



WHAT *Happens* When A Christian Leader Falls

*A personal testimony
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It

was on Saturday morning, January 3, 2004, when I confessed to my dear wife, Betty, that I had committed adultery—a seven-month affair with one of her best friends. She fell to her knees in disbelief. It was as if I had reached inside her heart and ripped it out...the pain was almost unbearable. Life had reached its darkest day for me—it was truly the worst day of my life. Immediately, life had changed, and everything began to take a different direction for us as we tried to somehow deal with this dreadful situation I had caused.

For almost 26 years, I had been the senior pastor of a Tidewater, VA church. We loved our people, and most all of our friends and a lot of our family members were in some way connected to that ministry. On that same evening I called a special deacons meeting and confessed to them my affair. Most of them wept in disbelief. I told them that the next day I would go before my congregation and come clean with them also. I did and also resigned. The news spread like lightning throughout the city and surrounding areas. The guilt and shame was overwhelming for me. The thought crossed my mind that death would have been a welcomed event. I had disappointed and broken trust with so many people.

Within seven days of my confession, at the invitation of Dr. Johnny Hunt, Betty and I pulled into the parking lot of First Baptist Church, Woodstock, GA to enter the City of Refuge, a ministry for pastors and full-time Christian workers who have been burnt out, forced out, or have struggled with some addiction or immorality. For 17 months, Betty and I received intense counseling and encouragement, which started a new journey of trust, transparency, and vulnerability in our lives. In addition to that, the sweet people at First Woodstock loved on us and offered us grace, safety, and love like we had never experienced in our entire lives. We were loved unconditionally. It was during that time that my dear wife offered me unconditional grace, forgiveness, love, and renewed trust. Our marriage and our home environment slowly became truly a place of genuine love, openness, and transparency.

The above is only a thumbnail of my 12-year journey, and I share it openly because pastors and church leaders (as well as laymen) are struggling with addictions and sexual sins. The fallout is at epidemic levels. We hear about it almost weekly, and there is very little help offered for pastors and churches who are experiencing such adversities.



The devastation that happens to pastors, deacons, and Sunday School teachers who have fallen morally is felt by their family, friends, church, and community. No one is ever the same. The question is, “How can we prevent this from happening?” and “How can we be a part of restoring the one that fell and bringing defeat to the enemy?”

Carey Nieuwhof recently listed the following in his blog, *5 Signs I Might Be Headed for a Moral Failure* (careynieuwhof.com):

- 1. I've chosen isolation over community.** *Sin usually happens in secret. And the only way to keep secrets, well, is to cut yourself off from true community. Solitude is a gift from God. Isolation is a tool of the enemy.*
- 2. I've stopped confessing my sins.** *As a leader, I have to make sure that I continue to confess my sins before God daily. When I confess my sins, I need to not only look for the obvious, but for the cracks. For small sins that could become much bigger. For motives that aren't pure. For thoughts that run off in dangerous directions. Confession is designed to stop what sin starts.*
- 3. I'm not thinking of the consequences.** *When you sin, you desire the action but not the consequences. But sin always has consequences. Keeping the consequences in mind can be so, so healthy. I can't imagine having to explain to my wife, my kids, our elders, our staff, our team, and to the hundreds (maybe thousands) of others who trusted me, how I betrayed their trust. Thinking about the consequences of a sin is a great way to ultimately avoid committing a sin.*
- 4. I think the rules don't apply to me.** *Perhaps this is why leaders fall more frequently than others. Leaders who avoid accountability still eventually have to give account for their actions—when they get caught. Accountability and transparency are vital in leadership. And if you cultivate a great inner circle (point 1), you will be a far better leader day to day.*
- 5. I see failure as my best escape.** *The bottom line is this. If you're burning out, an affair or a rash, irresponsible decision is NOT the only way out. Nor is it even a good way out. There are many other healthier options.*

T. A. Powell asserted that the desperate need is to prevent moral failure: “We must create safe places with openness and accountability for pastors to share without condemnation and judgment.”

I am a blessed and grateful man who realizes that God has strategically placed people and circumstances in my journey to help me understand what biblical grace is all about. My mess has become my message. I never want to forget the pain and disillusionment that I caused my wife, my family, my church, and my friends; however, my past no longer defines me. My vision and desire are to see the entire body of Christ understand grace, spiritual freedom, and healthy living out of our identity in Jesus Christ as mature Christ followers. ■

RESOURCES

BOOKS:
Preventing Ministry Failure, by Michael T. Wilson and Brad Hoffmann
Proven Men: A Proven Path to Sexual Integrity, by Joel Hesch
Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No, by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend
The Cure: What if God Isn't Who You Think He Is and Neither Are You? by Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and John Lynch

ORGANIZATIONS:
Truefaced (truefaced.com)
City of Refuge, a ministry of First Baptist Church, Woodstock, GA
fbcw.org/community/city-of-refuge