

The Pain of Betrayal

By Kevin A. Miller, 2002

<http://www.christianleadershipalliance.org/?painofbetrayal> [1]

If there was a binding contract to sign before entering ministry, the fine print would include: 'The undersigned acknowledges that the pastoral ministry may be hazardous and subject the undersigned to expressions of animosity, including but not limited to calumny, slander, misrepresentation, and betrayal.'

Being betrayed is so profoundly painful few pastors can talk about it – yet if they do open up, they can't stop talking about what happened to them.

Let's admit what most seminary classes and church-leadership seminars skip over: Being betrayed is fairly common for godly leaders. I just made a mental list of 12 pastors and Christian leaders I know who have experienced serious and significant betrayal.

David had his Absalom. Paul had his Demas, who deserted him, and Alexander the coppersmith, who 'has done me much harm'. Jesus had Iscariot.

We now know all about Judas, so the story may hold little drama for us. We forget that Jesus chose Judas after praying all night. They spent every day together for three years, talking, eating together, laughing. Jesus sent him out in ministry. Judas shared in the miracle of feeding 5,000 people; his hands took the small, round barley loaves from Jesus and tore off chunks of bread for hungry people.

What makes each case of betrayal so painful is that someone who knows your heart – who knows your longings and character – turns from that and chooses to believe you are really dangerous.

The mind freezes as it tries to grasp how a friend, someone who knew you deeply, intimately, could turn on you and attack you. Michael Card brilliantly captures the agony in one song: 'Only a friend can betray a friend, a stranger has nothing to gain / and only a friend comes close enough to ever cause so much pain.'

The brevity of this column keeps me from telling of the man who went into co-pastorate with his dearest friend – and then was pushed out by him. Or the gently and caring associate pastor who dared to question the congregation's direction – and was publicly defamed. I have heard too many tales of secret meetings, 'concerned' letters, and cover-ups for unwitting congregations.

Betrayal, I've noticed, calls good evil. It twists a person's true gift into something malign, a spiritual deficiency or psychological malady.

Betrayal causes leaders to not want to trust, to not want to be in church, to not be vulnerable, to not open their spirits in worship to God.

I too have tasted betrayal's bitterness, though less than many friends have. While recovering, I've found it doesn't help to ask, 'How could Christians do this?' Nor does it help to contemplate betrayal's fallout: the ministry lost, the bad name for Christians in the community.

What has helped is to acknowledge honestly, 'I've been betrayed.' It's easy to spiritualise the situation ('God was calling me on') or to analyse it detachedly ('This person is troubled'), but healing begins with bearing the plain truth in God's presence.

Regaining spiritual vitality following betrayal, I've observed, may take longer than 18 months. But don't give up.

You may be tempted to flee from the church, to turn your back on your call. Don't give up. You are walking where great people have walked before. They are remembered as great because they did not allow the betrayal to stop them. Instead they learned how to turn their pain into greater usefulness for the Lord.

Judas's money-making treachery, when combined with Jesus' obedient submission to God, transformed the world.

Notes:

[1] This article was no longer extant at date of attempted access in December 2018, hence this copy.