

SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND SEXUAL ABUSE: EMBODIMENT, COMMUNITY, AND HEALING



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Abstract: As a distortion of God's created designs, sexual abuse (SA) carries a unique devastation-factor. Abuse that is sexual in nature damages a spectrum of internal and external aspects of personhood. In particular, the core realities of: (1) self-identity, (2) community, (3) and spiritual communion with God can be deeply fractured through SA. In light of the significance of the image of God, movement toward healing includes strengthening personal agency, processing profound boundary ruptures, and managing disillusionment with God. Due to the multi-faceted trauma of sexual abuse (i.e., physical, social, spiritual) spiritual formation programs must not only plan for the unique profile of abuse victims, but also need to incorporate a fuller understanding and praxis of the realities of embodiment, ritual, and theocentric metaphor into their transformational goals. Analysis includes first-person experience, anthropological science, and theological reflection.

Survivors of sexual abuse (SA)—who have any faith at all—have learned three sobering lessons: (1) “I do not have control over my own body,” (2) “The world is not a safe place for me,” (3) and “God, the Almighty One, did not step in to prevent it.” There is an honest logic in this assessment. Each of these lessons reflects damage to the realms of self, community, and faith—the wounds of SA are chillingly comprehensive. By creation's design, a holistic sexuality can be holistically wounded.

For Christians who are sexually abused, processing the apparent neglect of God can unleash a profound crisis of faith. Tied to SA is a *theological* trauma that can outlast the psychological and social effects. All told, the collateral damage is not only difficult for victims to crawl out from, but this life-experience makes it difficult for the non-abused to understand what victims have endured and why most *continue* to suffer.

Standard patterns of grieving and spiritual maturity do not easily fit the abuse profile. Most conceptual frameworks for understanding SA focus on the self, fixate on sociologies of power, and minimize or ignore faith

altogether.¹ However, our study will consider all three. What does healing entail for survivors now at odds with their own skin? What is the role of community for victims afraid of relationships in general and leaders in particular? What can Soul Care uniquely provide for victims of incest? How can spiritual formation programs—built on the tenants of Spirit direction, transformation, and community—intentionally “make room” for the sexually broken who struggle to acknowledge their own abuse (= self), much less their anxiety toward authority (= community), and smoldering resentment toward God (= faith).² The needs are more obvious than the answers. Yet, these are the complex profiles of many in the Church, and many headed *for* or already *in* ministry leadership. Our study focuses on three interrelated domains of personhood foundational to creation design and profoundly ruptured in SA: self, community, and God. These we will consider in light of the image of God, key goals of spiritual formation, the contribution of ritual, and the reality of embodiment in abuse and healing.

THE STATISTICS OF THE CHALLENGE

The data suggest that one in three girls, and one in seven boys, are sexually abused before their 18th birthday, for a staggering 300,000 new cases each year.³ According to the National Center for Juvenile Justice, 14% of victims are under age six.⁴ Other studies show that SA may be as high as

¹ D. Finkelhor and A. Browne describe the nature of SA under the following rubric: (1) traumatic sexualization, (2) betrayal, (3) powerlessness, (4) and stigmatization (“The Traumatic Impact of Child Sexual Abuse: A Conceptualization,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 55 [1985]: 530–41). Note the emphasis on self and social context.

² The publicity of SA in the Catholic Church over the last decade clearly illustrates the interconnectedness of these primary realms: youth were sexually molested by spiritual authorities who wielded considerable community power. Taught to address their priests as “father,” those representing Christ[!], this perversion and deceit explains the profound vulnerability and betrayal surrounding SA. Because of the overwhelming hypocrisy, this crushing of numerous life-giving associations has led most victims to abandon the Church/faith, God or both. Jennifer Beste notes that by 2006, over 12,895 victims officially reported being abused by Catholic clergy. It has been estimated that in a 52-year period (1950–2002), at least 50,000 young people were abused by priests (J. Beste, “Mediating God’s Grace Within the Context of Trauma: Implications for a Christian Response to Clergy Sexual Abuse,” *Review and Expositor* 105 [2008], 245–46).

³ “Stop It Now: Child Sexual Abuse Facts Sheet,” <http://www.stopitnow.com/csafacts.html>; also NISMART-2 <http://www.unh.edu/ccr/factsheet/pdf/CSA-FS20.pdf>.

⁴ B. B. Lovett, “Sexual Abuse in the Preschool Years: Blending Ideas from Object Relations Theory, Ego Psychology, and Biology,” *Child & Adolescent Social Work* 24 (2007), 581.

54% for girls and 16% for boys.⁵ Since society stigmatizes same-sex behavior, the literature also shows that men are reluctant to admit their childhood sexual abuse.⁶ The rate of abused males may actually be far higher, between 20% and 30% or even 76%, based on the prevalence rate.⁷ Shockingly, 80% of victims, according to Child Custody Protection Act, are abused by family members and 19% are abused by other trusted adults.⁸ This means that the deeper problem behind sexual abuse is the problem of incest.⁹

Among the standard consequences of SA repeated in the literature are: anxiety, anger, depression (i.e., affective consequences); sleep paralysis, headaches, stomachaches, enuresis (i.e., psychosomatic effects); hyperarousal, interpersonal problems, sexualized behavior, and aggression.¹⁰ The experience of trauma writes its own neurological sequence on the brain. For this reason (and other complexities), victims of SA are at risk for re-victimization. Two-thirds of adult rape victims report that they were sexually abused as children. While this may seem counter-intuitive, this correlation is due in part to brain molding—the result of traumatic abuse.¹¹ This also helps explain why 50% of those who sexually abuse children are under the

⁵ H. W. Helm Jr., J. R. Cook, and J. M. Berez, “The Implications of Conjunctive and Disjunctive Forgiveness for Sexual Abuse,” *Pastoral Psychology* 54 (2005), 24.

⁶ “Stop It Now: Child Sexual Abuse Facts Sheet,” <http://www.stopitnow.com/csafacts.html>; also S. Boney-McCoy, D. Finkelhor, “Prior Victimization: A Risk Factor for Child Sexual Abuse and for PTSD-Related Symptomatology Among Sexually Abused Youth,” *Child Abuse and Neglect* 19 (1995): 1401–21.

⁷ J. N. Briere, *Child Abuse Trauma: Theory and Treatment of the Lasting Effects*, The Practice Series (Newbury Park, London: Sage Publications, 1992), 4.

⁸ H. W. Helm Jr., J. R. Cook, J. M. Berez, “Conjunctive and Disjunctive Forgiveness,” 25.

⁹ See the discussions of E. Lorentzen, H. Nilsen, and B. Traeen, “Will It Never End? The Narratives of Incest Victims on the Termination of Sexual Abuse,” *Journal of Sex Research* 45 (2008): 167–74; R. Alaggia, and S. Kirshenbaum, “Speaking the Unspeakable: Exploring the Impact of Family Dynamics on Child Sexual Abuse Disclosures,” *Families in Society* 86 (2005): 227–34; P. M. Cole and F. W. Putnam, “Effect and Incest on Self and Social Functioning: A Developmental Psychopathology Perspective,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 60 (1992): 174–84.

¹⁰ See F. Ferrara, *Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole, 2002); K. Saywitz, A. Mannarino, L. Berliner, and J. Cohen, “Treatment for Sexually Abused Children and Adolescents,” *American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 1040–1049.

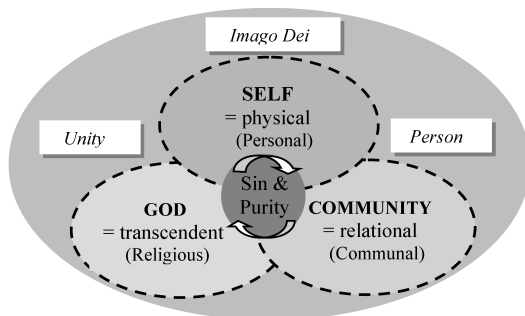
¹¹ K. A. Kendall-Tackett, L. M. Williams, and D. Finkelhor, “Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children: A Review and Synthesis of Recent Empirical Studies,” *Psychology Bulletin* 113 (1993): 164–70; also L. Koenig, L. Doll, A. O’Leary, and W. Pequegnat, *From Child Sexual Abuse to Adult Sexual Risk: Trauma, Revictimization, and Intervention* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004), 4–5, 33, 37.

age of eighteen; they themselves have been victims of physical (20–50%) and SA (40–80%).¹²

While the degree of damage varies among victims, as the variables differ, most suffer long-term effects.¹³ A chronic state of alert (i.e., hyper-vigilance) takes a toll on the victim's body with studies showing that sexually traumatized children are 10% to 15% more likely to suffer from cancer, heart disease, gastrointestinal problems, liver disease, and diabetes as adults.¹⁴ Spiritual transformation and healing—psycho-somatically, socially, and spiritually—requires a more comprehensive understanding of trauma theory alongside a more integrative view of biblical anthropology.

DAMAGED REALMS OF PERSONHOOD IN SEXUAL ABUSE

To achieve a more integrative healing, one must understand the comprehensive wounding of SA to the distinct realms of personhood: *physical*, *relational*, and *transcendent*. To explore this realm-dynamic, the conceptualization of personhood and its inter-related realms can be viewed as follows:



These three realms of personhood are individually definable though they do not function in isolation—they are a unity. Like the various colors used in a stained glass window, pieces give way to portrait; much as a harp performs within a larger symphony. Within the person, there is a soundness or in-

¹² See J. Hunter, J. Becker, “Motivators of Adolescent Sex Offenders and Treatment Perspectives,” in *Sexual Aggression* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1998).

¹³ Variables include: the age SA started, parent or additional perpetrator(s), nature of the SA, duration of the abuse, nature of the termination, resilience of the victim, presence of supportive family, adequate (on-going) treatment, spiritual support, etc.

¹⁴ D. Whitsett, “The Psychobiology of Trauma and Child maltreatment,” *Cultic Studies Review* 5 (2006), 355; K. Havig, “The Health Care Experiences of Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse,” *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse* 9 (2008), 20.

tegrity required for the interactive health of each realm. Yet these are vulnerable precincts of the person. In other words, the corporeal realm can be plundered like a garden; the social realm can be silenced and shunned; and the spiritual domain can be poorly nurtured and utterly confused. Positively, these realms share vibrant *bonds* between them that enable rich communication; but negatively these are protective *boundaries* vital to the health and interaction of each realm.¹⁵

These boundaries are intended to maintain the holistic order of being human. As Christian Gostecnik states, “In short, sexuality is and remains the arena where the most important relational configurations play out, and with all their power point to a transcendence and sacredness of interpersonal and family system relationships.”¹⁶ However, SA breaks down these boundaries that animate the human person as a functional image bearer. SA is inherently transgressive to the personal, communal, and religious boundaries.¹⁷ Person against person, leader against the led, image bearer against image bearer; *it is the human-induced trauma of SA that makes it uniquely devastating*. Because “trauma exists on a continuum,” healing SA must address the spoiling and distortion that now runs throughout these realms.¹⁸ Spiritual formation must now facilitate the personal, social, and theological healing that will be required.

THE IMAGE OF GOD AS BEING-IN-RELATEDNESS

The realms of the personal, communal, and spiritual are uniquely rooted in the theology of creation, particularly surrounding the image of God (Gen 1:26–28; 9:6). We will briefly consider each realm and comment on their inter-relationships in light of the effects of SA.

Realm of Self: Sexual abuse fractures the unity of personhood.

When the LORD speaks to the human beings, he addresses them as *persons*, not genders (1:26–28). Only as a whole organism is the term “soul” (*nephesh*) even appropriate in creation theology (Gen 2:7), since the OT

¹⁵ While I refer to *realms*, H. B. Lipka uses the terminology of “religious,” “communal,” and “personal boundaries” in her helpful study, *Sexual Transgression in the Hebrew Bible*, eds., D. J. A. Clines, J. C. Exum, K. W. Whitlam, HBM 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 16.

¹⁶ C. Gostecnik, “Sexuality and the Longing for Salvation,” *J Relig Health* 46 (2007), 589.

¹⁷ H. B. Lipka, *Sexual Transgression*, 23.

¹⁸ L. J. M. Claassens, D. G. Garber, “First Words . . . Faith Facing Trauma,” *Review and Expositor* 105 (2008), 187.

knows no dualism of body/spirit (cf. Ps 103:1–2).¹⁹ SA, however, effectively dismembers its victim; it un-creates because it dissects. Through domination, sexual violation of a person is characterized by: a sense of helplessness, loss, vulnerability, shame, humiliation, degradation, and other elements of emotional trauma.²⁰ Contributing to this distress is controlled secrecy—abuse occurs on the molester’s terms. Even the victim’s innate “fight or flight” response is overridden. Complete powerlessness is an initial isolating result.²¹

Abuse tears apart the *nephesh-wholeness* of a person. As such, SA depersonalizes not simply because it steals, but because it tears out what is intimately connected to the larger fullness of *being*, dismantling the symphony of human parts. Looted, the victim is abandoned to process the experience in further isolation. This violation deadens life along a spectrum of security and terror, façade and reality, wholeness and brokenness.²²

Early and progressive molestation puts the victim’s senses on *hyperarousal* or active patrol: defenses are activated, emotions are electrified, physiology is convulsed, and neurobiological information is “written”—and all without the spiritual perspective, psychological development or social resources to assimilate a morass of confusing dynamics.²³ Trying to manage pain in progressive proportions, anger wells up and the victim’s personality can fragment; the pieces of the symphony no longer play in harmony.²⁴ Not surprisingly, *dissociation* is a common result of sexual trauma.²⁵ Are spiritual formation programs adequately incorporating the traumatized *soma*

¹⁹ Used 755x, *nephesh* is adequately distinct to be addressed in the vocative for the totality of the human person (i.e. “my life,” cf. Pss 42:5, 11[6, 12]; 43:5), and even a dead corpse! (Lev 21:1; 22:4). See R. A. Di Vito, “Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (1999): 217–38.

²⁰ H. B. Lipka, *Sexual Transgression*, 29.

²¹ See L. H. Robinson, “The Abuse of Power: A View of Sexual Misconduct in a Systemic Approach to Pastoral Care,” *Pastoral Theology* 5 (2004): 395–404; also B. D. Perry, “Incubated in Terror: Neurodevelopmental Factors in the ‘Cycle of Violence,’” in *Children in a Violent Society*, ed. J. Osofsky (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 124–149.

²² W. Brueggemann, “Death,” in *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 48.

²³ Other forms of hyperarousal include irritability, angry outbursts, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and insomnia (J. E. Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 43).

²⁴ J. E. Beste writes: “Common mental illnesses include dissociative identity disorder, borderline personality disorder, major anxiety, and depressive episodes. These psychiatric illnesses often lead to chronic suicidality” (*God and the Victim*, 53).

²⁵ *Dissociation* is a potent defense mechanism used to deny the reality of violence that is overwhelming to an individual. Dissociating, or “splitting off” traumatic events from one’s consciousness—ironically, a gift for a child—is the capacity to separate elements of a traumatic experience such as emotions, thoughts, sensa-

into their ministry praxis? After all, “the integration of sexuality and spirituality is nothing other than the integration of the human being.”²⁶ Assessing our formation programs requires honest reflection at various levels and, increasingly, among several disciplines.

Formation programs may, at times, confuse overcoming sin with ignoring the complex somatic effects of violence. After all, if “the old is gone [and], the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17), if God no longer remembers our sin (Heb 8:12), and believers are to think on what is praiseworthy (Phil 4:8) anyway, then what is the believer’s warrant to discuss SA, much less study it? Does not Paul even declare that one should “forget what is behind” (Phil 3:13b)? Such a view, however, has not adequately integrated theology and the psycho-dynamic disciplines, for example. Further, this perspective does not grasp the complex relational toxins of sin or the long pilgrimage that healing can be. Somatic trauma, as found in SA, lives on as *body memory*. So, for the sexually traumatized, “take two verses and call me in the morning” is both simplistic and unethical.²⁷

Formation programs need to seriously explore what redemptive memory and body memory mean for the sexually traumatized believer. Inasmuch as redemptive memory is remembering truthfully, transformation programs cannot afford to minimize the reality of the *soma* alongside their biblical commitments to spiritual development, holistic maturity, and social reconciliation. The body is not a utilitarian vehicle or a guest in our seasons of grief; rather, the body is a profound participant in meaning, an astute scribe that also records life’s horrific experiences.

Realm of Community: Sexual abuse isolates the “self” from community.

Human creation resulted from a dialogical act—“Let us make humankind” (Gen 1:26a).²⁸ Humankind was made *in* community *for* community (2:18). Being human ultimately comprises an individual and communal

tions, locations, and time into shattered fragments that can defy integration and remain unconscious; see N. Feeny, L. Zoellner, L. Fitzgibbons, E. Foa, “Exploring the Roles of Emotional Numbing, Depression, and Dissociation in PTSD,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 13 (2000): 489–98.

²⁶ K. M. Murray, J. W. Ciarrocchi and N. A. Murray-Swank, “Spirituality, Religiosity, Shame and Guilt as Predictors of Sexual Attitudes and Experiences,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35 (2007), 223.

²⁷ The attitude of “nothing outside the text” goes beyond *biblical* counseling to a philosophical worldview of *logocentrism* (see K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], 53–54, 58–60, 64, 77).

²⁸ B. C. Birch, et al., *Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 49; T. E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (IBT; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 74.

human being.²⁹ Organically linked by exchanges of being-for-the-other, persons are parts of relationships.³⁰ “The two concepts—persons and relationships—are necessarily linked, for where you find a person you must necessarily find another” (cf. Gen 2:18, 23).³¹ This truth resonates deeply throughout creation, for once the declaration is made that it is as gendered male and female that God has created human beings the story then speaks of them *only in the plural*.³²

A core tenant of human creation is being-in-relation.³³ Purpose comes in belonging to an “other.”³⁴ To be human is to be *embodied* in time and space, relating to God and others.³⁵ As Cherith Nordling summarizes: “Thus, to be human is essentially to be a ‘who’ (a personal, intellectual moral agent) called forth into existence as a unique embodied ‘what’ (a biological entity).”³⁶ Whether through acts of compassion for others or violence against others, embodiment is communicated through performance, and in this way the *soma* becomes social, a social body.³⁷

Abuse, however, poisons person against community. It severs relational ligaments connecting the “who” of personhood to the “what” of embodied life. The links to one’s place in community, and the ability to read social interaction, are cut. Disoriented, and with limited ability for protection, the abused “can barely imagine themselves in a position of agency or choice.”³⁸ This has long-term effects. Miroslav Volf observes,

The self, however, is always a social self, and a wrongdoing intertwines the wrongdoer and the wronged as little else does. For the mistreatment consists not just in the pain or loss endured, but also in the improper relating of the wrongdoer toward the wronged—and remember it not just with our mind but also with our body.³⁹

²⁹ C. F. Nordling, “The Human Person in the Christian Story,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, eds., T. Larsen, D. J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75.

³⁰ D. Rim, “Proclaiming Jesus in a Cross-Cultural context: Understanding the Trinity as a Model for Declaring the Gospel,” in *Proclaiming Jesus: Essays on the Centrality of Christ in the Church in Honor of Joseph M. Stowell*, ed. T. L. Cornman (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2007), 230.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² P. D. Miller, “Man and Woman: Towards a Theological Anthropology,” in *The Way of the LORD: Essays in Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 311; emphasis added.

³³ C. F. Nordling, “The Human Person,” 72.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ A. Strathern, P. J. Stewart, “Embodiment Theory and Performativity,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 22 (2008), 68.

³⁸ J. E. Beste, *God and the Victim*, 51.

³⁹ M. Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 83–84.

SA persists by seclusion. Through debilitating shame and self-hatred, a victim undergoes a crushing alienation; the affirmation they desperately need they can no longer risk.

A diminished sense of agency and an inability to foster nourishing relationships brings further estrangement. Post-traumatic symptoms of startle response and emotional volatility can make victims ashamed of their behavior; and attempts to control these can lead to a life of suppression and avoidance.⁴⁰ Crucial to healing agency is the victims' ability to recognize and regulate their emotions—an agent for oneself.⁴¹ SA does not occur in a social vacuum, nor can its healing relationships. Part of normalizing the problem of SA involves listening to victims' stories of suffering and drawing these victims back into an empathetic community of care. Unless these nerves are reattached, healthy orientation to others is blunted at best and becomes toxic at worst. However, relational estrangement can be exacerbated by a religious environment that promotes an overly privatized faith.

Western Christianity as a whole has emphasized an individual-existential salvation. Eschatologically divorced from creation and community, salvation, as it has traditionally played out, has scorned the physical world and with it human embodied sexuality. In practice, it has been part of Christian pietism to associate sexuality with the “world, the flesh, and the devil,”—all bound to sinful humanity.⁴² Chillingly, a truncated soteriology can result in a truncated anthropology. In the pietistic worldview, purity and self is lodged in the depths of *interiority* rather than integrated into a larger relational world.⁴³ When this happens, biblical healing can fall through unbiblical cracks.

Unfortunately, community may be functionally lost to the victim because the trauma of victimization has effectively “depersonalized” them; community appears neither nourishing nor safe. Healing for victims includes *re-actualizing* their personhood toward community.⁴⁴ Learning to integrate the care and critique of community back into his or her life is a difficult but healing antidote. For the abused, heaven may best be described as *The Great Healing*.

Realm of God: Sexual abuse mars connecting metaphors for God.

In the garden-sanctuary, God is portrayed as cosmic king, master artisan, attentive father, gracious provider, and just protector. The imagery of

⁴⁰ D. Whitsett, “The Psychobiology of Trauma,” 367.

⁴¹ E. Lorentzen, H. Nilsen, and B. Traeen, “Will it Never End?” 166.

⁴² C. F. Nordling, “The Human Person,” 71.

⁴³ R. A. Divito, “Anthropology, OT Theological,” *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, A–C*, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld; Vol 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006) 1:172.

⁴⁴ D. Rim, “Proclaiming Jesus,” 234 (citing M. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 83).

creation creates a profile of God with metaphorical force “writ large.”⁴⁵ As metaphors transcend time and culture, readers are invited to look for a correspondence of relations in their own world.⁴⁶ It is the reader’s personal experience that keeps metaphors fresh as worlds merge. God has a rich profile of archetypal images that reverberate throughout Scripture. God is a parent (Hos 11:1), midwife (Isa 66:7–9), mother (Isa 66:13), and protective fortress (Psa 31:2). These are high correspondence metaphors between God, humankind, and community, fueled by the two-way traffic of the image of God.⁴⁷

For the sexually abused, their bridging metaphors have also been violated—particularly the nurturing metaphors for God as father and protector. With sober insight Terence E. Fretheim speaks of *controlling metaphors*. Like “metaphors among metaphors . . . they are able to bring coherence to a range of Biblical thinking about God; they provide a hermeneutical key for interpreting the whole.”⁴⁸ When these controlling metaphors are marred, the supportive skeleton bridging divine promise and human experience is crushed. For abuse victims, their operative metaphors are radically distorted. “When the inexpressibility of trauma joins itself to the inexpressibility of the character and nature of God, the crisis for a survivor of faith becomes even more acute.”⁴⁹ Healing requires finding a new fund of metaphors that re-connect God to his creation and human community.

The loss of controlling metaphors amounts to losing one’s navigational compass. The overwhelming dissonance between the earthly and heavenly father causes many abuse victims to abandon their faith altogether. For the abused, God as loving parent can be a terror-making analogy. If God exists for some survivors, his loving intimacy has been drained off.⁵⁰ The fact that other believers can pray “Our Father . . .” only adds to the suffocating blanket of frustration of those for whom God never showed up. Fretheim admits, “The meaning of a metaphor varies from culture to culture, and even from individual to individual within a single culture. A child, for instance, with a brutal or incestuous father will hear the word ‘father’ for God with far different ears than I will.”⁵¹ When the Church does not plan for this dissonance, it could be ignoring a terrifying reality for up to 20% of its congregation—if they are still there.

⁴⁵ Cf. Deut 4:32; Ps 148:5; Isa 57:16; Mal 2:10; Mark 13:19; Eph 3:9; Col 1:16; Heb 12:27; Rev 4:11.

⁴⁶ I. Paul, “Metaphor,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. K. J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 509.

⁴⁷ T. E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*; OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁹ L. J. M. Claassens, D. G. Garber, “Faith Facing Trauma,” 188.

⁵⁰ C. A. Courtois also discusses this spiritual impasse, noting that the emotions derived from incest can “block personal and spiritual growth” (*Healing the Incest Wound: Adult Survivors in Therapy* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1988], 202).

⁵¹ T. E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 11.

Controlling metaphors *do* something. They structure life and serve as “grids.” They reach into the future, making meaning of the present. Through metaphor, propositional truth becomes a nourishing ethic as life is filtered and configured.⁵² Thus the marring of bridging metaphors is the loss of blueprint and hope. Once marred, dignity and spiritual reality are forced to limp in a victim’s life—life-giving associations are gone. The heavenly “father” and his “guardian” angels can be a cruel joke.

With relationships severed socially and spiritually, healing moves a person back toward creation’s design, reconnecting internal spaces and external communities. The sense of the sacred is mediated through the body.⁵³ So bodies, minds, and souls can become sanctified spaces again. Adopting the relational view of the image of God, Douglas J. Moo acknowledges the intact image in humankind alongside the believer’s restoration in Christ, two theological realities (Gen 9:6; Jam 3:9). Moo states, “If we view the ‘image of God’ as having to do *primarily with the power to form appropriate relationships*—between humans and God, among humans, and between humans and creation—justice can be done to both perspectives.”⁵⁴ It is precisely here one finds the dynamic role that spiritual formation can play, namely, helping the sexually traumatized “form appropriate relationships,” from a biblically integrated perspective.

GRASPING EMBODIMENT AND ENACTING RITUAL

If spiritual formation is going to adequately address the sexually abused, then a richer understanding of both embodiment and ritual must be employed. Praxis and proposition need to be wed more closely for the sexually broken. We will touch on the nature of biblical embodiment and the contribution of ritual, two elements that interface to bring healing to victims.

Bringing Embodiment Out of the Shadows

Precisely where transformation and healing are needed in SA, one may encounter a minimization of the *soma* as a suspicion of the “flesh” and a practical denial of sexual impulses. When this occurs, it has “left us with a

⁵² W. P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 6. Image of God and metaphor is helpfully addressed by S. P. Greggo, “Biblical Metaphors for Corrective Emotional Relationships,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35 (2007): 153–62.

⁵³ M. Gottschall, “Embodiment,” in *Handbook of Christian Theology*, eds., D. W. Musser, J. L. Price (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 156.

⁵⁴ D. J. Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006), 481; emphasis added.

disembodied theology and a great deal of shame.”⁵⁵ Assessing spiritual transformation, for example, Dallas Willard has recently lamented that it often does not work because it “does not involve the body in the process of transformation.” Willard quips, “One of the ironies of spiritual formation is that every ‘spiritual’ discipline is or involves bodily behavior.”⁵⁶ This disembodied theology remains one of the greatest hindrances to the healing of the sexually abused in Christian ministries.

In the theology emerging from the OT, there is no equivalent word for “body,” inasmuch as there is no anthropological dualism of soul, body, and spirit. The human being does not *have* soul and flesh, rather, a person is both—transitory yet alive (Gen 1:26–27; 2:7).⁵⁷

The NT develops this theme as the body is practically synonymous with the whole personality (Eph 5:28; Phil 1:20).⁵⁸ At points in Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon, the body is no mere organism; the *soma* is the self (Matt 6:25) and helping the person is determined by the ethic of the body’s needs (Jam 2:16). It is this same “body that belongs to the Lord” and the Lord “to the body” (1 Cor 6:13).

Paul in particular, uses *soma* as *person*—“don’t let sin reign in your mortal bodies” (Rom 6:12). Thus, human life, even in the realm of the spirit (*pneuma*), is a somatic existence.⁵⁹ Significantly then, it is the body, not the soul that is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19–20; cf. Gal 6:17).

By creation’s design, it is the many-sided *soma*—with its ears, eyes, feet, and hands—that opens up a person to dynamic community relationships. By design, the body is an instrument of communication.⁶⁰ For this reason, the entire person, including the *soma*, can be deeply “marked” by life’s experiences. S. Wibbing aptly states:

Bodily acts affect not only the individual act of sin but the whole person to his innermost being. This is underlined by Paul’s questions: ‘Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . Do you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you which you have from God? . . . So glorify God in your body’ (1 Cor 6:15, 19 f.).⁶¹

⁵⁵ K. McClintock, *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call to Healing* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 28; emphasis added.

⁵⁶ D. Willard, “Spiritual Formation and the Warfare Between the Flesh and the Human Spirit,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1 (Spring 2008): 85; similarly, J. R. Wilson, “Biblical Wisdom, Spiritual Formation, and the Virtues,” in *The Ways of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, eds., J. I. Packer, S. K. Sonderlund (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 297–307; esp. “III. The Embodied Life” (300–301).

⁵⁷ E. Schweizer, “*soma*,” *EDNT* 3: 322.

⁵⁸ *BDAG* “*soma*,” 984.

⁵⁹ S. Wibbing, “*soma*,” *NIDNTT* 1:234.

⁶⁰ E. Schweizer, “*soma*,” *EDNT* 3:323.

⁶¹ S. Wibbing, “*soma*,” *NIDNTT* 1:235.

Our relationship with God is realized *in a body*; when the body is “broken” and traumatized, so can one’s relationship with God be—utterly traumatized. Spatio-temporal living works with the “mindful body,” that requires spatio-temporal approaches to healing. Even the new creation of *The Great Healing* is not a release from the material body into “nakedness,” but into the “clothing” of a new *soma* (2 Cor 5:1–3, 8).⁶² There is significant *continuity* between earthly and heavenly life that must be manifested in our Soul Care and formation programs. The completeness of our healing now may alter life and service later, at *The Great Healing*. Where rituals are actively used, there is dynamic respect for this spatio-temporal stewardship and its frailty.

Using Rituals in Healing and Transformation

Ritual provides a means for the believing community to “discover, enact and reflect upon its faith.”⁶³ Ritual brings into being (Lev 8), maintains order (Num 28–29), restores order (Lev 13–14, 16), and develops faith (Jn 9:1–12). But if ritualized activity is core to the formation of Christian identity in general (1 Cor 11:23–26; 12:12–26), it is also crucial to the spiritual transformation of the sexually abused. Theirs is a fragmented world where the self lives exiled from community and in suspicion of God. Here, ritual “speaks” with dignity for the abused when words cannot or need not be used. For the abused, ritual is restorative because it “reconnects” life’s inner and outer realms (e.g., self with community, community with God).

Ritual is a powerful “intercessor” for the *delayed grief* of the abused. Ritual gathers together the fragments of life and communicates to realms long paralyzed. For victims of SA struggling to retain their faith, ritual provides a liturgical forum for engaging the divine in light of one’s life-experiences. Ritual is capable of laying to rest the “corpse of comprehensive experience” while providing rich meaning for the life that remains behind. Ritual is also a comforting headstone, welcoming visitation as often as necessary. Toward the divine realm in particular, ritual unleashes a creative force for the construction of new relationship and the development of trust.⁶⁴ When victims cry out for God to “hear” them, then God breaks loose from his perceived failure and moves closer along a spectrum of redemptive silence and nourishing mystery (see Pss 13:1–3; 35:17, 22–23; 77:7–9).⁶⁵

⁶² E. Schweizer, “*soma*,” *EDNT* 3:323.

⁶³ F. H. Gorman, Jr., “Ritual,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. D. N. Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1131.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ The need to employ lament (psalms) is obvious when people demand that the LORD “hear” (*shema*) them!—using an imperative toward God! (this is the opposite of Deut 6:4, “Hear, O Israel!”; cf. Pss 4:1[2]; 17:1; 27:7; 28:2; 30:10[11]; 39:12[13]; 54:2[4]; 61:1[2]; 64:1; 84:8[9]; 102:1[2]; 119:49; 143:1).

Spiritual transformation can bring healing to the sexually broken through use of rituals inside and outside the church. Some rituals can bring closure to the past (e.g., burying a photograph), others create meaning for the present life (e.g., planting a tree), and still others can uniquely stress an eschatological healing. The “self” is no longer defined by its muted history (e.g., use of written laments); community can come alive with rich communal interaction (e.g., the Lord’s Table of broken bread mirrored in his “broken” people), and reorientation to God for those who feel abandoned by Him (e.g., a drama of “waking” God from his slumber in the boat [Mark 4:35–41]). As enactments, tied to the domains of life, these can be powerful rituals for the sexually broken.

Whether through community intercession or personal petition, ritual carries the cadences of pain and release through the community (= horizontally) and toward God (= vertically).⁶⁶ Such rituals do not merely “recite” what is true; they “recalibrate” what is needed by dramatizing a dialogue with God that reaches across painful breaches in the victim’s life. Working alongside therapy, have formation programs adequately matched creative praxis to textual proposition, addressing the non-cognitive needs of victims? Have victims been given words that acknowledge their life-experience so that they can re-enter the faith community in safety, participation, and leadership?

In its overtures to healing, spiritual formation may at times, be addressing sanctification with the language and passion of justification. For this reason, performative rituals, corporate ceremony, and certain spiritual disciplines too often are minimized in evangelical literature, since they are viewed as hedging in on “salvation by grace.” The concern is commendable, but with SA we are facing spiritual triage of a profound and complex sort—one that has not been adequately addressed in the church or academy. That said, *it is the transcending power of metaphor in the earthy drama of ritual that helps generate healing for the sexually traumatized struggling to find that loving God, whatever their faith tradition.* So, for example, forgiveness (personal and God’s) can be actualized through ceremonial acts at a Vespers service; changes of clothing can signify entry into Great Lent; or the use of fasting, reflective music, and body posture can create heightened identification at a drama of the Passion, a Paschal service or celebrations of Good Friday. We must do more to merge these great ceremonies of the redeemed with those struggling to hold on to their Redeemer. Staggering loss connects both. Is there a better way we can testify to traumatic experience even in corporate worship?

Rituals gather a halo of senses and exercise them redemptively for the needs of the violated that must have nourishing access points to both community and God offered in “safe” ritual drama.⁶⁷ An integration of the

⁶⁶ W. Brueggemann, “Prayer,” *Reverberations of Faith*, 149.

⁶⁷ For a discussion of ritual and forgiveness, see E. A. Gassin, T. A. Sawchak, “Meaning, Performance, and Function of a Christian Forgiveness Ritual,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 22 (2008): 39–49.

senses is imperative to healing the abused. “The theological schema of the field of relationships between God and human beings shows that, apart from the senses, there are no experiences; nor are there experiences of God.”⁶⁸ Thus, combining the realms of self, community, and God, ritual performance provides: a sense of safety, affirms mutuality of relationships, helps persons cope with transition, practices scriptural application, increases moral sensitivity, creates a sense of predictability, structures the mental world, and maintains contact with the transcendent realm.⁶⁹ Ritual also assists healing by stimulating redemptive agency.

Acknowledging Victims’ Struggle for Redemptive Agency

One of the greatest contributions spiritual formation can make is to help victims of SA create a sense of *redemptive agency* in their lives. Selfishly acted upon in ways that “bent” them, victims struggle to harness personal choice. Self-agency can be utterly foreign. Add to this the scapegoating that many have experienced from those closest to them, and not surprisingly, the notion of agency does not compute. Victims of SA have an “incidental-self” perspective—believing their needs are secondary to all others—and are often *re-victimized* for this reason. Victims often read Scripture existentially, proposition is a luxury that hardly applies to them. For this reason, many victims feel a *text estrangement*, finding that some biblical passages function between maddening and terrorizing. This awareness may increase with healing. For example, consider Rom 12:1,

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. (NLT)

To begin with, commands (“give”) can be threatening. “Bodies,” however, is terrorizing: “If I did have a sense of agency, what is left of my *person* (= “body”) that others have not already taken or spoiled?” “Because of all he has done for you” has instrumental notions and refers to God’s redemptive work, but victims of abuse are also likely to feel like victims of faith with such words—“What did God actually do to stop my abuse?” Such phrases are pious talk, maybe true in the abstract. Associating “body” with “living sacrifice” is grotesque—“I have already been sacrificed!” “Holy” is

⁶⁸ I. Fischer, “Israel’s Senses for the Sensual God,” *Theology Digest* 53 (2006), 141.

⁶⁹ E. A. Gassin, T. A. Sawchak, “Meaning, Performance, and Function,” 42–44. The new field of psychoneuroimmunology has shows that meaningful rituals also improve physical health (see H. G. Koenig and H. J. Cohen, eds., *Link Between Religion and Health: Psychoneuroimmunology and the Faith Factor* [New York, NY: Oxford, 2002]).

over the top; “If God wanted a holy sacrifice he could have preserved this body from its horror.” “How can I give what I do not believe I possess any longer?” Finally, “truly . . . worship” can sound both impossible and cruel to victims.

Spiritual formation can help stimulate personal agency for the abused by pointing to other texts where, for example, the “servant” himself was “despised,” “rejected,” “pierced,” and “crushed” (Isa 53:3a, 5a). Enlivening the text for the traumatized occurs when they find points of representation and association to their pain. It is the reality of brokenness that victims understand and cling to, and this makes their long journey home possible:

“He was beaten so we could be whole.

He was whipped so we could be healed.”

“In all their suffering he also suffered.” (Isa 53:5a; 63:9a, NLT)

Their trauma means victims will read Scripture with a hermeneutic of “self-involvement,” and this is what makes them empathetic and capable of being advocates for other “broken” people.

So, healing for the abused must acknowledge their human-induced trauma, resulting in their lack of self-agency. When the shepherds of creation are themselves exploited, not only is their personhood shattered, but in some form, they will struggle as agents of creation to extend a dignity they were denied. Healing arrests these “relational cancers.” Spiritual formation can help stimulate a sense of redemptive agency: body-management practically and living sacrifice, missionally (Rom 8:13; 1 Cor 9:27). Victims’ brokenness can become a powerful gift given to God in service, for our bodies always belong to someone (Rom 6:6; 7:24; 8:13), living as Christ’s spiritual agent is part of maturity. Spiritual transformation can help the sexually abused view their body under the mercy and service of God.

Redemptive agency is God’s instrumental use of his or her body (1 Cor 6:20; Rom 12:1). Vital for spiritual transformation, victims must be taught what submitting to the Holy Spirit means in light of their experience. But the language of “submission” will be difficult for survivors. Further, those leading formation programs must also be taught how these tenants of formation “translate” to abused people. Clearly, spiritual formation is needed here, but its foundational goals are cutting across the grain of victims’ somatic experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAMS

Assisting the sexually abused in their restoration will require some heightened awareness, disciplinary interaction, generous dialogue, and also retooling of areas in the praxis of transformation ministries. Taking embodiment seriously then means vigorous effort for the survivor must shift some

emphases toward a more multivalent approach of several disciplines in trauma theory, violence, theodicy, spiritual maturity, screening and therapy for SA, and specialized help for victims (e.g., conflict management). Given that spiritual formation, according to E. B. Howard, is concerned with the “human side” of maturity, formation intentionally explores the various means to facilitate that maturity.⁷⁰ To this end, we can note some basic recommendations for spiritual formation programs to more intentionally assist in the healing of the sexually broken.

Regarding Self . . .

1. *Help SA victims redeem their memory.* Harness the insight of victims through support groups made more available and assisted by survivors as well as the professionally trained. Acknowledge what survivors *do* know rather than insisting largely on what they *should* know—particularly from the non-abused. The non-abused need to understand that most survivors will carry a distinct “limp” for the rest of their lives.
2. *Help SA victims develop a sense of self-agency.* Most survivors will remain very suspicious of hierarchical leadership. Their wounds from controlling and narcissistic people have residual effects. Formation programs need to craft built-in detection techniques to identify and aid men and women with histories of SA (e.g., written personal sexual histories). In the academy and church, victims should have access to wounded leaders who are sensitive to these complex relational dynamics and can help victims practice a new sense of self-direction.⁷¹

Regarding Community . . .

3. *Build more healing rituals into spiritual formation programs.* Alongside specific types of assessment designed to screen for SA, healing rituals can then be infused into formation sessions (e.g., role play). Among other things, these rituals can help incorporate the non-abused into the schema of care that the sexually abused will need in the future ministries of the non-abused. Rituals in these intense sessions would help recalibrate the collapsed distinctions

⁷⁰ E. B. Howard, “Advancing the Discussion: Reflections on the Study of Christian Spiritual Life,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1 (Spring 2008): 13–14.

⁷¹ For example, it is increasingly clear that how a victim’s sexual abuse was terminated can affect their recovery. Four categories of termination can be identified: (1) the active agent, (2) a sort of termination, (3) third-party intervention, (4) and no story of termination (E. Lorentzen, H. Nilsen, B. Traeen, “Will It Never End?” 168).

between the subject-object modalities of the traumatized. In truth, we are all broken, though the manifestations will be different.

4. *Integrate a robust theology of embodiment into spiritual formation programs.* Dallas Willard is correct: the lack of a robust view of embodiment has left spiritual transformation ill-equipped to address such issues like SA. As if one must choose between the violin and the bow—the mind or the body—the role of embodiment and sound theology in spiritual formation are two parts of the same equation. Unfortunately, spiritual formation is often presented in an overly “mentalized” fashion. The need for serious integration has never been greater. Embodiment must also be brought into an eschatology of healing. Some wounded we will have to carry on our backs into Glory.
5. *Incorporate the life experiences of victims into the liturgical calendar.* The sexually abused live with a *disenfranchised grief*—their pain needs to be placed in a socially redemptive context.⁷² Disenfranchised grief is not corporately mourned, socially supported or spiritually invited.⁷³ Yet redeeming the trauma of abuse can be aided by employing their stories of suffering in some way, bringing a dignity to a pain long shunned or minimized in the church. Interjecting testimonies, written prayers, drama, Lament Psalms, and communal silence into the liturgical calendar establishes a vital community witness and spiritual acknowledgement. Soul Care for the sexually broken has more to do with *restoration* than transformation. Noting the absence of opportunity for lament in the contemporary church, W. R. L. Moberly notes:

Very few hymns express lament and psalms that are used in a modern paraphrase are almost never psalms of lament, but usually psalms of praise. And there is rarely formal liturgical provision for the expression of lament. The virtual exclusion of lament from most Christian worship carries a strong implicit message that such lament has no legitimate place in worship. Yet most congregations most of the time will have someone who is hurting. *It would seem small wonder if some Christians are driven to depression or superficiality, and that others abandon the faith altogether as lacking in integrity and reality.*⁷⁴

⁷² J. B. Gould, “Spiritual Healing of Disrupted Childhood,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 60 (2006): 263.

⁷³ K. Doka, “Disenfranchised Grief,” L. DeSpelder, A. Strickland, eds., *The Path Ahead: Readings in Death and Dying* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1989), 272.

⁷⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, “Lament,” *NIDOTTE* 4:883–84; emphasis added.

Regarding God . . .

6. *Employ the suffering of God which fosters transcending connections.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer claimed that, “only a suffering God can help.”⁷⁵ Between God’s delight and displeasure is a pained heart (Gen 6:6). There are texts which show that God suffers *with* those who are in pain (cf. Exod 3:7–8; Judg 2:18; Pss 16:8; 23:4; 91:15).⁷⁶ Further, God himself even mourns (cf. Jer 31:20; 48:30–32, 35–36). Some pains only find rest in divine pathos. This is not to spurn the sovereignty of God, only to stress that in deep suffering there is a cruciform immanence of God that is precious to the broken that are in the midst of anguish indescribable. Nicholas Wolterstorff admits, “Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God . . . Instead of explaining our suffering God shares it.”⁷⁷ There is a faith-affirming grief that can belong to Redeemer and redeemed, alike. Because God can suffer with people, a divine immanence is communicated which helps comfort and heal the traumatized—an immanence that “stoops” to the realities of deprived lives (Psalm 113).⁷⁸ This divine empathy is an *incarnational praxis* that spiritual formation programs and the local church need to actively utilize.
7. *Search for fresh metaphors to help rehabilitate victims’ view of God.* New metaphors will take root when victims’ experiences of trauma are meaningfully validated in an integrative theology that has a human face (cf. Jn 4:4–26). Many SA survivors who are believers desperately need *theological healing*. They have learned never to question God, their parents or church leaders. Most of what they know of spirituality is how *not* to talk to God. Clearly, the notion of “healing” needs more careful definition. We know “cure” is not the issue, but this needs to be brought in line with both our theology and practice. Curing isolates causes, healing unites realms. In SA, healing is the rejuvenation of metaphor, the restoration of the person’s

⁷⁵ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1953), 164.

⁷⁶ In some texts people are suffering due to their own sin and divine judgment, a connotation I do not wish to get into here. Regardless, even where God has delivered judgment, he may then be pictured as suffering *with* those he has just judged! (e.g., Isa 54:7–8).

⁷⁷ N. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 81.

⁷⁸ When ministering to the sexually abused, one should be cautious of two spiritual extremes: (1) “victory” theologies bent on notions of *cure*, (2) and social stigmas that treat survivors as lepers (i.e., victims will only victimize again). Both perspectives are driven by fear, lack an adequate integration of theological and psychological understanding, and need more developed notions of *care* to address on-going healing and problems in survivors’ lives (see D. Manning, *Don’t Take My Grief Away from Me* [Hereford, TX: Insight Books, 1979], 78).

communion, with God and his creation. One day the Redeemer of realms will bring all tears and groaning to an end, at *The Great Healing* (Rev 21:4; Rom 8:22).

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