



6 DECEMBER 2017 / DINAH / JARED OLIVETTI

Dealing with Sexual Abuse as the Church

[The following, which may be disturbing to some readers, is mostly from a sermon preached recently at Immanuel RPC in West Lafayette. You can listen to the whole thing [here](#).]

For reasons beyond my understanding, there is a sea change happening in our nation regarding sexual abuse. It has become difficult to go a day or two without hearing new accusations and recriminations. In areas where sexual harassment and abuse has long been winked at - Hollywood and the media - it's now being taken much more seriously. For this we ought to thank God. In other areas - politics and the church - we could still use some more work. Thankfully, God's Word is not silent on the subject of abuse. So while we hear accusations and see the results of wickedness, we can turn to the Bible to help us understand how God intends for the church to understand and deal with abuse.

A case in point is the rape of Dinah by Shechem, recorded in Genesis 34. Although the wickedness of that attack is not the center theme of the story, there is desperately needed wisdom for us there. Consider the following lessons the church can glean from this horrifying story to help us deal with sexual abuse as the church.

Understand how the vulnerable are endangered

Dinah was vulnerable. She was a woman, which makes her more vulnerable than man (though certainly men and boys can be abused in similar ways). She was also young - likely in her early teens - which adds to her vulnerability to attack. But her vulnerability was greatly increased in two significant ways.

Most scholars agree that the very presence of Jacob's clan near the city of Shechem was itself a problem. In other words, Jacob endangered his vulnerable daughter by not pressing forward to Bethel, where God intended for them to live. Stopping instead first at Succoth and then at the city of Shechem, he placed his family in a situation where they were at risk of being spiritually overtaken and, in Dinah's case, sexually assaulted and kidnapped.

Even more significant than their geographical location was how Jacob's lack of love endangered Dinah. Scripture specifically identifies her as "the daughter of Leah" - Scripture makes clear that Leah was the wife who went unloved. And by extension we assume well that her children were likewise unloved. If it feels like a stretch to say that Jacob didn't love Dinah, consider that his only response to her rape and kidnapping was rebuking his sons for endangering his own life and possibility of peace and prosperity.

The vulnerable are endangered when those given to love and shepherd them refuse. When fathers fail to love their children and fail to lead them spiritually, our children are endangered. When elders are disconnected from those they're called to shepherd, they are potentially endangering them.

Genesis 34:1 says that Dinah "went out to see the women of the land." Without accusing her in any way of Shechem's sin, God's Word does not approve of her actions. By purposefully seeking out the women of the land, Dinah is endangering herself. This is not

simply making friends with new neighbors, but a foolishly dan

involvement with people who don't share her family's spiritual identity or commitments.

_The vulnerable can endanger themselves through foolishness and lack of understanding. _When the church doesn't come alongside young people and help them develop Christ-centered wisdom, they will often put themselves at great risk.

Before moving on, two important caveats: when someone is sexually abused or harassed, we don't automatically condemn her father or those given to care for her. Likewise, when someone is sexually abused or harassed - even if their foolishness or naivete endangered them - that abuse is never their fault! In other words, the church needs to walk the path of wisdom, seeking to protect well the most vulnerable without demeaning or further victimizing those who've been hurt.

Understand how the wicked are enabled

Anyone has the potential of being an abuser. But some are enabled to that end by those around them. It's significant that Shechem is the "son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land." Shechem's wickedness shows us two important ways that the wicked are enabled:

The wicked are enabled by unchecked power and authority - When people are put into positions of authority and power without true and strong accountability over them, wickedness is enabled. Power and authority are, Biblically speaking, good things. But they often act as amplifiers, taking what's already in a person's heart and making it much louder. When a righteous person is given authority and power,

we rejoice. But when the wicked are given unchecked power and authority, bad things will happen.

It would be easy to point out examples in politics or Hollywood, but the church has repeatedly proven the truth of this over the past generation. In our infatuation with dynamic leaders, in our desire to be part of something powerful, we have repeatedly enabled worthless men to lead with unchecked authority, resulting in countless attacks and abuses. When will we learn?

The wicked are enabled by silence - When those who have the ability to bring light to wickedness refuse, the wicked are further enabled to fulfill their dark desires. In this light, Jacob's silence is one of the most shameful acts done by any patriarch, who knew a thing or two about shame. Motivated by fear and self-interest (notice his concern in 34:30 is almost entirely self-referential) rather than by love, justice and God's honor, Jacob "held his peace."

Again, the American church - including the reformed church to be sure - proves this case. When we decide to handle abuse cases "in house" without bringing criminal acts to light, we enable the wicked. When we force abuse victims to forgive their abusers but let the abusers remain undisciplined, we enable the wicked. When we silence those who speak up about abuse, we enable the wicked. When will we learn?

Understand how the abused are empowered

Perhaps the most puzzling part of Genesis 34 to modern readers is Shechem's pursuit of Dinah following the attack. Unlike Amnon, whose heart turned against Tamar after he raped her, Shechem's

infatuation only grew. He was desperate to keep her, promising

bride price they would ask. The reader is correct to see this as insult added on top of injury, but there may be here an important foreshadowing of Israel's civil law. Later, God would give important laws to His people about how to deal with similar situations. Here are the two most pertinent:

- Deuteronomy 22:25-27 gives instruction for dealing with a violent rape. In this case, the perpetrator will be put to death and the community of faith will go to great lengths to vindicate the victim. "...you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death."
- Immediately following, Deuteronomy 22:28-29 gives instruction for dealing with what we might call a forced seduction. This would be when a man seduces or otherwise coerces a woman into sexual acts that she doesn't really approve of or desire. Although absent the violence of the previous crime, this type of abuse is similarly condemned by God but with a different punishment. In the case of forced seduction, the abuser is forced to offer a significant bride price and to propose marriage to the young woman without the possibility of divorce. While this may seem like the last thing any sane woman would want in this situation, its cultural context aids understanding: to be an ancient woman who is unable to offer virginity to a future husband is to be almost assured of never being married and thus living in poverty and danger for the rest of her life. This forced proposal of marriage is a means of protection.

In other words, *when the covenant community was doing well and following God's law, two things regularly happened to the victims of abuse: (1) they were vindicated*

and (2) they were helped and provided for at great cost.

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While the exact means of provision might not be applicable to many today, the principle should be the church's clear goal for empowering victims.

For the recovery and health of victims of abuse, it is vital for the church to vindicate them. The elders of the church especially ought to go to great lengths to make sure that victims are never blamed for their abuse and that anyone who knows about the abuse hears the church's testimony of the victim's innocence. The church ought also to be willing to go to great lengths to aid the victims in any spiritual and practical way possible.

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The church lives to honor Jesus Christ. And we need to do better. We need to be more willing to speak about these horrifying things. We need to love and care for the vulnerable in our midst. We need to hold our leaders more accountable and disentangle ourselves from hierarchical ministries and leaders surrounded only by yes-men. We need to be more willing to listen to victims and vindicate them of their abusers' actions. We need to be more willing to pursue justice, both in civil and ecclesiastical courts. We need to be more ready to give sacrificially to help the victims of abuse.

Give the king your justice, O God,

and your righteousness to the royal son!

May he judge your people with righteousness,

and your poor with justice!

Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,

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and the hills, in righteousness!

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,

give deliverance to the children of the needy,

and crush the oppressor!

Psalm 72:1-4



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I'm a pastor at Immanuel RPC in West Lafayette, Indiana. God has blessed me with a wonderful wife, six kids and a loving church family.

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