

It's the Cover-Up that Gets You

Toxic...Pt. 4

Welcome to the sermon that you will go search the internet for years from now. What I want to say this morning has no impact on anything going on at our church at the moment. But I don't buy insurance because of "anything going on in my life at the moment." I buy insurance based on what *may* happen in the future. This is a sermon about what may happen in the future, maybe at Southwest Family - hopefully not - but the odds are it's going to happen *somewhere* and when it does, you'll want to go back and find these notes.

Today we're going to talk about what to do when scandal comes to church. We're in a series contrasting toxic church culture with healthy church culture – how do we evaluate, how do we create and how do we *protect* the kind of culture that is an attractive witness to the gospel of Jesus in a given community setting? I don't know if there are actually more church scandals now than there used to be, but there sure to seem to be a lot of them. I suspect that the bright and shining beacon that is social media has just made it harder to bury secrets anymore. A whistle-blower can reach thousands with a single post.

I've been wanting to talk about these issues for some time, but I finally found the direction for them in a book I read earlier this year by a New Testament professor who I have followed for a while, Scot McKnight - "*A Church Called Tov*". *Tov* is the Hebrew word for "good" and we're going to start talking about that next week. How do we form a "goodness" culture in the church? But one more week of darkness before we get into the light.

And this is a big one. I believe you can't really judge anyone's character until they are tested by a crisis. It's when the pressure comes that our character is revealed. If you're dating someone, don't make any big commitments until you have seen how they respond to crisis. It's like a tea kettle with a hairline crack in it. You may never notice it with the naked eye, but one day you pour the scalding hot water in it and the whole thing shatters. The pressure reveals the true state of things. Well, crisis is a true indicator of church culture as well.

McKnight says: "When an allegation arises against a pastor, a leader, or a volunteer within the church, what the pastor and leadership does first will reveal the culture of the church - whether it is toxic or *Tov*. If the response is confession and repentance, or a commitment to finding the truth if all the facts are not yet known, that church probably has a healthy, *Tov* culture. On the other hand, if the pastor's first instinct is denial, some form of story or narrative about 'what really happened', or a defensive posture against 'those who attack our church or ministry' there are toxic elements at work within the church's culture." (Tov, 41)

Now, what kind of allegations are we talking about? What scandals? There can be a number. A variety of abuses of power – controlling people through the manipulation of spiritual authority. Physical abuse – I know of a youth pastor who got in a fistfight with one of his students during a softball game; can't do *that*! Financial scandals – the embezzlement or misuse of church funds. Do you remember the Jim Bakker scandal? I saw a trailer the other day for a new movie about Tammy Faye! But he went to prison for collecting money from people for a condo in his Christian theme park – which, already I have questions - and then spending it on other areas of ministry.

But far and away, the most common, and perhaps most devastating, form of scandal is sexual abuse. These are the ones that tend to make headlines. God created sex to be a glorious thing – there's a spiritual connection to it that we can't even begin to fully understand. But because it is such a powerful thing, God placed it within well defined boundaries.

Have you ever seen the Mississippi River up close? It's a powerful site. No wonder Mark Twain was captivated by it his whole life. There's a glory to a river. But if that river overflows it's banks, that glory can become a horror. Out of it's boundaries, a river is incredibly destructive – costing lives even.

There is a glory to human sexuality, but when it overruns its boundaries it becomes destructive. And the boundaries of healthy sexual activity in the Bible – actually in any of the world's major religions – is marriage. Plain and simple.

And when those boundaries are broken in the church the results are devastating. Now obviously, many forms of sexual abuse are crimes. The sexual abuse of children is especially egregious. Even with adults, there is rape and sexual assault. But it doesn't have to be a crime to fall short of God's ethical standards. I serve on the ethics committees of both my ministerial denomination and a Texas State Board of professional counselors. I can tell you that the devastation caused my sexual misconduct is very real.

And let me address that terminology quickly. This is important and it's something that many of us – including myself until rather recently – do not fully understand. There is a well-used phrase that needs to be excised from our vocabulary, “The pastor *had an affair* with someone in the church.” No, we have to change our thinking on this. That's not a thing. *Anytime* a pastor or church leader engages in sexual activity with someone other than their spouse, the proper term is “clergy sexual misconduct.”

I want to read you a statement from an important book called “*When Pastors Prey*” P-R-E-Y, clever title. “It is a violation of professional ethics for any person in a pastoral role of leadership or pastoral counseling (clergy or lay) to engage in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, client, employee, or student, whether adult, teen, or child, within the professional pastoral or supervisory relationship. It is wrong because sexual activity in this context is exploitative and abusive.” (18)

For a number of reasons. First, is role and position. A pastor is given spiritual authority, the voice to proclaim “thus saith the Lord” to the congregation. As we read a couple of weeks ago, the Bible says that the one who teaches will be judged more severely. The pastor is representing Christ by their actions, and Christ cares for the sheep, doesn’t exploit the sheep.

It’s also a violation of vulnerability. Many times, people seek out spiritual counsel and advice because they are hurting. There is a word in nature for one who intentionally sizes up the injured or vulnerable to be consumed for their own desires – and that word is “predator”. Watch out for wolves among the sheep.

Well you say, “What if it’s consensual?” Well, I’m here to tell you it can’t be. Even if it’s not the spiritual leader who initiates the conduct, he or she, by virtue of their vocational ethics – this is part of why you don’t let just anyone become a recognized minister – but the religious leader is still responsible to maintain the boundaries.

Let me tell you something about consent. “In order to consent fully to sexual activity, an individual must have a choice and **the relationship must be one of neutrality and equality**: hence, meaningful consent requires the absence of fear or even the subtlest coercion.” (Prey, 19) This has been a welcome perspective in the workplace where any woman can tell you that things used to be very different. Wherever there is a power differentiation, true consent becomes functionally impossible.

Some people would accuse the church of being overly focused on sex. I can tell you denominationally, it is *the* thing that will get you defrocked faster than anything else. And perhaps we *should* take other abuses *more* seriously, but that doesn’t mean we should take this one *less* so. I can tell you that God takes it seriously.

There's a story in the book of First Samuel about a priest named Eli who had two wicked sons who were also priests. And they were basically stealing from the offering plate – defrauding the people who brought gifts to the Temple. But that wasn't all. So one day, their father confronted them. (**1 Samuel 2:22-25**) *“Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and **how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting**. So he said to them, “Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the Lord’s people is not good. If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but **if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them?**” His sons, however, did not listen to their father’s rebuke, for it was the Lord’s will to put them to death.”*

Do you see? The clear lesson is that God sees clergy sexual misconduct as, not just a sin against the victims – which of course it is – but a sin against God. So serious that it wasn't just the end of their ministry, but the end of their lives. You say, “That sounds harsh.” Really? If you kept sheep, you're telling me you wouldn't want to eliminate the wolf that murdered your little lambs?

Jesus himself – the Prince of Peace – while holding a little child in his lap said, (**Matthew 18:6 NLT**) *“But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.”* I think Jesus was serious. And if we understood what was at stake, we would be serious as well.

Just in recent years the reputation of the gospel has taken a beating, in large part because of such scandals. A 2018 survey by the Gallup Poll reports that 37% of Americans had a “high” or “very high” reputation of ministers. That marks the lowest view of religious leaders ethical standards since the poll began in 1977.

It's not just the victims that suffer – and I don't mean to any any way discount their suffering. But the damage done to the church of Jesus Christ is inestimable. I feel it as a vocational minister. “The profession as a whole also faces consequences. Daily reports of clergy members being arrested and new civil actions against the governing bodies of religious institutions seriously compromise the credibility of all religious leaders. **While not all religious leaders are engaged in boundary violations, all bear the burden of distrust created by the misconduct of a minority.**” (*When Pastors Prey*, 17)

For the past couple of years, I have been working through – in my role as Presbyter – a clergy sexual misconduct case that has resurfaced from 35 years ago. A young college student – who had come from a history of abuse – was groomed and eventually manipulated into a sexual relationship with her campus pastor. As a result of the MeToo movement, she took the huge risk of bringing it back to the light.

I have spent hours investigating and interviewing as many people who were present at the time – including her abuser – and have come to the conclusion that the situation was terribly mishandled. You can say nobody was really handling it well back then. And there is truth to that. In a 1986 Ann Landers column, a man asked what to do with the information he learned on his honeymoon. His wife confessed that she had slept with five men who were at their wedding, *including the minister who married them*. Among other things, the columnist advised, “And for Heaven’s sake, tell Sally to keep her mouth shut. The minister doesn’t need the publicity.”

In this day and age, that is unthinkable advice. But understanding the failures of the past does not mean excusing them. We have to call out bad behavior whenever we see it. And my own denomination botched it. Never interviewed the victim for her version of events.

Therefore allowing the abuser to lie and diminish his sins, resulting in nothing more than a slap on the wrist. He was allowed to return to ministry and *she* was asked to leave her church and campus ministry so that her abuser and his wife could “heal”.

To this day – even after years of therapy – this courageous woman is not able to worship in a church because of the trauma that still haunts her. And it wasn’t so much the initial abuse as the way the denominational officials later ignored her when she did bring forth her allegations. Offering platitudes and circling the wagons to shut her out at the advice of church lawyers. My predecessors botched it terribly. It’s an absolute tragedy. And I believe it enrages the heart of her Heavenly Father. And therefore it enrages mine as well.

I often say it this way; you expect to meet bandits on the road from time to time. There are bad elements out there in the world. But the real tragedy is when bad guys are not held to account. When the justice system itself breaks down, that’s when society is in danger. God hates injustice. Especially the injustice that allows the powerful to abuse the weak. For that God reserves millstones.

So what should this look like in the local church culture? Bad things happen. We can – and should - put all kinds of safeguards in place. And yet, in a fallen world, tragedies are sometimes unavoidable. The Bible says it rains on the just and the unjust alike. When an abusive situation occurs within a church, that in itself does not necessarily show whether the culture is toxic or not. But always watch what happens next.

There's a familiar saying, "It's not the crime, it's the cover-up." Remember Martha Stewart? The craft queen was never convicted of insider trading - she went to federal prison for lying to investigators. Richard Nixon resigned from the Presidency before the House could vote on impeachment charges, but the Judicial Committee had approved three accusations against him – obstruction of justice, abuse of power and contempt of Congress. Not because he was involved in the Watergate break-in – not even his biggest enemies believe that – but he *absolutely* covered it up once he learned of it. It's always the cover-up that gets you.

God wired us as humans to make sense of our lives through storytelling. We are a narrative people. We understand our lives – and the lives of our families, our churches, our nation, and our world – by forming the facts (or non facts) into a narrative chain. Those are the stories that build our world.

We do this because we are made in God's image. And God is a storyteller. I mean, think about the Bible, how does it start? "*In the beginning...*" The story of creation. And how does God bring the world into being? With His hands? No, what is the repeated refrain? "God *said*...let there be light...and there was light". God spoke the universe into existence.

And so do we. But in our fallen state, we always twist what God uses for good and creative, into something evil and destructive. This is the same problem with human sexuality by the way. The closer something is to the nature of God, the more the enemy wants to distort it. The truth matters.

This is why, as an historian, it is so important that we battle for the truth in our history. I don't want a patriotic history. I don't want an activist history. I don't want propaganda in any form. We must strive for a *truthful* history – no matter how painful. If our history is a lie – if our origin story is a lie – we will live a lie. UT students, what is chiseled at the base of your great tower? (**John 8:32**) "*Then you will know the **truth**, and the truth will set you free.*" And in case anyone asks you who said that, it wasn't Abe Lincoln, it was Jesus!

That's why I love the Bible, it's not a pretty story, but it's a true story. Our beautiful origin narrative lasts all of two chapters and then in chapter three Adam and Eve go off the rails. And the Biblical writers never sugar coat it. If only the same could be said for the rest of the church.

There's a sense in which we do not know who we are or how to live until we understand our place in the story. Lying is a form of storytelling when something goes wrong, a way of "spinning the narrative" in our own direction – either out of deceit, self-preservation, or self-interest. And too many times, when something goes wrong in a church – from behind-the-scenes abuses of power, to sexual affairs, to violence against the most vulnerable, to financial sins – the pastor and other leaders often seek to control the narrative to protect the reputation of the pastor and/or the church.

So I want to give you this morning a few false narratives to watch out for when scandal comes to the church. These things should always be red flags. It's not the crime, it's the cover up. Whenever one of these false narratives is used within a church, victims who have brought allegations, and advocates who have tried to expose the truth, experience institutional betrayal and are wounded all over again. And never forget, the courts may turn a blind eye, but God has a millstone at the ready.

I'm going to give you six broad categories, but there are probably more. Just think about how many shades of lies there are – deception comes in many forms. But the first thing to watch out for is **Attacking the Accusers**. This is an age-old trick: If you don't want to admit the truth of an accusation, discredit the accuser instead. How many times have you seen this in a political debate? That's bad, but you are generally talking about two people with near equal power levels. But when it's done to victims it is devastating.

A common tactic in a rape allegation is for the defense lawyer to immediately begin to dig up dirt on the accuser. "Look at these Instagram photos, she clearly like to party." It's pure misdirection from the allegations at hand. One name for this strategy is *character assassination*. **Character Assassination** seeks to get the congregation to question the truth of the accuser's story by casting doubt on the accuser. If you ever hear the type of language that says, "So and so is a damaged person, therefore what they say can't be trusted." That's a warning sign.

First of all, abusers often seek out damaged people to prey on. It's always easier to separate an injured lamb from the healthy flock. So it's very possible the accuser *may* have some issues. But what about the facts of the allegations? Of course it may be a false accusation. Contrary to popular opinion, that is actually pretty rare, but if you deal with facts and find them lacking, that's one thing. But if the initial focus is just on the character of the accuser, watch out.

Another way to attack the accusers is to question their motives. If you can't get them on character, try *collusion*. Everyone loves a good conspiracy theory. We talked last week about the scandal at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago surrounding long-time pastor, Bill Hybels. In 2018 multiple women came forward with allegations of sexual misconduct stretching back decades. These were members of the church and former staff members. And even more corroborated a culture of abuse.

Hybels eventually resigned and subsequent independent investigations have uncovered the credibility of the claims, and the church leadership – most all of them replaced – have owned up to it and apologized to the victims. But initially, the church spun it as a revenge narrative from disgruntled former employees. By the way, former employees who were abused are almost always disgruntled.

After the church board refused to deal with the allegations, the victims turned to the *Chicago Tribune*. I find that these days God often uses journalists as His means of achieving justice. At a hastily called “family meeting” Bill tried to reframe the story as a personal vendetta by several former colleagues and staff members. He said,

“The lies you read about in the *Tribune* article are the tools this group is using to try to keep me from ending my tenure here at Willow with my reputation intact... Many of these alleged incidents purportedly took place more than 20 years ago. The fact that they have been dredged up now and assembled in a calculated way demonstrates the determination of this group to do as much damage as they possibly can.”

Rather than address allegations in a factual manner, the tendency of leaders in toxic culture is to deny, deny, deny. There's an old legal adage that goes, “If you have the facts on your side, pound the facts. If you have the law on your side, pound the law. If you have neither on your side, pound the table.” And many times that leads to pounding the accusers.

The second red flag in Manipulating Scripture.

We always want to be Biblical when it comes to handling anything in the church – including allegations and scandals. But there is a particularly nefarious way that toxic leaders manipulate those scriptures to their own advantage. At Willow Creek for example, the women who eventually went public with their allegations were told they should have “followed Matthew 18” and talked to Bill privately first.

And initially this appeal to scripture sounds right. I am a big proponent of following Matthew 18 when it comes to conflict in the church. Some may ask, “What even *is* Matthew 18?” Great question! Let me give you the context. By the way, notice this is the same chapter that deals with causing little ones to sin, so take note of that.

But at one point Jesus says, (**Matthew 18:15**) “*If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.*” Sometimes this conversation works and it’s always best to settle the matter just between the two of you. But sometimes it doesn’t work. There are some people who will never admit to doing anything wrong. And sometimes you’re just not seeing the issue eye-to-eye.

So the next step is **v.16**, “*But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’*” Bring in a third party moderator. But if this doesn’t work, the final step consequences become more serious. **V.17**, “*If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*”

The goal of these steps is to bring about repentance and reconciliation. But if the process doesn’t work, the offender is to be separated from the congregation. This has generally been understood to refer to excommunication. Now, this is a good process and I believe in it. I have used it on many occasions.

*But...*when a woman or a child – or anyone in a vulnerable position - who had been sexually abused is required to meet one-on-one with the perpetrator, it becomes morally inexcusable and psychologically violent to insist upon rigidly following Matthew 18. Such an approach is almost always a cynical dodge designed to protect the leader or the church. Besides which, in the Willow example, several of the women *had* used Matthew 18 and to no avail.

Another biblical text that is often misapplied in cases of sexual abuse is **1 Timothy 5:19**, “*Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.*” Again, as with Matthew 18, an otherwise reasonable biblical standard becomes psychologically and morally inexcusable when applied to cases of abuse. Think about it: Sexual harassment and abuse do not typically happen in the presence of witnesses. Duh! And of course the tragedy is – think of the Roman Catholic Church – often times multiple witnesses *do* emerge and yet they still are not believed.

And then a third passage that is often used as an argument against making allegations public is 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 which discourages Christians from talking one another to court, because “the unbelievers are watching!” This is an important text – *especially* in our litigious American culture – for a godly principle of conflict resolution within the church. I wish more of you would take advantage of it. But for obvious reasons, abuse allegations against leaders *of* the church cannot only be handled *by* the church.

And especially if the allegations are criminal, they must be reported to law enforcement and handled through the legal system. I should tell you, as a pastor in the state of Texas, I am required *by law* to report within 48 hours, any incidences of child or elder abuse that I *hear* about – not even observe. I can be held criminally liable for my silence.

Ok, so watch out for attacking the accusers and misusing scripture. We have to pick up the pace with these last few. A **third red flag is Gaslight the Critics**. Do you know this term *gaslighting*? I had heard it used for sometimes but didn’t quite understand it until recently. It comes from a 1938 play called *Gas Light*, in which a husband tries to convince his wife she’s going crazy – by among other tricks, dimming the gas lights in their apartment and denying anything has changed – to cover up his criminal activity. “You think you saw me do *what*? Well clearly my dear your simply losing your mind.”

The use of denial, misdirection, contradiction and misinformation in an attempt to destabilize the victim and get them to second guess their grasp on reality – “Did I really see what I saw?” - is gaslighting. It happened to me just recently when I was aggressively attacked during a phone call with a supervisor, only to have him turn the entire thing upside down and accuse *me* of being the aggressive one when I confronted him about it. I can tell you, it was a helpless feeling. Why would anyone believe me when he has all the power?

And I’m an educated white male with some power! I’m not used to being made to feel helpless. Can you imagine the devastation when it is rooted in social inequalities – especially ethnicity and sexuality – and carried out in top-down power based relationships? Punching down. Gaslighting is a powerful tool in hiding from the truth.

Another way to spin the narrative is to **Portray the Perpetrator as the Victim**. After the Willow Creek allegations hit the press, the elder board of the church issued a statement that included: “We have deep sadness over the broken relationships with people we have respected and people we love. We are grieved for Bill and his family. After 42 years of faithfully pastoring you and me, our congregation, and after his family giving sacrificially, this has been painful beyond words for them.” Well how painful do you think it’s been for his victims who have suffered in silence for decades?

I was at our national denominational conference a couple of weeks ago and I was speaking with the pastor of a very large congregation. The conversation turned to a podcast that *every pastor I know* is listening to about the fall of Mark Driscoll – he’s the pastor who yells “Who do you think you are?” in our bumper video. And he said – rather piously – that he couldn’t listen to it because it was gossip. “What concern is it of ours what happens in some other church?”

In fact, he said about the late Bible teacher Ravi Zachariahs – who was posthumously accused by hundreds of women of sexual harassment and even rape, charges that were subsequently substantiated – “Think about his wife and daughter. Why do they have to be drug through this?” Well, that’s sad for them, but *I’m* thinking about those victims and all the people who may now abandon the gospel that this prominent man preached because of his predatory sins.

The pastor followed that gem up by asking what I first thought about when I heard the names Bill Cosby or Michael Jackson – their artistic accomplishments or the sexual allegations against them? That’s when I knew, “*You’re* going to be an illustration in my series on toxic church culture!”

Guys, this is what powerful people think! Protect the powerful and discredit the weak. That’s demonic and it looks nothing like Jesus. Jesus tended the wounds of victims. And he called wicked priests a “pit of vipers” and “children of their father, the devil.” Jesus was on the side of truth. He *is* the truth.

Another way to control the narrative is to **Issue a False Apology**. A true apology is grounded in confession, repentance and ownership. False apologies attempt to save face by condemning the victims, appeasing the audience, attaching excuses and justifying inappropriate behavior. You’ve heard them. You’ve probably *given* them. I know I have. The classic is, “I’m sorry that you feel that way.” No admission of wrong doing, just the manipulative suggestion that the offended person is being too sensitive.

I thought I’d share with you a funny example from *The Onion* – I love *The Onion* – it’s a satirical take on the recent Andrew Cuomo scandal in New York. Like Bill Hybels, the governor was eventually brought down by allegations from former staff members. It says, “Cuomo Apologizes For Role In Hiring So Many Crazy Liars Who Sabotaged His Political Career.” Now that’s funny right there, I don’t care who you are.

But it's not funny when it happens in real life, and too often it does. Bottom line, a cheap apology is not an apology at all. It is a false narrative that only *claims* to be doing the right thing while in fact it tries to excuse, appease or justify sin and garner sympathy for the sinner. Are you sorry it happened? Or are you just sorry it came to light?

Ok, finally, one of the most devastating ways to promote a false narrative is to simply **Silence the Truth**. An authoritarian culture will always attempt to deal with controversy behind closed doors. So if questions *are* asked, the leadership can reply, "Trust us, we took care of it." And if you ask too many questions, you could get labeled a "troublemaker" or a "gossiper" or "disloyal".

Scot McKnight says, "Narratives that silence people prevent the truth from becoming known, create confusion for people who sense something is wrong but can't put their finger on it, and sew discord between those who try to speak up and others who choose to believe the false narrative. **Silenced truth is an unspoken lie.**" (70)

Let me quickly tell you two things to watch out for that churches are using more and more to control their own narratives. As we said, part of the reason for this series is internal – let's make sure that *we* always

remain a healthy church culture. But part of it is to train you to know what to look for should you be in a position to find a new church one day. I want you to know the signs of a toxic culture. Let me give you two red flags on this front.

Some churches – including some very prominent ones – are now using membership covenants to try and limit litigation against the organization. For instance, to join one well known church in Dallas – and it's a young, happening church – you must sign an agreement which states "Members shall refrain from filing lawsuits against the church and submit to Christian Alternative Dispute Resolution" and then references that same 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 passage we talked about.

Again, this appears to be an attempt to take a biblical approach to conflict resolution, and that's good. But the problem with this is there is no definition of what constitutes a "dispute". For instance, there is a line between a "dispute" and a "crime" – and it takes moral sense and discernment to know the difference. This matters profoundly, and you should never sign that kind of agreement without those caveats. Can you even fathom that we've come to needing a lawyer to review your church's membership covenant before you sign? It's sad.

But sadly necessary. In 2019, *The New York Times* ran an article about the very Dallas church I'm talking about, headlined, "Her Evangelical Megachurch Was Her World. Then Her Daughter Said She Was Molested By A Minister." A family that had signed that covenant went to church leadership with her 11-year-old daughter's allegation. A senior director told the mother that it was impossible for a staff member to have violated her daughter at camp because the leaders all followed the church's membership covenant. Gaslighting.

The family actually pursued the arbitration process, but after exhausting all available options without satisfaction the family did file a lawsuit against the church. The mother said, "What we encountered was a church that made a conscious choice to protect itself rather than reflect the Jesus it claims to follow." The suit is still pending.

Membership covenants are not the only tool that churches use to silence people. Another way to prevent negative information from becoming known is through a "nondisclosure agreement", known as an NDA. These have been around in the business world forever, but have recently come to prominence through many of the celebrity scandals.

Someone makes an accusation against the rich and powerful, who then throw a large sum of money at the accuser to drop the charges, and in exchange the accuser signs a binding agreement of silence. They won't tell anyone what the rich and powerful did.

In the church world you mostly see this in settlement agreements when a staff member is let go. It's not about protecting proprietary information from competitors like it is in the business world – "Don't tell anyone where we get our communion juice!" – it is designed to render someone incapable of establishing justice by speaking truthfully. Churches that push NDA's in exchange for a severance package are already swimming in a toxic culture.

But I'm now hearing about churches requiring NDA's from *volunteers*. Can you imagine? "We'd like you to make the coffee, but you can't tell anyone what you saw!" That's crazy. Listen to me carefully. If a church ever asks you to sign an NDA, *run* in the other direction. That is a big flashing red light. As McKnight observes, "*Tov churches tell the truth. Tov churches do not use NDA's to prevent the truth from being told.*" (74)

Ok, enough of the dark stuff. I think we all get the picture. Attacking Accusers, Manipulating Scriptures, Gaslighting Critics, Depicting the Abuser as the Victim, Issuing Fake Apologies and Silencing the Truth. And we could come up with a dozen more if we brainstormed. But I think we've demonstrated what toxic culture looks like. And, painful as it may be, we have to. I teach my children the dark *and* the light, because I want them to know the difference. It helps keep them safe. And maybe you won't need this information right now – would to God you *never* do! – but I want you to have it if you need it.

But next week let's start building up. I'm going to show you what a goodness culture looks like. Introduce us to the *Circle of Tov*. We will then spend two or three weeks doubling down on some of the key elements, and then on to *God at the Movies!*

But I want to close with a scripture that I feel is appropriate for today. I was struggling with how to end this message. Heck, I was struggling with the whole thing! I've been in church all my life and I've never heard a sermon on this topic. And I understand why, it's a painful topic to think about, painful to discuss. Nobody wants to think about the worst-case scenario. Well, you engineers do, but you're weird!

And so when I was in my Friday morning prayer time – I write the sermons on Fridays – this was the “Refrain for the Morning Lesson” in my daily prayer book. Which means I repeat it like three times throughout the liturgy. But it was **Psalms 69:6**, “*May those who hope in you not be disgraced because of me, O Lord, the Lord Almighty; may those who seek you not be put to shame because of me, O God of Israel.*”

That's my prayer for me. That's my prayer for us. We can't always control what happens in our church, but we can control *how* we respond to it. Whether we will walk in darkness, or in light. Whether we will trade in lies, or in the truth. What our witness will be before a watching world...*and* before the Lord God Almighty.

Let's pray...