

What to Do When Your Pastor's Sin Comes Out

When Sarah Joy Hays learned in the summer of 2016 that her pastor in Baton Rouge, La., had been having an affair with another woman in their church – a woman who had been her spiritual mentor for many years – she was angry and confused.

“I got pregnant out of wedlock, and she was one of the first people I told,” Hays recalled. “She kind of pastored and mentored me through it.

“To find out she was actively involved in this affair throughout that – that’s where I had the hardest time, figuring out how to react to that. I was going through something that was very obvious, an ‘external sin.’ And she was in the same situation, essentially, but nobody knew.”

Both the pastor and the woman with whom he had an affair were disciplined by their denomination, and he was removed from the pastorate, Hays said.

Two years later, the small congregation has a new pastor, many members have taken advantage of periodic one-on-one and group counseling provided by their denomination, and some measure of healing has been achieved.

But Hays said she is still guarded spiritually. “It causes you to question any amount of wisdom and discernment from then on,” Hays said. “It helps determine trust and how you give away trust.”

Bill Hybels. Theodore McCarrick. Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. Tariq Ramadan. Andy Savage. Paul Pressler. Retired Mormon missions president Joseph L. Bishop. Creation Festival founder Harry Thomas. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein. Stanley Rosenfeld.

The shameful roster of spiritual leaders who have been accused of committing acts of sexual misconduct and abuse, or enabling others to commit such acts, or both has left many souls who looked to them for instruction, discernment and direction to sift through the wreckage wrought by their malfeasance.

What do we do when we learn that the person we trusted as an intermediary for God, or to teach us about all things eternal, is actually a predator? What if the faith leader we've admired all our lives turns out to be more a scoundrel than saint?

"Part of what happens to us, on a much deeper level than the initial shock, disbelief, disappointment or outrage, is that our sense of ourselves is affected negatively," said Lallene Rector, president of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Illinois, where she has been an associate professor of psychology of religion and pastoral psychotherapy since 1986.

"To the extent that we have felt enhanced in our own self-esteem by our affiliation with these leaders, part of what we may experience (often unawares) is a deflation of our own self-worth," said Rector.

"The failure of these idealized figures can strike at the very heart of our own longing for a kind of perfection," left over from our disappointments in our parents and other adults in childhood, said Rector. "Add God to that mix – the clergy as a role representative of God – and it's psychologically intoxicating."

The Bible can be instructive to some believers when it comes to spiritual leaders falling from grace – but perhaps not in the way some people might think it is.

Take King David, for instance – at best a morally complicated man who was nevertheless, Scripture says, "the apple of God's eye." It's a paradox often invoked to defend faith (and other) leaders who behave badly.

“David is like these pastors in that he is lionized for the things that he did, like expanding boundaries and whatnot, and a tradition of overlooking” the bad things he did, said the Rev. Wil Gafney, associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas.

But Gafney said the biblical king’s story is not meant to be a prescription for how anyone should behave. “Just because God did something wonderful with (David) doesn’t mean we should do all the things he did.”

From her reading of the biblical account, Gafney believes David raped Bathsheba. “The text says he sent men to get her. That evaporates consent,” Gafney said.

“I think we need to be able to not hang a thing around someone’s neck forever,” Gafney said, “but be honest and not sweep it under the rug. That means allowing brokenness to be broken.”

Because David’s story is about “how we deal with a beloved leader,” Gafney said, “some have chosen to say, ‘Well, it was all worth it.’ Some have said, ‘Let’s leave his bygones in the past.’ But others choose to say, ‘Let’s be real about this person and this is part of that legacy that doesn’t go away.’ And it doesn’t go away, because when we don’t hold him accountable for it in our telling, we then give other people permission.

“Christians have evolved into this understanding of repentance that is not biblical – that it’s about saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ and hopefully not doing the thing again.”

But that’s only the first layer of repentance, said Gafney. “From the Hebrew Bible forward, reparation is at the heart of repentance. ... Yes, your profound sorrow, your turning your life around – that’s part of it – but you’ve still never made it right,” she said.

If the ramifications of one person's failure can seem endless, the failure of an institution means restitution on another scale. A moral catastrophe like the systemic cover-up by bishops and other Catholic leaders cataloged in the landmark, 1,300-page Pennsylvania grand jury report released in August "demands public and sincere lamentation from every segment of the Body of Christ," said Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, N.M., in a recent statement. "Only then can deep healing begin."

But Rohr points out that the Catholic Church has more than just sinful behavior to account for. "It also demands public ownership, repentance, and reform of our very immature teaching in regard to sexuality in general, male power issues in particular, and our 'enforced' understanding of celibacy, which will predictably produce this kind of result.

"This shadowy material will keep emerging unless we own it and hold it fully accountable," he said.

And while leaders do their work, we have our own to do. "In the meantime," he wrote, "let's all pray and try to live more authentic sexual and spiritual lives ourselves." {eo}

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