

# An Introduction to *Even the Best of Us: Clergy Sexual Failure—The Church’s Hidden Sin*

---

*Dwight Perry, senior vice president, provost, and dean of education  
Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, Illinois*  
*Elizabeth Pierre, assistant professor of pastoral care  
and counseling psychology  
North Park Theological Seminary and University, Chicago, Illinois*

2018 was the year of the “Me Too” movement. Sexual abuse and sexual manipulation by persons, primarily but not solely men, has been the hidden sin of many major segments of our society. Whether it be the entertainment industry, business, the military, the news industry, or even the church, sexual abuse, until very recently, was something the abused would either deny or hide, especially if the perpetrator was someone in authority. The unfortunate reality is that sexual failure is also prevalent within the church, Christ’s beautiful bride (the “called out” assembly). The deception of those who took a vow to shepherd God’s people but acted more like wicked shepherds has caused many in Christ’s church to be riddled by pain and heartbreak.

## **Background**

In Ezekiel 34:1-10, the prophet could not have summarized this point any better when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he shared these words, during ancient Israel’s Babylonian exile:

The word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick

you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, declares the Lord God, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them. (ESV)

We wrote *Even the Best of Us* from this perspective.<sup>1</sup> In this book, we critically examine how servants of the Almighty God can, and have, fallen in the area of clergy sexual ethics. We also look at the inner life of those who are called to shepherd God's people. Unfortunately, clergy who fall in this area use their position of influence to abuse, shame, and cover over sexual sin either by themselves or by others, instead of leading well.

We also wrote this book as two ministry practitioners, who have a combined sixty years of full-time ministry experience. Thus, *Even the Best of Us* is written not only out of the wealth of that experience but also from the perspective of two persons of different genders (one female, the other male) and from the perspective of two persons of color.

I, Elizabeth Pierre, currently serve as assistant professor of pastoral care and counseling psychology at North Park Theological Seminary and University. I am also a trained clinician. I teach my students on a daily basis that “Even the Best of Us” can find ourselves in a place where we

<sup>1</sup> See Dwight A. Perry and Elizabeth O. Pierre, *Even the Best of Us: Clergy Sexual Failure—The Church's Hidden Sin* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021).

have fallen into sexual failure.

And I, Dwight Perry, former dean of faculty and professor of homiletics and leadership at North Park Theological Seminary and current provost at the Moody Bible Institute, have over forty years of full-time vocational ministry experience, sharing with others, both inside and outside the classroom, how easily the enemy of our souls can trick any of us to make a choice that we regret for the rest of our lives.

In this way, we pray that readers will find that even though this book is grounded in both research and theological nuance, it is not just a book for the *head*, but for the *heart* as well. As seasoned ministry practitioners, we share from our hearts to yours.

This book focuses on the devastation to individuals that takes place within the church and within society at large when clergy or ministry leaders commit acts of sexual failure. The main issue this book addresses is the need for clergy and persons in ministry to begin to discuss openly, with both peers and their leadership teams, ways by which a spiritual leader can build effective bridges of accountability around this area.

The reader should benefit in two ways. First, they will walk away with clear, specific, and implementable follow-up action steps that will help them to stop this type of behavior. Second, the reader will develop a theology of the church that breaks down the dichotomy between clergy and laity, and that positions the church as the place in which both parties can grow together as partners to combat moral failure by clergy.

The various chapters seek to address this issue from the overriding perspective that “only by the grace of God go I.” If we are not prayerful and alert to the dark side of our fallen nature, we can all fall into sexual sin. Note that I, Dwight Perry, wrote chapters 1-6 and chapter 9, while I, Elizabeth Pierre, wrote chapters 7 and 8.

## **Overview**

### **Chapter One: The Church Too Movement Is Unfortunately Too Late.**

This chapter gives an in-depth look at the problem. Statistics that will alarm the average reader, in terms of the scope of this problem within the American church, are presented. The argument affirms that the critical issue of sexual failure among clergy is one of evangelicalism’s hidden sins—sin that also includes race and class issues.

**Chapter Two: Who You Are Is Not What People See on Sunday.** This chapter focuses on the inward journey of the leader. In a performance-oriented culture, character and integrity come from the inside out. In

contrast, we often substitute intimacy with God for other external substitutions. Even ministers can get caught up in this performance-oriented culture if we are not careful. This chapter also explores in detail how the enemy uses falsehoods about ourselves, our society, and others to get us to believe a lie about ourselves, which then influences our choices in life. The danger of exploiting others, whether it be through pornography, incest, extramarital sexual relationships with the same or opposite sex “as long as it makes me feel good,” is further examined. This section of the book also looks at the narcissistic tendencies of Western culture that impact how we think about ourselves and about sex. Finally, this chapter touches briefly on the need for spiritual leaders to develop accountable relationships.

**Chapter Three: Activity without Substance.** Chapter two’s theme concerning the need for character is further developed. A brief exposition on James 1:2-4 details how character is never built without God, who, in his sovereign wisdom, allows hard times to come into our lives. The life of Joseph, in Genesis, is discussed as an example God bringing a person to the end of their own resources in order to build them up from the inside out—to finally be the person God is calling them to become. Finally, various types of leaders are reviewed who, if unchecked, will make decisions that not only hurt others, but also themselves.

**Chapter Four: Just the Emotions, Ma’am, Just the Emotions, Ma’am.** This chapter addresses the role our emotions play in our life choices. A balanced view of the role of human emotion is presented. While some say that emotions should never be listened to, it is noted here that God has given us the ability to *feel*. This is one means by which we can sense if something in our spirit is out-of-sync with God’s Spirit and direction for us. This chapter also investigates the following themes: the role of emotions in humankind, the direct relationship between one’s emotional development and one’s family of origin, the impact of trauma on emotional development, a brief discussion on attachment theory, and the role of Satanic accusation and its impact on our emotional life.

**Chapter Five: Sex Is More Than an Event; It Is a Relationship.** This chapter discusses the differences between men and women in general, and in the area of sexuality in particular. The discussion is grounded not only in relevant physiological and psychological literature, but also and, most important, in Scripture. Openly and candidly, it discusses why sex is the number one need most men have in a relationship, while affection is the number one need most women have in a relationship.

This unit concludes with some practical suggestions on how to “affair proof” one’s marriage.

**Chapter Six: Pornography, the Hidden Evil.** This section focuses on the dangers of pornography, even among clergy. Addiction to pornography is prevalent for those in ministry today. This chapter seeks to destroy the notion that pornography is harmless and only impacts the user. It concludes with some practical suggestions on how someone in spiritual leadership can experience victory in the area of pornography. This last section is applicable for those in vocational ministry and for men and women who do not serve in a vocational ministry role. A final brief section investigates whether a minister who has fallen morally can eventually be restored to ministry.

**Chapter Seven: The Unique Trauma of Clergy Sexual Misconduct.** This chapter examines the notion that clergy sexual failure is especially traumatic for its victims. Clergy are representatives of God, and the church is often seen as a healing space. Therefore, when there is abuse of any kind, trust is broken with parishioners within the church, with God, and with those outside the church and ministry, leaving many layers of healing to engage.

**Chapter Eight: Clergy Misconduct and Recovery.** This chapter examines the difficult process of recovery from clergy sexual failure. The chapter also looks at how to care well for survivors and the church community, and how to hold clergy and ministry leaders accountable for their behavior.

**Chapter Nine: Concluding Thoughts.** This short conclusion seeks to reinforce the “Big Idea” of the entire book. Any of us, even and especially someone who has been called to shepherd and serve Christ’s church, can fall into sexual sin.

Unlike some books written on this important subject, we wanted to produce one that is easy to read and easy to understand. It is our prayer that the Holy Spirit would use this book to help not only clergypersons, but also the laity, to realize that when it comes to sexual sin, none of us is exempt. As a matter of fact, “Even the Best of Us” need to be careful, lest in thinking we are standing firm, we end up falling.

Shalom!