

When Perfect Pastors Divorce

✖ Pastor Jack (not his real name) stood before his congregation in tears. He said, “I have to confess that I have been involved in an extramarital affair. Effective today I am resigning as the senior pastor of this church. I’m sorry.” The congregation sat in shocked silence. Many wept.

I never saw it coming. Just a week earlier I had taken the pastor’s beautiful wife, Angela, out to lunch. She acted as if she didn’t have a problem in the world. Everything was great.

I asked her, “How did you meet Jack?” Her answer is still vivid in my mind.

She set down her salad fork and said, “We met in high school. I was a lowly freshman, and Jack was captain of the football team. He was class president and the big man on campus.

“One day he sat down next to me in the school cafeteria and asked me out on a date. I was on cloud nine! I couldn’t believe that the most popular guy in school was interested in me.”

She had stars in her eyes as she told me about it. She said they had been married for 18 years and she was still smitten with Jack.

A few months later she and Jack were divorced. How could this happen? It wasn’t supposed to turn out like this.

Jack and Angela were the perfect couple. He was a wonderful, compassionate pastor who taught that marriage is sacred and that adultery is a deadly trap. Angela was a supportive, loving wife. They had sweet children, a large congregation that loved them and prominence in the community. What went wrong?

The Problem No One Wants to Talk About

Divorce is an unspoken epidemic among believers. A recent report by the Barna Research Group revealed that born-again Christians are more likely to go through a marital split than non-Christians. According to the nationwide study, released in December 1999, 27 percent of those identified as born-again Christians have experienced at least one divorce. Among those who are not born again, only 24 percent are currently divorced or have been at least once.

A related study also conducted by Barna Research found that among Protestant senior pastors, 15 percent have experienced divorce.

About the time that Pastor Jack resigned from his church, my husband and I were planning a ski vacation with our close friends Scott and Julie. Every winter we would rent a chalet and take our families skiing together.

Last winter they canceled and told us they were getting divorced. We were devastated. When they told me, I said, "No!" with such force that I felt my words alone could change their decision.

Scott and Julie had been in ministry for 20 years. Scott was an associate pastor in a thriving church. They had served as missionaries in Brazil and were popular speakers at Christian conferences.

Their divorce became hostile, and a bitter custody battle for their two precious daughters ensued. I couldn't shake the memory of Scott and Julie snuggling together in front of the fireplace at our chalet. How could they be getting divorced?

Living in a Glass Church

Picture the perfect pastor and his family: He is a great leader, wise and above reproach. His wife is pretty, modest and gentle. His children are well-groomed and well-behaved.

That's the stereotype. It's almost never the reality. But that's the image ministers and their families feel a burden to project.

Vicki Lyons is a pastor's daughter. She told me, "When I was growing up my mother had only two friends that she could confide in. I was one, and my sister was the other.

"No matter what difficulties we were facing in our family, my parents had to act like everything was great. It seems kind of hypocritical, but we felt that we had to be an example to the congregation. Sheep panic easily. If the shepherd shows any signs of weakness the sheep scatter quickly."

Pastors and people in ministry feel the burden to project a perfect image because we, the sheep, demand it. In subtle ways we affirm them for their "perfection." In obvious ways we snipe at them for their imperfections.

If pastor's wife is not leading a women's Bible study or working in the church nursery, if pastor's son gets his ear pierced, or if pastor preaches about giving, heaven help them. The sheep start bleating. No wonder pastors feel isolated! Everything they do and say is being scrutinized for flaws on a weekly basis.

Debra is a pastor's wife with a 16-year-old daughter. Her daughter, Amy, is an outgoing, loving, involved member of the congregation. She helps teach Sunday school and is active in the youth group. By all accounts she is a devoted Christian teen-ager.

Last summer Amy committed the unpardonable sin of highlighting her hair with lemon juice. So many people complained to the pastor and his wife about it that Debra finally addressed the issue at a ladies meeting.

She said, "A number of people have commented about my daughter's hair. They've said we shouldn't let her color her

hair. They've said she's too young, it symbolizes rebellion, she's trying to attract attention, all kinds of things.

"Ladies, Amy is 16 years old. She put lemon juice in her hair. She didn't do drugs. She didn't commit an immoral act. She simply put lemon juice in her hair."

With all the pressure their congregants put on them, is it any wonder ministers and their families become so skilled at projecting a "perfect" image that when they have marital problems, it's easier to live a lie than to expose the truth? Usually the congregation doesn't find out until it's past the point of reconciliation.

The Price of Pastoral Divorce

When someone in the ministry gets a divorce a lot of people get hurt. If it is your pastor there is a sense of personal betrayal. "How could they do this to us?" For the pastor's family there is a deep feeling of shame and abandonment.

What can we do to stand in the gap for pastors and their families? Here are some practical ways we can reach out to our pastors in the hope that they don't end up as another statistic of divorce.

Consistently pray for your pastor. Make it a regular discipline in your prayer time. Don't just pray, "God bless pastor"; do spiritual warfare! Bind principalities and powers that would seek to destroy his marriage and children.

Implore the Spirit of God to move mightily in their lives. Station mighty angels of God around their home and children to push back the forces of darkness that try to attack them. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you specific guidance so that you can pray effectively. Pray also for associate ministers, missionaries and other Christian leaders that you support.

Give the pastor and his family time together. Encourage them

to take family vacations and getaways. Pastors live their lives in a fishbowl. They need some private times with their spouse and children.

Give them a gift certificate to a nice restaurant, and offer to baby-sit their children. Encourage others in the congregation to do the same. If someone in the congregation has a vacation home, suggest that it would be a blessing to let the pastor's family use it for a week. Buy them tickets to a sports event, concert or circus. Create opportunities for them to be together.

Assure the pastor and his family members that they are loved and accepted. Tell them plainly that no one expects them to be perfect. Let them know that the congregation is committed to them and that it's OK to be vulnerable. Many times pastors don't realize that when they share their weaknesses it encourages the congregation to also be open with their faults.

What should you do if you know a minister who is going through a separation or divorce?

Here are some ideas for reaching out to pastors and their families in the midst of marital crisis.

Do not abandon them! They need friends who will love them. At first they may try to retreat and regroup. They may not answer the phone, or they may want to get out of town. That's a common behavior for pastors and their spouses in the midst of separation or divorce.

Another thing that's common is for their friends and family members to bail out of their lives as if they were jumping from the deck of the sinking Titanic. Don't flee the scene. Someone has to stick around to love them.

Encourage them to see a Christian counselor. Be a shoulder to cry on and a friend to pray with, but always steer them toward a godly impartial counselor. Whether the end result is divorce

or reconciliation, counseling is needed.

Assure them of the love of God. When a pastor gets divorced he doesn't lose just a spouse; he loses everything—his job, his identity, his home, respectability, financial stability—and seemingly, even the love of God. The same is true for his wife. Many times he is stripped of his credentials and thinks he is disqualified for future ministry.

Reassure both of them that God loves them and that the gifts and callings of God are without repentance (see Rom. 11:29). God is close to the contrite and brokenhearted. He will bring restoration and healing as they draw close to Him.

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