

On behalf of the voiceless

A theology of safeguarding

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Contents

Part 1: Towards a theology of safeguarding	p3
Part 2: A theology of safeguarding	p6
The Mandate	p8
The Motivation	p10
The Mission	p12
Conclusion	p14
References	p15



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“ Christians in all organisations must be attentive to what the Bible has to say about safeguarding in our different areas of work and ministry if we are going to be faithful and effective. I am excited that thirtyone:eight are seeking to ground their vital work on biblical principles. ”

Dr Krish Kandiah

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Part 1:

Towards a theology of safeguarding



“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)

Safeguarding must never become synonymous with an obligatory bureaucratic tick-box exercise. Theology must never be perceived as a dusty, irrelevant pastime. If these unhelpful stereotypes are accepted, then a theology of safeguarding risks becoming detached from reality and irrelevant to our day-to-day lives.

Theology is as vital to the church as a compass is to sailors in a storm. Safeguarding is the true north of all the helpful service the church has to offer. Together they must set the direction of all Christian ministry: grounding it with a mandate, a motivation and a mission.

Scripture tells us that in order to stay true to its divinely directed course, the church needs the word-based ministry of apostles, teachers, pastors, prophets and evangelists (Ephesians 4:9-15). Amidst the storms of distraction and winds of unhelpful trends and fads, the church charts its way forward first and foremost by holding on to the word of God, rightly understood and properly applied through vitally relevant theological reflection, discernment and insight.

Woven throughout Christian Scripture the Holy Trinity commends to God’s people a trinity of God’s special concern: widows, orphans and strangers. There are more direct and indirect references to helping these vulnerable groups than there are to tithing, communion and baptism. In fact, there are over 2,000 references to matters of justice and injustice in the Bible; of which the principles of safeguarding are included. Care for those in distress is included in the Mosaic law in the Old Testament (Exodus 22:21-22), and in the New Testament becomes the definition of authentic religion (James 1.27). Genuine fasting involves sharing food with the hungry and acceptable worship has to include providing shelter for the wanderer (Isaiah 58). Even more starkly, in Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats, hospitality towards the vulnerable is the signifier of being saved (Matthew 25:31-46). Even this very brief theological survey shows safeguarding to be at the very heart of Scripture.



Safeguarding children and adults and promoting their welfare is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), UK law¹ and the statutory guidance that flows from these, which describe the following:

Protection of children from maltreatment, preventing impairment of their health and development, ensuring they are living in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care and taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.²

Protecting an adult's right 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. working together to prevent and stop both the risks and experience of abuse or neglect. At the same time making sure that the adult's wellbeing is promoted including, where appropriate, having regard to their views, wishes, feelings and beliefs in deciding on any action, whilst recognising that adults sometimes have complex interpersonal relationships and may be ambivalent, unclear or unrealistic about their personal circumstances.³

The imperative that public bodies and institutions of all descriptions provide safe places for vulnerable children and adults to flourish is entirely appropriate. Sadly, there have been many situations where individuals and institutions have failed to protect the vulnerable as highlighted in recent times by the various independent, public inquiries into institutional child abuse and a range of other areas of injustice across the four nations of the UK. Abuse has been uncovered in government, in sport, in healthcare, in show business and sadly also in the church and other faith settings.

Since caring for vulnerable people is at the heart of our Scriptures, it is a disgrace that not only has the church often failed to adequately care but has also allowed abuse and neglect to take place on our watch. Jesus himself gave the sternest of warnings to those who fail to care for those who are vulnerable. It would be better for us to have a large millstone hung around our necks and to be drowned in the depths of the sea than to cause those little ones Jesus cares for to stumble (Matthew 18:6).

The church has to do everything it can to heed this warning and to remove stumbling blocks for children and other vulnerable people experiencing Christian compassion. It must engage purposefully and wholeheartedly with theology and safeguarding, ensuring they underpin all our ministry to all people and the creation of the safer places that they expect and deserve.

A robust theology of safeguarding is a gift to the church. Like an unbreakable compass in a storm, it keeps us travelling safely in the right direction without deviation or distraction.

Part 2:

A theology of safeguarding



“Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.”
Proverbs 31:8 (CEB)

Thirtyone:eight as an organisation has tied itself to the biblical command of Proverbs 31:8 to advocate and care for those who are or may be vulnerable. The mandate, the motivation and the mission of the organisation is clearly founded therefore, on the Christian faith and on Scripture.

The book of Proverbs has been designed to offer pithy aphorisms and memorable phrases to help transfer God-inspired wisdom to the reader⁴. However, there is merit in checking that this verse reflects the wider frame of chapter, book and the grand narrative of the Bible in terms of its foundation as a theology of safeguarding.

Proverbs 31:8 forms part of the advice given by a mother to her royal son at the end of the book of Proverbs. There is symmetry here, as the book of Proverbs begins with advice from a royal father to his son. This beautiful bookending *inclusio* depicts both the family and the workplace as the classroom for the passing on of wisdom, shows that both men and women are to take the lead, and identifies wisdom’s mandate, motivation and mission relating to safeguarding and the creation of safer places.

The mandate:

Every generation must play its part in caring for vulnerable people.

The motivation:

Every leader must pursue God’s purpose and priorities for vulnerable people.

The mission:

Every means must be employed to keep vulnerable people safe, heard and noticed.



The Mandate:

Every generation must play its part in caring for vulnerable people

The book of Proverbs ends as it began with wisdom being passed on from one generation⁵ to the next. This model is preserved in Scripture to authorise us to teach wisdom afresh for every generation. There are three important considerations for a theology of safeguarding based on this intergenerational mandate.



1.1 Spiritual and Familial Connections

King Lemuel's mother addresses her son as the fruit of her womb but also as the answer to her prayers. He is referred to as **my son**, but his name **Lemuel** means **belonging to God**⁶. This double parallelism is instructive. Children are both a gift of nature and of divine providence. We have both a human and a divine origin story. All human beings have important familial connections and spiritual connections.

Too often familial connections are under-valued. For example, it is not unusual for well-meaning Christians to support the unnecessary institutionalization of children in orphanages or children's villages severing their links with birth families. Sometimes youth and children's ministry pay scant attention to the priority of responsibility given to parents in the formation and wellbeing of their children. The spiritual connections can be under-valued too. Ministry to vulnerable people can often focus exclusively on practical help: providing food for the hungry, or social support for the lonely for example rather than adopting a holistic approach which includes spiritual well-being and protection from harm.

1.2 Victim/Survivor and Voice Considerations

The teacher in the Proverbs encourages her son to listen. Elsewhere in the book, children are exhorted to resist folly and pursue wisdom for themselves⁷. Children are entrusted with a role to play in discerning and pursuing wisdom and justice for themselves⁸. It is to be understood that children are not just passive receivers of education and information but active participants in transformation. Children have agency. Children's views are to be heard and respected just as much as adults.

This is an important consideration for a theology of safeguarding. Those who are vulnerable are not to be seen just as victims but as those with a voice that deserves to be heard. Victims and survivors have their own decision-making opportunities and indeed with their unique and personal experience can be effective advocates for others and pursuers of justice in their own right if empowered to do so. Safeguarding with this intergenerational understanding from Proverbs is a partnership: not something done to the vulnerable, or about them, but with them⁹. Speaking up for them and alongside them is therefore a deeply Biblical principle.

1.3 Prohibitive and Positive Concerns

King Lemuel's mother takes responsibility for instilling a concern for those who are vulnerable, oppressed and poor into her child's conscience and imagination. She offers a critique of negative behaviours but also offers positive pursuits to aspire to as a solution-focused approach to their needs.

Safeguarding policies and procedures can often be seen as negative documents listing all the things that shouldn't be done and seeking to minimise risk. This can be one of the reasons that safeguarding has negative associations in many people's minds. Proverbs, by balancing out the prohibitive and the aspirational, offers a helpful model for framing safeguarding conversations. Safeguarding is not just about ensuring people are not mistreated, but should inspire the church to engage in constructive action on their behalf to reduce vulnerability and any risks to them. We need protective factors against harm and against the negative treatment of all people, but we also need positive factors that seek to find ways to pursue justice and wellbeing for all concerned. Both aspects can have a formative influence and should be key factors in intergenerational ministry. In this we see both the need for preventative and responsive efforts towards creating safer places for all.



2

The Motivation:

Every leader must pursue God's purpose and priorities for vulnerable people

The wisdom given in Proverbs to a King challenges all leaders. The Bible's unequivocal articulation of God's concern for vulnerable people should motivate Christians to take safeguarding responsibilities very seriously, especially those who are in positions of power, influence and responsibility. There are three important implications for leadership that comes from this theology of safeguarding mandate.



2.1 The nature of leadership

King Lemuel is reminded by his mother that leadership brings with it the temptation to forget or take advantage of the vulnerable. Instead he is to use that position of power to speak up and act on behalf of those who are vulnerable. This is a common theme in the Bible's teaching on leadership: it is often explained in terms of servanthood. For example, Jesus after criticizing the way that many leaders use their power for self-aggrandisement argues that for his followers, leadership is about serving others, even to the point of laying down their lives for the sake of those they care for (Mark 10:45).

The expression of authenticity in leadership also requires that leaders have a desire to search for and achieve a deep understanding of themselves; their personal faults and challenges as well as their skills, gifts and motivations (Psalm 139:23-24). Any areas of one's character that may become negative or harmful towards others must be dealt with such that their interactions with others encourage selflessness and human flourishing for all.

2.2 The priority of leadership

King Lemuel, like the other Kings of the Old Testament were supposed to represent and emulate God. In Psalm 68, God is described in terms of his power and majesty, but this description doesn't stop there. It goes on to include his concern for the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable people: he is a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, and he sets the lonely in families. (Psalm 68:4-6). This is the model for all in positions of power: nobody is too important to care for the vulnerable¹⁰.

Godly leadership will follow God's priorities and demonstrate a commitment to pursue a duty of care for the lonely, destitute and vulnerable. Because biblical leadership calls for power to be used on behalf of those most in need, safeguarding must be a fundamental motivational factor for all Christian leaders, reflected in the way they use their time, develop their policies, treat those around them, and build their churches, organisations, businesses or communities.

2.3 The focus of leadership

King Lemuel's mother makes some stringent demands on her son. He cannot live like others around him. The temptations for a powerful man in a patriarchal society, here indulging in women and alcohol, are not appropriate for his kingly station. They would be distractions from his primary focus and calling to care for those who are vulnerable.

While safeguarding is often seen as merely a necessary administrative function, Proverbs 31:8 challenges leaders to give greater significance to its role in their lives and ministries. Placing the needs and interests of vulnerable people at the heart of our ministry and mission ensures that safeguarding becomes an integral and essential element of our wider activities rather than an add-on that can be met with a wide variation in commitment.

Keeping the focus on good safeguarding practice in ministry can enable leaders to withstand temptation, pursue God's priorities and get stuck into the business of caring for all people, especially those who are vulnerable.



3

The Mission:

Every means must be employed to keep vulnerable people safe, heard and noticed

The wisdom given throughout Proverbs is very practical and has universal application. When instructing Christians how to put faith into practice, the Bible reiterates these practical steps of caring for vulnerable people and those in distress. There are three important functional aspects of the outworking of the theology of safeguarding.



3.1 Advocacy for vulnerable people

King Lemuel is commanded to speak up for the voiceless. This theme of advocacy for the vulnerable is repeated throughout the book of Proverbs. (Proverbs 29:7. Proverbs 22:22-23. Proverbs 21:13). The destitute, vulnerable and oppressed must not be forgotten or ignored. Their cause is our cause.

Throughout the Bible, God is attentive to the cries of the poor. He heard the blood of Abel that cried out from the earth¹¹, and the cries of his people when they were in captivity¹² or exile. God commands that his people are similarly attentive to the cries of the poor. But this must lead to action. Advocacy is about giving voice to others and their concerns. One way we do this is by making good use of our opportunities and using our own voice to speak up on behalf of others. Another way is to give a platform to others, enabling and empowering their voice to be heard.

3.2 Defending the rights of vulnerable people

King Lemuel is instructed to make sure due legal processes are applied to the marginalised, oppressed and vulnerable. His position as King at the time meant he was uniquely placed to expedite this, but engagement with judicial and legal processes is available to all in a democratic society. Proverbs, like the rest of the Bible, refuses to allow for a sacred-secular divide between a leader's responsibility before God to care for the needy and to engage in civic legal processes. Therefore, engagement with legal or political processes is no less spiritual or important than other ministries. Indeed, it is imperative they go hand in hand. Where there are safeguarding policies in place in a nation there is good reason to engage with them and where these systems are not adequately protecting vulnerable people we must seek to reform them through active and purposeful engagement with policy-makers.

3.3 Dignify the destitute

King Lemuel is to speak up for and defend **all** who are vulnerable. The goal must surely be that all in our communities receive fair treatment and protection. We cannot pick and choose between people or groups of people based on our own preferences or prejudices. The Bible teaches we are to treat all with equal dignity: old and young, male and female, black and white, family and enemy¹³. We are not to distinguish between the so-called deserving and undeserving. All children, all widows, all homeless people, all those in poverty, all those without status in our country, all those with disabilities, all those victim to systemic and societal discrimination, all those who cannot feed or speak for themselves – whatever the reasons and situations for their vulnerabilities - must be safeguarded and the basis for their vulnerability understood and where necessary, actively challenged.



Conclusion

The Bible gives us a clear mandate, motivation and mission to ensure that those who are or may be vulnerable are heard, defended, and treated appropriately, effectively, fairly and compassionately. In our ministries, education, leadership, families and communities and in the attitudes and actions that underpin our systems and structures, we must speak up for them. Our theology must be worked out in best safeguarding practice for all.

Proverbs 31: 1-9

(Common English Version)

The words of King Lemuel of Massa,
which his mother taught him:

²No, my son!

No, son of my womb!

No, son of my solemn promises!

³Don't give your strength to women,
your ways to those who wipe out kings.

⁴It isn't for kings, Lemuel,
it isn't for kings to drink wine,
for rulers to crave strong drink.

⁵Otherwise, they will drink and forget the law,
and violate the rights of the needy.

⁶Give strong drink to those who are perishing
and wine to those whose hearts are bitter.

⁷Let them drink and forget their poverty
and no longer remember their toil.

⁸**Speak out on behalf of the voiceless,
and for the rights of all who are vulnerable.**

⁹Speak out in order to judge with righteousness
and to defend the needy and the poor.

References

1. UK law in this context includes the various Acts and Orders within the four nations of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, including but not limited to: Children Act 1989, Children Act 2004, Care Act 2004, Adult Support & Protection Act (Scotland) 2007, Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, Protecting Vulnerable Groups Act (Scotland) 2007, Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and the related statutory guidance that supports good practice in these areas.
2. Taken from Working Together to Safeguard Children (July 2018), HM Government. Pages 5-6
3. Taken from Care and Support Statutory Guidance (June 2020), HM Government. Section 14
4. Because the book of Proverbs is the collation of international wisdom it has a lot to offer those who do not claim Christian faith and so is especially helpful in the overlap between sacred and secular in the safeguarding sector. As Dumbrell argues "The wisdom movement directed its attention to what creation itself implied for human conduct." See Dumbrell, W. J., (1988) Faith of Israel: its expression in the books of the Old Testament, IVP, p. 228
5. For example, see Deuteronomy 6:1-3 for the parental responsibility of passing on the law to the next generation.
6. Kidner, D., (2008) Tyndale Old Testament Commentary: Proverbs, IVP
7. Proverbs 2:1-22
8. As Dunbar and Ngwa note the proverbs make "repeated appeals to the child to engage in the pursuit of Wisdom, to resist the allures of Folly, to embark on actions that ensure social justice, and that advance a particular religious and ideological stance." Dunbar, E.S., & Ngwa, K.N. (2019). Children in Proverbs, Proverbial Children. In S. Betsworth & J.F. Parker (Eds.). T&T Clark Handbook of Children in the Bible and the Biblical World (pp. 131–154). London: T&T Clark. Retrieved June 24, 2020, from <http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2094/10.5040/9780567672568.ch-007>
9. In many parts of the developing world aid and development agencies empower children and young people to play their part in child protection. See for example World Vision's work young adult child protection empowerment programme in Albania
10. Ramachandran, V., (2000) Faiths in Conflict, Downers Grove, IVP "Among Israel's neighbours, as indeed in the ancient cultures of the world... the power of the gods was channelled through the power of certain males – the priests, kings and warriors embodied divine power... But here, in Israel's rival vision, it is the 'the orphan, the widow and the stranger with whom Yahweh takes his stand. His power is exercised through history for their empowerment."
11. Genesis 4:1-10
12. Exodus 2:23-25
13. See Genesis 1:27-28 and John 3:16-17 as examples of the universality of God's love. Everyone is made in the image of God and God so loved "the world."

About us

Trusted for over 40 years, Thirtyone:eight is the UK's only award-winning independent Christian safeguarding charity which helps individuals, organisations, charities, faith and community groups to protect vulnerable people from abuse.

Our vision is a world where every child and adult can feel, and be, safe, and to achieve this vision we work together with a network of thousands of organisations across the UK helping them to create safer places.

We provide training, consultancy, DBS checks a Safeguarding Helpline, and international safeguarding support to make sure everyone is equipped and empowered with the tools they need. We are leading experts in safeguarding, working with government to inform legislation and promoting high standards in safeguarding practice.



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Creating safer places. Together.