

A Priest Worth Trusting

By David Feddes

Priests have been in the news, and the news hasn't been good. A number of Roman Catholic priests in North America have been charged with molesting underage boys. To make the situation worse, these molesters were often aided by superiors who covered for them. Rather than kicking sinful, sick molesters out of the priesthood and into prison, the hierarchy transferred them to other parishes, providing them a new crop of children to abuse. All too often, the church leaders cared more about public image than about truth. They cared more about the welfare of wicked priests than of unwitting children. My heart breaks when I think of the anguish these victims have endured.

It's a horrible scandal for clergy to abuse the young, but there have been other kinds of clergy scandals too—and not just among Roman Catholics. Other churches also have hypocrites and leaders who betray their calling. Some scandals involve sexual abuse of children or youth. Some involve pastors counseling fragile people and exploiting their vulnerability for the pastors' own lusts. Some clergy scandals are less abusive but are still evil, involving sinful sexual relationships between grownups who aren't married to each other.

Other scandals are not sexual but financial. Some preachers plead for donations to build God's kingdom but use the money to build mansions for themselves. They ask for money to help hungry children, but all they really feed is their own bank account. They preach wealth and prosperity and promise gullible followers that if only they make a big donation God will make them rich, but the only ones getting rich are the greedy ministers.

Still other scandals are political. In the former Soviet Union, for example, many brave priests and bishops were killed or imprisoned by the government, while leaders who compromised their integrity by working with the secret police held on to their positions. Still today some of these men hold high positions in the Russian Orthodox Church. Churches in China and other countries have similar issues involving government-controlled clergy. How can anybody trust leaders who aren't men of God but government cronies who care more about their own position than about God's people?

The sins of church leaders—political, financial, and sexual—do dreadful damage. They do the most harm, of course, to the victims. People often place a special trust in priests and pastors—they expect them to be shepherds who pray for the flock, not wolves who prey on the flock—so it's an awful blow when that trust is betrayed. If as a child you were molested by a member of the clergy, if as a teenager you were seduced by your youth leader, if as an adult you gave money to a ministry only to find out that your gift helped pay for the preacher's luxury car, if as a persecuted Christian you or your loved ones were betrayed by a church leader working with the secret police—if you've been victimized by a spiritual leader you trusted, you feel betrayed and violated. You have scars that won't disappear. And the damage isn't limited to your relationship to the person who hurt you. It can make you distrustful of ministers and of people in general. It can shatter your tie to God's church. It can even make it hard for you to trust God himself.

Even if you're not one of those directly victimized, even if you're a Christian whose own minister has been above reproach, scandals like this can be damaging. You hear about these things in the news, and you find yourself becoming a bit less trusting of your own minister, even

if he's a man of integrity. Your view of the office of minister has been tainted, and you find it hard to look at any minister in quite the same way.

These scandals have an impact even on many who aren't involved in a church and don't have a pastor or priest at all. With each new scandal, those who don't go to church have one more excuse to stay away, and those who make fun of Christianity have one more weapon in their arsenal. If you're far from God in the first place, if you're already steering clear of the church, the vile behavior of certain church leaders can drive you farther away than ever. Why should you be interested in church if it's full of phonies and run by hypocrites?

Painful Publicity

The publicity surrounding church scandals can be painful and have a negative effect, but sometimes the publicity is necessary. In some cases, corrupt clergy try to silence their victims. Sometimes, even after the church hierarchy becomes aware of problems, it drags its feet and tries to keep things hushed up rather than dealing promptly with allegations of wrongdoing. Sometimes painful publicity is the only thing that will force the issue. The church owes a real debt to victims who have the courage to speak out and to honest reporters who bring evil out into the open.

Negative publicity can hurt the church, but it hurts the church even more to cover things up and allow the evil to continue. Ignorance is not bliss, not when it comes to corrupt leaders. They're in a position to do too much damage if their evil is hushed up or ignored. The secrecy gives the violators opportunities to do even more harm. When there is clear evidence of wrongdoing, the church needs to deal with the offender firmly and openly, and if that means negative publicity, so be it.

Still, though painful publicity is sometimes necessary, you can get a warped view of the church and its leaders if the media is your only source of information. The problem isn't that scandals get reported. The problem is that, all too often, they are the only things that get reported. If a community has a hundred pastors who are faithful and one who's involved in a scandal, guess which one makes the news? The bad one. The hundred good ones aren't in the picture.

It would be nice if the media were to report on more than just the scandals and the controversies, if they gave as much coverage to good pastors and priests as to bad ones. But that's not likely to happen any time soon. Why not? Well, for one thing, most reporters aren't fond of religion—less than 20 percent attend worship regularly. But in fairness to reporters, that's probably not the main factor. Scandal gets reported more than faithfulness because scandal attracts the largest audience. Let's say one TV channel carries a story about a typical week in the life of an ordinary pastor. The camera follows him as he prays and studies and teaches and baptizes and visits people in his neighborhood. Meanwhile, another channel carries an investigative report about a clergyman who's charged with molesting children. Now, which channel will people watch? Which is going to get better ratings and make more money? The answer is obvious. News reporting is ultimately a matter of revenue, of selling papers and boosting TV ratings. As long as that's true, corrupt ministers will make the news and good ones won't. Scandal sells; devotion doesn't.

Now, if the only preachers you ever hear about are the scoundrels, you're not likely to have a high view of the clergy. Many of the scandals are very real and very serious, and they should be exposed, not hushed up. But there are still a lot of faithful church leaders out there who

never make the headlines. Don't despise all ministers because of the well-publicized scandals of some. That's a mistake.

God Versus Bad Leaders

An even worse mistake would be to reject God himself because of what certain people have done. Maybe someone claiming to be a Christian has hurt you deeply. It may be a minister, or it may be someone else: a deacon or a parent or a neighbor or your boss or someone you work with. Whoever it is, that person claimed to be a Christian but wronged you terribly, and you feel disillusioned and disgusted. You figure that if that's what religion is all about, you want no part of it.

Now, if that's your situation, if someone wearing the label "Christian" has betrayed your trust, it's understandable if you feel angry and hurt. It's tempting to forget about Jesus altogether. Before you do that, however, here's a story that might help put the matter in perspective.

A certain pastor was out visiting various homes, inviting people to come and visit his church. At one house he invited a man and mentioned that the man's neighbor was already a member of his church. Well, as soon as the man heard that, he said there was no way he'd go near that church. He said that the guy next door was the worst neighbor he'd ever had, and he wanted nothing to do with a religion that would include a person like that.

The pastor was quiet for a moment. Then he gestured toward a nearby piano, and he asked the man's little daughter to play a piece by Beethoven that was lying on the piano. The man protested: Beethoven's music was much too advanced for his daughter. But the pastor insisted, and the little girl gave it a try. It sounded dreadful. It was awful. When the little girl finally finished butchering that glorious piece of music, the pastor looked at the man and said, "Boy, that Beethoven sure wasn't much of a composer, was he?" The man got the point. He had been judging Christianity by the performance of one player rather than focusing on the composer himself, Jesus Christ.

Don't turn away from Jesus just because some religious people turned out to be corrupt. If you're going to base your attitude toward God on the actions of one person, make sure that person is the Lord Jesus Christ. Christianity is Christ. Don't dismiss Christ because of the wrongs committed by some who wear the label Christian. All Christians have sins and shortcomings, and immature Christians may not do a good job of living like Jesus. Don't turn against God because Christians aren't perfect.

Many of the scandalous leaders, however, aren't just immature Christians. They are veteran hypocrites. Many church leaders who commit awful deeds are not really Christians at all. As Jesus puts it, "They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." Jesus says that wicked leaders will be "thrown into the fire" of hell. On Judgment Day, says Jesus, "I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:15,19,23)

You may be angry at corrupt religious leaders, but don't let that turn you against God. Remember: the Lord is even more furious about these things than you are. The Bible says that church leaders and teachers "will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). If religious leaders act important but harm the weak, Jesus says, "Such men will be punished most severely" (Luke 20:47). Those who harm and corrupt little ones make the Lord so angry that they would be better off getting weighed down with rocks and thrown into the sea than facing God's judgment against

them (Matthew 18:6). Jesus confronts ungodly religious leaders and thunders, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33).

Bad Shepherds, Good Shepherd

In Ezekiel 34, the Bible talks about prophets and priests who were supposed to be shepherds for God’s people but betrayed them instead. Listen to these scorching words from Ezekiel 34:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.

The Lord denounces these people and then declares his judgment:

...because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: ...I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

As Ezekiel 34 continues, the Lord not only judges the false shepherds but also makes a tremendous promise. He promises to become a shepherd himself, to personally take care of his people.

For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep... I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

God kept this promise. God personally became our shepherd in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the good shepherd. He cares for his sheep and even died in order to save us. Jesus’ willingness to give up his own life is the final proof that he can be trusted. It’s one thing to turn away from a religious leader who hurts and almost destroys you; it’s quite another to turn from the good shepherd who was willing to die for you. In John 10:10-11 Jesus says: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

The Lord Jesus is my shepherd. Some pastors and priests act more like wolves than shepherds, but Jesus is the good shepherd. He’s not going to mislead or abuse us. He’s a priest worth trusting. “As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame’” (Romans 10:11). In a world where nobody’s perfect, where you can’t trust anybody completely, there is one priest worth trusting: the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Hebrews 7 the Bible points out that there have been many priests but none to match Jesus. “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him,” says the Scripture. “Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens” (Hebrews 7:25-26). Other priests and pastors have sins and problems of their own to deal with, but Jesus has no sins of his own. That’s why he can deal with our sins and meet our need—because he is totally sinless, perfectly pure.

He is able to save me completely, and he is able to save you completely. The Son of God lived a perfect life as a man, and God credits that perfect life to people who trust Jesus. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, and God the Father accepted that payment because Jesus was totally pure. Jesus lives and speaks to his Father on our behalf, and the Father does for us what Jesus asks. Jesus is the perfect go-between, the perfect priest who meets our need, the priest worth trusting.

Have you trusted Jesus to be your perfect priest and Savior? Maybe you've stayed away from God because of wrongs committed by religious people and because of hypocrites who hurt you. Isn't it time to stop focusing on unrighteous hypocrites and start trusting in the goodness of Jesus? Trust him. Pray for him to save you. Obey his teaching. Follow his example. "Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens."

Christ-like Leaders

The fact that Christ is the perfect priest means that you can count on him no matter how bad some church leaders have been. Still, even though leaders can't be perfect, it's important for leaders to become as Christ-like as possible, and it's important for God's people to recognize Christ-like leaders who follow Christ's pattern and teach Bible-based truth. Don't settle for ungodly, unbiblical leadership. No one should enter leadership if he fails biblical standards for leadership, and no one should remain in leadership if he violates the biblical standard for leaders. The Bible insists on the highest standards for spiritual leaders, and those standards must not be lowered.

The media says much about priests who molest young boys, and these awful things must be exposed and stopped. But in all the media coverage, little has been said about seminaries where up to half the students training to be priests are gay, despite the Bible's ban on homosexual behavior. The media applauds gay clergy, and some church officials think it's fine to have lots of gays in the priesthood. But if it's considered okay to betray biblical standards by having active homosexuals in the priesthood, why act horrified when an increasing number of priests get involved with under-age boys? [The Gay Report](#), a pro-homosexual publication, acknowledges that 73% of gay men have been sexually involved with teenage boys. And aside from such statistics, it's never a good idea to bypass biblical standards.

Bypassing any biblical standard is wrong, and so is adding any standard that is not required by the Bible. It's a mistake to require all church leaders to be single and to ban married men from leadership. The Bible contains no such ban. Rather, the Bible speaks of church leaders as husbands and fathers with model families (1 Timothy 3:1-5). Peter and other apostles had wives (1 Corinthians 9:5). There's no denying that godly single men can be excellent church leaders, but so can godly married men. It's not wise to be more restrictive than the Bible and to make singleness a requirement for church leadership. It can cause a shortage of leaders and attract a disproportionate number of sexually disordered people into leadership positions.

Sexuality isn't the only area where churches must be careful in selecting leaders. Leaders must not be hot-tempered or heavy drinkers or money grubbers. Leaders must believe the Bible, teach the truth, and set a godly example. Some seminaries openly contradict the Bible, deny that it is God's error-free Word, and train pastors to follow their own ideas or the latest trends. Such seminaries are training grounds for hypocrites and false prophets. Churches can suffer and die

under such leadership. The people of God must oppose such corruption and refuse to submit to ungodly, unbiblical leaders.

The church needs leaders who can say with the apostle Paul, “I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). No pastor or leader is perfect except Jesus, but there are some whose character and example bear a powerful resemblance to Jesus. Find such leaders, follow their example, and listen to their teaching. Don’t put yourself or your children under the care of a pastor who thinks he knows better than the Bible or blatantly disobeys God. Seek out leaders like those described in 1 Timothy 3. There the Bible says that a church leader “must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. . . He must also have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Nobody’s perfect, but a church leader must be someone in whom the life of Christ is evident.