

# You Cheated on Your Spouse—Now What?

Counseling Christian leaders that have fallen into infidelity, pornography or other sexual inappropriateness has been a regular occurrence in my office for the last 30 years. When you do something for almost 30 years, you learn quite a bit about that subject. I want to share with you what I have learned about those who fall and get back into a growing ministry. I also want to share with you what I learned about those who fall and don't go back to ministry or have a much smaller ministry if they do go back in their own strength.

## **Falling Forward**

Falling happens in ministry. Everyone reading this article can conjure up names of the famous Christian leaders and pastors who have fallen in the last two decades. My bet is you can also conjure up names of people you know personally who were in ministry and have fallen. I was on a plane one day after the national news that my pastor had fallen into sexual sin. As I was thinking through by name all the pastors I have had over the 30 years of being a Christian, I realized that 50 percent of my pastors or their wives had fallen into sexual sin. So these experiences are not just clinical for me; like you, these are friends and people I cared deeply about.

In the best of the cases I have worked with, I must first start with the church or para-church ministries. The ministry or church that actually plans ahead by clearly outlining in its bylaws or employee handbook the procedures that will occur to anyone who morally compromises is way ahead of the game.

I can't tell you how many times ministries and churches have had their heads in the sand, honestly believing it would not happen to them. Christian leaders and employees fail morally

all the time, so planning for this reality is the healthiest proactive step your church or ministry can do.

Second, the church in ministry that outlines a clear set of expectations for returning to ministry is also ahead of the game when it comes to a moral falling of a leader or employee. Those who have come to my office with written expectations had a real clear picture of what was expected of them to be able to return to ministry.

The person in the process is the other large variable as to whether restoration can happen. You can have perfect process with a rebellious heart, and that person can be difficult or impossible to restore. Also you can have imperfect processes and a good repentant heart, and restoration can fully happen.

The person I see regularly restored is the man or woman who disclosed their sin; be it pornography, sex with others or improprieties of some kind to their authority and their spouse. This person isn't responding to a real or imagined external threat or facts that are being imposed on them. Rather, this person is responding to the conviction of the Holy Spirit in a desire to repent and change their life, regardless of the cost. This variable of honesty and reckless desire to change is respectable and often paves a softer way to restoration.

A second quality of the person I see fully restored has a humble heart. They are not talking about their great gifts, their influence, or how important they are. They are broken from their mistakes. They are broken and realize some of the pain they have caused others who have trusted them and ache for what they have done.

A third quality I see of the restored is taking full responsibility. They are not blaming the spouse or marriage, how stressed they have been or even the other person they were immoral with. This person stands up to the plate and says, "I

did it, I'm 100 percent responsible." The person who fully owns their sin is mostly to heal from this past and have a future in ministry.

On this same note, this person accepts consequences for their behavior. They know there will be several layers of consequence and accepts these consequences as an adult. An adult says, "That's my mistake, my responsibility and my consequences" and moves through the process with no attitude to escape these consequences.

A fourth quality of those who can be restored is they can take direction. Be it a board, a bishop or human resources, they can take direction. A plan of restoration is laid out, and they simply follow the direction given to them by their authorities in a submitted manner.

Embracing accountability is the next feature I see in the heart that can be restored to ministry. This person knows that being accountable to someone or a group of people is part of the process. I had a worship leader in my office who, after disclosure to the pastor, was given the option of accountability to a team of four men. He willingly agreed to this and texted all four men daily and calls one of the four men every day. He was happy to do this accountability and will most likely be restored to ministry in the future.

Actively working on the marriage is also something I see people voluntarily do who are restored. The marriage is not responsible for the poor choices of the fallen person. The damage that infidelity or inappropriateness can cause to the marriage and its trust-fabric can be huge. The spouse and the perpetrator need healing, and so does the marriage.

Continuing on this thought, those who fall forward also seek out competent, professional counselors. This helps them discover why they did what they did. This can identify a sexual addiction, depression, psychological disorder, sexual

abuse or other issues. This can help make sense of an irrational choice; however, they are still responsible for the choice.

Finally, I have worked with organizations and individuals who request to do ongoing polygraphs to verify the stopping of pornography, sex outside the marriage or whatever the behavior was. To find a good polygrapher, call a few criminal attorneys and see who they recommend. This strategy has several helpful aspects. First, it ends the secret world of the staff member who acted inappropriately. Second, it can rebuild trust in the marriage. It can also help the authority to trust but verify before laying their hands on to return them to ministry. And it can show the church did due diligence in this season in case this person reoffends in the future.

## **Falling Apart**

Unfortunately, not all who fall will fall forward. In more than 20 years, I have been called not only to counsel the fallen but to be a consultant to churches and ministries to restore fallen leaders. There are characteristics of those who do what I call “fall apart,” not fall forward.

Again, I will start with the church or organization. This organization has not proactively written anything into its bylaws or guidelines about what is to occur when a leader falls in their organization. This leaves everyone scrambling; and if it is the leader or senior pastor, it leaves the underlings trying to make decisions, which cannot be optimal, and the leader can use manipulation and cohesion to call the shots on their own restoration (bad idea).

A leader who is caught is often on a harder road to restoration. External motivation, to be honest, can be short-lived. The leader or employee can try to manipulate facts as opposed to repent of their sin. I have seen some leaders truly repent after exposure, but it is a harder road for them than

for the person who discloses and repents at the start. I have been in countless meetings where the unbrokenness, denial and lies of a leader could take hours or longer before they actually repent or own their mistakes.

Arrogance is part of most of the people who are not restored to ministry by others. Their specialness, giftedness and sacrifice are circular conversations. They demand to decide their own restoration process. They are offended at anyone suggesting a path of submission.

As far as taking responsibility, those who are not restored rarely own their mistakes fully. They will still blame their spouse, the marriage the other person, their stress, depression or almost anything. A quality here I look for is if they still see themselves as a victim. If he or she is a victim rarely can they be restored.

They are the perpetrators of their life, their spouse and the people in the ministry, the other person and their family. They caused all the pain, and unless they can see themselves as a perpetrator, they are not in reality, and God only lives in reality.

This victim mentality goes into any consequence they or their family suffer as well. They are a victim of the brand, the overseers, Human Resources or their superiors. What is being asked of them is always unreasonable. Being the victim keeps this person stuck and leaves them vulnerable to bitterness and hate.

This person who falls apart, even if they start a new ministry or church, rarely has real accountability. They reject the notion that they should be fully submitted for a season. I know a leader who fully submitted as long as he was getting paid by the organization. But when the money stopped, so did the submission, because it wasn't from the heart.

This person will often minimize the need for help. They

repented; it's under the blood, and let's move on. I am a new creature. This is often from someone who doesn't heal and actually reoffends again in the future. I had a man in my practice who had been fired from three different church positions for infidelity with church members. He was a sex addict, which always led back to affairs.

You can imagine that this person won't do ongoing polygraphs, either. So if they start a new church or ministry, there is an unhealed, unaccountable person at the seed of this new work. If they can't be restored, often they blame others and do not mature past their mistakes.

I hope this has been helpful because most likely, as a Christian leader, you will be a part of restoring someone who falls. Make sure your organization is proactive by creating guidelines for when this happens to your organization. I believe in restoration. I have seen countless pastors and ministry leaders fully restored and prospering in their calling. If my team or I can serve you, let us know. We love seeing God restore leaders all over the world.

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