

The Right Way to Deal With Hypocrisy in the Church

Without a doubt, we have hurt our witness to the world with our hypocrisy, thereby undercutting our moral and spiritual authority. Why should people listen to us if we preach one thing and do another? How can we expose sin in the society when we're practicing sin in the church? On what basis can we speak out against gay "marriage" when we've allowed our own marriages to go to pot?

The pedophile priest scandal in the Catholic Church not only inflicted terrible suffering on the boys who were abused, but it also terribly damaged the reputation of the Vatican, greatly weakening its influence in many parts of the world.

The flood of scandals in the evangelical church, both sexual and financial, have made us a laughingstock, to the point that many Americans simply assume that the more famous the TV preacher or pastor the more certain it is that he (or she) is getting rich off the gospel, not to mention probably hiding some secret sexual sin. (Of course, the vast majority of evangelical pastors and leaders are not rich, not famous and not guilty of secret sexual sin, but there are enough bad apples to make all the apples suspect.)

We can't blame the world for not taking us seriously when so much of our own house is not in order, and we can only point a finger at ourselves and say, "Although we thank God for the multitude of godly men and women serving the Lord faithfully (and even sacrificially) across America, we have been plagued by hypocrisy and scandals, and we need to lead the way in repentance and asking for forgiveness, both from God and from people."

That's why I've said for years now that no-fault, heterosexual

divorce in the church has done more to undermine marriage than all gay activists combined, and that's why I'm all for any true spiritual movement that calls us to recognize, confess, and forsake our sins by the grace of God and the power of Jesus' blood.

Repentance blames no one else and makes no excuses. Instead, it takes full responsibility and makes an about face, receiving mercy and restoration from the Father.

Interestingly, the world's outrage against our hypocrisy suggests that the world actually expects us to be different as followers of Jesus, meaning people expect us to be living godly lives, they expect us to be caring for the poor and needy, they expect us to have a different set of values.

And so, while worldly people may hate us for those very values, they expect us to live by them.

What people fail to realize, though, is that the right response to hypocrisy is not to sanction the sins of the world or lower the standards of the church. The right response is to change our ways, put an end to our hypocrisy, re-establish our high standards and then call the society as a whole to repent.

In other words, the right response to hypocrisy is not to say, "Because we've had a plague of pornography in the church, we'll drop out of the culture wars," or "Because we've had so many scandalous divorces, we'll drop our opposition to same-sex 'marriage.'"

Why in the world would we do that? Why would we sanction our neighbor's sin because we too were guilty of sin?

The right response is to repent of our own sin and then to call our neighbor to repent of his or her sin.

The right response is to say, "From here on, I turn from my sinful ways, and I urge you to turn from yours."

Somehow, people think that because we have been hypocritical at times then the solution is to drop all opposition to sinful behaviors. But that makes no sense at all.

If I am engaging in the destructive behavior of alcoholism but I'm encouraging you to break your drug addiction, the right response to my hypocrisy is not to say, "I'm OK, you're OK." To the contrary, the right response is for me to get help for my alcoholism and to continue to encourage you to get help for your drug addiction.

Could you imagine a doctor saying to the patient, "We're ashamed to say this, but while we've been treating you for cancer, we've completely overlooked your serious heart condition, so to make things right, we'll stop treating the cancer"?

Of course not. In the same way, we don't stop exposing the sin of the world (or, worse still, condone the sin of the world, or even worse, celebrate the sin of the world) because we've had sin in the church.

Instead, we get our own house in order so we can help the world get its house in order. (Obviously, the best way we can help people straighten out their lives is by pointing them to Jesus and by setting godly examples.)

Thankfully, there are millions of sincere believers who have been living consistent lives and shining as lights in the dark, and they should go on shining brightly and clearly without shame or hesitation.

But where we have been hypocritical, let us acknowledge it, let us renounce it and let us redouble our efforts to stand for what is right in God's sight, in both the church and in the society.

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