

AFTER THE BRIDGE COLLAPSES

Lessons Learned About Rebuilding

It was Wednesday night at 6:05 PM on August 1, 2007. The 32nd Holy Spirit Conference would begin in less than an hour. Like the Kennedy assassination (for us older folks), we remember where we were when we heard: the Interstate 35W bridge had collapsed. A design failure was determined to have probably caused the collapse. Traffic patterns for a million people had to adjust to the disaster. Known simply as Bridge 9340, it had opened for business in 1967; forty years later it came down with a giant thud. Demolition took until the end of October, and construction of the new bridge started November 1, 2007. I was struck recently by the similarities of the bridge's demise to moral failures.

Collapses surprise us.

We were shocked. The bridge took about one hundred cars, trucks, and a bus with it. In similar fashion, we found the news of Todd Bentley's failed marriage and Ted Haggard's moral collapse just as surprising, to name two of many leaders who have fallen in the last decade. No one reporting the news of the bridge said, "I was expecting it," though the bridge had been inspected annually by Mn/DOT since 1993. Several reports cited problems with the bridge structure. In 1990, the federal government gave the I-35W bridge a rating of "structurally deficient," citing significant corrosion in its bearings. Approximately 75,000 other U.S. bridges had this classification in 2007. In addition, a doctoral dissertation at the University of Minnesota asserted structural problems.

Paul likewise wrote of human structural deficiencies that could cause ethical failure and warned, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (I Corinthians 10:12). Some of us take those warnings by the apostle as applying to someone else. But Paul gives half a chapter of warnings from Israel's history to cite precedent for people blessed of God falling under the weight of willful and persistent sin. Habit patterns that bring people down are not created overnight. Corrosion took place little by little, as lines are crossed and nudges from the Spirit **are** ignored. Collapses surprise us, but maybe they shouldn't.

Collapses damage many.

Approximately 100 vehicles were involved in the bridge collapse, sending their occupants and 18 construction workers up to 115 feet down to the river or onto its banks. Thirteen lives transitioned into eternity within moments. Another 145 were injured.

And likewise, months after the Lakeland revival shut down, people are still disrupted by the devastation, angry at Todd—and some at God. When people we have a right to believe violate that trust, it often leaves a hole in the heart. James warned, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). Why? Because teachers represent God, and their fall causes damage.

Restoration is a process, not an event.

Reconstruction of the 35W bridge took ten and a half months. The **St. Anthony Falls Bridge** opened on September 18, 2008, months ahead of schedule and under budget. Workers took great care to make the new bridge much stronger than the previous one. Had they spoken of shortcuts, city officials would have dismissed the builders as incompetent. Regular reports kept them accountable to complete the job to specifications.

In like manner, you can't rush the process of moral rebuilding. **If you rush it, you ruin it.** Because of the deception involved in moral failures, the timing of a restoration process must take into account this deception and the readiness of the person involved to enter the process. Putting external pressure to get "with the system" may actually prolong the potential for a healthy process of restoration.

And yet when the process has been initiated, those involved sometimes want to move through quickly. One can understand; it is painful to rebuild after a serious collapse. Each new stone laid takes pain. Regret, a killer emotion, causes people to relive the collapse over and over. Rebuilding is often laborious work, like an assignment from an overbearing teacher. It is, however, required in order to restore the soul. And those who have fallen are sometimes surprised that the victims of their failure are not interested in speeding up the process. Those who have fallen tend to confuse confession with rebuilding. Trust is broken in a moment. The bridge came down in seconds; rebuilding took close to a year. We would laugh at construction companies promising a one-week plan for restoration.

The promise of a quick moral fix likewise creates a deception. The deception is that because forgiveness has taken place, restoration has as well. The other deception is that because forgiveness has occurred, one can return to business as usual, such as ministry. Forgiveness does not remove the damage done, either to the victims or to the one who failed. Forgiveness erases the guilt of sin, but it does not remove the historical consequences. And my friend Larry Alberts, who has been involved extensively in the restoration of fallen leaders, adds, "Neither does it guarantee a restoration to the privileges (not the rights) of ministry in behalf of the Body." Larry says wisely that "ministry is not an extension of identity of an individual but rather a delegated work from the Lord done with the Spirit's help in the Church's name on the Church's behalf. That is why there is no such thing as self-ordination." He affirms that the Church must decide, not the fallen individual, whether a person is returned to ministry.

I was once helping a young man through a restoration process after he was involved sexually. I let him return to ministry too soon, and it gave him the impression that he had completed the process and closed the loop. He thought that he could do prayer ministry like he had done before, give answers in small group discussions, and basically return to normal. Doing this short-circuits restoration rather than aiding it. It is important in the restoration process to be a receiver, not a giver. When I explained what he needed to do to build up the bridge, he finally got it and went to work. He wrote a letter to the girl, to the girl's parents, and acknowledged his offense to those who needed to know. He went low, and God will honor him for it. And as we discussed, he was investing in a secure moral future, though holding off on the ministry he had been involved in was not easy.

Can you imagine the outrage if the new bridge collapsed ten years after completion? And can you picture the anger in people who were victims of a moral failure if a person returned to ministry precipitously, then fell again? Some spiritual leaders have cut the process short so they could return to ministry. Sadly, they do not recognize that they are creating a likely relapse.

“Christian ministry,” to quote Larry Alberts again, “is not a matter of entrepreneurial ‘free enterprise’ but rather the Body recognizing and ordering the outworking of gifts supplied by the Spirit ‘for the common good.’” It is certainly “not for one individual’s self-aggrandizement, increased sense of self-esteem, or ongoing opportunity for employment.”

Restoration requires help and hard work.

Paul wrote, “If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1). Restoration is not a solo assignment. Those who have fallen need help back. It is not uncommon for people involved in rebuilding to have times of despair when the truth of the damage begins to come alive in their souls. Discouragement overtakes faith and makes the process slow and tedious.

Rebuilding includes full repentance with all parties offended, grief over damage created, and a process of healing. The psalmist wrote, “He restores my soul” (Psalm 23:3). The word “restore” translates the Hebrew word “shuv,” which means “to turn back.” It is commonly used for repenting in the Old Testament, “turning around.” Repentance is not the same as restoration. When God restores our soul, He causes it to turn back. We accept the forgiveness of God in return for our repentance, and we come to forgive ourselves as well. We hope that the restoration process brings the same wholeness enjoyed before the fall, just as with the miracle Jesus performed: “So he [the man with the shriveled hand] stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other” (Matthew 12:13).

Psalm 51 comes to us from a man in restoration after a bridge collapsed and damaged a whole nation. The psalm portrays a man who has come through a time of deception we could hardly imagine for the “man after God’s own heart.” Therein lies the deception of the heart. David later wrote, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation...” David had lost more than joy. He had lost God’s pleasure, an undivided heart, a reputation for righteousness and for being a noble soldier. The consciousness of what he has done now oppresses him, and he knows he has nowhere to hide, except in the mercy of God. He offers nothing even close to an excuse for his criminal activity.

Rebuilding includes restitution. The Mosaic Law addressed the need for restoring what was lost. “A thief must certainly make restitution...” (Exodus 22:3). “If a man grazes his livestock in a field or vineyard and lets them stray and they graze in another man’s field, he must make restitution...” (v. 5) “If a fire breaks out...the one who started the fire must make restitution” (v. 6). “If the animal was stolen from the neighbor, he must make restitution to the owner” (v. 12). The Hebrew word for restitution in all of these cases is

the word “shalam” (meaning “to make whole, complete”), the verb form of the noun “shalom.” Zacchaeus took restitution seriously. He promised to restore what he had stolen four times over (Luke 19:8). What kind of restitution should be made when virginity has been stolen, or character, or a reputation? And if restitution cannot be secured, should it be forfeited?

Restoration requires truth, not just grace.

When I was meeting once with a brother who needed restoration, I said, “I want you to write down what you did wrong, why you did it, what the consequences are, and what you will do to fix it.” He came back thirty minutes later with some scrambled notes about how a guy like him with emotional needs could have gotten sexually involved with a girl. I said, “Now I want you to go deeper. Tell me what you did wrong and how it affected others.” He came back twenty minutes later and described what he did but not why he thought it had happened or how it had impacted him and others. I said, “Now consider what other sins were involved and how it has impacted others and why you think this happened.” I gave him a clue by referring to David, who went from adultery to deception to murder. I said that sexual sin often has other sins wrapped around it. He responded, “I feel like you are not forgiving me.” I answered, “This has nothing to do with forgiveness. I have already forgiven you, but that does not erase the damage done. If my son drove into the neighbor’s house, I could forgive him immediately, but he would still need to deal with the damage he had done to the house and car. Forgiveness does not put an end to the restoration cycle—it starts the process. It would take my son painful hours and money to undo the destruction. Hopefully, he would never do it again.”

Truth is the bridge that connects us with God and people. When we embrace lies, and worse, live them, the bridge collapses. The time of restoration depends upon the amount of damage. Stealing a newspaper from a rack does not create a lot of damage in relationships. But if theft grows into a habit, it does. And a simple prayer of confession does not rebuild the bridge. When I took one of my sons back to a store where he had stolen something, we were rebuilding the bridge. Repentance clears the deck of guilt; restoration and restitution rebuild the bridge. When people in our churches have broken down a bridge of truth, we would be showing them grace by walking them through a process of restoration rather than simply forgiving them and moving on. We should not fear being hardnosed even if people are impatient with us. It is for their good that the bridge is repaired so they can travel over it safely without future damage.

I recommend that pastors and leaders ask what action is required with each restoration case for proper rebuilding. Many of our people are forgiven but not restored. I know that I was sometimes too “kind,” and I short-circuited the process by saying, “It’s over; you’re forgiven.” I want to imitate Jesus, who was full of grace *and* truth. And we want to be used as his instruments to bring full restoration and the rebuilding of broken bridges.