
The Tests of Leadership - Why Some Christian Leaders are Derailed: Measures to Keep on Track

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Introduction

Christians who are leaders have advantages but face pressures and carry burdens that others often do not see or understand. Many feel lonely; some find it difficult to have close friendships with people who do not share their Christian world view. All come under spiritual attack. Few are taught how to cope. As a result, a high proportion end up “derailed”. How we respond to leaders who fall or burn out is a measure of our spiritual growth and strength of community. We must be redemptive, while not evading the reality of what people of free will choose and experience, in the same way that Jesus and the first Christians did (Luke 22:31-32; Galatians 6:1-5).

It can be difficult for a Christian who is a leader to deal with pressures, because expectations of their behaviour and output are high and there are many “pot holes” abound. Where moral failure is involved, the road back is much tougher in the church than in the secular environment (Luke 12:48; 1 Corinthians 4:1, 2). Scandals draw attention to the humanity of Christian leadership, against the backdrop of justifiably high standards everyone expects in their personal lives. Some “good” leaders quit because they run out of steam, or find it difficult to cope with change.

Leadership is a privilege. The impacts of derailed leadership are severe: experienced people sidelined; failed relationship; tarnished gifts; opportunities missed; alienation; financial loss; and disunity. As your leadership is tested (it will be), allow the Holy Spirit to challenge, teach and strengthen you, and give you wisdom and capacity to continue to serve the Lord and touch lives for His purposes. Get close to people who will stand by you, draw on their wisdom and support. Never give up. Likewise, support leaders you know who are going through tests of their own. Christians in leadership in any sphere who are tested can emerge stronger than ever, for the glory of God.

What Derails Leaders?

- moral failure (eg David's adultery with Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11)
- family break-down (David's family was divided as a result of his sin, 2 Samuel 12:10)
- other relationship failures (Absalom's betrayal, 2 Samuel 15; cf Psalm 41:9, 55:12-14)
- financial problems (Judas, John 12:26)
- persecution arising from Christian faith (Mark 4:17)
- loss of faith/belief
- sickness and personal tragedy
- ministry competition and exaggeration (Absalom, 2 Samuel 15:4)
- doubt and pessimism about the "call" to a particular leadership role (Jeremiah, see Jeremiah 20:9)
- lack of care in legal matters, leading to exposure and risk
- physical and mental exhaustion due to stress, deadlines, discouragement, being over-extended, hemmed in by others (Moses, Genesis 18:18), feeling lack of empathy or support (Psalm 69:20)
- neglect of personal spiritual walk – it is hard to give what we do not have
- loneliness (Elijah, 1 Kings 19:10); feeling unappreciated (Psalm 35:13, 14)
- independence (can lead to error, 1 John 2:19; Saul's impatience > rebellion, 1 Samuel 13)
- false teaching (Galatian church)
- addiction to power, roles, sex, praise, money
- compassion fatigue – taking on everyone else's problems and not knowing how to "let go"
- giving the world priority in our lives (Demas, 2 Timothy 4:10)
- inability to cope with criticism and close scrutiny by others
- believing people's rhetoric ("You are so good!"), dismissing negative feedback (Ahab, 1 Kings 22)
- indecision, leading to bad decisions (or decision paralysis)
- fear to obey God's way (Jonah, 1:3)
- carelessness in a sinful environment (Lot establishing himself in Sodom, Genesis 19:1)

We need to identify our blind spots and not fall in these areas.

A Case Study in Resilience –Paul’s Trials

“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

“Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.”

2 Corinthians 11:23-22

“I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize”.

1 Corinthians 9:27

None of us is the first to experience potentially derailing pressures.

Facing Up

It is important not to over-simplify or generalize factors that cause Christian leaders to be derailed. Some are within the control of those involved, whilst others come from outside and impact with little advance warning. Major developments often have small beginnings. Men and women of God can be working hard for the Lord and be shaken by external circumstances, eg health problems, a financial crisis, the death of a much loved family or team member, *or a combination of factors*. Others discover too late that moral or ethical hazards they should not have ceded a foothold in their lives have snared them and there is no answer short of stepping down from public ministry.

The response of the Christian community to *any* event that causes a Christian leader to stand aside should be motivated by the love of Christ and a desire to honour those who are touched by tragedy, or restore those who have fallen in some way. Our default position must never be a judgmental one (Romans 14:4, 10-13). In some situations there will be others to consider. It will be up to godly leadership to work through each situation and indicate the way forward in a spirit of mutual submission and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

"God gave me a message and a horse. I have killed the horse. Oh, what shall I do with the message?" - Robert Murray McCheyne, dying at 29. The irony is that all Christian life and ministry are worked out through "weak vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7), so that God alone is glorified.

The pages that follow contain a number of principles and suggestions that may be helpful. They are not a "menu" of antidotes, but approaches I have seen "work". In the final analysis, true renewal comes from God (2 Corinthians 4:16), but we must collaborate with Him.

Preventative Measures

- remember that your calling, gifting and ministry come from God, not people (2 Corinthians 4:1)
- define the calling/gifts God has given you (1 Timothy 4:14) and don't try to imitate others
- set clear boundaries around your time and availability and learn how to say "No"
- keep reminding yourself that "ministry" means "service", not position or control (Galatians 6:9)
- create a culture of "openness" with other leaders
- be aware of personal risk areas – and develop risk management strategies
- strenuously guard team unity
- do not push new or inexperienced Christians into key ministry roles (1 Timothy 3:6)
- be wary when everyone seems to be speaking well of you (Luke 6:26)
- foster trusting relationships with friends who will tell you what you need to know about yourself
- develop a strong "accountability" regime; be willing to submit to others (even those "beneath" you)
- don't take praise too much to heart (Isaiah 42:8); be humble; ultimately it is not about you
- be wary of people who will "use" you for their own agendas
- do not depend excessively on people's support, faithfulness to your vision
- seek out those who will encourage you in a godly way, regardless of what you are going through (we all need encouragement on a *daily* basis – Hebrews 3:13)
- don't rely on your infallibility – set up safeguards, rely on God (1 Corinthians 10:12, 13)
- keep a forgiving spirit in all your relationships – don't let lack of forgiveness, smouldering resentment or anger become cancers or traps (2 Corinthians 2:10, 11)
- focus on Jesus Christ, "so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:2, 3)
- keep appropriate distance from members of the opposite sex (1 Corinthians 6:18)
- be on guard against spiritual attack (1 Peter 5:8)
- keep around people of integrity, who have high moral standards and no margins for compromise (1 Corinthians 15:33), but are motivated by love

Our character must be bigger than, but support, the gifts of God in our lives.

Preventative Measures, continued

- keep studying God's Word – know *what* you believe, and *why*
- continually reaffirm your confidence in God alone to keep you (1 Corinthians 10:2)
- when people blame you for events beyond their/your control, encourage yourself in God's faithfulness (David at Ziklag, 1 Samuel 30:6)
- take advantage of every opportunity for spiritual "renewal" (2 Corinthians 4:16)
- maximise time with your family - no matter how much other people demand your time and energy
- don't over-extend yourself financially
- watch your public integrity (1 Timothy 3:7)
- celebrate all who have God-given capacities for ministry and avoid hierarchy
- don't publicly criticise other men and women in Christian ministry
- avoid wasting time with people who are only interested in polemics (Nehemiah 6:1-3)
- learn to delegate – if you are unsure seek the help of someone who can watch you and make recommendations (Moses and Jethro, Genesis 18:19-26)
- learn how to hear the Holy Spirit and keep a diary of what God is saying to you
- learn to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit, the first time, every time, and thereby develop a life of submission and trust in God
- when you feel like panicking, try "resting" in God and handing over your burdens to him (Psalm 55:22) – He has promised to "sustain" (maintain, support, nourish) you
- talk to someone you trust about what you are feeling and going through (in some cases, this may be a professional Christian counsellor, or your doctor)
- don't get hung up on whether you are full or part-time, or a volunteer ("laity" is not Biblical anyway)
- accept that others will let you down, for a range of reasons, despite their best intentions
- if God's plan is for you *not* to be in charge, accept it graciously (John the Baptist, John 3:26-30)
- keep "short accounts" with God; confess sin in your life, repent & break it before it overtakes you

"Your labour in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58). Your reward is from the Lord (Isaiah 49:4)

Practical Tips

- avoid perfectionists – you will probably never please them
- keep good records of events, places, names, issues – you never know when you are going to need the facts; pay attention to detail, but ensure written records are secure
- keep physically fit and look after your health
- pay attention when your body or mind say “Stop!”
- maximise your marriage and family – quarantine time for them alone
- shield your children from unnecessary pressures arising from “issues” in the church
- develop a budget, so that you can live within your means (Proverbs 30:8, 9) and pay bills promptly
- take a time management course, so that your schedule / workload do not become unrealistic or overwhelming, and you know how to plan and deliver against goals, or drop some things
- take holidays – be refreshed physically, spiritually and mentally; Jesus practised taking “time out” without feeling guilty (Mark 6:31)
- don’t blame others – give close friends permission to tell you when they find you doing so
- be careful with your “self talk”, so as to avoid negativity, self-condemnation, panic
- honour team members (even if they have different responsibility / authority); do not alienate them
- set up a daily personal devotion and stick to it
- surround yourself with good people (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 24:6)
- do not handle ministry finances; have due diligence processes in place for others to do so
- find two or three friends of the same sex and work hard on those relationships
- don’t trust your heart/emotions (Jeremiah 17:9)
- be uncompromising about what you allow yourself to view on the Internet or television
- read books, watch DVDs, listen to CDs that will inform and encourage you; don’t stagnate
- when things go wrong, do not try to keep ministering “out of hurt”

Ministry is not a sprint; it is a long distance run. Pace yourself.

The Modesto Manifesto

“We will never criticize, condemn, or speak negatively about others.

“We will be accountable, particularly in handling finances, with integrity according to the highest business standards.

“We will tell the truth and be thoroughly honest, especially in reporting statistics.

“We will be exemplary in morals - clear, clean, and careful to avoid the very appearance of impropriety.”

‘The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham’, Zondervan, 2005

Follow the examples of men and women of God who have established safeguards against falling.