

Dealing with Sin in a Christian Organization

by J.D. Whitney



Having grown up in the church, I have seen a lot of these types of situations. Most of the time, the human response is that we really want someone to pay. This isn't really the Christian response. We are very interested in the punishment fitting the crime which allows us to separate the sinner from ourselves. We say, "There is Judas. There is Adam." This attitude of punishment often turns us away from love and discipline.

When a leader sins, the sense of betrayal is huge. The leader will probably be really shocked by the depth of the repercussions of their sin. Even when their staff and friends respond in love and discipline, the leader may feel betrayal as well. So ironically, the betrayer may end up feeling betrayed. This is messy stuff.

If it comes down to the question of pursuing the well-being of a guilty leader or the 200 people on staff, I would choose the well-being of the organization whatever that costs me. Yet this is often an excuse to shoot our wounded and move on. I think we often underestimate the harm that shooting our wounded may do to our other staff members. When we pursue the hard road of reconciliation, discipline, and healing for all, we end up in a gospel story that glorifies Christ and brings comfort. It's not an easy road to take.

At our organization we had a leader in sin. For a period of time he kept people from knowing that the sin was

there. In the end he came on his own and admitted what he had done. It was a serious shock to everyone. When the board became aware, they took the hard road by making both the care and protection of the organization and the CEO a priority. Holding these things both in tension meant we had to engage with our CEO instead of moving on without him. That was a very important step.

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We had an emergency succession policy, but the board, led by the Holy Spirit, opted to do something different. It is not so important to know what they did as it is to know that these things can never be planned for entirely. Flexibility in implementation of our plan was a key to the end result being good.

The board gave three months between their original meeting and their follow up meeting. The three month time frame worked out really well even though the senior staff had originally wanted to work through things more quickly. During that time we had a number of interactions with the CEO, many of which were really hard as we worked through a lot of misunderstanding and suspicion between us. We had a series of

conversations the week before the board meeting and really saw God working toward health and healing in our CEO and our relationship with him. Three months is not a magic number for every situation, it was just the amount of time God knew we would need.

Here is where I think we really began to do things differently from my past experience. We have a very high value on godly relationships in our organization. This is something that we talk about all the time. We spend a lot of time confronting each other about sin and working through repentance and forgiveness. We try not to let those things fester anywhere in our organization. This was a big hairy mess because of the scope and the scale of the sin and the person involved. The one-on-one conversations that staff were encouraged to have with the CEO at his home were really difficult.

Many of our staff were uncomfortable confronting their leader. Others hadn't sorted out how they felt. Yet we really wanted our staff to follow the biblical model of confronting a brother who has sinned against you. At first, we told the staff that they were free to talk to the CEO, but as time went on, this became something that we encouraged and then required. Two and a half months into the process we had the CEO and his wife come to our staff retreat and they spent four hours interacting with them as a group. We wanted people to have time, but we

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also didn't want them to give up on the relationship. We constantly worked to move people toward confrontation and forgiveness, so that healing could take place.

During times like these we are all tempted to pursue "moving forward" or "getting past this." We never want to move past something that is unreconciled. We need to forgive even if the other person does not repent. But we often leave it there. As Christ held out hope for each of us when we walked without him, we can continue to be available and even proactive in pursuit of reconciliation with others.

While continuing this pursuit of relational reconciliation, you do have to address the programmatic questions of who will make the decisions. You can't put the universe on hold for a year. This is almost a separate track from the relational side of things. We were able to quickly put in place executive leadership that allowed us to continue to function and grow. This, however, did not come at the expense of our relational values.

In conclusion, there are two points that I think are worth drawing out of our experience. One is that our decisions in response to the sin of one person reveal how we will deal with sin in our organizations. Our decisions will either lead people to open conversations in pursuit of maturity or to cover up and isolation. We want people to be able to address temptation and sin in their pursuit of Christ. This

is a primary purpose in any Christian environment and one that I feel is not only helpful but mandatory for the Christian workplace.

For myself, I have the courage to lead this group of people because I've seen how far they are willing to go for my sake if I make a big mistake. That is a comfort I think all of our people feel and which is reflected in their attitudes and work. There is a time to fire someone quickly and we recently did that in another case, but it should be done as the choice which presents the most hope for that person's growth.

The other observation is that there is a kind of backslash that happens in this kind of situation. As I deal with the sin of another, I say to myself, "That could easily be me." If I can look in their eyes and see myself, then I can pursue attitudes and actions which reflect Christ's command to love your neighbor as yourself. After all, he loved us when we were unlovable.