

Making Good Decisions about Bad News

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.*

Proverbs 3:5-8 (ESV)

A lot of poor leadership decisions begin with the question, “But what will people think?”

I had this thought as I read the three-part Houston Chronicle / San Antonio Express-News report on sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches. It is tragic, but no surprise, that there are predators in Baptist churches. Approximately 100% of human beings have a sinful nature, and predatory sexual behavior is one way the sinful nature is displayed. That is why churches need diligent practices of prevention (background, reference, and employment checking) and good ministry policies and procedures that protect the vulnerable and minimize the opportunities afforded to predators.

But what the investigative report also highlights are the bad decisions church leaders can make when a predator strikes or when an accusation of abuse is raised. Most of those bad decisions revolve around some version of the question, “But what will people think?”

If this gets out, what will happen to the reputation and growth of our church?

What will folks say about me and my ministry?

Will people take their attendance, their children, and their money elsewhere?

What will those who are hostile to Christianity do with this information?

It is human nature to ask these questions. Perception has a big impact. Churches and church leaders can lose a great deal because of the heinous actions of one person. However, if “What will people think?” is the driver of thinking and action about instances of abuse, then ministry leaders will make awful decisions. These decisions will serve victims poorly, protect abusers, set up other churches for abuse, possibly break the law, and ultimately increase the costs to their churches and ministries. “But what will people think?” is a recipe for more harm and destroyed credibility.

It is every ministry leader's nightmare to be presented with a credible accusation of sexual abuse in their church or ministry organization. It can be hard to think straight in such situations. That's why Proverbs 3:5-8 is such an essential leadership guide for decisions and actions.

1) *Trust in the LORD with all your heart.* When confronted with bad news, affirm your trust in God's guidance and provision. You just found out something that makes you want to empty the contents of your stomach. When everything in you screams, "Oh no! What will people think!?", remember the Lord's faithfulness as well as his compassion for the victim. Surrender all your heart in that moment to the Sovereign Lord. Place all your faith in him.

2) *Do not lean on your own understanding.* You can't trust your own feelings, instincts, or motives in that moment. Of course the news is unbelievable; of course you want to keep it quiet. Your mind will invent a thousand and one reasons why you should do something irresponsible or foolish. Do not lean on your own resources or grasp of the situation. Surrender all your frailty to the Lord. Confess your inadequacy for dealing with the situation.

3) *In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.* To acknowledge the Lord is to surrender to his lordship, to make honoring him your singular goal. In a crisis, acknowledging the Lord is true north for your leadership compass. "Father, I'm not sure what all is going to happen here or even what all the facts are right now, but one thing I desire: that my actions going forward, and the actions of our church, will honor you. I trust you to show us, step by step, how to make that goal a reality. I trust you for the courage to do difficult things."

4) *Be not wise in your own eyes.* To be wise in your own eyes means thinking you can get away with pursuing a course that is dishonoring to the Lord. You might for a little while; you will not ultimately. You will only compound the damage to everyone involved, including yourself.

5) *Fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.* Instead of being wise in your own eyes, remember that you will reap what you sow. The justice of God will be upheld. Keep that thought in the front of your mind. It's a powerful deterrent to those tempting, but ultimately destructive, pathways that will present themselves in a crisis.

6) *It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.* The Hebrew word translated flesh here literally refers to the *navel*. We might say "pit of the stomach." There is no promise of a quick resolution to the problem or cost-free outcome. This bad news you just learned about may get a lot worse before it gets better. But in the pit of your stomach, in the depths of your soul, there will be healing and refreshment because you have done what is right. Healing and refreshment for you and for those who look to you for Christ-like leadership. Healing and refreshment, ultimately, for the church or ministry.

I hope – with all that is in me! – that I never have to put this guidance into practice in a sexual abuse situation. I hope you don't either, dear brothers and sisters. But if placed in that situation, make sure you are guided by Scripture and the faithfulness of God rather than "But what will people think?"