

Sympathetic Protestants: A Vision for Responding to Scandal in the Catholic Church

by Chad Allen

Heart-wrenching headlines about Catholic priests molesting young children have bombarded us since earlier this year when allegations of priestly misconduct began pouring in from around the country. *The Boston Globe* shouted, "Famed 'Street Priest' Preyed on Boys," while *The New York Times* later proclaimed, "Bronx Parish Is in Shock as Scandal Touches Home."

But what would the headlines say if the media were equally interested in how Protestants have responded to the scandal? If my interactions with fellow Protestants are any clue, *Time* magazine's cover would announce in bold red "Protestants Add Insult to Injury" beside the image of a Bible-toting Protestant looking down his nose at a small illustration of a Catholic cathedral. *The Washington Post* might report on a more common response with an article titled "Protestants Remain Silent on Catholic Scandal."

My conversations with Protestant Christians about the issue have been disconcerting. One told me this mess proves just how ridiculous priestly celibacy is. Another said it was confirmation he made the right decision in leaving the Catholic Church. Yet another said Catholics were getting what they deserved and maybe this would wake Rome up and force it to make some much-needed changes. In every case the tone was at best degrading and at worst insulting. Regardless of any validity their criticism may (or may not) have, Protestants aren't likely to help matters by faultfinding from a distance or, worse, from a perch. The way to be of help, as has always been the case, is the self-sacrificing way of love.

A more prevalent response among Protestants is apathy. One explanation for this is laziness, of course. We're too tired or busy to take notice of what's going on and do something about it until it enters our own backyard. Another, more troubling explanation is that Protestants are silently relieved this outrage is happening to Catholics so that Protestants do not have to confront the same problems in their own ranks.

The bedrock of Christianity is the belief that Jesus Christ came to earth to reconcile the world to God. Before going to the cross, he prayed that as he and the Father were one, so would his followers be (John 17:11). He called his followers—all of his followers as a united people—to be a new humanity that turns the world's will to power on its head and brings news of God's forgiveness to all. How are we doing at fulfilling this mission? Not too well, apparently. Other Christians are hurting, and what's our response? Insults and apathy.

If a Protestant church leader was caught in adultery, it would be easy for other people to point fingers and judge not just the person who committed the crime but the person's followers, too. This is precisely what's happening in regard to the current crisis. The problem belongs to a small number within a church that counts its members in the millions, yet outsiders are scorning all Catholics.

We tend to think of the Catholic Church as a giant institution, and for good reason, but we must never forget this institution is comprised of real people. And these real people are hurting, mourning in a way, because of the wrongs done to them by their leaders, the media frenzy, and non-Catholics who deride them or ignore their distress.

The Good Samaritan story teaches us that it shouldn't matter whether a hurting person believes all the same things we do. The victim on the road might as well be an atheist; we're to show compassion for hurting people—period. But in the case of Protestants showing love to Catholics (and vice versa), more is involved than the call to compassion. Also at issue is the importance of

being the people of God, which includes being a united people who love and care for each other in a way that makes a lasting impression on others.

I recently heard a lecture by Cambridge Ph.D. Rikk Watts who asked his listeners rhetorically, "Do you think God will send people to hell for praying to Mary?" Yet, it is because of an issue like this that many Protestants do damage to the kingdom of God by refusing to lift a finger to help Catholics in their time of need. Other Protestants raise more substantive issues, like the Catholic-Protestant debate over justification by faith alone, but no amount of disagreement with Catholics is a reason to shirk or belittle them.

The Reformation did not mark the first time Christians were split down the middle. A cursory reading of the New Testament reveals tension between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the first century or so following the resurrection. Many Christians who converted from Judaism wanted to impose rules associated with the old covenant on Gentile Christians, and Gentile Christians resisted. The real source of tension was that many Jewish Christians resented God's decision to open up his covenant promises to the Gentiles. Acts 15 records the early church's deliberations on these issues and their efforts to resolve them, but tense relations persisted.

What did Paul, the church's principal missionary, do about this uneasy situation? He traveled the Gentile world to collect an offering for the Jewish Christians in famine-afflicted Jerusalem (2nd Corinthians 9–10). His first priority was to spread the new word of forgiveness throughout the Mediterranean region, but once he had planted several churches in Achaia and Macedonia, one of his driving passions was to kindle a unity among Christians. He knew that if he and the Gentiles could pull it off, the offering would be a magnificent display of friendship and brotherhood that would go a long way toward mending the rift between the two factions.

What if Protestants saw Catholics in the same way Paul hoped the Gentiles would see the Christians in Jerusalem? There is more than one parallel, by the way. Just as new Gentile Christians first learned of Jesus from Jewish Christians, the first Protestant Christians initially learned of Jesus from Catholic Christians. Jerusalem's province, Judea, was struck with famine, just as the Catholic church is now struck with the sins of some of its leaders and the ensuing scandal. Gentile Christians were in a position to be of enormous help to Jewish Christians; Protestant Christians today are likewise positioned.

Paul endured beatings, imprisonment, exposure, stonings, shipwrecks, and more during his tenure as a missionary. We Protestants have the opportunity to show the same kind of love Paul did yet with little cost to ourselves.

Let me be clear. I am not arguing for a fusion of the Protestant church with the Catholic or vice versa. The reality, I'm afraid, is that Catholics and Protestants have doctrinal differences that are, at least for now, irreconcilable. Besides, if denominations within Protestantism are unable to build bridges between them (because of such weighty issues as whether to sprinkle or dunk people for baptism), it's simply unrealistic to expect more progress in the near future relative to the Catholic-Protestant divide. However, in light of Jesus' call for his followers to be one, all Christians should acknowledge these schisms are nothing less than tragic.

Let me also be clear that I do not think Protestant Christians should jump to the side of abusive priests. Priests who have committed crimes deserve justice, though unless we're involved in the relevant institutions of jurisprudence, it is not directly our job to see they get it. Rather, our job is to pray and do all we can to heal the victims of abuse as well as to pray for the perpetrators and visit them in prison.

What if Protestants saw this situation as an opportunity to talk about the evils lurking in our own church leadership? Are we too arrogant to admit the scandal could just as easily be ours? It has been ours, in fact; look at Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker. And it's only a matter of time before it's our turn again.

Imagine the message we would send to Catholics if we took it upon ourselves to fill Catholic churches' mailboxes with letters of love and solace. What if we offered to be of service in any way we could? What if out of nowhere we started bringing cookies to the offices of Catholic churches? What if we started praying for the healing of real people in the Catholic Church? What if Protestants invited Catholics to their potlucks and into their homes for dinner and fellowship? Now. Now is the time when such actions would send a loud message: "We're here for you. We love you. We want to be in fellowship with you."

One word of caution: We ought to exercise great care while doing these acts of love. We must leave all judgmentalism behind. We must not do them out of a sense of self-aggrandizement. We can't afford to make flip statements such as "Well, if your priests were just allowed to marry, all your problems would go away." Even if we do have the solutions, though I doubt we do, it's not our job to take care of problems in the Catholic Church, just as it is not the job of Catholics to take care of the many problems among Protestant congregations. Our job is to love, to mourn with those who mourn, to put our own house in order.

It's up to us, of course. If nothing else, I'd prefer we remain silent before castigating our already wounded brothers and sisters of faith. But I hope we'll do more. I hope we'll put on love and be the Father's instruments in answer to Jesus' prayer "that they all may be one." Maybe then we'd see a headline that read "Catholics Have a Friend in Protestants." What a joy that would be!

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