

# On abuse and the response to the Ravi Zacharias scandal

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The Ravi Zacharias scandal rocked Evangelicalism,<sup>1</sup> since Zacharias was a prominent Evangelical apologist until his death in 2020. In response to the scandal, Evangelicals reacted with sorrow and grief over the wickedness of Zacharias' sins. The more common refrain from many leaders however is some variant of "there but for the grace of God go I," as seen in Michael Brown's article,<sup>2</sup> and reposted on *Charisma News*,<sup>3</sup> a leading news source for Charismatics. While they sorrow over the victims of sins, the focus is on "not throwing stones" and empathizing with Ravi Zacharias to some extent. The most egregious piece here can be found in Singapore by Rev. Edmund Chan of CEFC (Covenant Evangelical Free Church), who ended his note with a confidence that Ravi Zacharias is indeed in heaven now,<sup>4</sup> an article which epitomizes a major problem within Evangelicalism.

## **Abuse and the Abusers**

### **Evangelicalism and Partiality**

Chan confidently asserts that his good friend Ravi Zacharias is in heaven. Now, whether Ravi Zacharias is in heaven or not is up to God, not us. But from our perspective on earth, Zacharias had indulged in gross sexual sin over a long period of time, and he was unrepentant over this sin until his death. While he might have repented on his deathbed, we simply do not know whether that is the case. And although salvation is indeed by grace through faith alone, we cannot see any person's faith, so we only judge base on the outside. Therefore, from the record of Zacharias' life of sin, can we credibly claim that Zacharias is in heaven? No. We hope he has repented; we hope he has true faith in Jesus, but we simply do not know whether that is true. What we do know is that he died seemingly in a state of unrepentance. Therefore, we cannot say that we know for sure Ravi Zacharias is in heaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, "Law Firm Details Sexual Misconduct by Global Ministry Leader," *U.S. News*, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2021-02-11/law-firm-details-sexual-misconduct-by-global-ministry-leader>

<sup>2</sup> Michael L. Brown, "How Should we Respond to the Ravi Zacharias Scandal?," *Ask Dr Brown* [blog] (Feb 15, 2021), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://askdrbrown.org/library/how-should-we-respond-ravi-zacharias-scandal>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Brown, "How Should we Respond to the Ravi Zacharias Scandal?," *Charisma News* (Feb 15, 2021), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.charismanews.com/opinion/in-the-line-of-fire/84406-how-should-we-respond-to-the-ravi-zacharias-scandal>

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Chan, "Ravi Zacharias: How does a shocked and grieving world respond?," *Salt and Light* (Feb 14, 2021), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://saltandlight.sg/news/ravi-zacharias-how-does-a-shocked-and-grieving-world-respond/>

But what is worse of all is how Chan's article, as well as the profusion of sorrow by evangelical leaders, looks to outsiders. While everyone expresses sympathy for the victims, that last part in Chan's article about seeing Ravi in heaven is a slap on the victims' faces; it is absolutely insensitive. So a Christian leader can sin in such a wicked manner and a fellow leader can confidently say he is in heaven, while the victim suffers below on earth? If the victim was an unbeliever, what kind of testimony is this? Where is justice for the victims?

Let me point out an obvious fact: If the sinner is some "nobody" in some church somewhere who committed the same type of sins, will any of these Christian leaders express such grief and sorrow? Would Edmund Chan confidently say that this "nobody" is definitely going to heaven? Of course not! It is because the Evangelicals leaders are mourning the fall of **one of their own**, which is why they are so profuse in their expression of sorrow and grief.

While certainly Christians are humans and it is natural to be more affected by people you have actually interacted with, the problem here is not in the outpouring of grief but in the way Zacharias' sin is trivialized. The expression of sorrow for the victims in their articles strikes one as a perfunctory gesture, as an acknowledgment that sin has occurred. One does not have to demonize Ravi Zacharias and harshly excoriate him, doing a 180 degree from one's former praises of the popular apologist. But one should not treat Zacharias differently from other believers when it comes to sin. Unfortunately, as we can see in their responses, Evangelical leaders are partial to Ravi, and that is sin.

### **Partiality leads to coddling of abuse**

The rush to empathize with Ravi Zacharias is alarming. While I am sure most leaders do not have such an intent, how they are perceived is that they are closing ranks with the abuser rather than the abused.<sup>5</sup> As if to show that no one actually learns from true instances of abuse, as seen in the sexual abuse cases involving Sovereign Grace churches<sup>6</sup> as well as that of the sexual abuse of Rachel Denhollender,<sup>7</sup> Evangelical leaders have closed ranks and used the biblical truth that "there but for the grace of God go I" as a cover to ignore the wickedness of sin. By identifying themselves as sinners just like Ravi Zacharias is a sinner, they make it sound as if Zacharias' sin is no different from their relatively minor sins (from a human perspective). The practical result is that gross

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<sup>5</sup> Kyle J. Howard, "Ministry leaders' rush to empathize with Ravi Zacharias is beyond alarming," *Religion News Service* (Feb 19, 2021), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/02/19/ministry-leaders-rush-to-empathize-with-ravi-zacharias-is-beyond-alarming/>

<sup>6</sup> Tiffany Stanley, "The Sex-Abuse Scandal that Devastated a Suburban Megachurch: Inside the Rise and Fall of Sovereign Grace Ministries," *The Washingtonian* (Feb 14, 2016), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2016/02/14/the-sex-abuse-scandal-that-devastated-a-suburban-megachurch-sovereign-grace-ministries/>

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Denhollender, *What is a Girl Worth?: My Story of Breaking the Silence and Exposing the Truth about Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2019)

wickedness hides behind a façade of false humility, as seen in actual abuse cases within churches. After all, since the rapist is just another sinner, if he apologizes to the victim, then the victim must gladly accept his apology and forgive the sin of rape, or should she?

In the case of SGM (Sovereign Grace Ministries), where ministry worker Nathanael Morales has been convicted of sexually assaulting children, what do you think would or had happened if a member had decided to file a police report instead of going through the “proper reconciliation process” with the leaders of the church? Excommunication from the church I would think! That is the problem with the coddling of abuse and abusers, when the fact that all sin is grievous before God is inappropriately taken as an excuse to trivialize abuse and coddle abusers. Instead of protecting the flock, the wolves are protected as they help themselves to lamb chops, under the guise of “grace”!

### **The Evangelical and New Calvinist flattening of sin leads to abuse**

Evangelicals love to say “there but for the grace of God go I.” In the sense of salvation from sin and the penalty of sin, that phrase is perfectly true and proper. However, the move by many Evangelical leaders in empathizing with Ravi Zacharias has shown how Evangelicals have **lost all sense of proportion** when it comes to sin. Just because all sins are equally worthy of hell does not mean that all sins are equal even before God. For example, just because anger is as culpable as murder does not mean that being angry with someone is the same as murdering him! After all, can we say that if we get angry with someone, we might as well murder him since sin is sin?!

Evangelicals are rightly averse to the Roman Catholic grading of sins between venial and mortal sins, or the Pharisees in minimizing their sins while condemning the other “sinners.” But not wanting to be self-righteous does not imply that all sins are equal sins and that there is no place in placing some sins to be worse or more deserving of censure than others! This inability to recognize the inequality of sins is why Evangelical leaders readily identify with Ravi Zacharias as a sinner. Yet I have not seen them identifying with the victims, have they?

When church leaders identify with the abusers rather than their victims, what do you think is the practical outcome? A church that coddles the abusers while demonizing the victims because the victims do not “forgive” their abusers! We can see that in the SGM cases, but Evangelicals it seems do not learn from the mistakes of others. Due to their flattening of sin and their partiality, they end up coddling abusers and partake of their sin. Is it any surprise if some of the victims leave the faith altogether? And why should victims of abuse trust the church, if the first instinct is to circle the wagons and write Edmund Chan and Michael Brown pieces extolling the virtues of the abuser? This is not to deny that Ravi Zacharias has exhibited some virtues, but does anyone else see how *tone deaf* these articles are in light of the revelation of sexual abuse?

## **Evangelicalism: A Church hostile to victims of abuse**

Due to these reasons, the practical outcome is that Evangelical churches become places where those who have suffered abuse are not welcome. Evangelicals are more interested in “wrapping things up” in easy “reconciliation,” instead of doing the hard and painful work of truth telling and heart-shattering reconciliation. Far easier to avert one’s eyes to evil than to confront evil, especially when church leaders are the ones doing evil. But how about the victims of abuse? If the shepherd is to care for the flock of God, can he afford to ignore abuse victims? Jesus does not even break a bruised reed (Is. 42:3 c.f. Mt. 12:20), yet Evangelical leaders do not care if they do!

On the issue of abuse, it is sad to say that the world is much better on the issue than the church. With whistle-blowing policies and procedures in place, and with no desire to be “nice,” the world has better systems to deal with abuse in the workplace than the church has within its walls. While the church is not the world, we can do better than to embrace errant ideas about sin and an unbiblical view of collegiality and so tolerate abuse within the church. The church should be a place with victims can be heard, not a place where their voices are silenced by the leaders of churches under the guise of “there but for the grace of God I would also be an abuser”!

## **The Abused**

### **Victims are not necessarily right**

It is an unfortunate reality in this sin-soaked world, but victims are not necessarily right. The 21<sup>st</sup> century world with its abhorrence towards abuse has swung to the other extreme where victims are treated like saints, which is why in America the “victimhood Olympics” is continually in full swing. But there is no virtue in being a victim. One should empathize with victims, and help them, but victims have no special moral standing. If they are wrong, they are still wrong, regardless of whether someone has wronged them before.

The obvious example is Man’s relation with God. Man is the victim of an injustice: Satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve leading to original sin. But did God absolve Adam and Eve for their sin? Of course not! Satan was indeed punished, but so were Adam and Eve, and all humanity with them. There is nothing wrong with having a wicked abuser, and wicked victims as well. **History is full of wicked men victimizing other wicked men.** One thinks of Ahab and the kings of Syria. One thinks of Sennacherib King of Assyria being assassinated by his own sons. Or one thinks of the Ilkhanate Mongols sacking Baghdad and massacring all its inhabitants in 1258AD, after the Caliph was done destroying neighboring Christian states. The fact is that victims can be just as evil or even more so than their abusers.

Most definitely, we should listen to and sympathize with victims. Yet at the same time, we are not to necessarily take their side, but rather to take the side of truth. We are not to

privilege the victim, just as we are not to privilege the abuser. The only criterion is truth, not one's victimhood status or lack thereof!

### **Abused can and do become abusers**

Just as victims are not necessarily right, so also they are not sinless. The abused can and do become abusers themselves. We see that when they began to make demands not based upon truth. The intersectional black "community" in America is one such example. Generations of suffering due to first racism and then the liberal expectations of soft bigotry has produced movements such as Black Lives Matter, an organization that make absurd demands such as the abolition of the nuclear family as the goal of what they believe to be justice.<sup>8</sup> Those who had and are suffering have become abusers, making demands that inflict suffering on others just as they once had suffered.

Within Evangelicalism, we see in various quarters demands that certain actions be taken as a form of restitution. While certainly restitution should be made for injustices, to demand a certain set of changes be made in order to correct what is deemed "systematic injustice" is to impose certain ideas of what is and is not justice. However, biblical restitution is to be objective not subjective (c.f. Num. 5:7), and proportionate to the offense (Ex. 21:24). The adage "an eye for an eye" is meant to restrain vengeance, such that any move for justice does not create the situation of Lamech killing men for merely striking him, where desires for vengeance create more injustice instead.

Thus, in response to abusers, certain people rail against "patriarchy,"<sup>9</sup> while others attack doctrines such as the Eternal Submission of the Son and the organization Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood,<sup>10</sup> which is seen to be a perpetuator of a "culture of abuse" through their promotion of "patriarchy" and "unbiblical doctrines that justify patriarchy." Since these people are victims of abuse, or advocates for victims of abuse, they utilize an emotional appeal as a ploy to cast themselves as the "good guys" against the "evil empire." But just because they are victims of abuse or advocates for victims does not mean that they are right, and their activism has made them become abusers themselves. When the standard for determining what is right or wrong is no more Scripture, but rather it is the *status* and *identity* of people who are seen as abusers, or friends and colleagues of abusers, then the abused have become abusers in themselves. Absent the authority of Scripture, what right do they have to make such demands of others and insist that their demands are the only proper way of restitution? To make such

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<sup>8</sup> Jon Miltimore, "Black Lives Matter's Goal to 'Disrupt' the Nuclear Family Fit a Marxist aim that goes back a century and a half," *Foundation for Economic Education* (Sept 24, 2020), accessed March 1, 2021, <https://fee.org/articles/black-lives-matter-s-goal-to-disrupt-the-nuclear-family-fits-a-marxist-aim-that-goes-back-a-century-and-a-half/>

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Green Miller, Aimee Byrd and the rest of the Reformed Feminists.

<sup>10</sup> Sheila Wray Gregoire, "No more Covering up Abuse of Covering for Abusers – A Plea for Churches," *To Love, Honor, and Vacuum* [blog] (Jun 12, 2018), accessed Feb 17, 2021, <https://tolovehonorandvacuum.com/2018/06/sbc-and-women-for-such-a-time-as-this/>

demands is to engage in emotional abuse, saying that “you must do X, or you are participating in my abuse.”

Restitution should be made for sin. But the terms of restitution are dictated by Scripture, not by the abused. If the abused made unbiblical demands, then they should be rebuked and not appeased. This must be done sensitively to be sure, but the abused do not have a right to become abusers themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The Ravi Zacharias scandal has shown us problems of accountability and transparency within segments of Evangelicalism. But the response to the scandal further reveals to us that Evangelicalism does not know how to deal with abuse, for both the abusers and the abused. From partiality to trivializing abuse to not knowing what biblical restitution is, Evangelicalism is in a sad state, and her leaders clueless.

We must do better. Jesus was someone who did not break a bruised reed, and while he strongly condemned the Pharisees, did not think of the Pharisees as those who are to shunned and the message of salvation withdrawn. While speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well, he did not shield her from his knowledge of her sins. But Evangelical leaders wink at sins within the church while lambasting sins outside the church. They attack those who point out sin within the church as “heresy hunters,” “Pharisees,” and thus they create a culture where coddling abuse is normal. Instead of standing on biblical truth and judging impartially, they are partial to those they deem “one of their own.”

May God grant us repentance for our short-comings, and let us learn how to deal biblically with the issue of abuse.