

Why Leaders Fall to Sexual Brokenness

Ravi Zacharias, Carl Lentz, Josh Duggar ... the list goes on. Why do leaders continue to fall into extramarital affairs, sexual abuse and porn?

The aftershocks have been devastating, causing feelings of betrayal, deep pain and trauma that makes life in this new normal even more unbearable, uncertain and confusing. This pain has led many into skepticism resulting in abandoning their faith.

Are these crises simply a matter of broken human nature, and might we be just a moment away from similar acts? Or is the reality more complex?

We would like to propose that many people suffer from a significant growth gap—a tendency to focus more on spiritual activity than spiritual identity. Many churches have a typical growth model where people are thought to grow primarily by external activity—serving in church, praying and Bible reading. There is a better way: one of internal maturation spiritually, emotionally and relationally. We must deal with our pain and the unhealthy relational and family dynamics we grew up in, move from isolation to connection and grow into who God has made us to be so that we will be able to love Him and others.

After being sexually abused as a child and experiencing pain from my dysfunctional family, I (Josh) harbored deep hurts. When I became a Christian, many things did improve, but eventually my unresolved pain caught up to me. Even though my ministry thrived, I didn't. I found myself exhausted, angry and struggling to cope with unhealed emotional wounds. For example, whenever my mom complained about the abuse she

received from my father, I bore the responsibility for stopping him and carrying the burden of my mom's emotional distress. Rescuing loved ones became one of the few ways I could gain my family's acceptance and love. Unfortunately, this behavior continued into my adult life; the world's problems were mine to solve. I remember this growth gap well. Do you find this familiar?

Although rescuing gave me temporary value and a counterfeit version of the acceptance God longed for me to experience, I was emotionally a wounded little boy in many ways. I had not outgrown that survival mechanism even when I was well into my 50s. My emotional growth was stunted because I hadn't dealt with unresolved parts of my story; this inhibited my relationship with God, myself and others. Angry, exhausted and struggling to go on, I needed serious healing.

Similarly, I (Ben) grew up struggling with deep wounds, confusion and trauma. I felt that I couldn't meet my dad's expectations, and I often faced his disapproval and intense anger. In addition, I was constantly bullied for being overweight and a Christian. Despite the decision I made to follow Christ at a young age, somehow I became a hostage to spiraling fear, anxiety and depression that, at times, caused me to dissociate from the present.

Then came my struggle with food, porn and alcohol, which unfortunately lasted through my first couple of years in full-time ministry. Although I constantly prayed, studied Scripture and faithfully served at church, my struggles only escalated. Suicidal thoughts joined the cacophony of chaos inside my head. Could God really heal me and set me free? Could things ever really improve?

Our stories aren't anomalies. After over 75 years of combined ministry, we've seen so much brokenness, hurt and addiction. The world is in crisis, and we need a radical move of God to heal our brokenness and bring about abundant wholeness.

However, we won't experience this better life until we confront the root cause of this widespread brokenness. This is one of the reasons we developed the Wholeness Apologetic Model. Through research and biblical truth, this model details how we heal, experience freedom from unhealthy behaviors and mature spiritually, emotionally and relationally. Together, we are on a mission to help others break free to thrive—to live the abundant Christian life.

Though I (Josh) had a theological degree, bestselling books and a global ministry that reached millions annually, my own spiritual growth was stunted. On the outside I may have looked like a spiritually mature Christian leader, but that was a superficial appearance. A key principle of the Wholeness Apologetic Model explains that our spiritual maturity isn't determined by our level of knowledge about God nor by the number of good things we do or how much we pray, read the Bible, serve or go to church. Rather, spiritual maturity is a product of our love for God, ourselves and others, unmistakably resulting in Christ-likeness. Stated another way, mature Christians are emotionally and relationally whole Christians.

In the Bible, we see this model illustrated by Jesus in Luke 2:52: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." In addition, Jesus shows the direct connection between our relationship with God (spiritual), ourselves (emotional) and others (relational) when he sums up the law: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind ... And ... 'Love others as much as you love yourself'" (Matt. 22:37, 39; CEV).

The bottom line is this: If we don't deal with our own stuff, other people will have to. What isn't healed will be revealed: Whether we knowingly hide our sins and unhealthy habits or are just unaware of the unresolved, unmet needs and pain from our past, everything will be brought to light—possibly with the devastating consequence of having God's name and our unhealthy

brokenness publicly strewn across news headlines. Luke 8:17 (NLT) conveys this principle best: “For all that is secret will eventually be brought into the open, and everything that is concealed will be brought to light and made known to all.”

After constantly feeling on the verge of emotional and physical exhaustion, I (Josh) finally hit my breaking point. I called Dr. Henry Cloud, a close friend and the best psychologist I know, and we began meeting weekly. Dr. Cloud helped me understand my heart’s deep, unmet longings, which had been compounded since my childhood. Although I thought I had moved beyond my issues, I discovered problems I had buried alive and the wake of destruction that I had left behind.

I thank God for providing a friend and therapist to kickstart my journey toward healing and freedom. Henry helped me quench these unwanted behaviors in healthy, satisfying ways. Over several years, God healed me and gave me eyes to see myself as He did. And I also learned how to set healthy boundaries—to give and receive love and acceptance from God and others.

After hitting bottom, I (Ben) also decided to go all in to overcome my past struggles. After years of trauma therapy, recovery groups and counseling, I saw God bring understanding, healing and freedom. My hurts from previous relationships found healing in healthy, new relationships as God and others began to meet my hunger for acceptance, safety and love. Over time, I was set free from lifelong struggles with food, porn and alcohol.

Jesus’ invitation to us is to seek health and healing today. In turn, our goal is to create healthy communities that value who we’re becoming over what we’re doing. Finally, remember that Jesus’ words tell us to not simply make converts but rather create disciples—“teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matt. 28:20). Therefore, let’s endeavor to reproduce mature disciples who are growing spiritually, emotionally and relationally into the full measure of Christ.

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