

One Leader's Failure Isn't an Excuse to Leave the Faith

I started seriously following Jesus in the 1970s. From those early days until now, I've watched many leaders fail.

During the days of the Jesus Movement, we learned that Lonnie Frisbee—the hippie evangelist portrayed in the movie “Jesus Revolution”—got divorced because of sexual immorality and had to break ties with Calvary Chapel pastor Chuck Smith. In the 1980s, evangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Marvin Gorman were on the evening news because of sex scandals. Then, after PTL founder Jim Bakker had an extramarital affair, he went to prison for misusing donor funds.

In the 1990s, when I became an editor at Charisma, I lost count of the scandals involving bishops, pastors, false prophets, gospel singers and charlatans who preyed on the faithful. I'm old enough to remember W.V. Grant, who was exposed on “Nightline” for faking healings; Robert Tilton, who bilked donors and threw their prayer requests in the trash; Earl Paulk, who sexually abused dozens of women in his Atlanta church; and Bernard Jordan, who had the gall to charge people \$365 to get a prophetic word.

The failures continued into the next decade. I can remember times when there were four or five ministry failures happening at the same time, all involving high-profile pastors. Even in recent years we've seen a global spiritual shaking because of scandals involving revivalist Todd Bentley, charismatic prophet Paul Cain, Nigerian pastor Sunday Adelaja, apologist Ravi Zacharias, Bishop Eddie Long of Atlanta and Hillsong pastors Carl Lentz and Brian Houston.

And now, the International House of Prayer movement is reeling because of Mike Bickle's confession on Dec. 12, 2023, of

inappropriate conduct with a woman. Add to this the reports of sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention and the cover-up of child sex abuse in the Catholic Church, and it's easy to understand why some people think Christianity is a mess.

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

Here's a simple reminder: There's no problem with the gospel. There's nothing wrong with God. He's perfect, but since the beginning of time His followers have struggled with their flaws and sinful tendencies. Jesus gave us the power to avoid sin, but not every follower of Jesus fully embraces that power.

Years ago, a pastor in Australia asked me why I didn't have a sour attitude toward ministry leaders. "Lee, you've had to report on all these church scandals," he said. "How have you not become a cynic?"

My reply was honest: "Because I know I'm capable of doing the things they did." In other words, I know I'm standing today only because of the grace and mercy of God.

During the current Bickle scandal, I've heard people say that many Christians will backslide because of his mistakes. But I don't understand this reasoning. In all my years of watching ministry scandals, not once have I said, "I'm going to abandon my faith because of what that person did." Why would I give a person so much power over my life? Here are three truths that guide me when servants of God fail:

Sign up NOW for a FREE Charisma Magazine Online 30-day trial!

1. Church leaders don't belong on pedestals. Paul and Barnabas rebuked the people of Lystra when they called them gods (Acts 14:14). I respect anointed ministers, but I also know every Christian has feet of clay, including me. Only Jesus deserves

worship. Some of the godliest pastors I know have shared with me their private struggles. The apostle Paul was a spiritual giant, but he was painfully aware of his weaknesses when he said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I am the worst of them all” (1 Tim. 1:15b, NLT).

2. Just because one leader messed up doesn’t mean everyone is failing. I know hundreds of pastors and ministry leaders who have walked with the Lord for decades. God’s grace has kept them on the narrow path. Their exemplary lives show me it’s possible to finish well. Instead of focusing on the negatives, identify the true heroes who are steady and stable. They may not be the loudest or the flashiest preachers, and they may not have the biggest social media followings, but they have track records of faithfulness.

3. It’s better to pray than to criticize. The longer I live, the more I realize that a wise man is quick to hear and slow to speak. I haven’t said anything in print until today about the Bickle situation because I care about him, regardless of what he’s done. I’m praying for him, as well as for all the people in the House of Prayer movement who have been affected by this tragedy. God will bring His correction as well as His healing in this situation. And if they hurt other people, pray for them, too.

Having a merciful and prayerful attitude doesn’t mean we avoid confrontation, or that we compromise with sin. But when I confront, I want my heart to be bathed in grace. Pray for all leaders who fail—and ask God to extend the same mercy to them that you need every day.

The devil wants to use other people’s failures to discourage us. Resist the enemy’s manipulation. Keep your eyes on Jesus, and trust in His amazing grace. He is able to keep you from stumbling.

Join Charisma Magazine Online to follow everything the Holy

Spirit is doing around the world!