

After the Fiasco: RESTORING FALLEN CHRISTIANS

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By the time twenty-two-year-old Eva Eber showed up in the pastor's office, her life story was already book length. Born into a nominal Catholic family in Los Angeles, she had begun to respond spiritually in junior high when a school friend invited her to a Baptist camp. Soon she was singing in the church's teen music group and even doing street witnessing. Her parents, however, scorned her "turning Protestant," and during her senior year, Eva moved out of the house.

By age nineteen she had landed a teacher's aide job 200 miles away, and at church there she met a young Air Force sergeant who gave her the acceptance she craved. The very first intimacy resulted in pregnancy, and only then did the news come out that her lover was already married. They lived together until six weeks after Ryan was born; by then the sergeant had tired of Eva and was off to arrange his divorce and take up with someone else.

Eva drifted from job to job, and from bed to bed, over the next two years. "I just went crazy—all I wanted were arms to hold me through the night," she later admitted. "As long as a man was taking me out and supplying the cocaine, keeping me from loneliness, I was OK."

She eventually moved in with a mid-thirties divorced father of three. Occasionally she would drop in at a church, faintly clutching for the anchor of her teen years. But then, suddenly, she decided to start

anew in Chicago, where a friend would help her get settled, find a job. Things would be different there.

Within a month, she found herself in bed one night with her friend's former boyfriend. "God—just give up on me, why don't you?" she prayed in the darkness. "I'm hopeless." By the next March she literally had nowhere to live. A Christian she had met at her last job introduced her to an older woman named Eleanor Hill, who let Eva and two-year-old Ryan stay with her temporarily. It was Eleanor who directed Eva to her pastor for help.

The Exasperaters

Ministering to people who have created their own fiascos is not the same as reaching out to victims of external adversity. We are readily drawn to help those stricken with leukemia, overwhelmed by the birth of a handicapped child, hit by a drunken driver, made homeless by a tornado. They were going along in life minding their own business when suddenly, tragedy attacked. Our compassion and empathy are instantly aroused.

But what about the unwed mother who should have known better? What about the mid-life man who is suddenly obsessed with trading in his job and marriage for a condo on a warm beach somewhere with a blonde? What about the Christian who's been indicted for embezzlement . . . the parents who

were too harsh or too lenient with their children and are now reaping the whirlwind . . . the person whose intemperate remarks have ignited a raging family (or church) feud?

These people are in no way candidates for heroism. In fact, they are an embarrassment, a blot on the name of Christ. They make us uncomfortable, even exasperated at times. Our lofty ministerial principles tell us to stay calm, sympathetic, and helpful, and we try. But sometimes we cannot help fighting the internal battle that emergency room personnel confess when the ambulance rolls up with someone who has attempted suicide: *Why should I knock myself out trying to save her life when she didn't think any more of it than to do this?*

Echoes of the Past

At such moments, we must take a deep breath and remind ourselves that we work for a Boss with an odd penchant for bunglers and rebels. His store of patience goes to extravagant lengths sometimes, not because he enjoys playing the fool, but because he's been around so long he has already seen it all. He keeps saying things like "I will restore you to health and heal your wounds . . . because you are called an outcast, Zion for whom no one cares" (Jer. 30:17).

It does us good occasionally to remember parts of his track record. He called a man named Abram to a great destiny—and the fellow promptly ran off to Egypt . . . conjured up a fancy scam to protect himself, but landed his wife in Pharaoh's harem . . . got evicted from the country . . . taking along an Egyptian named Hagar, whose presence almost split his marriage.

This is the paragon of faith, "the friend of God"? All the honor and achievement for which both Jews and Christians revere Abraham came *after* his personal disaster.

God is the type to pick up a murderer named Moses, who in one angry moment torpedoed his career as Pharaoh's protégé. No one would argue that the murder was meant to be—but as a fugitive Moses learned the Sinai terrain, and it is fascinating to see God use that knowledge when it was time to lead a nation eastward.

The trail continues through David's mid-life affair, to Simon Peter, whose apostleship reminds us that God has a future for people who blurt out things they don't mean. John Mark spoiled his initial chance at ministry (Acts 13:13) and yet went on to write the second gospel.

The case that stretches propriety is Jonah. When

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he decided to head for Tarshish, why didn't God just let him go on and have a nice vacation? Why not choose another, more obedient prophet to speak to Nineveh? One might answer, "God had to punish him. He could not let Jonah get away with ignoring a divine order." But why then the recommissioning?

God never claps his hand over his mouth and says to the angels, "Did you see *that*?"

Hadn't Jonah "missed God's perfect will" for his life, now to settle for second best?

Hardly. In fact, he turned out to be the one shining success among the prophets. Most of the others got kicked out of town, plunged into dungeons, or at least ignored. Jonah's altar call drew half a million, "from the greatest to the least" (3:5).

Sometimes God gets carried away with this restoration business.

The Kind of Lord We Serve

Such exhibits lead us—both ministers and counselees—to four conclusions about the nature of God.

1. *He is unshockable.* We human beings have the power to make him laugh, cry, smile, or yawn (especially)—but never gasp. He never claps his hand over his mouth and says to the angels, "Did you see *that*?" He has watched every imaginable stupidity, every twist of self-destructive behavior, every faux pas, to the point that he is beyond surprising.

2. *He is bent on restoring whenever possible.* "The steps of a man are from the Lord," David wrote in Psalm 37:23-24. "Though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord is the stay of his hand."

It would make little sense for him to give up on us, since the planet is populated exclusively by maldroit mortals. He could perhaps start over with a better breed elsewhere in the galaxy, but he has promised to stick with us and make the best of our case.

3. *He has more options than we think.* We are too prone to think there's only one way out of a bind, and even that one way is too often *ex post facto* ("If she'd only done/not done such-and-such, her life

could have been straightened out"). We forget that even human managers in business, if they're worth anything, can think of two or three ways to solve a problem. The successful manager takes roadblocks and hitches as all in a day's work, instinctively looking for Route B, C, or D in order to keep the organization moving.

How much more our God? He is certainly as creative as a corporate division head, and more so. His alternatives for the future of broken people are rarely as limited as we imagine.

4. *He uses us in his restorative work—IF we will be involved.*

The trouble is, too many of us are like the English ministerium who dismissed William Carey by saying, "Young man, if God wishes to save the heathen, he can well accomplish it without your help or ours." We assume that the divorced, the immoral, and the disgraced can make their own responses to the gospel like anyone else. After all, we're faithfully proclaiming the Word every Sunday; now it's up to them.

Unfortunately, most of them find it impossible to take the first step back. A man I interviewed for my book *Another Chance: How God Overrides Our Big Mistakes* said in the wake of his affair, "If you had asked me who in the Bible I was most like, I would probably have named Adam. I had gotten myself thrown out of the garden, with absolutely no chance of return, I thought. Now I was banished."

Such people are paralyzed by their shame. Nothing is likely to happen until the people of God break the awful silence.

One man who was ousted from his profession for an indiscretion took work as a hod carrier simply to put bread on the table. He was suddenly plunged into a drastically different world; instead of going to an office each day, he was hauling loads of concrete block up to the fifth level of a construction site. Gone was the piped-in music in the corridors; now he had to endure blaring transistors. Any girl who walked by was subject to rude remarks and whistles. Profanity shot through the air, especially from the foreman, whose primary tactics were whining and intimidation: "For _____ sake, you _____, can't you do anything right? I never worked with such a bunch of _____ in all my life. . . ."

Near the end of the third week, the new employee felt he could take no more. *I'll work till break time this morning, he told himself, and then that's it. I'm going home.* He'd already been the butt of more than one joke when his lack of experience caused him to do something foolish. The stories were retold constantly thereafter. *I just can't handle any more of this.*

A while later, he decided to finish out the morning and then leave at lunchtime. Shortly before noon, the foreman came around with the paychecks. As he



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handed the man his envelope, he made his first civil comment to him in three weeks.

"Hey, there's a woman working in the front office who knows you. Says she takes care of your kids sometimes."

"Who?"

He named the woman, who sometimes helped in the nursery of the church where the man and his family worshiped. The foreman then went on with his rounds. When the hod carrier opened his envelope, he found, along with his check, a handwritten note from the payroll clerk: "When one part of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer with it. Just wanted you to know that I'm praying for you these days."

He stared at the note, astonished at God's timing. He hadn't even known the woman worked for this company. Here at his lowest hour, she had given him the courage to go on, to push another wheelbarrow of mortar up that ramp. God had used a fellow believer to rescue his spirit just in time.

How We Help

It is only natural to assume that in pastoral ministry to the fallen, repentance comes first. The sin(s) of the past must be confronted and confessed in order

to restore oneself to a holy God and release his blessings in the future.

Theologically, that is impeccable. Psychologically, it doesn't work very well. John van der Graaf and the people of Saint Mark's United Methodist Church in suburban Saint Louis learned that two years ago when they started a support group for divorced and separated people. "I'm a firm believer that people have to take responsibility for their own behavior," says the pastor, "and I knew from my counseling that hard questions had to be faced somewhere along the way. But that was not the starting point, we decided. First we had to try to bind up the wounds."

They emphasized acceptance, warmth, and healing love from the first Thursday night on, moving to personal renovation only when people felt secure. No wonder their group zoomed to 200 members in a year.

The opening task in ministering to those who have made a major mistake in their lives is to *restore confidence*. It is to let them know that God just might accept them again in spite of what has transpired. It is to light the match of hope, to crack the gloom. As Paul says, "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on *what is unseen*. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

How do we do this? We use the powerful words of Scripture, of course. We say it with our body language, our openness, our touching. We say it through the stories of others in similar straits who have been restored. We let the person know he is *not* the all-time wretch. Others have been as low, or lower, and have rebuilt their lives before God.

Music can be a great ally in penetrating the spirit—for example, Phil Johnson's song:

He didn't bring us this far to leave us;

He didn't teach us to swim to let us drown.

He didn't build his home in us to move away;

He didn't lift us up to let us down.

On both the cognitive and emotional levels we convey the Christian theme that beyond death lies resurrection.

Only then are we ready to move to the second task: *confrontation*. The person who has erred must be carefully, sensitively brought to realize that this is not a case of "It happened to me" or "They did me in." This is a case of "I did it, didn't I? Others may have been a bad influence, but I made the crucial choices."

We must play the role of God's messenger wrestling with Jacob by the stream, who at the critical moment asks, "What is your name?" What he is really saying is "Jacob, what is your real problem? You've

blamed your father, Isaac, for his favoritism toward Esau; you've blamed your brother for his sour attitude; you've blamed your Uncle Laban for his shadiness—but down at the root of things, *who are you?* You're Jacob—the supplanter, the tricky one. Face it."

Some will rebel at this point. If we rush the question too soon, some will slip back into despair. But if we are Spirit-led, we will bring about a great awakening.

The pastor who counseled Eva Eber spent more than one session getting to some important roots: that while her parents had acted unwisely in some regards, she was carrying a cancerous resentment of them; that her churchgoing as a teenager did not guarantee that she was indeed a Christian; that her physical attractiveness and self-confidence was not enough on which to build a life. She eventually came to make an adult choice to surrender her problems, her value system, and her future to God's shaping, with the result that her lifestyle underwent a remarkable stabilization.

Once the cards are on the table, we are ready to move to the third step: *confession*. As Ecclesiastes notes, there is a time to be silent, but then comes a time to speak. Self-devastated people are often initially quiet; it hurts too much to air the sordid de-

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After the prodigal son came to his confrontation in the pigpen and resolved to get up and go home, he was hit by a sobering thought: He could not just waltz in the front door and go to his bedroom. *He would have to say something.* Getting right with his father meant getting verbal.

So he planned his speech. "I will . . . say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy . . ." (Luke 15:18-19).

The exciting thing is that when he arrived at home and nervously began his speech (v. 21), he only got halfway through. The business about "make me like one of your hired men" was lost in the father's whooping and shouting for the robe and the ring and the fatted calf. That's the way our Father is.

An aggrieved spouse or employer may not be so enthusiastic in receiving our counselee's confession, but that does not reduce the value of the act. The point is to clear the offense, so the guilty person can dismiss it forever. If the interpersonal relationship can be restored, so much the better, but it is not mandatory.

Now—we dare not stop. We must complete the fourth task: *guiding the person back into the stream of worship and service.* If we only lead people through the first three steps, we have set them up for disappointment and possible relapse. If it becomes apparent that the forgiven person still bears a stigma in the church, all that preceded is thwarted.

It is sometimes hard for lay people—who weren't present for the in-depth counseling and didn't see the bitter tears of repentance—to swallow this. Most pastors can tell of situations in which God forgave, but the deacons wouldn't. Sometimes the attitude of the church is like a button I once saw in a tourist shop: "To err is human. To forgive is out of the question."

We must not succumb to irritation or disgust at such attitudes. People are not always being mean; sometimes they are just being cautious, fearful of condoning sin. In these situations, we must instead employ the creative end runs for which God has made himself famous. If tradition (or the by-laws) prevent divorced persons from teaching Sunday school, how about a neighborhood Bible study? If

ministerial credentials have been withdrawn, what about a specialty ministry that doesn't require ordination?

A nagging fear sometimes comes along: "What if he blows it again?" The Devil loves to get us fantasizing about that. We must rise against such bullying and believe "that he who began a good work . . . will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

Does this mean instant reinstatement? Not usually. Reinstatement to the original post of responsibility? Not always. Sometimes it is better to start again in another town, not because the person is running from unfinished business, but because it's not worth waiting fifteen years until everyone's attitude mellows. The Lord runs a big vineyard, with plenty of work to be done in all corners.

Rescue Training

One reason we and our congregations feel uneasy about the ministry of restoration is that we have not talked very much about its possibility. We have long maintained the facade that all is reasonably well, and no good Christian steps very far out of line. Thus, when a spectacular crash occurs, we have no strategies on file for dealing with it.

Given the realities of our times, we must begin to lay down an ethos among the people that embraces rescue initiatives. We must preach the subject *on sunny days*, when there is no precipitating crisis. It is too late to talk of forgiveness the Sunday after the head elder's daughter turns up pregnant. People's emotions are aroused, and the hardliners will crucify us. We must teach, exhort, and explain the road back from failure in calmer times, so that the Christian community is prepared when the storm hits.

King David once puzzled over what to do after one of his wayward sons, Absalom, had created a family scandal and then run for cover. According to 2 Samuel 14, David came to a kindlier feeling for his son but couldn't quite bring himself to make the first move. What would people think? How would it look in the press? Maybe it's better to let the matter lie. . . .

The wise woman of Tekoa eventually brought him around with this insight: "God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him" (v. 14).

That is our ministry today. Estranged, banished people are huddling in caves all around us. It is our duty to take the risk of guiding them gently back into the sunshine. ■

A person who is always available is not worth enough when he is available.

—Elton Trueblood