

Overseer abuse of power

May 30

WINGS note: This letter was written by a very concerned friend.

After reading the most recent letter that captured so well the problem enshrined in exclusivity, I feel compelled to write. Silence at this point is complicity.

I applaud all those who have courageously shared their experiences as victims of abuse; sexual, physical, emotional and spiritual. We have heard from current and former workers, and current and former members of our fellowship. I say "our" as one who was raised going to meetings and has spent the last 30 years as an active participant.

How much longer is an open question. It is fully understandable that most, if not all who have shared their pain and their experiences choose to remain anonymous. I choose to sign my name to this letter. These are my thoughts and convictions, and mine alone.

To be clear, I am not a victim of abuse, at least not the most direct kind. But unlike many previous authors, I am angry.

I have brushed against abuse and abusers for my entire life, under the auspices of those entrusted with spreading the gospel, but did not know it. At least three known pedophiles spent significant time in my home as a child, teenager, young adult, and now as a father with my own children. None were known to me or my family, but all were known to the overseers at the time.

This only counts those that admitted their proclivities and crimes, not the generational monster that was Dean Bruer, who also spent a significant amount of time in our home, or any who have not yet been named and brought into the open. For a "never" event, that is far too frequent. It must also be acknowledged that what has been revealed in the past two months has been grudging at best, and had Dean not died, would not be known. That is inexcusable.

We keep hearing about the example of King David and giving grace to sinners as a way to pardon the repeated missteps in past and prior handling of abuse. Annaias and Saphira (Acts 5:1) are the examples we should be discussing. They intended good for the nascent Christian community by selling their property and

donating the proceeds, but withheld money and lied, first by omission, then by commission when confronted. Both were struck down in that moment.

There are consequences for actions. I don't pretend to know any person's status with God, and believe that anyone can find and follow their own revelation and conviction. God is the final arbiter for all, but from a human perspective, nearly the entire current leadership has lost my respect and confidence.

As horrifying as the crimes of pedophilia and sexual abuse are, as tragic as it is that multiple workers and friends have endured their own emotional and spiritual abuse, as egregious as it is that endemic denial and deflection have pushed a Christian ideal into the realm of abuse, we are still discussing symptoms, not the root of the problem.

The foundational problem in our fellowship remains the insistence that we are the one true way, the only Christians doing it right. The most common term used to self-identify is "the Truth", which says it all. This reeks of pride and self-righteousness. It also creates a clear and immediate in-group and out-group (with approximately 8 billion people in the out-group) and a moral and spiritual imperative.

I will go further than prior posters and say that as long as this pervasive and damaging doctrine exists, no substantive change is possible. It is not enough to say that it is spoken less frequently or directly, or hear it preached less forcefully from the platform at convention. It has clearly and cogently been spoken for generations, with concomitant and lasting damage. Redaction needs to be equally clear and forceful.

There is a legacy of sanctimony, hypocrisy, and refusal to allow change directly tied to this dogma, and a level of spiritual coercion that cannot be overstated. If salvation hangs in the balance, there is simply no choice—one belongs to this fellowship and toes the line, or one winds up in hell. The current crisis, the slowly unfolding nuclear implosion enveloping the church, is the fruit. Matthew 7 lays bare the truth—false teachings lead to bad fruit. As Matthew suggests, those trees need to be cut down and burned.

However, it is impossible to be an agent for change when no alternative exists. The level of change needed is more than structural, it is seismic. The ecumenical church that many of us wish for is so far from the current structure that it might as well be a fantasy. We need our own Martin Luther to nail his Ninety-Five Theses

to the door of a church. But we don't have a church building of course, another facet of which we are inordinately proud.

Second, as so many have pointed out, the pervasive denial of a power structure or hierarchy is almost as damaging, and a simple way to avoid responsibility. We are apparently not one body in Christ, but 18 geographic bodies (in the U.S. at least) with their own Ordnung, following a roughly similar tangent as Christians. Very simple way to pass the buck, and hyper-convenient way to pass abusers on without dealing with their actions.

Our workers have the authority to assign location of fellowship, elders in those meetings, and who can or cannot take part. They have the authority to say who can and cannot take the emblems, the most direct and physical connection to Christ. They are the gateway to baptism, the closest thing we have to admission into the legacy of Jesus' life. That is power, and when combined with a dogma that states we are God's chosen people, it is a truly singular form of power. The overseers control every facet of the lives of those workers in their sphere of influence. They decide whom to allow to enter the ministry, where they labor, who their co-workers will be, and when/if they are dismissed from the ministry. That is clearly power.

In the meetings, the hierarchy is clear, with women at the bottom and men/elders on the next rung. Within the ministry, the hierarchy is also quite clear, with all women at the bottom, younger men on the next step up, and exclusively older/experienced men at the top. To deny this structure exists is disingenuous at best, outright malfeasance at worst. There is no system of feedback or accountability, so combined with a dash of narcissism, the result is a recipe for abuse of all flavors with no recourse.

I believe that the majority of those attending meetings are good and loving people with well-intentioned ideals. I believe the same can be said of the majority of workers, who are willing to give their lives in service to this ideal. I believe the current church structure has strayed so far from the stated ideal that it is untenable. I am angry and believe there is a silent majority in the church who are in accord but has no voice. Until the problem is named, change is not possible. Once named, change remains a far-off and potentially unreachable goal, but honesty is a start.

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