

Science, abuse and Christianity

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1 Introduction

Over twenty years ago Chris Marshall (2005) set out the limitations in Christians' responses to victims. This paper takes a broader perspective and draws on more recent research to look at how societies and the Christians within them continue to fail both victims and offenders, not least by preferring myths and misconceptions rather than scientific research to inform their responses.

2 Harm and abuse

People harm each other in a wide variety of ways, often unintentionally but sometimes intentionally, ranging from a hurtful comment to serious emotional abuse.

There is no agreement on where harm turns into abuse; what is considered abuse in some countries and cultures is considered tolerable in others (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In some countries and cultures physical punishment of children and even adults is considered acceptable; in others it is treated as abuse. Professionals will assess an event as abuse where children do not consider what happened abusive (Cawson et al., 2000).

Historically, women have been subject to sexually exploitative behaviours from men including random rapes; nothing has changed in recent years in spite of greater awareness and numerous protests about the treatment of women.

Historically, what we would now consider serious physical mistreatment was regularly suffered by African-American slaves. Today people of an African origin often experience more harmful treatment than those of a European origin.

Similar harm can also be experienced as a result of neglect rather than deliberate abuse; so neglect often shades into abuse and results in similar consequences.

3 Physical, sexual and emotional abuse

Conventionally abuse has been divided into physical, sexual and emotional abuse though abuse often involves two or more of these forms of abuse (Rodriguez-Srednicki and Twaite, 2006). On their own physical and sexual abuse cause less harm than emotional abuse but people will often claim that physical abuse or sexual abuse was very harmful when the harm came because it was combined with emotional abuse.

3.1 Sexual abuse

Of the three forms of abuse sexual abuse has received the most attention. Victim studies show that it is primarily a family affair with brothers the most likely abusers, followed by members of the wider family — cousins, uncles, aunts and grandparents — and family friends the next most likely; parents account for a small percentage of the abuse.

Strangers account for around five per cent of sexual abuse and people in positions of trust like priests, teachers and young workers around two per cent. Most people will be surprised to learn those proportions because offences by the last two groups tend to dominate the news. There are two reasons for this: there are reporting restrictions on cases involving family members and family victims overwhelmingly receive support from their families to deal with the abuse and never report it to the authorities (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014).

Not all sex offenders are men and the best estimate of the proportion of female sex offenders is 18 per cent. Similarly, not all victims are women but I am not aware of any reasonably reliable figures for the proportion of male victims or whether these are victims of heterosexual or homosexual abuse. One difficulty in working out the proportion of male victims of heterosexual abuse is that men are less likely to acknowledge abuse particularly if it was abuse by an older woman (Owen, 1995).

Historically, there has been reluctance to acknowledge the sexual abuse of children by women (Elliott, 1993) while Denov (2004) argues that there is a culture of denial around female sex offenders who are treated differently from male sex offenders. For example, the Sex Offender Treatment Programme in England and Wales is not made available to female sex offenders.

Though the sexual abuse of children by teachers is often featured in the news, less attention is paid to the sexual abuse of university students by university lecturers where attempts to downplay it are common (Paludi and Paludi Jr, 2003).

The best estimate is that there are around three million sex offenders in the population of England and Wales of whom less than a quarter of a million are known to the authorities. This is because the majority of family victims of abuse receive sufficient support from within the family not to take the matter to the authorities (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014) and the overwhelming majority of convicted sex offenders, whether adolescents or adults, had a single episode of abusing people before which they committed no offences and after which they commit no further offences (Lloyd et al., 1994).

Lloyd et al. (1994) found that most convicted sex offenders fall into one of two groups: the vast majority who had no criminal record apart from their sex offending and a small minority whose sex offending was part of a criminal lifestyle. The risk of the first group re-offending was around one per cent; the risk of the second group re-offending was over 50%. Of course there is a very small group of sex offenders who do not fit neatly into either of these categories.

Taking all these factors into account, it is likely that most congregations will have people who are either hidden abusers or hidden victims and that people will be talking quite happily to them unaware that they are talking to a former sex offender or a former victim of sexual abuse. Because these hidden abusers are most likely to be among those who committed a series of offences some years ago and are unlikely to commit a further offence, they pose no risk to other members of the congregation. Similarly, most of the hidden victims will be those who received sufficient support from their families at the time and have moved on; few will want to be reminded of this aspect of their past.

Other than saying that anyone who has been emotionally neglected or abused is at risk of committing a sexual offence, there is no way of predicting that anyone will commit such an

offence because, other than when they are part of a criminal lifestyle, they nearly all take place when an opportunity arises in which the person is tempted to commit a sexual offence; without the first opportunity, they do not commit any offences; if they get the opportunity, they may commit further offences over a period of time but, usually, circumstances change and the opportunity disappears; they stop committing the offences and commit no further offences for the rest of their lives. So the likelihood that most of those who have committed a single series of sexual offences will commit another sexual offence is lower than the likelihood that someone who has never committed a sexual offence will be presented with an opportunity to commit a sexual offence which, because they are unaware of the danger, they will be tempted to commit.

3.2 Emotional abuse

Of the three main forms of abuse, emotional abuse has received the least attention and is routinely minimised in comments that it was just ‘banter’ or the children’s rhyme: ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.’ A European Union study of gender-based domestic violence found that emotional abuse was considered less serious than both sexual and physical abuse (European Union Directorate-General for Communication, 2010). Only 25% of sexual abusers have experienced sexual abuse themselves but most of them have experienced some form of emotional neglect or abuse.

Some years ago a lifelong paedophile shared his technique with me. He looked for a teenage girl who looked unhappy; he befriended her; he bought her meals; he bought her clothes; eventually she moved in with him and he had sex with her. She stayed for a number of years and then left and he went through the same cycle again. None of the girls had ever reported him and he shared some fond memories of them. More recently Woodiwiss (2009) described how one of her subjects had left an emotionally abusive family to live with her uncle who abused her sexually. She said that being sexually abused wasn’t as bad as being emotionally abused though she added that it had impacted her relationship with her partner because of her suspicions about men. The lifelong paedophile had clearly picked up that the girls he had befriended were prepared to put up with being sexually abused because it offered an escape from their emotionally abusing families.

A more typical sexual offender had overheard his parents say when he was eleven that he was an unwanted child. Later in life he took a job in a boarding school and recognised that many of the children were also unwanted children. He tried to offer them affection which turned into sexual abuse. After he left the boarding school he had a successful life in other areas and raised a family but never engaged in any form of sexual abuse. Eventually one of the boarders reported him and he ended up in prison. While his parents did not abuse him in the conventional sense, they almost certainly neglected him emotionally and emotional neglect often leads to the failures to develop emotionally.

Emotional abuse is widespread in organisations, including Christian organisations, not least because it is routinely minimised and emotional abusers are often unaware that their behaviour is abusive — 70% of bullies are surprised when you tell them that they are bullies (Mike Thomas speaking in West and Thomas, 2021). Bullying only began to receive attention in the early 1990s when Adams (1992) described it in organisations and La Fontaine (1991) among children. However, Spender (1980) had earlier shown how the English language is used to put down women and Nieva and Gutek (1980) had revealed the biases in the assessments of women and men in work (figure 1).

Men		Women
<i>Good performance</i>	A result of ability	A result of 'good luck' It's a woman's job and therefore requires less ability
<i>Poor performance</i>	A result of 'bad luck'	A result of lack of ability

Figure 1: Gender bias in appraisals (after Nieva and Gutek (1980))

Trade unions have been guilty of negotiating agreements which give male workers higher pay in jobs with a different name but requiring a similar level of skill to jobs predominantly undertaken by women.

More recently cyberbullying has become commonplace both of adults (Navarro et al., 2016) and of children (UNICEF, 2022). Much cyberbullying is linked to sexism, racism and homophobia.

Hobgen (2026), a wheelchair bound Baptist minister, offers examples of the emotional abuse of people with disabilities.

In cases of sexual abuse, women are overwhelmingly the victims and men the offenders though there are women offenders and male victims and this may be the case with emotional abuse though we do not have sufficient reliable data on this; there are certainly organisations where male employees are routinely emotionally abused and expected to take the abuse.

As already mentioned emotional abuse is the most harmful form of abuse (Rodriguez-Srednicki and Twaite, 2006) and Mike Thomas in West and Thomas (2021) reports that 14 minutes of relatively mild emotional abuse of a team takes six months to recover from — one reason why organisations which routinely engage in emotional abuse of their staff never do as well as the few that do not (West, 2021).

3.2.1 Recovered memories

In the 1980s a theory was developed that sexual abuse was more prevalent than previously believed — it was but not in the ways which the advocates of the theory of 'recovered memories' claimed — and that memories of sexual abuse could be recovered through therapy; this led to a considerable number of innocent parents being convicted of sexual abuse initially in the USA and subsequently in Europe in spite of the fact that there was no scientific evidence to support these claims (Axelrad, 2011).

'Recovered memories' was one of a number of emotionally abusive techniques developed mostly by unqualified 'therapists' which caused harm not just to innocent people but to genuine victims who were led to believe that their false memories were genuine (Woodiwiss, 2009). The

playwright Arnold Wesker wrote a play *Denial* in which he dramatised a therapist emotionally abusing a woman using this technique.

Eventually there were sufficient successful appeals in the USA that insurance companies withdrew insurance from therapists using these techniques and cases dried up but there is still a trickle of cases in the UK in spite of clear guidelines on these cases from the British Psychological Society Research Board (2010).

3.2.2 Satanic abuse

In the late 1980s Christians on both sides of the Atlantic along with the NSPCC were quite happy to accept the myths about Satanic abuse (La Fontaine, 1997) which resulted in children in Orkney being wrongfully taken into care on the Scottish mainland (Inquiry into the Removal of Children from Orkney in February 1991, 1992).

3.2.3 Threats regarding children

A particularly dangerous form of emotional abuse mostly practised by women against partners with whom they have fallen out is to threaten to stop them seeing their children; all too often this leads to the partner murdering the children in retaliation — in Euripides' play *Medea* it is the woman who murders the children to get revenge on her partner.

3.2.4 False allegations

There is a small number of cases where male victims of abuse by females are ashamed to acknowledge that they are the victims and the women exert control by claiming that their partners rather than they are the abusers. If this develops into full scale false allegations in order to protect the abusive woman from being challenged about their abuse, men in this situation have great difficulty defending themselves against the false allegations because women are more likely to be victims.

3.2.5 Non-consensual intimate images

A more recent abuse largely perpetrated by men has been the circulation of non-consensual intimate images of women, often manipulated using AI, on the Internet.

3.3 Physical abuse

Of the various forms of physical abuse, murder has received most attention and, like sexual abuse, murder is very much a family affair; half of murders are of partners and a quarter of other members of the family; only around 5% are committed by complete strangers. Unlike the murders in most crime novels, most are not planned and occur in the heat of the moment; murderers have the lowest rate of re-offending at under 1%.

3.3.1 Gender-based domestic violence

Since the 1990s gender-based domestic violence has received more research and more attention leading to greater awareness of it; studies tend to include sexual abuse within gender-based domestic violence but domestic sexual abuse of adults — often horrific in its manifestation — only accounts for a small proportion of the incidents of sexual abuse. Around one in four women

are likely to experience domestic violence during their lifetimes, with 38% of UK respondents saying that they know a victim within their own family and circle of friends, 29% saying that they know an abuser within their own family and circle of friends and 89% saying that it is common in the UK (European Union Directorate-General for Communication, 2010).

People considered drug and alcohol abuse as the most likely causes of gender-based domestic violence but 69% mentioned having been a victim of some form of domestic violence and 60% mentioned religious beliefs. Most people favoured punishment for abusers and support from family and friends for victims as well as from the authorities to tackle gender-based domestic violence (European Union Directorate-General for Communication, 2010).

3.4 Abuse by the Criminal Justice System

There is almost no data on abuse by the criminal justice system because successive governments have denied that it exists. When the UK introduced legislation to give effect to the Victims Directive (European Parliament and Council, 2012), the Government declined to include victims of the criminal justice system in the list of victims covered by the legislation. Interestingly, some years earlier Professor Lawrence Sherman (2007) had remarked to me that most criminologists do not believe that there are any innocent prisoners. The situation for victims is compounded by the fact that most of the institutions of the criminal justice system are covered by Crown Immunity and so cannot be prosecuted. At best, if the victim can identify an individual in the system who committed an offence, they can seek a prosecution of that individual — but that request may be denied and even if the request is accepted the institution never has to accept any responsibility.

4 Offenders

Though I am including separate sections on offenders and victims, this is an arbitrary separation as most offenders were themselves victims before they became offenders and some victims become offenders precisely because their needs as victims have not been met.

4.1 Child offenders

While some child offenders have already been victims, the abuse committed by others may be exploratory or imitative, that is, they do not realise that what they are doing is wrong or they have seen someone else doing the same thing and think that it is OK. Pre-adolescent children also lack the cognitive ability fully to understand the sex act (Goldman and Goldman, 1982) and death (Anthony, 1973), a full understanding of which normally only develops during adolescence. So the idea that pre-adolescent children understand the implications of sexual abuse or an assault which leads to murder is misconceived.

That said, as they develop their cognitive ability, they will come realise the nature of what they have done and need support to deal with the consequences of that realisation.

4.2 Adolescent and adult offenders

The pattern of sexual abuse among adolescents is not dissimilar to that for adults (Erooga and Masson, 2006); most of it takes place within families and they rarely commit further offences later in life. For most offences, including violent offending, the rate of offending is

highest among adolescents and young adults and declines with age (Ministry of Justice, 2014); however, we have little useful data on the extent of emotional abuse. Many adults are involved in it particularly in organisations, whether commercial, private, voluntary or central or local government, where emotional abuse is common even though such behaviour is associated with less successful outcomes (West and Thomas, 2021).

4.3 Christian offenders

Christians have a long history of abuse from St Augustine of Hippo arguing that it was fine to torture people to make them become Christian, basing his argument on the word ‘compel’ in the parable of the wedding feast (Lk 14:23). In the 80 years after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, more Christians were killed by other Christians than had been killed as a result of Roman persecutions in the previous 300 years. The Cathars, who had developed their beliefs in the 12th century were largely exterminated by the middle of the 14th century in part through the Inquisition which used both physical and emotional abuse to persuade people to give up beliefs incompatible with Roman Catholic doctrine. The Protestant reformation and the counter-reformation saw Christians persecuted, tortured and killed for holding beliefs different from those of their persecutors.

While there was disagreement among Christians as to the transatlantic slave trade, with some denominations accepting it and others opposing it, in the 19th century most denominations supported the emotional abuse of native children in countries like Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) and Australia (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997), abuse which sometimes extended to physical and sexual abuse. During the 1957 Indian War of Independence/Mutiny Christians slaughtered anyone who did not have a white skin including Indian Christians and exalted in doing so (Dalrymple, 2006).

The second half of the 20th century brought to light the extent of abuse in Christian organisations, often sexual abuse but also physical and emotional abuse (*see*, for example, the chapters in Hart et al. (2017) covering particular Christian organisations).

My father and I shared examples of emotional abuse including ones which he had encountered among Baptists and I have encountered emotional abuse in a number of Christian voluntary organisations as well as within the Baptist community. One thing I noted early in my work with secular as well as Christian voluntary organisations was the attitude, ‘We are good people and so we cannot be doing anything wrong.’ Often this attitude has been extended to abusers by other Christians who cannot believe that, because the abusers are doing all this good work, they would be doing anything wrong. Yet the bible records a number of ‘good people’ doing appalling things.

4.4 The needs of offenders

The stages by which offenders come to terms with their abuse were summarised 3,000 years ago by David in Psalm 51 (table 1). Particularly where the offence is serious and spur of the moment — something which they never intended to do, offenders are often in denial about the offence and their responsibility for it. They cannot believe that they could do something like that. Even if they planned the offences, they may try to dismiss them or blame the victim for creating the situation in which they committed the offences. This stage can vary in length from a few days or weeks to months or years if the offence was very serious and very unexpected (Ps 51:1–2).

Table 1: Phases in Psalm 51

Verses	Phase
1–2	Denial of responsibility
3–6	Realisation; coming to terms with the enormity of what he has done
7–11	Asking someone else to sort the problem out
12–15	Bargaining
16–17	Acceptance of responsibility

In due course they come to accept that they did commit the offence and, in the case of serious offences, a realisation of the enormity of what they have done but at this stage they do not accept their responsibility for what they have done. They may not be able to understand why they could do something like that and be quite traumatised by thinking about it. On the other hand, if it was a planned offence, as in the case of David, they may be shocked at the consequences of what they have done which they had not appreciated when they were planning the offence. They may still blame the situation or the victim for putting them in the position where they committed the offences. Whatever the case, this can be quite an emotionally difficult stage to get through (Ps 51:3–6).

Because they cannot yet accept their responsibility for what they have done, they will often ask someone else, today, often a therapist of some sort, to help them to sort the situation out rather than dealing with it themselves. In other words, they pass the responsibility for dealing with what they have done to someone else (Ps 51:7–11). Unfortunately, the criminal justice system has been all too happy to go along with this by offering all sorts of programmes and courses for offenders as if the offender had committed the offence because they were in some way ‘ill’ and needed treatment for their ‘illness.’ Over 75 years ago in an astonishingly farsighted article C. S. Lewis (1949) argued against substituting treatment for punishment. Today doing a ‘treatment’ programme can bog offenders down in this stage and prevent them from moving forward.¹

Before they get to the point of accepting full responsibility for what they have done, offenders often go through a bargaining stage in which they promise to do all sorts of things to try and compensate for or put right what they have done; even if you think that what they are promising to do is unhelpful or unrealistic, it is important to continue to support them because this is the last stage before they become able to accept their responsibility in full (Ps 51:12–15).

Accepting full responsibility can happen in many different ways. Some serious offenders have told me that, at the time of the offence, they thought that they had no choice; when they came to accepting their responsibility, they realised that they had had other choices but at the time of the offence they had not realised that they had other choices. In some cases the offence(s) took place because the offender had taken a number of decisions before the offence each of which seemed fine at the time but which together led them to the situation where they thought that the only thing they could do was to commit the offence(s). They need to accept that the decisions which they took before they committed the offence(s) were not as fine as they thought they were at the time. This is what is meant by *metanoia*, the Greek word translated

¹It is worth noting that the introduction of treatment programmes by the Home Office in the 1990s has had no impact on re-offending rates and the list of factors associated with a reduction in the risk of re-offending does not include completing any form of treatment (Ministry of Justice, 2014, p. 14).

‘repentance’ which means ‘a change in the way you think.’ However it happens, accepting full responsibility for the offence always involves ‘a change in the way you think’ about the offence. Of course, David did not speak Greek and so the way he expresses it in Hebrew is ‘a heart broken and humble’ (Ps 51:16–17).

However it happens, whether by ‘a change in the way you think’ as Jesus described it or by ‘a heart broken and humble’ as David described it, repentance comes when the offender can think about the offence(s) in a completely different way from the way in which they thought about them at the time of the offence(s). I found in talking to a number of serious offenders that most of them needed time, sometimes years, to move through this process; so whatever we call it, we need to ensure that there is a protective and supportive environment in which the most serious offenders can come to terms with their offending — not a new idea but first advocated by Jonas Hanway (1776) 250 years ago.

Less serious offenders who are able to reach repentance more rapidly may only need a supportive environment, perhaps provided by their families or within their local community. The key point is that they need a safe space in which to do this. This safe space may also be important if an offender who was a victim earlier in their lives, in coming to terms with accepting their responsibility, wants to explore their own experience of being a victim. Conventionally, victims and offenders are assumed to be quite different; yet many offenders will have experienced victimhood and never had their needs as victims addressed.

However the offender reaches repentance, apart from changing his/her relationship with God, it allows him/her to build new relationships based on an understanding of what he/she has done, why he/she did it and what he/she could have done differently to avoid committing the offence. If the offender has the opportunity to take part in restorative justice, this will involve new relationships with their victims but, even if this opportunity is denied to them, they will be able to develop new relationships with others which will support and protect them as they move on from being offenders to being ex-offenders.

4.5 Factors associated with a lower risk of reoffending

The Ministry of Justice (2014) identified the key factors associated with a reduced risk of reoffending:

1. Getting older and maturing
2. Family and relationships
3. Sobriety
4. Employment
5. Hope and motivation
6. Having something to give to others
7. Having a place within a social group
8. Not having a criminal identity
9. Being believed in

but very few criminal justice professionals pay any attention to these in planning the management of offenders.

Lloyd et al. (1994) identified the strong identification between growing older and the reduction in the risk of re-offending. Many families withdraw from contact with sex offenders on conviction while offenders may have come from broken families where there is no consistent support. Yet seeking to maintain or restore these relationships, as the APAC prison of Porto Alegre, Brazil, does (Soulou, 2019), greatly enhances the chance of successful rehabilitation. Not relying on any substance and having something constructive to do, whether paid employment or regular voluntary work, which provides a set of stable relationships on release also supports successful rehabilitation.

Ex-offenders must also have hope, realise that they have something to give to others and find a place in a social group; this involves losing any criminal identity they may have had. It does not help if a church accepts an ex-offender and then goes round telling everyone how good they have been to accept an ex-offender; that is the last thing an ex-offender needs.

And ultimately those around the ex-offender must believe that they have turned the corner and that they can be trusted like anyone else.

4.6 Offenders with a criminal identity

I am aware of one initiative aimed at sex offenders with a criminal identity: [Circles](#) which started as an initiative of a congregation in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada in 1994 to support a lifelong recidivist who had committed serious crimes against children. This involves a group of volunteers providing regular support for the ex-offender to ensure that they do not return to their former lifestyle. It involves very intense work but has been found to be successful and has been adopted in the UK. I am not aware of any similar programmes for other offenders with a criminal identity.

4.7 Offenders who do not accept responsibility

Of course, not all offenders are prepared to accept responsibility. In a very small number of cases, an offender who has initially denied the offence may be reluctant to change their ‘not guilty’ plea for fear of losing family support. But in most cases the reasons for denying responsibility are much deeper. Some former victims turned abusers are unable to accept any responsibility for anything they have done; this will normally have been apparent to family members and colleagues long before they committed the offence(s) and can normally only be remedied through a loving relationship over many years — the sort of relationship which they have never previously experienced and the absence of which made them vulnerable to becoming an offender.

In other cases the reasons lie in the social groups of which the offenders have become a part, whether as young adolescents or later, in which there is a lack of respect for anyone who is not part of the group. The group may just be anti-social or it may form the basis for developing a criminal lifestyle which brings them rewards to which they could not aspire in any other way. They will normally be supported in refusing to accept responsibility by others in the group, in some cases because, if they accept responsibility, it may implicate other members of the group.

These offenders are most likely to make a move towards accepting responsibility if they are accepted into a pro-social group in which their previous actions are not considered appropriate in whatever way. However, a group who does accept someone in this situation has to have

substantial strength as a group to withstand the challenges the offender will throw their way as they try to discover how reliable the group will be for them. There is no point in an offender joining a group which might later drop them.

5 Victims

The first step for all victims is to recognise that they are a victim. If the abuse is their first experience of a particular type of behaviour, they may not initially recognise it as abusive. If they do not confide in anyone about what is happening, they may not learn from others that the behaviour is abusive. If they gain some benefit from the abuse, for example, because the abuser gives them tangible rewards for allowing the abuse, they may not wish to mention it to others for fear of losing the benefit. If other people around them appear to accept the abusive behaviour, they may think that it is normal.

Even if they become aware that they may be a victim, many think that it is their fault that they have become a victim and are reluctant to mention it to others. Many offenders will try to persuade victims that it their fault that they are been abused; so they are reluctant to mention something which is ‘their fault’ to anyone else.

Any form of abuse which remains unaddressed can also lead to a person becoming emotionally abusive because the experience of being controlled by their abuser can lead them into becoming controlling in their lives often by being physically or emotionally abusive to others in order to avoid being in any situation of which they are not in control. Sometimes the emotional abuse will manifest itself in criticism of others accompanied by an unwillingness to accept any criticism of themselves.

5.1 Victims’ needs

In order to address their victimhood victims need:

- a safe space to speak of their experience,
- validation and vindication,
- answers to their questions,
- genuine truth-telling,
- empowerment,
- restitution or reparation and
- the hope of a better future (Marshall, 2005).

5.1.1 A safe space to speak of their experience

Churches are not always safe spaces to speak of their experience because, where it is going on within the family, it may be difficult to share with a church member that their family is not the wholesome Christian family that the rest of the church thinks that it is.

Where it involves a member of the church, people may be reluctant to believe that such a person could do such a thing and may not take the allegation seriously. Or they may panic

about the impact of any allegation on the church as a whole and try to discourage the victim from taking the matter further.

Occasionally churches will bring victim and offender together and ask the former to forgive and the latter to repent after which the situation is considered to have been dealt with — except that neither the victim's nor the offender's needs have been met in such a process.

A broader problem is that Christians often have very mixed feelings about physical and sexual abuse and so aren't able to talk about the situation compassionately with either the victim or the offender. Within this context homosexual abuse is difficult for many Christians to talk about — however, that is also a problem shared with non-Christians because, typically, heterosexuals do not want to get involved in dealing with homosexual abuse and homosexuals tend to see complaints about homosexual abuse as letting the side down.

So it is probably advisable for most congregations to have access to people outside their congregation who can offer the safe space where the members of the congregation would find it difficult to offer such a space themselves. Given the length of time that John Grant was apparently able to commit homosexual abuse within the Baptist community, it is important that any safe spaces a congregation finds are able to support victims of homosexual as well as heterosexual abuse.

Outside churches there are very few safe spaces where victims can speak of their experiences because the criminal justice system does not prioritise victims' needs and victims can often be re-victimised by the criminal justice system and by 'counsellors' and 'therapists' who want to make a name for themselves, particularly through dealing with those who have been seriously victimised in order to improve their professional profile. Such 'counsellors' and 'therapists' have little concern for the impact their 'counselling' or 'therapy' will have on the victim.

Other than safe spaces outside a congregation the safest places for many victims to speak of their experience will be trusted family members or friends who are prepared to journey with them through the process of coming to terms with their victimhood. That may not be practical if the abuser has such an important position in the family that no-one in the family is willing to be associated with the victim.

5.1.2 Validation and vindication

Where a victim is unaware that they are not the only victim of their abuser, the first step may be finding that they are not alone. But they also need confirmation that what happened to them was abuse; for children growing up this may not happen until they have the cognitive ability to understand the abuse. For adults living in families or organisations where abuse is part of the culture of the family or organisation, the realisation that they are victims may not occur until they meet someone from outside their family or organisation who has had different experiences or until they have left the family and organisation and have different experiences themselves.

Many victims believe that they are in some way responsible for the abuse and emotional abusers will often try to get the victim to believe that it is their fault that they are being abused — one reason why, when emotional abuse is combined with sexual or physical abuse, it can have such a devastating effect on victims. It is important for victims to realise that they are in no way responsible for the abuse; the abuser is the only person responsible for the abuse. In coming to this realisation they obtain vindication.

Sadly, most victims of abuse by the criminal justice will never get that vindication or any answers to questions.

5.1.3 Answers to their questions

In Shakespeare's *Measure for measure*, the Duke condemns Angelo to death because that is the law which Angelo had strenuously sought to implement. But Marianna and Isabella, the women whom Angelo had wronged, plead for his life not least because, once he is dead, they will get no answers to their questions about why he behaved in the way in which he did.

Over the past forty years there has been increased interest in restorative justice, the process by which victim and offender meet to share their experiences of the offence. Initially it was advocated as a way of helping offenders to repent but it is clear now that its most important contribution is to enable victims to recover from their ordeal. Once the offender has reached the point of acknowledging their responsibility, they may be prepared to meet the victim whether informally or in the context of a restorative justice process to answer their questions.

5.1.4 Genuine truth-telling

It follows that, when victim and offender meet, there must be genuine truth-telling from the offender; this in turn will normally only happen when the offender has completed the process of repenting. So in serious cases restorative justice may not be practical until some years after the offence; however, in my experience, this is not usually a problem as the time taken for the victim to get to the point when they are ready to meet the offender is not dissimilar to the time it takes the offender to complete the process of repenting.

5.1.5 Empowerment

Victims normally feel completely disempowered during the abuse and the process of meeting the offender on equal terms can be an empowering experience. But, if they do not have the opportunity of restorative justice, they still need to get to a point of feeling empowered once again.

5.1.6 Restitution or reparation

In Anglo-Saxon times towns published lists of the recommended compensation for particular offences with the actual compensation being worked out between the victim, the offender and the facilitator (Harding, 1982). In some cases, monetary restitution or reparation will be appropriate but in many cases of abuse monetary restitution or reparation will be meaningless. Nonetheless, it will be important for the offender to undertake something in the way of restitution or reparation to demonstrate their commitment to putting right the wrong they have done, even though putting it right in its entirety may be impossible.

5.1.7 The hope of a better future

For both the victim and the offender, the process should end with a hope for a better future; that may involve a completely new relationship between the victim and the offender but more often it will involve both victim and offender being able to make and develop new relationships without any hangover from their time as victims or abusers.

6 Recovering from abuse

In simple terms unconditional love is the key to recovering from abuse; this was discovered almost accidentally and has not been the subject of detailed research. Kadushin (1970) had reported that older children could be adopted successfully and that, regardless of their past circumstances, they would develop in their adoptive families to the extent that evidence of previous abuse was absent. In the 1960s the Czechoslovak authorities were appalled to discover twin boys who had been so severely abused by their father and step-mother, who had imprisoned them in a cellar, that their development had been seriously stunted. After a considerable amount of discussion they decided to place the twins for adoption with two unmarried middle aged sisters, one of whom had already successfully adopted a child, and to follow their progress. The twins eventually caught up completely with their peers at school in all areas and the only residue from their abuse was a fear of cellars (Koluchová, 1972, 1976).

There is other evidence which supports these findings and, combined with the evidence that victims who receive family support do not turn for support elsewhere (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), this suggests that those who fail to recover from abuse are those who do not receive support, whatever the form of abuse they experienced.

7 Secular responses

7.1 The Criminal Justice System

In Anglo-Saxon times, criminal justice was administered largely through forms of restorative justice (Harding, 1982). In the 12th century Henry II of England (1133–89), seeing that the share of any compensation that was being received by local lords and bishops for brokering settlements between offenders and victims was increasing, decided to nationalise the system, abolishing private settlements, restricting the powers of the church and converting compensation into fines to be paid to the Crown (Strang, 2002). Victims lost not only the compensation they used to receive but also all involvement in the criminal justice system beyond being witnesses who would provide evidence to convict the defendant if they pleaded not guilty. If the defendant pleaded guilty they had no part to play in the process until recently when victim impact statements were introduced into the sentencing.

7.2 Sexual abuse

For many years sexual abuse was accepted as part of society; victims rarely reported it; the small number of offenders who were identified tended to get fixed term prison sentences after which a high proportion committed no further offences. Also, whether because they were genuinely ashamed of what they had done or to get a lower sentence, most of them pleaded guilty thereby avoiding the need for the victim to appear as a witness in court.

However, in the mid-1980s Ross and Fabiano (1985) published a speculative article about the possibility of using cognitive-behavioural therapy as a way of preventing delinquency and enhancing rehabilitation. Even though there was not a shred of research evidence to support their speculation, the idea was picked up by the Home Office, partly in response to the UN mantra that offenders should be encouraged to ‘address their offending behaviour’ (Gray, 1991), and a new branch of psychology — forensic psychology — was developed to provide this.

This too was founded on ideas with no research evidence and one fruit of this development was the Sex Offender Treatment Programme, modelled on the mediaeval Inquisition. The psychologists developed a script about how the offending had taken place based on the evidence provided by the Crown Prosecution Service at the trial. The offender had to assent to this script in just the same way as a 'heretic' had to assent to the Roman Catholic doctrine which they had challenged. If they assented to the script, they were deemed to have passed the course; if they refused to assent to the script, for example, because the evidence provided by the Crown Prosecution Service was wildly inaccurate, they were deemed to have failed the course.

As one prisoner said to me, 'The psychologists preferred lies to the truth,' but he went on with the programme because it was his only chance of being released. Others refused to accept the Crown Prosecution Service inaccuracies which the psychologists were presenting and ended up staying in prison longer as a result.

Ironically, most of the prisoners who completed this programme were those who had only committed sexual offences and so tended to be on vulnerable prisoner wings. Those whose sexual offences were part of a criminal lifestyle would be placed on main wings and it suited both the prisoners and the prison service to emphasise the non-sexual offences they had committed because that meant they would not be selected for the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme and moved to a vulnerable prisoners wing. It suited the prison service and the psychologists who ran the courses because they could trumpet the 'success' of the programme even though most of those who took the programme only had a 1% risk of re-offending anyway and the people on the main wings with over a 50% risk of re-offending whose criminal lifestyle needed addressing were never tackled.

For all sorts of reasons there was a moral panic at the start of the 21st century and in many countries sentences for sexual offences were dramatically increased to include life sentences. This made no difference to the number of sex offenders being brought before the courts but the proportion of guilty pleas dropped because offenders were prepared to take the chance of a 'not guilty' verdict rather than accepting the possibility of a life sentence. Consequently, more victims had to appear in court to give evidence and some, inevitably, could not face this and so the cases collapsed.

Hulls (2015) argues that a better approach would be to invoke restorative justice because this offers a better process for addressing the offending and provides a better outcome for both offenders and victims.

8 Ideas about justice

A major problem in English speaking countries is the idea of justice as 'procedural correctness.' Shakespeare addresses the choice between justice as 'procedural correctness' and justice based on consequences in two of his plays: *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for measure*, suggesting that these two approaches were a matter of debate in his day. But within a century John Locke had shifted the debate away from discussion of the personal consequences of actions towards impersonal 'rational' ways of evaluating actions, a shift which Amartya Sen (2009) has described as 'intellectually interesting but not practically useful,' not least, as Shakespeare demonstrates, because victims' needs are ignored in the 'procedural correctness' which developed out of the Lockian approach.

Unfortunately, many churches, in line with the Lockian culture which dominates English speaking countries and which informs approaches to criminal justice, try to deal with abuse through ‘procedural correctness.’ As Shakespeare demonstrated, this never addresses the needs of victims and is not conducive to enabling abusers to develop more constructive relationships in the future.

More broadly, the dominance of English as an international language had resulted in many international treaties and declarations being written in terms of ‘procedural correctness’ rather than in terms of consequences. So countries often take actions which are ‘procedurally correct’ but cause harm to people. Similarly social media companies hide behind ‘procedural correctness’ in order to avoid addressing the adverse consequences of their actions.

9 Christian responses to abuse

Any Christian response to abuse should be guided by two principles:

1. not making things worse, and
2. supporting both victims and abusers.

Fortunately we have some good advice on how to do this from Marshall (2005) and from David in Psalm 51.

9.1 Support for victims and offenders

Both victims and abusers need support; however, anyone supporting a victim or abuser will find this stressful and those who support sex offenders are often assumed to be paedophiles themselves. So supporters themselves often need support if they are to support a victim or abuser adequately.

Support does not mean advocating for or representing the victim or the abuser; it means walking alongside them on their journey to forgiveness or repentance. So it is important to support the accounts they give of the abuse. Neither are likely to disclose the whole story when they first meet a supporter and offenders may still be going through the process outlined in table 1. Victims often feel shame about what has happened and so are unwilling to talk about the abuse in detail. This does not matter; the supporter does not need to know the whole story; they simply need to accept the victim’s version of it at the time, while recognising that elements of the story may change as the victim gradually deals with what has happened.

One way of looking at the process is that it has stages (West and Thomas, 2021):

- Attending: taking the time to listen to what the victim or the abuser has to say; time is the currency of compassion;
- Understanding: trying to understand what the abuse meant to the victim or the abuser; this can often be the most emotionally draining part of the process, particularly if the victim or abuser is disclosing things which are completely outside the experience of the supporter;
- Empathising: making clear that you understand where the victim or abuser is on their journey and not trying to push them on from where they are; walking alongside them and not ahead of them;

- Helping: taking actions which enable/empower them to take the next steps once they are ready.

If you are supporting children who were victims or abusers in their pre-adolescent period, they may go through the processes outlined by Marshall (2005) or by David in Psalm 51 when they realise as adolescents the reality of the abuse they suffered or committed as a pre-adolescent just as a young person who lost someone in their pre-adolescent period may begin to grieve again during adolescence as a result of their new understanding of death (Anthony, 1973).

9.2 Myths about forgiveness

Christians are beset by a number of myths about forgiveness, such as:

- *forgiveness is only complete when there is repentance*; Jesus never says anything about repentance being needed for forgiveness; rather he presents it as a free-standing process; in practice, numerous victims have been able to forgive without any evidence that the abuser has repented and many abusers have repented fully of their actions without any evidence that the victim has forgiven them;
- *Christians should forgive and forget*; a key point of forgiveness is that the victim places full responsibility on the abuser; they no longer feel any 'blame' for what they suffered; if the victim has the opportunity to forgive the abuser in person, the outcome may be a completely new relationship between the victim and the abuser; in that case neither are ever going to forget the events which led ultimately to their new relationship;
- *forgiveness should be automatic*; this completely denies the suffering of the victim or the needs which the victim has which need to be met before they are in a position to forgive.

9.3 The reality of forgiveness

The reality of forgiveness is that, like coming to repentance, it is the end of a process (Enright, 2001) which itself is not an easy process to understand (Cantacuzino, 2022) and which may take many years in the case of very serious abuse. There is no one way in which to forgive and, even if the abuser does not respond in the way in which the victim might prefer, this does not invalidate the reality of the forgiveness. Nor does it preclude the victim from developing a relationship with the abuser as, for example, in the case of [Jo Berry and Patrick Magee](#).

Ultimately, those who are able to forgive find a release from all the bitterness which the abuse might have generated and are able to move on without this cloud hanging over them. That is why Jesus said to Peter, in response to his question about forgiving Andrew, 'seventy times seven.' Forgiveness is not intended to benefit Andrew; it is intended to benefit Peter ('the victim').

That said, there will be times when a victim does not feel that they are able to forgive and, regardless of what we know about the benefits of forgiveness, we need to respect that decision and encourage them not to allow the feelings they have to become emotionally abusive.

10 What must Christians do?

The most important message for Christians is that they must start taking emotional abuse seriously; the words of Jesus:

Whoever scandalises one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe . . . to the person through whom the scandal comes! (Mt 18:6–7).

are often used by Christians against sex offenders but the people who cause the most damage to children (and adults) are the emotional abusers, of whom there are many in Christian congregations and organisations.

Emotional abuse and neglect makes people vulnerable to becoming physical or sexual abusers as well as emotional abusers and thus continuing the harm. One of the arguments for increasing the penalties for sexual offences has been that it will act as a deterrent; it hasn't and it never will as long as there is emotional abuse creating more physical and sexual abusers. Given what we know about the readiness of sex offenders in the twentieth century to plead guilty and the low re-offending rate of the vast majority of sex offenders, the suggestion from Hulls (2015) that we should use restorative justice for the vast majority of sex offenders makes a lot of sense.

The second important message is that Christians must treat supporting victims and offenders seriously. Whether we are talking about children and young people being bullied at school or online, young people, women or people with disabilities being emotionally abused at work or members of the congregation being emotionally abused by other Christians, we need to have support in place for all of them. The price of not having the support in place is that many victims then become abusers themselves, feeding the cycle of abuse that causes so much harm in our world.

Similarly, while many offenders will come to repentance and genuinely seek not get involved in any form of abuse in the future, having their families and other members of the community supporting them in this process will help to smooth the process.

The third important message is that nothing happens overnight; the steps to repentance for abusers and to forgiveness for victims can often be long and difficult and the support needs to be present throughout the whole process, not least where an abuser wants to explore not only own responsibility for the offence but also their own experience of being a victim. Moreover, those who are involved in supporting victims and abusers will often need support themselves because of the emotional demands of offering such support.

Finally, Christians need to acknowledge the limitations of the safeguarding rules which were created to protect children and vulnerable adults from physical or sexual abuse and say next to nothing about emotional abuse which is far more harmful than only physical or sexual abuse. There is limited value in having the very best safeguarding measures to protect children and young people and vulnerable adults from physical and sexual abuse if they can still be subject to the more insidious and harmful emotional abuse.

A Safeguarding

A.1 Abuse of safeguarding measures

There is widespread abuse of safeguarding measures. Though it is a criminal offence under the 1997 Police Act to seek a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check on someone who does not qualify for such a check, voluntary organisations and Christian bodies routinely insist that people who do not qualify for a DBS check undergo one as part of appointment processes.

Though this abuse is widely known, I am not aware of any prosecutions having been brought under the 1997 Police Act.

A.2 The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 as amended

The Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 was a panic measure and a complete mess; for example, someone whose job description included the word ‘caretaker’ had to have a DBS check even if children did not use the building for which they were responsible; a poet had to undertake a DBS check before being allowed into a school to read a poem to the children.

Accordingly, Theresa May as Home Secretary arranged for a thorough review of the Act and the changes were brought into force as Part V of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012. Instead of a long list of occupations for which a DBS check was required, the Act simply required that anyone who was involved in a regular scheduled activity with children had to have a DBS check and anyone who was involved in a regular scheduled treatment or support activity of a vulnerable adult had to have a DBS check. Anyone else could only take part very occasionally in a regular scheduled activity with children or a regular treatment or support activity of a vulnerable adult in the presence of someone who had had a DBS check.

From a church point of view everyone involved in running a crèche, Sunday School or youth activity has to have a DBS check. However, someone who joins an event to support those running the activity on a very occasional basis does not have to have a DBS check but there must always be someone with a DBS check in the same space with them where there are children or vulnerable adults.

A.3 The Charities Act 2011

The Charities Act 2011 prohibits those who have been

- convicted of any offence involving dishonesty or deception unless it is a spent conviction and
- subject to an adjudication of bankruptcy or related orders

from being a Trustee.

In addition the Charity Commission ([CC30 Finding and appointing new trustees](#)) prohibits those who

- are on the sex offenders register and
- have been disqualified by the Charity Commission

from being a Trustee.

Note that a sex offender may not be on the register if their sentence was short and they have come off the register after a short period or their sentence was long and fifteen or more years after they were released from prison they were taken off the register. There is therefore no conviction which bars a person from being a Trustee provided that it is spent and they are not on the sex offenders register, only being subject to an adjudication of bankruptcy or related order or disqualified by the Charity Commission.

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