

Games We Play

Two years ago we reported on a prominent pastor in California who successfully maintained his popularity even though he divorced his wife and married another woman within seven days. This man abandoned his family, left his denomination, moved his church to another location and continued smiling into the camera from his media platform. Not exactly the kind of behavior that qualifies a man for church leadership, but hey, the guy sure can preach!

When I mention this man's sin today, people remind me that it's now "all under the blood of Jesus." That is a convenient Christian code phrase that should be translated, "It's been two years, and his ratings are still good." For too many of us, the easiest way to handle a gross moral failure is to pretend it didn't happen. We don't want to be confused by the facts.

A psychologist would say we are living in denial by ignoring this man's actions. But many charismatic churches have made denial a doctrine. The message we send to leaders is: "If you mess up, hide it, and move on. Public confession will hurt the ministry." The message communicated to our congregations is: "If you mess up, hide it, and God will still bless you just as He blessed your pastor."

How is this any different from the game Catholic bishops played during the 1980s, when they moved pedophile priests from one parish to another to protect their image? Hiding that sin only hurt more children in the end. Jesus' blood does not "cover" what we conceal.

Yes, Jesus forgives our sins when we confess them to Him. But this does not give any church leader permission to live immorally and then lie about it in order to save his reputation. My Bible says sin will spread and infect everybody if it is not dealt with properly.

A Christian leader who falls into serious sexual sin (or violates other character standards listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7) should step away from the pulpit for a season. He must get his heart healed, mend his marriage and make restitution to the other victims of his behavior. (No threats or hush money allowed.)

After his soul is restored, the minister should by all means return to the pulpit. But not before. Meanwhile his church may suffer some financial consequences, and he may have to sell a house or a car. But that's a small price to pay for holiness in God's house.

Restoration is a simple process, really. (See Mike Fehlauser's excellent article on the subject, page 80.) So why is it that so few charismatic leaders don't step down when they fall? Part of the reason may be that we rarely see healthy repentance and restoration modeled by leaders.

Back in the 1980s, evangelical pastor Gordon MacDonald stepped down from a top ministry post and admitted that he had fallen morally. He took a sabbatical to heal his marriage, then he stepped back into the ministry—and his failures became fertilizer for spiritual growth. His new book, *Mid-Course Correction*, is helping many people navigate their midlife struggles.

Our movement needs a midcourse correction, and it could start with some good, old-fashioned repentance and confession. Please: If you have something to hide, bring it out from under the rug and into His light. Let God heal you His way.