

Christian Code of Silence: The Church's Current Response to Clergy Sexual Misconduct and
Potential Improvements Utilizing Principles of Restorative Justice

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Abstract

The prevalent and pervasive issue of clergy sexual misconduct within the Christian church has been perpetuated under a code of silence through the use of perverted Scripture to support its tactics. By departing from biblically aligned principles, and silencing the victims and protecting the offenders, the church's current response has detrimental effects, calling into question the moral standing of the church. However, by practically implementing the principles of community, accountability, and forgiveness found in restorative justice and interpreting them through a biblical lens, the church can begin to improve their response. In dismantling the code of silence, the church can restore its integrity and provide adequate support for victims through acknowledging the criminal wrong, church leadership accountability, and appropriate dialogues supporting self-acceptance and self-compassion.

Keywords: clergy sexual misconduct, restorative justice, forgiveness, purity culture, code of silence

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Being a victim of a sexual crime is a traumatically life-altering experience, a traumatic experience much more common than often thought. Recent statistics suggest that an American is sexually assaulted as frequently as every 68 seconds (RAINN, 2024). The effects of this kind of offense not only encompass the immediate physical impact of the act or acts themselves, but the long-term psychological, physiological, emotional, and social aspects as well. Due to the intimate personal trauma sexual violence survivors experience, they often spend a lengthy period of time working to restore relational connections, physical and mental health, and a sense of satisfaction in their life (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011; Koss et al., 2017). Furthermore, without an adequate amount of support from others during this process, survivors can become disheartened, and even experience retraumatization, hindering the already long and arduous process (Kirkner & Ullman, 2020).

Within the last decade, sexual crimes have become a more prevalent conversation in society and the media, with a main catalyst for the conversations being the MeToo movement, which gained widespread attention in 2017 (Brown, 2022). Due to this increased exposure, several people in positions of power have had their criminal sexual acts uncovered, including those in positions of high religious regard within Christianity (Graham, 2018; Griswold, 2018). This type of sexualized criminal behavior by a church or spiritual leader towards someone who is under their spiritual care, and thus is by nature in a position of less authority and power, is considered clergy sexual misconduct (Clergy Sexual Misconduct Information and Resources, 2021). Clergy sexual misconduct encompasses sexual assault, sexual abuse, which is sexual assault of a minor, sexual harassment, and stalking. A study through Baylor University estimated

that in the average American congregation of 400 people, an average of 32 people, or about 8%, have experienced clergy sexual misconduct, (Garland & Chaves, 2008). Based on this percentage, a member of a congregation is over one million times more likely to experience an act of clergy sexual misconduct during their time at church than to be a part of a congregation that is involved in a church shooting in any given year (Carter, 2017). Yet, despite the clear prevalence of an issue, many victims do not come forward about their experiences, especially clergy sexual misconduct, until years later, if at all (Eyde, 2019; Garcia, 2020; Griswold, 2018; Kirkner & Ullman, 2020). They appear to be silenced. Clergy sexual misconduct is a prevalent issue in the church that is suppressed through a code of silence, but with the use of biblically aligned restorative justice principles, the church can improve its response to its victims.

The Code of Silence

“You swore to yourself a long time ago / There were some things that people never needed to know . . . And you can’t talk about it / Because you’re following a code of silence . . . That’s not the kind of code you’re inclined to break / Some things unknown are best left alone forever”

(Joel, 1986)

A code of silence is a pervasive idea found throughout police culture worldwide. As shown by the lyrics above in Billy Joel’s song *Code of Silence*, the code’s name is self-explanatory. It refers to the informal rule among police officers that an officer should not report misconduct committed by fellow officers (Wu et al., 2022). Although this code is often unspoken, the attitudes that support and normalize the code of silence are ever-present in law enforcement agencies around the globe (Ivković et al., 2018; Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2022; Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). This code is thought to exist due to policing subculture which stresses loyalty,

solidarity, and camaraderie in the face of vulnerability (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2022). Due to the nature of policing work, and the dangerous and unpredictable work environment they deal with daily, the basic principle of loyalty found in the code of silence is not inherently bad. However, the issue arises when there becomes a significant decrease in willingness to report a fellow officer for misdeeds such as accepting a bribe or verbally abusing a motorist during a traffic stop, after they have been immersed into police subculture at the police academy (Donner & Maskály, 2022).

Church's Code of Silence

In a similar manner, some churches have also come to employ a type of code of silence in which it is frowned upon to be a whistleblower of questionable conduct when the conduct is committed by someone of influence within the church (Birchard, 2000). While it may not be referred to by such a name, or referred to at all, Christianity holds a similar set of values to those in policing culture that contribute to the police code of silence. A significant similarity is a sense of vulnerability that is created by perceptions of unfair scrutiny by other individuals (Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2022). A perception of persecution leads to a close-knit subculture as feelings of love and bonding towards group members are developed, and fear and insecurity about outsider persecution increases (Boyd-MacMillan, 2019). Thus, a code of silence is perpetuated in order to maintain current group dynamics and to not give outsiders additional information to use against the group (Navarrette, 2022). However, in the church's code of silence, it often extends beyond just those employed in the organization, but to congregants as well, capitalizing on the same fears of scrutiny and persecution (Birchard, 2000).

Silencing victims of clergy sexual misconduct is arguably one of the more sordid and saddening uses of a code of silence. A unique issue presented is that concepts that could instill a

shame for reporting, a sort of pre-emptive intervention tactic to reporting clergy sexual misconduct, ingraining the code of silence from an early age, are often employed within the structural teachings of a church. Teachings stressing the utmost importance of honoring and respecting authority, and deep guilt and shame for not abstaining from any type of sexual activity outside of marriage, can create an ideal environment for abusers looking to exercise their power (Ross, 2012).

Christianity and its teachings are not bad, nor do they make allowances for evil acts like clergy sexual misconduct to be committed. However, “those who seek to control and manipulate others can twist even the very heart of the gospel for their perverted ends” (Vries, 2023, para. 1). The Christian church culture does believe in principles of submission to authority, purity, and modesty. Those principles are not inherently evil concepts, in fact they are found throughout the Scriptures as high standards to strive towards, as ideals that assist in cultivating a fulfilling and God-honoring lifestyle. The Bible says in 1 Timothy 4:8 (New International Version, 2011) that, “physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” This is a clear proponent for godliness, or purity, as it has benefits that extend far beyond mere physical attributes. This view is expressed in several other verses throughout the Scriptures. However, when passages are taken out of context in both a textual and historical sense, they can easily be misapplied to circumstances that do not align with the original meaning of the text, thus misconstruing the essence of the verse. Without a strong biblical basis for what those principles entail, they can be manipulated into taking on caveats they were never meant to include. People who seek to take advantage of others often find that places that strongly advocate for these easily skewed principles, especially submission to

authority and shame surrounding any kind of sexual activity, can be good places to find victims due to their proclivity towards having connotations of condemnation (Ross, 2012).

Purity Culture

Christian purity culture is an example of a shift from education to condemnation that can prime children to be silent about clergy sexual misconduct before it even occurs. When topics like sex and sexuality are broached in the church, the discussion has the tendency to exclusively focus on advocating for abstinence rather than the full scope of the issues (Sellers, 2006). This manner of addressing these topics has become commonly referred to as purity culture. Purity culture is typically first explicitly addressed when children enter early junior high and continues to be stressed until marriage, at which point it is viewed as no longer relevant beyond being sexually faithful in marriage. Purity culture is an emphasis on sexual purity above all other kinds of purity, and perpetuates that everybody, but especially women, should remain completely sexually pure until marriage (Klement et al., 2022). Although the concept of purity, specifically sexual purity, has been a standard in the Christian church since its beginning, ‘purity culture’ became prevalent in the late 1980s. At this time, society was becoming increasingly publicly sexual through movies, music, and the media, which resulted in children being exposed to ideas about sex and sexuality at increasingly younger ages (Duschinsky, 2013). Christian leaders began to look for ways to address these topics in a biblical manner, and out of this desire, came a book entitled *Christian Sex Education: Parents and Church Leaders Guide* by Jimmy Hester in 1993. This book sought to educate parents and youth leaders on how to respond to the questions posed by kids influenced by the increasingly hyper-sexualized world around them. Soon after this emerged the “True Love Waits” slogan where teenagers would sign a card pledging they would

remain sexually pure until marriage. Inspired by this, from the late 1990s until the early 2010s, there became an increased focus on the topic of sexual purity in Christian literature.

Although there were several books that perpetuated these ideas, one impactful piece of literature during this time due to its popularity was *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris, published in 1997. A main theme perpetuated throughout this 235-page book is that any number of former partners means a person has less of themselves to give their future spouse. This book also does not limit former partners to specifically those with which the relationship was of a sexual nature, although those are especially taboo, even pushing for saving one's first kiss for marriage, hence the name of the book. This aligns with the common Christian mantra of dating to marry but fails to consider that not every relationship is a good match and is destined for marriage. If a relationship does not end in marriage, but rather a breakup, under this view, each party is now slightly less whole when they enter into their next relationship since they have already dated someone else before. This is not to say that emotional baggage does not exist, but this view increasingly dehumanizes a person as their number of previous partnerships increases. This can create a deep sense of guilt and shame along with the other negative feelings that already accompany a breakup, as the relationship failed to become the ideal situation. Thus, they are made to feel as if they are a lesser person for their future spouse (Klement et al., 2022).

This view extends beyond merely dating relationships. If merely kissing a former partner means you have less to give your future spouse, any kind of sexual act, consensual or not, would carry the same mental weight (Griffin, 2023; Klement et al., 2022). Whether or not an action is consensual is not addressed in purity culture, it merely addresses whether sexual activity is right or wrong, labelling all sexual activity within the context of a marriage as good and right, and all outside of the context of marriage as sinful and wrong. This mindset does not account for the

crime of marital rape. It also provides an opportunity to instill deep-rooted shame and self-blame into the victim of any sexual abuse or assault, crimes in which the victim is not at fault, because it was sexual activity occurring outside of a marriage context. Some of the most notable reasons victims of sexual violence do not report their experiences are due to self-blaming, internal shame, and fear of being shamed (Murphy-Oikonen et al., 2022). By imparting this purity culture worldview from such a young age, it functions as a sort of pre-emptive intervention tactic to reporting clergy sexual misconduct. However, the potentially detrimental purity culture worldview can be viewed as more of a self-imposed, distorted-doctrinally influenced code of silence. These principles merely set the stage for the code of silence that is enacted among church leadership when someone attempts to report an act of clergy sexual misconduct to the church.

The Church's Current Response to Clergy Sexual Misconduct

Crimes of a sexual nature are one of the least often prosecuted and have high attrition rates, resulting in victims often feeling that there is no point in coming forward about their experiences, which results in these crimes being some of the most infrequently reported (Hovey et al., 2020). Accordingly, whenever a crime of a sexual nature is reported, it is important to be taken seriously and treated delicately so as to not discourage the current victim, or any future victims, from pursuing justice. The beginning stages of when an accusation of clergy sexual misconduct is initially brought to light within a church contains several paths the church can choose in how to address said accusation. Although there are many positive options, when a church is operating under a code of silence, there is a distinct bias towards a variety of negative options.

Leader and Church Self-Preservation

If a victim comes forth about their clergy sexual misconduct to another leader (not the offender) within their church, the leader may initially focus on self-preservation of their reputation instead of helping the victim and bringing the offender to justice. An intense loyalty to the church, offender, or both, effectively results in the code of silence being activated. A persecution mindset makes the leader view those who are not members of the church as outsiders, and thus focus on silencing the detrimental information to not give the outsiders claims to use against them (Navarrette, 2022). However, in this case, the detrimental information is not a mere statistic or unfortunate fact, but rather a hurting victim's real, raw, and painful story that they entrusted with another person. Nevertheless, if the leader who received the report has an increased focus on how the church will be perceived if these accusations are made public knowledge, this often leads to forced silence on part of the victim.

There are different tactics used to force silence upon the victim. They may be bribed into keeping quiet, whether with money or material goods. In a recent case, a pastor in Colorado sexually abused a 12-year-old girl several times in her own home, bribing her with money, food, and a PlayStation 5 to not tell anyone (Prentzel, 2022). The victim may also be verbally or physically threatened into silence. Robert Carter, a pastor in Houston currently facing charges of continuous sexual assault of a child that continued for over a decade, initially bribed the girl with candy when she was little. However, as she got older, he moved to threatening his victim, stating, "I'm going to make your life a living hell" (CNN Newssource, 2023, para. 5). The offender may be transferred to a different position within the organization to limit contact with the victim, but not terminated, in exchange for silence. Although not in a church, but rather a Christian university, Keith Anderson was named in two separate lawsuits of sexual misconduct towards employees at Liberty University. He was also a pastor at this time. After these incidents were

reported, Anderson was not removed from the university, but instead transferred from his position as Dean of Students to his current position as Executive Director of Student Health and Wellness (Quintana, 2023). If the person was raised in the church, leadership may also tap into the guilt and shame imbedded from purity culture teachings in an attempt to make the victims blame themselves for the clergy sexual misconduct rather than the offender. For decades at Bob Jones University, another well-known Christian college, officials told sexual assault victims that they were at least partially to blame for their experiences, even encouraging victims to repent for their part of the abuse (Pérez-Peña, 2014). Overall, victims in each of these scenarios were silenced for an extended period of time.

Unqualified Counseling

The church's code of silence can also be upheld under the guise of being helpful and supportive of victims. Often, churches may offer some version of counseling services. Whether it is labeled Christian counseling, spiritual healing groups, or biblical soul care, the function is the same, to provide struggling Christians a way to approach their personal problems from a biblical perspective (Lelek, 2021). Finding support from people with similar belief structures is not a negative; the issue arises when those without expertise in psychology, counseling, or therapy attempt to administer care they are not qualified to give. Without adequate training in how to address sexual assault, abuse, or harassment, the counselor may give advice that contributes to the severe emotional damage the victim has already experienced (Lopez & Koss, 2018; Tchividjian, 2018). Since the counselor is also not trained in professional counseling, there are no official guidelines to follow, which could result in the victim being placed in an unsafe or uncomfortable situation without expressed consent, such as unexpected confrontation with the offender. A church may also only support and endorse counseling that is administered within the

church. This goes back to the persecution mindset from the code of silence, in not giving outsiders information to use against the church.

During counseling sessions, the overseer may reference distorted purity culture themes of chastity and modesty. In bringing up concepts of the victim's sexual purity, the counselor can effectively communicate that the victim's purity is now tainted due to the sexual misconduct they endured. This plays into the existence of rape myths, particularly a victim being viewed as damaged goods, and perceived stigmatization against victims (Schmitt et al., 2021). Additionally, the misapplication of these concepts can allude that the victim played some part in allowing the clergy sexual misconduct to occur. A 2000 study showed that adult survivors of sexual abuse perceived the overall outcome of Christian counselling as much more negative than professional counseling, largely in part to feeling blamed for their continued distress (Fouque & Glachan, 2000). By misdirecting the causation of the misconduct onto the victim, and off the offender's deviant behavior, the self-blame, guilt, and shame the victim experiences regarding their now tainted sexual purity often leads them to staying silent about their clergy sexual misconduct.

Additionally, if the victim is receiving counseling from another leader in the church, they are potentially at risk for re-victimization. One study found that over 85% of people who experienced clergy sexual misconduct had been going to their offender for counseling or spiritual direction at the time the misconduct occurred (Garland & Argueta, 2010). As the unlicensed counseling has no professional guidelines or oversight, the relationship tends to take on more personal aspects rather than professional due to boundary ambiguity (Birchard, 2000). The distinct power imbalance between a leader and a congregant in a personal relationship can "create a context for harm if left unnoticed or unchecked" (Teater, 2022, para. 9). Furthermore, due to the prevalent existing power dynamic imbalance, questions or behaviors the victim may

typically find unusual may be written off under the guise that a pastor would never engage in misconduct (Garland & Argueta, 2010).

Forced Forgiveness

Another form of resolution attempted by the church is forced forgiveness and reconciliation. A common belief in the Christian church is that once someone has forgiven a wrong, it should not be brought up again, and especially not to other people or law enforcement (Reinecke, 2021). In this version of upholding a code of silence, the criminal act of clergy sexual misconduct is approached with the attitude that since both parties are believers in the same God, the victim should be able to forgive the offender, and continue with their life as if no wrongdoing had been committed, without reporting the crime to law enforcement (Vries, 2023). However, human feelings are increasingly more complex than they are made out to be in this scenario.

The offender's commission of both a moral and legal wrong is also ignored. By forcing forgiveness, the church is forcing the victim to stay silent about their experience under the guise of acting like a good Christian. Forcing reconciliation is going one step further. When two people are reconciled, it means there is not only forgiveness for a wrongdoing, but the relationship is restored to what it used to be (Cornell, 2012). This causes the victim to play the part of a non-victim when interacting with others, becoming unwillingly complicit in hiding their injustice from the rest of the world (Vries, 2023). As opposed to the freedom true forgiveness can bring, this forced reconciliation only serves to inspire further hurt and resentment for the victim.

Victim Impact

“You’re never gonna lose the anger / You just deal with it a different way / But you can’t talk about it / And isn’t that a kind of madness / To be living by a code of silence / When you’ve really got a lot to say”

(Joel, 1986)

"Insensitive treatment, reports that are not taken seriously, blaming victims for provoking attacks, and not reacting at all can be additively damaging to sexual assault victims" (Bruns et al., 2005, p. 7). The church's current responses align in some way with these situations that are so damaging to victims. As noted in *Code of Silence* by Billy Joel, the victim will build resentment, frustration, and anger towards not being able to properly receive justice. In an environment that is supposed to help make people feel less alone during trials of many kinds, the church's responses under a code of silence result in a victim feeling uncared for, belittled, and alone. Being in a church and engaging in prayer and worship has been shown to help decrease symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), all symptoms common in the aftermath of an instance of sexual assault or abuse (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011). However, when a church, a place where people are supposed to find comfort after and during any difficult circumstance, is more concerned about maintaining appearances than providing that comfort to a hurting victim, those benefits cannot be reaped.

Some victims draw near to God and their church in the aftermath of their experience, searching to make meaning and purpose out of their trauma. However, after such an intensely traumatic experience, a victim may withdraw from God and religion completely, expressing anger and resentment (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011; Holton & Snodgrass, 2023). A key factor identified in whether a victim will grow stronger in their faith or break away is their church's response, and this is even more true for victims of clergy sexual misconduct as their experience happened within the context of the church (Fouque & Glachan, 2000). After a traumatic experience, a person enters into a vulnerable state. If they receive disdain regarding their trauma they did not cause, the toll it will take is devastating. Despite the evident need for a strong

support system, the church does not often provide an environment conducive to the restoration process of survivors of clergy sexual misconduct. If the importance of upholding a code of silence, and thus belittling a victim to maintain appearances, takes precedence over expressing the love of God within a church, there is a clear lack in the proper application of the biblical principles of justice, accountability, community, and forgiveness.

Restorative Justice Principles

A secular concept that upholds the principles of justice, accountability, community, and forgiveness is restorative justice. Although there is a lack of a comprehensive formal definition for restorative justice, the definition most commonly accepted is “a process whereby parties with a stake in a specific offense collectively resolve how to deal with the aftermath of the offense and its implications for the future” (Marshall, 1999, p. 5). Restorative justice is a practice that has existed under this name for decades, emerging into the contemporary mainstream in the 1970s, although the theory and principles have been around for centuries dating back to biblical times (Marsh, 2017). It was originally modernly proposed as an alternative option to the more commonplace adversarial retributive justice system whose main focus is on punishment for the committed offense (Armstrong, 2014; Leung, 1999; Wenzel et al., 2008).

Retributive justice views crime as harm done to the law and to the state because a rule was broken, zeroing in on legal guilt above all other kinds (Clark, 2008; Leung, 1999). A common phrase used is ensuring offenders get their ‘just deserts’, meaning the offenders getting what they deserve, punishment, for the wrongdoing they committed for justice to be reestablished (Wenzel et al., 2008). In this process, justice is sought through a criminal trial that is adversarial in nature with limited victim involvement, for the purpose of bringing pain to the offender to provide the victim with vindication (Holmes, 2021). There is almost no focus on

reconciliation between the offender and victim because social or moral guilt is not often deeply addressed.

Alternatively, restorative justice aims to hold the person responsible accountable for their actions and for them to make up for what they did (Daly, 2006). To ensure the people responsible are held accountable, restorative justice focuses on an open dialogue between the participants, mainly the victim and the responsible person, but also others who were affected (Koss, 2014; Lopez & Koss, 2018). The open dialogue allows for questions and answers that can provide greater satisfaction to each participant when the conference is complete. An optional step in this process is the apology-forgiveness cycle. Although this step is not required, it has been shown to be beneficial in improving satisfaction. Although the practice of restorative justice originally found its basis in biblical principles, with Mennonites being large proponents of the practice, it has become more popular, and removed from the spiritual realm, in recent years (Davis & Baliga, 2017). However, it still maintains the foundational pillars of community, accountability, and forgiveness.

Community Support

The community aspect is shown through support. Instead of going through an impersonal trial, with a judge and a jury who have no personal stake in the parties' long-term well-being, restorative justice allows victims to have an increased say in the proceedings in a non-adversarial environment (Koss et al., 2006). After a traumatic interpersonal experience, victims often feel a lack of control in their life and a lack of trust in those around them (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011). Giving the victim an increased voice in the proceedings increases their sense of control, which can help them to feel safer and increase their trust in the process (Buchholz et al., 2023).

The involvement of people who care is another influential component. Throughout what can be a difficult process, consistent presence and support from loved ones shows a victim they are cared for and valued (Naylor, 2010). Victims also receive social validation through the involvement of their family, friends, and general community (Koss, 2014). Many victims fear not being believed when they come forward with their experiences, so validation is crucial.

The victim's friends, family, and community often experience negative impacts as well. They may not know how to properly support the victim as they go through processing the events that transpired. Those close to the victim can often make the victim's grief their own or may choose to deal with the events in an opposite fashion and refuse to acknowledge that anything happened. They may also feel unsafe that a similar situation could happen to them. In a similar manner, the offender's family, friends, and community will be shaken as well by discovering a person they were close to and trusted committed such a heinous act. They may feel confused at how the person they thought they knew so well could do something like this (Koss et al., 2006). The open dialogue provided by restorative justice gives those connected to both the victim and offender the space to express those thoughts, questions, and concerns as well.

Accountability

Restorative justice also acknowledges that the availability of support for both the victim and the offender does not negate the necessity of acknowledging that a wrong has been committed. The restorative process still involves consequences for the offender's illegal actions. A lack of accountability makes the offender view the perceived costs of sexual offenses seem lesser than the perceived benefits, which often leads to continued offending (Bibik, 2020). In restorative justice, not only is the offender held accountable in the moment, but for a sustained

amount of time afterwards through parole-board-like check-ins to make sure the offender is continuing to take steps towards restoration (Koss et al., 2006).

The open dialogue can help humanize the process to the offender as well. Often in sexual crimes, the offender does not view their victim as a person, but rather reduces them down to the mere physical aspects that could give them sexual gratification, and as a means for the offender to exert power and control (McCabe & Wauchope, 2005). When dehumanization occurs, people can commit many kinds of atrocities with fewer qualms because when the value of a human's life is so belittled to the point of almost non-existence, they do not view their actions as affecting another real person (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016). When an offender is forced to confront the consequences of their actions, as well as the larger group of people who experienced the ripple effect of their offenses, the true gravity of the situation brings about a somber sense of reality.

Apology-Forgiveness Cycle

Forgiveness is generally understood by psychologists to be a “conscious, deliberate decision to release feelings of resentment or vengeance toward a person or group who has harmed you, regardless of whether they actually deserve your forgiveness” (*Forgiveness Definition—What Is Forgiveness*, 2023, para.1). This is why although the third key aspect is the apology-forgiveness cycle, it is equally as important to note that the cycle is not a mandated aspect of the restorative justice process. This is due to the fact that forced forgiveness is much less effective at reducing negative feelings, and sometimes even amplifies them, as opposed to when forgiveness is chosen voluntarily (Holmes, 2021). Mandating forgiveness in restorative justice undermines the victim. The victim's focus throughout the process should be on restoring their emotional losses as much as possible, not explicitly forgiveness. Additionally, mandating forgiveness as an outcome makes the victim feel invalidated, and their feelings of anger as

unjustified (Armour & Umbriet, 2018). When forgiveness is chosen voluntarily, there is a higher likelihood of it being authentic and thus more satisfying than if forgiveness were mandated from the beginning (Armour & Umbriet, 2004). Although the goal of restorative justice is to provoke a positive shift in and among the victim, offender, and community, to require forgiveness is to be counterproductive to that goal.

Biblical Basis for Restorative Justice Principles

Even though restorative justice has been shown to exist without ties to biblically-sound Christian principles, their removal has reduced the processes' effectiveness that could be greatly heightened with the reinstatement of those principles. A 2008 study found that Christians who went through restorative justice programs received heightened benefits as compared to non-Christians including increased feelings of warmth and compassion for others, increased empathy, and increased forgivingness toward themselves, others, and God (Armour et al., 2008). This is likely due to the fact Christianity inherently aligns with the pillars of restorative justice, although that label is not often used within the church. In biblical Christianity, there is an understanding and importance placed on the concept of community beyond individualization (Sarre & Young, 2011). When reduced to the principles of support, accountability, and forgiveness, the common threads among the concepts become evident.

Community Support

A biblically-based Christian church contains a well-connected community within the church, as Christians are instructed multiple times within the Bible to support each other through various trials in life. One such verse is Galatians 6:2 (New International Version, 2011), where Christians are commanded to, "carry each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Clearly, it is the desire of God for those struggling to not go through those struggles

alone. Proverbs 31:8-9 (New International Version, 2011) also says, “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly.”

The Christian’s call is to not merely a supporting presence, but an advocate for those without a voice, such as victims of clergy sexual misconduct who are suffering under the code of silence.

Christians also recognize the value of human life. If a loving God took the time and care to create a person out of nothing, and breathe life into them, he clearly values them, and instructs that other people should value them as well. Since that loving God created every person in all of existence, past, present, and future, all people’s lives should be recognized as having value.

Providing support for a survivor recognizes and reaffirms their humanity through a demonstration of love, which explains why sexual assault survivors who had access to and utilized a social support system, such as the one found within the Bible regarding the Christian church, reported lowered symptoms of PTSD (Bryant-Davis et al., 2011).

Accountability

The process for handling a wrongdoing committed between two individuals who claim to be believers is outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 (New International Version, 2011). This process initially begins with a dialogue between the wrongdoer and the wronged. If the issue is not able to be resolved in this manner, the process is moved forward to a small group of other people being involved as witnesses. If the issue is still not able to be resolved, then the Bible instructs to tell it to the church. The Bible does not instruct that if a genuine wrongdoing has been committed, the victim just accept it and move on without resolution. In 1 Corinthians 5 (New International Version, 2011), it is made clear that sexual immorality defiles the church, and that those that commit such an act should be removed. While there is a place for grace, there is also a place to address blatant wrongdoing to ensure it does not continue and harm anyone else further.

An attitude shift of the offender does not negate the deep pain the victim underwent during the clergy sexual misconduct, and the pain they go through daily in trying to heal from the effects of the clergy sexual misconduct. Criminal moral wrongdoings lead to negative consequences, even when those wrongdoings are forgiven; the biblical narrative of the life and death of Jesus Christ illustrates that. The narrative states that Jesus died for all sins to be forgiven, and that if a person believes in Jesus, their sins will be forgiven, and they will be allowed to dwell in Heaven after they die. However, despite sins, for example, lying, being forgiven, a lie will still result in a breach of trust and consequences will be implemented for that behavior, whether or not that offender was a Christian (Broughton, 2011).

Forgiveness

Christianity also speaks to the importance of forgiveness. Although this may seem like a contradiction to restorative justice's principle of unforced forgiveness, this is not so.

Unforgiveness is the emotional consequence of a perceived distance between desired justice and the victim's sense of injustice that can lead to resentment, bitterness, anger, and hatred (Armour & Umbreit, 2004). Engaging in forgiveness allows a victim to relinquish the negative power the offense and the offender have over them, while simultaneously not condoning or excusing the offense or offender. Forgiveness does not pretend that there is nothing to be aware of and watch out for (Tracy, 1999).

Forgiveness is not dependent on the offender apologizing, but rather it is between the victim and God (Reinecke, 2021). The biblical view of forgiveness shows it is designed to bring peace to the victim by relieving the weight anger, depression, and resentment bestows (Escher, 2013). However, as no one can force another to forgiveness, this process must be undertaken out of the victim's own willingness and on the victim's own timeline.

Forgiveness is also not an equivalent to a requirement for reconciliation in Christianity. Even Scripture recognizes that some offenses result in relationships being irreparably damaged, and thus reconciliation is not required. One such offense is adultery. The Bible allows for few reasons for divorce yet recognizes adultery as such a hurtful offense and deep breach of trust, that the marriage relationship is not required to be restored or maintained (Matthew 5:31-32; New International Version, 2011). If the marriage covenant, which God created to be the most holy covenant humans can enter into, can be broken on the grounds of improper sexual conduct, a mere friendship or mentor relationship not governed under a covenant is not required to be reconciled for the same reason. God does not coerce the vulnerable into forgiveness or reconciliation, but rather defends them and heals them. Thus, a biblical, God-honoring church must also do the same (Vries, 2023).

Morality's Impact

Restorative justice not only aligns with the biblical principles found in Christianity, but logic in fact necessitates the unchanging standard of Christianity. For the process of restorative justice to begin, there must first be a standard of morality. A belief in the Christian religion contains the presupposition that there is a God, and by nature, that God is the objective standard for morality, and that He is the one who imbued humanity with such morality (Williams, 2002). This is critical to the processes of justice and forgiveness as these processes both begin with the commission of a moral wrong, which brings about the need for a standard of objective morality (DiFonzo et al., 2020; Pérez-Navarro, 2022; Tännsjö, 2007). The foundation for forgiveness and for justice has no standing with relative morality as there is no true basis for saying whether a moral wrong has been committed. These fundamental truths found in Christianity are the basis

upon which many of the concepts in the world rest. Thus, when the deeper fundamental truths are removed from restorative justice, its essence is stripped away (Davis & Baliga, 2017).

Implementing Restorative Justice Principles in the Church

Accountability

Enforcing accountability can appear in multiple forms. First, the crime or alleged crime should be reported to law enforcement. It is not the church's responsibility to determine legal guilt, but rather that position is reserved for officers of the law. It says in Romans 13:1 (New International Version, 2011), "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." The governing authority over criminal activity, whether suspected or confirmed, is law enforcement, so it is a biblical mandate for the church to formally report any instances of clergy sexual misconduct (Tchividjian, 2018).

Even after handing formal legal proceedings over to the proper authorities, the church still has a responsibility to deal internally with the crime or alleged crime. The accused's position should be evaluated and further involvement in the church and church activities at least temporarily suspended while the investigation takes place (Pooler, 2017; Tchividjian, 2018). Continuing to give a person full access to their victim pool is both neglectful and counterintuitive to ensuring no further accusations are made due to a similar situation.

The heart of abuse is the "misuse of power to control another person through unjustified force or coercion" (Teater, 2022, para.10). Thus, to counteract this misuse of power, there should be checks and balances on said power, both internally between leadership and externally from leadership to congregation (Pooler, 2017). Due to the high relational levels needed to be proficient at the job, there is also boundary ambiguity between a personal and professional role

that comes with the role of being a spiritual leader (Birchard, 2000). Church leadership who are not qualified to give counseling should not be allowed to intervene in any sort of formal capacity. Any formal counseling or therapy should be left to those trained and licensed to deal with these matters. Establishing boundaries between a pastoral role and a counselor role, and ensuring those limitations are enforced, brings clarity to that inherent ambiguity (Erikson-Pearson, 2005; Teater, 2022).

An additional form of accountability is allowing for community input into the dialogue by informing the congregation of what occurred. By maintaining transparency, the church is able to address all of those who experienced negative impacts from the clergy sexual misconduct, not just the person who physically experienced the clergy sexual misconduct firsthand. Since those who commit clergy sexual misconduct are often spiritual leaders that others look up to, the emergence of any poor behavior can quite negatively impact how the church, and even Christianity as a whole, is viewed. Through the openness, honesty, and transparency required to admit a person in a leadership role acted so gravely against the moral standards held by the church, the members of the congregation can make an informed decision on their personal next steps (Pooler, 2017; Tchividjian, 2018).

Whole Person Approach

Another key aspect for the church to remember when dealing with a victim of clergy sexual misconduct is the comprehensiveness of the nature of the event. When clergy sexual misconduct occurs, it not only affects a person physically and sexually, but emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually as well. Their relationships with friends, family, and partners often suffer; their job performance may decrease, which in turn could negatively impact their financial situation (Koss et al., 2017; RAINN, 2024). The impact of clergy sexual misconduct

reaches far beyond the mere sexual and physical aspects. Although any formal counseling should be abstained from other than licensed counselors, due to the issue being within the leadership with the church, there will still be interactions between the victim and other church leadership. When these interactions occur, the victim should not be blamed for any part of the clergy sexual misconduct. In the specific context for those whose experience was sexual abuse, meaning they were a minor when the misconduct occurred, they may experience even deeper shame due to a lack of understanding of what exactly was done to them (Erikson-Pearson, 2005).

Promoting Self-Acceptance and Self-Compassion

Although forgiveness of the offender can be helpful to victims, the church should not try to force it, and instead allow the victim to address this on their own timeline. However, the church, through being supportive of the victim, can help facilitate self-acceptance. Some literature refers to this term as self-forgiveness instead, but based on previously defined terms that an act of forgiveness must first begin with the commission of a moral wrong, self-acceptance is better fitting as the victim did not commit a moral wrong against themselves during their clergy sexual misconduct experience (DiFonzo et al., 2020; Hughes & Warmke, 2022). For victims to begin to mentally cope with the trauma of clergy sexual misconduct, they must first acknowledge that they were not the problem or cause of their experience, but rather the offender was fully responsible for their deviant actions (Reinecke, 2021). Accepting oneself as a whole person despite negative experiences is crucial for mental health. However, self-acceptance also involves awareness and reflection on one's experiences, which can lead to rumination and self-criticism (Crapolicchio et al., 2020).

To combat the negative effects of self-acceptance, it must be coupled with self-compassion. Self-compassion is a way of viewing oneself and one's negative experiences with

self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness to enable greater emotional resilience and increased mental and emotional well-being. When a victim is able to address their negative thoughts and experiences with tact, it results in an ability to be aware of those thoughts without rumination, lessened self-criticism, and lowered feelings of isolation. Each of these in turn contribute to decreased shame surrounding the negative experience, fewer PTSD symptoms, lower levels of depression and anxiety, and greater overall life satisfaction (Bhuptani & Messman, 2021; Williamson, 2023). In this way, self-acceptance and self-compassion are the antidotes to shame.

Conclusion

Victims of clergy sexual misconduct are often suppressed by a code of silence which employs twisted teachings from a purity culture narrative, bribery, threats, unqualified counseling, and forced forgiveness. This loss of clear focus on biblically aligned principles has resulted in a degradation of the church's pillars of community, accountability, and forgiveness. However, by utilizing the concepts of these principles found in restorative justice, and practically applying them through a biblical lens as a response to victims of clergy sexual misconduct, the church can drastically improve its current narrative, restoring its integrity. The code of silence will be broken.

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