

How Do We Process the Robert Morris Scandal?

Gateway Church in Dallas is the ninth-largest church in the United States, with more than 25,000 members. But the church has been reeling since June 18, when Pastor Robert Morris, 62, resigned after he admitted to sexually abusing a 12-year-old girl during his early years as a youth evangelist.

Some of Gateway's elders have now resigned. Leaders who are still there say they were blindsided by the allegations. They knew Morris had admitted to a moral failure 35 years ago, when he was at a different church. But he had told people he had inappropriate contact with "a young lady," and that he had stepped down from ministry for two years to get rehabilitation.

But the "young lady," Cindy Clemishire, now a grandmother, says she was just a girl when Morris began a sexual relationship with her when he began visiting her parents' home in Oklahoma while preaching in youth revivals. When she reached out to Morris in 2005 to ask for restitution after years of abuse, he told her in an email that she could face criminal charges for exposing him.

Morris went on to become one of the most successful pastors in America. Now, no one knows who will fill his vacant pulpit. The whole dilemma leaves all of us sad, bewildered and angry at the same time—especially the people who consider Gateway their spiritual home.

Breaking news, Spirit-filled stories. Subscribe to Charisma on YouTube now!

There's so much to unpack when processing this tragedy. Fingers are pointing in many directions. But as I have prayed, and grieved, and prayed some more, I've come to some

conclusions that might help us all as we collectively mourn this loss.

– We must accept that Christian leaders sometimes fail. Sometimes we forget that as long as we are on this side of heaven, life isn't going to be perfect—and even pastors will sometimes disappoint us. Jesus had a Judas on his team, and Paul had a Demas. Paul had to confront to a man in Corinth who was living immorally with his father's wife (see 1 Cor. 5:1). Sometimes we must grapple with unspeakably ugly problems in the church. But those problems don't discredit the gospel; they only prove how much we need a Savior.

– Churches must have zero tolerance for child abuse. The Robert Morris scandal would have played out much differently if leaders had contacted police and followed proper protocols when Clemishire was abused. Sadly, there was a cover-up—by Morris and possibly others. It's true that people viewed sexual abuse differently in the 1980s—but we can't tolerate those sick attitudes today. Let's hope this fiasco will help us put proper policies in place so this never happens again.

– We need to do a better job of vetting ministry candidates. Let's be honest and admit that in the charismatic movement—which declares itself to be both independent and nondenominational—we've created a loosey-goosey world that lacks accountability. Ministers move around from place to place, often with skeletons in their closets. In some cases, elders or ministry board members become yes men instead of objective advisers. This scandal is a harsh reminder that we need to clean up our act.

– Character must be a priority when selecting ministers. When the apostle Paul described the qualifications for leaders in the early church in 1 Timothy 3, he demanded that they be prudent, respectable, gentle, peaceable, not addicted to wine, “free from the love of money” (v. 3, NASB 1995), dignified and of good reputation. All of the requirements Paul listed were

related to the person's character except "able to teach" in verse 2. Yet today, it seems we place more importance on pulpit savvy, charisma and fundraising skills than we do on basic integrity.

Get your FREE CHARISMA NEWSLETTERS today! Stay up to date with current issues, Holy Spirit news, Christian teachings, Charisma videos & more!

– We must reevaluate the health of megachurch culture. I've stepped back from the Gateway crisis to ask: How healthy is it for us to have churches of 10,000 members? How healthy is it for a pastor to be in front of a huge crowd every week? Many pastors dream about having a big church because in today's competitive culture, ministry effectiveness is determined by the size of the auditorium and the number of hits and likes on social media.

Wouldn't it be better if a church started multiple congregations rather than growing so big that it requires a stadium-sized building? A smaller church model would train more leaders instead of creating dependency on one man. I believe this will be a key issue in the next five years as spiritual revival brings a bigger harvest.

Fame can turn people into narcissists. I've studied the negative effects of fame on young children—such as child actors or musicians—and it's not good. Why do many child celebrities become depressed, addicted or suicidal? It's because God didn't intend for people to live on pedestals or in front of cameras 24/7.

Let's remember that Satan offered to give Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" when He was tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:8b). The devil offered Jesus worldwide fame, but our Lord refused the offer. He chose the humble path, and He poured His life into a few. He didn't call us to build towers of Babel to be seen; He calls us stay low to the

ground, wash feet and die to ourselves.

Let's choose to stay low. Let's pray for Cindy Clemishire, for Robert Morris and for the members of Gateway. And let's pray that we hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the global church in the wake of this crisis.

Join Charisma Magazine Online to follow everything the Holy Spirit is doing around the world!

J. Lee Grady is an author, award-winning journalist and ordained minister. He served as a news writer and magazine editor for many years before launching into full-time ministry.

Lee is the author of six books, including "10 Lies the Church Tells Women," "10 Lies Men Believe" and "Fearless Daughters of the Bible." His years at Charisma magazine also gave him a unique perspective of the Spirit-filled church and led him to write "The Holy Spirit Is Not for Sale" and "Set My Heart on Fire," which is a Bible study on the work of the Holy Spirit.