

# OpenTheo

## Is the Church Failing at Being a Church?

January 18, 2023



### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

Before we denounce most leaders as Pharisees and large swaths of the church as complicit in the evil deeds of darkness, let's make sure we are not trafficking in well-meaning, but unhelpful, myths.

This article, written for WORLD Opinions, urges Christians to be aware of and address sin, but to abstain from assigning widespread guilt to the church as a whole.

### **Transcript**

[Music] Greetings and salutations, welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung. Today I'm reading the latest article from World Opinions.

Is the Church Failing at Being the Church? We need to watch how we talk about ourselves. Why do you evangelicals love to make up? And say such bad things about yourselves. That's a quote.

That's how Ed Stetser began his forward to Bradley Wright's 2010 book, "Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites and Other Lies You've Been Told." The questions Stetser explained was posed to him while he was at the Washington Post building in DC to address a room full of reporters. Instead of believing the worst about ourselves and being overly concerned with how others perceive us, Stetser encouraged people to read Wright's book. Wright argued that despite many imperfections, evangelical Christianity in America was doing a pretty good job of being the church.

In his blurb, Scott McKnight, who in a much more dire mood recently called for saving evangelicalism, urged everyone to buy the book, read it carefully, and give the book away to others because he insisted, "There's lots of good news when it comes to the condition of the church in the West." Evangelicals have a long history of self-flagellation. On one level, this is commendable, I suppose. As Christians, we should, of all people, be aware of our sins, repent of our sins, and ask God to help us overcome our sins.

And yet, we must be careful lest the virtue of personal humility leads the church at large

to believe things that aren't true, develop responses that aren't necessary, and set out on paths that aren't wise. Grant Wright's book came out over a decade ago, before Obergefell, before Trump, before Me Too, before COVID, maybe evangelicals are finally right to believe the worst about ourselves, or maybe we have tendency to reach big conclusions based on experiences and headlines more than on hard facts. I'm not sure what to call the two sides, and I don't even like describing the conversation as sides, but there is an important and sometimes tense conversation of foot in the evangelical world about whether the church and its leaders are quite often worse than we've dared to admit, or whether the church and its leaders are quite often unfairly criticized in a rush of prophetic denunciation.

The two sides likely agree on what constitutes sinful leadership in the church, manipulation, lying, selfishness, the desire for vain glory, lack of accountability, a harsh spirit, demeaning words, angry behavior, and anything else that Paul lists under works of the flesh in Galatians 5. We usually know what sin looks like. What we don't know is whether these sins are bigger and better and more prevalent than ever before. A few weeks ago, Christianity Today published a list of its top stories from the past year.

Several observers pointed out that most of the articles on the list had to do with scandals and controversies in the church. It is easy to deduce from the most popular podcasts and headlines that the evangelical church is suffering from an epidemic of abusive pastors, deviant churches, and fallen leaders. But do we know that this is the case? That's an honest question.

Maybe there is hard data out there showing that our problems are much worse than they used to be, and that our sins are much worse than anywhere else in the world. But absent that data, we should not make sweeping conclusions based entirely on powerful anecdotes and personal experiences. The problem is not with calling out sin where it exists.

The problem comes when we implement grand plans and stir up new suspicions that may not be warranted. For example, in his book, Wright looks at sexual misconduct by clergy. Given the well-publicized sins of Jim Baker, Jimmy Swagger, and Ted Haggard, along with detailed reporting from mainstream media outlets of lesser known cases, it seemed obvious that sexual advances made by clergy was a pervasive problem.

But according to research cited by Wright, only one in 33 churchgoing women reported that a religious leader had made a sexual advance to them. Obviously, such behavior on the part of Passer should never be tolerated. Wright's point was not to excuse the 3%, but to make clear that 3% is not a lot considering that 1 in 4, that's 25% of women, reported an inappropriate sexual attention from authorities in non-religious workplaces.

Similarly, Wright showed that instances of domestic abuse declined significantly among those who attended church weekly. There are a number of issues Christians may not

agree on when it comes to discussing moral failure in the church. We don't always agree on what to call these sins.

For example, when does sin become abuse or trauma? We don't always agree on how to deal with serious sin when it surfaces in the church. When should we call in outside investigators and experts? Most of all, I don't think we are at all clear how often these types of sins are happening in the church. There are nearly 400,000 churches in America, so there will always be plenty of bad examples to go around.

In the bigger the denomination or movement, the quicker the numbers will multiply. But before we denounce most leaders as Pharisees and large swaths of the church as complicit in the evil deeds of darkness, let's make sure we are not trafficking in well-meaning but unhelpful myths. We don't always have to believe the worst about ourselves, especially when the ourselves usually means not me personally.

We can tackle problems somewhere without assuming they are problems everywhere.

[Music]