

The Tenderness Trap (by Jim Newheiser)

(The following is a semi-fictional compilation of various experiences of Christian leaders.)

It happened again. Another Pastor has fallen. This time, though, it wasn't a liberal or a glitzy television preacher. It was a man of sound doctrine with over twenty years of faithful ministry, a man whose godliness, giftedness, and soundness of doctrine was widely recognized. Tragically, he has been disqualified for ministry.

The sheep he served are wounded and confused. Some feel betrayed by the man who was a father and a brother to them. Their faith has been shaken. Others are angry at the other leaders for their handling of the problem. Couldn't they have shown more compassion to a man who had served them faithfully for so long? Still others, - including jealous husbands think that he got off too easy. How could he have abused his trust in this way?

There is concern that the church may not be able to complete the building program begun under this pastor's leadership. There is even concern that the body to which he devoted his life will be divided. This was a man who contended for sound doctrine. He was a mentor who guided many young pastors. Now he has fallen. "Tell it not in Gath lest the enemies of truth rejoice!"

The pastor himself, whose whole life has been ministry, faces great challenges. How will he support his family with so few marketable skills? Where will he go to church? What role will he play? How can he face his wife and children after what he has done? They too must live with the consequences of his actions.

The questions abound, including some that are relevant to others in ministry: How did it happen? Where did he go wrong? And how can you and I avoid following in his tragic footsteps?

This pastor did not actually commit adultery. He was and is very happy in his marriage. He was not looking for sexual excitement or fulfillment. He simply fell into "The Tenderness Trap." He got too emotionally involved with women he was counseling. In so doing, he crossed some lines and is no longer above reproach. Ruinous sin is the culmination of a process (James 1:14-15). In this article, I would like to help you to avoid taking even the first step.

Falling into the Tenderness Trap

How it Started.

These situations do not come about because the counselee or the counselor begins with wicked motives (Prov. 7:6ff). Most people in these cases begin with good intentions and wind up with disaster. Specifically, most individuals who come for pastoral counseling are women, and most of these women have problems in their marriages. They seek help from their pastor to learn how to better please God.

The pastor/counselor wants to faithfully minister the Word to such a woman. He has probably taken precautions to avoid temptation or even the appearance of evil, by keeping his office door open and having his secretary nearby. Still, the counselor and the counselee are facing a situation filled with danger. The woman's husband doesn't have time for her and won't listen to her. The pastor, meanwhile, patiently and tenderly listens to her problems expressing concern and compassion. He is the spiritual leader her husband has never been. In their sessions together this unhappy woman is finding genuine help from the encouragement her pastor is giving her from the Scriptures. She seems to be drawing closer to the Lord. At the same time, the pastor is gaining a sense of fulfillment from this success. He has seen all too many "failures" in ministry.

Danger Signs.

As the counseling relationship progresses, both the counselor and counselee may begin to have thoughts that should have alerted them to danger before it was too late. The woman may be tempted to think, "If only my husband were a spiritual leader like him," or "I wish that I had married a man like this, who cares about my feelings." Of course, if the counselor/pastor were ever to become involved with her, these very qualities would be betrayed by their bond.

The pastor, for his part, may find that he enjoys having a woman so dependent on him for advice and support. He enjoys meeting her emotional needs successfully and feels protective of her. He finds himself looking forward to their meetings. He may even realize that he is having more intimate conversations with her than with his wife.

Neither the pastor nor the counselee has any intention of moving towards a romantic relationship, but bonding is taking place. By now, the thought of emotional involvement has probably occurred to one or both of them. They may both be intrigued by the male-female electricity of their friendship, though thus far it is "low voltage". To the degree that they recognize this temptation, the two put these thoughts quickly aside, perhaps with a prayer of confession asking for strength. The pastor may tell himself that this is a way that Satan is tempting him, and that he needs to be strong. After all, counseling women is part of his job as an undershepherd in God's flock. The woman, meanwhile, trusts her pastor as a man of God. She can't imagine that anything inappropriate could happen.

Lines Crossed.

At some point in the counseling sessions a line is crossed. One of them realizes that they have gone too far. Perhaps the pastor finds himself violating some of his own rules, meeting with this woman alone in the office, or failing to tell his wife everything he should about the length, content, and frequency of their meetings. Perhaps there is physical contact, a hug or holding hands, which outwardly appears to be brotherly, yet the pair experience mixed emotions. Both of them find that they are enjoying the attention, attraction, and emotional involvement.

Finally, the pastor is getting worried. He realizes that he has gone too far, but now the price of corrective action seems too high. If he goes to his fellow elders and confesses his fault, he would experience terrible embarrassment. They might make a mountain out of a molehill. What if this woman's husband gets upset, or others in the church learn about this? Gossips would have a field day and his ministry could be ruined. Those inside or outside of the church who have sought an opportunity to discredit him would have their chance. If he were to tell his wife, she would be deeply hurt. She might also misunderstand and think that there is something wrong with her.

So the pastor rationalizes, perhaps what he is doing isn't so bad after all. He is still preaching powerfully. Things seem to be going smoothly enough at home. God must not think that he is wrong, otherwise he and the church wouldn't be so blessed. New members are coming. New ministries are being established. Why rock the boat? After all, he hasn't actually committed adultery. He is a strong Christian leader. He can keep the situation under control without involving or upsetting others.

A Ministry Ruined.

If one keeps playing with fire, sooner or later he will get burned. "When lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished it brings forth death" (James 1:15). Soon, perhaps the "brotherly" hug or pat on the back is followed by a short kiss - then a longer one, or a touching which is clearly more than "brotherly".

We might ask, "Why didn't one of them stop this when it happened?" While outwardly both of them were outwardly treating their relationship as purely pastoral, the emotional intimacy they had developed led very naturally to this point. Though both of them may be shocked on one level, it seems very natural on another. What happens next can vary. Many couples will go on to commit adultery. Some will still not cross that line, but will continue taking fire into their bosom (Prov. 6:27). The great majority will not stop until they are caught. A few will finally turn themselves in. But all will suffer greatly, and will watch others suffer as a consequence of their sin.

Avoiding the Tenderness Trap

How can you avoid falling into the tenderness trap? I have found several principles to be essential.

1. Don't Trust Yourself. Some men will say, "This could never happen to me." Such a man will talk about how happy and fulfilled he is in his marriage. Furthermore, he knows that he is strong. He has never felt attracted to any members of his congregation or come close to crossing any lines in counseling relationships.

Some men are confident that they are safe because of their older age or mediocre looks. Paul says, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). A friend reminded me that women are most prone to fall for the tender, caring men who know how to speak words of kindness. Many good (and even unattractive) men have fallen who would never have imagined that it could happen to them.

It is important to remember that you make your way down the road to ruin one step at a time. Satan knows that he probably cannot tempt you to immediately fall into adultery, so he is patient to bring you to that point little by little.

2. Make Strict Rules - and keep them. I suggest the following:

- Do not meet alone with a female counselee if you are not visible to others. Keep the door open.
- Do not talk about the physical relationship in marriage without the husband present.
- Do not touch a female counselee in a counseling session. I have had women weep in my office, even to the point of collapse. I keep my desk between myself and them no matter what. If a woman needs a hug, I ask another woman from the church to take care of her. If a counselee tries to touch you, I recommend pulling quickly away, and making it clear that this just isn't done.

As you explain these rules to your counselee, tell her that you hold to them not because you don't trust her or because she can't trust you, but because you want to ensure that both of you remain above reproach. Apply your rules uniformly - don't make exceptions for unattractive women!

If you find yourself wanting to bend or break the rules take it as a warning sign and immediately go to your fellow elders and your spouse.

3. Respect your counselee's marriage relationship. When you are counseling a married woman, remember that she is under her husband's authority. You do not want to undermine that relationship. Ordinarily, if a woman is having problems with her marriage, her husband should also be present for counseling. It is not right to talk about his sins without him present. Ordinarily, you should not meet with a woman without her husband's knowledge and approval, an exception might be if the husband is an unbeliever. The exceptional cases should be treated with the greatest caution. One pastor whom I respect will not meet more than twice with a woman without her husband present.

4. Get other women involved in counseling women. Titus 2:3-5 states that older women are uniquely qualified to help younger women be godly wives and mothers. In many ways, they may be better able to address many problems than you are. My recent practice has been to meet with a woman a couple of times. I then place her in a more intense counseling/discipleship relationship with a more mature woman under my supervision. This eliminates many of the problems that could occur in a male-female counseling situation.

Many pastors lack such older women in their churches. In addition to asking God to raise up such women, pastors must select women with potential for such a ministry and train them.¹

5. Remain Accountable. Keep your wife and your fellow elders aware of your counseling appointments and the general subject matter of your meetings. Within that circle, absolute confidentiality must be maintained; however, your marriage is more important than a woman's privacy. If a woman counselee is unwilling to agree to this condition, decline to meet with her.

If you are experiencing any "warning signs" or if you fear that you may have crossed some lines yourself, tell your fellow elders immediately (2 Tim. 2:22). Seek and submit to their counsel. Entrust yourself to the Lord through them. It is much easier to snuff out a small flame than to fight a raging forest fire. I know more than one pastor, who when he started to feel tempted or attracted to a woman, immediately made himself strictly accountable to others and the situation was diffused before disaster struck. If there is any question in your mind, seek accountability! Remember how deceitful the heart is (Prov. 14:12). One of the great dangers many pastors face is that they are on such a pedestal, they don't have any peers in the church in whom they feel that they can safely confide. Such a lofty perch is a precarious one.

Advice to Those Who Have Fallen

The great majority of men continue in sin until they are caught (busted). Usually, when a pastor is initially confronted about a compromising situation, there is either denial or minimization: "I'm just a man." "We didn't actually commit adultery." "Everyone deserves a second chance." "I'll never do it again." Usually the pastor is concerned with keeping the matter as private as possible in order to protect himself, his family, and the church. I, however, hold very little hope for the restoration of a man who persistently violates his conscience and has to be caught and proven guilty before he "repents". It is hard to believe that the "repentance" shown at this point is any more than preservation of pride, livelihood, and reputation.

If you as a pastor or a counselor have acted inappropriately, the best thing you can do is to confess your sin to your fellow leaders, the church, and your spouse. Accept the consequences. Submit to whatever discipline your fellow leaders impose upon you. Warn others against the same sins. Willingly relinquish your office and find a way to honorably support your family. Don't expect to be restored to office or paid ministry in the future. Take comfort in God's forgiveness (Psalm 51). God has borne fruit through you in the past despite of your sin. God will use you in new ways in the future.

Advice to Fellow Leaders

As you minister to a pastor or counselor in such a situation, deal with firmness and love. While many may be concerned for the parties involved in the sin, you too are going through a traumatic time of heartache. Realize that you are likely to be criticized for your actions by some members of the congregation. Some will think you are too strict, others will be upset because you are too lenient. You may be tempted to disclose less than the whole truth out of compassion for those who sinned, but the only way to avoid gossip and false accusations against you is to fully lay out the charges (1 Tim. 5:20). If the fallen brother is willing to submit to discipline, it may be appropriate for the elders to provide financially for his transition to "secular work". They should also offer ongoing counsel and accountability which will, it is hoped, lead to

¹ For example, the CCEF introductory course videos might be useful for this purpose. Also, see "Why Women Should Counsel Women" by Elyse Fitzpatrick, from the CCEF San Diego Summer Institute in Biblical Counseling, (1994).

his restoration to usefulness (but not office).

You will also need to help the others who have been affected. Those who have sinned must seek forgiveness from those who have been wronged (spouses, children, and the church at large). The woman and the other family members involved will also need counsel. Finally, the church at large will have great needs. Those who have trusted and loved their pastor may be terribly disillusioned. They should be reminded that only Christ is sinless. The fact that their leader has fallen does not negate the benefits they received from his ministry in the past. They should be encouraged to look to the Lord as our perfect head and example, and to watch themselves.

When time comes to hire a new pastor, seek to practice genuine plural leadership and mutual accountability, rather than putting him on a dangerous pedestal.

A Final Word to Those Who Haven't Fallen

What is your goal in ministry? Do you want to have a big church? Do you want to have a reputation as a great preacher? My goal is that when my life and ministry are ending, I can say with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). I want to arrive at the finish line without having been disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27). Regardless of the size and scope of my life's work, I want to be found faithful at the end - that I have not done anything to bring hurt and disgrace upon the Name of the Lord and His church.