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WHAT'S WRONG WITH PASTORS?

*Reflections on recent
pastoral failures*

Two more high-profile American pastors have failed out of ministry, one very well known, the other rather less well known. Both leaders of large and influential ministries. Both leaving their churches smoldering craters in the wake of their downfall. Both preaching sermons that were little short of high-handed rebellion only days before their sin became public.

Two more pastors to add to the litany of reformed-ish/evangelical washouts in the last decade. Two more churches, ruined.

What's wrong with the church? What's wrong with *pastors*, in particular? Why does this keep happening? There was so much tut-tutting and head-shaking at the end of the last century when all the

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There are so many analyses available in the aftermath of these ministry failures that it might seem gratuitous to add mine to the mix. But I knew one of these pastors

and ministries. I grew up in one of these churches. For me, one of these downfalls is deeply personal. I still know the church members who will be left devastated by the inevitable collapse of one of these churches. My heart aches for the sheep who will be scattered, and my soul fears that I myself could be one of these pastoral shipwrecks in 10 or 20 years.

So let me suggest three layers of protection to guard the sheep from – well, frankly – me. No, I don't want to fail. And I shall labour to be godly and faithful. But if I'm not, or if another pastor is not, these three principles will guard my congregation, and any congregation, from the disaster of a pastor's downfall. These principles are: solid ecclesiology, personal integrity, and ministry correctability.

Ecclesiology

I'm beginning to sound like a broken record, but ecclesiology, ecclesiology, ecclesiology. It's not an optional extra! It's not like bread sauce at Christmas, nice if your turkey is a bit dry, but rather unnecessary when a turkey is cooked properly and there's ample gravy available. It's not something a church just needs at the beginning to get a bit of structure, but once things are going then we can go freestyle. Ecclesiology isn't the boring initial bits we move from and don't reflect on, rather like forms for concrete when pouring a foundation – kind of important to get the stuff in place but then discarded once the building is finished. No, ecclesiology is absolutely essential from beginning to end.

The Presbyterian church whose elders were asleep at the wheel while the pastor was using the congregation as his own private harem failed in its ecclesiology. The Anglican church whose PCC was ignored and silenced while the pastor was dictatorial and immoral failed in its ecclesiology. The Baptist church where the pastor was allowed to be an enraged tyrant without the members seeking help from their local association failed in its ecclesiology. Pastoral failure is *always*

ecclesiological failure. Whatever issues also need to be addressed in the wake of these scandals – and there are usually so many other issues to be sorted – why is no one addressing the ecclesiological failure at the root of every single one of these pastoral implosions?

The doctrine of the church is meant to be a protection against pastors who fail their ministry vows, and it's meant to be a protection for the flock. Don't we understand who bears the brunt of these ministry collapses? Who is left suffering under the fallout of these high-profile ministry implosions? The sheep. The members of the churches these pastors claimed to serve. Christ's tender lambs. Many of whom are left reeling and permanently disillusioned about pastors, about the church, about any authority in life. It's the sheep who suffer most after these crises. Think about the sorts of people who are now reeling in the aftermath of these two pastors and their scandals:

- the couple whose marriage the disgraced pastor was counselling just weeks before.
- the new convert whose first time at church was the final hypocrisy-laced sermon before it all went public.
- the wife who's been struggling in her marriage and now wonders if continuing to struggle is really the best option for her as well.
- the congregation who listened to what seemed to be solid preaching, week after week.
- the children who were too harshly disciplined by their parents because of the pastor's heavy-handed teaching.

- the young seminary student with a tender conscience who now will never enter ministry for fear of creating the same sort of ministry catastrophe he's currently witnessing.
- the elder who tried to address these issues years before and was shut down and humiliated, for simply trying to be faithful and protect Christ's sheep.

Brother pastors, when we sin as pastors, it's always the sheep who bear the brunt of our failure. The sheep. Christ's tender lambs. Those for whom Christ died. They carry the burden and consequences of our sin more than we ever could. May God give us the grace of regular repentance and continual reformation so we protect our sheep from our sin.

Some of these people will recover, but others will not. Some will be permanently scarred, and will struggle ever to be meaningfully involved in a church again. Some will walk away from the church and Christianity altogether. Make no mistake, those who fall away will die in their sin and for their sin, but their blood will be required from the shepherd's hands. The one who claimed to watch over their souls will give an account for them at the Day of Judgment. The elders of a congregation are also responsible to protect a congregation from precisely these sorts of false shepherds. The other pastors or elders of the congregations in which the pastor was enabled to 'serve'

with impunity, they bear guilt over these failures as well. They missed it. All the while insisting they knew what was going on. If they couldn't be trusted to care for their pastor's soul, whose souls can they be trusted to look after?

If one of the leaders of the church was allowed to live in unresolved and unrepentant sin, how many other staff members are doing the same? Can we even trust any of them? How do we know any of their marriages are in a better shape? (And with personal knowledge of one of these situations: they're not.)

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Meanwhile the sheep will be further neglected while the pastors parade their heavy hearts and great responsibility. The flocks will slowly shrink and die. Those who are serious about repentance will seek out a better church, if such a church is even available nearby. Those in it for the show will just fade away. Another couple of thousand disillusioned former church members...

We to have recognise, as well, that some of these congregations may be experiencing these crises as a result of their own pride, the sort of lust for popularity or participation in something bigger than oneself, all the while ignoring Scripture's clear teaching on what a healthy local church actually is. It's rather like switching football teams every season just to support the winning side. While it would be unwise to assume

that every pastoral downfall is a direct act of judgment on the congregation, some certainly are. Sometimes we get the pastors we deserve. The book of Judges has immense application to the church today. Church members, even church leaders, sometime overlook warning signs because they like the cushy benefits a high-profile ministry bestows on them. Dear brothers and sisters, don't join yourselves to a church that has so little regard for your souls that they give no thought to the doctrine of the local church.

Ecclesiology exists, at least in part, to provide mechanisms for the protection of the sheep from men who are not qualified to care for the sheep or who fail to uphold the standards required from faithful shepherds. The Pastoral Epistles, to say nothing of the rest of the New Testament, give abundant insight into the sort of protections churches are to have in place, protections that exist so that pastors and elders can be held accountable and the flock can be protected. Protections like carefully evaluating the character and gifting of pastors, teaching on and practicing biblical conflict resolution and church discipline, and understanding the relationship of authority and accountability in the local congregation are neglected to the inevitable detriment of the flock.

Personal integrity

Personal integrity is also essential for local church health. This might be assumed as part of a biblical ecclesiology, but even healthy churches can have pastors who fail morally or turn apostate. That's what ecclesiology exists as a

protection against. But what should healthy churches look for in a pastor? Personal integrity. Does the pastor live the doctrine he professes? Is his public ministry consistent with his private life? I'm preaching on Titus at the church I serve now, and Paul again and again brings up right belief and right action, right faith and right living. They go together, inescapably, inseparably. Justification and sanctification. You need both. Always. Everywhere. No exceptions. Personal integrity is always lacking in these ministry collapses.

How can pastors cultivate personal integrity? Just godly harder? Well, the New Testament emphasises relationships in the local church. Look at Paul's defence of his ministry to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. The categories are deeply relational: house to house, night and day, with tears. Paul, as a pastor, was deeply and personally invested in the care of his sheep. In one of the recent pastoral washouts the pastor didn't even seem to have been a member of his church (massive ecclesiological failure on the part of the church leadership), and he wasn't personally around the congregation (another significant warning sign). Dear brother shepherds, we are pastors, not preachers. Preaching is only part of what we do; shepherding is the whole of our job. In the other recent washout, the pastor seems to have been more interested in relationships with high-profile community leaders in his city than in house-to-house care for his own sheep. In neither case was the pastor personally and regularly known by his ordinary sheep.

Church members, do you know your pastors? Do they let you into their homes and their lives? Do you have a chance to see, personally see for yourself, that their lifestyle matches their doctrine? Pastors, do our sheep know us? I mean, really know us. Do they know our sins? Do they know the struggles that exist in our homes? Do they know when we're discouraged? Do they know what fears and weakness grieve our hearts about our own churches? I think there's an older model of ministry that still lingers in the UK, that of the professional pastor, the medical model of the pastor. Keep a certain distance between shepherd and sheep. Pastors' wives shouldn't be too open or close with the ordinary congregants; they certainly shouldn't be open about marriage difficulties for fear of soiling their conception of their shepherd. Friends ... that is errant and destructive nonsense (not to put too fine a point on it!). We see nothing of that idea in the New Testament. We need the fellowship and accountability of the congregation as much as any other church member does, and any idea to the contrary smacks of pride and elitism.

Where in Scripture do we see the idea that pastors can only go to other pastors for advice? Or that pastors' wives can only go to other pastors' wives, women outside the congregation, for input? Does this not necessarily separate the pastor

from his sheep, and the pastor's family from the most natural means of regular discipleship? Why on earth would a pastor not want those most invested in – most closely connected to – his own life and ministry to be a means of care for his own soul? Doesn't the pastor need care for his soul as well?

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modelled living among his sheep for us. The whole New Testament bears witness of the necessity of mutuality in ministry. We all need care. Pastors need Galatians 6.1-5 in the church as much as anyone else. And personal integrity demands that we humble ourselves and submit ourselves to the same forms of accountability and confession as we expect our people to submit themselves to. Inconsistency in this area may very well be the first step towards ministry failure. Look, neither of these pastors failed overnight. These downfalls didn't just happen. They weren't hiccups. They weren't one sudden mistake or lapse of judgment. They weren't

random...could have happened to anyone.

Like so many other major ministry collapses, both of these failures revealed repeated patterns of resistance to repentance. They were, in both cases, a refusal to submit oneself to the same authority that they exerted over others.

They were a deliberate choice to live outside the protection of the ordinary means of grace.

In other words, the failure was inevitable yet preventable years before.

That brings me a small measure of comfort. I find fear crippling in the aftermath of these situations. How on earth do I think I'll endure to the end? I'm no better than either of these men. I cannot comprehend Paul's confidence at the end of 2 Timothy. How can he possibly know his race has been run well to the very end? And yet, there is comfort available for us as shepherds of Christ's sheep. Faithfulness is the key, daily faithfulness. Daily submission to the Word. Daily reliance on the means of grace. Daily humility and accountability to the same structures of authority we urge for the body. Daily confession of sin. And Christ will preserve his people, even his faithful under-shepherds. If we abide in him he will abide with us.

Ministry correctability

Ministry correctability might seem a bit unusual. How many of us would feel comfortable describing ourselves as 'ministry leaders'? Sounds a bit pretentious doesn't it; we're just local church pastors or ordinary church members. But the point is this: do we submit our own leadership and our church health to the evaluation of others? Many of *Reformation Today's* readers will be fiercely congregationalist, but

both the *Savoy Declaration* and the *1689 Baptist Confession* explicitly commend individual congregations working with other congregations of like faith and practice to resolve theological and practical difficulties. Have our churches become too independent in recent days? Has an over-emphasis on the principle of independence isolated us from the outside critique that's essential to the health and continual reformation of the church? In most of these high-profile church collapses there were plenty of people

outside the church who could hear warning bells ringing loudly; why could no one inside the church?

In one of the recent collapses, the pastor was connected with a number of other well-known ministries, but it seems no one was closely involved enough to actually know how this man functioned in the church in which he was supposedly a minister. In the other, the church isolated itself from criticism and chose not to foster relationships with those

who might have disagreements with how the church conducted the care of its members. Both ignorance and isolation are absolutely poisonous to local church health. Sunlight is the best disinfectant! A well-known American newspaper has this as its motto: democracy dies in darkness. However ironic that motto might be, given that newspaper's antics in recent years, the same applies for the church: faithful shepherding of Christ's sheep is never done in secret. Local church health requires openness, accountability,

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Are we, either as pastors or as church members, so tetchy about our churches that we're afraid to ask others for input? When other pastors come into our churches, do we ever ask what they see? In the congregation? In the leadership? What's the vibe of our churches? Do we know where we're strong and where we're weak? Do we know what's lacking in our churches? Are we growing in our understanding of pastoral care? Ministry correctability might just spare us significant heartache down the road. Like a check-engine light warning of some fault in our car, outside input can signal problems in our congregations we're not yet aware of ourselves. Are we humble enough to listen?

Biblically solid ecclesiology protects the flock. Personal integrity protects the pastor. Ministry correctability protects the structure. We need all three.

These ministry collapses usually leave me demoralised. And yet, and yet ... I was reflecting on the more recent of these ministry implosions on Reformation Day. The church has always been in a bad way. The letters to the seven churches at the beginning of Revelation. The church before Nicaea that very nearly confessed Arianism as orthodoxy. The medieval church. The Reformation. 20th century liberalism and the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversies. Now nearly perpetual scandals of pastoral failure and disgrace. So often the church seems to be gasping for breath, so close to death. Can it all be about to fail? Will we lose the

gospel and faithful pastoral care in our day?

G K Chesterton's timeless adage again reminds me of Jesus' promise: 'Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.' Christ is building his church. He is declaring his grace to the hearts of those whose faith is in him and whose hope is in his Word. Kings and pastors will fall. Nations and churches will fade away. We will always need reform in our churches and in our own hearts. But that's what the church is... the one place on earth where sinners come to hear of their sin and Christ's mercy. Christ's kingdom is being established, even in the ruin and wreckage of our sin.

The pain and destruction around us are real. Yet so is Christ's purpose through them. We can't understand, but he does. And he will use it to purify his church and draw his sheep to his fold. In that we can hope even as we weep. Christ the good shepherd is always caring for his sheep. Always. Ultimately, solid ecclesiology, personal integrity, and ministry correctability will not guarantee that we won't see or experience pastoral failure. But they go a long way towards protecting both the souls of Christ's shepherds and the souls of his tender lambs. An ounce of prevention is always better than a pound of cure... especially when our Saviour has given us such abundant instruction on how to conduct the ministry of his church. Maybe we would do well to heed his warnings, before it's too late. ■

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