

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Sexual Harassment Scandals and the Church

American civilization in 2017 is living with the results of the sexual revolution of the 20th century. Few would disagree with the conclusion that we live in a sex-saturated culture with few boundaries. Pornography abounds and is institutionalized on the Internet and in all forms of entertainment. Ross Douthat comments that “When the sexual revolution started, its conservative critics warned it would replace marriage with a divorce-go-round, leave children without fathers, and expose women to more predation than before . . . The cascade of revelations about powerful men [abusing women] is a continuation [of that] . . . But so far the process has *not* substituted successful marriages for failing ones, healthy relationships for exploitative ones, new courtship scripts for the ones torn up 50 years ago. Instead as Weinsteinian or Polanskian excesses have been corrected, we've increased singlehood, sterility and loneliness.”

The “Weinstein effect” has dramatically impacted the entertainment, media and political culture of American society. In many ways, all of this actually began with the disgusting and perverse behavior of President Bill Clinton and his relationship with the White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. Today, many of his defenders are ashamed of themselves and are saying so. Nearly 30 years later, today’s scandals have wrecked the careers of Kevin Spacey, Louis C.K., political journalist Mark Halpern, TV talk show hosts Charlie Rose and Bill O’Reilly and most recently Today Show host Matt Lauer and radio personality Garrison Keillor—among many others. In politics, Al Franken, John Conyers, Roy Moore and Donald Trump have likewise abused and manifested predatory behavior toward women. Until recently, all of these figures enjoyed seeming immunity because of their status and power, which resulted in so many women (and young boys) remaining silent. But no longer! One of the first biblical truths my mother taught me as a young boy was “be sure your sins will find you out.” The fear and the perceived threats felt by the victims of these predators have been removed and they are talking, providing credible evidence for their abuse.

As we think biblically about all this, it is important to remember that such predatory and reprehensible behavior does not occur in a vacuum. For example, as many have observed, Hugh Hefner, who recently died, validated the objectification of women. But he did so by embracing and championing a libertinism and a materialism that hid the reality of philandering, licentiousness and exploitation—all in the name of freedom! Hefner viewed himself as a moral revolutionary, one who “opened up the floodgates” of sexual libertinism, which *Playboy* encouraged, commercialized and symbolized. He thereby transformed American sexual morality by intentionally breaking down the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic that once defined American civilization.

Theologian Albert Mohler maintains that Hefner not only advocated a lifestyle of sexual libertinism but he also advocated a theology. In an interview, Hefner declared that he was a “spiritual person, but I don’t mean that I believe in the supernatural.” He believed in God as creator but not in “the God of the Bible.” He championed that “I urge one and all to live life as if there is no reward in the afterlife and to do it in a moral way that makes it better for you and those around you, and that leaves this world a little better place than when you found it.” Hefner’s moral philosophy and “theology” of libertinism and exploitation are now mainstreamed in American culture. Hefner was not a moral revolutionary but a peddler of smut in the name of freedom. His “freedom” produced bondage and enslavement to a sexual fantasy that has destroyed both men and women. Hefner personified the sexual ethic that now pervades American civilization—a lifestyle without boundaries and without many checks on behavior—until now! The predatory abuse and blatant harassment of men toward women is now being challenged—and it is long overdue.

What should be the response of the Church of Jesus Christ to all of this?

- First of all, we must forcibly and confidently condemn such behavior as sin. These scandals cover the entire political spectrum—from liberals such as Harvey Weinstein, Louis C.K. and Senator Al Franken to conservatives such as Roy Moore and Donald Trump. This is not a political issue. This is an issue of depravity and sin and evangelical Christians should be condemning such sin all along the political spectrum. Evangelical Christian leaders should take on the role of the Old Testament prophet and call out such egregious sin, not condone it, hide it or dismiss it.
- Second, we must affirm the clear teaching of the Bible about both men and women. The Scriptures affirm the equality of men and women, both in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and in their position in Christ (Galatians 3:28). Men and women who trust Christ will share in the privilege of being joint-heirs with Christ (1 Peter 3:7).
- Third, the church should lead the culture in both teaching and modeling the proper behavior of men toward women—in the family, in the church and in the broader culture. It is the firm obligation of men who love Jesus Christ to treat all women with dignity, respect and honor. Regardless of the situation, coarse jokes, demeaning statements and any form of sexual abuse or harassment are completely unacceptable. Jesus Christ challenged the old and established traditions of the first century culture. Contempt, discrimination and demeaning references often characterized rabbinic teachings about women and were common in the Greco-Roman world. For example, according to Jewish tradition, women could never be a part of the count needed to establish as synagogue. But Luke cited both men and women who were baptized and persecuted, and who contributed to the growth of the church (Acts 5:14; 8:12; 9:2; 17:4,12). In 1 Corinthians 7:1-10, the Apostle Paul challenged the obscene and abusive practices of Greco-Roman men in marriage by affirming the mutual equality and rights of both the wife and the husband. Women played a significant role in Jesus’ public ministry. Many of Jesus’ financial supporters were women (Luke 8:3). Mary, the sister

of Martha, sat at Jesus' feet—an honor normally given only to men. Several women had the immensely important distinction of bearing the news of Christ's resurrection—a remarkable honor in light of strict Jewish teaching on valid testimony. Women were part of the events at Pentecost and were likewise filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14; 2:1-4). In the early decades to the church, key women played extraordinary roles: Lydia (Acts 16:14-15); Priscilla, who with her husband Aquila, discipled and taught Apollos (Acts 18:26); Phoebe held a key leadership role in the early church (Romans 16:1-2); and of the 29 people Paul commends to the Roman church in Romans 16, 10 were women!

The brokenness and depravity of American civilization are evidenced by the sexual abuse and harassment of men toward women now coming to light. Such developments manifest how sick our society really is. We are a nation under judgment. The Church of Jesus Christ must vehemently and forthrightly condemn such behavior as totally unacceptable and counter to everything the Bible says about men and about women. In all conceivable situations, a godly man is to treat women with respect, dignity and honor. The Church must lead the way in restoring these virtues to our desperately sick and needy civilization.

See James P. Eckman, "Significant Women of the New Testament," *Confident Living* (February 1991), pp. 18-19; Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (2-3 December 2017); Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (3 December 2017); and Albert Mohler in www.albertmohler.com (14 October 2015).