



## **Week #8: Pastoral Power and the Ethics of Sexual Misconduct**

### **Prayer Before Studying Ethics:**

Keep your Church, Lord God, with your continual mercy, and because the frailty of man without you cannot but fall, keep us always under your protection, and lead us to everything that makes for our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Trinity 15

### Pastoral Power and Its Relation to Sexual Misconduct

In last week's class, we looked at the power which attaches to the pastoral office and noted some ways that this delegated and limited power could be

- misunderstood (as if it inherently belonged to the pastor and extended into situations beyond the preaching of the Word of God) and
- misused (being used for the pastor's own benefit or gratification at the expense of those under his or her care).

Most of the recent literature on pastoral sexual misconduct suggests that the latter is best understood along similar lines. The older, popularly held notion that sexual misconduct is the result of provocation by a seductive female and a subsequent temporary but understandable lapse in self-control by a male pastor has largely been abandoned.

Pastoral sexual misconduct occurs

- when a pastor ignores prudent boundaries
- so that he can exercise the power that attaches to him in virtue of the pastoral office
- to use a person under his care as a means to sexual gratification.

The gratification attaching to such relationships derives in large part from the power differential existing between the offender and the victim; the capacity to exercise power in a relationship with a dependent person of lesser power (e.g, a counselee) is part of the underlying dynamic which motivates professional sexual misconduct.

### How Common Is Pastoral Sexual Misconduct?

Given our society's extraordinary preoccupation with sexual gratification (treating sexual gratification as a major personal and relational goal), it is not surprising that evangelical laypeople's sexual behavior is broadly similar to that of members of the general society. For example, a 1988 survey of almost one thousand subscribers to *Christianity Today* (an evangelical publication) who were not pastors received the following responses (*Leadership* 9:1 [Winter 1988], p. 12):

- "45% indicated having done something" with a person other than their spouse "that they considered sexually inappropriate"
- "23% said they had had extramarital intercourse"
- "28% percent said they had engaged in other forms of extramarital sexual contact"

Since members of the evangelical ministry are selected from the ranks of evangelical laypeople, it is predictable that extramarital sexual contact would also be observed in members of the evangelical ministry.

When the same survey asked subscribers of *Christianity Today* who were involved in local church ministry the following questions:

- *Since you've been in local church ministry, have you done anything with someone (not your spouse) that you feel was sexually inappropriate?*  
23% answered yes
- *Have you ever had sexual intercourse with someone other than your spouse since you've been in local church ministry?*  
12% answered yes
- *Have you ever had other forms of sexual contact with someone other than your spouse...since you've been in local church ministry?*  
18% answered yes.

Similar studies have returned a similar or slightly lower degree of extramarital sexual contact by members of the evangelical clergy.

R. A. Blackmon ("The Hazards of Ministry," doctoral diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, in *Dissertation Abstracts International* v. 46, 02B) found in a separate study that

- 12.67% of persons in local church ministry "admitted sexual intercourse with a person affiliated with their church other than their spouse"
- 76.51% "indicated knowledge of a minister who had engaged in sexual intercourse with a person affiliated with his church"  
(summary from Jeff T. Seat, James T. Trent and Jwa K. Kim, "The Prevalence and Contributing Factors of Sexual Misconduct Among Southern Baptist Pastors in Six Southern States," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 47:4 [Winter 1993])

Seat, Trent and Kim, in a 1993 survey of Southern Baptist pastors, found a somewhat lower incidence of self-reporting of pastoral sexual misconduct:

- 14.1% of respondents indicated "[e]ngagement in sexual behavior which" they judged "to be inappropriate for a minister"
- 6.1% received a high score for composite sexual misconduct (usually indicating sexual contact with a church member or extensive use of pornography)
  - 5.8% "indicated that they had had sexual contact with a person currently affiliated with their church"
  - 4.3% "indicated that they had had sexual contact with a person formerly affiliated with their church"
  - The previous two were not seen as mutually exclusive, but rather supply evidence of recidivism (recurring events of misconduct over the course of time in different settings)
- 70.4% knew "of other ministers who" had "had sexual contact with a person affiliated with their congregations"
- 24.2% "indicated that they had counseled a woman who claimed to have had sexual contact with a minister"

- 80.1% conceded that “[t]he lack of written guidelines and policies aimed at preventing inappropriate sexual situations” was a significant problem

### Factors Relevant to the Initiation and Practice of Pastoral Sexual Misconduct

- 1) Stress: Persons who rank high on a composite stress score (feeling stress from several sources) are more likely to engage in sexual misconduct
  - a) Pastoral ministry is potentially a very stressful profession because
    - i) it has poorly defined boundaries and expectations
    - ii) it tends to attract people whose personal and professional goals coincide to a certain extent, so that it becomes easy to draw one’s identity largely (or even almost entirely) from one’s work;
    - iii) it tends to attract people whose profile is similar to that found in other helping professions, deriving significant pleasure from the well-being and good relations they enjoy with the people they relate to in their job, while finding bad relations and conflict with others to be difficult to manage and personally hurtful
    - iv) in contemporary society the minister is increasingly a marginal figure socially and economically and more likely to be held in contempt as a weak, powerless, dependent figure than to command the professional respect that attaches to doctors, lawyers, successful executives, professors at secular universities, etc.
    - v) as the minister’s public role and functions have gradually been eliminated in an increasingly secular, pluralistic, relativistic society, the minister’s role has increasingly been defined in terms of oversight and administration of local church programs and counseling. This can be very isolating and deprive one of the kind of social/public feedback one needs to remain emotionally healthy and maintain a clear focus or ministry vision.
    - vi) ministry is often treated as a performance-based system with little or no job security, with few incentives for maintaining healthy boundaries to protect oneself from overwork or prevent one from undermining one’s marriage.
      - (1) Poor self-care as a result of overwork → deterioration of physical health, poor diet, little or no exercise, stress, depression
      - (2) Occupational stress/unhappiness with work (often combined with financial stress) leading to inadequate time with spouse, emotional exhaustion and resulting of lack of affection, loneliness, lower marital adjustment and decreased global marital satisfaction.

Often the trigger for the deterioration that leads to sexual misconduct is sense of reversals (negative impacts from aging, decrease in health, unfulfilled expectations and disappointments in one’s professional work [particularly as affects perceived status])

- 2) Pornography as a Possible Contributing Influence: Exposure in adolescence to pornography or recent use of Internet pornography can elevate risk or escalate the pursuit of inappropriate sexual behavior with clients.
  - a) What pornography and other factors that predispose to sexual misconduct seem to have in common is this: They tend to especially be a problem for individuals who

are not comfortable with disclosing themselves to others and have a certain fear of intimacy, so tend to isolate themselves rather than developing ties with persons to whom they are well known. Because of this, they are caught in a bind: Because they have low self-esteem, they need the type of affirmation associated with emotional intimacy, yet they lack the capacity for emotional intimacy (i.e. sharing one's feelings with others and being empathetic and open to the feelings of others). To escape their problems and deal with their low self-concept, they therefore adopt a pattern of fantasizing (hidden from others) in which there is a significant power differential—the person imagines himself to be a strong, dominating personality upon whom the imaginary other person is dependent in a sexualized, two-dimensional relationship. The power differential involved in imaginary hierarchical sexual fantasies is therefore used to boost one's self-esteem in the absence of real intimacy, real self-knowledge and a real engagement with one's underlying problems.

- 3) Narcissism and the Ability To Compartmentalize: In working at a high-stress, service-oriented job with poor boundaries and little feedback, people will sometimes draw their own boundaries and say to themselves, “I’ve spent a lot of time and energy looking after other people and their problems—now it’s time for me to look out for myself and get what I want and need,” giving themselves permission (entitlement) to pursue individual gratification and individual goals outside of the framework within which they normally operate.
  - a) Narcissism=a love for oneself which limits one's concern to the pursuit of one's own felt needs and the gratification of one's own desires. (The fantasies described above in regard to pornography are unreflective forms of narcissism.)
  - b) Compartmentalization=separation of one's life into separate domains which are viewed as unrelated and operate according to different principles or guidelines (e.g. the values one holds or the way one acts in one's profession or place of work on weekdays has nothing to do with the actions or values that guide one's life at church on Sunday mornings
    - i) Seat, Trent, and Kim noted that of the Southern Baptist pastors who scored greater than 10 on the composite sexual misconduct score (usually indicating sexual contact with a church member or extensive use of pornography), 23.5% denied that they had engaged in “any behavior which they considered inappropriate for a minister”
    - ii) Cf. Loftus (in the assigned reading), pp. 39-40 (on the role of ego strength in mitigating anxiety and distress) and compartmentalization (p. 47)
- 4) Cognitive Distortions  
(See handout from Adam Saradjian and Dany Nobus, “Cognitive Distortions of Religious Professionals Who Sexually Abuse Children,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (18 (2003): 911-913)

5) Lack Of Familiarity With the Dynamics of Transference

- a) *Classic View of Transference* (see Baur, p. 2 in assigned reading): Freud held that the counselee could only be cured when he or she transferred his or her desires, longings and love (often unconsciously retained from childhood) to the analyst.

**Questions:**

- i) How should we as Christians evaluate this claim about the transference of love, longing and desire?
- ii) Don't Christians also recognize the transformational power of transferred love? For example, don't we recognize something remarkable in Sabina Spielrein's recovery and newfound ability to pursue a professional career or in Jung's burst of creative, imaginative work (which would affect the subsequent development of the profession of psychotherapy)? (See Baur, pp. 5,10-11)? How should we account for this theologically and how should we evaluate it?
- iii) How should we evaluate the counselor's temptation to respond to the attraction by accepting the adulation and invitations extended by the counselee?

Is there really anything wrong with this?

- (1) If this helps the counselee become more functional and gives them a certain sense of purpose in life, doesn't it meet the fundamental goals of counseling? How could it possibly be wrong?
- (2) If it helps the counselor to gain a sense of fulfillment from helping the counselee and meeting the counselee's needs, isn't this beneficial for the counselor as well?
- (3) On a related topic, how should we evaluate Ferenczi's practice of "mutual analysis, whereby analyst and analysand took turns on the couch" (Baur, p. 16)? Specifically why does this seem an odd or unexpected practice? What common rationale underlies (a) reciprocating the counselee's romantic feelings and (b) accepting mutual analysis as valid?

- b) *Modified View of Transference (Projection)*: Projecting onto the other person a fantasy (narrative) which is based on what you think you need to be whole. For example, perhaps you are racked by a cripplingly low self-esteem and are dissatisfied with your marriage.

Stage #1: (The Mind As An Idol Factory): You are fascinated by some other person's appearance and fantasize about how satisfying it would be to initiate a stimulating, exciting, novel relationship with them. You fantasize about how you electrifying it would be to be in their presence and initiate this relationship, how they would gaze at you in adoring dependence, how you would help them, banishing all problems, how you would be intimately known, understood and affirmed by the other person, etc.

Stage #2: (The Fantasy Increasingly Dominates One's Thought Life): Soon you find that you derive great satisfaction from reflecting upon and further developing this fantasy narrative--perhaps it is the first thing that pops into your mind when you see this person or it is one of the first things that comes to mind when you wake up in the morning or it seems to endlessly recur in times where one is idle,

bored or distracted. After a while the fantasy narrative has become a major source of personal satisfaction, consumes a fair amount of one's energy and may become linked to more tangible forms of sexual gratification (masturbation and/or viewing of or reflection upon pornographic images).

Stage #3: (Crossing Boundaries to Enlist the Other in the Fantasy): At this point it becomes important to set aside conventional relational boundaries and try to initiate a relationship which could serve as a bridge for enlisting the other person in a sexualized romantic relationship and securing their compliance in acting out their role in the fantasy you have constructed. (Notice the odd way that this process treats the other person as a blank slate whose character must be imprinted upon them through acceptance of the roles given in the fantasy, which runs contrary to the fantasy's own claim that this is who the other person really is and is what the other person really wants!) To solicit a relationship that can be used for these purposes, one may begin with a lingering glance, a touch that lasts just a little too long, an empathetic sharing of stories about one's intimate relationships, a confession that one has a certain emptiness or longing that awaits fulfillment, etc.

- The Ambiguity of Touch: What kind of touching could be seen as ambiguous or as potentially soliciting a romantic or sexual relationship? Should all forms of touch be avoided in Christian counseling? What about in other forms of local church activity?
- Putting On the Brakes:
  - What routine boundaries should a pastoral counselor observe?
  - At what point in a counseling relationship or local church based relationship would you recognize that a problem existed? What for you would be the warning signs?
  - What would you do if you recognized these warning signs in your own life/relationships? In the life/relationships of a colleague/church staff member/lay leader?

#### Next Week:

We will look at the aftermath of pastoral sexual misconduct and ask some questions about how one ought to respond to such misconduct. Building on some of the insights gained from this week's case study, we will look in particular at the following questions:

- (1) What is the impact on victims of pastoral sexual misconduct?
- (2) What ethical responsibilities exist in regard to reporting pastoral sexual misconduct?
- (3) Can/should clergy who have been involved in pastoral sexual misconduct be restored to local church ministry? If so, under what conditions and why?
- (4) Aftercare:
  - (a) What obligations do denominational officials or others exercising oversight have to congregations that are in turmoil due to pastoral sexual misconduct?
  - (b) What obligations do such overseers and congregations have to new clergy that are invited to lead those congregations?
  - (c) At a practical level, what must be done to
    - respond constructively to the sense of betrayal and anger felt quite reasonably felt by members of the congregation,

- restore
  - trust and
  - healthy and appropriate boundaries?