

# Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Who's entitled to throw stones?

I've recently learned about a church employee who is doing an outstanding job but whose job is threatened because the employee is dating someone whom some church members don't think the employee should be dating. To me the fierce and relentless attacks against this employee by a few church members seem outrageous, cruel, and completely uncalled for. Are Christians called to do this kind of policing of the personal lives of people who aren't criminals or abusers? I don't think so.



### Jesus dealt with this question

Looking at that question raises several different issues, some of which the Bible doesn't explicitly address. According to the Bible, however, Jesus made a clear statement about one of them. To some men who were about to stone a woman who evidently was committing adultery, he said, "Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone." To me that means that unless we're sinless ourselves, we have no right to attack people we consider sinful.

**The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to [Jesus], "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ... [Jesus] said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ...**  
—John 8:3-7

In the Bible we also read that no one is sinless. Doesn't that mean that no one is entitled to throw stones? I believe it does.

**... For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**  
—Romans 3:22-23

## God uses sinful people

From what we read in the Bible it seems quite clear that God calls people who are far from sinless. Look at Moses. While the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, he murdered a man and fled to avoid being caught.



Look at David, too. Scripture shows God calling him "a man after my own heart," yet he blatantly committed adultery. Not only that, he schemed to have Bathsheba's husband killed in battle, to get him out of the way. And we read about David publicly exposing himself in a way that onlookers criticized and that we would consider indecent if not criminal.

### We'd reject some that God has called

Many leaders chosen by God in more recent times are also well known to have had far less than perfect records of behavior. John Wesley, for example, had a questionable history of relationships with women. Martin Luther King's sexual behavior was evidently far from admirable. Yet someone whose behavior was known to be similar to either of these men's would be unacceptable in the ordained ministry of many of today's churches. And we could name many other outstanding Christian leaders who were called by God but whose behavior wasn't perfect.



### God doesn't require perfection

Countless examples make clear that God calls and uses imperfect people to carry out the ministries God wants done. That's fortunate, isn't it, because if perfection were a requirement for being called by God and accepting the call, none of us would qualify. In fact, God would have a very severe shortage of people to use as leaders.

Can we justify being more selective than God? That question isn't as easy to answer as it may seem, because in today's institutionalized church and especially in today's litigious society, we probably must have standards for who we will let represent the church and who we won't. Still, we need to keep asking, "Can we legitimately reject someone whom God has called?"



People who feel entitled to throw stones, however, evidently feel that if they haven't committed the same sin, that's all that matters—that if they haven't committed adultery they're entitled to stone adulterers, for example—but I don't see the Bible saying that. Instead, it seems to be clearly saying that the qualification for stoning someone is being without any kind of sin.

Maybe the stoners take the scripture from John literally and thus assume that it's only the first stone that counts—that once someone else has started the stoning, throwing additional stones is okay. But surely that isn't what Jesus meant.

### We want to feel blameless

What makes otherwise admirable, churchgoing people attack other church members for their sins, and especially for sexual ones? Part of the reason seems to be that we'd all like to see ourselves as



blameless, and we try to accomplish that by focusing on other people's shortcomings. We smugly congratulate ourselves if we're not doing the same bad things those other people are doing.

Focusing on sexual sin provides an especially easy way of seeing ourselves as blameless if we don't happen to be committing that particular kind of sin. It's a category of sin that can be relatively easy to see and that the church has denounced more vigorously than almost any other kind of sin. As a result, many Christians are especially conscientious about avoiding sexual sin, even if they're nowhere near that careful to avoid other kinds of sin, and they're especially ferocious in denouncing others for it.



### We overlook many kinds of sin

Not only the church but also the society that most of us live in tends to be much more outspoken about sexual sins than about other kinds of sin. The church doesn't made any big deal at all about gluttony, for example. In fact, we often encourage it by the array



of fattening foods we serve at church social events. Most of us eat them readily, so we don't feel we have any room to criticize anyone else for doing it. And have you ever known

of a church employee being fired for gluttony? I haven't.



Some of the other sins we're usually silent about are sins that the Bible emphasizes. What about greed? What about the extravagant ways in which many of us use our money? I've never heard many sermons or Sunday School lessons about the sinfulness of buying needlessly expensive clothes or cars. And what about lying? We sometimes ignore blatant instances of dishonesty in the church—pastors inflating church-attendance figures in official reports, for example, to make themselves look better.



What about treating people of other races or social classes or educational or financial levels as inferior to ourselves?

Few of us can legitimately say we never commit that kind of sin, so we tend to avoid criticizing anyone else for committing it, yet the Bible gives these justice issues a lot of attention.

### Where should we draw the line?

The question of who we allow in church jobs may go beyond questions about sin, of course. We certainly want to avoid having anyone harmed by a church employee whose behavior is abusive or criminal, so having rules for what kind of behavior is permissible for employees is important. Beyond that safety factor, however, we also want pastors, youth directors, choir directors, and other church employees and volunteers in leadership positions to set good examples for church members and others who observe their behavior. Understandably, we especially want church employees to set a good example for our children.

But where should we draw the line in order to accomplish this? I was recently surprised to learn of a church that, before letting people become Sunday



School teachers, checks on whether they've ever had any traffic violations. That seems to me to be going unnecessarily far in trying to present only the best behavior in our churches, yet I don't think we can merely say, "Anything goes."

## Different for clergy and laity?

Should we overlook sinful behavior in lay Christians that we refuse to overlook in clergy? Our policies aren't always consistent in this regard. Should they be?



With regard to sexual behavior in particular, some churches' standards for clergy have changed over the last few decades. As recently as the 1950's or 1960's, being divorced was not permissible for United Methodist clergy, for example, but it's permissible now. In making such changes, have we become lax when we shouldn't have? Or have we gotten greater insight about what is sinful and what isn't? I'm inclined to think it's the latter of those, but maybe not. It's easy to see something as newly recognized truth from God when it's actually just what we want to believe. It's dangerous easily to make the mistake of classifying behavior as faithful merely because it's enjoyable or at least comfortable for us.



## No perfect people to choose from

Making rules about what's permissible for church leaders is hard because we don't have any perfect people to choose from. Anyone we hire or enlist for a volunteer job in the church will have some faults and will be a sinner. Every leader will exemplify some things Christians shouldn't do, along with some they should. So how should we decide which sins should be a basis for rejecting employees and other leaders, and which shouldn't? Should we merely try to choose people whose talents and admirable qualities seem to outnumber their unadmirable ones, or are we jus-



tified in overlooking certain unadmirable ones (those that aren't criminal, presumably) but refusing to overlook others?

We're seeing an example of this dilemma in the Catholic church's current disagreements about how to deal with priests who have committed sexual abuse. That clearly seems to be sinful behavior that shouldn't be al-



lowed to continue. Surely it justifies forbidding a person to be a church employee or a volunteer who has access to children and youth. Beyond that, however, Christians disagree about how the church should respond to such behavior.

Should a person who has been sexually abusive still be allowed to represent the church in an official capacity? Some Catholics are saying that offenders should be removed from the priesthood. Others, however, say that letting abusive priests remain priests is okay as long as their duties give them no opportunity to continue their abuse or to conceal subordinates' abuse by continually moving them.

## We don't expect major offenses in church

We're often cruelly judgmental in dealing with behavior that God may not even consider sinful, but ironically, abuse and dishonesty can be easier to hide in the church than elsewhere. Like most other large bureaucracies, the church tends to protect its top leaders. It usually punishes, demotes, ousts, or at least shuns whistle-blowers instead of appreciating and rewarding them. Besides, in the church we tend to assume naively that all employees are Christian and thus are doing only what is right. We're thus caught



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

off guard when a church employee embezzles or commits sexual abuse.

## How can we respond faithfully?

Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, if a brother sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

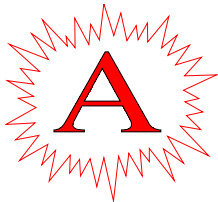
—Matthew 18:21-22

What's the answer, then? When we want to be faithful Christians, what behavior should be our basis for ousting church employees or volunteers who are in position to influence others, especially children? Should we use a different

standard from the one Jesus gave for forgiving sinners? Can we forgive but at the same time protect potential victims and present good examples?

There aren't any easy answers, I'm afraid. Nevertheless, we need to keep looking often and with fresh eyes at what God requires, as taught and demonstrated by Jesus. We must speak up about what we believe is sinful, but we must also refuse to support cruel, self-righteous attacks that falsely claim to be efforts by sinless people to do the judging and punishing that should be left to God.

*Barbara*



In 1850 the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel about a woman who is having an affair with a local clergyman. The self-righteous citizens of their community make her wear a big red letter "A" on her dress, to shame her by publicizing her adultery. I tend to assume that Christians no longer treat people like that, but clearly that's not true. We still cruelly attack people for what we perceive as sin, even when we're basing our judgment on mere rumor or speculation rather than fact. And we're quite selective in citing scripture as evidence for what's sinful and what isn't. We quote scriptures that support our opinion but ignore those that show Jesus's opinion.

So how should we respond when we suspect or even know that someone—especially a church leader—is doing something we consider sinful? To what extent should a person's private life be a qualification for leadership in the church? How does Jesus's command to forgive relate to the need to set standards for clergy and other church employees? Can we legitimately require them to meet standards that few lay members feel the need to meet? How do we decide which sins we will overlook and which we won't? Unfortunately we're still cruelly putting scarlet letters on people whose behavior we happen to disapprove of.

