

“No Big Deal! These Things Happen...”: The Church and Accountability

By Wayne Northey

A former senior pastor of a Baptist Church in Coquitlam BC is in love. I was there the day senior pastor Dean Davey openly affirmed that love for her. It seemed real in the context. 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 close friend and parishioner. Sadly again, the former pastor’s lover was the former Pastor of Children’s Ministries in the same church, who used to teach some of Pastor Dean’s kids in Sunday School. Her three kids who are older were devastated. His four kids are variously discovering the hurtful impact of his actions.

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

So what’s the big deal? That is precisely his question. It happens all the time, he explains. To the question I heard once asked by one of the kids, “But she’s married, isn’t she?” he replied, “Yes, but these things happen...”

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 counselled numerous couples about marriage in that regard, had conducted marriage enrichment weekends, and had taught his kids and everyone about faithfulness and truth telling in marriage and generally. Never mind that the moment his church initiated a process of accountability, he and his lover resigned from the church. Never mind the profound deceit exercised when in subsequently applying for church/parachurch positions, he initially mentioned the separation, sure enough, but that a pastor from his church was now “walking the difficult journey with him”. *That pastor was his new lover...* “These things happen...” He told many that soon enough this would all be forgotten, and he’d soon enough too get another job in church circles, for which he mainly has marketable skills and training.

He was proven right! A major international church ministry hired him within months of everything coming out in the open. Though they did let him go when he was found out, before he had started his new job. (He just ‘neglected’ to mention he was having an affair – and hence separated...) But in 2016, [Pacific Life Bible College](#) in Surrey BC hired him as *VP of Student Development*. From my personal correspondence with them, they cared not at all that he had *not* been held accountable in any way for his past, or for nasty, manipulative behaviour many times towards his former wife and kids...

Is this really “No big deal!”? Am I biased, given that the former pastor was also a former good friend, and his former wife is my niece?

Though the former pastor regularly lied about it to his former wife and kids, former Pastor Dean carried on for months with the affair, while still married. He eventually a few years

on *did* marry the former Children’s Ministries Pastor. Another Pastor Dean did the deed. From my personal correspondence with that senior Pastor Dean at the time, it mattered *not* that the former Pastor Dean had admittedly done all of the above, and had never even attempted *reconciliation* (theologically meaning a process of confession, repentance, amends-making, and public commitment to “go and sin no more” – in relation to all whom he had harmed: no inconsiderable number of people). All that mattered was: the former Pastor “had now returned to the Father”, and therefore (apparently) all accountability-holding, including for the continued harm done to his former wife and kids, *was off the table*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly named such “*cheap grace*”. In some church circles it seems to abound. No Rich Young Ruler giving up anything. No Zacchaeus repaying anything. No Rich Man needing to succour Lazarus. In short: no *metanoia* – with teeth (the only kind).

It in fact also mattered not to the other senior Pastor Dean that he had performed at the former Pastor Dean’s *first* marriage (I was there); and had not so much as contacted the former partner about *her* feelings on the matter, before marrying off the former Pastor Dean *again*. Or that the former Pastor Dean under the other senior Pastor Dean’s guidance had *already once before* promised faithfulness “until death do us part”. Did the former Pastor Dean thereby embark with pastoral support on a kind of Christian serial monogamy that commits “*until another partner do us part*”?

Two Christian couples I knew, some with whom I had worked professionally in my field of ministry, rented a house together. Two (wrong) spouses fell in “love”, and ran off together, devastating two marriages. Not to worry. Five years later, the one was representing yet another international Christian ministry in its endeavours. As if nothing had happened. No accountability.

There are hundreds of stories out there I’m sure 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.
- 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 *accountability, 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 was still offering to volunteer coach for a long time, etc. at his kids' Christian school, as if nothing had happened. Does the church have any business endorsing him in church 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, dozens 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.
- All must acknowledge: "There but for the grace of God go I..." – indeed (Galatians 6:1 & 2)!

One of former Pastor Dean's kids commented early on about this new family reality: "I don't get it. When I do something wrong, I'm supposed to admit it, stop the behaviour, say I'm sorry, and make it right."

Add (in this instance, since it was so public) public commitment to never do it again, and *Amen!* My former friend, you trained your kids well. *Go and do likewise.*