

APPENDIX 1: SAFEGUARDING – A BIBLICAL MANDATE

A quote of disputed origin claims that “The measure of a civilization is how it treats its weakest members.” While the source of the reference may be in doubt, the truth of the sentiment resonates the plethora of biblical calls to advocate and act on behalf of the vulnerable. The psalmist urges God’s people to, “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:3-4 ESV).

For Christians, the moral responsibility that flows from the heart of God to protect both children and adults at risk overarches government’s statutory requirements and guidance. The various safeguarding legislation within the UK nations are secular requirements that in broad terms reflect biblical principles. Such legislation provides vital frameworks within which we discharge our scriptural mandate. When it comes to safeguarding, our faith must inform our actions.

The need to protect vulnerable groups has been a constant feature of the biblical narrative almost from its inception. The Mosaic law in the Old Testament warns of the severest punishments on those who mistreat the widows, fatherless children and strangers in their midst (Exodus 22:21-22). Jesus does not mince His words when emphasising His feelings towards those who take advantage of innocence. He states, “If anyone causes one of these little ones - those who believe in me - to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” Matthew 18:6 (NIV).

Isaiah upholds compassion toward the needy as a true demonstration of sacrificial love (Isaiah 58). James echoes the prophet by pointing to our attitude toward vulnerable people as the indicator of the authenticity of our faith. He states, “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27). Jesus Himself states that such compassion for the vulnerable is the standard by which He will separate “the sheep and goats” (Matthew 25:31-46). These passages, and many more like them, show that safeguarding is at the very heart of Scripture and should be one of our primary concerns.

It is also indicative of the Lord’s heart for the vulnerable that at the moment of the greatest sacrifice of love the world has ever seen, one of the concerns uppermost in Jesus’ mind was the care of His widowed mother Mary (John 19:26-27).

Safeguarding laws and guidance offer protection of the rights of children and adults at risk to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect, with organisations and individuals working together to prevent and stop both the risks and experience of abuse or neglect. These are fundamental human rights as expressed in the Government’s Care and Support Statutory Guidance (June 2020, HM Government, Section 14.)

Sadly, despite the church’s high calling to protect the vulnerable, the scrutiny of the law and government inquiries has uncovered many shocking examples of not only a failure to prevent abuses, but also disgraceful attempts to protect the guilty by covering up violations of power. Such violations not only abuse the innocent, but also bring reproach on God’s name. According to Proverbs 14:31, “Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.” The higher the calling, the greater the responsibility. It is therefore incumbent on all within the church, especially those in positions of leadership to adhere to the highest moral and ethical standards.

The protection of children and adults at risk calls for a recognition of their inherent dignity (Genesis 1:27). Wherever possible and appropriate, we must have regard to their views, wishes, feelings and beliefs in deciding on any action, even at times respecting those with capacity to choose in their own worst interests. Even in the face of obvious suffering, Jesus did not impose His will, but respected the autonomy of the sufferer (Mark 10:51, John 5:6). Those who are vulnerable are not to be seen just as victims but as those with a voice that deserves to be heard. Therefore, safeguarding is not just something done for the vulnerable, but with them.

We must not allow any partiality in our care and be willing to explore any unconscious biases that may compromise our capacity to demonstrate the universality of Jesus love to those in need (see John 3:16, Rom. 2:11).

Placing the needs and interests of vulnerable people at the heart of our ministry ensures that safeguarding becomes an integral and essential element living out our gospel calling. The Bible charges every Christian to, “Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable” Proverbs 31:8 (CEB).