

Voices: The church, the gospel, and sexual assault

November 22, 2017

On Friday, I read a summary of the biggest news stories of the week. Unsurprisingly, it was dominated by the series of sexual assault allegations brought forward in the last week, with the most attention given to Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore.

While the wave of allegations against politicians, entertainers and other public figures is overwhelming, it demonstrates a positive change: women who have been afraid to share their stories are finally speaking out (and, to a lesser but still important degree, men too). Some victims, such as those who brought accusations against Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey, found that society has generally believed them and responded appropriately.

The women who have accused Roy Moore of sexual assault and inappropriate behavior have faced more hostility.

Our burden of proof

The accusations against Moore are significant. Nine different women have reported assault or inappropriate behavior, several of which have been corroborated by multiple witnesses.

One provided a yearbook with Moore's signature and a highly suggestible note. Multiple former police officers have corroborated that Moore was banned from a local mall for soliciting teenage girls. Moore's denials have been incomplete and inconsistent at best.

More evidence indicates Moore's wrongdoings than any of the allegations we've seen in the last month — except for Harvey Weinstein. If we claim that Roy Moore's accusers haven't met the burden of proof necessary to be believed, aren't we claiming that there's no such thing as a credible sexual assault allegation? What more would it take?

Two or more?

I've heard from many Christian leaders that the Bible provides a standard of proof that Moore's accusers haven't met. According to [Deuteronomy 19](#), two or three witnesses are needed to corroborate an accusation, and Moore's accusers haven't met that.

There are a few significant problems with this claim. First, several of Moore's accusers have, in fact, had their testimonies corroborated by other witnesses. Second, we can't take the legal code given to Israel and apply it directly to our current government. After all, we don't stone Sabbath-breakers and ban mixed-fiber clothing.

More importantly, Deuteronomy gives [entirely separate procedures](#) to the Israelites for dealing with rape and sexual assault: If the event took place somewhere where no one was around, the woman is automatically believed. The "two or three witnesses" rule didn't apply in these cases; rape and sexual assault very, very rarely take place in public.

I'm deeply concerned about the message this argument sends. If we refuse to believe women who say they have been assaulted unless there were witnesses present, we necessarily end up refusing to believe sexual assault exists because they don't typically happen in public.

The burden of proof is impossible to meet. We're telling people that the Bible prevents sexual assault from being prosecuted.

The question

Where does this leave women in the church?

The Roy Moore issue is revealing an ugly discrepancy in how the church responds to sexual abuse.

When we loudly condemn members of one party who have been accused of sexual assault but defend members of another, we're teaching our young men and women that partisan politics are more important than women's safety.

We're teaching them that, if their politics are right, their conduct doesn't matter.

What's at stake

How Christians respond to the Roy Moore charges is incredibly important.

If we dismiss the charges without any serious consideration, despite all the evidence indicating the charges are credible, we send the message that a seat in the Senate is more important to us than women's safety and a political victory matters more than justice.

Much is at stake in the way Christians respond to the accusations against Moore.

If we don't take them seriously, we send the message that the church is not a safe place for women.

If we seek justice for these crimes only when politically convenient and suppress and harass victims when it isn't, we delegitimize our message and plant the idea that we will support abusers if their party affiliation is right.

The safety of women and the credibility of the gospel we proclaim is at stake. Let's not be so quick to dismiss Moore's accusers.

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