



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Failing Leaders**
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What do you think?

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Failing Leaders

Why do some Christian leaders betray or abuse us? Nothing tests our resolve to forgive like these spiritual disasters. Do we, in turn, fail those leaders by not standing ready to forgive, heal, and restore them?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 18:1-35

Reflection

Headline-grabbing moral breakdowns by Christian public figures and celebrated ministers we can handle. The real disasters are local: our pastor sexually exploiting a member, a minister stealing church funds, deacons constantly tearing members down, a teacher flashing habitual bursts of temper, or a worship leader disguising substance abuse. 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.

Fallen leaders may be *unhealed wounders* who abuse their power. One counseling team discovered that 80% of sexually exploitive leaders had been abused or abandoned as children or adolescents. Now in positions of social power, these unhealed wounders fail to recognize the significance of personal boundaries; a few become cruel abusers who intentionally cross over them. This fact about their woundedness does not excuse their betrayal or abuse, but it gives us hope that we may participate in their healing. Fallen leaders need to ask for and accept the forgiveness of God and others, and know the deep self-worth that comes from experiencing that God accepts us. Our instruction and reconciliation efforts that hold failing leaders accountable may be instruments in their forgiveness, healing, and restoration.

Some of Jesus' disciples enjoyed having power and wanted more of it. So, he warned them to protect the weak members, the "children", whom they might easily abuse in church (Matthew 18:1-7). However, when a fellow member, even an abusive leader, harms us, we must not begrudge them forgiveness (18:21-22). Does this mean we are obligated to restore a fallen leader to church leadership? Marlin Jeschke wisely says, "it may be necessary to exercise discretion in appointing restored persons to office, just as in the appointment of new converts to office.... However, 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." Forgiveness requires that we treat restorees with the same grace extended to new converts.

Restoration practices usually fit these models:

- ▶ *Spiritual care team.* A small group, assembled by the fallen leader from among the congregation or other Christian friends, guides and holds him accountable, and cares for him and his family.



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- ▶ *Denominational*. The leader surrenders credentials to the denomination for a prescribed period of study and counseling, monitored by quarterly progress reports. The denomination keeps rehabilitation records and, at the proper time, restores the leader's credentials.
- ▶ *Congregational*. A local congregation follows the "threefold admonition" in Matthew 18:15. Usually this is formalized in some way, but it remains supple to apply to individual cases.

Each approach has its limitations. The *congregational approach* is the best framework to heal an injured congregation and to nurture 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 process stops at judgment and does not carry through to restoration. The *denominational approach* provides the needed resources (usually for failing *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, a *friendship-church team approach*, would combine the strengths of the congregational and spiritual care team models. Congregationally endorsed 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. The 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.

Study Questions

1. How are church members injured when a leader fails them? Are they all injured, or just those directly involved?
2. Do the six types of unhealed wounders outlined on pp. 72-73 of *Forgiveness* describe the abusive leaders you have known?
3. How should we respond when a fallen leader does not apologize and repent? Matthew 18:17 seems to be a harsh instruction. Yet, how did Jesus treat tax collectors and Gentiles? Read Matthew 9:9-13 and Matthew 12:15-21.
4. How does your church forgive, heal, and restore leaders who fail? How would the congregational model be applied within your church's administrative structure? Are there friendship-churches on which your congregation might depend?

Departing Hymn: "Remember Christ Our Savior"

Failing Leaders

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Galatians 6:1-2
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Review Matthew 18
Question 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand that some church leaders who betray and abuse members are “unhealed wounders”.
2. To appreciate how members are injured by these failures.
3. To understand the Christian community’s obligation to forgive and restore failing leaders.
4. To examine the restoration practices which are used in churches.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Forgiveness (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. You will need to print copies of the hymn “Remember Christ Our Savior” for everyone from the website www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a story

Share the story about Mr. Covey on p. 71 of *Forgiveness*. Or read the opening paragraphs about spiritual cairns on our Christian journey and ask members to reflect upon their own painful experience with a failing leader.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently, and then voice a request that your group will be accountable to one another, and that members will be prepared to forgive, heal, and restore church leaders who betray their trust.

Scripture Reading

Ask six people to take turns, or two people to alternate, reading aloud the six segments of Matthew 18 (vv. 1-5; 6-9; 10-14; 15-20; 21-22; and 23-35) from a modern translation. Too often we separate these segments in Matthew 18 and do not hear how the gospel relates these passages.

Reflection

Discuss these issues with great care. Some members have been deeply wounded by failing leaders, or your group may be divided over recent betrayals or abuse. Allow members to share their own experiences without disclosing hurtful or privileged information.

Remind members of the six types of “unhealed wounders” described on pp. 72-73 of *Forgiveness*. An abusive leader can display characteristics of more than one type. Emphasize that a failing leader’s woundedness is not a blanket or complete excuse, but it helps us understand our calling and opportunity to heal and restore them.

Discuss Jeschke’s suggestion that we have an obligation to approach the restoration of a person to leadership office with the same grace stance with which we extend the gospel to new converts.

Supplement these brief outlines of the spiritual care team, denominational, and congregational approaches with the information on p. 76 of *Forgiveness*. Ask members to discuss the limitations of each approach, and to reflect on the friendship-church team approach as an alternative.

Study Questions

1. Members may have personal stories that they want to share at this point. Many people are injured and in various ways. Some are directly injured as objects of abuse, the leader's family members are shamed and injured in a different way, and all members are indirectly affected. Read the passage on p. 75 of *Forgiveness* about how our being "*members one of another*" (Romans 12:5) will shape our understanding of how all members are injured.
2. Allow members to question the categories, to explore additional categories, and to use the categories to understand an abusive leader in their experience. Do those in some categories bear more responsibility for their behavior? For which categories of failing leader is restoration most difficult? In which categories would professional help be recommended or required?
3. Ask members to read Matthew 9:9-13 and Matthew 12:15-21. Tradition says the gospel writer was the Apostle Matthew, a former tax collector. Members might reflect that the gospels record many parables and events about restoration (rather than bringing in someone who was never part of the forgiving community): the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son (Luke 15); the ten lepers (Luke 17:10-19); Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); the restoration of Peter (John 21:15-19); Barnabas restoring both Paul and John Mark (Acts 9:27 and 15:36-39), and so on.
4. If the congregation does not have a formalized process, members might discuss how they would care for a failing leader, the leaders' family, and members injuries. How would members identify friendship-churches in the community or in more distant locations?

Departing Hymn.

Distribute copies of the hymn "Remember Christ Our Savior" from the website www.cyberhymnal.org. Its suggested tune AURELIA is in many hymnals, often with the hymn "The Church's One Foundation". If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.