

What to Do When Leaders Fail You

Several years ago my husband and I led a short-term missions trip behind the Iron Curtain for 14 days. We were immersed in ministry and had no access to any form of news in English. By the time our ministry responsibilities ended, we were eager to get a copy of USA Today.

When we arrived in Austria, we bought a paper at the first newsstand we found. You can imagine the shock we felt when we opened it up and read the bold headline, “Famous Tele-evangelist Indicted for Fraud.” While we had been out of the country, this scandal had been chronicled in newspapers, magazines and the evening news.

As the days passed, failure after failure among Christian leaders was brought to the light. Many believers became so disturbed that they lost their ability to trust spiritual leaders. The local church as well as parachurch ministries began to suffer financially. Wonderful ministries that were run with integrity suffered as people withdrew their financial support.

The publicizing of the failures was a devastating blow to the body of Christ at large. But we should not be duped into thinking that the failures broadcast on the evening news and written about in the papers during that season are the only ones that have ever occurred in the church. Similar heartbreaking scenarios are happening right now in city after city across our nation.

Effects of a Leader's Failure

We may not read about them in the headlines, but many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are facing a crisis in their local congregations. Presented with the agonizing truth that

their leader has fallen into moral failure, they wonder what they should do.

First Corinthians 12:26 tells us that “if one member [of the body of Christ] suffers, all the members suffer with it” (NASB). The reality of this scripture rings loud and clear for those who have experienced a leader’s fall. Here are some of the ways we can be affected.

Basic trust is violated. How can we place our trust in people we know are subject to failure? Many believers have responded to this dilemma by choosing not to trust leaders at all. The problem with this response is that it leads to isolation and a cynical spirit.

Living behind a wall of mistrust robs us of an ability to receive impartation. We are no longer teachable, and we open ourselves up to deception and rebellion.

Several years ago, I was part of a ministry that interacted with numerous other well-known ministries in the body of Christ. I had great admiration for the leaders of these ministries, whom I had previously seen only from afar. Unfortunately, my interaction with many of them on a more personal level proved to be somewhat disappointing.

To be honest, I was shocked by the conversation and behavior of people I had considered to be spiritual giants. I was so disillusioned I began to wonder if there were any really holy people in leadership. Now I realize I was overreacting, but those were my true feelings at the time.

With my walls of mistrust firmly in place, I attended a Sunday morning worship service at a church I was visiting. The pastor preached a message about—you guessed it—trust!

He talked about “disillusionment.” The word disillusion means “to come to the end of an illusion.” In that moment, I realized that I had believed an illusion concerning leaders.

The illusion was that ministers should never say or do anything wrong. I had mistaken the anointing for proof of character. The reality is that we all fail, and we are all less than the anointing portrays us to be. My inability to recognize the humanity of my leaders set them up for failure. This simple revelation released me to trust leaders with the understanding that they—like the rest of us—are all flawed.

There is a difference, however, between a simple character flaw and participation in acts of sin such as adultery, homosexual relationships, financial fraud or abusive behavior. Committing such sins requires a process of repentance, correction, restoration and accountability over a period of time.

If your leader has fallen, it is not wrong for you to expect this process to occur. The fact that a leader is “only human” does not excuse him from his responsibility to God and the people.

Our ongoing vision is interrupted. Becoming aware of a leader’s failure can cause us to question everything we have learned under his leadership. Our initial response is a feeling of betrayal. The leader has not only failed the church in a corporate sense but has also failed us on a personal level.

It is natural to want to reject when we feel betrayed. But we have to understand that no one is all good or all bad. We must believe God’s Word in Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (NKJV).

When my husband Steve and I were new believers, we were very hungry for ministry. We found a program on television called The PTL Club. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker were the hosts of this daily program. Even though they were somewhat flamboyant, we were drawn to them because of their love for God.

Our lives were greatly enriched by their teaching and sharing from their own lives. I identified with Tammy Faye because she shared her weaknesses on camera. She had a problem with fear just as I did. She helped me believe that if she could get free, so could I!

Millions of believers were blessed by the Bakkers' ministry. When the couple was targeted by the secular media for destruction we did not want to believe the news stories. However, the close scrutiny did uncover legitimate financial mishandling and moral failures.

After recovering from the initial shock, I realized I could remain bitter and reject all I had received. Or I could hold fast to the good and leave the situation in God's hands. In the final analysis, Jim and Tammy Faye really did love God and had a legitimate ministry. They simply had personal issues they did not yield to God's dealing.

We have to recognize that we are all recipients of God's grace. We cannot allow the agony of a leader's fall to interfere with our progress in God. Another's failure may sadden but should not paralyze us.

Being safe becomes too important. When a leader falls, shaking is inevitable. A leader is supposed to keep a steady hand on the helm so that the ship stays on course. When the leader creates the storm, we lose the steady hand, and the course becomes somewhat treacherous.

No one likes to feel insecure. After all, Hebrews 12:28 tells us that we "are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken."

A few years ago our whole family went on a cruise. We had so much fun, we decided to make it an annual event.

Unfortunately, the night before we pulled back into port, an unexpected hurricane hit us at sea. The ship rolled and shook with great intensity. For 12 hours, we endured the shaking and

pitching.

Even though we had nearly 4 days of great fun on perfect seas, those 12 hours made us reconsider our annual commitment. Personally, I want to have a guarantee in writing that the seas will be calm before I go again!

When a leader falls, the ship starts to rock. After the unsettling, many people want to make sure they never experience that kind of discomfort again. They usually do one of two things. They look for another church that lacks passion and relationship and places little demand on them. Or they stay where they are but become withdrawn and inactive.

In either case, they are attempting to keep themselves safe from hurt and disappointment. If your goal is to avoid risk, you will remain within safe boundaries. But your need to protect yourself is rooted in a spirit of fear. Once you give into fear, it becomes your master.

What Can You Do?

A leader's failure begins a cascade effect that is difficult to halt. If we don't respond properly to the situation, we can be caught up in the emotional climate that surrounds this kind of event. To avoid being one of the casualties, we should carefully consider our actions.

Pray, don't talk. When shaking comes to a church or ministry due to a leader's failure, everyone seems to have an opinion. And everyone wants to express his opinion. The problem is that opinions are often the seedbed of misinformation and wrong judgment.

Judgment comes out of prayerlessness, but the spirit of restoration is birthed in times of intercession. Discernment is heightened by spending time in the presence of the Lord. Because of the rumors that proliferate, discernment is very important.

My mother always told me, "Don't be a part of the problem; be a part of the solution." Her advice applies here. Too much talking will make you a part of the problem, but prayer will allow you to pour out all your hurt, disappointment and frustration to the only One who can bring good out of the bad.

Go to spiritual authority. During periods of upheaval in the church, we need to hear from those who have been placed in a position of spiritual authority in our lives. If your pastor has fallen and there is no authority substructure, it is important for you to find an impartial voice to help you keep on course.

Wait on God. Sometimes our initial response in these situations is to run. But leaving a hard place without God's direction will lead us only to another hard place. The Lord may tell you to make a change, but be certain you have heard from God. This is a time to examine the vision again and determine if you are still part of it.

Remember, the goal of correction is restoration. When our commitment is based on God's word, we must be faithful to Him and hold steady until restoration occurs.

If circumstances are as they should be, there will be a plan in place to deal with a leader's fall—an accountability structure to bring order. In a denominational setting, there will be many overseers who can be called upon. In an independent church order, there will normally be a group of leaders who are committed to making themselves available during a time of crisis.

In all cases this structure should allow for leaders to be held accountable, corrected and restored. Even during a crisis, proper order will help keep the safety net in place. In such a setting fallen leaders can be covered as they are going through the dealings of God.

The unfortunate reality is that many churches' structures do not allow for this type of accountability and restoration process. Even in some denominational environments, leaders are abandoned and removed for failure without an opportunity to be restored. I know of some leaders who desperately want to be delivered but cannot let anyone know their situation for fear of losing their reputation or livelihood.

When a leader falls, the most important thing for you to do is guard your heart and your behavior. If you aren't familiar with your church structure regarding correction and restoration, don't be afraid to ask for clarification, but be certain you are a committed member and have a meek and humble spirit when asking.

Last of all, don't give up on the church! God is raising up a generation of leaders and believers who welcome relationship and accountability. If you allow the crisis to take you under, you could miss a great moment in history. When leaders fall, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. We can trust Him to make us a glorious bride.

Shirley Arnold is pastor, along with her husband, Steve, of TLC Family Church in Lakeland, Fla. They have also established The Spirit Life School of Theology, The Secret Place Associated Network of Ministries and The Secret Place Training Facility. She is the author of several books and ministers in churches and conferences around the world.