

Transcript for the podcast “Worthy: Celebrating the Value of Women.”

Hosts: Elyse Fitzpatrick and Eric Schumacher

Episode 43 — Guest: Robert Cunningham

Date Aired: November 23, 2020

Eric Schumacher 0:06

Welcome to worthy Christian podcast that celebrates the value of women. Each week we'll bring you conversations with women and men, on the value of women in the church, home and society. We will not always agree on everything. But we do agree that God is glorious, the Bible is true, women are valuable, and respectful conversation on this topic is essential in our day.

Welcome back to the podcast Worthy: Celebrating the value of women. I'm Eric Schumacher, here with my co-host and co-author. And as she likes to say, my co belligerents; Elyse Fitzpatrick, and I'm here on a, eh it's a cool but clear sky pleasant day in Iowa, where our real estate is cheap. And Elyse is enjoying sunny, beautiful weather in sunny Southern California where the real estate is not cheap.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 1:41

Not so cheap.

Eric Schumacher 1:43

Yeah. So that's why we keep asking listeners to buy copies of the book Worthy because Elyse needs to pay the bills. So anyway, we are excited today to have as with us a special guest that we've both admired online for how he has led his church in responding to allegations of sexual abuse. This is Reverend Robert Cunningham. He is the senior pastor at Tates Creek Presbyterian Church. He's the pastor of preaching and vision at that church in Lexington, Kentucky. And in addition to his responsibilities as Pastor he is a regular opinion writer for The Lexington Herald Leader and their religion and culture commentator for Kentucky Sports Radio.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 2:38

Okay, I need to hear about that but go ahead.

Eric Schumacher 2:41

Kentucky sports radio? They have sports in Kentucky.

Robert Cunningham 2:44

We did.

Eric Schumacher 2:45

Yeah. Iowa is place you probably wonder about. He is also the host of an iTunes top 50 Christian podcast called Every Square Inch. He received his Bachelor's Degree from Murray State University his Master's of Divinity Degree from Covenant Theological Seminary. And he is pursuing a PhD from the University of Leicester Did I say that right?

Robert Cunningham 3:10

Leicester, It's it looks like Lancaster.

Eric Schumacher 3:12

There we go.

Robert Cunningham 3:13

Leicester, those those Brits would get on to you for that,

Eric Schumacher 3:15

Leicester? Yeah. Oh, yeah. So it's an overseas thing.

Robert Cunningham 3:19

So yeah, it's in England. Yeah.

Eric Schumacher 3:20

Let's keep the wrong pronunciation in there. Just because I love to poke an eye, you know, my thumb in the eye of the Brits. So we won the war. We can do what we want with the pronunciation. So Robert and his wife Abby, have four sons Holt, Charlie, Ellen and Henry. And outside of family ministry, he enjoys reading, fly fishing, golf. And he is passionately verging on idolotrously, supportive of - am I reading this right - the University of Louisville Cardinals?

Robert Cunningham 3:56

Yeah, let's do that. All right. Interview over.

Eric Schumacher 4:01

No, he is a big blue University of Kentucky fan. My oldest son is a Kentucky fan and -

Robert Cunningham 4:10

No way!

Eric Schumacher 4:10

So yeah, he was born in Kentucky. He was actually born in Louisville. Okay, and then we moved away when he was two months old. So I was finishing up seminary and

Robert Cunningham 4:19

Okay.

Eric Schumacher 4:20

So one of the first years though that we started watching the NCAA tournament was like, you know, one of Kentucky's many great years and right, we hadn't really followed college basketball at all in our house. And so he said, I said, Who are you rooting for? He said, I'm a Kentucky fan. And I said, well, why Kentucky? And he said because I was born there. It's my homeland. And I man, I'm like, whatever. And so anyway, then and then they did awesome. And then the next year was when they were undefeated and lost in the championship and art angstrom bring that up. Yeah, I yeah, anyway, It was hard to watch him be so excited and get crushed. Though I was well

Robert Cunningham 5:04

Bring him to town and I we can we can give him the full experience and tickets and all that stuff and show a good time.

Eric Schumacher 5:10

All right! Oh, I will I will tell him that. So tell us, Robert a bit more about your faith journey and how you ended up getting into ministry.

Robert Cunningham 5:24

Yeah. So born and raised in Lexington, that that's why I'm blue. so passionate about Kentucky. Yeah. So born and raised in Lexington, I have the honor of ministering in my hometown, which comes with its complexities, but I love it. I grew up in a nominally Baptist Christian home SBC church here in Lexington. I fell away from that, for the most part, in my, you know, adolescent teenage years, I had a fairly rebellious high school experience. That led to a lot of poor choices. And all along the way, there was a Young Life leader who just as Young Life does, they just were, you know, just kept pursuing me kept loving me. And the end of my senior year, this leader came to me and said, you know, I would love for you to consider going to one of our young life camps. And through a crazy story of providence, I ended up going I, you know, first like, no way, I'm not going to your silly Christian camp or whatever. But the Lord saw fit that I would be there, heard the gospel, articulated. And just went one of those stories. They're not all like this, you know, boring testimonies are great. But mom was a very radical testimony, I went to that camp, one person came back a different person. And that was 18. Right before I was to go to Murray State, which is a university in western part of our state. And so I went off to college and that zealous, new believer, Jesus Freak stage of life, which is beautiful and interesting on itself, and really immersed myself in the campus ministry, stuff, culture, but really more than that, became close friends with some guys who are still my best friends to this day and kind of did life with them. We really kind of without knowing it did the Bonhoeffer life together thing in college, and it worked. And I always had a thirst for knowledge. And it kind of suppressed that a lot. I was embarrassed by my love for reading and studying and writing and whatnot. But when I became a Christian, a lot of that stuff came alive. And so kind of through my own studies, I followed the stereotypical path of "Oh, I'm a Christian, then I heard John Piper preach, Oh, wow, God's really big and glorious." And wow, this is this is something more than I suspected, went down that path and then just through my own personal studies, no, really discipleship, anybody, just my own studies. I started reading the people that Piper was influenced by and I was like, wait, these guys are Presbyterian. What's going on with that? And so that kind of led me down into the path of Reformed Presbyterianism. And when I graduated college, I, I did a quick internship at the church where I'm serving now. So when I was coming home from college, I was trying to find any church that believed kind of this weird stuff that I was starting to believe. And there was one PCA church here in Lexington. And so I got connected and fell in love with this community- it's a very small church at the time, did an internship with this church, and then went off to Covenant Seminary, which is the denominational seminary of the PCA went to Covenant, got my MDiv, and then just never had any intention of coming back. But providentially a student ministry position opened up at our church, right as I was graduating, and I took that call, and did did youth work for six or seven years, and then this church called me as their senior pastor way too early. I was I was 30. I think I was 30 and maybe 31. And yeah, it's kinda one of those things. I just started pretending like I knew what I was doing. got away with it. And then and then, here we are, I've been doing it. You know, I've been in this role since in my job description has changed a little bit here in the past few years. We've got a wonderful pastoral team, that that does a lot of leadership and my focus is on preaching vision, public theology, public work, and what not. But yeah, we love it couldn't be happier.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 10:03

I've read some of the things that you have written publicly to your church. And I've loved the way you've crafted those things. And I could tell as I read them, how much you love your church, that you love the people there, love the body, really trying to walk humbly, gently, courageously through a difficult time, which we will talk about. But tell us for a minute brag about your church, which is tell us what you love about them.

Robert Cunningham 10:36

It's easy to brag about my church. You hear these stories of pastors. You know, pastoral burnout. Feeling like their churches, their biggest critic.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 10:50

Right.

Robert Cunningham 10:52

I mean, it's just churches are notorious for chewing up spitting out their pastors. I have, I think I serve the best church in the PCA. I love I love our people. And it's not only do I love our people, but I love her. I mean, I get to be in where my heart is. Our vision statement is the glory of Christ and the good of the Bluegrass, I, I love the Bluegrass. I love our culture, I love our community. I love the state. So I get to be in the culture that I love with the people that I love. And I have had the opposite experience. I have had the people who have bore patiently with me through my growth through my weaknesses, I have to repent, I have to apologize. They're always quick to forgive. They're my biggest fans, they've created a job description that really fits who God's made me to be. I have a pastoral team. That is, they're my best friends. So the people I work with are people I like to party with. And I have I have I have an elder I have a session of elders that are my biggest fans. You know, they're, you know, they're allowing me to pursue a PhD. I may just I could not be in a better situation. You know, I can't.. honestly speaking, you know, other churches. We're a larger we're a larger PCA church. We're a larger regional kind of church. But even larger churches have have come calling and I don't even usually pick up the phone. I just I I couldn't imagine doing life and ministry anywhere else. I love this place.

Eric Schumacher 12:28

Yeah. And and loving your church and having such a great experience and great people there hasn't meant that it's been without difficult negotiations. And that's one of the reasons that we we have you on is you went through a situation of having to handle a sexual abuse allegation against a staff member. Would you in whatever ways you're able to talk about that? Just tell us that story. What happened and and how did you respond and handle it?

Robert Cunningham 13:04

Sure. The the minister who left and his position was open that I ended up filling was at our church for a long time. Very, very beloved, a very charismatic man. You know, many people loves him. Many people were discipled by him. He was a fixture of our church. And he did youth in college ministries. And it was good for them on still still pray for him regularly. He he went to he went to Savannah, Georgia, to pastor after leaving our church, and I'll never forget I was I was in Scotland at the time speaking and, and my phone was blowing up internationally and I was I was trying not to deal with it because the international stuff and finally I just said something's going on, I get a call. So I called and I called number back and they said, Brad His name is Brad Wall or Brad Wall or has been deposed of office and PCA that that's just jargon for he went under discipline and he got stripped of his credentialing. He's been deposed of office

for some inappropriate behavior. And and it was I'll try to be as careful as I can here. It was very unconventional in its nature, which is why in many ways it was it was went undetected for so long. He had an erotic obsession for feet and was rubbing the feet of students in his ministry. And had confessed that he was getting pleasure from it. And as soon as that happened very quickly, he, he was deposed of office. So anyway, they call just tell us this has happened. He was a former pastor, your church. And now, at this point, he had been gone for a long over decade. Many of the people who were in his ministry were gone. And so I kinda was faced with well, you know, this that, you know, this was discovered another church, he's already been disciplined. He's not ministertng anymore. You know, I guess I guess this is something I could have. I could have just said that so sad and moved on. But I remember feeling this pit in my stomach of would, is it possible that this took place at our church? Is it possible that there are those out there with stories to tell that we need to hear and so I called a meeting of our session and I said, You know, I kind of want to do this unconventionally, I don't think, you know, by law, we don't have to do this. But I kind of want to, I want to ask us to come forward with what's come to our attention, and ask if there are any survivors of this abuse that took place at our church. And what happened, what what came of that is that in many ways, our church was kind of the epicenter of this abuse. Many people came forward. And we within a week realized we had a real problem on our hand. And so so we wrote, we wrote a public statement. And, and, you know, let everybody know. And invited victims to come forward. And then we contracted with Grace Boss, Boss divisions organization, we contracted with Grace to do the independent investigation. And we handed over everything we knew. They interviewed folks, and they, they, you know, they got to the bottom of the mess, and, and then came back with a report of kind of the extent of the abuse that took place, along with some mistakes that we made institutionally some improvements we can make. And it was a painful experience. It was for our congregation, obviously, an embarrassing experience. But it was very healing. It was a very healing experience. Not just for the survivors of abuse, you know, people that had talked to that have had since left the church and this and and this pastor being a big reason why, who weren't following Jesus who said, like, you don't understand how important this is to that you're taking this seriously and stuff. So it's healing to survivors. But I think institutionally healing, I mean, I think it's scary for a church to lay themselves bare before an independent investigation and before the public. But, I mean, I think the Scriptures are true, when Truth does set us free. It disturbs you first, it haunts you at first, it scares you that the first but it does set you free. And, and we have experienced a lot of healing and freedom from that experience.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 18:24

So first of all, thank you, thank you for being the sort of person that would lead in the way that you are, we understand that that's a function of God's grace in your life. But, you know, we we thank you for that one of the things that we have been most concerned about, particularly as we have interviewed, survivors of abuse is the way that generally speaking, the church hasn't done a very good job leading and responding. So, so thank you, you've really boldly and courageously sought to lead the church during a very difficult time I can imagine even just our our listeners don't get to see your face. But we were looking at you now we can tell this is this is very hard. So yeah, thank you. So this is a difficult time you have to embrace transparency and vulnerability, which nobody likes, particularly when it comes to something like this. And then in from this, undoubtedly people said, "Yeah, well, if that sort of stuff goes on there, you know, and how can God be real?" And you know, these guy I mean, all the things. Sure. So what's your heart in leading in this way? And what's been the most difficult about that choice and what has been the most rewarding and what we're wanting here is we know that pastors listen to this. And we know that they, at some point, maybe even now are being faced with this. What can you say to them?

Robert Cunningham 20:15

Yeah, so much. Let me first let me be clear, I thank you so much for your, for your encouraging words. And as you might imagine, from that previous investigation, and we just recently announced that we're having I can't talk much about this one, but that we had, that we're actually having to entering into another investigation. And you might imagine we, I get a lot of social media emails, you know, just a lot of thank you's. And I'm encouraged by that. But I do want to make made clear that, like, I was not equipped for this moment, I think this is part of, we're gonna get, you know, to some of the problems within the church. I wasn't ready for this moment. I didn't learn about this. I love my education at Covenant. I was never a class on dealing with this or protecting the vulnerable or anything like that. I think I heard recently, that Covenant is incorporating some of that stuff, which is encouraging. I was ill equipped and I get way too much credit for our response. What I did do is, is leaned heavily on people who knew what they're doing. Um, so I think you all are you all, interviewing Rachael too, as well?

Eric Schumacher 21:34

Yeah, we have. Yep.

You have. Okay. Rachael is a is has become a dear friend, somebody that I trust deeply. I got on speed dial. Boz obviously was a big part of that. Honestly, even like, you asked about, I want to hear the story behind this Kentucky Sports Radio thing. We have a big public figure in our state with a guy named Matt Jones, he's probably one of the most well known voices in our state doesn't go to our church, but a good friend. And even me reaching out to him who's a guy who deals with public stuff all the time and saying, "What do I do?" Basically, what I'm trying to say here is I don't think pastors know what to do here. And, and, and I reached out to the right people, and, and just took the step of faith to, to say, Okay, I'm gonna, this is really scary, but I'm gonna trust that these people know what they're talking about, and to do it this way. And and that would be to answer your question, what I say to pastors, that would be the first thing is, is, we were not experts in trauma, we're not expert investigators, we're not experts in any of this stuff. We're, we're, we're where people have word and sacrament, that's, that's where we're trained. And so when you get into a situation that is beyond your abilities, to reach out to those who are experts, and I did that, and we, and it was scary to trust them, it really was because all of them said the same thing. transparency, transparency, transparency. My friend that, like I said, who's who's in Lexington, Kentucky media. He said, Robert, you have two choices here. You can do what churches normally do, and kind of hide this up, cover this up and try to deal with it internally. And then let people like me figure it out and tell the story. Or you could just tell the story. And I was like, okay, I'd rather tell the story, then let you figure all this out, and tell the story. And so transparency, that that denying that understandable impulse to prioritize the protection of the institution over you know, we condemn these folks for doing that, and rightfully so, but I get it. Like I get when this hits and you're like, oh my goodness, my church is gonna be all over the news and what are they gonna be? What are they gonna think of our people, and people are gonna want to come to our church and I get it, but just, you know, our, our theme of our last investigation and it's the theme of this one is just righteousness over reputation. We're just gonna lay our reputation on the altar, and choose and trust that God does honor what's right. So transparency, handing it off to the experts. Allowing, trusting the Lord that that says that when you choose, you know that love and truth are never convenient and in fact they're a cross to bear but they're worth it in the end. It's scary, but but it just in my experience, in the end it's worth it. Now you said what has been hard? What's hard about this path is it does place you front and center of criticism, of slander, of the public opinion.. ou know, Yeah, it's there for a while there for a while, you know, there was there was a lot of stuff online and, and a lot of joking in our city about not only what

happened at our church, but the nature of it as you could imagine the nature of the abuse, and it's just, you know, it's hard. It's hard to be vilified. It's hard, all that stuff. But every phone call I get from a survivor thanking me. It's always like, I'll take that. I mean, I'll take that. For them, I'll take that reputation hit, I'll take the burden of public scorn and all that stuff, if it bears a burden that they're not able to bear. I'm sounding very pious here, but I'm not intending to I just, we just, we just really tried to do this differently. What we said is, this is a this is a principally speaking, I gave you some I'm rambling, let me give you some concrete stuff. Our session said, here's, here's where we, here's where we are. When the scandal hit. There are three there are three groups here. There's our congregation. There's the watching world. And they're the victims of this abuse. Typically, churches, prioritize the church first, the watching world second and the victims. Third, we want to flip that paradigm. We said we want we want, we want to prioritize the survivors of abuse first. So whatever everything we did, we said, First, what is this? How does this help them? Secondly, the watching world, like the witness of the church, like the public is so tired of seeing Christian institutions be quite honestly terrible in this area. So we want to do this right, so that they could say, "Oh, that's a ministry that that actually cares about this as well." And then last is our reputation like that that's not going to be our priority. So we kind of flipped the paradigm and, and the Lord seemed to bless it,

Yeah, so I'm wondering, just to get into some, you know, people are probably asking the question, like you said, the jokes and all that because of the unconventional nature of the abuse that happened, you know, erotic obsession with feet and foot rubbing? I'm sure someone raised the question. He was just rubbing people's feet. How is this sexual abuse? So how did you and your session come to determine that this was sexual abuse?

Robert Cunningham 27:41

Yeah, it's a great question. Um, and that was a big, honestly, that was a big thing that we had to if you read my public statement, I literally had to explain to our congregation; This is why we are treating this with the severity it deserves. We understand it's unconventional. It didn't take long for us to treat a sexual abuse when you started to talk to the people that were abused. So when I would have these stories, and they would tell me, it felt, you know, it felt weird and strange, but now that I know that he was getting sexual arousal from it, I just feel icky, I feel gross. I feel a shame all the stuff that you hear from survivors. Yeah. So when it wasn't hard to say, this is this is abuse. I know, it's unconventional, I know, it's protected under statute of limitations, you know, it's a different form. But but the the impact on the people that survived this was still there, and it was still the same. So you know, it wasn't hard when you talk to them. But, and this is really important. You know, we again, turn to the experts, and we said, can somebody give us a definition of sexual assault. What is abuse, because this is so unconventional. And when you actually get into the definitions, it's really, it's really somebody touching you without consent for their own sexual exploitation. And it doesn't matter how it is and what form it is, if they are if they are sexually exploiting you for their own pleasure. without your consent, and certainly in this case, you know, certainly those who are under your minors, you know, I just told our congregation Listen, we are we're going to treat this as if we have uncovered the quote unquote, most "heinous form of abuse you can imagine". Because the serve to the survivors, it feels that it feels that way.

Eric Schumacher 29:46

Yeah, that that's, that's really helpful because, I mean, what was happening is you had one person touching and using the bodies of other people for sexual pleasure without any consent. And some, you know, in this case people who couldn't consent. And I think if you would phrase it that way and ask

someone, what do you think about that? They'd say, of course, that's abuse, you know. Yeah. And but sometimes it's hard for us in these unconventional forms to kind of get ourselves in that paradigm of thinking. I'm also wondering, you know, you mentioned that, that he had been disciplined, stripped of his credentials in another state, and then the word came to you. You mentioned it's, you know, statute of limitations. You know, nothing, no prosecution can happen on this. No charges can be filed. Did you have people saying, you know, this was so long ago, and people don't know about it. Why speak publicly to it?

Robert Cunningham 30:48

Yes, absolutely. We had that. Yeah, we did. And, and, and churches? It is. This is a situation where I don't have any. I don't have any doubt that if we just said, Oh, wow, that that's that's terrible. glad he's, out of ministry, that was forever go to our church. We're not going to pursue this. I have no doubt this would not have been one of those like, big cover up scandals. I think we probably would have just gone on with business as usual. And, and we didn't have to do this is the point I'm making, we didn't have to do this. This is this wasn't a thing where we had enormous heinous abuse thing that was covered up. And and people did say that why such? Why are we going to such measures when there's so long ago, and it was so unconventional? And, again, going back to my paradigm, okay, well, that's viewing it through the institutional lens first, not the survivor lens first, because when I've talked to the survivors of this, they're still dealing with this on a daily basis, especially when they found out, you know, he came out and said, Yes, I was getting sexual gratification from this. It turned the world upside down. And so, you know, one of the things I've said to our congregation that I understand, perhaps grew weary of hint, do we have to do this, we had to talk about this. I not all, by and large, our congregation was was very supportive in this, but I just kept on saying, you know, survivors are not afforded the luxury of moving on, like, they're just not. And it would be easy for our church to just move on.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 32:30

Can I just stop you for one second? Yeah. Can you say that again? Say what you just said about the survivors? Not being able. They don't have the luxury. I'm sorry to interrupt you. But yeah, yeah.

Robert Cunningham 32:43

So survivors are not afforded the luxury of just moving on, like the institution can. So we could have just said, we're just gonna move on that was forever ago. And by the way, though, I mean, we were when this hit the amount of goods I mean, we were growing. We were planting churches, our I mean, we were in a season of just flourishing as a church. And it was so tempting to say, Oh, come on, things are going so well. Do we need to really dig this up and pause everything? I mean, it consumed it consume nine months of our church, and a lot of resources, those independent investigations aren't cheap. And, and, but, but like, like, Elyse, like you said, survivors aren't afforded that luxury. They're not allowed to just say, Well, I'm just gonna, it's haunting them every day. And so. So again, we just we flipped the paradigm and said, we're going to try to do this. We're going to try to do what's best for them, not what's best for us.

Eric Schumacher 33:45

Did you have I'm sure you had people responding, saying, you know, Robert's, just jumping on that whole, you know, Me Too bandwagon. And, you know, it's a hot button issue right now to talk about sexual abuse. And so yeah, how would you respond to that?

Robert Cunningham 34:08

Yes, I did. You know, the, there are folks, nobody in our church or anybody close to me, but you know, in that in that wholesome culture, that is Twitter, you know, it, you know, opportunistic, exploiting this to, you know, all that stuff. And that, that, again, that comes back to righteousness over reputation, like, okay, I mean, they can think that about what we're doing here. They could think we're trying to do that, but we're, we're not. One of the ways I would say to ensure that you're not doing that is and this is really important. We didn't speak about it. I wasn't on social media, you know, trying to craft this great story of our response. I didn't like what I'm the stuff I'm doing right now. I didn't start doing that. Until a long time after the investigation was complete, because we didn't want survivors to think that we're just exploiting their stories to pat ourselves on the back. So we didn't defend ourselves when those accusations came up, or I didn't defend myself when those accusations came my way we just really we just laid low and let the investigation do its thing. Now, I will tell you, you're hitting on something I don't know, I don't know if you intended to hit on. But the Me too stuff the Me Too movement, the Church Too stuff. Something that was interesting is that what I found is that that was getting lumped into some of the other debates that are going on in conservative circles right now. So intersectionality, and Critical Theory and all that stuff. I was getting lumped into that kind of stuff, becoming a liberal, you know, I was because everybody was a liberal, because I was taking sexual abuse seriously, which is crazy. And if I'm a liberal, I mean, I don't know that a liberal, you think I'm a liberal. But I noticed being lumped into that. And I think that was probably the thing where I wanted to defend myself the most. Like that it's somehow like, compromising the gospel and liberal to take abuse. We could talk Critical Theory. I mean, like, we could talk about Critical Theory and intersectionality we can have those debates, and those debates are, are healthy and stuff like that. But this one, the me to movement, it needs to be taken out of that gospel, compromising conversation. Because this is this, this is Gospel, and it's in its purest form, you know, defending the vulnerable and the helpless and and whatnot.

Eric Schumacher 36:47

That's, that's great. I loved what you've said about that. You just the paradigm that you walked through in terms of victim first and then public, and then, the church, and that is what it means for a church, to conform itself to the image of Christ, who humbled himself and became a servant lay down his life, for the sake of others.

Robert Cunningham 37:16

Let's say they call it the humiliation of Christ first. I mean, the Gospel is the humiliation of Christ for the needy. And so, yeah, it was humiliating. And, you know, God, you know,

And it feels that way, in the midst of it, I'm sure. And you know, and we have a Savior who said, and take up your cross, and follow me. And, and you're right, if you're a church that is focused on your own image, rather than the image of Christ, if you're a pastor that's focused on your own image, rather than the image of Christ, then this is a distraction from pursuing your own glory, because it's gonna take you nine months, or longer, when you had wished dreams for your church. And like, Bonhoeffer says Christ needs to destroy all of those. So let's say a pastor's listening. He's not he's not at a large church. He's at a smaller church. And something comes up and allegation is brought to him. I want you to speak two things. One is what are the practical steps that he should take right away? And then the second is, he's scared. And he doesn't know if his people are going to support him. He doesn't know if he'll be able to afford an investigation. And he's been hearing this conversation among people he respects that this is all lumped in with liberalism. Yeah. And he's worried that he's gonna lose his reputation there or that he's actually straying somehow. Talk to that to that pastor.

Yeah. So practical, practical wisdom, and then theologically. Practically, you don't have to bear this that they're experts. So immediately, call immediately call the authorities. The good thing about calling the authority I think people think like, oh, I gotta call the authorities to report it. Yeah, you do. You need to call the authorities report it. But the good thing about it is, you know, the first time I reported abuse to authorities, I called him and said, hey, I need to report this and I needed for you to tell me like, I don't know what I'm doing. And and the local police departments have to walk churches through, you know what to do. They love to come and talk to your sessions and do trainings and they love to help churches. Yeah. And so immediately on on a practical level, just start reaching out to experts. And just it's okay to say, I don't know what I'm doing. I really don't. And I'm not equipped to handle this. So could you handle this for me? You don't have to bear that burden. And so, you know, I just, I get, you know, because our story did get such public attention. And I do regularly get, you know, calls from pastors saying, I'm in this situation in this situation. And I'm like, I always say, Man, why are you trying to figure this out? Like, there are people who know how to do this, you know, just reach out to them, and they are glad to help. So, practically, get it out of the internal and get it to the experts externally, who are ready and willing to help.

Eric Schumacher 40:41

I want to just echo that the first time I ever called child protection services to report a possible abuse. You know, I was scared, and I was nervous. I didn't know what I was doing. And they were super helpful. You know, they, they, they told me what information they wanted from me, you know, took down all the information that I had, there was other information they asked about, and assured me that it was confidential, and then even sent me a letter in the mail to follow up to say, here's what's happened with this investigation. That's what they're there for.

Robert Cunningham 41:27

Exactly. Exactly. So they're there, there are people out there that that are able to help So reach out to them again. So practically, that's the number one thing I mean, it's just, I could I could take you through all the things we did, but all of them are going to end up in some capacity being we got help from somebody that knew. Theologically, or, you know, biblically, what would I say? to the, to the person who's to the pastor is scared to do this? And it is scary, and fears, the criticism fears, the cost, all that bad news and good news, bad news, is it it will bear cost. And it'll be different. You know, I mean, obviously, there's financial costs for us, but reputation costs, time costs, energy costs, sleepless nights cost.. the bad news is it will cost you the good news is that, that Jesus won't forget what you've done for the least of these that that, um, you know, it's interesting that when Jesus takes us to the judgment throne, which is, which is that moment that we all, you know, we all wonder about fear and whatnot. He is very clear, look, how were you towards the the least? How were you? And, and, and he'd, and what's, what's interesting about that scenario, is that people have forgotten what they had done. And Jesus reminded them, you did this, you did this, you did this. And when you're doing that, you're doing that for me. And so, yes, it's a cost, yes, it'll hurt. It'll hurt you. It'll hurt your church. It's a cross to bear, but Jesus won't forget what you've done for the least. And, and he will remember it and he will honor it. And he will say, I'm proud of you. And and and when you care for the hurting, when you care for the vulnerable. You are in a very real practical way you are caring for Lord Jesus Himself.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 43:42

Yes.

Eric Schumacher 43:42

That's good. I think of Paul's comment, you know, when he's writing to Timothy, and he says, everyone abandon me, but the Lord, the Lord stood by me, and then that will be just as true in this situation. You know, another fear that I think pastors and churches might face is- a question and a fear. The question is, how do I know when an allegation is credible? And needs to be acted upon? Do we as an elder board need to investigate this first and then decide it's credible and call the the authorities? And then the other is, if we call the authorities or we state to the congregation, or publicly credible accusations have been received against so and so, please let us know if if you have any further information, we might, we might have lawyers beating down our door. So, so speak to that. How do you know if it's credible? And then when you speak, what's going on legally? And I know you're not a trained lawyer, you're am pastor. But are there things churches can do even to protect pastors, you know, to indemnify indemnify them, so that as they're doing their job, even in the act of reporting, they're protected. The church is going to defend them?

Robert Cunningham 45:09

Yeah, I mean, practically speaking, I think every church needs to if they're going to take, if they're going to be committed to taking abuse seriously, then yeah, they need to have it needs to be in their policies, there needs to be coverage in the policy for a situation like that to protect the pastor and protect the church. So let me go back to your original question, the allegation, first and foremost. Again, I keep coming back to this, it's just not pastor is not your job to figure out whether this is credible or not. You can have your suspicions you can have you like, like, some have come to me. And I was like, there's no doubt in my mind that that's credible. And I need to believe this person. But in every situation, once again, you don't have to bear that you don't have to try to figure out what I do with this. Is this credible or not, you are allowed to just come to people and say, "this is what has come to my attention, and I'm bringing this to you." And there are people who can wade through that. Both at your church, a plurality of leadership, like bring don't, don't bear it yourself, but also externally, the authorities, this is what's come to our attention. We don't know how credible it is or not, but we're bringing it to you. Um, when you have a credible allegation, and you do come forward, like we did in the past, and are in such in the middle of doing it again, unfortunately. Yes, there, you will, absolutely. you need to be prepared to face the threat of legal stuff you need to have, you do need to have an attorney. And there's no doubt you need to have an attorney. But it's here, and this is really important. You have to understand that attorneys that your attorney works for you. And so what an attorney is paid to, to advise you to do everything you can to protect your institution. So you are but you are allowed to tell the attorney, we are we have decided that we are going to come at it this way. Now, now we are paying you to help us do that well. So no attorney in their right mind would advise us to put out a public statement like we did last time, and like we did a couple weeks ago, no attorneys is gonna say "Great idea!" Instead, we came to our attorney and said, "This is what we are doing. We want to pay you to read the statement to make sure there's no liability here" to make sure you know, that kind of stuff. So you got to be careful with the attorney thing there. You know, because they will they will try to convince you to do what gets churches in so much trouble. But yes, you're absolutely opening yourself up to the threat. But if you if you word it rightly if you say if you just speak the facts, this is an allegation that has come to us, we viewed it as a credible allegation. Therefore, we are asking if there are any others who are out there, we want to hear from you. And we're opening an independent investigation. You know, that, that you're just stating the fact and and you're not it's when you go beyond the truth, either way, hiding it or or over it or exaggerating it. Yeah, that's when you get in trouble. So just telling the truth and stating the facts. The other thing churches need to know is that, you know, the threat of lawsuits goes both ways. So yeah, doing this perhaps opens you up to the threat of legal action. From from the one that the allegations are made against, but let me tell you, where churches and ministries and Christian college stuff get in a lot of trouble legally, is when they are scared of that, so they don't do anything and they hide it. And then

when it all comes out, it found that "Oh, you knew about this and you didn't do anything?" That's when rightfully so that's when rightfully so victims who, you know, if I'm a parent, and you know, to my last if I'm a parent, and I knew that my child was in your youth group during that time period, and then we didn't say anything, and then it all came out and then they found out you knew about this, and you didn't say anything? To me legally, that's that's a lot scarier for an institution than just than just being honest and telling the truth. But I'm not - qualification not a lawyer. This I'm speaking for somebody who's just gone through this and observations I've made.

Eric Schumacher 49:56

This advice is for entertainment purposes only.

Robert Cunningham 49:58

Exactly. Exactly. Not legal advice!

Eric Schumacher 50:01

Yes. No, we understand that and I trust our listeners do as well. I loved what you said earlier that your friend advised, you know, you can tell this story, or I can find out about it and tell it. And, and often, you know, in these situations we see of in Christian institutions and churches, if, if the facts of the story had been told, immediately and appropriately, the media wouldn't have had much to say at all. There wouldn't have been much of a story there. Because everything there is where it gets messy, and where, you know, people worry, this is gonna, this is gonna smear the reputation of the gospel where the reputation of the gospel gets smeared, is when all these facts about the cover up and the lies and the deceit and other victims.

Robert Cunningham 50:57

It's so true, like, again, I promise you, we did not we have not acted the way we've acted, in order to get public recognition. Oh, you're the church that did it right, or anything like that, that, that, that none of that. That being said, that big bag media that we fear, we've got nothing but Thanksgiving, celebrate every piece that's been written about our situation has been, this is how you do it. I, I think the public world that we're so scared of is longing for stories like this, they want to tell this story. They don't want to tell the stories that have they're so tired of Christian institutions hiding and, and cover ups and all that stuff. They, they they'll tell the story the way you handle it. And you don't have to be afraid of that.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 51:49

You know, it's so hopeless if I were someone in the media and the secular media, which of course I'm not, but it's so hopeless for them to hear this same story over and over again. And I mean, even, you know, you would say, isn't there anyone in the whole world that tells truth? And we somehow think that we are protecting Jesus' reputation? As if. We're thinking we're protecting Jesus reputation, by covering something up, instead of saying, we're throwing it up into the light because of all people, we should be the ones as particularly as Reformed people who say, "Hey, sin is here!" That's why we're here. And we're not afraid to talk about it.

Eric Schumacher 52:44

Man, Jesus already destroyed his own reputation in the way that he lives.

Robert Cunningham 52:48

Yeah, yeah, we Jesus does not need us to protect his reputation. He now now Jesus does love his glory. And guess how, guess how he gets his glory? By taking really jacked up messy situations and people and redeeming them. And so and so if there's a reputation he's into, it's that: redeeming what sin has laid waste. And if you hide the sin, if you hide the mess, which is what is our natural inclination as Christians to hide the messiness from the world, that's robbing him of the glory that he could tell a beautiful story out of this.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 53:20

Absolutely. And, you know, if we say, Oh, you know, we're the good people, you know, what's the point of the church? You know, if we pretend that we are all, you know, perfect and tidy and clean and not messy, then what's, what's the point? You know-

Robert Cunningham 53:40

I know it, and who wants to go to that church? Because, like, like, who feels like they can go to that church, you know, we've had, you know, one of the things we've noticed is that we were getting our churches, we're getting a lot of survivors of sexual abuse, that are coming to our church. And we praise God that they, they see us as a place where they're allowed to, to bring their story, and be loved in that. And no survivor of sexual abuse, wants to go to a church that's clean and perfect and, and doesn't have room for their messiness.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 54:20

Well, thank you. It's the spin. Oh, this has been wonderful. I yeah, I I'm just going to ask you one more quick question, and then we're going to be done. Again, we know that it's the grace of God that's working in you. But God uses means and you are means that God is using to speak hope to a world that's looking for some place that actually recognizes the mess we're all in and, and offers and offers an answer. So thank you for that. So I want to I want you to just take a moment now as we, as we close up and and just what's your hope for the future as you're walking through this difficult path? Pastor, what do you what are you hoping for?

Robert Cunningham 55:19

My hope? Well, first of all, my hope is - And it's it's been such an honor to be let in on the stories of so many survivors of abuse from afar who've written to me and my hope is that, that our efforts are bringing some measure of healing to those who have suffered abuse within the church, whether it be spiritual, sexual, whatever, the church is very attractive to abusers for reasons we can get into another podcast, but my hope is that that just in some small measure, our efforts are bringing some healing to their stories. And I just, you know, I say to those listening in, this is just another example that the church cannot commend herself to you, but can only commend our Savior, we will harm you, he will heal you. Please do not hold our sins against the one that we follow. He really is faithful and good. And so yeah, that that's, that's my hope to those who've been harmed. I think my greater hope to the church is that that our story is so normal that you don't have to have a podcast to discuss it. I just I don't want to be exceptional. I don't want well we don't like people. I'm thankful when people say thank you this so is so refreshing, you know, whatnot. And I'm but I'm also greived, like, why I don't want this to be exceptional. I want this to be normalized in the church and in Christian institutions. I did a after our previous investigation, I did a television interview with a local news outlet here. And she was just going on and on thanking me profusely, and I just I literally, I stopped her, I said, you know, "Thank you. but my prayer is that this is not exceptional, that this is normal." And she said, "Yeah, I know that. But you need to notice it." I said, No, I really mean that. Like, it grieves me that you're, you know, I'm at a

television station getting interviewed for doing what should just be expected of the of the Christian church, that we should just be the safest place for the vulnerable and the most intolerant place for predators like that. That should be just normalized across Christendom. It's not I think we need to admit that I think we're, I think we're making a lot of progress. And your your all's work is helping in that. But that's my dream. Is that is that this is just really? Yeah, of course. That's what church did. That's, that's what's to be expected.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 57:58

Well, thank you. Thank you for your time. We certainly appreciate it. We will continue to pray for you as you walk to another season.

Robert Cunningham 58:11

Thank you.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 58:14

Following Jesus, outside the walls, following Jesus out to Golgotha.

Robert Cunningham 58:22

Amen. There's a there's a resurrection on the other side of Golgotha, right?

Elyse Fitzpatrick 58:27

Yeah!

Robert Cunningham 58:28

Pick up the cross knowing that there's an Easter on the other side. And hey, thank you, for you all. Thanks so much for for letting me come on in. And have this discussion.

Eric Schumacher 58:37

Yeah.

Elyse Fitzpatrick 58:38

And Worthy listeners, thank you so much for being part of our podcast today. We really appreciate you being there. Again, let us remind you to share this podcast. Share this podcast with your pastor and encourage him that these things are being talked about and they're so important, and we look forward to seeing you again.