Extremely American Season 2 Episode 5: Disobedience

DRUZIN: A heads up to listeners. This episode deals with child sex abuse and sexual assault and their swearing. There's also a mention of suicide if you or a loved one are considering suicide, please call or text the National Suicide Hotline at 988. There is help available. Okay, here we go.

It's 2005. A 20 year old named Steven Sitler is a student at New Saint Andrews. That's the Christ Church affiliated college in Moscow, Idaho. Steven is staying with the Christ Church family while he goes to school. New Saint Andrews doesn't have dorms by design. They want to keep students from the temptations that come with cramming a bunch of 18 to 22 year olds together. Instead, students are encouraged to board with church families. But when it comes to Steven, that idea of keeping students away from sin, it horribly backfires. Jimmy read through a detailed report about what happened next.

DAWSON: So it was March of 2005 and the family that Steven Sitler had been staying with. They had a few children, and there was a sleepover one night with, uh, some children of another family, friends. And after that sleepover, the family friends reported to the father that Steven Sitler had molested their their daughter while they were sleeping.

DRUZIN: The kids had been sleeping upstairs and boarders weren't allowed to go there, but apparently Stephen went up anyway and touched the friend's daughter inappropriately.

DAWSON: And eventually the father, uh, worked out that Sittler had also been molesting his own children. Um, at least one of the daughters for a year and a half. And that's almost the entire time that he had been with the family. So the father and the mother approached pastor Doug Wilson got his advice. He told them to go to law enforcement.

DRUZIN: And that's when it all started unraveling with Steven. Steven grew up in the Christ Church world. His dad is a deacon at an affiliated church. Steven actually went to Doug Wilson first to confess to molesting multiple children. Not just the daughter he was boarding with and the friend's daughter. Children from other places he'd lived outside Moscow, Idaho.

He then turned himself in to police and confessed to them too. I actually spoke to Steven briefly on the phone. He didn't want to do a recorded interview. He was kind of

defiant, said people had been dishonest about him, though he wouldn't give specifics. When I asked him once more if he would consider a recorded interview, he said, quote, I address it with God. I don't need to with man, unquote.

Doug Wilson takes credit for the whole Steven Sittler episode coming to light.

WILSON: He confessed to years of abusing others, and that was at my instigation and him doing that.

DRUZIN: Plenty of people, however, are not impressed with how Doug handled the situation. One of them is Rachel Shubin. As the details of the abuse trickled out to affiliated churches, she wanted to know more.

SHUBIN: I had a whole bunch of younger kids that were all right in the age ranges of Sitler's victims. It's soul crushing for the parents and the children and the community at large.

DRUZIN: At the time, she was attending an Oregon church. It's part of the Community of Reformed Evangelical Churches, or CREC. The church association Doug Wilson founded. Rachel was horrified by the Steven Sitler case, and there was actually one other Christ Church sex abuse scandal unfolding nearly simultaneously. So Rachel went to her pastor. She was like, hey, I want to figure out what's happening here with our sister church.

SHUBIN: And I he told me that I couldn't, that I shouldn't talk about things I didn't know anything about. Um, and that went over badly, So I started researching when.

DRUZIN: He said that. When you said when you said it went over badly, can you. I mean, like what? So what was your reaction?

SHUBIN: Like, my reaction was like, I'm sorry. I'm gonna learn every single thing there is to know about this now.

DRUZIN: And Rachel pretty much did. We'll come back to what she learned later, but we wanted to get the perspective of survivors of abuse in the Christ Church world. We weren't able to talk to Sitler's victims or their families, but we did hear directly from another survivor about her experience. And it happened at Doug Wilson's school.

DYE: Basically, you have to not care in order to have so many stories coming out of your community and to keep doing the same thing over and over again and keep addressing them the exact same way and continuing to treat victims in the way that he's been treating victims.

DRUZIN: I'm Heath Druzin, and this is Extremely American Onward Christian Soldiers. A story about a small town, a big church, and the people who want to make America a Christian nation. Episode six Wolves among the Flock. The first part of Emily Paige Dye's story is not so different from Helen Shores Peters. She started at Logos School in her early teens and was all in for the Christ Church ideology. In Emily's case, her parents were too.

DYE: They wanted us to go to a Christian school. They wanted us to get that Christian education. My mom started reading Doug Wilson's books. Um, so she really bought into it and became very excited about the idea that we could go to this school. We'd be wearing uniforms, we would be learning Latin. And it was kind of this very idealized version of what a private school would be like.

DRUZIN: Emily says one thing Logos didn't offer was sex education.

DYE: I didn't know any of it. I there was no explanation. I think my parents are like school. Teach them that. And the school's like, that's the parents responsibility. There was nothing. Uh, so I learned about periods from the Diary of Anne Frank.

DRUZIN: So Emily had no idea how people actually got pregnant, but she knew she wanted nothing to do with whatever it was.

DYE: It was 100% on the women to protect the purity of the men around them were responsible to be modest. We don't want to cause our Christian brothers to stumble. Oh, I was terrified of being seen as flirting or interacting with the boys in an in an appropriate manner. Um, I had a pretty bubbly personality, and so there's a couple of times where and this was very much the culture at Logos, where one of your classmates would call you out and it's like, oh, you were flirting with him. And then you feel awful because you feel like you've sinned and you have to repent. Even if that wasn't the intention at all, you had no idea. So there's actually like boys in my class that I went to school with for four years, that I probably said 1 or 2 sentences to at most.

DRUZIN: Emily says defined gender roles were also ingrained in her. It's that Christ Church focus on headship again.

DYE: I actually remember thinking that kind, somewhat consciously of women are supposed to submit. I've been told that women are supposed to submit.

DRUZIN: She says that idea would set her up for the nightmare that came next. And that nightmare begins with a guy named Jim Nance. Jim was a long time teacher at Logos. He was also an elder in Christ Church. Middle aged guy, married with kids. Kind of a big deal in the Kirker universe, given the seriousness of the allegations to come. I want to pause to say. We reached out to Jim several times for comment. He didn't respond. Emily was in his physics class, and at one point in her junior year, Emily started studying in his classroom during her free period while he graded papers. They would chat. She looked up to him.

DYE: So I started to go close to him. He started to view him as kind of like a father like figure.

DRUZIN: Okay, here, I have to explain something that will become important to the story, because there's a whole hugging protocol in the purity obsessed world of Christ Church.

DYE: Yeah, the Christian side hug. It's this weird. And so, like, if someone tried to do it to me now, I'd probably slap him. It's so weird. And also, it feels way more intimate than just a normal hug. Um, where, like, they grab you, like, on the side and, like, put your, their hand on your waist and it's like, it's this Christian side hug thing.

DRUZIN: She says Jim was a big side hugger. At some point, though, something started to change.

DYE: And then it was like, right before Christmas break. He gave me a full frontal hug and it went on for way too long. And I was like, that was weird. It was. It felt very uncomfortable. This like, um, you don't do the full frontal hug because then the woman's breasts would be pushing up against you, and that would be totally inappropriate. Um, but the weird Christian standards.

DRUZIN: Partly because of who Jim was at first, she brushed it off.

DYE: He was hugely powerful in my life. He was he's an elder of the church. He's a teacher. He's super well respected within the community.

DRUZIN: But it didn't stop.

DYE: He would just hug me constant like all the time. It became like every time, like every Friday I would be leaving for the weekend. He would hug me and it would get longer and longer, and it would have been sometime during this period, probably early spring. It was still cold. Uh, he gave me the full frontal hug and, like, felt my ass.

DRUZIN: Emily was 17. She had never kissed a boy. Remember she barely talked to them for fear of appearing to flirt. This sent her head spinning.

DYE: I remember going and standing in my locker and just like, staring into my locker for a crazy amount of time. Like, did that really happen? Like, did he mean to? Was it an accident? What was going on? Not knowing what to do. And so I end up doing nothing.

DRUZIN: After the break, things escalate and people start to notice.

[Ad break]

DRUZIN: Emily says after the groping incident, Jim would keep touching her whenever he had the chance.

DYE: I was doing the musical ... The school musical, which I was super excited about. He was also in the musical in some part, I don't remember which. And yeah, it would be. He constantly asked, like every time I came up, he'd ask to see me. I would meet him, he would feel me up. And it was just this thing that would happen.

DRUZIN: And this seems obvious, but this is not something that you wanted, and this is not something that was like you were. It sounds like this was something that was really freaking you out.

DYE: Oh, yeah, fully freaked me out. Um, I was fully wigged out by it, I didn't know. I didn't know what to do or how to cope with it. But I feel like by this point in the dynamic, it's like he said he wanted me to do something. And so I did it. Yeah, because he would. He would have been touching my breasts. Touching my ass.

DRUZIN: You're you're a kid in high school, and yes, you're a kid in high school who had to learn about your period from Anne Frank. So you're not. It's not like you're a savvy adult by any stretch.

DYE: And at this point, I still didn't know the word vagina. I learned that, um, as a 19 year old in university.

DRUZIN: And then Emily says Jim starts to get careless on their senior physics trip.

DYE: And so we were all going to Seattle. It was a small class, super excited, super stoked about it. And leading up to that trip, he planned out what I would wear on the trip. And I believe at this point it would have been I'd have been sending him photos. He'd ask for photos regularly of me, sometimes not fully clothed photos. Um, he asked for photos of all of my outfits and chose what outfits I would wear on the trip.

DRUZIN: Emily says it's a sexually repressive culture of Christ Church that got her to go along with that. That's because she saw Jim as a father figure.

DYE: It felt like it made sense. Like in a weird way, there's with the modesty culture, there's this idea that your father chooses, like, can inspect your outfit, make sure your outfits appropriate.

DRUZIN: And so they go on this field trip to Seattle with a bunch of other students. I looked at Jim's Facebook page, scrolled back to that time, and knowing what was happening, it's surreal to see the photos he posted with Emily tagged. A smiling teenage girl on the Space Needle, but with an awful secret.

DYE: I feel like he would play footsie with me under the table at like in front of everyone. It was this, like, pretty apparent to some extent, like what was going on.

DRUZIN: And it was particularly apparent to a school chaperon on the trip who was a Logos mom and employee.

DYE: So the other mother reported it to the school. As soon as we got back that Nance was acting inappropriately with me.

DRUZIN: As far as Emily knows, this was the first time anyone had stepped in. According to Emily, school leadership talked to Jim, and that was that. No notification of Emily's parents, no conversation with Emily. Whatever Jim said to leadership, they dropped it. Doug Wilson, who has continued to serve on the Logos board since its founding, confirmed the basic details but says the Chaperons report was vague. He says Jim was told to keep a professional distance with his students.

WILSON: There was no inkling on the part of anybody that something, um, illegal or criminal or immoral, sexually immoral was going on.

DRUZIN: Emily says at the time she was actually relieved that nothing happened to Jim. Her abuser was protected, but so was her secret. Emily says Jim was not chastened by his close call. Quite the opposite. She says he was emboldened.

DYE: It escalated like he was fully molesting me. His hands were under my clothes and my underwear and all of the things. He had me meet him on the on the school property. Like one Saturday I'd come into town for something or other, and he had me meet him in his classroom and he took off my clothes and molested me.

DRUZIN: Emily says she was desperate for it to stop, but she didn't know how. Then Jim reported himself. Here's how it happened. Emily's mom saw a text from Jim pop up on her daughter's phone. The message wasn't sexual, but seemed overly familiar for a teacher. And it was 9:30 at night. Emily told Jim her mom had seen the text, so Jim confessed to Logos Superintendent Tom Garfield saying he had been texting Emily.

DYE: I got called into the office with my parents and Tom Garfield.

DRUZIN: And Emily says. Tom asked her just one question about their physical relationship. Did he kiss you?

DYE: He had honestly not kissed me at this point in time. He had done a lot of other things. He had molested me repeatedly, but he had not kissed me. And so I was able to answer honestly and I said, no, he's not kissed me.

DRUZIN: And according to Emily, after that, it was basically no further questions, Your Honor. Tom Garfield didn't respond to requests for an interview, and I just can't let this one go. How can you ask one question in a situation like this the second time this teacher has been reported? Emily can't either.

DYE: I think it was a very specific choice on the part of the school not to ask me questions, to choose to be ignorant, to choose not to learn what actually happened, Because I would have shared it. I was not in any position to hide what had happened. I was willing and ready to be honest. Um. And Nance had told me not to say anything and that I would ruin his marriage and had threatened to me and had done the whole thing.

But at that point, like I was done lying. So if someone had asked the question, I would have given an honest answer, but no one bothered. My parents then had a meeting with Doug Wilson. Wilson assured them that nothing illegal had happened, that they had approached the correct authorities. Everyone had been notified that the police weren't concerned, etc., etc., and that the school had decided to ask Nance to resign.

DRUZIN: And again, another shot to ask more questions. And Emily says Doug didn't even include her in the meeting. But Doug did follow through with Jim Nance.

WILSON: He was dismissed because we had zero we had zero tolerance for that kind of thing.

DRUZIN: Doug says at the time, all they knew about was the text. Given that he says firing Jim was a strong measure. Here, I think it's important to mention one more thing. Jim has a long personal history with Doug. In Doug's early days as a pastor, Jim was in church leadership, and critics say Doug stuck up for Jim. Back in 1997, Jim was an elder at Community Evangelical Fellowship, which would become Christ Church. He committed some kind of, quote, sin that required punishment. I asked Doug for specifics, and if it had to do with any kind of transgression with women or girls.

WILSON: I can't talk about the particulars of that, but I can't. I can tell you that he was given a leave of absence from the elder board for a sin that he committed.

DRUZIN: Doug confirmed he made Jim take a six month hiatus, but allowed him to return to his position. Doug says it was a fair punishment. That history is one of the many reasons Emily doesn't buy Doug's story. That he didn't suspect more was happening between her and Jim.

DYE: I feel like you'd have to be an idiot to not realize that there was more going on.

DRUZIN: After Jim was fired. No one filed a police report, but the school did write a letter letting parents and students know Jim was leaving. It was short on details, but did ask everyone to thank him for his service and pray for him. After high school, Emily went far away to college in DC thinking she could escape her nightmare. One trip back home in 2016, Emily ran into Tom Garfield. He was the Logos superintendent when she attended the school. He was also friends with Jim Nance.

DYE: He's like, yeah, really glad we caught everything that happened with Nance. That could have been really bad. I just looked and I was like, it was really bad. Like it was so

bad. Um, it was so beyond bad. And he's like, what? And then I told him what had happened while I was at the school, and I told him that it still happened and that it only until recently ended and that I had ended it.

DRUZIN: Emily says what sticks in her mind was Tom's reaction after she told him everything.

DYE: He wanted me to describe in detail. Nance going down on me. And I did not do that. Um, and he wanted to know if I liked it. That was a question he kept asking.

DRUZIN: At this point, Emily was wrestling with a lot of her views. She knew what Jim Nance had done to her was wrong, but she wasn't fully out of the ideology of obedience and fundamentalism. She actually reached out to Doug Wilson's wife, Nancy, for counseling. Nancy Wilson is not a licensed counselor, but she does something called biblical counseling. Emily says it went badly.

DYE: She told me that I was slutty, and I need to change the way I dress, and I should go home and clean out my closet. And that I should stop trying to seduce university boys, um, and other men and people's husbands. She treated me like I was a threat to her and her husband.

DRUZIN: Nancy declined our request for an interview. In an email reply, she wrote she would never discuss counseling sessions publicly, but she did defend headship and women submitting to men. The ideas, Emily says, helped groom her for abuse. Some female abuse survivors, like Emily, say the way Christ Church treats them is directly tied to headship. That the perspective of women and girls is not valued. After the break how Christ Church deals with abusers.

[Ad break]

DRUZIN: Or does it, according to critics. Emily feels like Christ Church leadership swept her case under the rug. And Rachel Shubin says that's exactly how Christ Church deals with their scandals. She says Doug Wilson takes action against whistleblowers, not abusers.

SHUBIN: Wilson does not clean his own house ever, from what I can see, unless it's somebody that's saying, hey, we should stop doing this in our house. Then he cleans them right out.

DRUZIN: Rachel was that congregant at that Christ Church affiliate who decided to investigate Doug Wilson's response to sex abuse. After her pastor told her not to, she embarked on a months long investigation. She was looking into Christ Church's response to Stephen Sitler's molestation case, and another case of sexual abuse in the congregation. She tracked down police records and court documents, had email exchanges with a judge and parole officer, even interviewed the county prosecutor. She carried on a lengthy email exchange with Doug Wilson to say, a woman doing something like this is unusual in the hyper patriarchal world of Christ Church is an understatement.

SHUBIN: And that is a large portion of why my report is 400 pages of footnotes on 100 pages of text is because, you know, if you're going to say something in that community, you have to be able to back up every single line because especially if you're a woman, because otherwise it just gets like dismissed.

DRUZIN: Yes, she wrote a 500 page report. One thing Rachel found in her research really shocked her. After Steven Sitler confessed to Doug. Doug waited a full eight months to tell his congregation about the abuse.

SHUBIN: I don't think they had the faintest idea of what was going on or what had happened. So which means that there was, you know, wolves over there.

DRUZIN: Wolves, as in Doug Wilson was letting wolves run loose amongst the flock, his congregation. In the case of Steven Sitler, there was more before Steven was sentenced for being a child molester in September 2005, Doug went to bat for him. He wrote a letter to the judge on Steven's behalf. Here's how it ends.

Quote I am grateful Steven was caught and am grateful he has been brought to account for these actions so early in his life. I am grateful that he will be sentenced for his behavior, and that there will be hard consequences for him in real time. At the same time, I would urge that the civil penalties applied would be measured and limited. I have a good hope that Steven has genuinely repented, and that he will continue to deal with this to become a productive and contributing member of society. End quote.

Steven was given a life sentence, but with the possibility of parole. He was free in about a year and a half. The even wilder part is that he wasn't the only accused sex abuser Doug went to bat for.

At about the same time, a 25 year old Christ Church seminary student faced sentencing for an alleged sexual relationship with a 14 year old church member. Doug wrote a letter

to a police officer on behalf of that seminary student, Jamon White. In the end, Jamon's charges were reduced to felony injury to a child. The judge in Jamon's case actually threw out a plea agreement and gave him a lesser sentence than agreed to. Jamon didn't even have to register as a sex offender. I had a brief email exchange with Jamon, but he declined to comment for the podcast. Doug still calls Jamon's relationship with a 14 year old girl.

WILSON: An underage, consensual relationship.

DRUZIN: Rachel Shubin says her research led her to the conclusion that Doug and Christ Church were trying to minimize the impact of the scandals. And she says Doug prioritized helping abusers over looking out for victims.

SHUBIN: I was pretty horrified at how Wilson had handled all that stuff with his own churches.

DRUZIN: In the end, Rachel says she heard almost nothing from the Christ Church community about the report. She says she emailed it to Doug and he said thanks, and that was that. Doug said he didn't read the report, but he denies he sweeps abuse under the rug, and he denies he helps abusers find a soft landing.

WILSON: All the help that we provide for victims is not happening in the court. It's not happening with cameras running. It's not happening with recording devices. That's in the pastoral work of the church. Okay. And I can't go back and talk about all of those things in detail without violating confidences.

DRUZIN: But he certainly doesn't banish the abusers. After Steven Sitler was released, Doug officiated his wedding, married him to another church member. And that brings us to a wrinkle in Stevens case, a particularly twisted one. Steven and his wife now have a young son who have.

THOMPSON: A diagnosed pedophile. Multiple victims, probation for life. And he now has a child who is defenseless.

DRUZIN: That's Latah County Prosecutor Bill Thompson at a court hearing talking about Steven's son. A son, Steven, is legally bound to never be alone with.

THOMPSON: Mr. Sitler irresponsibly and recklessly brought this child, this innocent child, into this untenable situation.

DRUZIN: Prosecutors said Steven admitted to being aroused by his own child during a polygraph in 2015, but there have been no allegations of him molesting his son. Doug says he has no regrets about officiating Steven's wedding.

WILSON: Because I believe that someone who manifestly does not have the gift of celibacy, right. And the Bible teaches that sexual, uh, an active sexual life is one of the helps toward a guard against sexual temptation. Um, if that's the case, then this is going to help, not hurt. Okay. Now them having a baby was a that's a separate question. But when I married them, they had to get the blessing of a judge to do it. The judge agreed and I performed the wedding, so I don't I don't have a problem with that by itself. I would do that part again.

DRUZIN: If you're thinking, that's not how it works, the research is messy. I spoke to a couple experts who said strong support networks can help keep pedophiles from offending, but they also said simply getting married is not enough. Doug Wilson handles cases like these in a little corner of his blog called Controversy Library. It's not exactly a mea culpa. It reads more like a series of explanations for why he and Christ Church did the right thing. Steven Sitler's case is in there. So is Jamon White, the guy who sexually abused a 14 year old girl, Emily Paige Dye didn't even make the controversy library.

But I think the ending of her story is notable because unfortunately, there is more about Jim Nance. You might think a teacher who had to resign because of inappropriate conduct would have trouble getting an education job. Not Jim. After he resigned from Logos, he quickly landed a job at a Christ Church connected education company. And after the full story came out, he bounced to another church connected company, though not in education. There was no legal action until years after the abuse, when Emily told the former Logos superintendent what had happened. At that point, Doug got involved again. He filed a police report and for the first time, Emily spoke to the police. It was early 2017.

DYE: I spoke to the police. I then attempted suicide after speaking to the police. Backed out of it. Um, because I didn't want my parents. I was so freaked out about my parents finding out.

DRUZIN: Moscow police didn't file charges. Then Emily says they actually reached out to her again in 2020 to look into the case. Emily said the officer she spoke to said Idaho law made it difficult to prosecute Nance. He was never charged. I reached out to Moscow Police Chief Anthony Dahlinger to ask why. He declined to comment and told

me to file a public records request for the case file. I did that, and the city of Moscow denied my request, citing privacy concerns. To this day, Nance is still a member of Christ Church. So is convicted child molester Steven Sitler. In light of that, I want to share something Doug Wilson told us. I think it's particularly notable given that Christ Church has welcomed these wolves back to the flock.

WILSON: We would discipline someone if I officiated a wedding, and five years later, the husband ran off with his secretary. Well, I was in the church where you promised not to do that and and so we're going to we would excommunicate someone like that.

DRUZIN: Doug says he'd kick out someone for adultery, but he welcomed back a man who molested Christ Church members and a teacher who allegedly preyed on a student. In a follow up interview, Doug says he meant that an adulterous man would be excommunicated if he didn't repent. He says Steven Sitler and Jim Nance have repented. Emily would still like to see Jim face legal consequences for what he did. And she says she's open to speaking to police again. In the meantime, she has taken back her life. She's speaking out about what happened to her, even wrote about it publicly in the online publishing platform called Medium. It's been a long process. She says college helped.

DYE: I tried alcohol for the first time, um, got drunk for the first time. Just very fun. Started to make friends with non-Christians, made friends with lesbians, which was a really taboo.

DRUZIN: Part of her still thought these otherwise friendly people were going to hell, but she had more and more trouble squaring that in her head.

DYE: And I saw them being good people. I think one of my closest friends was doing all of these incredible things, and I had so much respect for her. But she was also a lesbian. And so, like, my mind was like, how can this person be so amazing? But also like the worst of the worst by Christ Church standards.

DRUZIN: So she turned her back on the church, turned her back on the belief that men should be in charge. She moved to Australia and is an analyst at a think tank. She hopes her story will reach other girls or women struggling in the Christ Church sphere.

DYE: I think there's probably nothing scarier for people like Wilson and Nance and all of the people in that community. When the women that they have downtrodden and

they've abused and they've taken away their voices and have told them that they must submit and obey, actually start speaking up and telling their stories.

DRUZIN: Next time on Extremely American Onward Christian Soldiers: how to take over America for Jesus.

VOICES: The end of this ratty stores. You see Golden Lion or whatever when you're driving there like an adult store. Zoning can just keep it out. We just keep losing our applications or whatever. We'll just keep them out there the pagans. They're wicked. We don't want that in here.

We want to turn the world upside down. And you don't turn the world upside down by being nice.

I believe that we are in this polytheistic place.

DRUZIN: Extremely American was created by me, Heath Druzin. This season was written and recorded by me and James Dawson. Story editing by Morgan Springer. Mixing and sound engineering by James Dawson. Fact checking by Naomi Barr. Additional reporting and special thanks to Mary Ellen Pitney, who was a big help early on and throughout the project. Shout out to Madeline Beck, Sasa Woodruff, and Rachel Cohen, who lent us their ears while we were writing this season. Music from Artlist.

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Thanks for listening.