

“Suffer the little children...”
By Tamryn Coats and Liezl Gevers
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Tamryn Coats holds an MA in Research Psychology from the University of Witwatersrand and is currently working towards an MA in Counselling Psychology. Liezl Gevers is currently reading for an MA in Historical Studies at the University of KwaZulu Natal. We're young, passionate, critical thinkers who feel strongly about social justice. Researching the Rezolution conference, the authors of this article stumbled across various articles both locally and internationally that highlighted a controversy surrounding one of the guest speakers. Further inquiry exposed a current lawsuit in which one of Rezolution's guest speakers is implicated as a defendant. This article was initiated as we felt challenged not only by the very serious allegations of the lawsuit but also by the manner in which the conference organizers were handling our inquiry as to why the defendant remains an invited guest speaker at this conference despite the allegations against him. We are both of the opinion that given the serious allegations of the pending lawsuit, the Rezolution conference organizers, as a caution, should not have kept him on as a presenter. We felt compelled to voice our opinion, using this incident as a platform to raise uncomfortable questions about the manner in which society, Christians and the church respond to issues of alleged social injustice.

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Whilst it is impossible to know with certainty the rate of child sexual abuse that occurs in South Africa because of the general underreporting of these specific cases, it is estimated that one in three girls and one in five boys suffer sexual abuse before the age of 18 years.¹ The high incidence of child sexual abuse is by no means unique to South Africa; it is a global problem that knows no cultural, racial, economic or societal bounds.² In an era where access to information has become an easy reality, society now more than ever has little excuse to turn a blind eye when confronted with cases of social injustice. Yet complicity in child sexual abuse cases by those aware of the abuse, as well as the more aggressive tactic of victim blaming is rife, and this needs to be addressed if there is to be any chance of lowering the prevalence of these forms of atrocities.

At large, society attempts to deny or forget the capacity for the evil that is capable at the hands of their fellow human beings. Child victims of sexual abuse, with their need to express their experiences on the path to recovery, place society in the uncomfortable position of not only hearing the traumatic experiences endured by the victim, but also being forced to acknowledge that these types of perpetrators exist. As McFarlane & van der Kolk suggest, "victims are the members of society whose problems represent the memory of suffering, rage and pain in a world that longs to forget".³ For this reason, society regularly engages in a course of self-protection through denial, avoidance and victim blaming. By calling into question the actions, validity or reliability of the child victim, society is able to distance themselves from the likelihood of those same experiences happening to them or their children at the hands of adults entrusted to protect them.

Silence and apathy on the part of Christians, or any member of society, towards allegations of sexual abuse are reprehensible and contribute to the continued prevalence of sexual abuse. Ignoring, dismissing or undermining the claims of victims of sexual abuse adds yet another layer of shame and injury on the already traumatized individual and further pushes

them into a world of isolation. Indeed, silence in and of itself can demonstrate a side has been taken. In a compelling argument Judith Herman (1994) argues that in failing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the child victim's claim, society essentially adopts the side of the perpetrator. Herman highlights how in all cases of morality, we as the bystanders are forced to take a side. Condoning silence inherently takes the side of the perpetrator.⁴ Those who identify themselves as Christians need to be aware that the way the Church publicly interacts with cases involving any form of abuse sends very clear messages to those who are victims about whether refuge within the church is a viable option for their path to recovery.

The upcoming Christian evangelical conference 'Rezolution' has brought to light some important questions regarding how reformed⁵ Christians and Churches conceptualise and handle abuse against women and children. One of the speakers attending the Rezolution conference, currently being held in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban this April, is implicated in a class action lawsuit against Sovereign Grace Ministries (an organisation of mainly US based churches). As the former president of SGM, CJ Mahaney is listed as one of several defendants in the lawsuit which alleges the covering up of a number of cases of sexual abuse within the organisation.⁶

It is acknowledged that we do not know all the facts about the lawsuit, and so it is important that we withhold judgment about the guilt **or innocence** of those allegedly involved.^a However, withholding judgment does not mean that one need remain silent on the matter, especially when the allegations involve something as serious as the cover up of child sexual abuse within a church organisation. The way in which the organisers of the Rezolution Conference have dealt with these allegations is concerning on a number of levels. The responses and, perhaps more telling lack of responses from the conference organisers to the knowledge of this lawsuit have raised some uncomfortable questions about how the church community responds to and deals with abuse. At best, these responses reveal apathy on the part of the Christian community towards the allegations referred to in the lawsuit and at worst, a more disturbing attitude of pardoning such abuses based on faulty conceptions of 'grace and forgiveness'.

A major concern is the readiness with which the organisers of Rezolution and other Christian leaders^b adopt the standpoint of "innocent until proven guilty" as implied in a news article that reported on the opinion of Rezolution conference organizers:

Local organisers of the conference were aware of the lawsuit, which he said SGM was "busy sorting out". He said the action dated back to incidents that allegedly took place 30 years ago. "**we believe in the premise of innocent until proven guilty.** I don't believe we have anything against Mahaney coming to South Africa." "He was an invited guest speaker and until other things come to light, **we believe in his character**".⁷ (Author's emphasis).

For some reason the legal principal "innocent until proven guilty" has been adopted as a default moral standpoint, which unfortunately can be very problematic in cases that involve rape and sexual assault. In such cases, where survivors have taken steps to break the

^a It should also be noted, however, that factual allegations have been explicitly laid out in the lawsuit. A copy of this lawsuit can be found at <http://www.tennessean.com/assets/pdf/DN199282115.PDF>

^b For an example of this see Tim Challies response as to how Christians should 'biblically' respond to the allegations against SGM. It can be accessed at <http://www.challies.com/articles/thinking-biblically-about-cj-mahaney-and-sovereign-grace-ministries>

silence and confront their perpetrators, the presumption of innocence on the part of the alleged perpetrators means that the alleged victims are presumed 'lying until proven innocent'.⁸ This seems more like a pre-judgment than viewing the situation from a neutral stance and raises questions regarding the ways leaders in Christian communities are respected and trusted by mere virtue of their being in positions of authority.

Another big concern is the lack of transparency that has accompanied the knowledge of CJ Mahaney's alleged complicity in the covering up of sexual abuse within his organisation. There has been no statement on the conference's website acknowledging the lawsuit and the involvement of one of the key speakers at the conference in it. In addition, the reasons for taking the decision to keep him on as a speaker in the conference, in spite of this involvement, have not been made clear publicly, which unfortunately, leaves a lot to suspicious speculation by concerned citizens who refuse to remain silent over such serious allegations. Mahaney officially announced he will be stepping down as president of SGM in March 2013, effective as of April 12th 2013⁹. Despite this action on a professional level, he remains an invited guest speaker at the Resolution conference.

The issue here is not so much about judging guilt, but about the lack of transparency that has been displayed by SGM regarding the facts of the case, as well as the Resolution event organisers. Furthermore SGM invoked the First Amendment in order to attempt to get the court case dismissed; an action that implies a forceful thwarting of transparency (not merely a lack thereof), as highlighted in a statement on the SGM website on 14 November 2012:

SGM believes that allowing courts to second guess pastoral guidance would represent a blow to the First Amendment, that would hinder, not help, families seeking spiritual direction among other resources in dealing with the trauma related to any sin including child sexual abuse.¹⁰

Perhaps a more transparent and less evasive response would have added more credibility to the organisation's position.

These attitudes, whilst alarming, are unsurprising considering the traditionally patriarchal structure within which many churches operate where the character and integrity of the church leader or leaders are naturally assumed because of their position. A concerning presumption considering that "as Christians, our first impulse should be to protect and defend the powerless, not the powerful".¹¹ The church should serve as an exemplar for society in breaking down the barriers that perpetuate abuse and should be a resounding voice, actively working towards social justice. It is clear that the church community has a responsibility to create public awareness on the nature and prevalence of child sexual abuse amidst a society that longs to forget.

In conclusion we advocate for greater transparency from conference organizers thus allowing such issues to be brought to the foreground, publically discussed and debated. In agreement with various other commentaries over this case, we do not feel that individuals facing such serious allegations should be given a podium and public platform at a Christian conference. We agree that the law must take its course, however, in the interim, it is of our opinion that defendants ought to stand back from all positions of public authority until a verdict has been concluded.

Notes:

¹ Ansie Fouche. "Sexual abuse and the impact on the child in middle childhood" in *Facilitating disclosure of child sexual abuse victims in the middle childhood : a forensic interview protocol for social workers*. Doctoral thesis, 2008.

² Shanaaz Matthews et al. "Sexual Abuse". Accessed: <http://www.mrc.ac.za/crime/Chapter7.pdf> 11 April 2013.

³ McFarlane, A & van der Kolk, B. (1984) Trauma and it's challenge to society, in van der Kolk (ed.) *Post traumatic stress disorder: psychological and biological sequelae*. Washington D.C: American psychiatric press.

⁴ Judith Lewis Herman. "Trauma and Recovery: from domestic abuse to political terror". (London, 2001).

⁵ We specify reformed Christians as discussions around sexual abuse in the church have predominantly been triggered by controversies surrounding the Catholic Church.

⁶ This has been reported on a number of news websites. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/sex-scandal-clouds-visit-by-church-group-1.1458003#.UWhKtqJTBAr>, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/how-churches-should-address-abuse/2013/04/10/ea39fdb8-9fb5-11e2-9c03-6952ff305f35_story.html
For a copy of the lawsuit see: <http://www.tennessean.com/assets/pdf/DN199282115.PDF>

⁷ Article accessed at <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/sex-scandal-clouds-visit-by-church-group-1.1458003#.UwrYA6JTBAr>

⁸ Idea adapted from a comment on this blog post:<http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/sovereign-grace-ministries-abuse-allegations>

⁹ Article accessed at <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/blogs/sgm/post/A-Word-of-Thanks-from-CJ-Mahaney.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/blogs/sgm/post/Updated-Statement-on-Reported-Lawsuit.aspx>;
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-web-only/sovereign-grace-ministries-courts-shouldnt-second-guess.html>;<http://www.challies.com/articles/thinking-biblically-about-cj-mahaney-and-sovereign-grace-ministries>

¹¹ Rachel Held Evans blog post: <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/sovereign-grace-ministries-abuse-allegations>