



# *The Doctrine Commission Of the Anglican Church of Australia*

Report from the Doctrine Commission concerning

## Theological Issues Surrounding Sexual and Other Forms of Abuse

### 1. Preface

1.1. At the behest of the General Synod Professional Standards Commission, both the General Synod (Resolution 35/04 (f)) and its Standing Committee (10.3.15) asked the Doctrine Commission for a report on theological issues concerning abuse of the vulnerable. The Professional Standards Commission has subsequently clarified the thinking behind this request. In summary, the Professional Standards Commission has asked the Doctrine Commission to examine:

the theological issues underlying sexual abuse and harassment in the Church...(and) the Church's responsibility for the physical, emotional and spiritual welfare and safety of all people within its own community including children and other vulnerable people, the abused and known abusers of children or other vulnerable people.

In its comments on this reference, the Professional Standards Commission notes that a vulnerability to abuse exists in relationships "where there is an improper use of power and/or crossing of appropriate boundaries by an abuser". It identifies as particularly vulnerable, people who are elderly, those who live with poverty, disability, mental illness and grief.

1.2. The Doctrine Commission first received this reference in 2005, but still has considerable work to do before offering a full-scale report. The delay reflects both the number of other references to the Commission and the inherent importance and complexity of this subject.

1.3. The Doctrine Commission is convinced of the need for profound theological reflection and plans to study the subject under such themes as power and authority, the culture of the church, truth and reconciliation, the nature of sex, and the nature of sin. This work lies ahead of us.

1.4. Given the importance of the subject, however, the Doctrine Commission is also offering to the General Synod this brief interim Report. The Report seeks mainly to indicate the areas which need theological reflection, to encourage all (but especially bishops and theological educators) to continue to think through these issues, and to offer some preliminary suggestions about the way in which theological truth can help meet pastoral needs.

1.5. Much in the way in which the Church has responded to the scandal of abuse has been both commendable and necessary. But it has also tended to be merely legal and managerial. Important as such responses are, the real issues can only be addressed theologically. It is for this reason that the Doctrine Commission is committed to offering its best efforts to the Australian Church, and would be grateful for the prayers of God's people towards such a result.

## 2. Why theological reflection on abuse is important

Theological reflection is required to explicate why sexual and other abuse is so significant for the church, drawing on gospel understandings of the human person in community.

- 2.1. Every human being is a created, embodied, social self. As created, we are frail but individually precious to God. As embodied, we experience the world physically. As social, we learn who we are as part of the network of family, kin, tribe and humanity. In this, and in the promised new heavens and new earth, we are created to share righteousness and love with God and with each other.
- 2.2. As embodied and social selves, living in the world after the Fall, we are vulnerable to suffering both through our bodies and through our relationships. Violence against the body, such as torture, assault and sexual abuse, creates profound and persistent personal dislocation and pain. This is particularly true for sexual abuse and the abuse of children. It is also true for social abuse such as vilification, rejection, neglect and exploitation.
- 2.3. In all physical abuse, the self is violated through the body. So significant is our sexual nature, however, that the damage to body, mind and soul is intense. The fabric of our lives, physical and relational, is torn. The trust which is indispensable to all human relationships is stolen by the perpetrator.
- 2.4. God's righteous compassion is over all of us, but especially those who are young, elderly and for other reasons weak or powerless. It is particularly offensive to God when they are violated by people with an obligation to treat them with respect and love. The Bible tells us that we shall continue to live in a world in which evil things happen. Indeed, all of us contribute to this state of affairs. Nevertheless there is also forgiveness, transformation and love in this world and the hope of God's new and perfect order in the world to come.
- 2.5. Sexual abuse may happen in private, but its ramifications are wide ranging in the lives of those who are abused, their families and communities. When it occurs (often secretly) among believers, it corrodes fellowship. When it becomes public it must be dealt with, as it makes a mockery of the communion of God's people and dishonours Christ's name.

## 3. The problems abuse creates for survivors

Theological reflection needs to address these issues, among others, for the sake of the survivors of abuse and those who support them. These are matters which call for the most sensitive pastoral care grounded in the wisest theology and informed understandings of the dynamics and effects of abuse.

- 3.1. Problems for faith. If sexual abuse is linked to faith, it poses an immense challenge to the faith of the victim of abuse. She or he may have prayed to God for safety and protection, and no help has come. The abuser has destroyed their confidence in God. The ensuing anger and/or immense spiritual loneliness are not resolved by ignoring them, or by exhortations to have faith, or other cheap panaceas. But powerful resources exist in patient and attentive listening, and prayerful Christian fellowship, informed by an understanding of sin and evil, and sustained by the hope of the gospel of the crucified one.
- 3.2. Problems for the self. The violation of the body is often followed by enduring despair, shame, and self-accusation, contributing to a loss of the sense of the valued self. Such

difficulties will be not be ameliorated merely by pastoral exhortation and advice. Once again, however, there can be powerful healing in knowing that we are created in God's image. Furthermore, the experience of God's grace in redemption, can (with patience) help bring a measure of trust and restoration of the valued self. Full healing waits for God's future.

- 3.3. The problem of the perpetrator. Such is the impact of sexual abuse, that forgiveness may seem risky, dangerous or an impossible demand. Knowing that Jesus taught us to love our enemies and to forgive those who offend us, many people who have been abused despair of their spiritual state. The situation is often made worse by exhortations to forgive, or even demands to forgive and be reconciled if the perpetrator has apologised. Forgiveness, which arises from the gospel, offers a wonderful freedom from the impact of violence and abuse, but pastoral teaching about forgiveness must be understood and offered sensitively, with great wisdom.
- 3.4. The problem of forgiveness. Concerning Christ's forgiveness, we need to note that there is a distinction to be made between the decision to forgive and the lifelong practice of forgiveness. Furthermore, the need for forgiveness should not be equated with the full restoration of previous relationships, let alone constitute an invitation to further violence. Reconciliation does not necessarily mean ongoing relationship in the same sense as before. The effects of some abuse cannot be undone or swept away, and the consequences for both parties may be long-lasting.
- 3.5. The problem of the church. Sometimes theological and ecclesiological errors distort the biblical teaching about God and contribute to a climate of abuse. The problems can become systemic and entrenched, with the suppression of truth and misapplied disciplinary processes. Where sexual abuse occurs in the context of the church, especially where the abuser is a person of power within the church, the whole church is accountable. The abuse must not be ignored or covered up. The hurt must be met by truth and repentance and an acceptance of appropriate responsibility and action.

#### 4. The Power of the Gospel

It is a matter of deep shame that sexual abuse has occurred in our churches and has often been met with culpable naiveté. Turning once again to God's work in Christ and by the power of the Spirit, we move forward in hope.

- 4.1. We confess that our churches are far from perfect. And yet as we heed God's word and reflect the gospel of Jesus, we can build communities of faith, hope and love, through which God's love is experienced and lives transformed for the better. We are grateful for progress in addressing the issues of sexual and other forms of abuse, helping those who have been abused and challenging perpetrators to repentance and restitution.
- 4.2. We recognise that all Christ's people have a role to play in the discipline and godliness of the church. We are called to accept and care for people who have been abused and remain vulnerable, and to hold leadership and potential abusers of power to account. We need to detect and challenge systemic evil, and insist on standards of integrity and truthfulness as befits the gospel.
- 4.3. However, in maintaining the good spiritual and moral health of our Church, the leaders of God's people have a special responsibility. As well as being people of truth and integrity,

they must be prepared to exercise such discipline as will build up and not tear down. Through the pastoral teaching of God's word, they will lead people to spiritual maturity, calling for genuine repentance and renewal. In particular they will be aware of those who listen to public teaching and the need to speak to the real situation of significant numbers of people who may be victims of abuse in other contexts and who need to receive the special consolations of the gospel.

4.4. A measure of our understanding of the gospel will be our willingness to care for the victims of abuse, and for the perpetrators of abuse. Those who offend may themselves be victims of abuse. The gospel offers the possibility of breaking this cycle. For offenders, too, are made in God's image; they too need the word of the cross and the forgiveness of sins; they too can experience the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. But we will not minister satisfactorily to them by offering 'cheap grace' – the mercy of God without a transformational repentance which accepts the consequences of discipline.

## 5. Conclusions

5.1. The gospel tells us, while this world lasts, sin and evil are ever present, full healing may not come, and the church will continue to face failure, hypocrisy and abuse. We also know that in the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the church created by the gospel, we have a unique capacity for dealing with abuse and its aftermath. Our hope is for the coming of God's kingdom – 'the new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells'. This active hope sustains us.

5.2. These preliminary reflections are meant to communicate with urgency the ramifications of the problems of sexual and other forms of abuse. Our Church will not have addressed these matters in any way satisfactorily until the theological issues are considered in depth and incorporated into our thinking and pastoral practice.

Doctrine Commission  
Feb 2007