

EDITOR'S ETC.

BY DEAN MERRILL



What does it take to restore a guilty prisoner?

Or for that matter, a fallen Christian leader?

Must they wear sackcloth and ashes? Is it enough to apologize privately to those actually injured? Or have they, in a sense, injured us all, and thus must confess to us all? How do we know if they're sincere? Should they be trusted again? With only small responsibilities, or with large ones? If so, when?

These questions are familiar to those who work in prison ministry, the subject of our special section this month. As they look into the faces of men and women behind bars, they weigh the answers constantly.

The same questions have been buzzing around the heads of *all* of us ever since the scandals of last spring. I had to face them afresh when "The PTL Club's" new management invited me to come talk about my book *Another Chance: How God Overrides Our Big Mistakes* (Zondervan).

As you can immediately tell from the title, the topic was more than academic. "Uh, well, how specific do you want me to get?" I asked the show's producer.

"Just present the truth and let the viewers make their own applications," she replied.

So I looked into the cameras that day and said yes, God can forgive major blunders—but it takes a process. The four steps, as I see them, are:

1. Regaining *confidence* that God has not totally abandoned us for messing up.

2. *Confronting* what we did—ad-

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mitting to ourselves that *we* did it, without trying to blame others.

3. Gathering the courage to *talk* about what we did, confessing our wrong to God and others. Until we speak, the situation is frozen; God and other people remain motionless.

4. *Moving on* to whatever future a gracious God provides—which may or may not be the same as the past.

The interviewer that day, Gary McSpadden, was open and candid; he didn't try to brush past the difficult areas. "Where is the balance in this confrontation you speak of?" he asked.

Throughout church history, I noted, we've always had trouble making forgiveness either too easy

or too hard. The Pope once required King Henry IV of Germany to stand barefoot in the Alpine snow for three January days before receiving him to hear his apology. Wasn't that going a little far, we ask?

On the other hand, it's not enough to toss off a quick "Ooops—guess there's been a little problem here. Unfortunate things happen, don't they?" Old Testament saints did not shrink from declaring, "I have sinned; I have done wickedly"—and neither should we.

What about the future? In the words of a Ken Medema song, "It's no good trying to fix up yesterday." We have no right to demand that God restore us to former places of privilege or leadership. He may, in his mercy, do so . . . but more often he'll guide us into a Plan B or C or D.

Jeremiah 29:11 says, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" That's a promise for prisoners, preachers and everyone else. It shows where God's heart is—provided we submit to his process.

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