

When pastors fail * 1 Peter 5

January 17, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning I want to share with you something that's been on my heart lately; something I've seen happening very publically that's been really frustrating and saddening.

In NYC for example, the church that Justin Bieber has been going to – Hillsong NYC – had to dismiss their pastor because he was having an affair with a number of women.

That was in December and in just the last few weeks, we found out posthumously that one of our generation's greatest apologists was alleged to have committed a number of sexual assaults and there's pretty good evidence to back it up.

And that's not all. Ten days ago, I read a tweet from an author and pastor in North Carolina that read: "Ten years ago, I sat in a room with a few pastors, one of whom was in the midst of a meteoric rise to fame. I noticed him frequently making sexist, inappropriate jokes, while the other pastors laughed. They brushed it off as harmless and continued to commend him to me and others... Years later, this pastor completely destroyed his church. He was fired. Many of his church members lost their faith or had to spend years in counselling" (Sharon Hodde Miller (@SHoddeMiller) Tweet. January 7, 2021).ⁱ

This is sadly all too common. And the worst part of it all is the last part of that tweet. "Many of his church members lost their faith." Scrolling through people's responses, I saw a lot of stuff like "I walked away from the church because of stuff like this." It's so sad.

So what I want to do this morning is think with you about what to do 'when pastors fail.' Just to be clear, there's no scandalous revelation coming at the end of this message – I hope and intend that this is something that you'll never have to use – but I want to take this up with you because I think it's important. And ultimately, my purpose here is not to throw pastors under the bus, but to acknowledge that this kind of thing happens and that even if His servants fail, Jesus is still worth it.

So let's think for a minute about the role of pastors in the church and their relationship to Jesus. Turn with me to 1 Peter 5 and we'll start right off the top in verse 1. 1 Peter 5, verse 1.

NIV 1 Peter 5:1 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:

2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;

3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1Pe 5:1-4 NIV).

Let's take that one step at a time. Pastors:

2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers. So first and foremost, pastors are supposed to be shepherds of God's people. Not rulers, not CEO's; shepherds. We are to lead you and feed you and keep you from danger, serving as overseers of GOD's flock. That's key. I'm just a steward. And frankly, even though I'm called to be a shepherd, I am just as much a part of God's flock as you are. So I'm a sheep and I'm a shepherd, serving as an overseer,

--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be;
not greedy for money, but eager to serve;
3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

The worst thing that you can have is a pastor who is only in it for himself, for money or power or prestige, because that's just a pit waiting to fall into. Instead, you want a pastor eager to serve and share his life with you. And that's certainly my goal.

Now v. 4 we get an important note - 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1Pe 5:1-4 NIV). That's good and the goal, right? Fame and fortune in this world are nothing compared to the eternal crown of glory and so that is what I'm working towards. But I want to point you to the hierarchy inherent in this sentence.

"Shepherd, when the Chief Shepherd appears..." So pastors are to be 'shepherds' but really we are 'under-shepherds.' There is a supreme shepherd, the Good Shepherd, Jesus. And even when pastor-shepherds fail, the Good Shepherd remains in charge, and He cares for us with greater care than any pastor ever could.

And this is why it breaks my heart to hear people say 'I left the faith because of my pastor's failings.' That's so said – 1. That the pastor has caused it and 2. That you're walking away when the Chief Shepherd still cares. Sure, the undershepherd may have failed, but this is really a baby and the bath water situation – if a pastor steps in it, don't walk away from Jesus just because your under-shepherd failed. Jesus is worth clinging to and He remains faithful, even when His servants aren't. If you have been hurt by a pastor, I'm sorry. I really am. Our job is to take care of you on behalf of the Chief Shepherd, and if we cause harm, that's no good. Please though don't let it push you from Jesus. Hang on and cling to the Good Shepherd.

Because, you know what? Pastors fail sometimes. Carey Nieuwhof, a pastor up in Orillia writes:

"... Our lives are a complex mixture of sin and grace. Of brokenness and redemption. This is true of pastors too. We don't have a direct line to God any more than you do. Our marriages aren't 'easier' just because we're in ministry... Our souls aren't inherently more virtuous. Pastors aren't better people; they're just called people. Called to the same calling to which non-pastors are called but in a specialized role... Clearly, there are activities and conditions that would and should take us out of ministry for a season or longer, but we have to get over this idea that leaders need to be perfect. Christ is perfect. We get to partner with him." <https://careynieuwhof.com/some-thoughts-about-the-recent-exit-of-two-megachurch-pastors/>

Pastors do fail sometimes and sometimes it's a real mess. So what happens when pastors engage in 'activities and conditions that should take us out of ministry'? Well, the very first thing is Matthew 18 – 15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you..." If he won't listen, take witnesses; if he still doesn't listen, take it to the church, to the board/the elders. That's there to make sure that people aren't leveling false accusations at the pastor just because they don't like him.

But, if the accusations are true then take him out of ministry. Remove him from the context where he could do any more harm and keep him from teaching hypocrisy through his words and deeds. Pastoral

work isn't like some other jobs where any old schlub with the right education can do the job; you need someone with the right heart for it, and if that's not there, then you've got a problem.

A lot of times this sort of things happens because of sexual misconduct but you can make an argument for removing a pastor who violates the qualifications Paul lists in 1 Timothy 3:2 and onwards –

2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.

5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)

6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.

7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap (1Ti 3:2-7 NIV).

Those are the basic requirements for being a pastor and if a pastor steps outside them, then we have a problem. Obvious, these things have to be looked at on a case by case basis, but the bottom line is – if a shepherd stops acting like a shepherd, then he needs to be removed.

Now, the next question is – can he be restored? Can a shepherd be reinstated after he's fallen? Well, here, you need to tread carefully. A lot of it depends on the behaviour of the pastor. If they confess their sin and demonstrate true repentance, it makes sense that you could establish a long term plan for rehabilitating them through counselling and spiritual direction, with the intention of preparing them to re-enter ministry. On the other hand, if they fail to see the error of their ways, then, well no, don't let that fox back into the henhouse. Some people would even argue that you can never rehabilitate a fallen pastor but I think that Peter's experience at the end of John's Gospel means it's possible.

John 21 – Peter has denied Jesus three times, run away from Him in His time of greatest need and yet Jesus comes back and reaffirms Peter in ministry. He doesn't say 'Well, Peter, I intended you to be the Rock upon which I would build my church but you really dropped the ball so I'm just going to throw you into the lake.' He says 'Simon Peter, do you love me more than these?' and then when Peter says 'Yes,' Jesus replies 'Take care of my sheep.' Three times over.

That suggests to me that it's possible to rehabilitate and reinstate a pastor – and notice here - it's not the pastor who's doing the reinstating. Right? The pastor can't decide 'ok, well, it's all good, water under the bridge, I'm just going to go find a new church.' No, the Church, Jesus, through the Church, needs to be able to say – 'we've seen repentance and progress and change that makes us believe that you are now ready for ministry again.' So that's really the church's job. So, yes, given the right attitude and effort between the church and pastor, I think that it is possible to reinstate a 'fallen pastor.'

So, what do you do when pastors fail? Well, I think you remove them from office and then help them back onto the right track, all the while clinging to the Chief Shepherd.

And that is what I really want to emphasize. Pastors are human beings. Even if it's not catastrophic, we all stumble and make mistakes but Jesus never does. Don't ever let a pastor keep you from the head Shepherd. He is gracious and compassionate and abounding in steadfast love. He knows what it's like

to be mistreated and He is eternally faithful to you. Pastors are important but above all, hold on to dear life to the Chief Shepherd.

BENEDICTION

Heb. 13:20-21 - Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
the great shepherd of the sheep,
by the blood of the eternal covenant,
equip you with everything good that you may do his will,
working in us that which is pleasing in his sight,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

ⁱ <https://twitter.com/SHoddeMiller/status/1347171277396717568?s=20>