

Dealing With Church Leadership and Infidelity

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Over the years I have talked with hundreds of pastor's, their spouses and or church board members about dealing with church leaders and infidelity. In each case the conversations were deeply emotional, filled with disbelief and pain. In all too many cases the fact of broken trust with the spouse, the church and the Lord were overshadowed with comments like "But he is so anointed . . . He has helped so many people." Many thought that everything would go on as before. After all "he has repented . . . we need to walk in forgiveness." For those that did see the need for counseling and a restoration process, the expectations were completely unrealistic. "He should be able to resume full responsibility with in a few months, shouldn't he?" And then there was the other response of shooting the wounded. Immediate termination, no severance, no counseling, and no thought of restoration. Both types' of responses are more emotionally based, extreme and lacking in biblical understanding. Moral failure on any level with church leadership must be dealt with in a scriptural manner if the ministry couple and church body are to survive the trauma.

Before one can discuss proper discipline and restoration it is important to have a clear understanding of what church leadership is. Leaders are people who serve in the church *with proven character* as outlined in 1st Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Once meeting God's standard, being duly appointed and recognized by the congregation they *serve by their example* to encourage, strengthen and build up the flock of God. While the bible does not stipulate, nor do we as fellow believers expect perfection in these areas, these qualifications MUST be visibly evident in all church leaders (elders, deacons, ministers, priests, etc.).

Let me state here that I personally believe that in some cases a fallen leader may in certain circumstances be allowed back into leadership after much caution and sufficient time (in some cases many years) to ensure he has properly repented demonstrating godly character and having reestablished his reputation. (Matthew 3:8, Acts 26:20, Ephesians 4:23, 28)

If a man is frequently involved with pornography, is lustful and/or has been sexually involved with anyone other than his wife he is biblically disqualified to serve. Sexual sin is not an isolated issue by itself but rather a cluster of character flaws culminating in corrupt sexual expression. He must be removed for the following reasons.

- **He is guilty of infidelity:** He has sinned against God, sinned against his wife, broken faith/trust with his leadership team and with the congregation who put their confidence in him. (Matt 5:27-28, 2 Peter 2:14, Hebrews 13:4)
- **He is no longer blameless** (Greek-unrebukeable): It means to have nothing in one's conduct on which someone could ground a charge or accusation. Having unquestionable integrity, ir-reproachable, not able to find fault with, or deserving of censure. (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:6)
- **He no longer has a good reputation:** Having an excellent testimony and reputation with those outside of the church i.e., the non-Christian community. This includes the areas of business, community relations, and civil law. A church leader must be a respected person 'on the job' as well as in the church. (1 Timothy 3:7)

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- **He is not a man of good behavior:** Having a modest, orderly (disciplined) respectable life-style. Honorable, dignified, decorous, good deportment, not forward, boastful, arrogant, presumptuous. Well behaved. *“Orderly, decent, grave and correct in the whole appearance, carriage and conduct.” Commentary on the New Testament by Adam Clark (1 Timothy 3:2)*
- **He is not temperate** (Greek-self controlled): Denotes keeping oneself in hand, disciplined, self-restrained, self-controlled over appetites and affections. (Titus 1:8)
- **His behavior is not Holy:** Being devout, pious, pleasing to God and set apart for His service, as opposed to being worldly (carnal) and not totally dedicated to God. (Titus 1:8)
- **He has been self-willed:** Church leadership cannot be dominated by self-interest, be self-pleasing, stubborn, or arrogant. They must be submitted to proper authority, seeking to please God and others, and not ‘set’ in their own ways. (Titus 1:7)
- **He has not been sober in his thinking:** That is, sober-minded, prudent, sensible, discreet, having a sound mind. Not given to fanciful thinking or emotional irrationality. Using sound judgment. (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8)

My recommendations in cases of this nature would be . . .

1. Immediate administrative leave, length to be determined.
2. Keep copious notes of all related meetings, testimony, counsel etc.
3. Seek legal counsel if infidelity involves another person. Offer counseling to all persons involved not just the ministry couple.
4. Contact the legal department of your insurer as a law suit could ensue. They will explain the provisions of your policy and hopefully give you good legal counsel.
5. Intensive counseling for 3 to 12 days. Don't just send the offending leader. Insist that both husband and wife go together for counseling. Referrals are available upon request from the Counseling and Pastoral Care departments of Focus on the Family.
6. Prepare a written statement of the situation to be read to the congregation. This will keep you on track with what needs to be communicated initially and help you to avoid inappropriate details. Don't shoot from the hip!
7. Formulation of a restoration plan (restored to Christ, spouse, church body, and ministry last). This must be done with much counsel and carefulness! The marriage relationship has been seriously damaged. Healing and rebuilding trust will take time and must be proven to be valid (Acts 20:20, Matthew 3:8, Ephesians 4:28). In my judgment it can take a *minimum of 6 to 18 months* to rebuild. Under no circumstances should the man be placed back into any position of leadership until this has taken place. The marriage and the individual pastor are the primary concerns *not his ministry!*
8. Determine the severance package and follow through with the restoration plan where possible.
9. Begin the process of finding a new leader to fill the void.

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There must be clarity before there can be agreement.

Agreement in the leadership team is absolutely critical. Any division will further weaken the team's ability to function and care for the congregation.

“Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?” Amos 3:3 (NLT)

“. . . if a house is divided (split into factions and rebelling) against itself, that house will not be able to last.” Mark 3:25 (AMP)

If the team is not united in their understanding and approach to the crisis, then bring in someone or a team skilled in conflict resolution. Referrals are available upon request from the Counseling and Pastoral Care departments of Focus on the Family.

I would also recommend the following resources.

- Nothing to Hide: Hope for Marriages Hurt by Pornography and Infidelity by Joann Condie (Focus on the Family publication #F00038T)
- Sexual Misconduct in Counseling & Ministry by Peter Mosgofian, ISBN: 0849936764
- Restoring The Fallen: A team Approach to Caring, Confronting & Reconciling, by Earl and Sandy Wilson ISBN: 0-8308-1619-4
- The Restoration Manual by Tom Pedigo (800) 841-4248
- If Ministers Fall Can They Be Restored? by Tim LaHaye, ISBN: 0310521319
- False Intimacy by Harry Schaumburg
- Colorado Statement on Biblical Sexual Morality www.family.org/cforum/fosi/abstinence/bv/a0028508.cfm
- www.pureintimacy.org (Sexual Sin Among Church leaders article)
- www.thechurchreport.com/content/view/778/32/ (Church Sexual Misconduct)

This is not intended to be an in-depth paper but merely a reference point to help identify the immediate issues, to help ensure an accurate response. I hope that it is helpful to you and those you may choose to share this information with.