GRACE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

VULNERABLE RELATIONSHIPS:

A STEP TOWARD AVOIDING LONELY LEADERSHIP

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A Devastating Trend

In the spring of 2018, Bill Hybels, lead pastor of Willow Creek Church, founder of

Willow Creek Association and influential leader, speaker, and writer, was subject to a series

of disturbing allegations relating to his behavior toward former female staff. Hybels was

accused of a prolonged pattern of inappropriate sexual words and actions directed toward

a number of women over the course of his pastorate dating back decades.[1]

In early 2019, news broke of Harvest Bible Chapel senior pastor James MacDonald

taking an indefinite leave of absence to deal with, what he describes, "can only be called

sin."[2] In the wake of this news, former Harvest members began to speak out, describing

MacDonald's history of bad financial management and dishonest leadership.

In the summer of 2020, Joshua Harris, author of the popular Christian book *I Kissed

Dating Goodbye* (1997) and former lead pastor of Covenant Life Church in Maryland,

announced that he and his wife of 21 years were separating and, perhaps more shockingly,

that he no longer defined himself as a Christian.[3]

These are only 3 examples of what seems like a growing trend in the church today of

influential Christian leaders renouncing the faith, suddenly resigning, or being ousted

under disgraceful circumstances. These incidents are quite different, but they are all

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[1] Kate Shellnutt, "Willow Creek Investigation: Allegations Against Bill Hybels Are Credible," News & Reporting, accessed September 9, 2019, https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/february/willow-creek-bill-hybels-investigation-iag-report.html.

[2] Patrick M. O'Connell and Diana Wallace, "James MacDonald, Harvest Bible Chapel's Founder and Senior Pastor, Takes Indefinite Leave, Cites Actions 'That Can Only Be Called Sin,'" chicagotribune.com, accessed September 9, 2019, https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/ct-met-harvest-bible-chapel-james-macdonald-on- leave-20190117-story.html.

[3] "Joshua Harris of 'I Kissed Dating Goodbye': 'I Am Not a Christian,'" accessed September 9, 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/07/29/joshua-harris-i-kissed-dating-goodbye-i-am-not-christian/1857934001/.

reminders that Christian leaders, no matter how influential, struggle with doubts and sin, and when these are allowed to go unresolved, can have an enormously destructive impact on a leader and his or her organization.

<div align="center">The Problem of Lonely Leadership</div>

That Christian leaders deal with sin and doubt should not be surprising to us. Paul reminds us, "*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"! (Rom. 3:23 ESV, emphasis mine). Yet it never ceases to amaze, confound, and shock the faith world when an influential Christian leader succumbs to sin. People react in anger, hurt, and embarrassment – and perhaps rightfully so, in many cases – but it must be understood that most leaders do not set out to use their influence in a sinful way. There is no way to fully understand the backstories of such leaders as Hybels and MacDonald, but it is difficult to believe that these men desired at the beginning of their ministries to deceive, abuse, and mistreat those God entrusted to them. There is no way to understand the depths of Joshua Harris' spiritual life, but there is every reason to believe his faith was once vibrant and active. But the unfortunate end to each of these leaders' ministries suggests that they were dealing with significant sin and spiritual turmoil, and they allowed it to go unchecked.

I want to be clear that I do not know these men personally and therefore can only speculate, but a nagging question plagues me whenever I hear stories such as theirs. When faith leaders are suddenly immersed in scandal or prominent Christians seemingly out of the blue renounce Christ, I often wonder if, and how long, they dealt with their sin or doubt alone before they finally succumbed to it. Did Bill Hybels have an individual to whom he could confess his struggle with sexual temptation, and seek accountability? Did anyone close to James MacDonald know of his unhealthy relationship habits and his temptation to

act dishonestly? Did Joshua Harris have to struggle alone with a failing marriage and nagging doubts about God? Again, there is no way of knowing and only speculation. But one cannot help but wonder if these men, whom God had obviously called and gifted in extraordinary ways to lead his Church, felt that they had to deal with sin and doubt alone in order to preserve their influence.

Churches boast of being places for community, and many of them do a wonderful job of providing community for their laypeople. New believers' classes, small group ministries, and discipleship programs are all designed to foster an environment of vulnerability and spiritual accountability between two or more people. However, pastors and ministry leaders may feel that they are not afforded these essential elements of spiritual community. Fear of stirring distrust, embarrassment, job insecurity, or judgment may cause leaders to put up a façade of perfection, or even convince themselves that they themselves do not need spiritual community. Vulnerability is espoused and encouraged in the life of the church, but for many leaders it is hard to come by. As a result, pastors and ministry leaders often cope with sinful temptations and nagging doubts *alone*. Alone, that is, until they succumb to these sins or doubts, and their churches and loved ones are left to question why and how.

We were created for community. No one is designed to operate alone – that includes (*especially*) those in leadership. We have already seen just a few potential consequences of lonely leadership. Knowing the dangers, it is important to assess how church leaders can find and benefit from spiritual friendships that encourage vulnerability and foster accountability to avoid leading alone.

Coming to Terms With Brokenness

Peter Scazerro, author of the seminal book *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, argues

that vulnerability and brokenness make for kingdom-minded leadership. He writes,

> In emotionally healthy churches, people live and lead out of
> brokenness and vulnerability. They understand that leadership
> in the kingdom of God is from the bottom up, not a grasping,
> controlling, or lording over others. It is leading out of failure
> and pain, questions and struggles – a serving that lets go.[4]

No one in this world is exempt from brokenness. In ministry, the danger is not brokenness

itself; rather, danger arises when ministry leaders neglect to seek accountability and

vulnerability in order to deal with their brokenness in an environment of spiritual support

and community. Effective ministers come to terms with their own brokenness and allow

Christ to redeem it. Nancy Leigh DeMoss remarks, "Before you can get close to God, you

have to find the highway of lowliness."[5] There is perhaps no better example of this concept

than Paul's. In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul was not shy about the "thorn" from

which he suffered. The identity of this thorn , whether a physical or spiritual ailment, is

impossible to know, but Paul made it quite clear that it had pained him for some time. He

went as far as to admit that he pleaded with God on numerous occasions to remove it. But

rather than remaining secretive about his own weakness, Paul came to terms with the fact

that his weakness could be redeemed by Christ if he simply allowed Christ's power to be

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[4] Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 110.

[5] Nancy DeMoss, *Brokenness: The Heart God Revives* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2005), 48.

sufficient where he was not. Rather than covering up his own brokenness, Paul *boasted* of

it, and exemplified for his people a fuller picture of Jesus' redemptive work in his life.[6]

An Example in Christ

We cannot move on without also discussing Jesus' example of vulnerability. On the

night he was betrayed, Jesus retreated to the Garden of Gethsemane where he experienced

a spiritual agony that would only be trumped by that which he experienced a few hours

later on the cross. But Jesus did not suffer alone in the garden that night. Jesus brought his

disciples into his greatest moment of vulnerability, telling his them, "My soul is very

sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch with me" (Matt. 26:38). Some

commentators suggest that the imperatives Jesus uses – *meinate* ('remain') and *gregoreite*

('watch') – should be understood as entreaties or pleas! That is to say, Jesus Christ, the very

incarnation of God, revealed the depths of his anguish to his disciples and plead for "the

companionship and intercession of men who, for all their weakness, foolishness and

sinfulness, [had] become his closest friends."[7] Jesus, the greatest spiritual leader in history,

was not above vulnerability. He was not above seeking the presence and intercession of his

followers and friends. He was not above expressing sorrow or anguish. Jesus allowed his

divine characteristics and miraculous works to take a back seat in the garden as he invited

the disciples into an intensely intimate, profoundly holy moment where they saw the Son of

God at his most human.

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[6] Tremper Longman and David E Garland, *Romans--Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005).

[7] J. Knox Chamblin, *Matthew* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Pub., 2010), 1313.

The Necessity for Vulnerable Relationships

It is difficult for anyone to allow others into the deepest recesses of their souls as Jesus did, where their most difficult fears, temptations, sorrows, and doubts can be put on display. But as a pastoral leader, it is arguably even more difficult. There is an added pressure to perform, cultivate trust, and put on a brave face. But this makes it all the more vital for pastors and ministry leaders to have relationships that allow others to see them at their most human.

One Sunday, the pastor of a local church walked into the building following a week of meeting with grieving relatives of two members of his congregation who died tragically within a few days of each other, leading two funeral services, parenting two toddlers at home, preparing a sermon, and dealing with the everyday stresses of pastoring a church. On this particular Sunday morning, this pastor was stressed out, low on energy, depressed, and unmotivated. He was greeted by one of his congregants in the hallway, who cheerfully asked, "how are you doing today, pastor?" The pastor answered, "I'm doing great!"

A pastor friend and I were recently discussing how often this very scenario occurs week in and week out in our churches. It is true that, as a spiritual leader, a pastor will not be able to foster deep intimacy and vulnerability with every person in his congregation. It is not appropriate to emotionally unload on unsuspecting congregants in the hallway. That is not to say that a little honesty at times is never appropriate, but there are appropriate boundaries and safeguards that are necessary for ministry leaders to put up. Henry Cloud comments, "Vulnerability is good, but to lead, one must not be dependent on those he is

leading. That kind of dependency and healing must come from somewhere else."[8] Boundaries to avoid dependence are necessary, but a pastor who has such boundaries and is not intentional about fostering intimacy, vulnerability, and accountability in other relationships risks deep loneliness and isolation. And what may begin as loneliness and isolation may eventually evolve into withdrawal, depression, spiritual turmoil, or even hidden sin.

As a ministry leader, I constantly need to be asking myself, "Of the relationships in my life, who do I allow to see me at my most human? Who can I truly be vulnerable with, not as Matt the youth pastor, but as Matt the person? Who can I allow to challenge me, hold me accountable, and call me out when I sin? To whom can I grant access to the hidden fears, doubts, and pain that are present in my heart?" In these relationships, I grant others access to my deepest struggles so that they can help me proactively guard against potential temptations, and pray for me in my moments of weakness.

<div align="center">A Personal Example</div>

I would feel slightly hypocritical if I did not take some time in my paper on vulnerability in leadership to be vulnerable myself. One of my deepest personal struggles is depression. I am able to cope with it reasonably well using antidepressant medication and counseling, but there are still many weeks when life and leadership are especially difficult.

Like the pastor in the aforementioned illustration who was approached by a cheerful congregant in the hallway, I often find myself responding, "I'm great!" several times a day when people ask me how I am doing. However depression, by definition, means there are many days when I am feeling considerably less than great. There are a few people

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[8] Henry Cloud, *Integrity: The Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality: How Six Essential Qualities Determine Your Success in Business*, First Collins paperback edition (New York, NY: Collins, 2008), 96.

who know that I struggle with mental health, but as a ministry leader, I do not feel the need to allow everyone I encounter into the details of this deeply personal battle. There are appropriate boundaries that need to be set. However, I have come to realize that I cannot allow myself to deal with my mental health alone. Though many aspects of depression are out of my control, I desperately need relationships in which I can be vulnerable and held accountable for that which I can control. Thus, there are certain people whom I have intentionally invited in. These people have permission to know how I am *really* doing, and the right to speak truth and even rebuke into my life. They understand my fears, doubts, and insecurities; they know that I am prone to self-doubt and even self-hatred, and recognize that I am disposed to coping with sadness and anger in sinful ways. This knowledge gives them permission to speak into my life and confront me when they notice unhealthy patterns.

One of those relationships is my relationship with my wife. Alessa and I have been married for two years, and during that time she has seen me at my best and at my worst. She is able to understand my moods and my thought patterns, and anticipate my feelings and actions. She is also excellent at holding me accountable for my sinful habits and actions. She knows of my health struggles and is able to pray for me and comfort me in my moments of weakness. In addition to my wife, my friend Anthony is another person who sees and understands my brokenness and holds me accountable. I meet with him every week, and I am never afraid to be honest and vulnerable with him about what I am going through. In turn, he is never afraid to challenge me with tough questions, hold me responsible for my goals, and even offer loving rebuke at times. These are only two examples of vulnerable relationships in my life, but I could not fathom life and ministry

without them. I cannot imagine coping with my personal struggles, doubts, and sinful patterns by myself. Despite the fact that I, like everyone who lives in a fallen world, deal with brokenness and sin, I rarely feel like I am handling it alone.

I have established the potential dangers of lonely leadership, and discussed the necessity and benefit of vulnerable relationships in ministry followed by a personal example of how they have benefitted me in my own leadership experience. The remainder of this paper will focus on the characteristics of these relationships, and how pastors and ministry leaders can seek out and foster relationships marked by vulnerability and accountability.

<div align="center">The Characteristics of Vulnerable Relationships</div>

I have established the need for all leaders to have relationships with others that foster vulnerability. I realize that the term "vulnerable relationships" is ambiguous and may mean different things to different people. Because of this, I want to offer a working definition. Descriptions of these relationships in the previous paragraphs have provided enough to submit a definition for the purposes of this essay:

Vulnerable relationships are relationships with other mature Christ followers, characterized by trust, betterment, and accountability.

I will provide a more detailed description of these characteristics in the following paragraphs.

Trust

Though people in the church may look to them as exemplars of godliness, pastors and ministry leaders struggle with the same fears, doubts, brokenness, and temptations as everybody else. But imagine if it came to light that a pastor was struggling with a failing

marriage, or needed accountability for a former addiction to pornography, or had entertained suicidal thoughts in the recent past. Imagine how uncomfortable their congregations might be if they found out these details! Yet, these are real battles that real people in a fallen world fight every day – and pastors are not exempt. This is why it is so vital for pastors and leaders to have relationships with others that are characterized by *trust.* In these relationships, a there is no shying away from honesty, and no pressure to over-spiritualize or trivialize personal struggles. The "pastor hat" can be removed, and they can simply *be.* These relationships are a *safe space* in which my vulnerability and value are recognized and honored.[9] Renowned researcher Brené Brown pointed out that an essential element of trust is what she refers to as the Vault: "You don't share information or experiences that aren't yours to share."[10] In other words, trust requires a feeling of safety. For me to truly trust someone would mean that I am confident they will carefully steward my deepest fears, doubts, and temptations, and that they will not will not share these with others.[11]

Betterment

Vulnerable relationships should not simply be a sounding board; they should be a source of wise counsel and improvement for both parties, where there is a desire to spur one another on "toward greater Christlikeness."[12] In his work *The Softer Side of Leadership*, Eugene Habecker writes, "All leaders must answer this question, 'Who can say no to me and

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[9] Gary Smalley, ed., *The DNA of Relationships* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), 82.

[10] Brené Brown, "Supersoul Sessions: The Anatomy of Trust," (2018).

[11] Jonathan Holmes, *The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendship* (Place of publication not identified: CruciformPress, 2014), 55.

[12] Ibid., 56.

make it stick?' – both in their personal and organizational lives."[13] The other side of trust is allowing another person to issue loving counsel – to evaluate performance, personal integrity, or give feedback and opinions. While it is vital for a relationship to foster trust and safety, this trust should cause both parties to desire the betterment of the other. If, at our weekly meeting, my friend Anthony were to only listen to me verbally vomit about how bad my week has been and not take the time help me gain perspective or seek God's will, our relationship would be lacking an essential element of vulnerability.

Accountability

Accountability, while related to betterment, differs in that it relates to evaluating oneself for personal sin. C.J Mahaney writes of accountability:

> I'm convinced that left to myself, if I'm seeking to grow beyond myself, I'll only be deficient in discerning sin within, and I'll therefore experience only limited growth in godliness . . . We must pursue humble and aggressive participation, and that means consistently confessing our sin as well as inviting and welcoming correction from others, particularly when we've come together for that very purpose.[14]

This is a difficult exercise, as it requires a leader to allow another person into his or her deepest temptations and vices, and invites confession, repentance, and correction. Yet, as painful as it may be, accountability in vulnerable relationships is essential for guarding against moral failure. A research study surveyed a pool of counseling clients who were dismissed from their leadership positions due to moral failure that included adultery, pornography, substance abuse, or other misconduct. One of the top five reasons for catastrophic moral failure in leaders, according to the study, was accountability being

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[13] Eugene Habecker, *The Softer Side of Leadership: Essential Soft Skills That Transform Leaders and the People They Lead* (Sisters, OR: Deep River Books, 2018), 162.

[14] C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2005), 128-129.

"rejected or absent."[15] Denny Howard, a licensed clinical counselor and author of *At Full Strength: Navigating the Risks All Pastors Face,* writes,

> A lack of accountability is a declaration of independence,
> refusing to answer to anyone outside yourself . . . If we won't
> submit to accountability with trusted others in the family of
> God who are genuinely concerned about our wellbeing, then it
> follows that we will eventually refuse to submit to God.[16]

Christian community was designed, among other things, for the purpose of accountability. James exhorts the church, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (Ja. 5:16). If a leader does not seek accountability, he risks overlooking, hiding, and eventually indulging in serious personal sin. God often works through personal relationships to convict us of our sin. He often gives those around us insights into our souls that we do not perceive alone.[17]

Concluding Ideas and Practical Steps

I have a more analytical, task-oriented personality. As a result of this, relationships can be difficult for me. I am often critical of people and slow to trust others.[18] Though I am extroverted, I tend to withdraw from initiating new relationships with other people. Despite these tendencies, I have had some success in fostering vulnerable relationships in my life and ministry. Though I am by no means an expert in relationships, I believe it will

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[15] Denny Howard, *At Full Strength: Navigating the Risks All Pastors Face: The Complete Survival Guide for Those Who Serve in Ministry and Other Caregiving Vocations* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2019), 136.

[16] Ibid., 137-138.

[17] C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness*, 130.

[18] From Bob Phillips' analysis of social styles in, Bob Phillips and Kimberley Alyn, *How to Deal with Annoying People: What to Do When You Can't Avoid Them.* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2011), 37-59.

be beneficial to share and reflect on a couple action steps and ideas that have worked for me and helped me avoid leading alone.

Never Cope Alone

We have already established that brokenness is an unfortunate reality of a sinful world. The job description of a pastor or ministry leader is to enter into the brokenness of peoples' lives to help them encounter healing in Christ. If only it were that straightforward! Ministry is messy. Pastors will counsel people who encounter unfathomable tragedy. They will agonize over students and kids who endure physical or sexual abuse at home. Once-healthy and unified congregations will divide into warring tribes. People will gossip, slander, or leave the church. This is the reality of the brokenness and hurt we enter into – *as* we are dealing with our own! Financial difficulties, marital problems, health crises, long workweeks, and job-related stress and anxiety are all realities faced by pastors and Christian leaders every day. When we enter into other peoples' brokenness while coping the reality of our own, it can quickly become overwhelming and exhausting. It is at this point of exhaustion that temptation often strikes.

Satan didn't tempt Jesus in the wilderness right away. He waited 40 days until Jesus was physically at his weakest, and *then* the tempter came to him (Matt. 4:1-3). Satan often chooses to tempt us when we are at our weakest. When I am feeling particularly depressed or overwhelmed, I cope by isolating myself and eating ungodly amounts of unhealthy food. Others may be tempted to cope by avoiding responsibilities, drinking to excess, watching pornography, or lashing out in verbal or physical violence. However, I can testify personally that I am less prone to cope in unhealthy ways when I am able to cope *with* somebody else. When another person knows my unhealthy tendencies, they are able to be strong when I

am feeling at my weakest and encourage me to practice healthy coping strategies such as prayer, meditation, reflection, or exercise. This is an outcome of *accountability,* which is important for guarding against moral failure. Paul exhorts the Galatians to "bear one another's burdens" (6:2), arguing that "the burdens of others within the church are our own by virtue of our union with one another in our union with Christ."[19] We were never meant to cope with our burdens alone. The function of Christ's Church is for all believers to bear one another's burdens in order to help one another keep in step with the Spirit (5:25).

Be Transparent With Others

Andy Stanley argues that an essential step for preparing to be a leader is investing in personal character. He writes, "Your talent and giftedness as a leader have the potential to take you farther than your character can sustain you . . . To become a leader worth following, you must be intentional about developing the inner man. You must invest in the health of your soul."[20] One of the steps he suggests is making your goals for yourself public. "Character is personal", he states, "but it is not private."[21] Going public with personal character goals helps a leader remain accountable to others around him. A pastor who tells a friend that he is going to make more of an effort to spend time with his wife to make their marriage healthier has made his friend aware of his character goals and more equipped to hold him accountable. His friend will notice when the pastor stays at the office until 8:00pm the following week, and will be there to draw it to his attention. Henry Blackaby summarizes this concept well:

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[19] David B McWilliams, *Galatians: A Mentor Commentary* (Fearn: Mentor, 2009), 212.
[20] Andy Stanley, *The Next Generation Leader: Five Essentials for Those Who Will Shape the Future.* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Pub, 2006), 151, 153.

[21] Ibid., 155.

> The time to buy the smoke alarm is when you build the house,
> not after the fire starts. The time to enlist friends as partners in
> accountability is not when sexual temptation is already a
> raging inferno but before the first spark. Time after time
> disgraced leaders admit that although they were surrounded
> by people, they had no close friends with whom they were
> transparent. They rarely cite the lack of available people or the
> unwillingness of others to hold them accountable.[22]

Conclusion

We live in a society that has become aggressively individualistic. But individualism

was never God's plan for us. He created us for relationships – to love one another, support

one another, grieve with one another, and help one another grow in godliness. Leaders are

not exempt! God hard wired everyone to exist in relationships. However, pastoral

leadership, as we have seen, can be lonely. Expectations from others, the desire and

pressure to perform, and fear of weakness often drive pastors and ministry leaders to

isolate themselves. It is in this isolation that temptation is at its greatest. Lonely leadership

is dangerous! The remedy to this problem is vulnerability in relationships. Vulnerable

relationships are relationships with other mature Christ followers defined by trust,

betterment, and accountability. These relationships may be difficult to come by for some;

They require work, honesty, communication, and intentionality. But I am convinced that a

pastor who is intentional about letting others into their deepest personal convictions,

struggles, and temptations to seek accountability and vulnerability takes a significant step

toward avoiding spiritual burnout or moral failure.

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[22] Henry T. Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda*,
Rev. & expanded (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Pub. Group, 2011), 322.

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