

How to Extend Grace When Christian Leaders Fall

A close friend of mine was discouraged last week. A pastor he respected for many years was asked to resign from his church because of serious allegations of inappropriate conduct.

I knew how my friend felt. Over the years, I've known several pastors and leaders who found themselves in spiritual disasters—a sexual scandal, a financial scam or a crisis of integrity. My trust in these people was shattered. My trust in all leaders was tested.

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. Fortunately, I never walked away from my faith because a leader failed. But many people do.

If you are close to a leader who has experienced moral failure, I recommend taking these steps:

1. **Make sure you have the facts.** In this age of fake news, anybody can make up a story and post it online. That's why the Bible says we should not receive an accusation against a leader "except before two or three witnesses" (1 Tim. 5:19). The devil keeps a special set of knives sharpened and ready for those who are eager to assassinate the character of a pastor. Make sure the story you heard is accurate.
2. **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. We should shed tears over it.

3. **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 for a season of rehabilitation.

Biblical gentleness is not a greasy form of cheap grace. Biblical gentleness doesn't require you to overlook sin or minimize its consequences. But biblical 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 like you would want to be treated!

4. **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 23:34).
5. **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 have learned a lot from watching the mistakes leaders make. 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.

6. **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 let's learn to apply more mercy. 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.

7. **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, 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.

God will have a holy church, and we can't compromise His standards. But holiness must be bathed in mercy. As we seek to extend more grace to the fallen, let's also pray that fewer leaders in today's church will fall. {eoa}