

Understanding Sexual Abuse

– by Shawn Corkery

The subject of abuse has skyrocketed in the Australian consciousness over the past few years. It seems every month another scandal, court case, or testimony fills the airwaves. Such media saturation shocks us, and can eventually make us numb to the destruction accrued in so many people's lives. We may begin to wonder: is all of this real and will it ever end?

No matter how overwhelming it may seem, abuse will not go away. The cork on denial has been lifted off (including balanced and unbalanced responses), and will probably continue to saturate the media until our society becomes tired of hearing horrific stories.

Sadly, the secular world has little power to stop abuse or to provide powerful healing for victims. Even with the current media exposure, news and entertainment cannot eradicate the problem. Social service agencies can provide some immediate help for victims, but afford them no long term solutions.

The good news for Christians (victims or not) is that we have a healing answer! Though not quick or simplistic, we have the real capacity to stop and heal abuse. The answer is in the person and power of Jesus Christ. Unlike the world which must rely on human willingness to end abuse, followers of Christ have the One greater than themselves to help curb and eradicate abusive urges. He is also One outside of our pain and despair who can lead us out of the mire of destruction accrued from abuse. Jesus, whose divine nature and desire is to redeem humanity, can heal victims as well as abusers. Victimisation can come to an end through Christ's intervention.

Defining Abuse

To help apply the Lord's power to this problem, we need to understand abuse better. It's important to have working definitions. (For the sake of this article, I will be specifying abuse done toward children). Childhood abuse, in all forms, can be defined as: any act of power that is forced upon a child that leaves destruction. A good image for this would be a weapon (a bullet, spear, arrow, etc). A weapon's capacity for destruction can be determined by the amount of power behind it. A weapon first makes

contact with a person's body at the skin – our outside defense. The weapon then makes its way inside the body where it leaves destruction (tears flesh, breaks bones.) If a wound is not addressed properly, or protected only by a bandage, infection will eventually set in. Abuse is like a weapon to the soul (body and spirit). It's any act – physical, sexual, emotional, spiritual, or neglect – with a force of power behind it, which goes beyond our own personal safety and boundary and enters our soul where it causes destruction. Because secrecy is usually needed for abuse to occur, most wounds go untreated, and becomes infected with shame, self-hatred, and spiritual oppression.

The power behind the act (or weapon) is the key factor. Abuse is measured not by the act itself, but by the destruction it leaves. It's very easy for adults to minimize their own childhood experiences of abuse by saying "Oh, it wasn't that bad. A lot of people had it worse than me." The problem is focusing on the event, not on the effects that it left in their hearts and souls. It would be like saying "I was only wounded by a pin prick, "but the pin entered the body and punctured major nerves and arteries.

Sexual Abuse

One of the most devastating forms of power inflicted on children is sexual abuse. Molestation is: any act of sexual power (overt or covert) that is forced upon a child under eighteen years old. For too long our culture has defined sexual abuse in terms of genital contact. Sexual abuse can encompass any act of sexual power – from intercourse to voyeurism (being sexually leered at). Children were never designed by God to contain within their souls (and bodies) any form of sexual energy. This sexual power, whether from adults or older children (explicit or subtle), can leave different forms or intensities of destruction. This is manifested in how a child feels about his/her body, sense of protection, ability to trust, and personal safety.

Many adults who experienced sexual abuse as teenagers feel guilty and personally responsible, especially if pleasurable feelings arose in them. Even more devastating can be the sad truth that legitimate longings for love, concern, and attention were met perversely by the abuser. Adults are solely responsible for their sexual energies and are accountable to not misuse their power by crossing boundaries. This is true no matter how old the child or adolescent is, how they were acting toward the adult, or what the child's emotional needs were.

Healing

Defining abuse is much easier than summarizing the process of healing. That's because abuse affects every facet of one's being and there is no simplistic process to the healing of the soul. At the same time, healing is simple. It involves applying the restorative power of Jesus to the destruction, and calling the victim to live out of his or her true personhood.

The wound

I see healing of the soul as two simultaneous processes. The first is allowing the Presence of Christ to enter the injured places – the memories, feelings, and beliefs that formed around the wound. An abusive experience untreated will have some form of defense around it. It can be a conscious or unconscious mechanism attempting to keep unbearable pain to a minimum, but the defense ironically keeps the wound from being healed. The Holy Spirit's desire is to enter the memory (the wound) and begin to heal the damage. This usually involves a time of grieving over the event. Most victims need a "season" of mourning the fact that a very bad thing happened. This is especially true when the person has repressed or suppressed memories and feelings.

Inner Lies

The victim also needs to renounce self-hatred, inner vows, and faulty beliefs kept inside which work to deny the true pain. As these things are recognized by the victim and given to Christ, He takes them into himself on the cross where they have no power to injure again. With a consistent practice of bringing memories and feelings into the presence of the Lord, Jesus can begin to fill them in with truth, joy, objectivity, authority, and victory. The memory doesn't disappear-Jesus doesn't rewrite history – but the destructive residue left from the force of the abuse is cleansed out and replaced with his presence and healing intention.

Defenses

The second process of healing (ironically the area we wish not to face) is our defensive and/or sinful reactions to abuse. These are areas of personal responsibility. When fearlessly and humbly faced, the victim can choose to give them up. These defense mechanisms once served a purpose in childhood by covering the wounds. But like a bandage, they have outlived their purpose and must be removed. Without their removal, the Lord will

not have complete access to the injury. His desire to heal will be hindered, and we will continue to use the defenses to block future pain.

Some of these defenses are: denial (choosing not to remember or feel), passivity and fear, taking personal responsibility where that responsibility belonged to another, secrecy, inner vows, compulsive behaviors and addictions, and especially unforgiveness. Each of these areas must be soberly recognized in our lives and brought into the Lord's light. In the security of his presence, we can find the courage to let go of our old ways of defending ourselves.

The long road

In my own healing from sexual abuse, I spent many years waiting for the Lord to heal my wounding. I didn't recognize that while I was complaining that nothing was happening, Jesus was calling me to live out of my true self. I wanted to be released from the horror that was done to me, but God had other priorities. First, Jesus strengthened me to say no to sexual addiction and homosexual behavior. Then we dealt with my hatred and unforgiveness toward the perpetrator and family members. Next came a long season of grieving over the past and all the ramifications I had denied about the abuse. Finally, when we had worked long enough on my passivity and accepting my true masculinity, the "mother lode" of pain was taped into. The Lord directed the right time for the foul sexual energy and power to be bound out of my soul and body (with my willing participation). As I stayed open to him, the destruction came up and out and was brought to an end on the Cross!

God's love and faithfulness won't stop until he's finished with us. All the wounding from the past, along with inner anxiety, aching voids, and a nagging sense of "badness" can slowly be lifted out. To our amazement, like a sunrise overtaking darkness, the good things of life which were always an arms reach away can become our own. Life won't be perfect, but very good: filled with the joy and fruit of the Spirit. Best of all, we become holy and obedient people of God.

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