

Child Abuse

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“In the Roman Catholic Church, there have been some recent scandals regarding priests who were caught sexually abusing children. The Roman Catholic Church handles these in its own way, but this made me wonder what would happen if this situation were to arise in one of our churches. If a minister were caught abusing a child (and may God graciously forbid that this ever happens), what would be the consequences? Since this is a crime, would the church contact the authorities? Although church and state should not mix, the minister should not be above the law. Would the church simply strip him of his ministerial status and put him through counseling, or must legal action be involved?”

Let me echo the reader’s sentiment: “May God graciously forbid!” Abuse of a child is so abominable a sin that even the ungodly world punishes it with heavy penalties. The ungodly tolerate all kinds of perversions and abominations, but (for now) they abhor the abuse, especially the sexual abuse, of children. Abuse of a child is so destructive that the victim is left scarred physical, emotionally, and spiritually for life. Let the words of Jesus ring in our ears: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6).

We have heard of the scandal in the Church of Rome. Although Rome is a false church, Rome’s sins have tarnished the reputation of all churches, since the world lumps all forms of Christianity together. Basically, Rome has been guilty of a widespread cover-up of abuse. Deviant priests were shuffled from parish to parish, where they were free to abuse more children. Not only did Rome fail to report the crimes of her priests to the civil magistrate, she failed to discipline her own clergy, with the result that the sin spread until it blew up in a massive scandal.

One of the marks of a true church is the faithful exercise of Christian discipline. A member (or even a minister) who abuses a child has committed a gross sin, and must be restored to repentance through Christian discipline. Sin may not be ignored in the church. We have a church order, which we use when a minister falls into a gross public sin. “When ministers of the divine

Word, elders, or deacons have committed any public, gross sin which is a disgrace to the church or *worthy of punishment by the authorities ...*” (Article 79).

If a minister were caught abusing a child, he would be immediately suspended from office, and Classis would, in consultation with the consistory, recommend his deposition. In addition, that man would have to be reported to the police. In the USA and in most Western nations, there is a mandatory reporting law. This means that if the church officers know or have reasonable suspicion that a member of the church has abused a child, they *must* report it to the authorities. Failure to do so is *in itself* a crime punishable by the authorities. Should the consistory fail to report the sexual abuse of a child by the minister to the police, they would be violating the law. There is, of course, the temptation to spare the minister and the reputation of the church, but make no mistake: a man who has sexually abused a child is a danger to children. His crime must be reported to the police, even if he is genuinely sorry for his sin.

Therefore, assuming the minister is guilty, and is tried and convicted, he would (presumably) go to prison. (And if he is guilty, he should plead guilty to spare his victim the trauma of a lengthy trial). He would no longer be a pastor, for he would be deposed. However, he would still be a member of the church, and if he repented, he would be forgiven. His repentance would not enable him to escape the legal consequences of his sin. In prison, he would be a member of the church, and the church would have a duty of care toward him. Upon his release, he would be free to enjoy the rights of church membership. However, a prudent consistory would have to place restrictions on him for the sake of the safety of the children in the church. No doubt, the parents and other church members would be wary in receiving him back into fellowship.

One final thing should be mentioned. Sexual predators, sadly, target churches because churches teach the grace of God, and they believe that if they are caught abusing children and express sorrow, the church will forgive them and they will get away with it. Please do not misunderstand me: the church *does* preach grace, and there *is* forgiveness for the vilest offender, but the church does not preach grace *without consequences*.

To avoid such an appalling situation, not only must we pray that God keep us from such vile sin, but every congregation should have a child protection policy. In many jurisdictions, such a policy is also mandated by law.

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