober assessment of the field:

The history of psychology in the past one hundred years has been filled with theories that deny sexual abuse occurs, that discounts the responsibility of the offender, that blame the mother and/or child when it does occur, and that minimize the impact. It constitutes a sorry chapter in the history of psychology, but it is not only shameful, it is also puzzling. Hostility toward child victims and adult women leaks through the literature like poison.

This biased view of allegations of sexual abuse, coupled with high profile day care cases from the 1980's in which many believed children were coached into false allegations, spilled over into our mainstream culture, including religion. For example, one Christian publishing house printed a book whose author claimed there was an "industry" of child protection professionals working to manufacture allegations of abuse and to "snatch" children away from parents.

Clergy and laity with such a skeptical view of claims of sexual abuse are more likely to view claims of abuse as suspicious, to conclude that the child was equally responsible for any victimization, and to apply a heavy dosage of law to problematic behaviors exhibited by the child—behaviors that, ironically, may be attributable to the abuse.

There is no excuse for modern era clergy applying such a distorted view of law and gospel to child abuse victims. Although we all need to be mindful of the possibility of false allegations, a number of studies conclude that false claims of sexual abuse are rare and that when children do lie, it is usually done to *protect* the perpetrator, not to get anyone in trouble. Law enforcement officers and other child protection professionals have made great strides in the past 25 years, improving their skills in interviewing abused children and in collecting evidence—thus further reducing the risk of false allegations. Accordingly, it is unreasonable for any pastor to

automatically assume an allegation of abuse, even against a respected member of the church, is untrue.

There is also no excuse for clergy to fail to understand the dynamics inherent in cases of sexual abuse. There is a large and growing body of literature to assist spiritual leaders in understanding these dynamics—including many resources for the faith community.

The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS)

In 1983, Dr. Roland Summit from UCLA published a pioneering paper which not only challenged decades of myths partly fueled by Freud's theories, but that helped professionals and laypersons understand the dynamics present in child sexual abuse cases that make it difficult for children to disclose abuse timely, if at all. Although not universally accepted, Summit's work has been widely heralded in the mental health field and accepted by many courts as helpful in assisting lay persons understand sexual abuse dynamics. Despite its imperfections, CSAAS is a helpful model for theologians or other lay persons to use in understanding the psychological dynamics present in many cases of sexual abuse.

According to Summit (1983), sexual abuse cases are engulfed in secrecy, helplessness, entrapment and accommodation, delayed, conflicting and unconvincing disclosure, and retraction. Clergy and laity who take the time to understand these and other dynamics will increase the chance of responding sensitively to the spiritual needs of maltreated children.

Secrecy

According to Summit, at least three dynamics convey to the victim that the abuse is to remain a secret. First, the circumstances of the abuse suggest the need for secrecy. The abuse may only happen when the victim and perpetrator are alone, it may only happen late at night when the door is locked and the perpetrator is whispering. Second, the secrecy is often a "source

of fear” in which the perpetrator conveys to the child bad things will happen if there is a disclosure. Bad things may include the abuse of the child’s sibling, non-offending parent, or pet. Disclosure may result in the victim’s placement in a foster home. Disclosure may result in the child’s embarrassment in front of fellow classmates who learn details of the sexual abuse through media or other sources. The child may fear that disclosure will result in his or her condemnation in their church community. Third, secrecy may result in a “promise of safety” and the hope of good things to come. The child may expect that secrecy will keep the family unit intact and may result in special privileges such as staying up later at night, a trip to a favorite vacation destination, or a new toy or other coveted item.

Helplessness

In Summit’s view, child sexual abuse victims typically feel helpless to stop the abuse. First, their size and immaturity create this feeling. A young boy or girl may be less than half the perpetrator’s height and weight and is likely less knowledgeable and mature. Second, in our society children are taught to obey those in positions of authority. In church, for example, children are taught to obey their teachers, pastors and parents and that this obedience is commanded by God. Perpetrators use this dynamic to their advantage as they admonish children to honor requests to submit to sexual conduct with the offender. Third, it is important to keep in mind that most sexual abuse is committed by a trusted, even loved adult. Accordingly, Summit contended that many parents or other offenders simply need to suggest they will no longer love the child if abuse is revealed. In one instance, a child lamented that his grandfather was in prison for sexual abuse and asked the prosecutor “is it OK if I keep grandpa in my heart?”

Entrapment and accommodation

Since the child has a secret he or she is helpless to do anything about, Summit said the child must “accept the situation and survive.” Summit claimed a child may cope with abuse in at least three ways. First, and most commonly, a child will develop what Summit called a “coping mechanism.” It may be as simple as a child telling him or herself that the sexual abuse prevents a father from abusing siblings or that the victim is deriving benefits from the abuse in the form of money, gifts or other privileges. For example, a grand jury investigation of former Penn State University football coach Jerry Sandusky concluded he had given golf clubs, trips and other expensive gifts to boys he was sexually abusing.

Second, an abused child may dissociate during abusive episodes. To assist theologians in understanding dissociation, think of a time when driving a significant distance and suddenly you suddenly realize you have no memory of the drive because your mind was thinking about the sermon that needs writing or any number of other church or family obligations. This is, at some level, a form of dissociation.

When sexually abused, a child may dissociate by sub-consciously sending his or her mind to another place or room during abuse. In one case, for example, a child victim told the investigator she was with Winnie the Pooh in the hundred acre woods during the time her father was anally raping her. Dissociation of this type offers “a kind of temporary emotional escape from the horror, the fear, and that pain” of child abuse.

Third, in extreme cases of trauma, some children may develop what in Summit’s day was called a multiple personality disorder but is today referred to as dissociative identity disorder. According to the DSM-IV, “Dissociative Identity Disorder is the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states” that “recurrently take control of behavior.” Each personality state “may be experienced as if it has a distinct personal history, self-image, and

identity, including a separate name.” In lay terms, a child abuse victim may sub-consciously develop a second personality or alter who “suffered the abuse... that alter is the one present during the abusive episodes, but is not the one seated at the breakfast table the morning after the attack, chatting away as if nothing happened.”

In movies such as *Sybil* and *Primal Fear*, Hollywood has given the general public a sense of dissociative identity disorder that is not always accurate. For example, football legend Herschel Walker endured bullying and cruel racism as a child which led him to develop a second “Sentry” personality that would protect him whenever he felt threatened. Walker tells of going to a dentist to have teeth removed when this second, tougher persona took over and led him to refuse Novocaine or other anesthetic drug to numb the pain. However, Walker says he never changed his name when his “Sentry” personality exhibited itself—he simply developed a different, seemingly invincible persona. Clergy and laity alike should not assume that Christian victims of abuse are immune from dissociative identity disorder. Indeed, Herschel Walker describes himself as a devout Christian “baptized and washed with the blood of Jesus.”

Theologians should be aware that although there is little doubt that dissociation exists, the medical and mental health fields are not in complete agreement as to the prevalence or even existence of dissociative identity disorder. Theologians may not need to understand the many nuances of this debate but should, as a general rule, understand that anyone diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder has likely suffered severe trauma and is in need of continuing, professional mental health support.

If a child cannot create what Summit calls a “psychic economy,” feeling of rage may cause a child to commit suicide, engage in self-mutilation, become promiscuous or develop other harmful patterns of behavior. Clergy and laity unaware of these and other dynamics may be

quick to dismiss a child's allegations of abuse, concluding the child is exhibiting mental illnesses or is not credible given the closeness with a perpetrator and the many "kindnesses" a child has received from an offender. Similarly, the Christian pastor or lay member may unwittingly focus on delinquent or other behaviors without realizing these behaviors reflect deep-seated childhood trauma.

Delayed and unconvincing disclosure

As a result of the dynamics described above, many children never disclose sexual abuse. When children do disclose abuse, Summit contends the disclosure is often delayed and comes out in an unconvincing manner. Consider, for example, a girl molested for years by her father. Not surprisingly, the child develops an array of mental health problems, truancy and delinquency behaviors, and is sexually promiscuous. At a family reunion, the child asks her father to borrow the keys to a car because she wishes to go on a date. Her father reprimands her, reminding her that the family reunion was planned for more than a year and she needs to stay put. Years of rage fueled by repeated molestations bubble over as the child yells at her dad that when she grows up she will not rape children. A guest overhears this outburst and reports the incident to the church pastor. When confronted, the father tells the pastor the outburst is true but the allegation is not. The father calmly explains the child is out of control and he is simply, as a Christian parent, trying to reign in his troubled daughter. Unless the pastor is aware of child sexual abuse dynamics, he may dismiss the underlying allegations without reporting the case to the authorities or taking any other appropriate action.

Retraction

According to Summit, “in the chaotic aftermath of disclosure, the child discovers that the bedrock fears and threats underlying the secrecy are true.” In other words, the perpetrator’s claim the child would be isolated, not believed, be removed from the home, bullied at school or any number of other horrors do, in fact, occur. As a result, the child concludes that living with the lie is easier than telling the truth and chooses to recant her allegation of sexual abuse. A number of studies of sexual abuse victims have found that recantation is not unusual. Again, clergy and laity unfamiliar with these dynamics are not only at risk to accept a recantation at face value, they are often used by perpetrators to apply pressure on children in the hope of securing a recantation. In more than one instance, for example, a non-offending caretaker has taken a child to a pastor to “confess” the lie. Many clergy have testified as character witnesses for an accused with little thought as to the impact on the child alleging abuse. In one case, a child victim saw both of her ministers and numerous church leaders in the courtroom as a sign of support for the father she accused of molesting her. Upon witnessing this spectacle, the victim asked the prosecutor “Does this mean that God is against me too?”

The ACE Studies: the Medical and Mental Health Risks of Child Abuse

The Adverse Childhood Experience Study is an ongoing collaborative research project between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, and Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, California. Over 17,000 patients participating in routine health screening volunteered to participate in the study. According to the ACE researchers, “data resulting from their participation...reveals staggering proof of the health, social, and economic risks that result from childhood trauma.” Specifically, the researchers queried adult patients on ten types of adverse childhood experiences including child sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and witnessing domestic violence. Researchers concluded that patients

suffering from one or more adverse childhood experience were statistically more likely to suffer from a variety of medical and mental health problems with the risk of these conditions increasing markedly based on the number and severity of adverse experiences.

Clergy and laity not familiar with the ACE study are at risk to conclude an allegation of sexual abuse is not credible and to focus primarily on the victim's behaviors, including delinquent and criminal behaviors, without fully appreciating the role childhood abuse played in their life. In spiritual terms, the danger is a pastor will be quick to apply the law, without an appreciation of the need to provide a victim already burdened with enormous guilt the comfort of the gospel.

Spiritual Injuries resulting from sexual abuse

There are a number of studies documenting the impact of abuse on spirituality. For example, a study of 527 victims of child abuse (physical, sexual or emotional) found a significant "spiritual injury" such as feelings of guilt, anger, grief, despair, doubt, fear of death, and belief that God is unfair. The same study, though, found survivors of childhood abuse report praying more frequently and having a "spiritual experience."

When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy, the impact on the victim's spirituality may be even more pronounced. Clergy abusers often use their religion to justify or excuse their sexual abuse of children. According to one study, clergy in treatment for sexually abusing children believed that God would particularly look after the children they had victimized and otherwise keep them from harm. Through their religious role, these offenders also engaged in "compensatory behavior" and believed that their good works in the community would result in God excusing their moral lapses with children. The religious cover used by clergy abusers is often communicated to the victims in a manner that irreparably damages their spirituality.

Specifically, church attendance of these survivors decreases, they are less likely to trust God, and their relationship with God often ceases to grow.

The importance of spirituality for many abused children

Spirituality is of critical importance to most children. Indeed, a “growing body of theoretical and research literature suggests that spiritual development is an intrinsic part of being human.” Research from UCLA’s Higher Education Research institute found that 77% of college freshman believed “we are all spiritual beings.” Eighty percent of these freshmen said they had an “interest” in spirituality. Some studies suggest spirituality may be particularly important to vulnerable children. In a study of 149 youth in an institutional care setting, 86% of these children considered themselves spiritual or somewhat spiritual. As an example of the importance spirituality plays for some vulnerable youth, a teenage survivor of the sex industry told a journalist “I admit that I’m still struggling, even after six months away from the business...Because I dropped out of school I have few career options...Yet I know what God wants for me. I need to be healed.”

Some researchers have found that a victim’s “spiritual coping behavior” may play either a positive or negative role in the survivor’s ability to cope with the abuse and with life in general. Victims of severe abuse may remain “stuck” in their spiritual development such as remaining angry with God. Children abused at younger ages are “less likely to turn to God and others for spiritual support.” Nonetheless, even victims describing a difficult relationship with God “still rely on their spirituality for healing.” Victims who experience “greater resolution” of their childhood abuse are able to “actively turn to their spirituality to cope...rather than attempt to cope on their own.”

When Christian clergy and laity mis-apply law and gospel to victims of abuse, they risk destroying the very coping mechanism many children need to survive physically and emotionally—their sense of spirituality.

Overview of dynamics of child molesters

Not all child molesters are the same

It is beyond the expertise of theologians to diagnose or even understand the myriad types of sex offenders or the mindset of those who sexually abuse children. This is important to understand because many pastors and laity assume that everyone who sexually violates a child does so for the same reason or requires the same degree of supervision, consequences or treatment. For example, there is a difference in the risks posed by a nineteen year old man impregnating his 15 year old girlfriend and a man accused of molesting multiple boys or girls at a church summer camp. There is also a difference between adult and juvenile sex offenders—with the latter generally more amenable to treatment.

In dealing with any particular sex offender, it is important for church leaders to consult with a mental health professional well versed in the literature on sex offenders and who is experienced in dealing with this population. If a parishioner sought spiritual guidance on treating their cancer, diabetes or other ailments, a wise pastor would inquire about the physician's diagnosis and treatment options. A wise pastor would do this because he or she is not a physician. In the same vein, a pastor should not be deciding the risks posed by a given sex offender without consulting a mental health professional skilled in the treatment of sex offenders and who, ideally, has assessed and/or treated the offender in question.

Having said this, there are some general characteristics of child molesters that every pastor should know—in part because sex offenders often count on clergy and laity to be ignorant about these characteristics. For starters, clergy and laity should have a working definition of a pedophile. A child molester meeting the DSM-IV criteria of pedophilia is at least 16, is at least five years older than the child victim and, over a period of at least 6 months have “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving sexual activity with a prepubescent child or children (generally age 13 years or younger).”

Although this working definition is helpful, clergy and laity should be cautious in applying the definition without professional guidance. In one instance, a church assumed the allegations of sexual abuse made by two separate children could not be true because, if they were, the “pedophile” in question would have had dozens of additional victims in his life. There were two glaring errors made by the church. First, the church leaders failed to recognize that many pedophiles molest hundreds, even thousands of children without ever getting caught. Accordingly, it is possible the alleged offender may have had other victims. Second, and equally important, the offender may not have been a pedophile but could have fit into any number of categories of sex offenders. In commenting on the various reasons offenders molest children, one sex offender treatment provider notes:

There is a subgroup of child molesters who molest children simply because they are sexually attracted to them. There are others who molest because they are antisocial or even psychopathic and simply feel entitled. There are still others who use children for the intimacy they are too timid or impaired to obtain from adults. And there are others who molest children for reasons we don't understand at all.

Many child molesters are religious

Although clergy and laity may never be able to master the myriad nuances of sex offenders, they can and should be cognizant of a number of pertinent characteristics of those who offend against children. For starters, the faith community needs to be cognizant that sex offenders are often religious and many of them attend church. In a study of 3,952 male sex offenders, 93% of these perpetrators described themselves as “religious.”

Religious sex offenders may be the most dangerous group of child molesters

There is some evidence that “religious” sex offenders may be the most dangerous category of offenders. One study found that sex offenders maintaining significant involvement with religious institutions “had more sexual offense convictions, more victims, and younger victims.” According to another study, clergy sex offenders share the same characteristics of non-clergy sex offenders with the exception that clergy are *more likely* to use force.

Child molesters manipulate both children *and* the church

Child molesters, particularly those meeting the diagnostic criteria of pedophilia are extremely manipulative of not only their victims but also the church as a whole. According to one treatment provider, “If children can be silenced and the average person is easy to fool, many offenders report that religious people are even easier to fool than most people.” In the words of one convicted child molester:

I consider church people easy to fool...they have a trust that comes from being Christians...They tend to be better folks all around. And they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people...I think they want to believe in people. And because of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words.

Child molesters are skilled at deception because, in part, they have considerable practice at lying to their families, their victims, their friends, and to themselves. Sex offender treatment provider Anna Salter describes the abilities of molesters to lie convincingly in this way:

Very few of us have ever been suspected of a crime, and fewer still have been interviewed by the police about one. Under such circumstances, detection apprehension would be very high for most of us...But that would change had we practiced lying over serious matters every day, had we lived a double life, had we been questioned by upset parents or by police numerous times in the past. You are never going to run into a child molester who is not a practiced liar, even if he is not a natural one.

Not only are child molesters skilled at lying to pastors and parishioners alike, they are often *proud* of their abilities to fool the leaders and members of their congregations. In the words of one convicted child molester:

(T)here was a great amount of pride. Well, I pulled this one off again. You're a good one...There were times when little old ladies would pat me on the back and say, 'You're one of the best young men that I have ever known.' I would think back and think 'If you really knew me, you wouldn't think that.'

Many child molesters offend with others present

In many instances, a child molester offends with other children or even another adult present. According to one study, 54.9% of child molesters offended when another child was present and 23.9% offended when another was adult present. The abuse, of course, may be subtle and not easily detected. For example, a child molester in a Christian school may call a pupil up to his desk ostensibly to review an examination while, at the same time, touches the child's genitals

which are covered from the other students by the desk. As another example, a father may touch the child beneath the bed covers while his wife is asleep in the same bed. Offenders report that molesting a child with others present may be more arousing and may also give them more power over the child—conveying to the victim that he or she can be abused at any time, in any place, with anyone present. The fact that many sex offenders molest victims with others present is critical for clergy and laity to understand. Without this recognition, offenders often argue that a child’s allegations are absurd—after all, who would sexually touch a child with others in the room? A pastor acquainted with studies such as those cited in this article will tell a suspect that, as it turns out, many sex offenders engage in precisely this conduct.

Many child molesters carefully select their victims

Many child molesters put a great deal of time and thought into selecting the children they will violate. There are two reasons for this. First, sex offenders often look for the easiest target. Second, sex offenders often look for the child or children least likely to be believed should he or she disclose the abuse. A Christian convicted of sexually abusing children at church was asked how he selected his victims. The offender icily responded:

First of all you start the grooming process from day one...the children that you’re interested in...You find a child you might be attracted to...For me, it might be nobody fat. It had to be a you know, a nice looking child...You maybe look at a kid that doesn’t have a father image at home, or a father that cares about them...if you’ve got a group of 25 kids, you might find 9 that are appealing...then you start looking at their family backgrounds. You find out all you can...which ones are the most accessible...you get it down to one that is the easiest target, and that’s the one you do.

This is a critical dynamic for clergy and laity to be aware of. When sex offenders are suspected of abuse, they often point to the accuser and remind the congregation of the child's history of problems—ignoring the fact that it was precisely these problems which made the child such an easy target. Simply stated, child molesters often select damaged children or, in the alternative, they damage the children in their homes and then cite the damage as proof the victim cannot be believed. It is a wicked game in which the church and the children often lose.

Child molesters often abuse children in the name of God

Child molesters often use religious or spiritual themes in the abuse of children. Child molesters may cite a child's biological reaction to abuse and contend the victim equally enjoyed the abuse and is equally sinful. It is not uncommon for a molester to pray with his victim and ask God's forgiveness for *both*. A molester may tell a victim that if he or she disclosed the abuse, the church will condemn the victim for his or her sin. In one case, a child eventually learned to initiate sexual activity with her father simply as a means of getting the abuse over with. The perpetrator, however, reminded the victim of the initiation and convinced her she was the offender. The victim developed a series of medical and mental health conditions including an attempted suicide.

In a highly publicized case, Father Lawrence Murphy sexually abused as many as 200 deaf or hard of hearing boys and often used spiritual language or religious concepts in the abuse. For example, he told one victim that "God wanted him to teach the boy about sex but that he had to keep it quiet because it was under the sacrament of confession."

According to one sex offender treatment provider, sexual abuse in the name of God creates a "triple trauma" involving the abuse itself, the betrayal of trust, and spiritual harm that often includes "threats regarding God and damnation." According to this treatment provider,

“fear of retribution from God, whom the abusers related ‘gave me permission to do this to you,’ and ‘if you tell anyone, God will punish you in hell for eternity,’ produces an intense fear as well as feeling of confusion. The confusion results from the fact their religion teaches them that what they are doing is wrong and sinful, but the religious abusers teach them that the God of their religion gave them permission to sexually abuse them.”

A teenage victim of a neighborhood child molester told the prosecutor preparing her for court that she had not disclosed the abuse for years because she was certain her church would reprimand her for the sin and not the offender. The child had internalized many of the messages provided by the perpetrator and saw no difference between sinning and being the victim of sin.

What would Walther Do?

C.F.W. Walther: a brief history

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was born in Germany on October 25, 1811. His great grandfather, grandfather and father were pastors and Walther continued this family tradition. Although little is known of Walther’s mother, there is some indication his father was physically abusive. In reference to his father, Walther said “A young man must endure much pain, ere he becomes a gentleman.” As one example of this strictness, there was a special sofa in the family parlor reserved only for guests. When the boy Walther forgot this rule and sat on the sofa he was physically punished. This harshness may have particularly impacted the sensitive Walther who, according to one scholar, lacked self-confidence and saw himself as a “miserable boy.” Although there is little, if any, indication that Walther ever considered himself a victim of child abuse—the harsh discipline of children was more commonly accepted in his era than in ours—it is possible that, under current law, Walther’s childhood would be deemed abusive.

Although it is difficult, probably impossible, to accurately assess how physical blows received as a boy may have impacted Walther, it is interesting to note that he developed some of the characteristics of children enduring maltreatment—including bouts of depression. Indeed, Walther suffered at least three nervous breakdowns at different points in his life and, at the height of his career, wished he was dead. Although there may have been a biological component to Walther's mental illness and any or all of the myriad heartaches in his life may have contributed to his depression, the impact of violence during his childhood should not be excluded as a possible contributing factor. Whether or not the violence he experienced influenced his empathy toward victims, there is evidence that, on more than one occasion, Walther displayed a remarkable sensitivity to the victims of physical and sexual exploitation.

Walther was part of a group of Saxons who migrated to Missouri in search of religious freedom. The group was led by Martin Stephan, a charismatic leader who became increasingly isolated from his followers. Stephan assumed dictatorial powers and insisted the Saxons build roads and bridges prior to planting crops or homes. There were also allegations of financial mismanagement and, most seriously, the sexual exploitation of a number of women. Additional details of these events, and Walther's response is discussed below.

Walther eventually became the leader of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, serving as its first president. Under Walther's leadership, the synod grew from 30 congregations to 678 and from less than 5,000 baptized members to nearly 450,000. He oversaw the development of schools, seminaries and publications. His most noteworthy achievement, however, was a series of Friday evening seminary lectures on the application of law and gospel—lectures that have profoundly influenced Christianity for more than a century.

Walther's treatise on Law & Gospel

In distinguishing between law and gospel, Martin Luther described the terms this way:

(T)he gospel is the message about the incarnate Son of God, who was given us without our merits for salvation and peace. It is the word of salvation, the Word of grace, the Word of comfort, the Word of joy...But the Law is the Word of perdition, the Word of wrath, the Word of sadness, the Word of pain, the voice of the Judge and the accused, the Word of unrest, the Word of malediction..

Although Luther's description of law and gospel is clear, the great reformer acknowledged the complexity of applying these concepts as a theologian to individual cases. Indeed, Luther said that anyone who could accurately and consistently apply these concepts was worthy of the title "Doctor of Holy Scripture."

Perhaps more than any other theologian, C.F.W. Walther applied himself to understanding the application of law and gospel. Indeed, Walther's exhaustive analysis of this issue was unparalleled in his time and has not been equaled in our era. According to a noted historian of American religion:

Walther's influence was especially significant in that he stood almost alone in the nineteenth-century American theological scene as one fully aware of the crucial importance of the problems of Law and Gospel.

Walther's lectures on the law and gospel extend several hundred pages and continue to be utilized by Christian theologians of diverse denominations. Walther found at least twenty-one ways in which Christians confuse and otherwise fail to properly apply law and gospel. Walther's law and gospel thesis most applicable to instances of child sexual abuse is thesis VIII. According to this thesis, "(y)ou are not rightly distinguishing Law

and Gospel in the Word of God if you preach the Law to those who are already in terror on account of their sins or the Gospel to those who are living securely in their sins.”

Walther’s application of law and gospel in cases of sexual or domestic abuse

The case of a woman fleeing an abusive husband

While still serving as a pastor in Germany, Walther provided spiritual counseling to a woman whose husband physically abused her. On one occasion, the woman was beaten so severely that she was unconscious. Walther intervened on behalf of the woman’s safety, going so far as to draft a petition for separation. Although Walther was reprimanded and fined for his intervention, he wrote a letter defending his conduct and his theology. It may even be that Walther lied to the authorities as a means of protecting the woman—claiming she was not interested in emigration to America when in fact both the woman and her son appeared on the immigrant list.

Perhaps the blows Walther received from his father made him particularly empathetic to others “disciplined” with violence. Whether or not this is true, Walther understood that a husband pledged to love his wife as Christ loved the church would not beat her. In a wedding sermon on the obligations of a husband to love his wife, Walther said:

(T)he Christian husband should love his wife in deed, care for her body and soul, pray for her and with her, not let her lack any good thing, *be her protector*, comfort her in moments of sadness, and as his other self, daily seek to provide her joy (emphasis added).

Obviously, a man who is physically striking his wife is failing his Christian obligation to protect her and to fill her life with joy. Long before a societal recognition of domestic violence, Walther understood this fundamental principle of a Christian marriage.

The case of Martin Stephan

Upon their arrival in Missouri, the Saxon immigrants divided themselves into two groups with Walther among the pastors and parishioners remaining in St. Louis and the rest going to Perry County under the leadership of Martin Stephan. On the voyage to America, Stephan became increasingly isolated from his flock and prepared documents declaring himself Bishop and assuming significant powers over his flock. In Perry County, Stephan ordered the Saxons to build roads and bridges instead of planting crops or constructing dwellings. He ordered the pastors and parishioners in St. Louis not to visit Perry County without his explicit permission. On May 5, 1839, one of the pastors remaining in St. Louis, Friedeman Loeber, delivered a “soul-searching” sermon. Although the contents of the sermon no longer exist, Loeber’s words contributed to two women visiting him separately and confessing to sexual relations with Martin Stephan. In the days that followed, two additional women also made “detailed confessions.” Loeber confided in his fellow St. Louis clergy who selected Walther to travel to Perry County to address the situation. One factor in selecting Walther appears to be that he was the pastor who had “expressed greater opposition to Stephan.”

Walther arrived unannounced and in direct contradiction to Stephan’s edicts. When Walther arrived, Stephan and others were gathered around a campfire and there was an immediate confrontation with Stephan who, according to one scholar, expressed “total disapproval” of Walther’s presence. The next day, Walther met alone with Stephan. Although he did not apparently discuss the allegations of sexual exploitation, there is no doubt that Walther was openly defying Stephan and otherwise making it clear his belief that Stephan’s conduct was sinful. Walther then proceeded to undermine Stephan’s authority by preaching publicly, by encouraging parishioners to plant crops and build houses as opposed to roads and bridges, and to

otherwise deliberately “give the impression...that something was very wrong.” Within a few weeks, most of the St. Louis Saxons also arrived, formed a church council and invited Stephan to meet with them. When Stephan refused, calling the council a “rebellious faction,” the council excommunicated Stephan on the basis of teaching false doctrine, financial mismanagement, and sexual immorality. Stephan was given the option of a church trial, returning to Saxony, or exile across the river in Illinois. Stephan chose the latter and never returned to his parishioners. Some modern day theologians and scholars challenge Walther’s handling of the Stephan matter, alleging Walther violated the principle in the gospel of Matthew to first privately confront a sinner. One theologian calls Walther’s actions “dubious” and fraught with “serious errors.” This analysis is flawed on at least three grounds.

First, Stephan’s mis-conduct involved more than just sexual relations with multiple women, it involved dictatorial demands on *all* of the Saxon pastors and parishioners including a prohibition from setting foot in the colony without permission. Accordingly, Walther fulfilled his obligations in Matthew simply by showing up—his mere presence informed Stephan that Walther regarded his edicts and conduct as sinful.

Second, Walther did meet privately with Stephan before advising the immigrants in Perry County to violate Stephan’s commands. Although Walther did not apparently speak about the allegations of sexual exploitation, it is a fair inference that Walther received a clear indication of Stephan’s unrepentant state. Indeed, shortly after his meeting with Stephan, Walther delivered a sermon based on the text of John 3:20: “For everyone who does wicked things hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.” This text and accompanying sermon suggest Walther had concluded that Stephan had hardened his heart and was far from the broken sinner for which the gospel is intended.

Third, an explicit confrontation with Stephan about the sexual exploitation allegations may have endangered the lives of others. Given that Stephan had left his wife in Germany, that multiple women had accused him of sexual offenses, and that he had created a situation in Perry County where he was seemingly immune from oversight raised a strong possibility of additional victims. Too strong of a confrontation with Stephan may have caused him to pressure other women *not* to disclose additional offenses. Moreover, Stephan's control of the treasury and the sway he had over the immigrants, a sway that was endangering their lives as crops were not planted, required extreme caution.

If a member of a congregation is observed by a fellow believer to be holding up a convenience store with a gun, it would be ludicrous to suggest our Christian obligation is to speak with the man before calling the police or taking other meaningful action to protect the victim of this crime. Applying Mathew 18 in such a rigid, thoughtless manner would endanger lives should the criminal choose to fire the weapon to avoid capture. In cases of sexual exploitation and abuse, there is also a grave danger in rigidly adhering to Mathew 18 in that doing so may result in an offender destroying evidence, pressuring victims to remain silent or recant, or even the possibility an offender may harm himself.

The seriousness of Stephan's conduct cannot be overstated. Given his absolute power over the flock, and the vulnerability of the Saxons in a new country and culture, the potential for continued abuse was extremely high. In many states today, it is a felony crime for a pastor to have sex with a parishioner he or she is providing spiritual counseling to even if the parishioner consents. As noted by one historian, the women Stephan sexually exploited were both "impressionable and vulnerable." Although Walther may not have had our modern era appreciation of the significant differences in power between a pastor and the parishioner he is

counseling, Stephan's conduct was so extreme it is difficult to believe Walther did not understand the egregiousness of the conduct.

Walther's handling of the Stephan situation is akin to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians in which he urged that a man involved in an incestuous relationship be expelled from the congregation. Paul did not ask the congregation to meet privately with the man before excommunication or wait until Paul could visit and examine the man. Instead, Paul wrote "For though absent in body...I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing...You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved."

It is interesting to note that Paul does not urge the excommunication of the woman involved in this incest—perhaps an implicit understanding of her vulnerability. Similarly, Walther and the other Saxon pastors appear to have recognized the particular vulnerability of the women Stephan exploited and simply pronounced forgiveness and the full force of the gospel. The law was reserved for the unrepentant perpetrator.

Applying law and gospel to victims of child sexual abuse

In a great many of his published prayers and addresses, C.F.W. Walther recognized that Christians are charged with grave responsibilities for the care of children and that God will hold us accountable for our unfaithfulness in discharging this duty. Walther called children "far more precious than gold or silver, than house and home" and prayed:

O Lord God, we tremble when we recall that You have placed us over our children as Your representatives to lead and guide them on earth, and that You will someday say to us: 'Where are the children whom I have given you? Have any of them been lost?' For again and again we have been guilty of neglecting

them, due either to a lack of love or to misguided love, to a lack of earnestness or to sinful zeal, to a lack of wisdom or to the deceptive wisdom of this world.

Reflecting his belief that God was especially concerned with the welfare of children, Walther prayed “Lord Jesus, by Your holy Word You have again warned us against despising any one of these little ones, for their angels always behold the face of Your Father in heaven.” In the care of children, Walther admonished his parishioners to “leave no stone unturned to keep them safe from the evil foe and the world...”

Given his own childhood, his own application of law and gospel in cases of violence and sexual exploitation, and given his admonishment to “leave no stone unturned” in the care of children, it is more than conjecture to suggest that if Walther were alive today he would take heed of the many studies documenting the devastation that abuse has on a child’s spirituality. Accordingly, pastors wishing to follow the spirit of Walther in applying law and gospel to victims of child abuse may begin by reviewing the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Studies and remind themselves of the shattered lives left in the wake of storm-filled childhoods. With these studies in mind, a pastor contemplating the words of our Savior will likely find a clear course of action—the liberal use of the gospel, and the sparing use of the law. To this end, the following guidelines may be of assistance.

Avoid the temptation to focus on the victim’s sins

If the ACE studies are accurate, a pastor or other Christian meeting with a boy or girl, man or woman abused as a child may very well see the aftermath of this exploitation---a child or adult who has turned to alcohol, drugs, smoking, sex, food or a thousand other worldly attractions in search of solace. The victim may have difficulty controlling anger, may have had multiple marriages, may have committed crimes and, perhaps, even gone to prison. The victim

may be mentally ill, suffering from anxiety and the deepest sadness. It may be that the victim frequents a bar with an unseemly reputation or otherwise hangs out with the worst kind of crowd. The victim may be the subject of church gossip as elders and other modern day Pharisees whisper her shame and promote their own righteousness. In other words, the child is completely alone.

When confronted with such a pilgrim, the pastor may be tempted to focus his gaze on the specks in the victim's eye, and avert attention away from the gaping hole in the child's heart—a hole that can only be filled by the gospel. A pastor succumbing to the temptation to judge quickly and harshly may lose the child forever—and will one day be subject to the gaze of a Savior who asks us to care for the suffering and promises to hold us accountable for our failure to love those rejected by the world.

Instead, the pastor should recognize the brokenness before him—a brokenness that may have displayed itself for years. Jesus came to bind the wounds of the broken hearted and the gospel may be the only tonic the abused child has *never* experienced. The pastor must pour out this oil liberally.

Assure the victim's of Christ's empathy

A victim may question the goodness of God, in part, because of the theological statements made by the offender. The victim may also question whether or not God can truly understand his or her pain or experiences. One psychologist describes the problem this way: “The sexual violation of a child can have many spiritual effects. A distorted image of God coupled with a distorted image of the self creates several barriers to experiencing God's love and grace. When children are betrayed by those who were supposed to protect and love them, they find it very difficult to grasp that God loves them ... God is often

perceived to be punitive, an impossible taskmaster, capricious, impotent, indifferent, or dead.”

When this is the case, a Christian pastor can assist by showing the child a very different image of God. Tell the victim that those who abused him or her violated the clear commandments of God and that any twisted theology they employed in justification came not from God, but from Satan himself. Tell them that Jesus understands such toxic theology—after all, the devil employed that trickery on Christ as well. More importantly, speak of Christ’s love of children and the grave warnings he gave to anyone who harms them—telling his disciples that the angels of children have direct access to his Father and that being tossed into a sea with a millstone around their neck would be a better choice than to hurt a child. Tell them that Christ, the very son of God, was a descendant of a sexually exploited woman, and was frequently seen in the company of other sexually exploited women as he promised not only his help, but the very kingdom of God.

Tell the suffering soul that Jesus understands maltreatment. As one who was called names and mocked with purple robes and twisted thorns, Christ understands emotional abuse. As the recipient of blows to his face and whips to his back, Christ understands physical abuse. As one nailed naked to a tree, publicly exposed to the jeers of soldiers, Christ even understands the pain of children forced to disrobe before the eyes of men with only evil thoughts. Surely he has borne our sorrows.

Apply the Gospel compassionately

The victim may have extreme guilt over the usage of drugs or alcohol, may have suffered from myriad failed relationships or a host of other problems. The pastor should recognize the

enormity of this pain and assure the survivor of God's forgiveness and love. Simply stated, the pastor must display the compassion of our Savior.

Tony Campolo tells of being at a diner early one morning and overhearing Agnes, a prostitute, lament that she was about to turn 39 years old and had never had a birthday party. Campolo worked with the manager of the diner to arrange for a splendid party for Agnes, complete with a birthday cake. Upon seeing the cake, Agnes was overcome with this strange love. She asked if she could take the cake to show her mother. As Agnes left momentarily with the cake, Campolo led all the prostitutes gathered for the party in prayer for Agnes. In other words, Campolo preached the gospel by demonstrating the compassion of Christ.

Campolo's is not the only account of sexually abused women and children finding comfort in the gospel. When Phillip Yancey asked a group of prostitutes, all of whom were abused as children, what Jesus meant when he said that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven before many religious leaders, one of the exploited women responded:

We are at the low. Our families, they feel shame on us... We feel it too. We are at the bottom. And sometimes when you are at the low, you cry for help. So when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that.

Assist the victim in accessing appropriate medical and mental health care

Pastors should not ignore the needs of those struggling with drugs, alcohol, sexual impulses, anger or any number of other conditions often found among those ripped from childhood. However, pastors need to recognize the extraordinary pain and guilt of many victims, and to apply to these wounds the truest balm in Gilead, the remarkable love of Jesus. These children have never known a love like this—none of us have—and this extraordinary love is the first step in addressing even the sins of those who have been abused. Once they know this love,

abused children will be more receptive to taking additional steps in their recovery—and the church should be fully invested in walking this path with them, no matter how difficult the journey may prove to be, no matter how many setbacks, no matter the obstacles the serpent slithers in front of us.

In helping the child access mental health services, pastors should seek a mental health provider current on the literature addressing childhood trauma and who is skilled at providing counseling or other services. Many well educated professionals have had very little training at the undergraduate and graduate level on child sexual abuse and thus it is critical to ask some questions before making a referral. In some cases, an incompetent counselor may be worse than no counselor at all.

Refrain from platitudes

Many well-meaning theologians are quick to offer a biblical platitude to complex spiritual struggles. When this happens, a victim often feels frustrated and looks elsewhere for guidance. Consider, for example, the complex theological questions contained in this survivor's account of trauma:

When I was a little girl, my dad would come into my bedroom to tuck me in. He would read me a story and then he would have me utter my bedtime prayers. 'Now I lay me down to sleep ... ' After the prayers, Dad would sexually abuse me. When the abuse was done he would tell me things like 'God doesn't hear your prayers. If he did, he wouldn't allow me to touch you sexually right after your prayers. Either there is no God or, if God exists, he is unable to protect you.' I have never forgotten what my dad said. I'm a grown woman now and, every time I pray, I remember all the times I asked God to watch over me during the night,

and how the prayers went unanswered. I want to pray, I want to be close to God, but I don't know how. I'm thinking maybe my dad was right--either there is no God or else he is unable to protect me. Please tell me what to do.

A pastor engaged with this parishioner will need to explore the toxic theology presented by her father as well as the difficult questions posed about prayer. Simply stated, a platitude won't do. What is likely needed is a series of theological discussions on these myriad issues. The pastor may wish to recommend helpful books or materials on one or more of these issues and discuss the assignments with the parishioner. The pastor must be invested for the long haul.

Don't make forgiveness into a law but a change of heart rooted in the gospel

Many victims of abuse struggle with the issue of forgiveness and, when forgiveness does occur, it often takes time. Consider, for example, the pain of this victim:

I am a police officer and a Christian. I've been baptized, confirmed, and have faithfully attended church all my life. I am, though, deeply troubled. When I was a boy, my father cruelly abused me. One of his favorite things to do was to take me into the barn (we lived on a farm), strip me naked, bind my hands together with a rope and then toss the other end of the same rope over the rafters in the barn so that I would hang naked in the barn as he beat me with a stick. The sound of that stick, the smell of that barn, and the sight of my blood are never far from my memory. I am a good person, and I believe Jesus is my savior. At the same time, though, I know I'm going to hell. I recall the Sunday School lesson of Jesus scolding Peter that our obligation is not to forgive seven times but seventy times seven—meaning an infinite number of times. I recall Jesus saying that if we can't

forgive others, we won't be forgiven. Try as I might, I cannot forgive my father.

Why should I have to go to hell because I can't forgive the man who tortured me?

Although some of the answers to this question may differ depending on the particular denomination of the survivor, it is clear that the survivor has multiple theological questions which need careful consideration and compassionate responses. As a starting point, though, three concepts may be helpful. First, assure the survivor that forgiveness is not a toleration of sin. The child abuse victim has every right to have a perpetrator prosecuted and otherwise held accountable for crimes committed. If forgiveness was the toleration of sin, no government could enforce the law, no parent could correct a child, and no church could exercise discipline. Second, recognize that forgiveness cannot be forced. Requiring the victim to forgive a perpetrator as a condition of redemption is simply to place the victim under the law. Instead, suggest to the victim that forgiveness is a gift of God that allows the survivor to let go overwhelming feelings of anxiety, hatred and anger. Many victims have said that until they forgave an offender, the perpetrator continued to have power over them. Martin Moran, a survivor of child sexual abuse at the hands of "Bob," a man at a church summer camp, described the process of forgiveness with these words:

And a thought came to me. Something Sister Christine said all those years ago.

That with the really tough things it would always come down to grace. *A gift from the beyond that moves us toward our own salvation.* And as I crawled out into the thick Los Angeles traffic, what I kept hearing in my head was this prayer, a plea repeating: *OK, grace, please, let it go, let him be, for heaven's sake. Let him rest.* I mean Bob, of course. But then, I realize I'm really talking about someone else.

The twelve-year-old. The sweet kid caught in a photo, still talking his way out.

And I'm not sure how in the world to let him rest. Not yet, anyway.

Third, point the victim to the cross and trust the Holy Spirit to do His work. Diane Langberg, a Christian psychologist specializing in counseling sexually abused children, puts it this way:

It has been my experience in my work with survivors that rather than simply telling them they need to forgive--a statement that often overwhelms them with despair--it is much more helpful to teach them, as they are ready, about the work of God in Christ on the cross ... Over time, clients see evidence of that work in their own lives... The recognition of that wonderful redemption almost always results in a hunger to be like the one who has loved them so faithfully.

Cautiously respond when a victim asks to confront the perpetrator

Many survivors reach a point in mental health and spiritual counseling in which they want to confront the father or other party that molested them. Pastors need to be cognizant of the significant power differential between offenders and survivors and realize these dynamics may not have changed simply because the child abuse victim has grown. Angela Shelton was a grown woman with a successful career when she chose to confront her father to obtain closure for the sexual abuse he inflicted on her and her siblings. During the confrontation, however, her father continued to deny the abuse, claiming that although he and the children were often naked together and there was at least one "rub down," there was no sexual abuse because he never ejaculated. In response, Shelton became passive, describing herself as a little girl alone in a room desperately wanting her father not to be a monster.

Martin Moran chose to confront the man who molested him at a church camp only to find that the offender continued to engage in cognitive distortions that minimized his conduct. Specifically, the perpetrator told Moran "I wanted to help you. You were such a gentle

soul...Mentally, you were way ahead of the other boys. You were special ...There were others, I admit. But not like you. You were so curious about things ... you were shy and I wanted to teach you about the land and animals and help you gain confidence. And you did.”

Rather than genuine repentance, the offender continued to minimize his own conduct and suggest to Moran that somehow the sexual abuse was *good* for him. This is not an isolated or unusual occurrence and pastors need to help survivors understand that a confrontation with the offender is unlikely to go as they envision. If they nonetheless choose to confront the offender, the survivor should be fully prepared by a mental health professional to process the event before and after the confrontation. It may also be wise for a pastor, counselor or other support person to be with the victim during any confrontation so that the support person can immediately challenge the cognitive distortions the offender may direct at the survivor.

Seek the lost

Preaching the gospel to abused children involves more than waiting for one to appear in our office or even our churches—it means an active search for the lost. Given how many of these children are driven from the church by Christians who violated their bodies in the name of God and by other Christians who, at best, responded passively, there is an urgent need for Christendom to adorn itself in sackcloth and ashes and then change course. Pastors should be proactive in preaching about the sin of child abuse, Christian publishing houses should produce books and other materials directed at abused children or those who seek to help them, and every Christian should promote and enforce rigorous child protection policies as a public witness that the church cares for children in deed and not just in word. This is not an easy course to take and many will bristle at a bold ministry to abused children, particularly if this means bringing such damaged souls into our midst. If, though, the church cannot heed Christ’s command to care for

children, those closest to God in faith and yet the most vulnerable, it is doubtful a church can consider itself truly Christian. In addressing the needs of abused children, the church has done too little for too long and, when it has acted, has often done so for the wrong reason—such as avoiding a lawsuit. Instead, the church needs to act out of genuine repentance and an overflowing of Christian love. Let that reformation begin with each of us.

Applying law and gospel to perpetrators of child sexual abuse

Throughout his lectures on law and gospel, as well as his addresses and prayers, Walther was deeply concerned about applying the gospel to “secure sinners.” Walther claimed that a Christian church does not “tolerate obvious servants of sin” In his lectures on law and gospel, Walther told his seminary students: “Do not proclaim forgiveness of sins to impenitent and secure sinners. That would be a horrible mingling of Law and Gospel. It would be like stuffing food into the mouth of a person who is already filled to the point of vomiting...”

Avoid cheap grace

Walther’s words reflect the concept of “cheap Grace”—a term coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran minister executed by the Nazis because of his opposition to the government. Bonhoeffer defined cheap grace as “grace sold on the market like cheapjacks’ wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices.” Many sex offenders have found the value of “cheap grace” in faith communities. Simply put, these sex offenders have come to realize that if they cry readily and mouth the words of repentance they won’t have to take any action to remedy the damage they have inflicted. According to sex offender treatment provider Anna Salter, “If children can be silenced and the average person is easy to fool, many offenders report that religious people are even easier to fool than most people.”

Numerous clergy have been confronted with an offender who confesses to sexually abusing a child, emotionally expresses remorse and pledges abuse will never happen again. The offender begs for God's forgiveness and some members of the clergy are quick to absolve the sinner and to ignore the needs of the victim. When this happens, many offenders return home, realize how easy it is to be forgiven and will molest their child again.

Ask tough questions

Given the manipulative nature of many offenders, members of the clergy may wish to ask a series of questions to determine the seriousness of the offender's repentance. The pastor may wish to ask the following:

- Have you informed your spouse that you have sexually abused your child? If your wife wants you to move out of the house, are you willing to do it? If the child victim wants you to leave the house are you willing to do it?
- Have you informed your child's medical provider that you have violated her body?
- Have you referred your child to a counselor to assist in coping with the abuse you have inflicted on him or her?
- Do you hold yourself fully responsible for your conduct—or do you believe your victim in some way contributed to the abuse?
- Have you turned yourself in to the police? Are you willing to confess your crimes to the police or will you make them “prove it”? If the government files charges for crimes you have committed, will you be pleading guilty or will you force your child victim to testify publicly and be grilled by any attorney you hire?
- Are you willing to enroll in a sex offender treatment program?

An offender who is confessing sexual misconduct but is unwilling to address the physical or emotional needs of his victim, to disclose the abuse to his spouse or to seek sex offender treatment may be seeking forgiveness but is giving no indication of an intention to repair the damage inflicted or to reform his behavior. Given the serious criminal nature of the conduct, an offender unwilling to turn him or herself into the police should be subjected to church discipline—not the recipient of sacraments.

Apply the law as an act of genuine love

Some members of the clergy contend that such harsh treatment of an offender removes the gospel from the pastor's work. A pastor with this concern should contemplate how he would handle a situation in which a parishioner confesses to having committed numerous thefts, asks God's forgiveness for his crimes, but freely admits he has no intention of returning any of the stolen property to his victims, much less turning himself into the police. When confronted with this hypothetical, many pastors acknowledge they would not pronounce forgiveness since it is clear the offender is not truly penitent. The very same principle must be applied to the sex offender unwilling to hold himself accountable to the authorities or to do everything within his means to assist the children he has harmed.

Such a harsh application of the law is not cruel, but a genuine act of love. A sex offender unwilling to accept full responsibility for his conduct, who continues to minimize his offense or to blame others for his conduct is not yet the "crushed" sinner Walther believed to be ready for the gospel. Specifically, Walther said:

Woe to everyone who pampers secure sinners with soft pillows and cushions!

These preachers lull to sleep with the Gospel those who ought to be awakened

from their sleep with the law. It is a wrong application of the Gospel to preach it to people who are not afraid of sinning.

Just as Walther believed God will hold us accountable for failing to care for children, it is also true God will hold us accountable for failing to properly apply the law to those sex offenders secure in their sins. Pastors offering cheap grace provide a false solace and serve only to endanger the soul.

Seek true confession

Like Walther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the need for true confession, fearing that many parishioners avoid discussing their sins with a fellow Christian in the secret hope of *continuing* their conduct. Bonhoeffer believed these Christians recognize that a brother in the faith may hold them accountable for their sins and demand a change in their behavior. Fearing the necessary dosage of the law, these sinners unwittingly also deprive themselves of the gospel. Specifically, Bonhoeffer wrote:

Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless. He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is sinful as we are... Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the Holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-righteousness and not a real forgiveness?

Recognize the value of earthly consequences

When a pastor provides a healthy dose of the law, the child molester is forced to realize how much damage he has done and the consequences of his actions. The sex offender may lose his freedom and his family, he may have significant restrictions on where he can work and live, and may forever be ostracized by society. It is only in this brokenness, though, that an offender will find the true power of the gospel. For many sex offenders, the only way to the cross is to lose everything.

Consider, for example, the two thieves crucified with Jesus. Although both thieves recognized their crimes, one of the men was not repentant, choosing instead to mock Christ and demanding that Jesus take this criminal from the cross. The other thief, though, did not ask to be excused from earthly consequences for his sins, acknowledging “(w)e are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve.” This repentant sinner simply threw himself upon the mercy of his Lord. In response, he received the gospel: “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “today you will be with me in paradise.”

When confronted by sex offenders complaining of prison sentences and registration requirements, clergy and laity may wish to remind them of the thief who accepted governmental punishments for his crimes and asked only for the mercy of God. It was this genuine repentance, a repentance that did not seek relief from earthly consequences to sin, that Jesus responded to with unmerited grace.

Conclusion

Jesus called on us to display the humility and faith of “little children” if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus also warned us not to cause these children to sin and said that “whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me.” Unfortunately, many who

sexually abuse children do so in the name of Christ and purposely twist theology in such a way as to convince the child he or she is responsible for the abuse. As a result, many of these children suffer significant medical, mental health and spiritual damage. Abused children are at greater risk to develop problems with drugs, alcohol, smoking, anger and a host of other ills.

Clergy and laity unfamiliar with these dynamics often apply the law to victims and the gospel to perpetrators of abuse. When this happens, perpetrators are emboldened to strike again, and many children are lost to the church. With a large and growing body of research documenting these facts, the church can no longer hide behind ignorance. Simply stated, the church must properly apply law and gospel to victims and offenders and to otherwise fully prepare for the day of judgment when our Lord will ask each of us “Where are the children?”