



THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO ABUSE (PART 2)

Most of us have watched in horror and sadness the unfolding of events in the small town of Steubenville, Ohio. Just in case you've not been watching the news, two high school football players were found guilty this past week of sexually assaulting a young woman who was too intoxicated to give her consent for sexual contact, or even to know what was happening to her. While this was taking place, countless other teens watched, laughed, tweeted and photographed the debauchery.



We'd like to blame what happened on teenage foolishness, adolescent recklessness, the inability of teenagers to understand the consequences of their behavior and the problem of absentee parents. But I wonder how different the evening might have turned out for both the two convicted young men as well as the victim if just one of their friends would have had the courage to speak up and say, "Stop?"

Why were these adolescents so willing to turn a blind eye to the evil right before them? Were all of these teens too drunk to know right from wrong? Or was there something more universal at work?

I don't think their reluctance stemmed from drunkenness but rather from the fear of man. They were too afraid to stand up against what was happening because they feared the disapproval and censure of the group.

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Lest we judge these teens too harshly, history tells us that we aren't much different even as adults. This past year I read two books describing the mindset of the people and culture in Germany and the United States just prior to World War 2. One was Bonhoeffer, by Eric Metaxas, and the other, In the Garden of Beasts, by Erik Larson.

It was difficult to comprehend how an entire culture including the Christian church closed their eyes to the obvious atrocities that were happening, especially to the Jews. Reading both books helped me to see that it was more appealing to protect and promote allegiance to the country than to care about the individual. By our silence however, we empower the emotional (or political) or sexual bully to continue his sinful behaviors. Jesus was never afraid to speak out about injustice, about oppression, and about hypocritical law keeping those in power. As his church, we must speak out too.

There is a good deal of research on the effects of positive peer pressure. For example, when bullies are confronted by strong men and told, "We don't act that way around here" or "We don't treat our women that way," it yields positive results. How might the young woman in Steubenville have felt the next morning if she woke up at one of her friend's homes instead of naked in a stranger's house or if one of her friends had the courage to speak up and gather a group of girls or boys together that would have protected her? How might those two football players felt the next morning when they realized that their friends stopped them from doing the unthinkable?

A number of women have told me that they begged someone in church leadership to speak to their husband about his destructive behaviors. When we do so, we have an opportunity to stand alongside the victim and bear witness to the sinfulness of her husband's behaviors as well as help the abuser truly repent. Jesus gives us a method of dealing with difficult people and reconciling relationships. It calls for speaking up. It calls for increasing the pressure and accountability on one who will not take responsibility for their wrongdoing. It calls for the church to sanction and distance themselves from someone who refuses to repent in the hopes that as they feel the pain and shame from the group, they will be willing to change. Sadly, most churches do not implement Matthew 18 or other biblical passages with destructive husbands, and therefore a Christian woman is left without the social support and peer pressure that God provided.

Perhaps you are not a church leader or a person of great influence, but you too can speak out and come alongside a hurting woman or mentor a man who is disrespectful and/or abusive toward his wife. No one heals from destructive relationship patterns through counseling

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alone. People are wounded in relationships and people are healed in relationships, but it takes real people in real community in real relationships. If the church does not, will not, or cannot provide this for broken people, then where will they go?