

Why Christian Leaders Fade Out - John Sweetman

There are many Christian leaders that start well but finish poorly. Sometimes it's because they fail morally and are disqualified from further leadership. Sometimes they get dreadfully damaged and can't go on. But most of the time, they just fade away or slack off or stop making an impact. In this article, John looks at some of the reasons why Christian leaders fade out. The article is designed to help you avoid the pitfalls and to finish well.

Reason 1: They forget about grace

All Christian leadership starts with grace. God calls and we trust his call and obey. We move into leadership because of grace. This is God's work and he is giving us the privilege of being part of it. We often feel inadequate, but that's okay because God is with us.

However, as time goes on, it's easy to move from grace to works. I do it all the time. We feel that it's our responsibility to make things work; we try harder and work longer, and sometimes we're successful. So then we get the idea that leadership is about our ability and effort and achievements. We've moved away from grace.

To ensure that we are successful then, we need people around us to do what needs to be done. So we motivate by challenge and guilt, and before long they too are driven by works.

Perhaps I've exaggerated, but you know what I mean. Once we move away from grace, leadership becomes this huge burden, not a privilege. Eventually you get to the point where you ask the question, "Why am I doing this?" If there is money or kudos or great achievement involved, then maybe you can keep going. But if not, there really doesn't seem to be a lot of point to kill yourself for nothing.

That's why some Christian leaders don't finish well. They forget about grace, and leadership eventually becomes a drag - a thankless task that provides little satisfaction. You can't blame them when they pull back.

I could easily be one of them. But God has come along at vital times and reminded me about grace. It's not about me, it's about him. When we grasp grace, Christian leadership becomes an incredible privilege again. By God's grace, I have a bit part in this amazing drama that he is unfolding. God is powerfully at work even though I only see the tip of the iceberg. It's his responsibility.

Maybe God is trying to remind you about grace once again.

Reason 2: They are not teachable

Some leaders fade out because they don't grow much - they won't learn from anyone. Oh they might make adjustments on minor matters, but they won't look for or accept input from those who will challenge them or call them to change. There are a number of reasons for this.

Some leaders are arrogant. They often have experienced early success and really think that they know best. Samson was a leader like that. Because he was greatly gifted by God and was successful, he really believed that his way was the only way; he thought that he knew best. His arrogance made him unteachable. He did not finish well!

Some leaders are desperately insecure. They feel bad about the possibility of being wrong, so they remove themselves from anyone who challenges their ideas or approach. They often gather around

them those who will support everything they do and say. They need the constant affirmation. It's nice, but unfortunately they never learn.

Some leaders are just lazy. They would rather just keep pursuing the familiar than make the effort to change and grow. This will work for a while, but in a changing society, the tried and true eventually becomes the stale and ineffective.

Other younger leaders are driven by postmodern values. They don't really believe in absolute truth but see their own truth as equal to anyone else's. So they think that they have no need to learn from anyone else because others will not see truth in the same light.

I see quite a few younger Christian leaders who are unteachable. Some are very capable and quite influential. But I know that they will not finish well. They can't. Oh they might claim that they're listening to God and not "man." But really they're ignoring God's voice through others.

However, I see many other younger Christian leaders who are beautifully teachable. They are keen to learn and grow and willingly submit to others. They have strong opinions and won't change these easily, but they genuinely want to learn and will seek out those who can help them identify their blind spots and challenge their values.

I just hope they don't lose this openness. Teachability won't guarantee that you finish well, but it's a great start.

Reason 3: They get distracted

It has been said that "good is the greatest enemy of the best." In other words, we are distracted from doing what is most important by doing good things. This is certainly true of Christian leaders. Let me give some examples of good things that have caused Christian leaders to fade out.

1. *Family.* Now I believe that family is a very high priority for every leader. Many Christian leaders have neglected this important priority and their families have unfairly suffered. We have made a strong effort to redress this imbalance in our leadership training. You lead and serve first at home. But God's warning question to Eli rings in my head, "Why do you honour your sons more than me?" (1 Sam. 2:29). I have seen many great young leaders get married and start families, and gradually family priorities and responsibilities squeeze out their call to Christian leadership. The young family season can be pretty demanding (for both parents), and some allowance needs to be made for this, but obeying God and following his call still remains paramount.

2. *Career.* I am not trying to separate your career from your Christian leadership. Many of us will mainly express our leadership for God through our career. But there comes a point for every leader where pursuing our career leads us away from serving God. It usually has something to do with salary or promotion or time demands. At these points, we need to make it clear that our priority is God, not our career or employer. I love the way that the biblical character Daniel was able to maintain God as his priority through a number of high-flying careers. There was no doubt who he served (see Dan. 1 and 6), and his impact as a godly leader was outstanding. Christian leaders can easily be distracted by their careers.

3. *Interests.* It's important to have interests outside of work and ministry. I know I'm a nerd, but I enjoy crosswords and new technology. Some of you like sport or the outdoors or eating at good restaurants or travel or movies. Sometimes our interests become a distraction because we are so passionate about them. At other times, the problem is that they release us from the pressure of leadership so we rely and concentrate on them rather than God.

These, of course, are not the only distractions, but they will do to illustrate my point. Distractions usually creep in slowly, but they can turn our hearts and capture our energy and change our priorities. Somewhere every leader has to say with Paul, "Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal..." (Phil. 3:13-14).

Reason 4: They lose hope

Christian leadership can be hope-less. You make sacrifices, you give it your best shot, you pray lots, and still nothing seems to happen, or worse still, things go backwards. On top of the disappointment often comes criticism by those who are keen to point out what they think you're doing wrong. It all feels so hopeless. There doesn't seem to be a lot of point in continuing.

It's not always as stark as this. Sometimes hope just gradually dissipates. You realise that somehow you've lost your enthusiasm for your ministry or role and that nothing is really motivating you to continue. It feels like things won't ever change.

Almost every Christian leader goes through a stage (often many times) when perseverance seems like a waste of time and energy. It's hopeless. There's no point in trying to lead any further. Plenty of Christian leaders pull out of leadership completely when they face this point.

Sometimes this is God levering us out of a leadership role. God is saying that our time is up and is closing the door to this vision. Our call to influence continues; we are not to stop leading, just not in this role or ministry. We need to ask God for his new vision for us, and let him renew our hope.

However, frequently it's a test of whether we can hold on to God and continue to believe in his call and his power. Moses faced such a time when his initial attempts to free his people from Egypt only antagonised the Pharaoh and resulted in further pain for and rejection by his people. All his worst fears were confirmed (Ex. 5:22-23). It was all hopeless. It was time that he exited and went back to the farm.

But listen to God's words to Moses: "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of my mighty hand he will let them go" (Ex. 6:1). God spoke vision and hope to Moses. God was far from finished with him.

You won't last long in Christian leadership without hope. I know that sometimes it gets hard and frustrating and unrewarding. If you feel your hope diminishing, you need to ask God for a fresh word. Hammer on that door until God speaks. There's no point in just going through the motions.

Reason 5: They feel unsupported

Christian leadership was never meant to be a solo sport. It's too lonely, too hard, too frustrating, too difficult, too challenging, too draining to attempt by ourselves. Not only do Christian leaders have the normal pressures that leaders face, especially in the people-helping fields, but we're also being opposed by Satan. He prowls around the place looking for our weaknesses and trying to destroy our heart and ministry.

Oh we have God's incredible Holy Spirit strengthening us and guiding us, but we should still never attempt things alone unless there are no other options. You will notice that leadership in the New Testament was always a corporate affair. Jesus developed a team to lead the church. Paul surrounded himself with other pastors and missionaries. Solo Christian leaders are sitting ducks for the temptations, frustrations, distractions and depressions that Satan concocts. You don't fight a war by yourself, unless you are Chuck Norris!

Some Christian leaders fade out of leadership because they find themselves alone and it's just too hard to keep fighting. No-one seems to care, no-one is interested, and no-one will help. When things turn dark and disappointing, there is no-one to lean on. They feel completely unsupported.

When I was really young, I used to lead by myself, but I never do it now. I've learned my lesson. In the end, you can't rely on support from followers; it has to come from other leaders who share your journey. So whenever I start a new ministry, I look for a leadership team to share the load. I need their support (and wisdom).

I also have spiritual friends (co-mentors) who keep an eye on me and encourage me. There have been a number of times when I've been hanging by a thread in leadership, and it's the support of my friends (with God's grace and care) that has got me through.

Maybe I'm weak and easily depressed. Probably so. But I've remained in Christian leadership for over 35 years and am still going strong (by God's grace). I would never have made it without the support of others. I'm no Chuck Norris.

Reason 6: They dry out spiritually

Providing spiritual leadership is like drawing constantly from a bank account. We are withdrawing spiritual resources as we give ourselves to others. It costs us something spiritually to lead and develop others.

This is no problem if our spiritual bank account is constantly being topped up, but as all poor students eventually learn, you can't keep withdrawing if there isn't anything left in the account.

There are times in our lives when we are deeply replenished spiritually. Times when God speaks in powerful ways; times when we trust God and he comes through; times when our heart draws very close to God; and times when we deeply appreciate God's grace. These times can fill our spiritual bank account and provide great resources for leading others. I've seen people lead for over a year drawing on past blessings and experiences.

But if we are not feeding ourselves spiritually, eventually we run out of spiritual resources. There is nothing left to give. We can speak the right words and do the right things, but there is no life in us. There is no reality. We are empty and deep down we know it. Our heads are full of information but our hearts are dry.

I'm not talking here of going through difficult times or feeling distant from God or getting down emotionally. These are part and parcel of Christian life and growth. No, I'm talking about neglecting our spiritual lives until we run dry. Actually, Christian leaders often hit spiritual empty in the good times. It's usually much easier to neglect our relationship with God when things are going well, than when everything is falling apart.

At this point, some Christian leaders pull back. And so they should. You can't lead when you've got nothing to give. No-one appreciates hypocrisy.

I remember a time when I ran on empty. It was a time of incredible blessing in the church. We saw many people come to Christ. Then I woke up one Monday morning after 8 baptisms the night before, and realised that I had nothing spiritually left. I felt that I would never preach again. I had nothing to say or to give. It was very scary. I had been so busy that I'd neglected my own personal relationship with God.

But I didn't resign. I took two weeks off to seek God and be renewed. God in his graciousness filled my heart again and replenished my spiritual strength.

Don't rely solely on your past experiences of God for any length of time, but keep pressing in to Him. Replenish your spiritual bank account through disciplines like prayer, reading Scripture, spiritual friendships and mentoring, worshipping, fasting, retreating, reading/hearing stories of what God is doing, and listening to sermons.

John Sweetman is the Principal of Malyon College and Director of Malyon Leadership. He lectures in the fields of pastoral ministry, leadership and preaching.