

## Book review: Handle with Care

***Handle with Care: How Jesus Redeems the Power of Touch in Life and Ministry*, Lore Ferguson Wilbert**

**B & H Publishing Group, 272pp, 2020, £15.99 (Kindle £5.59)**

### Abusing touch

Following sexual abuse allegations against the powerful film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, actress Alyssa Milano expressed concern over the scale of the problem of sexual abuse on Twitter later that year:

If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem.

Within 24 hours, the words had been tweeted 500,000 times and more than 4.7 million different people had used the expression on Facebook. While the so-called *#MeToo* movement itself was not untainted by misuse (false accusations do happen<sup>1</sup>), it did much to open the discussion regarding sexual abuse of women (as well as men).<sup>2</sup>

With such abuse so prevalent in our world, it is no surprise that the idea of 'touch' or 'touching' has come to have negative and sexual connotations. Lore Ferguson Wilbert has written a unique book, filled with personal anecdotes, scientific facts (hugs are medically good for you), theological references and specific pastoral applications, all highlighting the necessity and power of human touch for personal, spiritual and relational wellbeing and pastoral care.

### Redeeming touch

Wilbert, a regular contributor to *The Gospel Coalition* website, notes:

In the Old Testament books of the law there is a form of one statement made thirty-eight times: 'Do not touch'.

She then goes on to helpfully contrast this with the ministry of Jesus who touches and is touched – even when the touching is, according to Jewish Law, unclean. In the current COVID-19 crisis when 'cleanness', not touching and hand-washing are almost sacred rituals, we should be reminded of Jesus' care even for the most untouchable: the diseased, lepers and the dead. His physical touch brought them healing, cleansing and raising to life.

Some of Wilbert's writing makes difficult reading; I wondered at times if sharing some of her personal stories was strictly necessary. And yet, perhaps such transparency on her part is warranted to help us understand so that God's people might grow and be built up. I think she is probably right in acknowledging,

...most of our thoughts immediately run in the direction of erotic touch when we talk about touch at all. It's as if we cannot separate good, healthy, normal, human touch from what we envision to be its most intimate case scenario – or its most perverted forms... For fear of sinful sexual touch (erotic touch outside the covenant of marriage) we limit all or most touch. Yet our bodies are very literally aching to be touched.

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<sup>1</sup> Karlyn Borysenko, 'The Dark Side Of #MeToo: What Happens When Men Are Falsely Accused', *Forbes*, 12/02/2020 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/karlynborysenko/2020/02/12/the-dark-side-of-metoo-what-happens-when-men-are-falsely-accused/#54acc996864d> (last accessed 19/06/2020).

<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, it is being recognised more that abuse is not perpetrated solely by men against women: Sylvia Ann Hewlett, '#MenToo: male victims of workplace sexual harassment share their shocking stories', *The Sunday Times*, 16/02/2020.

## Self-care

Chapter Four particularly resonates with its reminder that our bodies – which God made – matter to him and so we should take care of them, not scoffing at terms such as ‘self-care’. We are psychosomatic, holistic beings – created with mind, body and spirit in one entity. Due to the effects of the Fall, we experience hurt, pain, exhaustion and stress. It is important to take care of and be good stewards of the bodies God has given us. This need not be selfish; rather, in this we are rested and enabled to better serve others. Wilbert roots this insight in a deep appreciation of Christ’s incarnation and that our bodies are part of God’s design for us as whole beings.

## Are you touching any singles?

Having lived as a single woman to the age of 34, Wilbert helpfully comments on the needs and concerns of singles and the complications and loneliness of living with the absence of healthy touch (chapter 5). As with the rest of this volume, there is much food for thought here. For anyone who is more reserved or introverted, some of her suggestions may seem strange and perhaps intimidating, but she starts a conversation that needs to be had: do we let our sensitivities keep us from showing Christ-like care by touch? Wilbert helpfully outlines appropriate parameters for what constitutes healthy and unhealthy touch in this and other contexts.

## Get out of the comfort zone and show Christ’s love

Wilbert writes:

We abide in the truth that we are infinitely loved by God and the loving way to interact physically with any human, male or female, young or old, is to care more about the other than we do ourselves.

As such, Christians need to realise that if we are not at the forefront of defining (biblically), advocating, and providing healthy touch, people may look for, experience and be harmed by unhealthy touch. I have heard something said along the lines of, ‘Perhaps if we valued and accepted healthy non-sexual touch more we would see less of the unhealthy sexual touch so prevalent in western society’. I think there is something to this. While I think Wilbert may be overly critical of the ‘Purity Movement’ of the 90s and 2000s, I think she does have a point in highlighting its emphasis on negative prohibitions often without balancing positive affirmations of things such as healthy touch.

Ultimately, looking to Christ’s example is key in redeeming our cultural abuses of touch. The book also contains a letter to those who have been abused and questions for reflection as a useful and thought-provoking resource. I don’t necessarily agree with all her conclusions or applications, but *Handle with Care* stands apart for stimulating reflection on a subject that, I fear, is often not considered. Recommended.

*Regan King*

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