

Don't Throw Stones at Carl Lentz

Many of us groaned collectively back in November when we learned that Carl Lentz, pastor of Hillsong's New York City congregation, had been fired because of a moral failure. The 42-year-old preacher, known for his hipster style, admitted in a public statement that he had engaged in an extramarital affair.

"This failure is on me and me alone, and I take full responsibility for my actions," Lentz said in the Nov. 5 post on Instagram.

Lentz and his wife, Laura, and their three children have reportedly relocated to California to seek therapy and healing. Meanwhile the Hillsong network of churches must deal with the fallout, along with the larger body of Christ—which has been shaken multiple times recently by high-profile moral failures.

A church scandal is not just traumatic for the leader at the center of the storm; it also destabilizes everyone around them. Whole churches or ministries can be shaken to their foundations when a leader makes poor choices.

During my 18 years at *Charisma* I had to cover many stories of moral failure—sexual scandals, financial scams or horrific abuses of power. My trust in the people involved was shattered. In fact, my trust in all leaders was tested. Fortunately, I never walked away from my faith because a leader failed. But many people do.

You may have been tempted to pick up a few stones to throw at Lentz. It's certainly understandable to feel some anger in this situation. And the Lord knows we didn't need another reason for the world to call us hypocrites. But this situation

is not about what the world thinks of us. It's a family matter, and Lentz is a brother in Christ who needs our compassion right now.

Here are a few steps I always recommend in the aftermath of a moral failure in the church:

1. **It's OK to grieve.** Jeremiah wrote an entire book of the Bible—Lamentations—to process his grief over Israel's unfaithfulness. He cried out: "Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers ... Our fathers sinned and are no more" (Lam. 5:2a, 7a). Jeremiah did not minimize the impact of the sins of Israel's leaders. But he didn't sit in judgment; rather, he cried for them—and for the effect their choices had on others. Sin has huge implications. It is appropriate to shed tears over it.
2. **Extend mercy to the leader who fell.** The apostle Paul often had to bring correction to first-century leaders who failed God. He wrote: "Brothers, if a man is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore such a one in the spirit of meekness" (Gal. 6:1a). That means we shouldn't be harsh or vindictive, even if we must remove the person from leadership.

Biblical gentleness is not cheap grace. Being merciful doesn't mean we overlook sin or minimize its consequences. (In Lentz's case, Hillsong fired him.) But gentleness does require us to recognize that if it were not for the grace of God, we could have made the same mistakes the offending leader did. Treat the fallen brother or sister as you would want to be treated!

3. **Forgive from your heart.** I've met Christians who still nurse the same grudges 30 years after a pastor hurt them. They keep their pain alive by reliving the offense over and over. As a result, they are stuck in a time warp, and no one wants to be around them because their sarcasm is so toxic. You must learn to say what Jesus

said on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34a).

4. **Learn from the offending leader’s mistakes.** The Bible provides us with both good and bad examples of leaders. I have mentors who taught me much about God, leadership and ministry. But I also learned a lot from watching the mistakes leaders made—a few times at my expense. If someone in ministry hurts you, make a mental note: “That is not the way I want to treat people.” You can turn your disappointments into blessings if you learn from them.
5. **Keep communication open.** I’ve seen cases in which leaders were asked to step down because of a scandal, and suddenly everyone they knew stopped talking to them. That’s understandable because often we just don’t know what to say. And it can be awkward if the fallen leader is justifying his behavior or trying to convince people of his version of the story.

But fallen leaders need friends too. If you were close to the person who fell, try to maintain the friendship—knowing that your words might not be appreciated at first. If you did not know the leader well, a kind letter sent at just the right time can be like water in a desert to a soul who thirsts for encouragement.

6. **Stay in fellowship.** Many people who experience a church scandal leave church altogether. It’s okay to take a short break to recover. But if you go two months, then six months and then a year without being in close fellowship with other Christians, you are making yourself vulnerable. You may be tempted to believe that there are no healthy pastors or churches in your area—but I dare you to disprove that.

Years ago, a pastor who is affiliated with the Hillsong movement asked me: “Lee, you’ve seen so many leaders fail

during your years at the magazine. How do you not become cynical about that?" I quickly responded: "Seeing their brokenness only reminds me that we are all flawed vessels, and that I am capable of the same failure."

Please don't judge Carl Lentz for his sin. He has admitted it; he has repented, and he is now working with his leaders to recover. Instead of throwing stones, consider your own weakness as you pray for his restoration. {eo}