

Jack Hayford: How to Restore a Fallen Leader

The discipline of a fallen leader is not a punishment by others. It is a voluntarily accepted state of one who believes the full teaching of the Word about three things: God's mercy in forgiveness, God's summons to restoration and the obligation of every spiritual leader to accept the counsel of other leaders in the spirit of submission.

That's what "the discipline of time" is about: healing and mending, not punishment.

Time for Restoration

"What do you mean, 'time'? Don't you think God has forgiven them?" "Who gave you the right to judge? We're sick and tired of hearing about it anyway!"

It's a water-cooler conversation you may hear often these days. And one may ask, "Why insist on time as a healing, restorative factor in the recovery of fallen spiritual leaders? Why risk the barrage of questions and criticisms certain to volley forth like a fusillade from a dozen cannons?"

The issue of "time for restoration" is a hot one, boiling on the church's front burner by reason of recent events that have forced a focus on such themes as:

- The balance between judgment and mercy
- The requirements of spiritual leadership
- The relative significance of various sins
- The submission of leaders to one another
- The nature of forgiveness and restoration
- The purpose of the present purging of the Spirit.

I have undertaken the subject—the proper requirement of a

significant amount of time being applied in a spiritual leader's recovery process—because I believe its resolution is crucial to the spiritual health of the body of Christ at this specific time. It's a risky undertaking, to say the least, because so much misunderstanding abounds. But to neglect addressing the subject involves a greater risk.

Not to confront legalistic demands gives a place to religious notions that forget mercy. Not to challenge propositions offering cheap grace gives a license to indulgence and irresponsibility. To require too much of the fallen is to corrupt grace. To require too little is to cheapen the office of spiritual leadership.

To make too much of sexual failure is to appear preoccupied with a public theology. To make too little of it is to surrender to the world's sexual ethics. To exact various time penalties for different sins may too easily fall prey to arbitrary judgment. To expect too little or no time for the restorative process may overlook essential requirements of God's Word.

A Watershed Issue

The diversity of opinion on the issue of time needed for the restoration of a fallen spiritual leader exposes deep problems. Critically significant to the church's health are its views of God's Word, the requirements of Christian leadership and the ministering of grace. But it seems these views have become muddled and twisted in the turmoil of dealing with fallen leaders, and we have therefore been brought to a watershed point.

Which way will things go?

The nature of the church—its health, wholeness and holiness—is directly correspondent to our view of the nature of God. How we think about God's character and the manner of His administration of His kingdom will inevitably determine the

formation of our own character and behavior as believers.

Straight thinking is crucial, not only about His love but also about how His love acts when His children need correction; not only about His mercy but also about how He mercifully judges when judgment is necessary. It isn't an exaggeration of the present problem to say that in the last analysis, the church's view of Jesus' Lordship is at stake.

What the church expects of its spiritual leaders and how we relate to them essentially reflects how Christ Himself is viewed. The Bible says He has "given" each of them as His personal representatives, and as His appointed leaders under His ultimate headship, they are accountable to His terms.

To wade into the melee seeking to sustain standards for leadership while at the same time seeking to sow mercy and pursue peace seems an impossible dilemma—that is, unless a point of reference can be agreed upon. Presumably, the Word of God is that point for those who read these words. And yet, claiming biblical authority, widely dissonant statements resound everywhere on the matter of restoring fallen leaders.

Arguments for mercy are pled on grounds that "We're all sinners anyway, and we have no right to judge the fallen" (notwithstanding that 1 Corinthians 5 and 6 and Matthew 7 require self-judgment by the body of Christ).

Pleas for an instant return to ministry are made on the grounds that "David wasn't removed as king even though he was immoral and a murderer"—without bothering to study the negative factors that dogged David's life and rule ever after.

Demands are made for permanent removal from ministry with "no hope of restoration" because "the sacred trust of holy leadership has been violated"—notwithstanding the Savior's proven ability to renew, recreate and restore (see 2 Cor. 5:17; John 8:1-12) and His promise that if He begins a good work in us, He will complete it (see Phil. 1:6).

Appeals are presented for temporary removal and restriction because “a person needs to make some restitution—to pay somehow” (a case of calling for a right action for a wrong reason).

It takes time to restore a fallen spiritual leader because it took time to make him one. The position of spiritual leadership is not one that is “claimed”—that is, simply assumed or even humanly assigned. It is one into which a person matures.

In the earlier mentioned passages from the epistles, the Holy Spirit explicitly mandates certain qualifications, all of which can only be arrived at with time. Thus, 1 Timothy 3:10, in referring to the identifying of spiritual leadership, says, “Let these also first be tested”; that is, besides allowing the time required to cultivate the character traits required, overseers must “test” (“prove”) those being considered for leadership.

Haste in appointment is specifically prohibited. That’s why, two chapters later, Paul further instructs Timothy, “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily” (5:22). New Testament leaders are grown—matured and seasoned over time, and verified in character and conduct—before hands are laid upon them, confirming the grace and call of God on their lives.

But what happens when a leader so proven and dedicated to ministry falls?

Forgiveness and Fruitfulness

The failure of a spiritual leader is a staggeringly painful event in the life of everyone affected by that person. Some argue that God lets leaders fall to break down the idolatry in the hearts of those who so admirably follow the leader. I disagree completely.

Though isolated cases of idolizing of leadership may

inevitably be present in the body of Christ, by and large the admiration, emulation and appreciation accorded leaders is neither unspiritual nor improper. God intends leaders to “grow” into that kind of respectability and trustworthiness.

It is an unfortunate trait of human nature that when a devoted spiritual leader falls, the people he leads are so emotionally impacted and bereft of the security they have felt in their spiritual relationship to that person that rarely are their emotions controlled. Though a few may express anger, the disposition of most of the sheep, bruised in spirit by the fall of their shepherd, is to seize on the greatest point of support we all have—the grace of God.

That grace, which always brings instant and complete forgiveness wherever full-hearted and genuine repentance is present, becomes their overarching point of appeal, but its application is pressed beyond forgiveness to reinstatement. All too quickly, and for understandable yet unjustified emotional reasons, their voices lift an appeal for an instant settlement of the problem—a quick relief for their pain.

But forgiveness and fruitfulness are two different things.

Forgiveness is instantaneous, but the fruits of repentance take time to grow. The restoration of the scorched fruitage of years of ministry and the repair of the “cracks” in the character that sinning has exposed cannot be restored in a moment’s burst of gracious intent or holy passion.

It is characteristic of most recommendations for quick restoration that too casual an attitude exists concerning the time that was involved in leading to the sin or the time involved in continuing the sinful walk to which the leader submitted.

When grace forgives and then God’s Word summons to time for healing and full recovery of the person, we must remember: What takes time to break takes time to mend.

Sin isn't the fruit of a moment; neither is restoration. It is outright dishonesty with the psychological facts of the human personality to suppose an overnight or quick-fix healing in relationships or trust is as immediate as the blessing of God's instant forgiveness.

Discipline or Punishment?

It's a sad fact that many believers see the disciplining of a spiritual leader as an effort on man's part to punish, embarrass or retaliate. If such unworthy motives have ever been present, they were as unbiblical as the leader's tragic fall. But the requirement of time for restoration is not a punishment—it is an opportunity for another side of "grace" to be shown.

Failure takes various forms—the mishandling of monies, deception in teaching the Word, immorality in relationships, brutality in conduct, mounting of ecclesiastical warfare, and so on. Whenever one or more of these failures befall a spiritual leader, a certain wisdom must be applied. It is needful that (1) repentance be humbly manifested; and (2) submission to the restoration process be allowed.

The leader needs to declare both before those he leads and those who are his peers or leaders in ministry. That his repentance includes his commitment to time for his restoration cannot be mandated apart from his own will. But honesty requires an acknowledgment of the realities of our human nature: Time is needed to heal, and time is needed to restore trust.

The causes of leaders' failures are not something that can be reversed in a moment—or in a few weeks. Yes, forgiveness on everyone's part, including God's, may be instant, but the fruit of proven character takes time to be regrown. Failure disqualifies, and requalification takes time.

Is Restoration Possible?

Just as some would too readily return a fallen spiritual leader to ministry, there are other sincere believers who would say such failure disqualifies him from ever returning to leadership.

What does the Bible say?

It is far easier to administrate a prohibition than to minister a restoration. Yet there is no biblical justification for rejecting the proposition that redemption and restoration may recover fruit lost in the greatest tragedy.

“I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten,” Joel prophesies (Joel 2:25). His movement through the list of insects that ransacked and stripped the fields bare, and then his holding forth the promise of recovered fruitfulness by the restoring grace of God, are words that heralded the age of the Holy Spirit.

We live in that age today.

And it is precisely because we do—because we are living in a time when the Holy Spirit is moving so mightily—that both the discipline of time and the promise it holds must be seen for what they are, an opportunity to instruct with wisdom and to inspire with hope. To hold forth a forgiving grace in the name of Jesus is the glad tidings we have been commissioned to bring: instant reconciliation with God, new birth in Christ, promised blessing and eternal life forever in His presence.

But there is no instant cultivation of character. People still need to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. It takes time to, “giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love” (2 Pet. 1:5-7).

That is the believer’s call to discipleship—to the disciplines

of a full-hearted follower of Jesus.

And thus, when a leader falls, if he will submit himself to spiritual discipline under the care of other elders who will love, serve and assist his restoration through their care and kindness, discipline will be realized.

As I stated before, the discipline of time is about healing and mending, not punishment. And the one who accepts that discipline becomes a disciple again at a fresh point of beginning—forgiven and cleansed and ready for the process of recovery.

Let us never doubt that by God's Holy Spirit and in accordance with His Word, such a recovery can be complete.

How Much Time?

At the bottom line, the practical question of “calendarizing restoration” comes under inquiry. What length of time is required? How much time is needed? Who is to say, set and monitor the time?

What does the Bible say about the matter? Some conclude that the Bible has spoken on the subject. They cite David's adultery, Jonah's running and Peter's denial as biblical precedents arguing for an unbroken continuance of leadership, if not a short time of recompense for restoration.

In the absence of an explicit biblical directive regarding the amount of time necessary for restoration, what guidelines do we have? I think there are three.

First, beware of any preoccupation with too quick a return. Such a disposition by the fallen one probably signals a resident presumption or shallow repentance, and such a disposition by those sincerely wanting to affirm the fallen usually indicates an immature perspective on the nature and requirements of spiritual leadership.

Second, beware of overlooking the depth of the fallen's injury. One of the most human responses in the world is to attempt a sudden scrambling to your feet when you have been embarrassed by having slipped or fallen. Spiritual leaders usually fall as the result of both.

Third, beware of unilateral or "pop" methods of reinstatement. Self-announcement is not the biblical pathway to leadership.

Irrespective of what terminology one employs or which form of church government he acknowledges, the Bible shows that all ministry is to be confirmed by "a presbytery"; that is, a group of elders who (1) who meet the requirements of character and conduct qualifications; and (2) are committed to lay hands on and endorse only others who do.

It would be pretentious for any group or denomination to suppose they had mastered the issue of how much time restoration requires; but it would be equally foolish and presumptuous for any individual to resist the accumulated wisdom of years reflected in the decision-making of such groups and to arrogantly suppose his own personal system to be superior.

It is not without reason that so many groups recommend or require from one to even four or five years for the recovery of fallen leaders. More and more are accepting a greater responsibility for caring for their fallen: providing transitional financial assistance, expenses for counseling, personal support groups and guidance toward recovery. The strength of this development in the larger body of Christ is in both the Christ-like care it shows and the biblical value being served: time for restoration—time that is not only required but also filled with redemptive action.

Note: This is an excerpt from Jack Hayford's book, "Restoring Fallen Leaders." Copyright Jack W. Hayford, used by permission. Originally published by Regal Books, 1988.

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