

Leading After Failure

Christian leaders are not perfect and will inevitably sin and fail in many ways. Whilst Christian leaders are rightly held to a higher standard of godly conduct, this does not mean that they should not be treated with grace and forgiveness when they fail. Some failures might rightly result in disqualification from ministry, but the proper response to others is repentance, restoration, and reconciliation. This session will consider what the Bible says about leadership failure, what churches, organisations, and leaders should do when there has been a significant failure, and how a healthy, biblical response to leadership failure impacts our communities and the wider society.

John Stevens is the National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, a family of over 500 Bible-centred churches in the UK, a position that he has held since 2010. Prior to this he was one of the founding pastors of City Evangelical Church Birmingham, which was planted in the centre of the UK's 2nd largest city in 1999. He was instrumental in starting the Midlands Gospel Partnership, was the course Director of the Midlands Ministry Training Course and is a visiting lecturer at Oak Hill Theological College. John is also one of the pastors of Christchurch Market Harborough, a church he helped to plant when he took up his current role. He was converted whilst studying law at Cambridge University, and after taking a post-graduate degree at the University of Oxford worked for 16 years as a University Lecturer, ending his career as Deputy Head of the Law School at the University of Birmingham. John is married to Ursula and they have four children aged between 12 and 7. He blogs at www.john-stevens.com on theology, church life and ministry, culture and politics.

Introductory Discussion

Whilst maintaining confidentiality, reflect on a specific situation in which a leader you have known has failed in some way. How was their failure addressed? What was done well? What could have been done better?

1. Leadership Failure in the Bible

Adam
Moses
David
Solomon
Peter
Demas

2. Leadership Failure in the Church and Christian Organisations

How do leaders fail?
Mistakes
Incompetence
Lack of wisdom
Sin

Who has been failed?
Yourself
Family
Colleagues
Congregation/Clients
Board/Employer
God

3. Why Do Leaders Fail?

- Human limitations
- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of competency
- Lack of emotional intelligence
- Indwelling Sin

4. How Does the Gospel Apply to Leadership Failure?

1 John 1v8-2v2

Sin is to be expected

Grace is available

Repentance and confession are necessary

Forgiveness is extended

Restoration is possible

5. Biblical Paradigms for Addressing Leadership Failure

Judas – did not repent and damned (Matthew 25v14-16; 27v1-10)

Peter – repented and immediately restored (John 18v15-19; 25-287; 21v15-23)

John Mark – disqualified and subsequently restored (Acts 15v36-41; Col 4v10; Philemon 24)

6. Why Might Leadership Failure Lead to Disqualification?

Criteria for church leadership – 1 Timothy 3v1-13

- Character
- Competence
- Reputation

7. Avoiding Leadership Failure

1 Timothy 5v16: ‘Watch your life and doctrine closely.’

- Personal spiritual life
- Growth in wisdom
- Accountability to others
- Training
- Openness to criticism and feedback

Case Studies

Consider the following scenarios. What do you think ought to happen?

1. Andrew has been the pastor of the church for two years. He was appointed in succession to a long and successful pastorate of a much loved founder-pastor. The congregation is complaining that he is not as good a preacher as his predecessor, and some people have left the church. Andrew knows he is not as gifted, but thinks the church knew that when they appointed him.
2. Bruce is the leader of a large Christian charity providing care for children. He has attended an awards dinners sponsored by the government to recognise their work. Out of character for him, he drank too much at the dinner because he felt socially embarrassed and was noticed by others to be slightly drunk by the end. Pictures have appeared on social media with some negative comment about his behaviour.
3. Carla is the women's worker of her church, caring for single women. She has struggled with sexual temptation herself. She has confessed that she has had a one-night sexual relationship with someone she met through an online dating app. She is deeply remorseful for her behaviour.
4. Daniel is the pastor of a small church. There is a very difficult and critical couple in the congregation who are always disagreeing with his plans for the church. At a church meeting at which they have been particularly aggressive he loses his temper with them. He knows he should not have done this but says that it is 'no big deal' and that they had pushed him to breaking point.
5. Eddie is the leader of a small apologetics ministry. He has long struggled with pornography and had accepted accountability software on his devices and a regular accountability partner. It is discovered that he has been using a new phone to access pornography when he is away on speaking visits. He does not do this all the time but falls into this temptation once or twice a month. He has not told his accountability partner.
6. Fred is the pastor of a church and has been married for five years. His wife admits to having an affair with an old school friend, saying that Fred has failed to give her the attention she needs because he is so devoted to the church. Fred accepts that he has overworked but wanted to save the marriage. His wife has now divorced him.
7. Greg was the pastor of a church. Ten years ago, he stepped down because he had been having a long affair with a member of the congregation. He was repentant and restored to fellowship in the church after a rigorous process of church discipline. His marriage was saved, and his wife and children have forgiven him. He is now wanting to return to pastoral ministry.
8. Hugo is the leader of a church ministry providing support to refugees and asylum seekers. One night in a fit of anger and frustration he hits his wife. This is the only time it has happened. His wife does not want to press any charges, and has forgiven him and stayed with him, but she has told the church and asked for help. Hugo is remorseful and wants to seek counselling.

9. Irene is the leaders of a discipleship ministry for young people. Here Board has discovered that she has been overstating the number of people who are being served by the ministry and overreporting the number of 'responses' at their evangelistic events. These figures have been used to support fundraising efforts and persuade donors to give to the ministry.
10. Kristof is the pastor of a well-known evangelical church. He has been found to have been plagiarising other people's sermons in recent months. He says this is because he has felt under immense stress and lacks time to prepare because of the demands of caring for his autistic son. He says that he feared that the church would not support him if they knew he was struggling to preach.

Further Reading

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/thoughts-restoration-fallen-pastors/>

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-it-possible-to-restore-a-pastor-who-has-sinned-sexually>

<https://www.paultripp.com/wednesdays-word/posts/our-pastors-need-restoration>

<https://www.reformation21.org/blog/a-fallen-pastor-and-his-restoration>

John Armstrong. *The Stain that Stays: The Church's Response to the Sexual Misconduct of its Leaders* (Christian Focus)