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# Failing Leaders

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**Forgive Christian leaders who betray us? Nothing tests our resolve to forgive like these spiritual disasters.**

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**S**piritual cairns mark our Christian journey. Like the small piles of rocks that hikers place along an alpine trail, they record our important turnings and remind us of how we came to our present view on the world. Some are Ebenezer stones showing where “The Lord helped us”: memory of baptismal waters, a mission trip that sparked a vocation, loving a life-long spouse, meeting a dear friend and colleague, dedicating to God a newborn child. Other cairns, however, record our spiritual setbacks. Too many of these were placed to mark the painful memories of when trusted Christian leaders failed us.

I remember the Saturday night as a young boy when my dad told me that FBI agents had arrested Mr. Covey, my Sunday School teacher and a gentle man who had led me to personal faith. He went to prison for theft, though some church members thought it was more like treason to steal from the army warehouse where he worked during those chaotic Vietnam War years. That’s an old marker along my path. Others record recent betrayals that are difficult to talk about. For many Christians, cairns mark tragic memories of a leader’s failure that went far beyond betrayal to personal threat and abuse.

We celebrate with others those Ebenezer stones along our pilgrimage. But what do we do about the hurtful, “failing leader” cairns? We wonder, of course, why do these Christian leaders fail, betray, or abuse us? Perhaps in personal confession, we also question if we, in turn, are failing those leaders by not standing ready to forgive, heal, and restore them.

The headline-grabbing moral breakdowns by Christian public figures and celebrated ministers—from Jim Bakker’s thievery to Jesse Jackson’s adultery—are not “disasters”. We handle their failures easily because we stand at an impersonal distance from these men: they don’t confess to us or require tough forgiveness from us. We are scandalized, but the shame,

flowing over denominational and theological boundaries, even unites us with other Christians. The disasters are local: our pastor sexually exploiting a church member, a minister stealing from building funds, deacons constantly tearing members down, a teacher flashing habitual bursts of temper, or a worship leader disguising substance abuse. The terrible becomes the worst if the wrongdoer is “a local saint”—a Christian who leads by example, whose judgments carry weight, and whose life we desire to emulate. Our pain is more personal; our shame, grief, and anger are deep and smoldering. Our feelings often go unshared. We blame and distrust fellow church members, and fissures hidden just below the surface of congregational life split wide open into cliques and divisions.

### **WHY DO CHRISTIAN LEADERS FAIL US?**

In fallen leaders, Richard Irons and Katherine Roberts usually find a potent mixture of power and woundedness. Irons and Roberts, medical doctor and priest, minister to sexually abusive professionals and clergy, but their insights may apply to a wider group of failing Christian leaders.

The first ingredient is power. Pastors, deacons, teachers, and other Christian leaders have a lot of it. They have ministerial authority, God-given and welcomed by us, to be agents through whom God can work in our lives. In worship, Bible study, and counseling they witness to divine authority and are representatives of God to us. They also have power that we grant to them as our caregivers, when we make ourselves properly vulnerable before them. Our feelings for them may even go a bit haywire: we may treat them as our parents or spouse (which psychologists call “transference”), or make them out to be heroes on a pedestal.

The other ingredient is woundedness. “Over 80 percent of sexually exploitive professionals” whom they have treated, say Irons and Roberts, “were victims of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, emotional incest, or profound abandonment as children or adolescents”. Now in positions of social power, these “unhealed woublers” fail to recognize the significance of personal boundaries or they intentionally cross over them. Irons and Roberts delineate six patterns of failing leaders. The most common types are unintentionally hurtful—like the *naïve prince* who mistakenly believes that he is morally invulnerable; if, in relationship with someone who trusts his leadership, his repressed wounds are expressed and the other person responds, he develops inappropriate closeness and ‘discovers’ that he has violated personal boundaries. Or the *wounded warrior* who lacks self-worth and affirmation from friends and family; when a dependent person responds to his unhealed wounds, he accepts the inappropriate closeness and violates boundaries with that person. Some, but many fewer, failing leaders verge toward cruelty—like the *self-serving martyr* who seeks the refreshing personal attention of persons whom he leads; he feels that he

has done so much for others, that now he demands inappropriate favors from them. Or the *false leader* who intentionally crosses personal boundaries, enjoying the drama and thrill of controlling others; and the extreme (and thankfully, uncommon) charismatic *dark king* who carefully chooses his victims to dominate. A very infrequent type is the *wild card* whose abusive behavior is a symptom of some mental disorder.

From unintentional stumblers to cruel abusers, failing leaders often have been damaged by “estrangement or feelings of abandonment”. Irons and Roberts do not draw this point in order to excuse their betrayal and abuse, but to give us hope that we may participate in their healing. Exploitive leaders need “to ask for and accept the forgiveness of God and others and to reestablish a relational quality of life that reflects a personal relationship with God that influences and frames his life”. Through our instruction and reconciliation efforts that hold failing leaders accountable, we may be instruments in their forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

#### **WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN FORGIVENESS REQUIRE OF US?**

We hardly feel up to the task to “bear one another’s burdens” or moral failings, as the Apostle Paul instructs, rather than heaping additional suffering and shame upon one another (Galatians 6:1-2). We don’t *want* to “restore [leaders] in a spirit of gentleness”, especially if they were a *false leader* or *dark king*. Yet, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion,” Paul disciplines us as a community. “Forgive [plural] each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive” (Colossians 3:12-13).

Paul was not a Pollyanna; he knew how extraordinary it is to live in a mutually forgiving community. Forgiveness flows from one member to the next, and does not stop at the community’s perimeter. Metaphors tumble out in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 to describe it. It is like seeing other folks with fresh, Christ-like eyes: “we regard no one from a human point of view.” The world becomes brand new again: “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” It is like God making us “ambassadors for the Messiah”, empowered to continue God’s work, through Jesus, of “reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”. Behind Paul’s metaphors lies this truth: forgiveness is incredibly difficult, both to offer to others and to receive to ourselves. A “ministry of reconciliation” will never be natural to us; it will require that we get new eyes and a divine appointment. It will be a work that we neither initiate nor can sustain. The forgiving community will arise and reconciliation will flow from one person to the next only because “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ”.

Even if we manage to *forgive* abusive leaders, to *restore* them makes us very uneasy. We breathe a bit easier when John Paul Lederach says that

restoration does not mean “going back to what was”, because we do not really want the fallen leader to be leading again; but then he continues, restoration requires “healing . . . and bringing about what should be”. Are we obligated to restore the fallen leader to another position of leadership in the community? Marlin Jeschke gets it right when he says, “it may be necessary to exercise discretion in appointing restored persons to office,

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**As a church we will see failing leaders as morally blameworthy for wrongdoing, yet we will overcome our anger and invite them to repent, be healed, and included again within God's forgiving community.**

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just as in the appointment of new converts to office. Such appointment should be by virtue of spiritual fitness, not automatic reappointment.

However, it is inconsistent with forgiveness to hold truly restored members in a state of perennial

disgrace. It is inconsistent with forgiveness to make them ‘pay’ with continued humiliation or to put them on any other ‘probation’ than that under which all believers live all the time.” Even if in “spiritual fitness” we include that leaders be “well thought of by outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:7), forgiveness still requires that the church treat restorees with the same grace extended to new converts.

### **WHY ARE WE FAILING OUR LEADERS?**

We do not bear with them to confront their sin, work on repentance, and be restored to faithful service. Why are we failing our leaders? David Augsburgers believes that Christians, too much influenced by modern culture, seek and settle for superficial reconciliation: “Forgiveness becomes equated with live-and-let-live tolerance, acceptance, and ‘love’—rather than absorbing the hurt and building bridges of understanding.” We follow our culture in privatizing all moral behavior and thinking that the church has no business “sticking its nose” into what leaders define as their private lives. Marlin Jeschke places the blame closer to home, in our disorganized congregational structures. Many congregations lack any practice to forgive, heal, and restore fallen leaders. Perhaps they fear repeating past mistakes in unloving church discipline; or they have simply discarded hierarchical models of authority (members being watched by pastors) and not adopted collegial models of accountability (members being spiritually responsible to one another). In a few congregations, revivalism is a distorted replacement for restoration: fallen leaders become targets to be ‘saved’ again in the next cycle of revival. More likely, taking advantage of our Christian disunity, an abusive leader just goes

across town and joins another congregation, which pays no attention to appeals from the victimized one.

To these insightful diagnoses, I would add another: it simply hurts too much. Our injuries, in these spiritual disasters, go far beyond betrayal or the breaking of a trust relationship—because Christians belong to one another in more than a voluntary, extrinsic way. Think of it this way. When betrayed by a trusted employee, we are deeply hurt, but say, “We will hire another person—and more carefully this time—to do the job properly.” When a local Christian leader fails, it is like losing an arm or leg, or a vital organ. Pauline language of ‘membership’ is on target: we were “called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:6) and this makes us “members *one of another*” within the body of Christ (12:5, my emphasis). When the leader fails, it is akin to something inside us dying. In Wendell Berry’s *Jayber Crow*, the title character glimpses his small town as a membership in the Pauline sense:

What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on . . . . It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward good will. I knew that, in the midst of all the ignorance and error, this was a membership; it was the membership of Port William and of no other place on earth. My vision gathered the community as it never has been and never will be gathered in this world of time, for the community must always be marred by members who are indifferent to it or against it, who are nonetheless its members and maybe nonetheless essential to it. And yet I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another’s love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace.

Only when we similarly glimpse our local congregation as a membership, will we diagnose our injuries for all that they really are—the detectable scarring of a hidden destruction.

#### **HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO FAILING LEADERS?**

Restoration practices usually fit these models: spiritual care team, denominational, or congregational approach. Only a combination of these can resist the distortions of modern culture and honor the nature of our injuries. First, let me describe each approach in its “pure” form.

In the *spiritual care team approach* the fallen leader assembles a team of four to six spiritually balanced men and women whom he respects. Drawn from his congregation or wider network of Christian friends, they guide him, hold him accountable, and care for him and his family. The pastor is not a team member (the restoree and his family continue to need the pastor to fulfill the pastoral role with them), but a professional therapist may be added to coordinate advice. The team meets quarterly with the restoree for two to three years, providing him direction about church involvement, work, rest, and exercise; reminding him of the issues involved in his failing, but helping him to deal with discouragement; calling him to faithful obedience; and encouraging a new openness, a new teachability. After this period of formal restoration, the team provides aftercare as appropriate: requiring ongoing accountability, monitoring attitudes and behavior, handling rumors and building bridges back to the community, monitoring rebuilding within the family, and providing ongoing prayer support.

The *denominational approach*, which usually applies only to clergy, begins with the leader surrendering pastoral credentials to the denomination. An official or committee then prescribes a fixed period of study and counseling, which is monitored by quarterly progress reports or meetings with the restoree. The restoration may be divided into stages of no ministry, followed by volunteer service, then supervised employment, and so on. The denomination keeps rehabilitation records and, at the proper time, restores the leader's credentials.

The *congregational approach* follows the "threefold admonition" in Matthew 18:15. First, one goes directly to the person who has failed morally. If acknowledgement and repentance are not forthcoming, the next step is to seek additional counsel with wise persons respected within the congregation—to clarify the facts in order to prevent false charges, discern the attitudes of all parties involved and prevent mere personality clash, and determine whether the problem is a serious spiritual matter. A series of small-group meetings may be required. The third admonition, if required, is before the congregation, which, writes Jeschke, "is essential at this stage because the issue has become nothing less than membership itself. This issue, like baptism, is by nature congregational, since it bears upon the relationship of every member of the congregation to the person under discipline." Though it may be formalized to some extent, the suppleness of this approach, Jeschke remarks, is consonant with "the very purpose for which it was formed—namely, to present the claims of the gospel", which "is always a personal appeal."

Each approach has its limitations. The *congregational approach* provides the best framework to heal an injured congregation and nurture it in its Christian responsibilities for community discernment and offering restoration to the fallen leader. Yet a congregation may not have the

spiritual or professional resources required; the restoree may move across town or across the country from the congregation; and this approach may not provide continuing spiritual care to the restoree and his family—too often, the congregational process stops at judgment and does not carry through to restoration. The *denominational approach* provides those needed resources (at least for *clergy*), but by professionalizing spiritual care it fails to address the local congregation's injuries or encourage the congregation's responsibility. The *spiritual care team approach* provides the best care to the restoree and his family, but can it address the congregation's injuries?

A more adequate practice would combine the strengths of the congregational and spiritual care team approaches. I call this a *friendship-church team approach*. Congregationally endorsed spiritual care teams, flexible enough in composition to care for fallen clergy or lay leaders, would enrich the congregational approach. Team members would come from the congregation or "friendship churches" – other congregations of the same or another faith tradition, nearby or in distant places, with which the injured congregation's members have built networks of trust. And friendship-church teams would have more inclusive goals: not only would they care for the restoree, they would care for the injured local congregation by convening it, when possible and at an appropriate time, to give its approval to the process and its results through a restoration worship service for the restoree.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

Richard Irons and Katherine Roberts, "The Unhealed Wounders", is in Nancy Myer Hopkins and Mark Laaser, eds., *Restoring the Soul of a Church: Healing Congregations Wounded by Clergy Sexual Misconduct* (Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 33-51. Earl Wilson, et al., *Restoring the Fallen: A Team Approach to Caring, Confronting and Reconciling* (InterVarsity Press, 1997), presents the team approach. Marlin Jeschke, *Discipling in the Church: Recovering a Ministry of the Gospel*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Herald Press, 1988), is the best resource for a congregational approach. I quote: David Augsburg, "The Private Lives of Public Leaders," *Christianity Today* (November 1987), pp. 23-24; Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Counterpoint Press, 2000), p. 205; and John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999), p. 138.



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