

A Theology of Safe Church

*[If] safeguarding is about process and getting things right, safeguarding becomes this thing that we do, a requirement, a duty. But what if there were a completely different way to look at it? **What if safeguarding is not being reactive, but being the church?***¹*[emphasis mine]*

This quote is taken from a survivor-led group and their paper on ‘Theology and Safeguarding’. It challenges the view that safeguarding, or ‘Safe Church’, is merely a ‘box-ticking’ exercise to make sure we are seen to be doing the right thing. It inspires us to reimagine checks, reports, training, forms, and the other practical outworkings of Safe Church as powerful expressions of gospel love. They become a way for believers to imitate Christ’s life and mission, expressed clearly throughout the Bible. This paper seeks to capture some of the biblical principles and examples that demonstrate the truth of the statement, ‘what if safeguarding is not being reactive, but being the church?’

God’s Love for All People

Right from the very first book of the Bible we see the principle that every person is created in the image of God² and that there should be an inherent care and dignity afforded to every person because of this principle. This is the basis of Safe Church and safeguarding; that all people have value to God and as such we as the church are called to demonstrate that love through the actions that we take and the things that we value.

This principle is further expressed in John 3:16-17 where God declares his love for the world, for *all people* by sending his son Jesus into the world. Safe Church seeks to love all people to the best of our abilities, as an expression of God’s love for all of humanity.

We see this focus demonstrated numerous times by Jesus in his interactions with people as well as the words that he speaks. In Matthew 7 Jesus sums up the Law and the Prophets with the quote that has become known as the ‘Golden Rule’; to “do unto others as you would have them do to you”.³ That this verse is quoted as part of the passage of scripture known as the Sermon on the Mount, a particularly practical summary of theology and its outworkings in life, is not without note. Essentially, when Jesus wants to give a clearer picture of what he believes to be the underpinning elements of the law, he points us to a guide for how to love people well.⁴

Jesus then continues this summary of what it means to be a follower of God from the Law and the Prophets with the story in Matthew 22, where a religious leader seeks to test Jesus by asking him for the greatest commandment in Scripture, to which Jesus replies, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And*

¹ Survivors Voices, “Theology and Safeguarding: Trauma, justice, forgiveness, wholeness, experience and calling”, <https://survivorsvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Theology-for-safeguarding-paper.pdf>, accessed 13 August 2024

² Genesis 1:27 (NIV)

³ Matthew 7:12 (NIV)

⁴ It is also worth noting that this principle, expanded by Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan, was used as the basis for establishing the legal concept of duty of care when the idea of a responsibility to ‘our neighbour’ was used as the definition of who we are required to care for.

*the second is like it, Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*⁵

Emphasis on Protecting and Empowering the Vulnerable

This call to love and care for people, and particularly for those who are vulnerable, is not just a principle found in the New Testament. It is a theme that runs throughout the Bible and underpins many of the stories that we have read and studied in our churches. In Proverbs 31 we see the sayings of King Lemuel being recorded, identified as wise teachings that his mother has taught him in preparation for his role as King. Within this one chapter of Proverbs, we see the king (the person who holds power within the realm) being told to be mindful of their conduct, not to misuse their power over those who are oppressed or vulnerable, and then to also be the one who will “... *speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.*”⁶ This teaching from Lemuel’s mother holds particular weight when put up against the story of David and Bathsheba⁷, where the king uses his position and power to take away the rights of a vulnerable person in a terrible story of murder and rape by a man who was meant to be the example for God’s people to follow.

The responsibility that God’s people have is described in this call to protect, care for and provide for the vulnerable people in our communities and is quoted again and again throughout the Bible, including in the following verses.

Deuteronomy 10:18 “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.”

Psalms 82:3-4 “Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hands of the wicked.”

James 1:27 “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

1 Peter 5:2-3 “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve.”

Connecting the Dots

When we complete volunteer screening, we aim to prevent a situation where a vulnerable person is harmed. When we train our volunteers, we equip them to imagine what it means to love others well in the way of Jesus. When we report, we uphold the cause of those who may not be able to voice their experiences and seek justice. When we complete risk assessments and implement policies, we intentionally create environments where people can thrive.

In these ways and more, the church can be a powerful witness to God’s love in the world.

⁵ Matthew 22: 37-40 (NIV)

⁶ Proverbs 31:8 (NIV)

⁷ 2 Samuel 11-12