

What to Do When a Shepherd Falls

Few things are more devastating than the failure of a church leader we trust. Here's how you can rise above the disappointment.

Not many things are more devastating than when someone in authority—someone we trust—betrays our trust and chooses sin. It's natural for us to be wounded in such situations. But unless we deal with the effect of a leader's sin, it will always be a source of oppression to us.

Sometimes church splits occur because of the sins of church leadership. I am not referring to minor offenses or flaws but to sins that are either sexual in nature or a violation of community laws that could lead to incarceration.

Zechariah warns, "Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered; and I will turn My hand against the little ones" (Zech. 13:7, NASB). This Scripture refers, of course, to Jesus Christ. He did not sin but was slandered as though He had sinned. Either way, the effect was the same: a scattering of the little ones.

Satan knows that when the shepherd of a flock is struck, "little ones" are scattered. Thus, there will almost always be more spiritual warfare against a leader than what typically comes against the church in general. Indeed, much of the warfare against a church is a direct result of the battle against its leader or leadership.

Sometimes leaders fall under the attack. Men and women alike can fail to gauge the cunning of the enemy and become entrapped in serious sin. When such sin is finally exposed, it has a devastating effect upon a church—so much so that people leave en masse.

This kind of split is caused not by the ambition of those who leave but by the failing of one in leadership. For both those who leave and those who remain, a cleansing is necessary to guide the sheep back into the blessedness of God's presence.

Effects of a Leader's Sin

When church leaders serve the living Christ in love, aggressive faith and prayerful humility, the people who dwell in that atmosphere become rich in the presence of God. Conversely, when leaders blatantly sin or are led into deception, the heartache of their downfall is absorbed into the spirits of those in their care.

This precept—that a leader's sin carries negative consequences—is not something with which we are unfamiliar. Do you remember what you felt when you heard of the sins of Bill Clinton, our former president? Or when Jimmy Swaggart fell?

Or consider the distress that crushes a family when a parent falls into serious iniquity. Unless it is remedied, the impact of these events is similar to that of a curse upon one's life.

A biblical example is David's ordering Joab, a general, to take a census of Israel. Joab begged the king: "'Why does my lord want to do this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?'" (1 Chr. 21:3, NIV). David's sin of putting his trust in numbers brought "guilt on Israel" and a plague struck them, killing thousands.

And remember the proclamation of Jeremiah about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians: "The adversary and the enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem. Because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests" (Lam. 4:12-13, NASB).

The godly example and care of true spiritual leaders, though imperfect, creates a living shelter for the people they serve. When leaders vacate their posts through serious sin, however,

spiritual enemies gain access to the church that they would not otherwise have. Instead of blessedness, oppression fills the spiritual realm of that church.

Though we may be tempted simply to ignore a leader's sin or pretend it has not affected us, the Lord reveals in the Scriptures that He wants us to face its consequences and to deal with its subsequent effect upon His people. The book of Leviticus says, "If the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer to the Lord a bull without defect as a sin offering" (Lev. 4:3).

"Guilt" in this context is not a direct result of the people's sin. It is, rather, the collective effect of what the leader's sin created within them: fear, shame, heartache, confusion and anger. The "guilt on the people" does not mean they have sinned but that the effect of their leader's sin has oppressed the congregation, positioning them in an "unblessable state of being."

This unblessed state—be it anger, cynicism or confusion, as understandable as these responses may seem—is now a "guilt on the people." To return to the state of blessedness, the people must journey away from their reaction, which needs to be openly acknowledged and atoned for.

As much as they may wish it were otherwise, a wounded church often carries a discernible cloud of heaviness. For years the influence of the wounding surfaces in mistrust of all leaders. Attitudes of cynicism or fearful anticipations become part of the normal congregational thought life. Worse, their shared, unremedied pain becomes a beehive of demonic exploitation, where human attitudes of anger and confusion leave the church vulnerable to manipulation by the enemy.

Referring to the effects, or the dwelling place, of unresolved sin, The Amplified Bible gives us an insight into this demonic infestation. It reads, "The shades of the dead are there

[specters haunting the scene of past transgressions]" (Prov. 9:18).

"Specters haunting the scene of past transgressions": This Scripture tells us that the disappointment and heartache caused by a leader's sin provide the means for demons to "haunt" the church body—if we do not find a way to redeem the failure in Christ. Human reactions and unresolved memories from the past can become a magnet for ongoing warfare. To move into a blessed future, we must be cleansed of the unredeemed past.

What is especially unfortunate is that the unredeemed past can be transferred to new members who join a wounded church, even though those individuals were not partakers of the original wounding. New believers come to churches where mistrust of leadership has residence. Soon, through the osmosis of human relationships, the same fears, mistrust and suspicions that were resident in the older members begin to surface in the life of the new ones.

Simply replacing pastors does not bring healing. What needs replacing is the cloud of heaviness that remains in that church. Not only does the fallen leader need forgiveness, cleansing and renewal in Christ, but the people also must be cleansed of what was transferred to them.

Perhaps we are tempted to think: So what? Leaders come and go. I walk with God. Their fall does not affect me. Individually we may indeed be blessed; however, we will never know the descent of the Lord's corporate blessing upon a healed, renewed church until we experience cleansing for the consequences of a pastor's sin.

If we fail to deal with the oppression caused by a leader's fall, it is possible that our future relationships with church leaders will be colored with fear and suspicion. The attitude that "leaders come and go" and that one feels he is capable of

walking alone is itself a form of oppression.

We do not have to walk alone. The voice speaking “leaders come and go” is a wounded voice. Remember: There is greater power in unity than in isolation (see Ps. 133). Although we may have to walk alone at times, God designed us to be interconnected members of a Christ-filled people.

Additionally, the Lord promised He will raise up “shepherds over [His people] and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing” (Jer. 23:4, NASB). Unless we are cleansed of the effect of our negative experience, the filter of our mistrust and our corresponding isolation might disqualify us from recognizing godly leaders when the Lord brings them to us.

You see, there is a corporate blessing coming to the church that is greater than the individual blessing, for it carries a unique reward to those who overcome offenses and persevere in faith for one another and their leaders. This is the Pentecost anointing that was available to the 120 in the upper room, 108 of whom had to overcome the failings of the original 12. Out of the anointing of unity, God touches multitudes, turns cities and empowers His people with the life of heaven.

The Remedy: Forgiveness

You may say, “Ours is a new church; our leaders have not fallen in sin.” Locally, your church may be clean. The people in your church, however, did not float from heaven to Earth. They were somewhere when national leaders fell—and one does not have to be a church historian to recall how many major spiritual leaders have fallen in recent years.

Each time a minister fell, the “mistrust level” toward all church leaders increased. The cumulative effect of moral failure, both on a national and on a local level, has smothered the fire in many Christian hearts. Some of those hearts may be sitting in your church.

If you are a pastor and are wondering why people do not respond to your teaching as you would like, it may be that they are carrying woundedness from a previous leader. This former leader may be totally unaffiliated with your church, yet their reaction toward him is keeping them guarded and unable to truly hear from you. Among regular church attendees, this woundedness has been translated into a polite, yet numbing, attitude of unbelief and suspicion toward church leaders in general.

Remember: As a pastor or teacher, your goal is not to prepare a sermon but to prepare a people. Thus, it is imperative that you dispel this cloud of mistrust so that people can once again absorb your message and be changed.

They may not hear your teaching at the proper response level because they have distanced themselves from the memory of pain. Distance always hinders hearing. The antidote for a leader's sin in the Old Testament was to "offer to the Lord a bull without defect as a sin offering" (Lev. 4:3). Of course, we have a sacrifice for sins greater than the blood of bulls and goats.

Yet until we apply Christ's sacrifice to this need, the need remains and continues to negatively affect us. We must, therefore, present ourselves before God for examination. As we yield to His Holy Spirit, one of the great graces He pours upon us is to make all things new.

On a personal level, this work of renewal is as effective as our ability to forgive those who have hurt us and let go of the heartache caused by the shortcomings of our leaders. It is a profound opportunity: We can be delivered from becoming hardened in heart. We can look forward to the future, trusting God for ever more wonderful beginnings.

Just as Daniel represented Israel in repentance before God (see Dan. 9), let me personally repent to you on behalf of

those church leaders who have fallen or misrepresented Jesus to you.

I ask for your forgiveness. Leaders have fallen and caused you distress and heartache. We have burdened you with a yoke that was not the yoke of Christ but a yoke of oppression. For the sins of all, I ask for your forgiveness.

As God gives you grace, please release that specific man or woman who misused his or her spiritual authority or betrayed the solemn responsibilities entrusted to him or her. Again, I ask you to forgive leaders who have fallen or failed your expectations.

Knowing that shepherds experience a greater “striking” from the enemy (see Zech. 13:7), let us also take up our positions to intercede for our leaders. God never intended that congregations would not participate in their leaders’ protection, inspiration and well-being. The power and confidence in your church leadership reflects, at least in part, the answer to your prayers.

Paul asked for prayer; Jesus asked for prayer; and your pastor needs prayer as well. Pastors not prayed for are vulnerable to attack in unique ways. If you have not stood in intercession for your church leaders, perhaps you are—at least in a small part—a contributor to their stumbling.

Even good leaders fail. Yet God can raise them back up again. In fact, in some ways a fallen but restored leader has a depth of compassion, a “grace understanding,” that makes a wonderful shepherd out of him. We should not abandon those who have fallen but observe whether their brokenness has truly attracted a new grace from God.

Remember what Daniel said, speaking of our days: “‘Some of those who have insight will fall, in order to refine, purge and make them pure until the end time; because it is still to come at the appointed time'” (Dan. 11:35).

Through Daniel the Holy Spirit tells us certain leaders “will fall” but that God will not abandon them. He will instead “refine, purge and make them pure.”

Fallen leaders are difficult to bear; but if we are part of the process of sorrow, let us also be part of the restoration—together with Christ. Let us forgive our leaders for the ways in which they have failed us and in so doing release ourselves from the oppression of the past.

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