

Case Study of a Scandal: A Clergy Sexual Misconduct Resource for Small Group Discussion

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The article *The Love Song of Robert Bentley, Alabama's Horndog Governor* (<https://www.gq.com/story/affair-robert-bentley-alabama-governor>) describes the scandal that engulfed Alabama Governor Robert Bentley. It resulted in the end of his marriage, estrangement from his children, and eventually to his resignation as governor and guilty plea to misdemeanor campaign-finance charges.

When I first read the article it bothered me for so many reasons. How could church people act like this? Are we that ineffective in our discipleship ministries? What were the unspoken power dynamics in this relationship? Are there parallels between this and similar scandals involving pastors? Is there anything we can learn from this horrible mess?

I was so disturbed by the article that I talked about it with my Peer Learning Group. We eventually used it as a case study and had a very fruitful conversation. Below are questions that got our conversation started.

1. As a pastor, how do you make sure this doesn't happen to you? What ethical standards and practices do you have in place to make sure you do not find yourself in a situation where you are tempted to compromise morally?
2. What does this situation say about the effectiveness of the discipleship and spiritual formation that we are doing in our churches? Everyone involved was an active church member, but their congregational participation did not prevent their immoral and destructive behavior. Are we doing something wrong? What should our churches be doing differently?
3. If you were the pastor of First Baptist Church of Tuscaloosa how would you respond pastorally to this situation? To Governor Bentley? To his wife and family? To Mrs. Mason? To her husband and family? To the congregation? To outside groups and the media?
4. I am a member of the Baptist Women in Ministry and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Clergy Sexual Misconduct Task Force. (You can read about the Task Force's work here: <http://bwim.info/clergy-sexual-misconduct-taskforce/>) The research we have done shows that how a church responds to a victim can be just as damaging to her as the actual abuse.

Throughout the article the relationship between Governor Bentley and Mrs. Mason is described as an affair. The article depicts the governor as naïve, innocent, seduced, and

overwhelmed. He was “a kindly old grandpa and Sunday School teacher.” He was “an awkward man with a heart-rending comb-over . . . unaccustomed to female attention. And foolishly susceptible to it.” In contrast, Rebekah Mason is described as worldly, savvy, and manipulative. She “always longed for a grander stage” where she could flash “the supersize smile she’s honed in teenage beauty pageants and on eyewitness news.” She “wormed her way into the governor’s good graces through flattery and flirtation.” Even when he was a state representative, Bentley was “a no body” who became “the accidental governor.” Mason, as his top political advisor, is said to have been “running the state of Alabama.”

No one will ever know the truth of their relationship, but could a different story be told? There was a power differential—he was the governor and she was a staff member. Her family was financial dependent on him—Bentley saved her young family from “financial difficulties” by giving her a job when she was “struggling to make ends meet,” giving her husband “a \$90,000-a-year job as the head of the governor’s office of faith-based initiatives,” and later possibly “steering hundreds of thousands of dollars to Mason’s husband’s public relations company.” Given these dynamics, could the relationship be described as a story of exploitation and abuse with the governor as the perpetrator and Mason as the victim?

Other questions to consider in this conversation:

1. How do these same dynamics of power relate to the relationship between a pastor and a congregant?
2. What can we learn from this article about how we describe and think about inappropriate relationships between a pastor and church member?
3. Is it an affair or clergy sexual abuse?
4. Why is the victim often blamed, and the pastor seen as a victim?