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When leaders fail

BY ANDREW GARNETT

People of faith need trusted relationships with mature Christians. Mentoring and modeling have been a key aspect of spiritual formation from the earliest days, with even Paul encouraging the Corinthian Christians to “follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Biblical principles remain abstract unless we see them incarnated in the life of a leader. Yet we are more cognizant than ever of leaders who fail to uphold those principles.

It seems each day brings news of a priest who has abused a child, a minister accused of sexual harassment, or a trusted lay leader who has misused church funds. We seem to be working at cross purposes: We want Christians to have spiritual role models, yet we are wary of encouraging too much trust in any one leader lest that leader disappoint us.

How can we teach Christians to trust, while also preparing them for the disappointment that inevitably comes in human relationships? We can do it by encouraging them to trust their leaders, while simultaneously teaching them how to cope when leaders fail.

Psalm 13 is a useful guide for responding when a trusted leader lets us down. In this psalm of lament the author prays for deliverance from a dark situation. Along the way we see several key principles for helping believers navigate their disappointment when a leader exhibits a serious moral failure.

NATURAL FEELINGS

Psalm 13 gives voice to negative feelings of grief, frustration, abandonment and anger. All of these are natural in the wake of a serious moral failure by a leader.

This psalm also carries a theme of resentment directed toward enemies: “My enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed;’ my foes

will rejoice because I am shaken” (13:4).

Themes of resentment or vindication over enemies appear in many psalms. Ordinarily these are some of the verses to which Christians — who have been constantly encouraged to love their enemies — have the most difficulty relating.

In the aftermath of a leadership scandal, however, Christians may begin to connect with these verses. When a leader is caught in sin, the talking heads pontificate and the online message boards light up — often suggesting faith is part of the problem. We can empathize with the psalmist that our enemies not be vindicated in their critical opinion of us.

Psalm 13 demonstrates that the full range of human emotions is normal. Sometimes we make wrong choices about what we do with our feelings, but the feelings themselves are never wrong. God is always big enough to handle our feelings.

PERMISSION

The exact crisis faced by the psalmist is not clear. But whatever the problem, this psalm does not sugarcoat it. It offers no simple answers to a difficult situation.

There is some hope at the end, but mostly this psalm just sits with the pain. Weathering long periods of pain is necessary in times of grief and deep disappointment.

Indeed, it is helpful to think of a moral failure by a leader as a form of grief. When a leader does something either criminal or exceptionally immoral, Christians must accept that the person they knew is, on some level, gone. The mental image of the leader must pass away, and a more realistic one must emerge. It is a long and painful process to grieve the loss of the leader they thought they knew.

Christians do not need to worry if they are upset or angry. They should worry, however, if they have those feelings one day and the next day everything seems back to normal. That is not how grief works.

LOOK FOR GOD

This psalm reminds believers to look for God in every situation of life. God is found in moments of happiness and joy. In horrific moments God is there too.

Even though the psalmist feels broken and forgotten, he still talks to God. Although the psalmist feels like God is absent, he cries out to God anyway. It is key for disappointed Christians to remember that God is always there, even if it feels that their prayers are directed toward an empty heaven. We can learn from the psalmist’s example and continue talking to a God who feels absent.

FINDING HOPE

This scripture reminds disappointed believers that they will see and experience God’s love and comfort again — even if they can’t imagine it at the moment. It seems that the author of psalm 13 has not seen hope yet (v. 5: “my heart will rejoice in your salvation”). But because God has been bountifully good to him in the past (13:6), he knows that he can trust God’s love for the future.

If you have ever experienced a deep grief or a loss, you probably know of what the psalmist is speaking. After the loss of someone very close, it seems that the world is hopeless. All of life is a pale shadow, and it seems that the grief will never lift. But eventually, it does; in time you find meaning and purpose again.

This is a truth that believers need to remember when a leader disappoints them. Though it may seem hard to imagine in the aftermath, there will come a day when they experience God’s bountiful goodness again.

BIGGER STORY

When walking with Christians who are disappointed in a leader, it is important to remind them that the church has always considered the Christian message to be independent of the Christian messengers.

One moment when the church most dramatically affirmed this was in the aftermath of the Diocletianic Persecution. The early fourth century saw the most severe persecution that Christians ever faced in the Roman Empire. Even many church leaders surrendered to the Roman authorities. Bishops and priests renounced their faith, handed over copies of the Scripture to be burned, and even betrayed lay Christians in order to save their own lives.

Eventually the persecution ended. Christians — and former Christians — came out of hiding. The church faced a difficult choice: what to do with those who had given in and done terrible things during the persecution. Could Christians who abandoned the faith really come back to the church?

On a deeper level the church was troubled by what the failings of priests and bishops meant. If a priest had baptized a Christian but later betrayed that Christian to save his own life, was that baptism still valid? Had it even been a real baptism if performed by a leader who had fallen so short?

If a bishop had served a congregation

with the body and blood of the Lord, and then betrayed them, had that bishop really celebrated communion at all? Was everything done by an unworthy leader really false?

Eventually the church decided in the negative. Baptism, communion or worship performed by a fallen leader was authentic and holy. It was holy not because the failings of the church leaders were unimportant; on the contrary, the sin of those church leaders was incredibly serious. But, the church said, the sins of leaders simply did not have anything to do with the larger message of the church.

The church's saving activity did not depend on any one person. The church's life depended on God. The church recognized that the Christian story was true, regardless of the flaws of the leader who told the story.

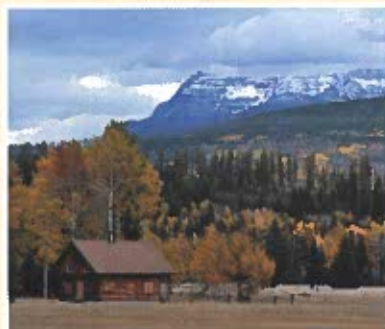
That was true for the church 1,700 years ago, and it is still true for us today. Christians can be comforted with the knowledge that our faith ultimately rests not on any one leader, but on God. **NFJ**

—Andrew Garnett is a minister at Forest Hills Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., who previously served at a Christian peace and reconciliation center in Northern Ireland.

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Bruce Gourley is the online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith, an award-winning photographer and owner of the popular web site yellowstone.net.

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