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The Depth of Depravity and the Remedy of an All-Embracing Life System: A Kuyperian Response to the Crisis of Sexual Abuse in the American Evangelical Church

by Joya S. Schreurs

In 1898, Abraham Kuyper delivered his renowned Stone Lectures to an audience at Princeton Theological Seminary, presenting a thorough defense and extensive application of Calvinism.¹ Kuyper referred to Calvinism as an “all-embracing life system,”² asserting that it spoke to each realm of human existence.³ This all-encompassing approach to religion was necessitated by the innate sinfulness of humankind that Kuyper articulated, describing the pervasive nature of evil present even among Christians.⁴

One century later, Kuyper’s message remains pertinent. In her acceptance of Calvin University’s 2021 Kuyper Prize, Rachael Denhollander, prominent lawyer and advocate for survivors of sexual abuse, quotes the Stone Lectures,⁵ saying, “When principles that run against your deepest convictions begin to win the day, then battle is your calling, and peace has become sin; you must, at the price

of dearest peace, lay your convictions bare before friend and enemy, with all the fire of your faith.”⁶ In the American Evangelical church, such a “battle” is needed to combat the ongoing crisis of sexual abuse, an epidemic yielding staggering statistics and disturbing accounts of corruption in the institution intended to be “the light of the world.”⁷ Only when the evangelical church in the United States acknowledges the sexual abuse within its walls as a fatal infestation and opposes it with a Kuyperian engagement of all creation’s spheres can the body of believers fulfill their commission to “praise God in the church and serve him in the world.”⁸ Unless otherwise specified, any references to churches or church authorities in this paper will indicate American institutions that broadly identify as evangelical—that is, Protestant and emphasizing personal Christian commitment.

The Scope and Causes of the Crisis and its Contrast to Kuyper’s Theology

According to the American Psychological Association, sexual abuse is “unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent.”⁹ On a global scale, approximately one out of

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four women and one out of six men will be sexually assaulted by age eighteen. Compared to those who have not undergone sexual abuse, survivors have a drastically higher propensity towards post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide.¹⁰ However, pastors estimate that only ten percent of their congregants are survivors, and sixty-four percent of pastors mention sexual abuse behind the pulpit once a year or less.¹¹ It follows that pastors generally disregard sexual abuse as irrelevant or otherwise unworthy of mention, when the global statistics contest that proposition.¹²

to underreporting and contested accounts, even the facts that are publicized from evangelical churches are dismal. For youth pastors specifically, 2008 to 2016 yielded over one hundred allegations of sexual assault. The most glorified institutions within the denomination also yield shocking stories of abuse: Over half of 166 students in 2014 who survived sexual assault on the campus of Bob Jones University said that staff discouraged them from pursuing legal action; among the churches of Reformed sect Sovereign Grace, numerous accounts of abuse among congregants and at the hands of

If Kuyper's theology and the principles that churches claim to hold are opposed to the nature of sexual abuse, it begs asking why such abuse is prevalent in these institutions.

While the #MeToo movement entered the public sphere in 2007 and grew into a global force in 2017,¹³ apart from disparate individual testimonies, no prominent institutions within the church faced challenges on the basis of sexual assault until as recently as 2021.¹⁴ In the summer of 2021, Russell Moore, a pastor and the former president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention—the largest evangelical denomination in the United States at 14.5 million members¹⁵—left the denomination, responding to what he called a “crisis of sexual abuse as it relates to the SBC Executive Committee.”¹⁶ In his letter to the denomination’s president, Moore detailed extensive mishandlings of abuse, including systemic repression of survivors’ testimonies, lack of consequences for perpetrators in church leadership, and general apathy, or even scorn, towards treating the issue.¹⁷

While mentioning sexual abuse in religious spheres typically recalls the centuries of crimes to minors at the hands of Catholic priests, in recent years evangelical denominations have met, if not surpassed, numbers within the Catholic church. The most recent yearly reports have shown over 260 documented cases against minors alone per year for all combined evangelical institutions and 228 from their Catholic counterpart.¹⁸ While statistics from both denominations, and for sexual abuse cases in general, are admittedly inaccurate due

clergy were allegedly quieted from the 1980s until 2014 and “treated” with manipulative pastoral counseling; evangelical giant Bill Gothard of Basic Life Principles was recently convicted of decades of sexual harassment, molestation, and assault; beloved apologist and pastor Ravi Zacharias was exposed as a serial abuser;¹⁹ and Christian TV personality Josh Duggar was found guilty of child molestation and pornography. The subliminal normalization of sexual violence bears troubling fruit in spheres outside of the church walls: Franklin Graham casually dismissed President Trump’s vulgar commentary of personally committing rape, and thirty-nine percent of evangelical voters said they were more likely to vote for Republican nominee Roy Moore in his race for the U.S. Senate after allegations of sexual assault were brought against him, due to his public defense by Jerry Falwell Jr., president of the major evangelical university Liberty University.²⁰

These appalling accounts of sin by Christian authorities are contrary to the position Kuyper takes on the inherent worth of all persons, especially its necessity to be upheld by those who claim God’s name. In the first of his Stone Lectures, Kuyper proclaims, “If Calvinism places our entire human life immediately before God, then it follows that all men or women, weak or strong, dull or talented, as creatures of God, as lost sinners, have no claim whatsoever to lord over one another and that we

stand as equals before God and consequently equal as man to man.” Therefore, he states, “Calvinism condemns not merely all open slavery and systems of caste, but all covert slavery of women and of the poor.”²¹ Sexual abuse by nature places victims, most often women, children, and others with heightened vulnerability, at the hand of their abusers, who often—as evidenced in the previous statistics and accounts—hold positions of prominence in churches. In situations of abuse, not only do survivors endure irreversible trauma, but perpetrators deny their “divine likeness” and the “equality of all men before God”²² that they are specifically commanded to honor. Kuyper describes the appropriately lofty standard God holds for those in church office. He says clergy easily become “domineering” when they detach from the mission of the church both the individual and congregational spiritual enrichment that ultimately yields to God.²³ As Kuyper stresses that believers are placed in all things “before the face of God,” those who corrupt their task of shepherding God’s people will not evade judgment permanently.²⁴

If Kuyper’s theology and the principles that churches claim to hold are opposed to the nature of sexual abuse, it begs asking why such abuse is prevalent in these institutions. Boz Tchividjian, human rights lawyer and law professor, asserts that the sexual abuse epidemic in churches is not a matter of coincidence, but logical consequence: The structure of such churches is “ideal” to foster such harm, he says. The grandson of Billy Graham and a long-time faculty member of Liberty University, Tchividjian is motivated not by sabotage but by a truthful critique of institutions he has willingly participated in for his entire life. The domineering power structures Kuyper identified are easily capable of executing and glossing over crimes, especially by shaming victims into silence by threats or making them believe they have taken part in sinful activity or will disrupt community by exposing what has been done to them.²⁵ Steven Mintz, historian at Columbia University, writes,

Sexual abuse flourishes in environments with unequal power relationships. Factors that allow sexual abuse to flourish include isolation and social disconnection, both of the abused and the abuser; emotionally needy and disempowered young

people; a self-validating ideology that rationalizes abuse; institutional settings that shield individuals from public scrutiny; and institutions intent on protecting their reputation and safeguarding themselves from liability—and that do so in part by decentralizing decision-making about crucial issues.²⁶

Such twisted hierarchies are fueled by ignorance of the oppressed, a withholding of information or resources that cements the unjust stations. In evangelical institutions, this stems from churches’ overall shame surrounding the topic of sex. Ironically, churches’ regard for the “sanctity of sex”²⁷ has made the topic difficult to broach, resulting in a lack of education and openness to discussion surrounding it. This is problematic, as children steeped in evangelical culture are raised without a complete understanding of what is inappropriate behavior for the adults around them to practice, and if they tragically fall prey to any kind of sexual assault, they lack the vocabulary to describe it. For adult survivors, even those who become more educated on sex through experiences outside of church, the shame of having been a part of a sexual act outside of marriage remains stifling.²⁸ In addition, viewing sexual sin to be the most severe infraction creates a stigma, which instead of being applied to serving justice on behalf of survivors, leads church bodies to refute the testimonies of survivors. Members become reluctant to believe their respected fellow congregants—or especially spiritual leaders—are capable of such evil.²⁹

In addition to corrupted echelons within churches and the patterns of nescience that uphold them, the political structure of churches invites a lack of accountability in cases of sexual assault. Arguably, one of the strengths evangelical churches present is their independence from a state governing body, as promoted by the separation of church and state Kuyper and most Protestant thinkers profess.³⁰ However, with the lack of legal presence comes an absence of an enforced system of treating or reporting infractions that do occur within churches, allowing countless cases of sexual abuse specifically to slip by unaddressed. Even in the 14.5-million-member Southern Baptist Convention, there exists no enforced system of accountability.³¹ Mary DeMuth, author, survivor of sexual abuse, and lifetime mem-

ber of the SBC, also states that the massive array of choices within evangelicalism—that is, the variety of church buildings and smaller denominations—“introduces the incentive for churches to protect themselves,” “covering things that are undesirable for the religious consumer.”³² Surely no institution, let alone churches that are supposed to present and encourage a moral authority, wants to be known for cases of assault that happened within their walls or among their congregants: “If you lose your constituency, you also lose your power, and you also lose your financial backing.”³³

Kuyper’s Vision for the Church

This perversion of the church, a place where the vulnerable are trodden upon for the protection of oppressors, is directly contradictory to Kuyper’s vision for the church: an organism, or body of believers, dependent on a sovereign God for its lifeblood and infusing the surrounding creation with the Gospel. Kuyper expresses that the church is organic in nature because, like any living thing, the life it generates mirrors what the organism is made of.³⁹ Therefore, churches that yield twisted power dynamics, silencing the weak and prioritizing worldly gain over

The early life of Denhollandar—lawyer, advocate, and survivor—exemplifies the church's failing to glorify God in this way.

A final factor to consider in the silencing of cases of sexual abuse within churches is the mentality of survivors. It is essential to understand the extreme manipulation victims of sexual assault are subjected to by their abusers, whether the crime occurs in or outside of a church setting. Predators often spend years grooming their victims, especially in cases of child abuse, bringing the victims to a point where they both trust and fear their abusers and therefore do not consider exposing the crimes to be an option.³⁴ In religious settings, this manipulation only worsens as it takes on a spiritual face. In his years of human rights law, Boz Tchividjian accounts cases of abuse in churches where abusers prayed or read scripture to their victims during the act of assault.³⁵ Carefully curating their public image, abusers are often viewed as “good Christian men” or “spiritual leaders.” To erase suspicion, many will appear to uphold high morals, including publicly condemning other acts of abuse.³⁶ Survivors face contradicting the pristine reputation of respected members of their congregation—or worse, church authorities—in bringing their abuse to the light. Having undergone abuse where they were rendered completely helpless, survivors also struggle to imagine their testimony having any effect.³⁷ Or yet more severe, survivors reckon with the reality that “to expose the flaws of the system is to invite the wrath of the system upon oneself.”³⁸

truth, can only be rooted in a “warped and twisted theology.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, efforts to deny or conceal abuse in the church cannot provide a cure for the sickness at its heart, but rather deepen and infect the wounds, spreading them throughout the church body. This corrupts the church’s engagement with the other areas of society as believers’ unjust actions corrupt their witness to the world.

Instead, Kuyper writes, the church’s calling is to nothing less than complete commitment to defending the vulnerable and undoing injustices that perpetuate harm in and outside of its walls.⁴¹ This is upheld by the church’s function as an institution as well as an organism. On an institutional level, the church operates as a structure independent from surrounding society to uphold its internal holiness and outer efficacy of witness. This intention is manifested in the church’s key purposes: to “preach the word, administer the sacraments, and to exercise discipline, and in everything to stand before the face of God.” When not fully “incorporated into Christ,” rooted in the pillars of Scripture, and allowing itself to be molded to Christ’s will, churches lose their verification to execute the former tasks.⁴² Instrumental in accomplishing this purpose are the leaders appointed to churches. Kuyper writes that those appointed to office have a special responsibility to dedicate themselves to the service of their congregation through their ultimate sub-

mission to God. Therefore, their aim is not to appease individuals, but to operate under a higher truth.⁴³ However, every believer's complete commitment to sacrificially model Christ is required. Kuyper writes,

Only when hundreds of candles are burning from one candelabrum, can the full brightness of the soft candlelight strike us, and then in the same way it is the communion of saints which has to unite the small lights of the single believers so that they may mutually increase their brightness, and Christ, walking in the midst of the seven candlesticks, may sacramentally purify the glow of their brightness to a still more brilliant fervor. Thus, the purpose of the church does not lie in us, but in God, and in the glory of his name.⁴⁴

The early life of Denhollander—lawyer, advocate, and survivor—exemplifies the church's failings to glorify God in this way. Denhollander's abuse began in her Baptist church in Michigan in 1984, when she was seven years old. The perpetrator, a college-aged man, executed typical grooming strategies, and the molestation continued for months before Denhollander's parents became aware. When seeking retribution, Denhollander's parents were met with disdain for their "overreaction," and were soon isolated from their congregation for "disturbing the community." Because of the adverse consequences her parents faced in their church for saying what had happened, Denhollander later chose to stay silent while being groomed and abused for years by U.S. Gymnastics coach Larry Nassar.⁴⁵

Joshua Pease, journalist and pastor, writes of Denhollander's childhood church, "Immanuel Baptist Church faced a choice, the same one before many American churches today: Face the sin in their midst and make the church a place that follows the biblical command to care for the powerless and victimized—or avoid the disruption and churn out another generation of silenced victims who learn, like Denhollander did, that the church isn't safe."⁴⁶ Immanuel Baptist's decision to "keep the peace" was in direct contradiction to the Word of God and Kuyper's conception of the church's foundation; Kuyper writes that the church is "united, not then as they see fit, but according to the

ordinances of Christ."⁴⁷ In choosing to disregard violence against the vulnerable for the sake of maintaining a "united congregation," the church loses a picture of what peace or unity truly is. Denhollander says, "We teach unity as if unity was a goal in and of itself without adequate emphasis that unity around the wrong thing is not unity at all."⁴⁸

Based on her experiences of abuse inside and outside of the church as well as what she has witnessed in her time as a human rights lawyer, Denhollander details what she believes a truly Christian, Kuyperian response to sexual abuse is. She explains,

The depth of the damage and the ability of a survivor to heal is definitively linked to the response they receive when they disclose their abuse. This means that how we think and respond, and the responses victims receive from our institutions and our legal systems and our medical and economic systems, has profound impact on the depth of their injury and the ability they will have to heal.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the reaction that believers have when survivors of sexual assault disclose their pain gives the survivor a picture of the God whom the believer represents. A skeptical or uncaring response presents an apathetic if not sadistic God, while an empathetic, educated response accurately points to a loving God.⁵⁰

Utilizing Kuyper in Response to Crisis

The foundation through which to approach a case of sexual abuse is an understanding of humankind's total depravity. Kuyper writes that, to wisely engage in any conflict, churches must acknowledge "that the pure and full light of Heaven has disappeared" and that all humankind is "groping around in the dark," with the sole "light" being provided in Scripture.⁵¹ Therefore, each person is privy to certain sinful tendencies.⁵² In situations of responding to sexual assault, this may be the temptation to choose safety and a false unity over truth. Denhollander says, "If we diminish the darkness and the reality of the evil in how we respond societally and culturally, and we act like something isn't as evil as it really is, the beauty and the holiness of God that exists in utter contrast to that evil becomes less glorious and beautiful."⁵³ Additionally, "Christian responses that

minimize the evil of abuse have in turn minimized the righteousness of God.⁵⁴

Once acknowledging the depth of sin that churches wade through while carrying the responsibility of being God's light, the next step is to remedy the crisis through engagement in the breadth of creation, including the "secular." As stated earlier, Kuyper upheld that Calvinism presents an "all-embracing life system,"⁵⁵ a worldview that claims every facet of God's creation to be used for his purpose, whether it explicitly bears his name or not. Craig Bartholomew,

age back into the ordinance of God's word.⁶¹ This cry for reconciliation is far from the shallow "solutions" churches have presented for abuse when handling cases without outside resources. In 2018, Paige Patterson, former president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was removed from office quietly after being proven to persuade several women not to turn their rapists into authorities. Similarly, Bill Hybels, founding pastor of one of the United States' largest evangelical churches, slipped into retirement after being met with numerous allegations of sexual

Beyond immediately reacting to crises, congregations should intentionally incorporate survivors and their stories into the life and worship of the broader congregation.

Kuyperian scholar, writes, "Within the evangelical world, we too often retain a commitment to Jesus primarily as a personal savior so that we have little of consequence to say to a world in crisis."⁵⁶ This tendency denies the church's identity as an organic source of healing, instead restricting churches from engaging with the scope of the created world to remedy some of its deepest hurts. Prayer and preaching of the word alone cannot heal the wounds of sexual abuse; God has given legal, political, medical and all other systems to provide healing.⁵⁷ Instead of viewing the world outside the church as "liberal," "secular," or otherwise corrupt or irrelevant, Kuyper lauded the purpose each of these spheres serves. He claimed that God created government to defend against abuse,⁵⁸ and his doctrine of "common grace" leads to structures like the justice or healthcare systems to bring Christian healing.⁵⁹ It is imperative that believers understand that the church and what lies outside its walls do not exist in opposition to each other, but that the organic nature of the church equips it to engage with the surrounding world so that all spheres may be enriched.⁶⁰

In engaging with the world beyond itself, churches begin to live into God's intent for the them, which Kuyper articulates as follows: "Let whatever is oppressed have the church's support; may the poor find the church a place of refuge, and may the church become for rich and poor together once again an angel of peace from both the abuses and utopias of our

assault, the accusations being investigated only after his retirement.⁶² Other failings to legally deal with abuse have allowed perpetrators to step down, only to later ascend to more prominent positions within the church.⁶³ This conflict avoidance does not represent the peace Kuyper references. In fact, *shalom*, the Hebrew word translated as "peace" in the English Bible, is deeper than a lack of disruption or a state of comfortable agreeance, the definition churches seem content to achieve. Rather, it means a state of wholeness, an actualization of God's desires for humanity in his people's relationships with each other.⁶⁴ This peace does not allow for the continuation of exploitation, but challenges God's people to act contrary to their self-serving nature and sacrifice on behalf of their most vulnerable brothers and sisters.

As the evangelical church faces its history of devastatingly incorrect responses to abuse, it is challenging to discern how, or if, there is a proper way to react. Much of the solution comes from proactivity on an institutional level: proper education to embolden potentially vulnerable congregants with the knowledge and vocabulary to understand and defend their boundaries. Churches must instill or encourage sex education that is complete, addressing all components of a person, not regarding "saving sex for marriage" to be sufficient in and of itself. Children especially, even before they are old enough to learn about sex, must be taught they have bodily autonomy and can advocate for themselves when they feel their

boundaries are being crossed.⁶⁵ This approach begins to dissolve the unequal distribution of power that leads to many cases of abuse and connects vulnerable parties to trustworthy authorities if violations do occur. Further protective measures, enforced to eliminate the lack of scrutiny in which perpetrators thrive,⁶⁶ include a regular schedule of training for congregants on identifying and preventing abuse, careful selection processes for those who teach Sunday school or otherwise work with children, and heightened security in spaces like nurseries and bathrooms.⁶⁷ Kuyper is clear to state that children are members of God's covenant and therefore a valuable part of the church community, so churches must reflect this love for children through attentive and effective policies.⁶⁸

In situations where abuse does occur, it is imperative to "start by believing" survivors.⁶⁹ Realistically, few congregants or pastors who will be entrusted with stories of sexual abuse will have the qualifications to provide legitimate counseling or "solutions," but everyone has the capacity to simply listen. In such situations where one is trusted with an account of abuse, it is essential not to provide excuses for the perpetrator's behavior or attempt to "interrogate" the victim.⁷⁰ After the initial disclosure and subsequent report to relevant legal authorities, a congregation's role can include providing a committee—composed, in part, of other sexual assault survivors—to process the situation from a communal standpoint. Beyond that point, it is essential for the church to organically intersect with other spheres to complete their work. This often means referring to an independent third-party committee to investigate and make decisions regarding the case.⁷¹ One such option is GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment), which Boz Tchividjian formed in response to the horrors he saw in churches in his law career. If churches are specifically interested in Christian organizations, GRACE and others are available investigative and preventative resources.⁷²

Beyond immediately reacting to crises, congregations should intentionally incorporate survivors and their stories into the life and worship of the broader congregation. All congregants have a responsibility to contribute to a safe, restorative environment by partaking in communal preventing, healing, and repenting. Therefore, church leaders need

to sensitively disclose what acts of abuse have taken place within their churches and what is being done in response. Being informed of what sin occurs in their midst removes the privilege of ignorance from congregants, urging them towards empathy and recognizing where they may have been culpable in enabling abuse.⁷³ Survivors should also be provided with—in addition to professional therapists outside of church—spiritual mentors or companions to provide supplementary support and mediation between them and the larger church, when necessary.⁷⁴ Connection between survivors and the rest of a church's congregation can include, when the survivor feels that it would provide personal closure and healing, public sharing of experiences and communication with pastors to educate them on how to address sexual abuse from behind the pulpit. This sharing begins to remove the shadow of guilt surrounding other survivors within the church, encouraging closeted victims to seek help and confronting other congregants with the scope of the problem and their role in curing it.⁷⁵

Finally, in their response to sexual abuse, Christians must commit to justice as fully as they preach forgiveness. Kuyper writes, "church discipline must come in (...) in order to preserve the purity of this covenant as soon as the interpermeation of grace by nature tends to lower the purity of the Church."⁷⁶ The covenantal trust and love, which binds churches together, is perverted when survivors' testimonies are undermined and churches fail to "name evil as evil." As Denhollander expresses, "When our actions, our responses, our policies, and our laws treat wickedness as less wicked than God does, we are not accurately representing Christ."⁷⁷ God's holy wrath and grace exist in a perfect harmony that humans are incapable of, but for situations where perpetrators intentionally prey upon the vulnerable, churches must display God's justice on behalf of victims, granting them grace to heal and reach forgiveness that can only be prompted through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸

In a time where protectors leave the vulnerable defenseless, congregations place comfort above Kingdom service, and the church's "one foundation" seems lost all together, there are age-old truths that remain. Churches are not stranded in the cultural storm of exploitation and injustice but can

lean upon the prior centuries of men and women who dedicated themselves to the true teaching of God's word and what it means to follow God's word in a nuanced world. Kuyper's expression of humankind's innate depravity informs churches' understanding of their ongoing sexual abuse crisis, and his embrace of Calvinism as a "total-life system"⁷⁹ provides a groundwork with which to remedy it. God's people not only look forward to a day where injustice will be entirely stomped underfoot but understand that they are given the means to engage with each other and the world around them to commence restoration today.

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