

Guardians of the Flock: Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock (Acts 20:28)

I. Introduction - Psalm 82:3-4

- A. Churches ought to be the safest & best places in society. A place to learn about loving God and caring for others. For me, this was the case - it was apple juice and animal crackers and flannelgraphs and youth group in a church I loved, that cared well for me. This has been the experience for many.
- B. Sadly, this is not the case for all - and as a church, we need to make sure we do everything we can to make the church the safest place for boys and girls, men and women, and vulnerable people.
- C. Setting the scene: The prevalence of abuse in society
 1. In a world where 38% of girls 16% of boys will be sexually abused before they turn 18. Where 1 of 4 women and 1 of 6 men have been abused, surely this is an area where Jesus desires us to focus the gospel for healing, and for leaders and church members to be aware and to protect those within their care and to be a source of hope and encouragement to those outside of the church.
 2. Abuse is a betrayal. Most of those sexually abused know their abuser. Only 7% of abusers are strangers. 34% are family members. 59% are acquaintances. Average age of disclosure is 52 - the trauma is so overwhelming.
- D. Good: **Psalm 82:3-4** - "Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked."
- E. From the **Baptist Faith & Message, 2000**: "In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick.
- F. The call to protect and defend the vulnerable
 1. Call to **Pastors** - Acts 20:28-29 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;
 2. Call to **Christians** - 1 Thessalonians 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.
- G. To Build a Culture that Cares Deeply
 1. SCREEN - Adopt a careful vetting process for all those working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. Screening should include applications, interviews, references, and background checks. Due diligence. Growth pressures = grow safely.
 2. TRAIN - Provide initial and ongoing training for staff, volunteers, and church members that raises awareness and shares effective actions to

help prevent incidents of abuse in the church. I know the subject is unpleasant - the mind can only endure so much - but what is the cost if we fail and someone is harmed?

3. PROTECT - Create and implement policies that protect children, youth, and vulnerable adults from grooming, and abuse. Policies that inhibit and confound the efforts of predators and groomers and their ways of preying and creating safe conditions for wicked behavior.
4. Shepherding responses: REPORT - Have a written plan in place to communicate with both the church and appropriate government authorities in the event of an abuse allegation. Nail this or there will be trouble. Don't leave things up in the air. Plan and follow the plan. Don't base response on pressure from non-employed leaders, or who someone is or how much they give or how respected they are in the community. You have to report.
5. CARE - Identify and offer resources that will provide victims, survivors, and their families with options for ongoing care. Be ready to listen and to act when they speak up.

II. Seeing: Defining & Understanding Abuse

- A. Illustration: My father used to work for IBM, and inside the standard toolbox was a small screwdriver, it had a little pocket pen clip on it, it was so small. And apparently so many repair techs had broken this screwdriver that they started printing a phrase on the side of them that read, "Not a Chisel or a Prybar" to remind people not to abuse them.
- B. Definition of abuse
 1. Abuse – any action, or lack of action, that endangers or harms a person's physical, emotional, psychological health or development.
 2. Sexual – sexual contact upon a person without their consent or is upon a person who is incapable of giving consent. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal and physical conduct of sexual nature, which is unlawful under federal and state law.
 3. Spiritual Abuse - When an individual or an organization uses spiritual authority and/or scripture to coerce or harm someone.
- C. The devastating effects of sexual abuse on an individuals
 1. Pastor Justin Holcomb says that the violation of personal intimacy and boundaries brings a disgrace that grinds people down, leaving them feeling lonely, filthy, worthless, repulsive, hopeless, and unwanted - sometimes for a lifetime.
- D. This is why churches need to Train, Screen, Protect, Report, and Care.

III. God's Heart is for the Vulnerable

- A. He has compassion on the oppressed and mistreated: Woman at Simon's house: Do you see this woman? God's visitation to Hagar (trafficked, plot to steal her baby.)
- B. God's example is to protect and deliver

1. Exodus 2:23b Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. **24** And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. **25** God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.
 2. Exekiel 34: I am against the shepherds
 - C. Emphasizing the value and dignity of every human being - Matthew 10:31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.
- IV. Acting: The Role of this Church and Believers
- A. Care by creating an Environments of Care: Creating an environment where victims feel heard and supported. Talking about the reality of sexual abuse. Being ready for disclosure, which comes from a place of deep vulnerability.
 - B. Care by breaking the silence: Encouraging open dialogue and breaking the stigma. People are wounded in all kinds of ways and all kinds of places - schools, church, summer camps, sports teams, hospital, friends, dating relationships, in marriages, in families. Abuse happens more than you think. The more we name it, the more people will feel safe to disclose.
 - C. Care by equipping leaders and members: Training in recognizing, preventing, and addressing sexual abuse.
 - D. We also care by thinking deeply about sexual abuse and what justice looks like. Avoid easy answers and shallow theology when talking with those who have been hurt. We take great care with the idea of forgiveness. Forgiveness is important, but we should avoid the misapplication of forgiveness to the unrepentant. We should holding abusers accountable for their actions. Understand how the law works and that sexual abuse is a crime we have no right to dismiss or cover it up. Understanding that law enforcement doesn't always act but the church is free to act.
 - E. Understanding the urgency of reporting abuse to appropriate authorities - Romans 13:2-4
- V. A People who work for Healing and Restoration
- A. Addressing the wounds of abuse with God's love and compassion. The importance act of bearing witness.
 - B. Providing counseling and support for victims and survivors. Using a benevolence or fellowship fund to help.
 - C. Being a friend who is willing to help survivors to recover voice, agency, and rebuild identity.
- VI. You may not be directly involved in care, but you can be part of helping create a culture that cares by knowing about Train, Screen, Protect, Care, and Report.
- VII. We should commit to caring for everyone God entrusts to this church.
- A. The importance of protecting the vulnerable
 1. Human Dignity demands it.
 2. Our spiritual responsibility demands we care for our neighbor.
 3. Sexual abuse is Anti-Great Commission: Allowing harm to little ones.
 - B. The Church should be a place of protection for the vulnerable and a place to find help within the community.

- C. Call to Commitment and Action
 - 1. Call to Commitment for leaders to support internal reforms.
 - 2. Call to Support for people as leaders work and train.
 - D. Call to Action for all to care for the abused and work for a safer church.
- VIII. Prayer for the Vulnerable and the Abusers
- A. Prayer for vigilance in the church
 - B. Prayer for church leaders to be brave
 - C. Prayer for conviction of sin and divine protection for the church.
 - D. Prayer for families and for lives torn apart, for healing.
 - E. Prayer for the protection and healing of those affected by abuse
 - F. Prayer for the repair of broken systems, and for good systems to be built. While we remain, we pray in hope for righteous laws, functioning systems, and proper action steps.
 - G. Praying for the repentance of abusers and for justice for those harmed.