

How to Find Healing After Church Leaders Fail You

Editor's Note: In view of the recent scandals involving high-profile ministries, Charisma News shares this two-part series by bestselling author Eric Wilson about his own experiences as the son of a pastor who fell into sexual sin. We present this for your prayerful consideration. Watch for part 2, coming soon to Charisma News.

The coming announcement would change our lives forever.

On that somber Sunday morning, my brother, sister and I didn't park in a marked space near the church entryway, and we didn't sit in reserved seats up front. No, our dad and mom discouraged such things. They believed servanthood was the key to true leadership. As a family, we had served on mission fields from Brazil to India, and for decades our parents had touched hearts and lives in spiritual and practical ways. In the mid-1980s, this pioneer church of theirs became one of the fastest growing in the Pacific Northwest, and we Wilson kids couldn't go anywhere without being recognized.

Despite our place in the spotlight, my siblings and I learned as teenagers to put others' needs before our own. We were no better than anyone else. As believers, all of us were ministers of the gospel, all of us sinners saved by grace.

Static crackled in the mic as the assistant pastor faced the crowd.

Here it came.

Our family, church and futures were devastated by the news that Pastor Mark had been asked to step down due to "moral failure." While details weren't made public, we discovered our dad had been sleeping with my sister's longtime friend.

Believing he was in love, he showed no interest in repentance or restoration. He and his new girlfriend bolted for California.

Not only was our community left reeling, but our mother experienced a mental breakdown, and our family home soon went into foreclosure.

My brother, age 16, was emotionally orphaned.

At 18, my sister's dream of someday having Dad conduct her wedding was over.

At 19, my plan of pursuing a pastoral career was now up for serious debate.

In the years that followed and into adulthood, my brother, sister and I wrestled with questions about God, truth, leadership and personal sin. Could we ever trust a pastor again? Why had God allowed such amazing things to happen in our parents' ministry only to let it fall apart? How could we point fingers when each of us had our own issues to deal with? Then again, wasn't it biblical to address rather than ignore ungodly behavior?

At the deepest level, I wanted to know:

If Dad cheated on Mom even while parenting us and pastoring a church, was anything he taught me worth holding onto? Was marriage a joke? Was God even real? Or was all of it just a lie?

Many believers have struggled with similar questions over the past year, after three separate scandals made headlines and rocked the evangelical world. Initially, some of us refused to believe what we were hearing. Perhaps these were just hack jobs aimed at prominent Christian leaders.

Yet as details came to light, we had to face the cold, harsh truth.

In August 2020, Jerry Falwell Jr. resigned as president of Liberty University after reports of financial corruption and sexual misconduct. Falwell was a prominent voice in American Christianity and politics. His support of President Trump drew even more attention to his situation, and cries of hypocrisy rang out.

Then in November, Pastor Carl Lentz was fired from Hillsong Church, in New York City. He had ministered to celebrities such as Justin Bieber, Kevin Durant and Selena Gomez, and been interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. Lentz's spiritual and cultural impact was severely tested, though, by breaches of trust and incidents of infidelity.

Finally, as February 2021 rolled around, a monthslong investigation confirmed rumors regarding yet another Christian luminary. Ravi Zacharias was a popular writer and speaker, an intellectual who boldly defended the faith. Before his death at age 74, he had used thousands of ministry dollars to support massage therapists with whom he was intimately involved. His actions betrayed his wife's trust and the trust of millions worldwide.

Falwell, Lentz and Zacharias represented biblical gifts of administration, music and teaching. They used these gifts to direct students, celebrities and agnostics toward God. While I'm sure none of them would have called themselves perfect, they were influential and highly regarded. I myself was a fan of Zacharias' books and apologetics.

So, where do I go from here?

When leaders fail, how do I reconcile the things they taught us about God's nature with the things they later revealed about humanity's fallen nature?

The scandals of 2020 and 2021 will not be the last time Christian figures come under fire for wrongdoing. If we proclaim a higher standard, we should be held to that

standard. To look away in horror, pain or denial will not provide any answers. Whether cover-ups happen in U.S. women's gymnastics, the Catholic Church, Wall Street or evangelical Christianity, the best course of action is to bring things into the light. We've all seen how stuff gets uglier when left to fester in the dark.

With cancel culture now so prevalent, I am not surprised to read that Ravi Zacharias' books are being pulled by HarperCollins Christian Publishing, and that author Lee Strobel is revising his book, *Case for Faith*, which was to feature Zacharias. These are prudent financial decisions. And as any parent can tell you, if bad behavior has no consequences, there will be no lessons learned.

I understand all that. I do.

Looking back, though, I wonder, how was I to cancel my own dad? Could I simply remove my memories of him from my brain? If I removed all his words of guidance would my entire foundation crumble?

Surely, there are Liberty students who were guided along by Jerry Falwell Jr.

There are well-known figures who came to Jesus through Carl Lentz.

There are thinkers who turned to God through the words of Ravi Zacharias.

And there are three Wilson siblings who learned about love, laughter, faith and forgiveness, through the fathering of the man they called Daddy.

I am older and wiser now, and yes, a bit more cynical. Sin nature is not often acknowledged these days, but that seed of rebellion was planted in the human heart by Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, and it spreads through

each family tree, a cancer in our spiritual DNA. We're told in 1 John 1:8 (NLT) that "if we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth."

For my siblings and me, the path to healing and redemption meant facing the truth of what occurred. We couldn't succumb to the lies Dad initially told us, to rationalizations Mom clung to or to rumors others circulated. Whether our dad ever repented or apologized, we had to confront the damage caused. We talked honestly amongst ourselves. We expressed simmering rage and emotional anguish. We even tried to comfort other people who had been hurt, though a few refused to be in the same room as my brother or me because we looked too much like our dad, which stirred their own anger and pain.

Ultimately, we had to go to our heavenly Father and tell Him how we felt. We couldn't hold it in and pretend everything was all right. It wasn't. {eoa}

Eric Wilson is the New York Times bestselling author of 18 books, including *Fireproof*, *October Baby*, *Facing the Giants* and *Samson*. He recently completed a family memoir with his brother and sister titled *American Leftovers: Surviving Family, Religion and the American Dream*, which is under consideration for publication. Eric lives in Nashville, Tennessee, with his wife of 30 years, singer/songwriter Carolyn Rose. They have two grown daughters and two grandchildren.

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