

A mother's letter to the brother workers – April 2023

Posted with permission.

April 11, 2023

Dear Brothers,

The past few weeks have weighed on all our hearts. I am sure that this is not the first letter you have received on this topic, but I feel compelled to share what has been on my mind and heart as a woman and a mother.

In Judges 19 there was a horrific act of sexual violence committed. I remember reading this chapter for the first time in college. I was stunned and brought to tears. I have never heard this scripture spoken on. It's never been on a Bible study list in my area, and for good reason! It's difficult to read, difficult to understand, and difficult to talk about, much like what has been happening in recent weeks. What has encouraged me lately has been what happens in Judges 20. There is a response from all of Israel, they are united before the Lord as one man. They want to know how this happened! They didn't blame the concubine for what had happened to her, even though she "played the harlot." They didn't leave others to deal with the problem because it hadn't happened in their area. They didn't try to ignore or repress their anger. They demanded that the men responsible be delivered up "that we may put them to death and remove the evil from Israel!" In the battle detailed in the chapter, Israel goes before the Lord repeatedly to ask for counsel, and again and again the Lord encourages them to fight. God was on their side in their desire to remove evil, and they were united in that desire.

In my conversations with others in the past weeks there has been a common theme. People are angry and wonder how such evil could happen in our fellowship. The biggest question has been how to keep these things from happening again. I do not have the answers, but I have some thoughts I hope will be worth at least considering and pondering. I don't know what it's like to be a worker. I certainly don't know what it's like to be an overseer. Some of the changes I suggest are likely already happening, and certainly I'm not the first to suggest them. I wonder if "my two cents" comes from the scripture about the widow with two mites. I don't feel like I am much. I don't know if my thoughts are much, but if they could help even a little I want to offer them.

One thing I want to beg of you brothers in authority is that you include the sisters in your talks and decisions. There are countless examples in the Bible of faithful women providing essential help and counsel. Esther. Abigail, and Deborah. Mary bringing the resurrection message to the Apostles. Priscilla, with her husband, explaining the gospel more fully. Phoebe, a helper of many' and to Paul also. Our sisters are not likely to demand more authority or 'usurp,' but I feel confident that if they were called upon to help they willingly would. Women and children often feel more comfortable with sisters than they do with brothers. If we want victims to come forward honestly with faith that they will be listened to, it may be much easier to do if a sister is available. If you were abused by a brother worker, another brother worker may be the last person you would want to talk to about it! It may be helpful to the friends to know which sisters are open to having these discussions and have a direct line to brothers in authority. It can be very disheartening to have a difficult conversation and leave feeling as if nothing will change. Give sisters the opportunity to listen and the authority to do something about what they hear. Certainly sisters could be helpful to you yourselves in your efforts to understand the feelings of victims, as they would be familiar with the fears and anxieties most women carry with them through life. Likewise, inviting elders and parents to weigh in on changes could be extremely helpful for you. "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety."

That brings me to my next suggestion. I don't know the Bible as well as most of you. but the current structure of having one overseer over a state or multiple states does not seem to be scriptural. Why is it this way? Order is both scriptural and practical. There are decisions to be made, the scope of which I do not understand, and someone must be willing and able to make them. That being said, it seems so strange to me that the oversight of so many is often left to one fallible man. In God's plans for marriage, parenthood, and the ministry he has not planned for anyone responsible for others to be alone. I. like many of the friends, know very little about how resources are managed and distributed to the ministry. When it is Spirit-led, it works. Dean is an example of the sacrifices of honest givers being grossly misused. Those who give have no desire for their name to be on a plaque or in a newsletter, but they give in faith that it will be used wisely. When I got married, I gave up some financial freedom, but I gained a tremendous help and counsel in my husband. With accountability comes assistance, and vice versa. If two or more are given the oversight of an area, what a burden would be lifted from the one who previously held the position on his own! Not only would no one be given 'darkness' to work evil within, but they would have at their disposal help, counsel, and encouragement to keep them from stumbling. Furthermore, it might be helpful for some who have been overseers for a while to res from the role and reacquaint themselves with what it is like to be under authority. Circulating into and out of the role could be refreshing both for overseers and for the body.

My final suggestion is a call for transparency and consistency, Kingdom-wide, it seems the issue of sexual immorality and abuse, especially against children, has long been a cancer in the fellowship. In the past perhaps it has been dealt with surgically, if at all. with attention given to specific areas of the body with the greatest problem. It seems that God Himself removed the tumor that was Dean. I feel that the time has come for the entire body to receive treatment, metaphorically speaking, so that the evil is removed and prevented from returning. Cancer treatments are not comfortable for the body, but they are necessary to preserve life. The Lord gave counsel to Israel to fight a battle against evil and He helped them prevail, but they still had to willingly go forth, putting their individual lives on the line for the sake of right, I hope that each of us in our own place and area are willing for whatever it takes to help the Church, not to get back to normal* but to move forward stronger and healthier, closer to God. This is an opportunity to examine ourselves, to look even at the structures and traditions we have been following and compare them once again to the Pattern and to the scripture. Some of these ideas are already being accomplished, but I write them here for the sake of clarity; metaphor only takes us so far.

- Workers across the entire nation, even the world, should receive the same or similar training regarding sexual abuse and training should be refreshed frequently.
- Workers should always be swift in informing the friends of any known or alleged perpetrators in their area, even if they haven't been convicted of a crime. Unfortunately many perpetrators still avoid justice. It's in our best interest to uphold a standard higher than that of the world and have no tolerance for harmful behavior.
- Perpetrators or alleged perpetrators should be removed from positions of responsibility or authority.
- Perpetrators or alleged perpetrators should not be allowed to attend fellowship meetings or conventions *with children*, anywhere, anytime. We live in a time where it is quite possible for them to enjoy the messages from home. Keeping them from situations of temptation or opportunity is the best thing for them, and keeping convention and home meetings a safe and comfortable place for women and children is the best thing for all. The repentant are likely to be willing for this.
- Workers should not be afraid to give out worldly' resources and encourage people to seek help and therapy. So many of you are facing this and feeling overwhelmed. You are called to a specific place, and that place is not one where you can or should 'do it all.' Call upon the Lord for help in referring people to experts that will be helpful for them. Providing local and relevant hotlines and resources at the bottom of sensitive emails would be helpful.

- It's unfortunate, but the reality is for many of us our trust in the oversight has been shaken, even while trust in God remains. In order to rebuild our trust we must be confident that if there is any misconduct discovered it will be swiftly and publicly dealt with. For there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed, nor has anything been kept secret but that it should come to light." Those whose deeds are evil love darkness. It is our responsibility to get the Lord's help in shining light into the dark corners of our fellowship. We cannot hesitate in fear of what we'll find, it's better to see the full scope of the problem so we can be specific not only in our prayers but in our actions. This fellowship is worth fighting for.

A final plea: communicate, communicate, communicate! Overcommunication is better than undercommunication, because when people aren't sure of what's going on imagination takes over. Give necessary details and specifically name the crime when you can. It's better to send an email that says "I don't know" or "more later" than for us to be left wondering, gossiping, and Googling. You can help avoid this by being swift and forthright in your communication, ensuring everyone receives the same information. When you are, and when things are handled appropriately, fewer and fewer will be able to find occasion to speak ill of our fellowship. Trust that the Lord is able to guide your words even when you must send them hastily, perhaps even more so: "whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit"

As a parent, I am very aware of my own responsibility toward my children. The intention of any concerned or outraged parent is not to pass all responsibility toward those in authority, but to create a united front to protect the most vulnerable. When we have open and honest communication between workers and friends we can better understand the unique anxieties of each place and can help each other be what we ought to be in our own place.

Thank you for being open to my concerns and thoughts. What I said was conveyed from an honest heart, and if anything expressed was off-base or incorrect I hope that the Spirit can work with the reader to interpret my hopes and intentions more accurately. I don't know if these words have the power to help or make a difference, but if they do you are welcome to share them.

A mother,

Bridget Hanks