

## **“No Big Deal”: The Church and Accountability**

A former senior pastor of a church in British Columbia is in love. I was there the day he openly affirmed that love for her to his wife and kids. It seemed real in the context. It still does a year later. Everyone enjoys a touching love story.

Sadly, this was not rededication of love for his wife of nearly two decades, but declaration of love for the wife of over two decades of a former friend and parishioner. Sadly again, his lover was the former Pastor of Children’s Ministries in the same church, who worked under his leadership, who used to teach some of his kids in Sunday School. Her (older three) kids and husband have been devastated. His (younger four) kids are just discovering the hurtful impact of his actions, and his wife is devastated. We continue to watch up close the deep harm this pastor has caused his children and now former wife in many ways.

This is not an unfamiliar “love” story in church circles – or anywhere in fact, as this former pastor points out now.

So, “What’s the big deal?” That is precisely his question. It happens all the time, he explains. After his wife wisely said he should tell each of his kids the day following his announcement to her of new “love”, in her presence with another witness (me), one of the kids said, “But she’s married, isn’t she?” The father replied, “Yes, but these things happen...” Instant ethical confusion, that I know firsthand to have continued.

Never mind that he had promised at his wedding lifelong faithfulness to his wife and his new lover had promised the same to her husband. Never mind that he had performed numerous marriages urging just such vows, had similarly counselled many couples about marriage, and had taught his kids and everyone about faithfulness and truth-telling in marriage and generally. Never mind that the moment his former church initiated a process of accountability, the one-time pastor and his new lover and former Children’s Ministries pastor resigned from the church. Never mind that awareness of a pattern of emotional abuse in hindsight is emerging about this disgraced pastor, who perhaps (in hindsight too) fits a “narcissistic personality disorder” profile. The Bible calls such a self locked in “wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). “These things happen...” The former senior pastor told my wife and me personally that soon enough this would all be forgotten, and he’d soon enough too get another job in church circles for which right now he mainly has marketable skills and training.

He was proven right! A major international church ministry hired him... Though he lost his job when his adultery was discovered. He had lied by omission in the first place. He is still pursuing jobs in church circles.

Is this really “no big deal?”

Two Christian couples I know, two spouses with whom I had worked professionally in my field, rented a house together. Soon enough, two (wrong) spouses fell in “love”, and ran off together, devastating two marriages. Not to worry. Five years later, the one, a musician, was representing

yet another international Christian ministry in its endeavours. As if nothing had happened. No accountability. Subsequently, that second relationship also fell apart.

A former close colleague in Restorative Justice, an ordained pastor too, announced to his wife of over three decades two years ago that he wanted out of the marriage because she could not give him the love he wanted. He is now divorced and soon to be remarried. “These things happen...” (He had been in an earlier adulterous affair, not she.) When my wife and I asked him about biblical teaching and Jesus’ way, he at least admitted he knew he was directly choosing against both in leaving his marriage.

There is a local ministry that has been working (amongst others) with pastors and churches, including Mennonite Central Committee BC, on male-dominated abusive relationships. Too many church leaders are abusive. The ministry is called “When Love Hurts” (<http://whenlovehurts.ca/>). Through now the experience of our niece and others “up close”, we have been greatly helped in understanding abuse in the context of male dominance.

There are hundreds of stories out there no doubt that prove the former pastor right: “No big deal. These things happen...”

In response and conclusion, I offer a few considerations:

- Breaking church marriage promises and spinning related webs of deceit *are* a big deal for anyone claiming to follow the Way of the One who is also The Truth.
- Church discipline however is not about vindictiveness nor retribution. Though sadly it too often is and has been – with devastating consequences littering church history. We Christians can be a terribly judging and condemning lot.
- Church discipline is about accountability, reconciliation, and restoration. Each is close to impossible, and invariably messy. But with God “everything is possible”.
- Churches and their agencies should do far more due diligence about any former church/agency leader looking for work. “Are there unresolved skeletons in the closet?” should be a close-to-first concern. *Ecclesia caveat* – let the church beware, should be a primary watchword in all hirings.
- Church discipline should be about peacemaking and restoration – and huge celebration of such! The *first principle of biblical ecclesiology* in Matthew 18 is peacemaking, “where two or three are gathered together” in Jesus’ name for that purpose (with the contextual promise of Jesus’ presence to abet reconciliation). This is the church’s primary ministry. In John 17 church unity is the only evangelistic strategy given by Jesus. In Luke 15 there is repeated celebration of restoration, which is the essence of biblical justice.
- Church discipline is also about consistency of the wider church in response to known wrongdoing. Hence this article. The former pastor is still offering to volunteer coach, etc. at his kids’ Christian school. The church has no business endorsing him in leadership of any kind until he has done the difficult work of confession, repentance, showing accountability, pursuing reconciliation/amends-making and committing to “go and sin no more”. In his case, hundreds of people are involved. He has a long road ahead before the wider church anywhere should again embrace him as a sinner saved by grace.
- Church discipline is also about holding the “self-righteous” accuser accountable. “There but for the grace of God go I...” – indeed!

One of the kids showed right training by the former pastor when early on the response to this new family reality was: "I don't get it. When I do something wrong, I'm supposed to admit it, stop the behaviour, say I'm sorry, make it right, and do no more harm." Amen! My former friend, you trained your child well. Go and do likewise.