

# **SEXUAL TEMPTATION**

## **How Christian Workers Can Win the Battle**

By Randy C. Alcorn

“Something terrible’s happened.” The tense voice belonged to my friend, who was calling from across the country. “Yesterday our pastor left his wife and ran off with another woman.”

I was sad, but not shocked or even surprised. I’ve heard the same story too many times now to ever be surprised again.

A few years ago I spoke on sexual purity at a Bible college. Many students came for counseling, including three I’ll call Rachel, Barb, and Pam.

Rachel got right to the point: “My parents sent me to one of our pastors for counseling, and I ended up sleeping with him.” Later the same day Barb, a deacon’s daughter, told me through tears, “My dad has had sex with me for years, and now he’s starting on my sisters.” Next day I met Pam. Her story? “I came to Bible college to get away from an affair with my pastor.”

At another school, Toni, an eighteen-year-old girl, was guilt-ridden because she had had sex with her former youth pastor. “Have you confessed it to the Lord and cut off the relationship?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “His wife found out, and he moved to another church. “But that’s not all.” She paused. “I can’t believe it, but the church hired a new youth pastor, and I ended up in bed with him too!”

Toni said I could discuss her situation with the dean of students. “What’s going on with Christian leaders?” he asked. “Last year our music minister was dismissed for adultery. Then we found out he did the same thing in his last church. And I just heard that a seminary prof was dismissed for immorality.”

For every well-known Christian television personality or evangelical leader who “bites the dust,” there are any number of lesser-known local pastors and Bible teachers and parachurch workers who quietly resign or are fired for sexual immorality. Most of us can name several, some dozens, and some many more still. (Three Christian leaders sat down together and came up with a list of 250 names.) Furthermore, there are innumerable lay men and women whose service as Christian workers and leaders has been eroded or abruptly halted for exactly the same reason.

Much as we hate to admit it, the evangelical landscape is littered with the carcasses of lives and ministries decimated by sexual sin. The conclusion is sobering and the implications far-reaching: there is among Christians, including Christians in ministry, a moral epidemic of enormous and frightening proportions.

### **Addressing the Problem Head-on**

In writing and researching the book *Christians in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution*, I discovered that a prominent earmark of the early church was its sexual purity. If we do not reclaim this lost ground, today’s church and its leadership are destined to spiritual impotence. Why? Because an unholy world will never be won to Christ by an unholy church.

How much has our reputation suffered as Christ's servants? How much credibility have we lost as a result of the highly publicized immoral exploits of those in ministry? After hearing of yet another fallen Christian leader, a committed Christian woman told me in tears, "Every time I listen to a Christian leader now, I can't shake the thought that he's likely living in immorality."

Despite the toll it has taken, there are some positive developments that have come out of the shocking moral lapses of Christian leaders. The most significant is that a bucket of ice water has been thrown in our face. We can no longer deny the reality of moral weakness among those who serve Christ. Both leaders and lay people have become acutely aware of the wide-spread moral crisis, the severe consequences of our sexual compromises and the desperate need to shore up our sagging morality.

Much has been said in the past few years about the need to care for and restore those who have fallen into sexual sin. While this must be addressed, the emphasis is corrective in nature. What we lack, and need desperately, are clear preventative measures.

There are two ways to respond to a perilous ledge where people keep falling fifty feet to the ground below. One is to position ambulances and paramedics at the bottom. Another is to post warning signs and build a railing at the top. This booklet is intended to post warning signs and build a railing, with the prayer that fewer ambulances will be needed at the bottom of the ledge.

To keep this booklet from becoming a book, I must assume that readers know what Scripture says about sexual morality. I'll focus first on three critical facts we must understand. Then we'll explore the reasons Christians commit sexual sin. The bulk of the booklet zeros in on a number of practical guidelines that can help us fight and win the battle for sexual purity.

### **Three Critical Facts**

*Critical #1: We are targeted for sexual immorality.*

Some years ago there was considerable scuttlebutt about an international "hit list," a calculated plan for paid assassins to murder strategic world leaders. A terrifying thought, isn't it? Yet, I'm convinced that the enemy, Satan, has maintained such a hit list throughout the millennia. And there's every reason to believe that Christian workers are at the very top of his list. If you are a pastor, missionary, evangelist, youth worker, elder, deacon, Bible study leader, parachurch worker, Bible college or seminary teacher or student, writer, musician or have a ministry of any sort, then take heed-you are a targeted man, a marked woman. The forces of evil have taken out a contract on you. There is a price on your head sufficient to make any bounty hunter salivate. Satan is out to get you. Why? Because he wants to nullify your ministry. Because more than any others you bear on your shoulders the reputation of Christ. If you commit immorality, the enemy scores a strategic victory in his assault on that sacred reputation.

Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers of darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the invisible realm (Eph. 6:12). These desperately evil beings have vested interests in our moral collapse. They will do everything in their power to strike out at Christ and his church.

"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8).

*Critical fact #2: We are vulnerable to sexual immorality.*

All Christians, including those active in ministry, are susceptible to sexual sin. The myth that we are morally invulnerable dies slowly, even in the face of over-whelming evidence. But there is not and never has been some mystical antibody that makes us immune to sexual sin.

“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16:18). What level of pride is required to believe that sexual sin could overtake Lot, Samson, David (“a man after God’s own heart”), Solomon, the Corinthians and a host of modern Christian leaders, but not me? Paul’s warnings deserve a prominent place on our dashboards, desks or Daytimers: “But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Gal 6:1); “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1Cor 10:12).

*Critical fact #3: We are fully responsible for our moral choices.*

It’s often said that people “fall” into immorality. The expression is as revealing as it is faulty and dangerous. The very term *fall* betrays a victim mentality. It sounds as if we were walking down a street and someone tripped us or kicked our feet out from under us. It implies that moral collapse comes out of nowhere, that there is little or nothing we could have done to prevent what happened.

We do not fall into immorality we walk into it. Indeed, sometimes we run headlong into it. We must realize from the beginning that immorality is a choice. It is not something that happens to people. It is something that people make happen.

We may do everything in our power to achieve physical health, and prevent getting cancer, yet we can still get cancer. But this is not true of immorality. If we depend on our Savior and take deliberate and ongoing steps to cultivate purity and avoid immorality, we can avoid it. It does not choose us. We choose it-or we choose to avoid it.

We must always take responsibility for our choices. But those of us in ministry-whether full-time or part-time, paid or unpaid, in the church or parachurch-must take even greater responsibility for our choices concerning those we meet with for counseling or spiritual direction. Such people are particularly vulnerable and easily swayed. Our role involves an authority and power over their lives which must not be abused.

Even the secular counseling profession considers it the highest breach of ethics to enter into a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a client. Indeed, sexual involvement with one who has come to seek emotional help or spiritual guidance should not only be considered fornication or adultery-it should be considered sexual abuse.

Sexual activity that comes out of a ministry context is comparable to child sexual abuse, where the supposedly mature and stable adult figure takes advantage of his or her authority and credibility to initiate or allow a sexual encounter with the immature and vulnerable. In such cases, the person in ministry is not a victim, he or she is a victimizer. And it is all the worse because we are trusted representatives of Christ to this person’s life.

There is a disturbing tendency in the church to blame the adulterous relationship of a male leader on the woman he becomes involved with.<sup>2</sup> She is often automatically regarded as the seductress, with as much or more responsibility for what happened than the man. On the contrary, though the woman is also responsible, it is the partner in the position of authority that must be regarded as more responsible.

Ministry is not just a task. It is a sacred trust. To misuse and violate that trust to achieve sexual conquest or even emotional dependence is a particularly deplorable behavior. Every time a Christian

leader's sexual sin is passed off as "an unfortunate indiscretion that came at a vulnerable point in his life," responsibility is avoided or denied, and others are taught that one's own emotional needs and inadequacies can somewhat justify immoral entanglement.

### **Why Christians Commit Immorality**

We are susceptible to sin because we are sinners. Beyond that, active Christian ministry brings with it serious built-in hazards, moral land mines that can destroy us, our families and our churches.

Among these land mines is the position of power and influence that every ministry entails. A Sunday-school teacher or small-group leader is viewed as an authority, and authority always brings with it power and influence. The more prominent the ministry, the greater the power and influence. In pastoral ministry, for instance, there is a strange blend of ego-feeding flattery and debilitating criticism that can fill us with either pride or despair. Like the Lord, pastors tend to be either worshipped or crucified, sometimes both in the same day. In this up and down process, our perspective gets warped, and our resistance to temptation lowered.

We in ministry usually have people-centered personalities. We care and we listen, and that draws others to us and us to them. We get wrapped up in the lives of people, sometimes in unhealthy ways. Over half of those with emotional or mental struggles go first to see their minister or rabbi.<sup>3</sup> Most pastors are men, and yet as many as 75 percent of those who come to them for help are women. Often these women are coming precisely because they have deep emotional needs and relational voids. This situation is compounded because pastors and lay people alike are rarely trained to understand the sexual dynamics involved in ministry.

Those in full-time ministry often set their own schedules and lack the built-in accountability of most secular jobs, creating isolation and allowing considerable freedom to pursue an unhealthy relationship. Prime candidates for sexual sin are those who keep long hours away from home, are gone evenings and travel frequently. Since these very things become characteristic of successful Christian leaders, as they come into more public demand, it's no wonder so many of the well known are stumbling.

Our inordinate emphasis on youth, outward appearance and success are among the many factors that contribute to the phenomenon of mid-life disorientation, which often leads to extramarital interests. The fact that so many people are involved in affairs cannot help but make immorality seem a more viable option. Social restraints have broken down, and other forces favorable to immorality have replaced them. We must not be deceived into thinking that Christians are immune to any of these forces.

Of course, the reasons people commit immorality are more than social or circumstantial. Every sin is the fruit of a tree that has a long root system. Confession and repentance signal the beginning of change, but there is often a long road ahead to deal with the root problems.

This is one of the dangers of the philosophy that says "forgiveness for immorality requires restoration to ministry." Many men and women are being restored to ministry when the root problems leading to their immorality have never been dealt with. In many cases there has not been enough time to establish a new track record of right thinking and right living. Such people are often moral time bombs waiting to go off again.

## **Is Immorality Inevitable?**

One woman said to me, “There’s so much immorality among Christians now that I’m living in constant fear. It makes it difficult even to work with my associates in the ministry. It’s happened to those more godly than I, so I keep thinking that it’s probably going to happen to me. It almost seems inevitable.”

God does not want us to be presumptuous, but neither does he want us to be paranoid. We do not have to live each day teetering on the edge of immorality or paralyzed by the fear of a sudden fall. In the specific context of seeking to be sexually pure and resisting sexual temptation, the wise man says this to his son:

My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment,  
do not let them out of your sight;  
they will be life for you,  
an ornament to grace your neck.  
Then you will go on your way in safety,  
and your foot will not stumble;  
when you lie down you will not be afraid;  
when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.  
Have no fear of sudden disaster  
or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,  
for the Lord will be your confidence  
and will keep your foot from being snared.

(Prov 3:21-26)

If we walk daily with Christ, being alert to what’s happening in our minds and implementing steps of righteousness and wisdom, then we can go our way “in safety” and “not be afraid.” The next section of this pamphlet presents principles and practical steps for cultivating sexual purity, and to avoid and resist sexual temptation.

### **1. Take Time to Cultivate Your Inner Life**

Often those who sin have neglected in previous weeks or months or years the regular practices of meditation, worship and prayer. In doing so, they have forgone the healthy self-examination these spiritual disciplines foster. In our busyness we can neglect the care and feeding of our own souls. The battle for sexual purity is won or lost not just in the noisy trenches of the world’s temptations, but at home, in quietness, on our knees.

An over-full schedule and constant activity erode the soul. Busyness wears down our ability to hear, to listen to the promptings and warning signals of God’s Spirit, his Word, and his people. Fatigue becomes disorienting, and it makes us oblivious to what’s really happening in us.

While I have found a daily quiet time essential, for me it isn’t enough. I need my time in the Bible and prayer, but I also need time to read a good book, to exercise, to listen to music, to leisurely talk with my wife over coffee, to take bike rides and play with my children without glancing at my watch. It can’t always be harvest time-the land needs rest in order to renew.

God gave Israel not just one day a week, but several weeks a year, and even one year every seven to break the pattern of life long enough to worship and reflect and take stock. I periodically take overnight retreats by myself or with my wife. Sometimes I’m gone several nights, and in times of greater need I’ve been away a week, usually in a cabin at the Oregon coast. This isn’t a normal vacation, but a time

in which the fresh air, lack of immediate demands and absence of noise give clarity to the still, small voice of God that is too easily drowned out in the busyness of daily life.

Of course, time with God is not merely a means to the end of purity, but is an end in itself. It is not a pragmatic instrument we use to resist immorality, but the fountain from which holiness flows.

A regular time with God is necessary but not sufficient. I know Christian workers who have maintained their quiet times but have nevertheless made unwise choices which led them to careless indiscretions they might otherwise have avoided.

## **2. Guard Your Mind**

A Christian lay leader once told me, “I fell into this adulterous relationship without warning. It came out of the clear blue sky.” As I asked him questions, it became clear that he had actually cultivated a mind for immorality. His choices to feed his mind on immoral images made him an adulterer just waiting for an adulteress to come along.

Sexual sin never comes out of the clear blue sky. It is often the result of a long process in which a mind susceptible to sin is granted unguarded exposure to immoral input.

“Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow a character, reap a destiny.” Our thoughts are the fabric with which we weave our character and destiny. We must actively fight off thoughts of impurity. But the key to doing this is not simply saying “I will not lust, I will not lust”-that often has the same effect as saying, “I will not think of purple elephants.” We must cultivate our hearts and minds with what is godly and pure. These better thoughts will displace the others (Phil 4:8).

We can't avoid all sexual stimuli, but we can keep them from taking root in us. In Martin Luther's terms, “You can't keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from making a nest in your hair.” I like to put it another way: “If you're on a diet, don't go in a doughnut shop.” Stay away from the magazine racks, video stores, advertisements, programs, images, people and places that tempt you to lust. “Flee from sexual immorality” (1 Cor 6:18). Our first duty is not to resist but to run. Scripture puts it emphatically: “Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way” (Prov 4:14-15).

## **3. Take Precautions as You Minister**

We need to be careful where, when and why we meet with those of the opposite sex. There is a natural bonding process in counseling that can lead to a sense of intimacy on the part of one or both. Do you look forward in a special way to your appointments with this person? Do you cancel appointments with others to meet with her? Do you prefer that your coworkers not know you are meeting her again? Or do you feel flattered when seen with her in public? Any of these can be warnings of an improper relationship.

One pastor found that his thoughts were continually drawn to a coworker, more than to his own spouse. After months of rationalizing, he finally admitted to himself that he was looking for every excuse to have long lunches with her when a short discussion in the church office would have done just as well. His rule of thumb became, “I will only meet with her when necessary, only as long as necessary, only at the office, and as often as possible with others present.” In time their relationship returned to its original healthy status.

I am all for relationships with the opposite sex, both casual and close. But unless we have a well-defined familial relationship (meaning that a person is a “parent” or a “sibling” to us in the sense of 1 Timothy 5:1-2), we need to be wise about our meetings with the opposite sex and take precautions. Usually we can find a qualified person of the same gender to meet with the person. If a man does need to be the one meeting with a woman, he can include his wife or someone else. If you choose to counsel alone with those of the opposite sex, burst the illusory bubble that you are alone and unaccountable: for instance, have your office near main foot traffic areas, keep your office door ajar or have a small window installed in your door.

#### **4. Discern the Subtle Signs of Attraction**

There’s a mystique about spiritual ministry that breeds fascination in some people. Their respect for a pastor, for instance, can border on awe. It’s flattering for the pastor (especially when nursing fresh wounds from the last deacon board meeting) to receive attention from an attractive woman who obviously admires him and hangs on his every word. Unless there is a clear awareness of human nature, a subtle but powerful process of soul-merger can occur. This can range from slowly developed infatuation to an “instant intimacy” that accelerates at an alarming pace.

We must develop an early detection system, to spot moral danger before we are too deeply entrenched in it. Remember: A relationship can be sexual long before it becomes erotic. Just because I’m not touching a woman, or just because I’m not fantasizing erotic encounters with her, does not mean I am not becoming sexually involved with her. Often the erotic comes at the end of sexual attraction. In my experience, many Christian workers end up in bed with someone not just to gratify a sexual urge but because they believe they’ve come to really love the person.

#### **5. Beware of Cloudy Thinking and Rationalizing**

When meeting one woman for our third counseling appointment, it struck me that she was personally interested in me. What was frightening is that I realized I had subconsciously sensed this before but had enjoyed her attraction to me too much to address the problem. Since I was not yet emotionally involved or giving her inappropriate attention, I was tempted to rationalize and dismiss it as unimportant, “knowing” of course that I would never get involved with her (famous last words, since every affair begins with the “harmless”). I decided, however, that I was no longer the right person to meet with her and made other arrangements. God only knows-and I do not want to-what might have happened if I’d allowed the situation to continue unchecked.

Often we justify our flirtations with sin on a rational and even spiritual basis. For instance, one Christian worker didn’t tell his wife about his frequent meetings with a particular woman on the grounds that he shouldn’t violate counseling confidentiality. Besides, he sensed that his wife would be jealous (without good reason, of course), and so why upset her? Under the cloak of professionalism and sensitivity to his wife, he proceeded to meet with this woman secretly. The result was predictable.

A pastor had been struggling with lustful thoughts toward a college girl in his church. Rather than dealing with his struggles alone with the Lord, or with a mature brother, or with his wife, he actually took the girl out to lunch to talk with her! Citing the biblical mandate to confess our sins and make things right with the person we’ve wronged, he told her, “I’ve been having lustful thoughts about you, and I felt I needed to confess them to you.” Embarrassed but flattered, the girl began to entertain her own thoughts toward him, and eventually they became sexually involved.

Remember that all this came from what the pastor told himself was a spiritual and obedient decision to meet with the girl! To misuse Scripture in this way and violate every rule of wisdom and common sense

shows how incredibly cloudy and undependable our thinking can become—and how much we need the righteous and wise counsel and admonition of others. “For in his own eyes he flatters himself too much to detect or hate his sin” (Ps 36:2).

## **6. Anticipate and Prevent Sexual Temptations**

It’s always easier to avoid sexual temptation than to resist it. A Joseph ran from Potiphar’s wife, so we must get away from the lures, baits and hooks of impurity. When it comes to sexual temptation, God says, be a coward (1Cor 6:18).

Those who travel in their ministries are often subjected to considerable sexual temptation. Home, family and community provide certain natural restraints that are removed while traveling (and, unfortunately, some travel so much precisely because their home lives are unhappy). Anonymity and leisure time spell catastrophe for the weak, struggling, lonely and hurting.

I know some godly men and women who travel frequently, yet consistently have victory in this area. But many others need to travel less. Some should make it a practice as often as possible to stay in private homes of strong Christian families.

When I spoke at a men’s conference, I asked several of the men who travel to stand up and share what steps they had found helpful in resisting sexual temptation. One man who travels extensively told us that for years his spiritual life had been stifled by habit. He would stay in the same hotel three or four days, and late at night when he was lonely and bored, he would turn on one of the television movies that invariably features immorality. After years of losing this battle, he did something about it:

Whenever I check into my hotel, I ask them at the front desk to please remove the television from my room. Invariably they look at me like I’m crazy, then say, ‘But, sir, if you don’t want to watch it, you don’t have to turn it on.’ Since I’m a paying customer, I politely insist, and I’ve never once been refused. Immorality is no longer just one push of a button away. Having the television removed has been my way of saying, ‘I’m serious about this, Lord.’ I’ve done this now for a year, and it’s been the key to victory against impurity.”

This man taught us a great principle: In moments of strength, make decisions that will prevent temptation in moments of weakness. Anticipating temptation and choosing to avoid it is often the key to fulfilling a contract of purity: “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (Job 31:1).

## **7. Cultivate and Guard Your Marriage**

Communication is crucial. Every adultery begins with a deception, and most deceptions begin with seemingly innocent secrets (“she doesn’t need to know this”). If you’re married, regularly evaluate your relationship with your spouse. Watch for the red flags of discontentment, poor communication and a poor sexual relationship.

Many Christian leaders move so freely in the world of great spiritual truths that, unless they take pains to communicate daily, their spouses get left out. This development of two separate worlds leads to two separate lives and is often the first step toward an adulterous affair with “someone who understands me and my world.”

But we live in the real world, and that means a fallen world. The truth is that even in Christian marriages we can become filled with resentment, boredom or hurt. This makes us more vulnerable to



the intrigue and excitement of a new person. The answer, however, is not a new person, but a fresh appreciation of the “old” person. Boredom can be overcome, and attraction can be rekindled.

A lay leader in our church recently shared with a group of men that he found his eyes wandering from his wife. He was no longer attracted to her. Realizing this was not God’s desire, he committed himself to praying daily that God would make his wife the most attractive woman in the world to him. Within a month that prayer was decisively answered. After hearing his story, another man did the same thing and also saw dramatic results. Both of their marriages are better now than they’ve been in years.

Sometimes our marriage problems need assistance from the outside. Yet many Christian workers are too proud to ask for help. They stubbornly refuse to admit their struggles and get counseling-until after they fall into immorality. If your marriage or personal life is faltering, get help now before greater damage is done. The short-term cost of swallowing our pride is far less than the long-term cost of not doing so.

Avail yourself of the books, tapes, videos and seminars geared to improving your marriage. When my wife and I went on a Marriage Encounter weekend, we were surprised to discover some of our true feelings and differences in perspective in certain areas. Though not major, at the time, they could have caused more serious problems down the road if they were left unaddressed.

## **8. Be Honest with Your Spouse**

After I addressed some of these issues at a conference, a woman came up and shared with me her story. A year earlier her husband had come to her in tears, confessing his attraction to a Christian woman he worked with. He was under constant temptation and felt himself slipping. He committed himself to backing off from the relationship and asked his wife to please understand and pray for him. She was initially hurt but realized she needed to help him rather than feel sorry for herself.

The result? Not only did he get out of the relationship, but through his wife’s support they drew closer than ever before. In tears she told me, “Two months ago my husband died without warning. I know that if he hadn’t been honest with me that night, he would have ended up in an affair with the woman, and perhaps would have left me. He would have died in sin, unready to meet God, and I would have lived the rest of my life grieving his affair. But that isn’t how it happened. His last words to me were, ‘I love you,’ and I know it was true-he had proven it by his actions. I thank the Lord every day that I think of him with complete respect and admiration for loving God and me enough to be honest about his struggles.

Lust thrives on secrecy. Nothing defuses lust so effectively as exposure. Honest communication between husband and wife will make them allies, not adversaries. While there is often initial pain in discussing sexual temptation, there is also some immediate relief. And while sharing specific names is not always necessary, spouses can now understand their mates better, pray for them more effectively, and be more sensitive to their needs-all of which will draw them together.

## **9. Share Regularly with Those Who Hold You Accountable**

Nothing is talked about more and done less than being “accountable.” Those gifted and active in ministry can be notoriously proud and independent. The more leaders become prominent, the more they need accountability-yet often the less they get it. In several cases involving Christian leaders, it is remarkable that many people around them were aware of their immorality, or at least the obviously indiscreet and unwise actions leading up to it. Yet almost to a person they did not have the conviction or

courage to confront these leaders with it. Those around them think, “Who am I to ask him if this is a wise choice he’s making?”

As church and parachurch workers, we may become so busy with our tasks that we are shoulder to shoulder with our coworkers, but are seldom face to face. Many pastors in small churches feel isolated, and even those in large churches with multiple staff members are usually Lone Rangers (without a Tonto) when it comes to facing their moral struggles.

In our church we have seven full-time and several part-time ministers on our staff. Four years ago we started committing the first two hours of our weekly all-day staff meeting to sharing personal struggles and joys. In the process we often tell each other where our spiritual lives are at and the struggles for which we need prayer and help. We move around the room from person to person to make sure no one is left out. We ask, “How are you doing?” and if the answers are vague or something seems wrong, we probe deeper.

To do this is risky—it involves entrusting your reputation to others and opening yourself up to examination and even criticism (though, in fact, what comes out is usually positive encouragement). But the risks are small compared to the rewards. Unlike many pastors, we do not feel alone in the ministry. We know each others’ imperfections, and we have nothing to prove to each other. These hours of weekly accountability have become weekly therapy, and no matter how full the agenda, we are committed to keeping in touch with each other’s inner lives.

After several years of doing this, though, I determined that for me it just wasn’t enough. Our staff meetings are large enough to let us fake it, to slip through the cracks or otherwise escape real accountability. Consequently, I started two accountability groups, one with three other pastors on a Tuesday afternoon and one with four laymen on a Saturday morning. We begin each week with a passage of Scripture we’ve memorized. Then each of us in turn answers several key questions: How are you doing with God? With your mate or the person you’re dating? With your children? What temptations are you facing, and how are you dealing with them? How has your thought life been this week? Are you consistently living for Christ in your workplace? Have you been spending regular time in the Word and prayer? Who have you been sharing the gospel with? How can we pray for you and help you?

After just a few of these meetings, men in both groups expressed that this was the most meaningful ninety minutes of their week. For some it was the first time a brother in Christ had ever asked them these questions. One said, “Why for so many years have we talked about sports and hunting and business and everything else under the sun, and not talked about the most important part of our lives?” Another said, “I’ve gotten to know you men in one month in a way I don’t know people I’ve been with for ten years.” Our key verse is Proverbs 27:17: “As iron sharpens irons, so one man sharpens another”—and we have seen its reality over and over again.

Every accountability group has its own personality, and will sometimes make changes to avoid stagnancy. But the key is always to get back to the basic questions. You or our group may wish to come up with some of your own. Often the best questions to ask in an accountability group are the very questions we least want to answer! Write those questions down and put them on the top of the agenda each time you meet. Howard Hendricks suggests that the last question on the list be this: “In your answers to any of the previous questions, have you lied?”

Even simple and spontaneous attempts at accountability can produce amazing results. Once I was undergoing hours of sexual temptation, and finally I called a brother I was to have breakfast with the next morning. I said, "Please pray for me, and promise to ask me tomorrow what I did." He agreed. The moment I put down the phone, the temptation was gone. Why? I'd like to say it was because I'm so spiritual, but the truth is there was no way I was going to face my friend the next morning and have to tell him I'd sinned! If this is a crutch, then fine. When it comes to battling temptation, I for one need all the help I can get!

### **10. Be Quick to Confess and Repent**

One Christian worker struggled with homosexual temptation. He had come out of a background of immorality, but walked with Christ in purity for two years. Then he became careless, allowing his thoughts to wander. Within a month he was browsing in a pornographic bookstore; then a week later he walked into the wrong part of town; then finally weeks later still, into a gay bar where he had a sexual relationship. The process took two months, but at no time did he overtly recognize and confess his sin and plead for God's grace and strength. Confession and repentance were the only things that could break him out of the downward spiral he had stepped into. But he did not do them.

We must keep short accounts with God. When we sin, we must confess it now. Otherwise, we'll become desensitized to it and be able to go one step further next time before our dulled conscience objects. Delayed confession is the next worst thing to no confession. "he who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy" (Prov 28:13).

All sins should be confessed to God, and some to others—"confess your sins to each other and pray for each other: (Jas 5:16). Whether or not a sin is confessed to others, and if so to whom, is dependent on who is affected by the sin, who is aware or suspicious of the sin, and who is in a position to help avoid repeating the sin. Any Christian's immorality has a significant effect on the whole body or organization (1Cor 5:6). If others have been aware of my sin, they may have been hurt by it or even worse, desensitized to sin themselves. When a sin is public, then it is appropriate that confession should be public.

There is a higher standard for those in ministry, and public exposure is a price that must often be paid (1 Tim 5:20). One of our pastors had this to say about the importance of public confession: "If I ever commit immorality, I want to know that I will have to face our church body. I want to know my reputation would be ruined. I don't want any deterrent to be removed." Having seen the purifying effects of public confessions by two lay leaders in our church's history, I'm all the more convinced of the importance of such actions.

While my spouse may be unaware of my sin, she has nonetheless been deeply affected by it. If I do not confess it, I cheat her twice: first in the sin itself, and second by not allowing her to forgive me or respond in the way she chooses. If I have violated my marriage vows, it is she who must decide if she will forgive me. Anyone who lives in fear that his spouse will someday discover the truth is not living as God would have him live.

### **Counting Its Cost**

In 1850 Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*, a powerful novel centered around the adulterous relationship of Hester Prynne and the highly respected minister, the Reverend Mr. Arthur Dimmesdale. The fallen pastor, remorseful but not ready to face the consequences, asks the question, "What can a ruined soul, like mine, effect the redemption of other souls?-or a polluted soul, towards their purification? He describes the misery of standing in his pulpit and seeing the admiration of his

people, and having to “then look inward, and discern the black reality of what they idolize.” Finally he says, “I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am! And Satan laughs at it!”

I met with a man who had been a leader in a Christian organization until he committed adultery. I asked, “What could have been done to prevent this?” He paused only for a moment, then said with haunting pain, “If only I had really known, really thought through what it would cost me, my family and my Lord, I honestly believe I never would have done it.”

Some years ago my copastor and friend Alan Hlavka and I each developed a list of all the specific consequences we could think of that would result from our immorality. The lists were devastating, and to us they spoke more powerfully than any sermon or article on the subject.

Periodically, especially when traveling or when in a time of temptation or weakness, we read through this list. In a personal and tangible way it brings home God’s inviolate law of choice and consequence. It cuts through the fog of rationalization and fills our hearts with the healthy, motivating fear of God. We find that when we begin to think unclearly, reviewing this list yanks us back to reality and the need both to fear God and the consequences of sin.

What follows is an edited version of our combined lists. I’ve included the actual names of my wife and daughters to emphasize the personal nature of this exercise. I recommend that you use this as the basis for your own list, adding those other consequences that would be uniquely yours. The idea of course, is to not focus on sin, but on the consequences of sin, thereby encouraging us to refocus on the Lord and take steps of wisdom and purity that can keep us from falling.

- Dragging Christ’s reputation into the mud.
- Having to one day look Jesus in the face at the judgment seat and tell why I did it.
- Untold hurt to Nanci, my best friend and loyal wife.
- Loss of Nanci’s respect and trust.
- The possibility that I could lose my wife and my children forever.
- Hurt to and loss of credibility with my beloved daughters, Karina and Angie. (“Why listen to a man who betrayed Mom and us?”)
- Shame to my family. (“Why isn’t Daddy a pastor anymore?” The cruel comments of others who would invariable find out.)
- Shame and hurt to my church and friends, and especially those I’ve led to Christ and discipled. (List names.)
- An irretrievable loss of years of witnessing to my father.
- Bringing great pleasure to Satan, God’s enemy.
- Possibly contracting a sexually transmitted disease (gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes or AIDS), passing on the disease to Nanci, pregnancy (with its personal and financial implications, including lifelong reminder of sin to me and my family).
- Loss of self-respect, discrediting my own name, and invoking shame and lifelong embarrassment upon myself.

This is less than half of the items from my list. If only we would rehearse in advance the ugly and overwhelming consequences of immorality, we would be far more prone to avoid it.

## Winning the Battle

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, there was no one more seemingly invincible than Smaug, the mighty dragon. But unknown to him, there was one small chink in the armor of Smaug's underbelly. That was all it took for Bard the hunter, a skilled marksman, to seal the doom of the presumptuous dragon. Unaware of his weakness and underestimation his opponents, Smaug failed to protect himself. Bard's arrow pierced his heart, and the lake people were saved.

An exciting story, with a happy ending. But when it's a servant of Christ felled by the evil one, the ending is not happy. It is tragic. Satan knows only too well the chinks in the armor of the most mighty Christian warriors-not to mention the rest of us! He isn't one to waste his arrows, bouncing them harmlessly off the strongest plates of our spiritual armor. His aim is deadly and it is at our points of greatest vulnerability, that he will most certainly attack.

As I take a hard look at myself and my brothers and sisters in Christian ministry, sometimes I'm alarmed at what I see. Some of us have grown presumptuous and morally soft. At times we are frighteningly weak in our exercise of sexual purity. We watch and listen to and are amused by suggestiveness and immorality, and we subtly adopt the world's values instead of the Word's. We begin thinking like the world-no wonder we end up acting like it.

It is time to take a close look at our minds, our speech and our actions. Like the Greek warrior Achilles, we may appear unassailable to ourselves or to the many who respect us, but one arrow to our heel proves otherwise. Think honestly and carefully-is susceptibility to sexual impurity your Achilles' heel? Is it the chink in your armor? If so, following the guidelines of this pamphlet may be more than a nice precaution-it may actually save your life, family and ministry from ruin. It may save you from having to hear what haunted Arthur Dimmesdale and has haunted countless thousands of others in ministry-Satan's laugh.

We are in battle far more fierce and strategic than any Alexander or Napoleon ever fought. No one prepares for a battle he isn't aware of, and no one wins a battle he doesn't prepare for.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a fuller treatment on Scripture's view of sexual morality, see my *Christians in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution* (Portland, Oreg.: Multnomah, 1985) or John White, *Eros Defiled* (Downers Grove, ILL.: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

<sup>2</sup>See Ann-Janine Morey, "Blaming Women for the Sexually Abusive pastor," *Christian Century*, October 5, 1988, pp.866-69.

<sup>3</sup>Dean Merrill, "The Sexual Hazards of pastoral Care," *Christianity Today*, November 8, 1985, p.105

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