

When Church Leaders Fail, How Do We Respond?

It was sad enough when leaders of the International House of Prayer cut ties with founder Mike Bickle last December because of a sexual scandal involving Bickle and at least two women. Then on June 9 of this year, veteran pastor Tony Evans of 10,000-member Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, Texas, stepped down from his pulpit, citing an unnamed past sin as the reason for his abrupt resignation.

And just a few days later, allegations surfaced about Robert Morris, senior pastor of 25,000-member Gateway Church, also in Dallas. An Oklahoma woman, Cindy Clemishire, went public with allegations that Morris abused her sexually over a four-year span in the 1980s. She says she was only 12 when the abuse began.

Morris released a statement admitting that he was “involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with a young lady,” but he didn’t address the fact that Clemishire was a minor when the alleged abuse occurred. “It was kissing and petting and not intercourse, but it was wrong,” Morris said, noting that the behavior “happened on several occasions over the next few years.”

Morris said he confessed and repented of his sin in 1987 and went through a two-year rehabilitation process. He also noted that “no other moral failures” have occurred in his life since then. The incidents involving Clemishire occurred before Morris founded Gateway Church in 2000. Morris did not address the scandal from his pulpit last weekend.

Over the years I’ve known several pastors and leaders who found themselves in spiritual disasters—from sexual scandals to financial scams to spiritual abuse. In many cases my trust

in these people was shattered—and my trust in all leaders was tested.

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A church scandal isn't just traumatic for the leader at the center of the storm. It also destabilizes everyone around them, and it is especially nightmarish for any victims. Whole churches or ministries can be shaken to their foundations when a leader makes sinful choices.

Fortunately, I never walked away from my faith because a leader failed. But many people do. If you are close to a leader who has experienced moral failure, I recommend taking these steps:

– **Make sure you have the facts.** In this age of fake news, anybody can make up a story and post it online. That's why the Bible says we should not receive an accusation against a leader "except before two or three witnesses," (1 Tim. 5:19b). In recent months, some critics of Dallas pastor T.D. Jakes used artificial intelligence to create fake videos alleging that Jakes had resigned. Make sure the news you read is accurate.

– **It's OK to grieve.** Jeremiah wrote an entire book of the Bible—Lamentations—to process his grief over Israel's unfaithfulness. He cried out: "Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers ... Our fathers sinned and are no more," (Lam. 5:2a, 7a). Jeremiah didn't minimize the impact of the sins of Israel's leaders. But he didn't sit in judgment; rather, he cried for them—and for the effect their choices had on others. Sin has huge implications, and we should shed tears over it.

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– **Extend mercy to leaders who fall.** The apostle Paul often brought correction to first-century leaders who failed God. He wrote: “Brothers, if a man is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore such a one in the spirit of meekness,” (Gal. 6:1a). That means we shouldn’t be harsh or vindictive, even if we must remove the person from leadership. At the same time, never trivialize or minimize a leader’s sins; doing so can further hurt the people who were victimized by the abuse of power.

– **Forgive from your heart.** I’ve met Christians who still nurse the same grudges 30 years after a pastor hurt them. They keep their pain alive by reliving the offense over and over. As a result, they are stuck in a time warp, and no one wants to be around them because their bitterness is so toxic. You must learn to say what Jesus said on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do,” (Luke 23:34a). Treat the fallen brother or sister as you would want to be treated if you had made a similar mistake.

– **Learn from the offending leader’s mistakes.** The Bible provides us with both good and bad examples of leaders. I have mentors who taught me much about God, leadership and ministry. But I also have learned a lot from watching the mistakes leaders make. If someone in ministry hurts you, make a mental note: “That is not the way I should treat people.” You can turn your disappointments into blessings if you learn from them.

– **Stay in fellowship.** Many people who experience a church scandal leave church altogether. It’s OK to take a short break to recover. But if you go two months, then six months and then a year without being in close fellowship with other Christians, you are making yourself vulnerable. You may be tempted to believe that there are no healthy pastors or churches in your area—but I dare you to prove that.

God will have a holy church, and we can’t compromise His

standards by applying cheap grace. We have entered a serious period of spiritual shaking, and we may see more of the Lord's purging and correction in the days ahead. Just as John the Baptist prepared the way for the Messiah, waves of burning repentance always precede true revival. Lord, have mercy. Send Your refining fire and burn up all the chaff in our hearts!

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