

Restoring Integrity in the Pulpit

We are living in difficult times. The moral default of many ministers has resulted in a leadership credibility crisis. The public exposure and media circus that ensues when a leader fails damages the hearts of precious, tender believers.

As a pastor for more than 30 years, I have observed the disappointing failure of a number of once-powerful leaders. Their churches are confused and divided, their supporters are angry, their critics are thrilled and their families are devastated.

A number of denominations have developed clear guidelines for restoration. Unfortunately, many independent churches have no idea “who’s in charge” and how to restore a fallen leader they once looked to and placed their families under. As a result, the restoration process—or lack thereof—takes various forms.

Some leaders simply apologize and continue their ministry, seemingly facing no consequences for their shameful behavior. Others witness the division and dissolution of their churches as members either defend or depart. Still others craft their own path of restoration, believing that their spiritual expertise is sufficient to guide them back into credibility and respect.

None of these forms is ideal. Paul told us, “The overseer must be above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2, NIV) and “those [overseers] who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (5:20). But Paul’s admonitions are not a lot to build a process on.

Some quote Galatians 6:1 as a guideline: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (ESV). But Greek

scholars point out in *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* that this verse refers to a “slip or lapse rather than a willful sin.” Though it is probably not referring to the deeply ingrained moral failure of a leader, it is still true that any process of restoration must be done in a spirit of meekness, and the person overseeing the restoration must heed Paul’s warning to keep watch on himself lest he also is tempted (see Gal. 6:1).

With so many different approaches to consider, I humbly offer some suggestions, not for those interested in debating the subject but for those who truly need to know how to deal with a fallen leader. All denominations differ in their approach to this process because there are no scriptural guidelines for exactly what the process to restore a leader who lapses morally, ethically, financially or even theologically should be.

Discernment of Sin

The process I recommend starts with discernment of the sin by those “who are spiritual” (Gal. 6:1). The discovery of the sin is not as important as the discernment of it. Some sins are “faults”—indiscretions—as opposed to moral failures. You don’t need a hammer to remove a splinter. An indiscretion requires discipline, whereas a moral failure may require disqualification.

After a leader sins, there are eight questions the spiritual overseers of the leader’s church must carefully answer:

1. How deeply rooted and long-standing is the sin? Patterns of sin can sometimes take as long to get out of as it took to get into them. You cannot simply bandage a malignancy. Those in charge of the restoration process must recognize that there is a need for skillful surgery that deals with even the margins and borders of the cancer.

2. Has the individual taken steps to cover his sin for a long

period of time? Does he have a long history of untruthfulness regarding the failure, lying and denying to those who had a premonition of failure or perhaps confronted him? Or was it a sudden, impulsive weakness he immediately confessed? Did he develop a lifestyle of deception? Did he confess his sin?

3. Did the leader publicly deny his sin and thus lose all credibility with his followers when the evidence became undeniable? We have seen even in the political and athletic world that the worst offense related to a scandal is an initial, public denial of wrongdoing and then an embarrassing confession when the evidence becomes too weighty.

4. Is he cynical about the seriousness of his sin, downplaying it as if it is normal or, at worst, marginal behavior? Self-justification and self-defense are the opposite of “godly sorrow.”

5. Is he willing to break off every wrong relationship? In moral issues, this is the “acid test.” A final, geographical, whatever-it-takes removal of all contact is essential, but persistent contact indicates a lack of repentance.

6. Has he excused his sin by blaming others, making himself out to be a victim? Some hide behind a spouse’s failures, a church’s negligence or a faulty process of discipline to evoke sympathy rather than humbly owning up to their failure as the cause of all damage.

7. Does he twist Scripture to excuse his behavior or label anyone who opposes his leadership “Pharisaical” or “legalistic”? Some leaders who have failed try to find “proof-texts” in obscure passages to deceive the sheep into thinking that their immoral behavior is actually scriptural. Some label any effort to confront their behavior “legalism.” The doctrine of grace is certainly needed by all of us sinners, but “grace and truth” is required for those who stand before others as a spiritual leader.

8. Has he repented? Repentance includes a willingness to renounce and forsake the sin as well as a willingness to surrender and submit to the requirements of authority—without changing to a different authority during the process of restoration.

The Process of Restoration

After a leader's sin has been carefully discerned by an overseeing body and there are clear "fruits of repentance" as outlined above, his restoration can begin. If his failure was simply an indiscretion (wrong judgment, poor financial stewardship, marriage and family problems, doctrinal issue, or similar fault), it's possible he can be given a season of discipline (such as a sabbatical) to recover without forfeiting his position. If, however, his sin was a moral failure, then the recovery of his marriage is in question, the trust of his congregation has evaporated, and he has placed himself in a position of being disqualified.

Unfortunately, some who are in the second category are being asked by their board to immediately resume their roles as pastors to preserve the church's financial stability. This is a very misguided approach to restoration because the same weight and pressure that contributed to the leader's demise will be back on his shoulders again.

Here are a few steps I recommend that the overseeing body take for those who have been disqualified for leadership.

1. Change his location. It is usually best for a leader caught in immorality to be placed under another local church that is not in the area (he can choose the church). I recommend that the church be several states away for the following reasons:

The area the leader is from is where the person he had a sinful relationship with usually resides. Sinful roots can blossom quickly with even a casual, "coincidental" rendezvous at local places such as the grocery store.

Confusion in the leader's former congregation may arise if he is present. He may even be tempted to assert his leadership again when surrounded by sympathetic people he once had influence over. If he remains in the same city, he almost always attempts to begin a church that will pull sympathetic members to his side. This is unethical and counter-restorative.

2. Provide support. The disciplining church should prepare to help a repentant leader relocate and provide him with several months of salary while he moves his family, finds work and gets settled.

However, the church's providing support is dependent on a cooperative attitude. The leader cannot "demand" anything from a church where he has disqualified himself. He must cast himself on the mercy and grace of the church leadership, realizing that nothing is "owed" to him. He has forfeited all claims to support by his improper actions and has even brought discredit to the name of the church in the community, hindering the church's ability to provide support for him.

The "receiving" church—the church that agrees to oversee the restoration—has obligations, also. They will be in charge of aiding the leader in finding housing, employment, spiritual accountability, and so on. They are not *responsible* for any of these things; they only agree to do their best to facilitate a smooth transition.

The leader being restored should prepare to return to the workforce as soon as possible. Options for careers include substitute teaching, insurance sales, real estate, and other types of non-ministry-related employment. The home he is leaving should be put up for sale or leased for an extended period.

3. Require accountability. The leader being restored and his family must be fully accountable to the new church they become

part of through engaging in small groups and church life.

By “small group” I mean a weekly small group with church leaders. The senior pastor’s small group, a men’s ministry leader’s small group, or a marriage ministry leader’s small group would all be ideal. The leader and his spouse should be in weekly counseling for at least three months after they arrive (or until the counselor feels they have dealt with the root causes of the moral failure).

Engaging in church life means the leader must bring his family to church weekly, sit toward the front, and participate in worship and fellowship. Any serving or leadership must be postponed until the pastor has observed months of consistency and steady, functional progress.

4. Facilitate deliverance. The primary requirement for moral restoration is true repentance and deliverance. True repentance is 99 percent of deliverance. A renouncing of soul ties, breaking of all contact with the person he was in an immoral relationship with, closing of doors opened from childhood, and prayer and fasting for roots of sin to be discerned and removed are all critical to restoration. It is important for the overseeing body to not only recommend but also to facilitate this type of deliverance.

Addressing Other Failures

Often when a leader commits a moral failure, other areas of his life are affected and must be restored as well. For such a leader, or for one who has not fallen morally but who has mishandled money, fallen into addiction, or failed in his marriage, I recommend intervention.

Finances. Restoration for financial failures requires, as a minimum, repayment and restitution. If criminal activities were engaged in, they may require judicial punishment. A leader whose personal finances are not in order must forfeit his leadership position and allow a ministry representative to

monitor all income and disbursements until outstanding debts are paid in full.

Vices. Paul said that an overseer must not be “addicted to wine” (1 Tim. 3:3, NASB). Though many groups differ regarding their opinion on the casual use of alcohol (I prefer to abstain to preclude any possibility of drunkenness), addiction to alcohol, illegal drugs, or pain pills is grounds for disqualification. Addictive behavior requires several years of restorative therapy.

Divorce. The Scriptures qualify a leader as the “husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2). A leader who unscripturally divorces (that is, divorces for any reason other than spousal adultery) or whose spouse divorces him should step down from ministry for an extended time period in the hope of restoring his or her marriage. It is not unusual for an unscriptural divorce to result in reconciliation and remarriage.

The leader must not consider remarriage to a different partner until his spouse has remarried and reconciliation therefore becomes impossible. All initial efforts must be toward restoration of their home, not beginning a new life with someone else.

If a couple is close to divorce or has divorced and is seeking reconciliation, weekly counseling for marriage restoration for at least one year should be pursued by the couple. Ministry activity should be limited to events both partners can participate in for an extended period.

Finally, if counselors, pastors and the couple agree, they can be restored back into full-time ministry.

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