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The Tragic Lessons of Penn State — A Call to Action

What would prevent this scandal at your school or church?



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No one thought it would end this way. Joe Paterno, the legendary head football coach at Penn State University heard of his firing by the school's board of trustees by phone last night. Just two weeks after achieving the most wins of any NCAA Division One football coach in history, Paterno was fired. His firing — a necessary action by the Penn State board of trustees — holds lessons for us all.



Almost a decade ago, a graduate assistant told Coach Paterno that an assistant coach, Jerry Sandusky, had been observed forcing a young boy into a sexual act in the school's football locker room showers. Sandusky was himself a big name in Penn State football, and he was considered a likely successor to Paterno if the head coach had retired. Sandusky also ran a non-profit organization for boys, and he brought the boys onto the Penn State campus. He continued to do so even after his own retirement from Penn State's coaching staff.

After hearing the report, Paterno informed university officials of the accusation. At that point, little or nothing seems to have happened. The scandal broke into public view last Saturday, when Sandusky was arrested and charged with 40 felony counts of sexual abuse

involving young boys. Penn State had been harboring a serial child sex abuser. Also arrested were the university's athletic director and its senior vice president of business and finance. Both were charged with failure to report the abuse and with perjury.

What about Paterno and the university's president, Graham B. Spanier? The Pennsylvania grand jury said that both men had knowledge of the 2002 first-hand report of abuse, and neither contacted the police. Furthermore, Sandusky was allowed some use of university facilities even long after this report. Paterno went back to coaching football. Spanier went back to raising money and building the school's reputation. Jerry Sandusky had every opportunity to keep on sexually abusing young boys.

When the facts became known, the firings of both Paterno and Spanier were inevitable and necessary. Both men had credible knowledge that young boys were being sexually abused, and neither did anything effective to stop it. Most crucially, neither man did what they should have done within minutes of hearing the first report — contact law enforcement immediately.

Every single coach, athletic director, and college or university president awoke this morning to a changed world. Nothing will ever be the same again. The firing of Joe Paterno will send shock waves through the entire world of higher education. A man who a day before had announced under pressure that he would retire at the end of the season was told by phone that he would never coach another game. Penn State University will forever be associated with a scandal the likes of which college athletics has, thankfully, never seen before.

But the world has not only changed for college athletics. The detonation of the Penn State scandal must shake the entire nation into a new moral awareness. Any failure to report and to stop the sexual abuse of children must be made inconceivable. The moral irresponsibility that Penn State officials demonstrated in this tragedy may well be criminal. There can be no doubt that all of these officials bear responsibility for allowing a sexual predator to continue his attacks.

What about churches, Christian institutions, and Christian schools? The Penn State disaster must serve as a warning to us as well, for we bear an even higher moral responsibility.

The moral and legal responsibility of every Christian — and especially every Christian leader and minister — must be to report any suspicion of the abuse of a child to law enforcement authorities. Christians are sometimes reluctant to do this, but this reluctance is both deadly and wrong.

Sometimes Christians are reluctant to report suspected sexual abuse because they do

not feel that they know enough about the situation. They are afraid of making a false accusation. This is the wrong instinct. We do not have the ability to conduct the kind of investigation that is needed, nor is this assigned to the church. This is the function of government as instituted by God (Romans 13). Waiting for further information allows a predator to continue and puts children at risk. This is itself an immoral act that needs to be seen for what it is.

A Christian hearing a report of sexual abuse within a church, Christian organization, or Christian school, needs to act in exactly the same manner called for if the abuse is reported in any other context. The church and Christian organizations must not become safe places for abusers. These must be safe places for children, and for all. Any report of sexual abuse must lead immediately to action. That action cannot fall short of contacting law enforcement authorities. A clear lesson of the Penn State scandal is this: Internal reporting is simply not enough.

After law enforcement authorities have been notified, the church must conduct its own work of pastoral ministry, care, and church discipline. This is the church's responsibility and charge. But these essential Christian ministries and responsibilities are not substitutes for the proper function of law enforcement authorities and the legal system. As Christians, we respect those authorities because we are commanded to do so.

There may well be further arrests in connection with the Penn State scandal. One can only imagine the lawsuits that will consume the university's time and treasury in years ahead. Christian institutions and churches looking at this scandal had better act immediately to ensure that all operate under adequate policies and guidelines. What would prevent this scandal at your school or church?

Church leaders and pastors must decide now — not later — that we will respond to any report of sexual abuse with immediate action and an immediate call to law enforcement officials. We must decide in advance what we will do, and not allow ourselves to think that we can handle such a challenge on our own. Every church and Christian institution needs a full set of policies, procedures, and accountability structures. As leaders, we must develop the right instincts for right action.

The leaders of Penn State University must have acted, or failed to have acted, out of many motivations. One may well have been to protect the image and reputation of the university. Well, we now see where that leads. A scandal reported and ended in 2002 would be horrible enough. A scandal that began there, was known by officials, and explodes almost a decade later is too horrible to contemplate.

We all need an immediate reality check. I discovered yesterday that the policy handbook of the institution I am proud to lead calls for any employee receiving a report of

child abuse, including child sexual abuse, to contact his or her supervisor with that report. That changes today. The new policy statement will direct employees receiving such a report to contact law enforcement authorities without delay. Then, after acting in the interests of the child, they should contact their supervisor.

In a real sense, the whole world changed today. We all know more than we knew before, and we are all responsible for that knowledge. The costs of acting wrongly in such a situation, or acting inadequately, are written across today's headlines and the moral conscience of the nation. The tragedy at Penn State is teaching the entire nation a lesson it dare not fail to learn.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

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