

Episode4

Tue, 5/4 8:53PM 40:45

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sovereign grace, church, abuse, people, sarah, gossip, happened, pastors, concerns, felt, untangled, meeting, spiritual, owens, truth, knew, talking, sharing, faith, jeff

SPEAKERS

Sarah O., Amy Fritz, Laura Barringer, Scot McKnight, Jeff O.



Amy Fritz 00:00

Previously, on untangled faith,



Sarah O. 00:02

what kind of example would we be of Christ and His love to send our kids back to the orphanage? Like, how can you see that?



Jeff O. 00:12

We tried to explain these kids have been traumatized by being abandoned. We can't do that to them a second time, you know, that would destroy them. And they were like, well, you either send them back or you don't have any tie with us anymore. And



Sarah O. 00:26

you're gonna cut ties, right, right now that's easy. That's well, thank you for making this an easy choice. We knew what was at the core of what we clung to. It makes it a lot easier to hold on. When you've already kind of had to boil it down to the bare basics.



Amy Fritz 00:42

God showed up for us. We saw him repeatedly do amazing things like that little girl that we wanted to adopt, and they were working too hard against us to not get. She just walked through the room 10 minutes ago, like we got her today we'll hear the rest of Sarah and Jeff's story.



Sarah O. 00:59

They were watching my social media that closely that they knew what I wasn't liking. I'm like, do you know how this works? Like what if I didn't even see the thing that you're accusing me of?



Jeff O. 01:10

They're also angry that Sarah has been reading about the court case, and like actually going like looking at the court documents to see what was actually



Sarah O. 01:20

we started talking about so what do we do now? What do we do with our story?



Amy Fritz 01:27

The sick systems it's hard to see when you it's paying your bills. This is Amy Fritz, and you're listening to Untangled Faith, a podcast for anyone who has found themselves confused or disillusioned in their faith journey. If you want to hold on to your faith, while untangling it from all the things that are not good and true, this is the place for you. Hello, and welcome to the Untangled Faith podcast. You get more of my voice today as it's just me and my guests sharing their story. Today's episode is set up a little bit different than the past several episodes. I wanted to open up today's conversation by sharing more about the characteristics of spiritual abuse. I'm not an expert so I'm sharing the work of those who are, and as always, I'll link to my sources in the show notes at untangledfaithpodcast.com. Wade Mullen states this in his book, *Something's not Right: Decoding the Hidden Tactics of Abuse and Freeing yourself From its Power*. :If you're like me, you may hear the word abuse and think as I did of physical or sexual harm done to another person. But the truth is the term abuse is appropriate to far more situations than those. When someone treats you as an object they are willing to harm for their own benefit. Abuse has occurred and that person has become an abuser," Ken Blue defines spiritual abuse this way. "Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that

authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower. Thus causing spiritual wounds." And at the risk of sounding like a college class on spiritual abuse, I need to add one more resource from the book Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse by Dr. Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys. These are the key characteristics of spiritual abuse. The first portion of that outlines coercion and control and that looks like manipulation, pressure and exploitation, expectation of excessive commitment and conformity, enforced accountability, censorship. Under censorship, we're going to see an inability to ask questions inability to disagree, inability to raise concerns inability to discuss the topic of spiritual abuse both individually and collectively. Also under coercion and control, we see a requirement for obedience, fear, isolation and rejection, public shaming and humiliation. And here are the specific spiritual aspects of abuse. Use of Scripture to coerce and control. Use of divine calling to coerce. Use of God's name or suggested will to coerce and threats of spiritual consequences. Let's see how many of these signs of spiritual abuse we can see as we drop back in to Sarah and Jeff Owens story. When we last left the Owens they had returned to Bethlehem Baptist when they came back from China. Later, they attended a church planted by Bethlehem- Jubilee. They loved their time there. But Sarah explained to me that at a certain point with all the driving back and forth, they just didn't feel like they were close enough to fully dive into community there. They decided it was time to find a church closer to their home.



Sarah O. 04:51

The pastor at Sovereign Grace and his wife had been pretty instrumental for us in adopting our son because they had also adopted a little boy From Russia, ultimately, we knew this pastor from that and decided, you know, this church is only like 10 minutes away. So we visited the church and really felt like God met us there. There was another family that we had been friends with forever that also had been living in China kind of the same time we had been, but in a different part where they had kids of the same age as ours. And we knew that they were back in the States, but we hadn't come across them yet. And the first Sunday that we visited the Sovereign Grace church, they were there, and they were visiting it. It just, it really did feel like initially when we went there that there was a lot of God drawing us there. I think God really did draw us there. I just think his intention for us there was different than we thought.



Amy Fritz 05:50

Nathan, I have had similar conversations. Maybe there's a reason why you were supposed to be there.



Sarah O. 05:58

Yeah, I remember sitting in there, like, you know, so you want to join this church class, or I don't remember what it was called. And we were in this class with our friends, we really loved these people had always kind of wanted to be in a phase of life where we could like do life with them, but just had never really imagined it. And so I remember sitting in this class with them at this little church and thinking, God, what are you doing? I really felt like the Holy Spirit said to me, in that moment, just watch me, okay. It wasn't like a clue. Like, I'm gonna do something amazing, you know, but like, just watch and see what I'm what I'm going to do here. And it was definitely was not anything like we imagined. What he did do was nothing like with that, but he was not wrong. In some ways, I kind of got the same deja vu feeling and kept hearing about like all these people that had left and like culture of like secrecy over a lot of people leaving.



Jeff O. 06:56

Yeah, we kept hearing stories about they're basically having been a church split half the church left, and who knows where they all wound up.



Sarah O. 07:05

Nobody would really talk about it. Yeah.



Jeff O. 07:07

It was very Hush Hush. And if you did ask questions, it was it was gossip.



Amy Fritz 07:13

You can probably guess where this is headed. But I do want to point out a couple things. First of all, if someone has some early positive experiences somewhere, it can make it really difficult to see red flags later on. But their previous experience in China and with their previous church, set them up to recognize unhealthy systems. So they may have had a little bit of an advantage here in recognizing this red flag. On Episode Three, Nathan and I had a great conversation about gossip. As a reminder, defining gossip in a way that prevents clarity and tips the power dynamic toward an already powerful organization is not healthy. Sarah and Jeff were looking for clarity regarding why so many had left. And they were having a difficult time finding it. One big issue this church was dealing with was that there was a significant rift between this church and another local church.



Sarah O. 08:08

There have been some other things that had happened, good things, and also difficult things. There was another situation that had happened with there was a family at Bethlehem who did daycare for a family that was at Sovereign Grace. During one of the days where he was at this family from Bethlehem's house, he had a seizure and was taken to the hospital. Anyway, they ended up accusing this lady from Bethlehem of abusing him that he had had like a massive brain hemorrhage, like he didn't have any bruising, there was no they didn't know what they couldn't come up with what had happened to him. And so I mean, it went to court, there was this big trial. And I knew this lady I couldn't have imagined in a million years, her harming anyone also I knew the family at Sovereign Grace and just really felt like churches need to work together to help. This is a court case that really it was like the state was taking her to court. And it was the state that was holding the trial, not not the family themselves. It was a really tense situation. And I felt like I was being watched because people knew that I knew this other lady, too. I went to the trial. I went to the hearings, the I was there. At that point the pastoral staff was hostile towards me. I had asked for meeting with them just so that they knew you know, the the work that I had done to like try to help this lady and and really the goal was to like see restoration between these two families that had happened and then Jeff had written a letter or like a list of concerns. Like this is what the Bible says about how we how churches should, you know, work with each other in these kinds of situations. I'm just concerned that this is not happening. And so he wrote to the pastors this list of concerns.



Amy Fritz 09:57

Healthy leaders are willing to have awkward conversations they welcome questions and concerns. That's not the response Jeff experienced. if you're keeping track at home, you can draw a big x through the censorship square on your spiritual abuse bingo card.



Sarah O. 10:14

Yeah, they were pretty hostile. Like, don't talk to us about this. And



Jeff O. 10:16

yeah, they basically said, like, you shouldn't be concerned about this. And the general tone was, keep your nose out of this and stop talking about it. I emailed them back and said, because of your response, I am concerned. And here are the things I'm now concerned about, like he



Sarah O. 10:32

listed scriptures we had asked for a meeting with all of them, like the meeting that I had, had had earlier with them didn't include the head pastor, he's the one who had been our friend before. He wasn't at that meeting. And so we had asked that he be at this next meeting, anyway, so we met with them and they basically asked us to leave the church. We refused. Because we said we can, we can disagree and still fellowship together like we don't all have to be on the same page.



Jeff O. 11:00

They kept saying, I don't see how you can stay here. And you know, continue to be under the leadership of people that you disagree with so strongly. I said, We don't disagree with you on, you know, biblically scriptural matters. We still love the church, and you know, the direction that we feel like the church is going. We disagree with you on how you're handling this situation. That doesn't mean we're at odds with you. But what what



Sarah O. 11:28

happened at that meeting was they said that Jeff's list of concerns were a list of accusations. Okay. And then they said, Sarah, you are very loud about this on social media. I was like, I haven't said a thing about it on social media, because I value relationships with both families. Then this is the head pastor talking. He said, "it's not so much what you say. It's what you don't say, it's not what you like. It's what you like, and what you don't like," I'm loud with what I wasn't saying. And I was allowed by things that I liked, or things that I didn't like. They were watching my social media that closely, that they knew what I wasn't liking. I'm like, do you know how this works? Like, what if I didn't even see the thing that you're accusing me of not liking? So there was there was there was a level of paranoia there on their end that was, that was a whole new ballgame.



Amy Fritz 12:21

Did you think, "I bet they'll receive this Okay." What did you think? What happened?



Jeff O. 12:26

The first email? Yeah, I thought just kind of saying, Hey, here's some thoughts we have about how we should partner with the church. And

S

Sarah O. 12:34

this was the church that they had come from. This church, right, they were a plant from that church.

J

Jeff O. 12:38

It's not like we don't have a relationship with them already. You know, you know, like all the pastors and everything there. This is a difficult situation, let's come together, at least to pray together and, and ask God for wisdom on what to do.

S

Sarah O. 12:51

And there had been a lot of lies and like not telling people things that other people were saying. This is important. This is legally important. Like this is a court case. You cannot withhold information from someone. Where it may not have affected the outcome of the trial, but it would affect the outcome of the heart. You know, that like this lady was praying and trying to get in contact with them. And she was calling you and you were, you were not passing the messages on. She's trying to follow protocol. You are not passing the messages on, you know, the parents of this kid thought for sure this lady's guilty in one respect, because she never tried to contact us after it happened. Well, she even showed up at the hospital and was turned away. But she's not getting this information. So our concern was like pastorally, you need to be trying to do whatever you can to let brotherly love

J

Jeff O. 13:46

grow here, when they responded to strongly and basically said, like, we don't need to meet and we won't meet and all this. That's when I then wrote down and messaged, I think I even had my dad or somebody read the list of concerns I had, And I said, I want to make sure I'm not speaking out of turn here that I'm being respectful and these are valid. And it was really disconcerting, because during the meeting went in thinking like, you know, okay, this probably isn't gonna be the most pleasant meeting in the world. But as long as they can hear what's on our heart, how can they be upset about that? Their response was just disturbing, just flat out rejected the thought of trying to do anything, bring churches together, bring the families together, even the thought of it, they just outright rejected it. They were angry. They're like, "we don't need to look at this list of concerns. Let's just set that all aside." And then later, they're like, "let's look at this list of concerns. It's actually accusations and because let's be honest, that's what it really is." And they're also angry that Sarah had been reading about the court case, looking at the court documents to see like what was actually being said and doing research



Sarah O. 13:59

the way that they responded to to us, I think was spiritually abusive. But that wasn't the mindset that we had at the time, right. And we're not going to be bullied out of the church because they wanted us to leave. We still thought we had good relationships there and we wanted them to know we're on your side, we would not be faithful Christians if we didn't bring our concerns to you. We're going to be faithful to God's word. We have to tell you, we're concerned about this because it doesn't look to us like you are responding as you should be as a shepherd.



Amy Fritz 15:33

In 2018, the trial of Larry Nassar and Rachel Denhollanders later interview with Christianity Today about her testimony in that trial got Sarah's attention, Rachel mentioned losing her church home because she raised concerns about the handling of abuse allegations by CJ MAHANEY and other leaders in the Sovereign Grace ministries church movement. Since the Owens church was part of the Sovereign Grace network, it raised questions for Sarah, I



Sarah O. 15:59

was very encouraged by her witness and what she was willing to do and say, but then when she said that piece about Sovereign Grace, I thought, okay, we need to back up and see what is happening here. Another woman in our huddle group had and she asked, "Do you know anything about what had happened with Sovereign Grace?" and they were newer to Sovereign Grace than we were and so I really don't know this is one of the pastors told us: " CJ MAHANEY, they should have he should have been like more staunchly defending himself back then. We should have all been louder about it to like, defend him. We didn't." And anyway, so that's all we knew. And we didn't look into it anymore. When this came out, my friend said, " I think we need to look into this more because this something doesn't sit right here it with me about this." Both she and I started just doing some research, we found all the original court documents of the case that had been filed against Sovereign Grace and all of the like the one that they had said, got thrown out of court because they were unsubstantiated claims. Well, it got thrown out of court because the time had passed. The judge actually said in writing that there are very substantial claims here that if this had been filed was in the time statute limitations, this would definitely be going to court. That's not what anyone had ever said. That was not what was public knowledge. And so the court documents are online, anybody can download them and read them. All of the the actual abuse that had happened is documented. Grant Lehman, he testified in Nathan Morales trial that CJ MAHANEY knew about the abuse

that all the pastors knew what was happening. Like he said this. It's recorded, but he didn't, he's still staunchly denies that had happened. I was just shocked to read all this stuff very easily. We've been lied to.



Jeff O. 17:49

We have been lied to because we had asked, and the response had been, "oh, there was an investigation done. And you know, basically, they found that there was everything was handled properly. And so you know, CJ MAHANEY and everyone was totally cleared." You know, that was not true.



Sarah O. 18:06

Just Jeff and I were talking about this. We weren't blasting it out. We weren't talking on social media. We weren't Sovereign Grace's denomination wrote a response to Rachael Denhollander, which when we read it, we were horrified might be too strong of a word. There is something really wrong with the way they're responding to her. So we wrote to our pastors, our concerns about the way Sovereign Grace was responding, and we said, like, we're not concerned about our church. We're concerned about how Sovereign Grace as a denomination is responding to Rachel DenHollander.



Amy Fritz 18:44

Based on all that Sarah had seen in the court documents and the response from Sovereign Grace, Sarah and Jeff decided to raise their concerns with their church leadership. They were hoping their local church could help encourage the Sovereign Grace leaders to do an independent investigation,



Jeff O. 18:59

Really encouraging them, can you encourage the denominational leaders to pursue doing an independent investigation? Because you know, if there's nothing to these accusations, let's live in the light. And let's get everything out in the open. For people who are coming out of a background of any kind of abuse, they're going to stay away from Sovereign Grace because there's a cloud over us. And if there's nothing to that cloud, then let's look why would we want to not walk in the light?



Amy Fritz 19:27

The Owens' received a response within 30 minutes. The leadership agreed they needed to meet.



Sarah O. 19:34

We hadn't picked a time to meet yet. I get another email, saying that my huddle group like that I was hosting was being shut down. And then I was removed from the huddle group leadership page. It had come to their attention that I had been "sharing my opinion about this case," that's an exact quote. So because of that, I was not qualified for leadership until we could meet and talk about it. And so they were shutting my group down so that I would stop sharing my opinion. But But the thing about it was was that it wasn't even true. I think the only opinion that I had ever expressed outside of just like Jeff and I talking about it was that we believe a third party investigation should be done. We didn't even have an opinion about whether CJ Mahaney was guilty of the accusations or not.



Jeff O. 20:24

We had said that in our email,



Sarah O. 20:25

one of the things that we had said to them was the truth says, examine me. And this was a friend of ours, who was a police detective for 20 years like that. That was what he would say the truth says, examine me, right. So like, if we're refusing to be examined, what is that saying about the truth? Why would like that isn't true. And if you thought that I was doing something that was so sinful, that involves shutting down a group without even talking to me, like you should at least talk to me about it first. Like without saying. You would think that you would have the decency to come talk to me. At least a phone conversation, not just like a random email from the system saying, like, you're locked out, your group shut down. So then we told them, "okay, well, guys, like I feel like you have sinned against me.



Amy Fritz 21:12

The church leaders resistance to Jeff and Sarah's concerns was a sign of one of the most common hallmarks of an abusive institution. They were choosing to protect the institution, over allowing scrutiny that was simply looking for the truth. Jeff, and Sarah felt like it was time to bring in a third party to this conversation. So you



Sarah O. 21:34

following the guidelines we were trying to? And they said, "No." And so he even Went, went and talked to them about it. And they said, "No," they don't they do not believe that this situation qualifies for that. They did not want him to be there. We've been down that road with you before. You know, we know what these meetings are like, I am not doing that without somebody else. Somebody else's ears



Jeff O. 21:55

they called me while I was at work, when they couldn't answer. I was on meetings, and there was no way I can answer my phone. They left me this message, "why can't he just basically put all this aside." And so then I called him back in the evening. And it went to his voicemail. And though I just did what I had done before, when we had met with him, which is just share my heart and and pled with him to say, "look, we please listen to what I'm saying. And you please see how this is wrong and hurtful in the way that you've treated my wife and you're treating us. You know, please understand why we're saying what we're saying to you. You know, we're not angry at you. We're not, you know, trying to cause trouble. We're just trying to get you to hear where we're coming from and see the hurt that you've caused. And I think you said on that phone conversation. Yeah, we wanted to see the church walking in the light being the church being what the church is supposed to be. And so we were committed to staying as long as we could, kind of as long as we felt like God was saying, "stay."



Sarah O. 23:01

We didn't want to be quick to leave. We don't want to be people like that, you know, they have one problem with the church and then they just leave. Like, we didn't want to be those people. We want to try to work through it. But at that point, we're like, there's nothing else we can do. We just have to leave. And I remember one of the hardest things was our little boy Jack, who has dwarfism. He was saying, "I don't want to go to another church where they don't know me," Life for him is already more difficult. He already has a very visible difference. And he felt known in that place like he felt accepted and for who he was, and like, "I have to go somewhere else. And like, people aren't going to know me." I mean, that just that just ripped me up. So devastating for me just to see for them the devastation of like having to leave a place for you know, not just a practical reason, like we live too far away. Right? Like, yeah, if you could have stayed, you would have. Yeah,



Amy Fritz 23:56

yeah. A few days later, the Owens decided to send a letter to some of their youth leaders, and also to their friends who had been in their original small group. They didn't want to leave people wondering why they had left. They have learned from their previous experience in China, how helpful it was to be clear,

 Sarah O. 24:14

and just saying, "We wrote the pastors an email with our concerns about their response to Rachel Dehollander. This was here's the email that we sent them. We want you to see this as well. These were our concerns. They responded by asking for a meeting we agreed to meet. Then they shut down my Huddle Group. They removed me from the system with no reason. When we asked them when you know, they didn't say anything to me about it. Then when we asked him about it, they said I had been sharing my opinion. That was untrue. I had not been sharing my opinion. And then they would not meet with the third party with us to talk about this. And so, we felt like at the end, we just have to leave. We just can't stay with when this is the situation. But we just want you to know that we love you We we're sad to have to leave but we just feel like at this point, there's really nothing else we can do. My daughter, who had gotten married during that time, still was on the church mailing list. And I mean, it was probably like 10 minutes after we sent that email, they sent an email to the entire congregation saying, "You may or may not have received a email from the Owens with, you know, the sole intent of creating disunity in the church. And so we need to have a family meeting on Sunday after church."

 Amy Fritz 25:26

Notice the reaction that leaders had to the Owens simply sharing why they were leaving. A healthy institution with nothing to hide, doesn't fear the truth. They have no need or inclination to malign those who leave and share their reasons for doing so.

 Sarah O. 25:42

They had this big family meeting, and our daughter recorded it

 Amy Fritz 25:47

Don't you just love the Owens family.?Of course, they would have a justice minded daughter who records the meeting. Their young adult son also went to go to the meeting. But he was stopped at the door by his youth pastor. This youth pastor said, you don't belong here.



Jeff O. 26:05

So then that guy just turned around says, "You don't belong here." Yeah, it was just like, that was devastating to him. Wow. You know, I thought you were the one who really cared about me. Now you're telling me, I don't belong here.



Sarah O. 26:18

So at the meeting, they told blatant lies. It was shocking. I could not believe what I was hearing. They were saying that I have this plan to like make my huddled group a conspiracy against them. Something else that we had we had found about or heard about earlier in the week that pastor was calling other members of the church people that were in our small group and asking them to speak against us at the meeting, including our son in law's family.



Amy Fritz 26:45

They were recruiting people.



Jeff O. 26:47

Yeah, so we got calls from a couple people in our small group like saying what is happening? And so I just told them, "Here's what's happening."



Sarah O. 26:54

I had never seen such a blatant protection of the system, right? Like, and even then I didn't like have the language. The whole spiritual abuse explosion hadn't happened yet,



Amy Fritz 27:07

right. Like, there is a lot going on here. I'm going to draw your attention to just a couple of red flags that are waving prominently. First of all, Wade Mullen has this to say, "These are dismantling tactics. Dismantling tactics are most clearly attempts to control a targeted person to actions involving intimidation, humiliation, and outright violence to reduce feelings of fear and shame. Mullen also says this, abusers will seek to dismantle your connection to supportive relationships, institutions and sources of understanding and their attempts to isolate you. We see a clear example here in the meetings and the recruiting of friends to speak against the Owen's. These are all part of the isolation tactics straight from the spiritual abuse handbook. That year happened to coincide with the MLK 50

conference held to reflect on the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's death. The Owens had bought tickets long before their church drama situation imploded. This conference came at just the right time.



Sarah O. 28:15

It was really impactful for us at that time in our life, to see just people that are willing to stand up and speak out about things that are important in the church and suffering for it. Russell Moore's sermon about how you know, he was a prophet, and everyone loves him now, but they hated him then just like Jesus, you know, like they hated Jesus, and they hated the prophet and that I'll never forget that message. As long as I live. I mean, in just the assurance God gave us through that conference that we did the right thing, you know, that we were that we were in the right place. And we saw every pastor that we had ever had in our life, was at that conference, except for there's no no Sovereign Grace people at all. But like our college pastors, were there all the Bethlehem pastors were there. The Jubilee pastors were there. But it was like assuring I think, for us at that time of our hearts, like, we've had, we've had good pastors, We've had people who like care about what matters. They're here right. You know, it ministered to our hearts> Everything feels like your foundation feels like it's totally crumbling. And so to be able to, it was just a reminder that no, you come from a solid foundation. You come from a place where people who really do love God and care about other people. And that's what your foundation in the church was built on. We would just like see these guys and they will just like, come over to us and love on. We're so glad to see you. We missed you.



Amy Fritz 29:44

They shared with me some of the best advice for people walking through confusing church hurt: talk to someone outside of the situation.



Sarah O. 29:53

And then we met Kyle Howard. During this we had we had known him already just through Twitter and some of the things that he had published. We had like, contacted him and just asked for his help. So we had had a couple like sessions with him before this just to like for clarity like, like, what you when you start going through these things you think, Oh, am I crazy?



Jeff O. 30:11

We were really looking for someone who was completely out of the community. But that didn't

 Sarah O. 30:17
even really like know us or our history or that, but

 Jeff O. 30:21
that would understand the dynamics of Kyle was amazing for that. Absolutely.

 Sarah O. 30:26
Yeah. It really helped to give us a solid footing just to know, okay, we're doing the right thing. We're on the right track. This is hard. But we know that we're doing what we're supposed to be doing. With with Kyle, I think the affirming thing was we just sent him some of these like back and forth messages. And he said, "You guys something is really wrong with your pastor, "right? Like "this is not shepherding. This is not a pastoral response." And like just to have someone say that to you, when you're going through that to like to just help see, okay, I'm not I'm really not crazy. And

 Jeff O. 30:58
he was able to kind of say, "When you said this, and they respond to it in this way, that's not a normal response. That's not it's not the way that someone who is loving and looking for you to minister to your heart is going to respond."

 Amy Fritz 31:12
After the conference, Jeff and Sarah started talking about what God might have next for them

 Sarah O. 31:17
On the drive back we started talking about so what do we do now? What do we do with our story? And so we felt like we need to share, people need to hear what happened to us. We don't know if there's any truth to these claims about CJ MAHANEY, but we do know what happened to us. When we tried to raise questions. People need to know this.



Amy Fritz 31:39

I'm going to quote Wade Mullen, and again, here's what he said. "It is okay and even ethical to bring dark secrets into the light, provided the goal of exposure isn't to shame the abuser just for the sake of condemnation, but to expose them as an act of mercy for the abusers, future health, and for the protection of others." Jeff and Sarah were warned that they would face some resistance if they told their story. They really had no idea how it would be received.



Sarah O. 32:08

Yeah, I mean, we got some pretty heavy backlash. But honestly, I feel I felt like more supported after we told our story. There were some really bad moments after that. But the vast majority of what happened to that was like solidarity. All of a sudden, 10s of people called messaged that had left the church that we like before us that we didn't know why they had left, or that had left before we even came. I mean, out of the woodwork. Everyone was sharing their stories of what had happened.



Jeff O. 32:38

It's the systemic part of it is you know, they ingrained in you that if you say anything, you're gossiping, and that is "the Bible says do not gossip." And it's like I am not gossiping. When I'm telling the truth about my story, what was done that is not gossip. That is the truth. That is that is the story.



Sarah O. 32:58

and over the mantra that I just tell everyone that comes to me is "Your story is never gossip. Telling somebody what happened to you is never gossip, even if it involves other people. This is your story. This is what somebody else did to you that isn't gossip."



Jeff O. 33:15

In the time we are at Sovereign Grace, being surprised at how often the pastor's talked about gossip. It stood out to me even before I knew anything was wrong. I was like, I've never been to a church where the pastor has talked about gossip this much. I knew that there had been like the church split, and I was like, maybe they're just on edge. But I was like, but that happened years ago. Now I know. It was because it was all just a policing method to keep anyone from saying anything. These people who had left the church are still so terrified of gossiping.



Sarah O. 33:48

The thing that has been most beneficial for me and telling my story is everybody knows the truth. Now, regardless of what they want to do with it, you know what happened, what I said, what I didn't say, what somebody else did, what they didn't. You can't weaponize it against me anymore. These are the facts. Telling the truth clearly is just freeing for everyone. It doesn't bother me if you're saying if you're saying that I'm slandering and gossiping, I know I'm not. I have confidence that telling my story was the right thing to do to help other people. And one of the things we even said in our in our statement or whatever, when we're telling our story, it was that part of why we're doing this is for the sake of our pastors at this at Sovereign Grace, because it would be ungodly for them to be allowed to continue this kind of behavior in the dark. Like if we care about them, we're going to expose them for their own sake so that they cannot continue to treat people like this behind the scenes like it's not behind the scenes anymore for their own sake. It just needs to be known.



Amy Fritz 34:52

That you know if someone were to say to you, Sarah, why are you talking about this? You're just making the church look bad.



Sarah O. 35:01

I can't, like we can't make Christ look bad, we can only make ourselves look bad. It's like Jesus went through the temple and turned over the tables and threw out the money changers. He was angry. And that, I think, is what is happening right now in church culture. You know, Jesus was so angry at the Pharisees, and he was so angry at what had happened. They had turned it into a den of thieves, I feel like that is so much what is happening in the American church. It has been turned into a den of thieves. I mean, it's it's rampant.



Jeff O. 35:37

You look at the example of Jesus. And, you know, when he encountered sinners who were repentant and contrite of heart, he tended to meet with them person to person. The Samaritan woman, the woman who was caught in adultery, and you know, it was very personal and almost a private interaction. But with the the spiritual leaders, he was very public in calling them out, and he didn't pull any punches on it. No, we're not Jesus, we were not can't do things the same way he did. But I think from that example, for us to publicly say, "We are seeing this, this happen, this should not be hidden." If we are, if we're

going to be the light and the salt of the world. We can't hide. The light needs to shine and expose the darkness and the salt needs to purify. Otherwise, the salt will lose its saltiness and the light will be hidden.



Sarah O. 36:40

This spiritual abuse has caused us to really tear apart our faith down to the very, very roots of what do we really believe? Who is God, really how much of this is just hypocrisy, Pharisaical, building your house on the sand



Amy Fritz 36:57

We could have spent so much more time talking about this. But we did briefly touch on the fact that it is really, really hard to see when things are broken when you're in the middle of it, especially when you're benefiting from that in some way. We just can't our subconscious says to us, we can't afford to see it. Depending on what you're going on your what's going on in your life. The sick systems, it's hard to see when you when it's paying your bills, you know, like if your husband's a pastor. To believe the truth means it costs you a lot. When I first emailed Sarah, I asked her this question. I wanted to know what her hope was for the church.



Sarah O. 37:40

You know, I've been thinking a lot about that the last couple of weeks. And I think really my hope for the church is that anything that is not holy or off God would just burn to the ground. You know that if that means most visible aspects of the church are destroyed in order to purify it and make it what it was always meant to be, then so be it. God does not ever want sin to be hidden for the sake of His name. That is not for the sake of His name. You know, Satan is the author of lies. Satan is the author of confusion. Satan is the one one who wants things to be hidden. This presence of God brings in light and exposes. Anything hidden? That's not of God.



Amy Fritz 38:28

Each week as I work on my podcast, I try to keep in mind the different groups of people who are listening. The first group is made up of people looking to make sense of a painful season. The second group is made up of people curious about this topic, but not stuck in the weeds of it. I'll wrap up this episode with a word to the second group, Wade Mullen notes that "abuse is not someone else's personal and private matter. It's a community

concern. He says, we need to ask ourselves, in what ways Am I perpetuating an abusive culture? Through my silence or tacit endorsement of those who are in the wrong, there is no remaining neutral. Bystanders must take sides, either to be active supporters of the wounded, or to actively turn their backs. There's only deception and truth. People who choose to remain neutral are giving safe passage to lies." Today, I am grateful for the brave wounded resisters who have refused to remain neutral. I have watched in amazement, as so many men and women have chosen integrity over comfort. They chose truth over a paycheck or position, and those decisions pushed over dominoes that continue to fall. Thanks for listening to Episode Four of Untangled Faith. If you enjoyed this episode, I would be so grateful if you would share it with a friend and leave a review on iTunes. You can also find me on Instagram and Facebook as untangled faith. For transcripts and show notes, check out untangledfaithpodcast.com. On the next episode of Untangled Faith,



Laura Barringer 40:15

Pastors with platforms were silent. That's when I encourage my dad to write because nobody else was saying anything and we needed to hear from a theologian.



Scot McKnight 40:27

I was asked by two or three of the women involved in the Willow story, "Why are Christian leaders not speaking up?" This was the question asked.