

# HOLINESS, LEADERSHIP AND FAILURE

By DAVID CONNER

**H**OLINESS IS THE STATE to which God is drawing the whole created order. God's Spirit, operating within the very fabric of creation, presses upon the world, seeking opportunities to shape it and to form it, to direct it towards a destiny which he has in mind for it. To walk the way of holiness, for any individual Christian, is to try to 'open up' to the Spirit of the Creator God, to provide a space for him<sup>1</sup> to enter, so as to be charged with his energy and driven towards the goal already revealed and reached in Jesus Christ. The conscious attempt to 'open up' to God is frequently described as 'prayer'. It demands, before all else, an *awareness of personal failure*.

## *Holiness and failure*

There are many kinds of prayer and many ways of praying. However, if prayer is to be the way by which I begin to be an instrument of God's peace within the world, an opening through which he can erupt and work more fluently within the world, one ingredient in prayer is necessary. *Honesty* is fundamental. God cannot begin to work through *me* until *I* come to him. If God is Truth, then any falsehood blocks his path; pretence obstructs the flow of the Spirit. And honesty requires that I acknowledge failure. Only when I know that all my petty attempts to achieve some state of goodness have come to nothing will I acknowledge my *needs*. Only when I know the shame of failure, and of repeated failure, will I find myself crying out for help, being hungry for forgiveness, aching for healing. My failure, time and time again, throws me back on God and, paradoxically, becomes the occasion of renewal and redemption. Only that sense of failure keeps me dependent upon God.

It is therefore sad that honesty should, so often, be the first casualty of the spiritual life. There are always subtle allurements to prevent my being honest. Little fantasies about myself, and about what it might mean for me to become holy, are projected

on to the screen of my imagination to tempt me away from facing the stark truth about myself. Such fantasies can be persuasive. There is always the tendency to play at being spiritual, not least because the game is much more fun than the real business of facing the relentlessly nagging fact of failure which is that truth about myself. Yet to face that fact is to know dependence upon God and thereby to become a tiny spot on the surface of creation which has come to a proper relation to its Creator.

If to walk the way of holiness demands an awareness of personal failure, it requires also the screwing up of courage to *run the risk of further failure*. I used to think that the more I opened up to God's Spirit the more tranquil I would become. Holiness meant personal wholeness, integration and inward peace. God would iron out my neuroses and mend the fractures of my personality (get rid of my hang-ups!) and I would join the ranks of those calm people with enigmatic smiles who seem to glide through life unruffled and are recognized as being spiritual. I now believe that I was wrong.

I now see myself as part of God's creative enterprise. Wholeness, integration, peace and sabbath rest are God's promises to and for the world that he is making. They are pointers to a future time when the whole complex of interrelations within creation will be ordered harmoniously according to God's love and justice. For the time being, I and other individuals are part of the process. As an individual, I am a chunk of often intransigent material that is still being forged, but I am also part of a bigger project. As I open up to the working of God's creative Spirit and respond gratefully and actively to him for his forgiveness and acceptance of me, I cannot help but be affected by the strains and stresses involved in the welding and the moulding of everything into a pattern which is yet to emerge. I am not able to exist in splendid isolation. No individual will attain a proper peace until the whole creation is at peace for, in God's design, we are meant to fit together. If holiness does have something to do with wholeness, the wholeness must be the wholeness of creation. Holiness cannot be limited to the quest for individual integration or personal salvation. Such a quest would be an attempt to escape from the rough and tumble, the pain and unpredictability, of the Maker's workshop. The cross of Christ, as a disclosure of the character of the Creator God, is a declaration of the stress and strain involved in the drawing of the world into harmony with its Maker. It is also an invitation to cooperate with

God in that creative task, and a warning of the apparent failure that that might involve. I am challenged to risk that failure.

W. H. Vanstone's hymn, *Love's endeavour, love's expense*, a meditation on the meaning of the cross, has helped to open my eyes to this fact. The third and fourth verses read:

Love that gives, gives ever more,  
gives with zeal, with eager hands,  
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,  
ventures all, its all expends.  
Drained is love in making full,  
bound in setting others free,  
poor in making many rich,  
weak in giving power to be.

If I open up to God, I shall be the victim of a passionate God. Real involvement in the making of this broken world will take its toll. Like the passionate-God-in-Christ, I might appear to fail.

The failure that I risk cannot be predicted. It might be hidden or it might be open. It could be the failure of burn-out at an early age, that being 'drained' that Vanstone speaks of. It could be the onset of physical illness brought on by taking too many knocks along the way. Because I am confused and cannot always hold it all together, it could be the more shameful failure of marital breakdown. Since I am weak and cannot always take the strain, I might seek solace in too much alcohol or nicotine. I cannot tell. There is nothing to suggest that creation is a smooth and oily process; there are many casualties along the way. Sometimes, however, where failure is the dark side of a life lived lovingly, or the price paid for trying to stay open to God's Spirit, it can be the case that even the casualties can speak most eloquently of the character of God. Failure can touch the hearts of onlookers and awaken a concern in them to play their part in working alongside God in the making of his world. So the passion keeps on burning.

To walk the way of holiness demands an awareness of my personal failure and the preparedness to run the risk of further failure. Worse still, at least in the short term, it might mean that I am *seen to be a failure* by those whose approval I have a tendency to seek.

Acknowledging my failure can be hard. It runs against the grain. In the world in which I live, autonomy, independence and strength are greatly prized. To admit any kind of dependence

upon God, or any other, is thought to be a sign of immaturity. The repentance that is a sign of being honest is dismissed, even in church circles, as an expression of unhealthy guilt. To acknowledge my need, as a prerequisite of finding the right relation to God, is seen, in these self-affirming days, to be self-denying. When the model of progress to which most people hold is crudely linear, the circularity of my continuing return to the beginning which repentance demands is seen to be a way of getting nowhere and causes deep frustration. By voicing a desperate need of God, I am seen to be a cripple, weak, neurotic and therefore a failure. Furthermore, it seems just mad to many people that I should run the risk of *further failure*. The conventional wisdom of the day, which too many Christians have adopted quite uncritically, tells me to take care of myself, give priority to my 'day off', guard the boundaries to avoid too much involvement, reserve my strength and thereby be of *use* to people. The exponents of that wisdom have loud voices and they seem to speak such sense. Passion however does not work like that. The passionate-God-in-Christ 'spares not, keeps not, all outpours'. If I am to allow the Spirit of that God to direct my life I might have to fly in the face of the wisdom of the day. I might have to be seen to be a failure and a fool.

To try to walk the path of holiness is therefore to place myself in danger. I can draw courage from my companions, my fellow pilgrims on the way. But what do we together look for in those who have been called to lead us on the way?

#### *Leadership and failure: worship*

If experience of failure seems to be a significant component in the Christian life it is essential to Christian leadership, not least the leadership of worship. Christians are people who, having caught sight of God-in-Christ, yearn to be at one with him and to be drawn to him as he draws the whole world to its intended end. We know deep down that to repent, to open up to God in an attitude of total dependence, will result in our being charged with his energy to go out into the world as his witnesses and fellow workers. The exercise of true dependence seems to result in the ability to take responsibility. It is a cyclical process. We need the leaders of our worship then to understand that, in order that we might be effective agents of God's working in the world, we have to be allowed in worship and in prayer to make contact with those

parts of ourselves which want to cry out 'Lord, have mercy on us'. We need our worship leaders to make us feel safe enough to be truly dependent for a while. We need them to be strong enough to assume the role of parent so that we can be children, often frightened children. They must be able to take authority.

Only if they have known repeated failure in their lives, failure which has driven them also to cry out 'Lord, have mercy', will they have developed the sensitivity to exercise authority properly, being strong in worship so that we can be weak. Only if, in opening up to God in absolute dependence, they have known what it is to have been charged with God's Spirit to go out into the world as his fellow-workers, will they understand the profound connection between the expression of dependence and the exercise of responsibility.

Of course, with part of ourselves we do not really want the connection to be made. We are frightened of it happening. The world seems to be a dangerous place. Its divisions, political, social, environmental, ideological and intellectual, seem too wide and daunting ever to be bridged. It is hard to believe in any ultimate at-one-ment. The possibility of being charged to work to make things whole raises a natural anxiety. The price that seems to have been paid by those who have been so charged (often the price of failure) is alarming. We are always quick to find ways of going into retreat.

This retreat takes several forms but it is always a kind of half-way house retreat in which we are stranded somewhere between our true selves, our deep-down needs and the real world for which God cares. It is always an exercise in denial. It might be a retreat into the haven of the saccharine spirituality that is so popular today, where religion becomes a means by which only warm feelings are evoked and by which we find disengagement from a troubled world and from our troubled selves. It might be a retreat into the arms of community and fellowship, acceptable commodities in a highly mobile society, where the development of personal relationships within the Church is our only concern. The holy huddle where we are nice to one another can be just as much disengagement from the world and from our deepest selves. It might be a retreat into any one of a thousand ways of 'taking part in the service' through which we can sometimes seek for personal affirmation in the name of lay participation, while never really giving ourselves the chance to worship and to risk the consequences.

It is easy for the leaders of worship to collude with this tendency to retreat. The pressures to do so are great—not least because collusion often breeds ‘successful’ churches. Only those who genuinely know a need of God and therefore also possess an aching for the wholeness of the world will have the sensitivity and strength to resist the pressure. That is why our leaders must be people who acknowledge and stay with their own failure.

### *Pastoral care*

We expect our leaders also to be pastors. It is in the area of pastoral care that the experience of failure makes its most obvious contribution. A great deal of pastoral need is related to a sense of having failed.

Often, during illness or maybe at the point of death, we are troubled because we think that we have let other people down; we have failed them. Sometimes, at moments of personal crisis, we are made unhappy by the thought that we are somehow being punished; that we have brought it on ourselves. There are times of bereavement when grief is sharpened by regret for what we once said or never did. On occasions we feel wretched and responsible at the breakdown of a valued relationship. We know inadequacy because of our addictions and obsessions. We experience helplessness in the face of all those habitual sins which we cannot help committing. We are ashamed at our complaining and our impatience with our lot. We know we are failures. We do not want condemnation. We do not want some well-meaning denial of our feelings. We need, at such times, to be understood.

The incarnation and, par excellence, the cross where Jesus reaches down into despair, are God’s declaration to us that he understands. Yet all too often God feels distant and his reassurance unreal. We want understanding ministered to us in the flesh. The pastor must understand and communicate understanding often in unspoken ways. Nothing more is needed. Nothing greater can be offered. Understanding is an expression of compassion, a sharing in our pain and relieving of our loneliness. Somehow that gives us courage to endure. The pastor mediates God’s understanding and thereby enables our sense of failure to be transcended. It is the pastor’s personal sense of shame that can be the greatest spur to understanding. We therefore look to our pastors for some sign that they too know what failure is but, more than that, that it has

been transmuted into genuine compassion. Where it is unacknowledged, it will only be a handicap and become the cause of that condemnation or denial which we do not want or need.

Our pastors also need discernment in this matter. They must have reflected deeply on their own sense of failure. Sometimes failure can be imagined, a kind of conditioned response to difficulty. Sometimes it will be real but could, with some effort, have been avoided. Sometimes it will be related to deep scars left over from childhood and seemingly incurable. Sometimes it will seem to be that 'further failure', the darker side of a life lived lovingly, the price that is paid for being open to God's Spirit, a strange consequence of walking the way of holiness. This last will only be discerned by one who has known something of what it means to pay that price.

### *Teaching and preaching*

If all that I have so far written has any truth in it, we shall look to our leaders to help us *understand* the place of failure in the Christian life. We shall need to help us to interpret our experiences, to make some connections between our feelings and our minds. We shall want them to be truthful people. We will not be satisfied with cold statements of crisp doctrine. We will not want anything by way of glib triumphalism. We shall welcome being reminded that it is only through acknowledging our failure and encountering our deepest needs that we can come honestly and openly to God. We shall want them to make us remember that it is only by so doing that we can become charged with God's Spirit and become responsible agents in his world. Furthermore, we shall look to them to help us face the possibility of further failure and increased vulnerability as we try to walk the path of holiness. We will want words addressed to us that awaken our deepest intuitions of the way things have to be. We shall want the truth spoken by people who have lived it.

### *Any kind of failure?*

All this is not to say however that *all* failure is compatible with Christian leadership. Failure is a consequence of trying to succeed. It cannot be planned or designed without becoming quite unreal. We must try to succeed in providing leaders for the Church who are capable of working in the ways that I have outlined above, and who will enable us to walk the path of holiness. Experience of

failure is essential to their ministry. There are, however, experiences of, and attitudes to, failure that would prove a handicap.

It will be clear from what I have written that an acknowledgment of failure must be transmuted into compassion if it is to be put to the service of Christian leadership. This will only come about if it is contained within the assurance of acceptance that God understands. Where this is not the case, it can lead to self-hatred and cynicism even though these attitudes might be disguised beneath conventional Christian vocabulary about the love of God. Unless Christian leaders have a sense of being understood by God they are not able to communicate God's understanding to others. They will acknowledge failure, it is true, but they will condemn it, however subtly, in others as they do in themselves.

There is another handicap of which the disguise is even more subtle. In these days when perhaps we speak more openly within the Church of failure and of vulnerability, I detect a tendency to romanticize and sentimentalize the experiences of suffering and failure. They can be cheapened when they slip too easily into conversation. There is a reticence about the person who has known failure. The experience has been painful and is not lightly spoken of. Where suffering and failure are savoured in a melancholy way, spoken of too fluently or too poetically, we need to ask whether there is any genuine experience there at all. Might it not be simply a matter of being caught up in an idea, like being in love with love rather than with a person? Such an attitude would be a severe handicap to effective Christian leadership.

Then there are those continuing and repeated failures that are plain scandalous. They might be rooted in deep scars from the past. They might be an expression of the 'further failure' that has been risked by following the path of holiness. It could well be that they form the seed-bed of genuine compassion and understanding. Nevertheless, there are certain kinds of failure, usually of a sexual nature, which the Christian community in general cannot *cope* with in its leaders. Perhaps one day it will. For now it is a matter of seeking areas where, in some unofficial way, the real gifts of such 'failures' can be used. This is part of the price that is sometimes paid.

Finally there are those people who seem to be permanently diminished by reason of severe breakdown or addiction; their holiness is frequently apparent, shining through their brokenness,



and their compassion and understanding are often deep. If leadership were a matter of pastoral care (as it is commonly perceived) and nothing more, they would make the best of leaders. However, we also have to ask: how would they cope with leading worship? How would they teach and preach? And how reliable would they be in a pastoral crisis? The answer to these questions might dictate whether or not they could function as effective leaders. Usually they would not. There might be other ways in which the Church might affirm and use their gifts. There might be *particular* pastoral contexts where their presence would be invaluable. Religious communities *ought* to welcome such people. But their inability to exercise effective leadership in the general sense which we expect of official Christian ministers remains part of the price they pay.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The use of masculine pronouns in reference to God in this and other articles in this issue is not intended as a statement about the gender of God nor an assertion of patriarchy. To change this conventional form of language in this case would have severely impeded the flow of the prose.—Editors.