

What About Hypocrisy and Abuse?

Series: The Deconstruction Zone: Navigating Doubts and Difficulties

Brad Bailey – July 9, 2023

Summary: Engaging the issue of hypocrisy and abuse by Christian leaders which effects the decision of many to leave church or their faith. What do we do when those trusted...especially as leaders of Christian ministry... violate that trust?

Note: I do not read or memorize notes in full but rather use as a reference. The following notes are more extensive than time allowed but they, and the many footnotes that follow, should provide a good reference for those engaging this topic or using as source to develop their own message.

Intro

Only a few here may be familiar with the name **Bruxy Cavey**. He's a **true hippie in style and heart** ... bright and fresh in vision... he **took a small church in Canada** which grew to serving over **6,000 lives across 19 campuses**. It was advertised as **a church for people who weren't into church**...and many found the fresh voice they needed.

Then, in **December of 2021**, a former member alleged that Cavey had **carried on a sexual relationship with her for several years**... which **began with inappropriate texts**...and **manipulation**... that was **bound in his pastoral position**.

Two more women would eventually come forward...and on **May 31, 2022**, the police arrested Cavey and subsequently **charged him with sexual assault**. [1]

The impact... has been crushing. One **young married woman** described how she had become deeply disturbed amidst the pandemic related conflicts in her own church and she turned to this new church for escape from the conflict and verbal abuse. When the news came out about the accusations of sexual abuse against Cavey and his own (qualified) confession of guilt, she sobbed as she reported these tragic twists in her spiritual journey...saying...

“So the safe place to land became unsafe. Its still confusing... because a lot of my theology is stuff I learned from him and I don't know what you do with that, if the person has been lying for years and years.” – Member of The Meeting House

The tragic truth is that...

When leaders go off the rails...they take with them a whole trainload of unsuspecting people who trusted them.

Such an experience **can bring deep confusion** that can take years ...to overcome. And today...we are going to talk about this challenge.

And the hard truth is that it's **become part of the cultural story** within our own lifetimes....especially in America.

For those old enough to remember... there was a dramatic reckoning across many of the early televangelists starting in the 1980s...including **Jimmy Swaggart... Jim and Tammi Baker**.

Then came the years of uncovering **abuse within the Catholic Church**.

And in the **more recent years**... there have been **examples across the spectrum** of churches. (Following list best just noting names)

Ted Haggard was the former pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs and president of the National Association of Evangelicals...until 2006 when a male prostitute reported that he had been used by Haggard for sex and buying methamphetamines.

Bill Hybels, the founder of the massively influential Chicago-based megachurch Willow Creek, retired amid allegations that he'd sexually harassed former staff, claims deemed credible by a third-party investigation;

Carl Lentz, a Hillsong pastor who once counted Justin Bieber among his parishioners, stepped down after revelations of marital infidelity...now being exposed widely in two different documentaries... that have recently come out.

And at the same time ...the toxic nature of a parenting ministry developed by **Bill Gothard** is being exposed in Prime Video's limited docuseries, ***Shiny Happy People***.

and an investigation uncovered that the late evangelical speaker and author **Ravi Zacharias** had sexually abused women, including employees at massage parlours he co-owned.

...and yes ... **even some leaders** who have violated the trust of others **within our own wider Vineyard movement of churches**. (Some of whom I have known.)

In many ways, it's **an old story**. From King David to every current example, we see leaders **rise in prominence and power** and then an opportunity that taps into their weakness...remains hidden for a while...then ultimately implodes. [3] And often there are **enablers, fixers, and others who chose to ignore it**.

And by way of **today's vast media**...some of us have found **our news feeds too often are bringing stories** about, the **moral failings** of church leaders, **toxic church cultures**, systemic patterns of **covering up child abuse or sexual abuse**, the misuse of power or authority, **greed and financial scandal**, entrenched racism, churches **becoming defined by political loyalties**...and on and on it goes.

And while this may sound like just more **abuse of power...like political leaders and Hollywood moguls** ...there is **something different ...because these are those who are connected to our spiritual beliefs and trust**. There is a violation of trust that claims to represent God. [4]

For some...you may have experienced a violation of trust that is deeply personal... you may find trust is hard to navigate at all.

For others ... the trust that is broken **can be a general trust in leaders**. One can naturally develop a distrust for any church.

Even if it's not a leader you have personally trusted in...there can be a sense of disillusionment.

It can leave many wondering how to **maintain their faith**... or their association with the communal church.

A recent [Barna survey](#) found that **two of the top sources of doubt** for most believers are **negative past experiences with a religious institution** and the **hypocrisy of religious people**.

So today...as we continue in our series entitled The Deconstruction Zone: Navigating Doubts and Difficulties... **we are engaging the question...**

What About Hypocrisy and Abuse?

What do we do when those trusted...especially as leaders of Christian ministry... violate that trust?

I know that **may feel a bit negative** ... you might have hoped for a topic like **"5 things to make your day even brighter."** But the truth is that **Jesus cares deeply** about the nature of trust... it is a sacred gift...and he wants to speak to us...and guide us. **So let's pause** to open ourselves to his work in our hearts.

PRAY

This may be hard to grasp... but If you have ever **had to navigate disillusionment** over what some churches or leaders have done... I get it.

In my 40 years of serving through leadership of the church... nothing has been harder than the disillusionment that comes when churches and leaders fail to truly represent Christ.

Along with giving my life to Christ...as a pastor I have given my whole adult years to the leading the call of gathering and growing of lives in unity with Christ. And it's hard to face having the very nature of Christ subverted...and the reputation of the entity called the church...become associated with distrust and disillusionment. (suspicion and resentments.)

And yet, here I am.

Why?

To those who might be tempted to walk away from your Christ ...or from a vital connection to his church...let me share how God has helped me navigate this challenge... **what has helped guide my mind and heart...**

1. Recognize that Jesus calls out hypocrisy and abuse... more profoundly than any other.

Jesus came speaking as the voice of God to the religious leaders of the day... and he clearly intended for everyone to hear the challenge. [5]

The prophet Isaiah had condemned the hypocrisy of his day...and now Jesus raises these very words to bring the heart of God to bear upon the religious leaders he confronts. [6]

Matthew 15:7-9

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

**“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.**

**They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.”**

When we find hypocrisy offensive... we need to hear what God has to say.

Jesus calls out the very hypocrisy that looks one way on the outside... but isn't dealing with what is inside of them.

He continually called them out. Later he said...

Matthew 23:25-33

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

²⁷ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness....³³ “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?

Jesus couldn't be clearer... everyone...especially those who hold leadership and authority... **must focus on what is inside themselves.**

But Jesus **doesn't just speak of hypocrisy...** he speaks of the very nature of how we should relate.

In what is often referred to as **Jesus' Sermon on the Mount**, Jesus declares that those who **are blessed** are the **humble**, the **merciful**, and those who work for peace. He goes on to challenge emotional and verbal abuse by **calling everyone to consider the contempt they may have inside towards others... the lust that they may think is acceptable** because they haven't committed adultery.

He is speaking of **the desires that will use others rather than serve others... the self-serving desires** like **power** and **lust** and **greed**.

And Jesus speaks into the very nature of leadership. It is not about being served.[7]

“You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. [Notice he isn't just referring to religious leaders...it is actually a human issue] But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many” - Matthew 20:25–28 (NLT).

Jesus told his disciples explicitly to **lead by serving**, not by holding authority over others.

Jesus certainly had authority, but he did not use it in a selfish way. The crowds recognized his authority. We are told how they were amazed at his authoritative teaching (Matthew 7:28–29). The Father gave Jesus all authority, and Jesus passed that on to his students. Jesus told them to use that authority to welcome others, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching people, by their example of love and service.

People abuse others for a variety of reasons, but selfishness underlies all abuse.

And this was **meant to set the way for all leadership that follows...**

We are to

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves.” - Philippians 2:4

Jesus contrasted his way with the way of the Pharisees, who “crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden” (Matthew 23:4). [8]

And with this call... **Jesus also calls us to care for those who are most vulnerable.** *[The section below on children was simply summarized]*

Matthew 18:2-3, 6 (GNT)

Jesus called a child to come and stand in front of them,³ and said, “I assure you that unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven....⁶ “If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose his faith in me, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied around his neck and be drowned in the deep sea.

This may not sound particularly shocking to us...but to the ancient world and culture...the child was not deemed to have gained their full worth... people valued the strong and powerful...not the poor and sick... or children. Jesus is declaring that the most vulnerable matter to God... and they should matter to us. The most vulnerable are to be protected. [9]

Those who are given the least in this world's forms of power... **are the most vulnerable to being abused. It is the abuse of the powerless** that God speaks to.

It is what every person must become conscious of regarding their own power and position.

What I realize... is that the very problem that we face... Jesus spoke to more clearly than I could ever hope to.

> If I am put off by hypocrisy... disillusioned by abuse...why would I want to walk away from Jesus?

Far from being disillusioned with Jesus...and what he seeks...I am drawn far more. He is more distinct than ever.

And when Jesus calls out abuse... he also calls out what we choose to value. When he calls us to be servants of others... it means that what we value will be challenged.

We have a problem with how we relate to leaders.

It is not a distinctly Christian problem... but a cultural one.

We are **drawn to those who seem bigger than life.**

We naturally **want those who achieve something that inspires us.**

We all **want a winner on our team...**that we can find confidence in.

The problem is that **we tend to create heroes based on outward success more than inner substance.**

I have come to realize more and more that

2. Decide to honor goodness over greatness...character over confidence.

As a culture... we have been so drawn to greatness...that we don't seem to care much about goodness.

We do so with our celebrities... our athletic stars... and our politicians. And we can do this with leaders of the faith. [10]

The problem is not so much that we give too much honor... but it's WHAT we honor.

Depending on our nature... we may tend to honor a leader for being very **smart...** or for being **very bold...** or for **being very successful numerically.**

While each of those may be qualities to appreciate... **we need to value character above all. Faithfulness... kindness... compassion.**

The point is that we need to consider what we are valuing... what **unspoken exchange we are making with leaders.**

As our world seems to be shaken...and there is a general sense of uncertainty about anything... we can naturally be drawn to those... who often certainty...confidence...and the signs of success. [11]

3. Embrace the common challenge of avoiding our own vulnerability.

One of the hard truths that I have had to face is that hypocrisy is far easier to denounce than to face in ourselves.

We all have a degree of being actors... of putting on a mask... of presenting that which we think will make us accepted.

We all are being invited by Jesus into the acceptance of God...where we can find acceptance and become more honest. [12]

And this helps to navigate our disillusionment.

When there is hypocrisy or abuse by those associated with Christ...it may be natural to feel the desire to separate from all Christian community.

But what lies outside the community of Christ... in the world at large... is a world in which the **offense at hypocrisy is most often met with only self-righteousness...** by those who know how to judge... but have no grace to face themselves.

I can go to where I am supported as a victim... but with no ultimate source of appeal...and no basis for anything beyond revenge. Jesus calls us to come before him who defines our worth / dignity...and his common grace... not that which simply defines them and us. (In any particular situation...there may be a them and us...an abuser and abused... but it is never a categorical way of defining ourselves. Every abuser is very likely to have been a victim...and every victim has the potential to abuse. And therein lies a reality that is often not found in the world at large.)

And this naturally leads to ...

4. Create a culture with healthy boundaries to protect integrity.

I know that most of us **don't tend to like a lot of rules.**

And partly for a good reason...**rules have their limitations.**

But every community...and every church...is wise to recognize that there are common vulnerabilities... and we **need guidelines** to protect our behavior.

“Where there is no guidance, a people fall, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety” - Proverbs 11:14

This is a quality that is infused into the communal life of the church. They are to discern teams of elders...and one of the qualities is that they manage money with integrity... and and manage their own lives and families well.

And the Apostle Paul explicitly tells the churches he serves to look at his own example of how he worked hard... didn't seek the wealth of others...gave money to those in needs...and didn't exploit anyone.

Paul says,

We are traveling together to guard against any criticism for the way we are handling this generous gift.- 2 Corinthians 8:20 (NLT)

And he went out of his way to include other character-approved men—both from inside and outside his own group.

Paul also says,

"We are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man." - 2 Corinthians 8:21

What is he doing?

He is bringing transparency... and saying **I want you to see our lives and how this is managed.**

And he is affirming the need for boundaries... for the safety of involving others. [13]

And this is a vital part of every community...and in every realm of vulnerability to our own desires.

Last year... amidst so many stories of abuse...and the failures of integrity...and the cost to so many... I had us develop a more explicit commitment...

I have such a deep sense of our whole team's integrity... but I wanted us to define our commitment. This is how our policy describes our commitment...

Embracing a Commitment to Guard Against Abuse

It is vital that we embrace a commitment to create and protect a safe community. This involves guarding our integrity in terms of potential misconduct or abuse. Such potential abuse includes: 1) allowing our positions to use another person to satisfy our own sexual, emotional, or financial desires, 2) allowing our own personal biases or loyalties to dismiss or cover up an accusation made about another individual, or 3) allowing our own personal biases or loyalties to unjustly accept the truth of a claim before being properly assessed.

We must embrace responsibility for both our personal behavior and the "system" that we create. A healthy system cannot be a complete substitute for our personal responsibility and our personal responsibility cannot be a substitute for a system that allows inappropriate control and lack of accountability. If anyone believes that they have not been treated appropriately, as in all such contexts, they are faced with engaging both individuals as well as a system.

The goal entrusted to the Westside Vineyard's Council, is that of protecting the well-being of all who are entrusting themselves to the gathering of the community and its leaders. As such, we believe that amidst any conflict, the goal is not simply to become an advocate for any "side", but to seek the truth and then establish the boundaries that will serve the good of the community.

The guidelines go on to name every vulnerability... identify boundaries... to give explicit permission to express concerns ... and explicit responsibility to share any accusation with other elders.

But I also know that like any good boundaries...they have limitations.

They are no substitute for self-awareness and honesty...that desires to honor God.

And I hope it is **encouraging to know that the Vineyard movement of churches** is engaging the call for healthy leadership and process in a really commendable way.

In one of the very recent difficult situations, a major group who assesses the handling of abuse wrote this [14]:

"I wish every church responded like Vineyard with a timely, caring, and thorough response. They are also involved in providing other resources for care along with pastoral support for the victims. Well done, Vineyard USA! You are an example to the church at large by serving those who have been harmed. Frankly, I needed a story like this. Thank you." – The Wartburg Watch

I was proud to read that. And I hope that you **find some encouragement** in knowing that the Vineyard is really taking our responsibility for integrity seriously.

Finally...

5. Keep our most ultimate trust in Christ who has called us.

I certainly know many great leaders and many great churches. I have known men and women who are a testimony that change is real... and churches in which are more self-sacrificing than self-serving...in which people come together to grow spiritually... in which people genuinely care for one another and for their neighbors...and do so with grace...not legalism or compromise.

But...**If you ask me why I am here...** it's because **none of the leaders who have fallen or failed are the one's who called me.**

It is **Christ who has called me.**

It is **Christ who calls the church to be his bride...** and no one elses.

I am reminded that the **early church was discouraged from developing cult personalities.** The Apostle Paul saw how people began to identify with different leaders...and he wrote:

Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul." Others are saying, "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," or "I follow only Christ." ¹³ Has Christ been divided into factions? Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul? Of course not!... ²⁴ But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. - 1 Corinthians 1:12-13, 24 (NLT)

Some had favorites... and they needed to remember the old saying: **"The best of men are men at best."**

This is a call to remember that it is Christ who has called us. He is the **power of God and the wisdom of God. [15]**

This **calls me** from **becoming cynical** to **becoming centered.**

And that is the call that I hope you will be drawn to today... a call to become more centered in Christ.

Closing

Let me conclude with a word **to those who may be navigating disillusionment.**

The way forward is discernment...not disengagement.

Disengagement will simply leave you floating with no center.

The way forward is discerning where Jesus is being embodied.

Jesus said he is building his church...and his call is to be a part of it.

If there is a church that is toxic to its core and unwilling to address that toxicity or repent of it, then it's not being the church and you need to leave it and find one that is.

If there is a church that has embraced racist or misogynist or bigoted views, and is distorting Scripture to support those views, then it's not being the church and you need to leave it and find one that is.

If there is a church that systemically covers up the abuse of children, or the sexual misconduct or financial misconduct of leaders, then it's not being the church and you need to leave it and find one that is.

If there is a church that is teaching a message other than the message of Jesus, if it is distorting Scripture and conveying heresy, then it's not being the church and you need to leave it and find one that is.

And if any of that ever becomes true of the Westside Vineyard, you need to leave it.

But make sure you are fleeing those kinds of things, and not just fleeing the normal brokenness you will find in every church.

We'll all disappoint each other. We'll all say something that is off.

But we can all grow together.

And finally **a word to anyone who may have experienced real abuse in the past**...and perhaps without any resolve.

Jesus is here. He hasn't abandoned you.

While it is good for the abuser to take responsibility and make amends to those he hurt, it is Jesus who grants peace to those in pain.

Resources:

Some resources for navigating doubts and difficulties associated with “deconstructing” in general are: *Before You Lose Your Faith: Deconstructing Doubt in the Church*; by Trevin Wax (Author), Ian Harber (Author), & 14 more (2021); Amazon - [here](#) / Provided as FREE eBook at TGC - [here](#); *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*, by Rebecca McLaughlin (2019, Crossway) - [here](#); James Emery White Meck series: Deconstruction Zone

Among many resources related to this topic of engaging abuse by church leaders, the following, along with all references in the “note”, I found particularly helpful:

- Matt Chandler Is Latest Fall From Grace in American Evangelicalism
- by Khaleda Rahman; 8/30/22; [here](#)
- [Don't Make the Church Leadership Crisis Worse](#) - We need to renew our spiritual imaginations amid the spiritual-abuse reckoning. Mike Cospe, March 21, 2022
- [The Ethics of Jesus Stand Against Abuse](#), Becky Castle Miller, Sep 26, 2017
- [5 Marks of a Spiritually Abusive Leader](#) by Kevin Halloran (Drawing upon 3 John 9–10) He notes,
From John's description of Diotrephes, we see at least five marks of a spiritually abusive leader.

1. A spiritually abusive leader displays selfish ambition.
 2. A spiritually abusive leader does not respect authority.
 3. A spiritually abusive leader spews unjust accusations.
 4. A spiritually abusive leader lacks hospitality for those who differ.
 5. A spiritually abusive leader creates division.
- How We Stay in Church Matters as Much as Why - Spiritual abuse survivors who join a new congregation still need to heal from their hurt. - Michelle Van Loon; June 23, 2023 - [here](#).
Includes the following:

Rachel Baker, a pastor's wife, [described](#) her thought process after a painful experience in a previous congregation: “In order to begin the process of healing and forgiving it became imperative that I pinpointed the ‘who’ behind the hurt. Once I was able to identify ‘who’ had actually done the hurting I was able to separate them from the church as a whole. Suddenly, I wasn't really experiencing ‘church hurt’ but rather ‘relational hurt.’”

That distinction can be very helpful. A shattered relationship with another church member can leave deep wounds and spill over into other friendships in the congregation. That kind of hurt may be a part of a larger constellation of damaged relations that swirl around a spiritually abusive leader—or it may be limited to a struggle between two individuals. That's why it's important to identify the source and scope of the hurt.

But for many, this pinpointing isn't possible. While not every experience of church hurt leads to [religious trauma](#), repeated patterns of [moral injury](#) and spiritual abuse is far more pervasive than an isolated relational breakdown.

As Russell Moore [notes](#), the same thing can happen in the body of Christ as a whole: "What is not repaired is repeated—and what is not reformed cannot be revived."

Notes:

1. From Sexual Abuse Sends out Wide Ripples of Hurt: Bruxy Cavey's Meeting House Wreckage; Posted on November 2, 2022 by Peter J. Schuurman - [here](#)

In addition, this young women explained, "I tried not to attach my faith to a real life person." But our faith is relational, and some people, even in this skeptical age, still give a special trust and deference to those who claim to be God's priests.

For more on The Meeting House and Cavey, see [Toronto Life article "House of Lies"](#)

2. It is difficult to read through the stories of such harm done...but it can be healthy to face the patterns that we must seek to avoid and protect from. Here are some of the leaders whose stories have had the most notoriety:

Jimmy Swaggart - In 1988, famed television evangelist Jimmy Swaggart made a shocking, on-camera confession. He admitted to ["moral indiscretions"](#) and "incidents of moral failure" as tears streamed down his face on live television, and asked his followers and family for forgiveness before ultimately stepping down from his post. More at Wikipedia article - [Wikipedia article on Jimmy Swaggart](#).

Jim Bakker - On the afternoon of December 6, 1980, when Jessica Hahn was a 21-year-old church secretary, she was drugged and raped by Bakker and another preacher, John Wesley Fletcher. Hahn was given a \$279,000 (equivalent to \$718,666 in 2022) pay-off for her silence, which was paid with PTL's funds to Hahn through Bakker associate Roe Messner. Bakker, who made all of the financial decisions for the PTL organization, allegedly kept two sets of books to conceal the accounting irregularities. This became public in 1987. Additionally, he was indicted on federal charges of mail and wire fraud, and conspiracy to defraud the public. Jim Bakker's six-week trial in 1989, ended with him being found guilty of all 24 counts of fraud, misappropriation of \$158 million for Praise the Lord Ministries, and embezzling \$3.7 million for personal expenses. He was sentenced to 45 years in prison, of which he served six.

Robert Tilton

Peter Popoff - one of the bolder [frauds in televangelist history](#). He claimed to be able to diagnose (and cure) any of his churchgoers' hidden diseases just by asking the heavens for help. He was later revealed to be wearing a wire, through which his wife would feed him the information.

Eddie Long - a prominent pastor in the Atlanta area before he was accused of sexual misconduct with members of his congregation. He was eventually convicted and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Ted Haggard – former pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs and president of the National Association of Evangelicals...until 2006 a male prostitute reported that he had been used by Haggard for sex and buying methamphetamines. Haggard had been voicing his position against the sin of homosexuality and political related issues at the time. ([CNN report on Ted Haggard](#) and [LA Times report on Ted Haggard](#))

Mark Driscoll – In 2014, after nearly 20 years as lead pastor of Seattle's Mars Hill Church, [Mark Driscoll](#) resigned. Driscoll, 44, had faced mounting criticism over church leadership and discipline

within Mars Hill and how he wrote and promoted his popular books. The decision came less than two months after Driscoll [stepped down from leadership](#) while the church investigated charges against him. They concluded Driscoll had “been guilty of arrogance, responding to conflict with a quick temper and harsh speech, and leading the staff and elders in a domineering manner,” but had “never been charged with any immorality, illegality or heresy. Driscoll founded The Trinity Church in Scottsdale in 2016.

David Yonggi Cho’s Embezzlement ([here](#)) – Megachurch leaders may be associated with the United States of America, but it the largest Evangelical megachurch in the world which is in South Korea. It’s the Yoido Full Gospel, which seats 800,000 churchgoers in Seoul. In 2014, the once globally popular Cho was convicted of embezzling \$12,000,000 of church funds. He was fortunate that the sentence was suspended, and it was only going to be a surprisingly brief three years anyway. What was established was that “in 2002, Pastor Cho instructed the church to buy \$12 million in stocks privately owned by his eldest son, Cho Hee-jun, at prices four times higher than their market value. He also dodged \$2.9 million in taxes in the same deal. The Reverend received a three-year sentence, suspended five years, and was fined \$4,200,000. His son was jailed three years.” ([From this article on Cho's prosperity message in 2018](#))

Carl Lentz – pastor of Hillsong Church in New York who was found to have pursued an affair and whose celebrity lifestyle became a focus of the wider dysfunctional celebrity nature of the younger “hip” church culture. - [Newsweek story on Carl Lentz](#)

Bruxy Cavey – Leader of large Canadian church with multiple campuses. On May 31, 2022, Hamilton Police arrested Cavey and subsequently charged him with sexual assault, which is alleged to have occurred between 2012 and 2018 against one of the women who had come forward. The charge against Cavey has not been proven in court, and he is currently released on bail pending trial. (For more on The Meeting House and Cavey, see [Toronto Life article “House of Lies”](#))

He promised he would be different,” said Peter Schuurman, author of *The Subversive Evangelical*. “He was going to be the egalitarian, pacifist, apolitical, generous and gentle nonevangelical, evangelical pastor. There’s a deeper travesty here.” (From [here](#))

As for impact, one example is a particular young married woman who was already deeply disturbed by COVID-protocol wrangling in her own church and she turned to Cavey’s preaching, hoping for some reprieve from the conflict and verbal abuse she saw in her home church. Then when the news came out about the accusations of sexual abuse against Cavey and his own (qualified) confession of guilt, she was utterly distraught.

“So the safe place to land became unsafe. Its still confusing... because a lot of my theology is stuff I learned from Bruxy and I don’t know what you do with that, if the person has been lying for years and years.”

She sobbed as she reported these tragic twists in her spiritual journey. This is really important to remember: when leaders go off the rails, it is not only the celebrities and their victims who crash and burn in the brush. They take with them a whole trainload of unsuspecting people who trusted them, and many who bet their lives on the leader’s integrity and vision. “I tried not to attach my faith to a real life person,” explained this young woman. But our faith is relational, and some people, even in this skeptical age, still give a special trust and deference to those who claim to be God’s priests. (From Sexual Abuse Sends out Wide Ripples of Hurt: Bruxy Cavey’s Meeting House Wreckage; Posted on November 2, 2022 by Peter J. Schuurman - [here](#))

Ravi Zacharias – Among the most popular and winsome apologists / speakers over decades. Upon his passing, what emerged was his use of female massage workers, one whom he had long befriended and partnered with in business, for sexual release, which used manipulation of his role and financial support... a sexting relationship with in 2016 which he had made false counter-accusations, and then a pattern in his larger ministry organization, of avoiding or dismissing concerns. See [Roy Report on Ravi Zacharias](#) and [OPINION: Spokesperson's Letter Reveals RZIM's Spiritually Abusive Leadership & Consequences Of Protecting "Ravi" & "Brand"](#)

Brian Houston and Hillsong – Accused and faced trial for covering up his father's sexual abuse. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/june/hillsong-brian-houston-trial-closing-argument-sexual-abuse.html>

Bill Gothard - founded the Institute in Basic Life Principles in 1961 which taught what were presented as "seven Biblical, non-optional principles of life. Years later, a family closely connected to IBLP, the Duggar family, became a reality TV sensation. The Duggar family has been a TV phenomenon since 2008 when their reality show 19 Kids and Counting first aired on TLC. The show, which followed Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar and their 19 children, was cancelled in 2015 following allegations that the couple's oldest son, Josh, had allegedly inappropriately touched several minor girls. Now, Prime Video's limited docuseries, Shiny Happy People: Duggar Family Secrets, is revealing details behind the wholesome surface of the reality TV family and their shocking connection to the controversial religious organization, Institute in Basic Life Principles. In the new docuseries, the couple's daughter Jill Duggar Dillard goes on the record for the first time alongside close friends and family who witnessed what really went on when they were involved with IBLP. Gothard / Duggar reports [here](#) and [CNN on Duggar docuseries](#)

L'Arche's late founder Jean Vanier – accused of having a nearly secret ritual with a few of the female workers which included inappropriate touch. Resources [here](#) and [here](#)

Caleb Baker – Included here because recent at the time of this message (Feb 2023) and how dismissing allegations can lead to abuse re-occurring in another setting. See: [2 Megachurches Rocked by Allegations They Allowed Pastor Guilty of Sexual Abuse to Re-Offend](#) By Rebecca Hopkins; February 27, 2023 - [here](#)

Alan Scott (Former Vineyard Pastor) – Took role as new pastor of the Anaheim Vineyard Church, deemed the flagship / mother church of the movement. He then disassociated from the Vineyard. This raised a sense of both betrayal and fraud as this included gaining \$62 million of assets. This led to further public accusations of patterns of spiritual abuse by staff both in the current church and via an investigation by the UK Vineyard of his former church in Ireland. See: [Explained: Who is former Vineyard pastor Alan Scott and what has he been accused of?](#) By Tim Wyatt. 3 July 2023 and [Vineyard Senior Pastor Faces 'Historic' Spiritual Abuse Charges](#) 6/7/2023, Shawn A. Akers

The Gatlin family (Duluth Vineyard) – Son accused of sexual abuse of teen as youth pastor... and parents who were the pastors...of potentially having known and not reported it. The parents have resigned from their roles as pastors and Vineyard USA leadership. The details of this case are still very uncertain and should be heard only as such.

3. You can see it throughout church history. Sixteen hundred years ago, [Jerome wrote about prideful bishops](#):

They govern the sheep harshly and infuriatingly, behaving haughtily as is expected of them. They adorn the dignity of their office with their works and take on pride instead of humility. They think

that they have assumed honor rather than the burden of their work, and however they see coming forward in the church, preaching the word of God, they seek out to impress.

Jerome (commentary on Ezekiel 11 – CCL 75:485)

4. As one described, “Spiritual abuse is using the Bible or your position as a spiritual leader to influence others for personal gain.” While our current therapeutic culture tends to use the word “abuse” in quite a wide manner, it is wise when speaking of leaders, to recognize some distinction between being relationally hurt and being spiritually abused. All churches are made up of sinners. There will be conflicts, slander, short tempers, misunderstandings, and acts of selfishness and pride... all of which may bring hurt... and be a type of “abusing” our call to “love one another.” However, spiritual “abuse” is best understood as the unique misuse of the unique positional spiritual role one has been entrusted with.

An abuser desires to satisfy their natural selfishness regardless of the consequences to themselves or others. Several passages in the Bible strongly condemn taking advantage of or abusing others ([Exodus 22:22](#); [Isaiah 10:2](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:6](#)).

Both relational hurt and spiritual abuse of an entrusted role can also fall on a spectrum of forms. Emotional abuse may be more subtle to identify but still be significant in the destructive effects it bears. Examples of emotional abuse include verbal attacks, criticism, favoritism, manipulation, deceit, threats, and withheld expressions of love. Physical abuse will tend to strike the greatest fear. Sexual abuse... even if manipulated into a form of consensual relationship... will tend to bear the deepest effects as it engages intimacy and vulnerability and guilt.

5. John the Baptist who was the forerunner to Jesus, had called out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in a prophet manner, telling them to produce “fruits worthy of repentance” ([Luke 3:8](#)).

6. We also here the heart of God regarding the abuse of others, in the ancient text of Proverbs 6:16-19 (GNT): “There are seven things that the Lord hates and cannot tolerate: A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that kill innocent people, a mind that thinks up wicked plans, feet that hurry off to do evil, a witness who tells one lie after another, and someone who stirs up trouble among friends.”

And God’s heart against those who hurt the “innocent” can be heard across His warnings to the people.

Deut. 27:25 cursed be he that taketh reward to slay an innocent person...

Psalms 10:8 in the secret places doeth he murder the innocent...

Psalms 106:38 And shed innocent blood, even blood of their sons and of their daughters, and polluted the land with blood.

Isaiah 59:7 Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood...

Jeremiah 19:4 Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place/ and have filled this place with the blood of the innocents; ...

7. In such a manner of care, Matthew 12 quotes from Isaiah 42: “Look at my Servant...He will not fight or shout or raise his voice in public. He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle.”

8. This ethos of service vs. abuse is drawn from a great piece: [The Ethics of Jesus Stand Against Abuse](#), Becky Castle Miller, Sep 26, 2017

In contrast, we can hear how the passion against “false prophets” is filled with how they selfishly bring harm to others. This is pointed in 2 Peter 2:1-22, which bears a condemnation that should not be applied in its entirety to all who may abuse, but reflects the anger towards self-serving manipulative abuse of others.

9. Also...Mark 10:13-14 (NLT)

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him.

¹⁴ When Jesus saw what was happening, he was angry with his disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children."

While the Bible supports discipline, and would even appear to support some form of "corporeal" punishment, it is clear that those following in the way of Jesus, were not to act in anger...and whose discipline was not to become a form of mere force and control that discourages.

Ephesians 6:4 - Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Colossians 3:21 - Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Some suggest a basis that Jesus could be speaking of child sexual abuse. See:

[Did Christians edit out Jesus speaking on child sex abuse?](#) By Jonathan Poletti, Jul 14, 2019

And a good article noting God hates abuse... not just divorce. - [God Hates Abuse](#), Chad Ashby, May 11, 2018

10. As David Virtue express:

"Stop the hero worship of any leader. It is nothing short of idolatry. I remember a speaker eulogizing John Stott prior to his speaking, and when he had finished, Stott quietly said "you don't know my heart." That said it all. Remember that the true heroes of the faith are people you have probably never heard of, or they get written about decades later when their person and work has been evaluated over time. And what of all the countless missionaries who gave their lives in strange lands, unsung and under reported, who are now mere footnotes to history? They may have done more for the kingdom than all the "celebrity Christians" in the West put together." - From: How Fallen Christian Leaders Have Hurt Us All By David Virtue, DD, February 1, 2022 - [here](#)

11. I am indebted to the deep insight articulated by Mike Cospers and recommend the full reading of his article, [Don't Make the Church Leadership Crisis Worse](#) by Mike Cospers, March 21, 2022. He states:

The church's leadership crisis isn't simply happening against a backdrop of innumerable moral failures. It also exists in a complex fog of faith and doubt that the philosopher Charles Taylor has described as disenchantment. As Taylor sees it, modernity has fundamentally transformed the moral and spiritual imagination, introducing a steady undercurrent of doubt.

This is what makes the phenomenon of the charismatic pastor so seductive—particularly (though not necessarily) when they achieve celebrity status. They stand before us with an apparent spiritual certainty that we lack or struggle with. Then, through their performance as an inspiring, challenging, or entertaining personality on and off the stage, they can stir our emotions and imaginations in such a way that we experience something transcendent—something that feels an awful lot like an encounter with God.

This kind of post-enchantment transcendence is comforting. It doesn't just silence our doubts about God; it also silences them about humans.

It's my sense that the common thread that ties these churches' stories together isn't simply character issues, significant as those may be. But we too often overlook the undercurrent of disenchantment. We keep bad leaders around because in response to our default setting of doubt, we've created conditions in which character isn't a qualification for the job. We want someone who can make us feel something.

12. Carey Nieuwhof notes that “the seeds of failure are in me too. None of us are exempt.” “It’s way too easy for your platform to outgrow your character. And that’s where all the danger lies.” “What you and I need most is people in our lives who know us inside out, who love us and as a result of that love, tell us the truth about us. Cultivate an atmosphere in which your team and those around you can tell you the truth. How you hurt them. What you’re not seeing. What you don’t realize is that they’ll be afraid to do that. You can fire them or dismiss them. The challenge in leadership is to live in a way that people closest to you become the people most grateful for you.” - From - Carey Nieuwhof - [Some Thoughts On Why MegaChurch Pastors Keep Falling](#)

13. We read in Acts 20:33–35:

“I coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”

As one states: One of the telltale signs of a pastor’s and elder’s integrity is the handling of their personal, and church, finances. How an individual handles money, especially if one is in the ministry, speaks volumes.

It is interesting that the Apostle Paul stressed how he handled money with the utmost care. He did not covet other people’s wealth or their resplendent clothing. Paul indicated how he worked hard for his personal necessities. Paul was not afraid of working hard. He also indicated how he financially helped those who were his colleagues.

Paul’s reason for this transparency with the Ephesian church elders was so that his motives in preaching the Gospel would never be called into question.” – DR. THOMAS CLOTHIER

- <https://hiswordtoday.org/2021/02/10/the-apostle-paul-financial-integrity/>

Consider also

2 Corinthians 8: 16-24 – “*We are traveling together to **guard against any criticism** for the way we are handling this generous gift. We are **careful** to be honorable before the Lord, but we also want everyone else to see that we are honorable.*”

1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

14. From: Brenda Gatlin Has Resigned. Vineyard USA, Within 1 Month, Responded Thoroughly to the Accusations of Abuse at Vineyard Duluth! They Are an Example of How It Should Be Done! - Posted on Fri Mar 03, 2023 by dee – At Wartburg Watch - [here](#)

15. Along these lines, we can note that the apostle Paul emphasized Christ’s headship to at least two struggling congregations. His prayer in Ephesians 1:18–23 emphasized that the resurrected Jesus holds all of the authority and dominion over every human institution and government—even at a time when the predominant culture told a different story.

In his letter to the Colossian church—which was under attack from false teachers who preached a different gospel—Paul affirms that Christ “is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” (Col. 1:18)

Survivors know better than most that not everything that happens in a congregation reflects Jesus’ character and authority. But remembering that Christ is the Head of his Church offers us clarity and perspective on the actions of our local body of believers. As pastor Benjamin Vrbicek [says](#), our hyperawareness of “bad shepherds” points to a “deeper longing for good shepherds—and ultimately, *the Good Shepherd.*”

