

WHEN YOUR HUSBAND AND PASTOR DEMAND RECONCILIATION AND FORGIVENESS

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of Flyingfreenow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 43 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today it's just me, Natalie Hoffman. We had originally planned a podcast recording this morning with some other advocates on the subject of reconciliation, and through a variety of different circumstances, it ended up falling through. So I decided to record the podcast anyway, and I will just dialogue with you about it. This podcast is in response to some of the blog articles that I have written recently. I'll give you a little bit of background information.

A couple of years ago, I listened to a sermon at a local church that I had been attending for a couple of years. That sermon wasn't a bad sermon, but if you listened to it through the lens of an abuse survivor, it was somewhat shaming. It would be the kind of sermon that would cause someone living in an abusive environment to feel like they needed to stay there, that there were no other options for them, and that if they tried to get out they were being disobedient to God or being a bad Christian. It was basically the kind of sermon that I grew up hearing and that I have heard a lot in my adult life which kept me stuck in my own abusive relationship. I started taking copious notes as I listened to the sermon, because I realized that I felt the Holy Spirit saying, "Natalie, this is so important. You need to be writing this stuff down." So I started writing things down.

When I went home, I wrote a blog article basically spelling out the things that I was seeing, because I understand that if you are not an abuse victim, you may not be able to see or hear the kinds of things that an abuse survivor would see and hear in a sermon like that. I thought it would be very enlightening for abuse survivors to be able to discern and be able to pick apart things like that. But also, it would be enlightening for people who have not experienced abuse themselves to be able to get the perspective of an abuse survivor. In my mind I was thinking, "This will be great! People can learn. They can be better advocates. They can be better helpers." I was thinking, "This pastor and his team, I am sure they are different from the pastor and the team that excommunicated me. I'm sure these guys are going to be much more open to feedback." (This is me being the ever-positive, ever-hopeful person that I am.)

I recorded myself reading the blog article so that the leadership team at this particular

church would be able to meet me in a recording so that I could be a real person and not just someone hiding behind my words. Well, I did that — and I should have known better. But the response I got was not good. Actually, nobody on that leadership team responded to me, but the pastor, Wes Feltner (who has been in the news lately), did respond to me via email. I put all of this in a recent blog article, so you can check it out on my website, flyingfreenow.com. One of the interesting things that he said — demanded, really — was that I reconcile with him. I thought that was really intriguing. That is what I want to talk about today — what reconciliation actually is.

So, he wanted me to be reconciled to him before he would address the concerns that I laid out in my email and in my blog post. By the way, in that original blog post, I did not say who he was. I didn't say what church it was. I just talked about it in general — a general Baptist church — because it was very symbolic of the kinds of messages that you hear in Baptist churches, or other conservative types of churches, across the world. I didn't necessarily want to pick apart any particular kind of church. It was the message that I was most concerned about. But Wes Feltner felt that I needed to be reconciled to him.

The only thing is that the idea of reconciliation implies that a serious wrong has been done that has destroyed a relationship, and Wes Feltner didn't know me, and I didn't know him. I had been going to his church, but I had never shaken his hand. I had never said "Hi" to him in person. I knew nothing about him other than from watching his sermons. I had picked up on a few things that I was very leery about, but I didn't have any facts. They were just my gut feelings, and I usually dismiss those until I see some hardcore evidence that someone is problematic.

Anyway, reconciliation implies that there is a wall between two people who have been previously close or had a previous relationship of some kind, and that the wall needs to be taken down so that those two people can be reconciled with one another. It has nothing to do with giving feedback — for example, a person in a congregation giving feedback to their pastor. Reconciliation has nothing to do with that. When you give feedback to your pastor, it is a very straightforward process. You give them feedback, and then they respond in a way out of the character that is within them. If they have character that is like Christ, they will respond out of that character. If they have character that is more of a wolf hiding behind sheep's clothing, they are going to respond out of that character. That is what I want to talk about next.

It is a dead giveaway that there is a wolf hiding in sheep's clothing when they respond to feedback by making demands or by becoming defensive and offended in such a way that they begin to attack you. When they want things to be covered up or hidden, that is

also a dead giveaway. Here's the thing about wolves in sheep's clothing. They are in sheep's clothing: They look like you, they talk like you, they act like you and all the other sheep. You don't know that there's a wolf in there until you give them feedback.

That is why I always suggest to people who are out of their prior abusive relationship and are getting to know new people, new romantic relationships, or maybe a new church that if they are wondering if that person or people are safe, then they should give them feedback about something. Disagree about something. Show up as yourself. If you are afraid to show up as who you are — being authentic, having your own perspective, ideas, and opinions — if you are afraid to do that or you sense that if you do that you will get attacked, that is not a safe or healthy person. If you are in the Christian world, it is not a Christ-like person.

Jesus never got defensive. He never responded by attacking people. Even those who attacked Him and called Him "the son of the devil," He never attacked them back — ever. When someone is attacking you back, that means that they are doing it out of a sense of their own emptiness or deficiency. They are projecting their own deficiencies onto you. They probably need to get into therapy or get some help for that. Usually wolves in sheep's clothing don't think they have a problem, so they aren't going to go to therapy and get help.

I recently heard Dr. Romano. She said, "People always ask me, 'Can an abuser change?'" She said she has had narcissists in her office. (Rarely do narcissists come into a counseling office to get help.) But she said when she has had them, they can make micro changes in that kind of laboratory environment; however, when they go back out into the real world, it is difficult for them to actually change. Here is why — it is their personality.

She said it would be just as easy to get a person who... Right now, just close your eyes and imagine one of the nicest, kindest, sweetest, and most empathic people that you have ever met. I have a daughter like this. She is absolutely phenomenal. She is like an angel. It's her personality. She has been like this her whole life. Nothing shakes her. She is just good as gold! I've never had to scold this child or anything. She is just amazing. Try to take a person like that and put them in a counseling office and change them into a malicious, malevolent person who wants to hurt other people, who wants to trick other people, who lies, who cheats, who does things behind other people's backs, who doesn't let other people show up as they are, who doesn't have empathy. Could you even do that?

Dr. Romano points out that, "No, you can't do that, because it is personality. People are

either wired one way or they are wired another.” (Whether they get that way through nature or nurture is irrelevant to the point I am trying to say.) The point is that that is who they are, and they will operate out of the character of who they are.

So back to the whole wolves in sheep’s clothing. When someone takes off their mask, we need to believe them, because with people like this, they will take off their mask and expose themselves when they get feedback from you. Then they will put the mask back on again and be charming and nice (especially to other people who didn’t see them take the mask off). It doesn’t matter how many times you say, “Hey, wait a minute! I saw this and this, and this is what they did.” Other people will have a really hard time believing you, because all they see is the sheep mask. They hear the sheep talk, and they see the sheep walk. Then it is hard for other people to believe there is actually a wolf in there.

But wolves end up exposing themselves enough, eventually. The problem is that they can’t help but be themselves, so there are people in their lives who know who they really are. I know that there are a lot of people in Wes Feltner’s personal life who know exactly who he is, including... I’d be willing to bet that there are elders and other people who work in that church who’ve had close, personal contact with him who know what he is really like out of his character. They are careful around him. I’m guessing they have probably also discounted their own gut feelings.

I know a person who worked as an intern at that church in the sound booth, and this person told me that what they saw behind the scenes of Wes Feltner’s character was not good. This person no longer goes to that church either. This was a very young person who had enough discernment to see what was what. Unfortunately, it seems like Christians have a hard time grasping this.

Let’s get back to the idea of reconciliation. What happens when a person wrongs another person and destroys that relationship? I’m not talking about a normal relationship where you might say something out of line in the heat of the moment or because you’ve had no sleep. We all do that. That is normal human behavior. We realize later that it probably hurt the other person’s feelings, because that other person is important to us. They are a person. We see them. We see them as a human being who has a perspective, feelings, opinions, and emotions that are different from ours, and we are okay with that. We don’t want to hurt them because we love them. So when we see we have wounded another person we say, “I am so sorry. Will you please forgive me for...” and then we say specifically what we did. “When I snapped at you about that, that was the wrong way of bringing up the situation,” or whatever the case may be. That is how we are immediately reconciled to the other person. The other person says, “Sure.

No problem. I get it." Then we move on.

The problem in relationships that are severely destroyed is that one person is hurting the other person because they are not seeing the other person as a human being. They are seeing the other person as an object. They don't believe the other person has the right to their own feelings, their own opinions, their own beliefs, or their own perspective. Narcissistic types of people — I'm not talking about people diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, I'm just talking about people with narcissistic tendencies or narcissistic behaviors — don't see other people as people that are worthy of respect and honor just like they are. That's a problem. You can't have healthy relationships unless you have mutual respect, mutual love, mutual vulnerability, mutual responsibility, mutual submission — and one more that I cannot remember now, but it is in my book.

With reconciliation, what is required is that the person who did the damage needs to acknowledge the damage that they have done. That means to specifically state what they did that was hurtful. The second thing they need to do is acknowledge that your perspective and your humanity is worth listening to and worth caring about. I already said that they need to acknowledge their specific behavior, but it is not okay to just say, "I'm sorry that you thought that I did that." That is not acknowledging their behavior. Or, "I'm sorry. I know I can be cranky sometimes." That is not acknowledging specific behavior. They acknowledge it by saying specifically what they did — to re-describe what happened. Show the other person that they know what it was that hurt your heart. Then they make restitution. The person who has done the damage needs to make restitution.

That means if they have gone around speaking poorly about you, saying things that are not true or that they have no evidence for, they need to make restitution by going back to the people that they have spoken poorly to about you behind your back and they need to say, "I was wrong. I wasn't really understanding or respecting the fact that this person has a different perspective than me and that they have a right to have a different perspective than me. I am sorry that I tried to turn you against that other person." I want both you and me to respect the perspectives and the humanity of other people. That's what makes the world go around. That's what Jesus Christ modeled for us. If we want to be like Jesus, we will need to also follow in His footsteps in this way.

So making restitution, repairing the damage that's been done to a reputation. When you ruin someone's reputation, you have stolen something from them. You've stolen their reputation from them. By the way — because I can just hear some people saying, "You've stolen Wes's reputation from him," or "Those women who came from the past

have stolen Wes's reputation from him," — no! It is not the same thing. If you do a naughty, naughty thing and someone tells about it, the person who tells didn't destroy your reputation — you did! Your reputation is what you do. If you do naughty things and someone points it out, you have just destroyed your own reputation. It wasn't destroyed when the person pointed it out. You destroyed it when you did the naughty thing.

If you choose to go screw around with lots of women at the same time, you've just ruined your own reputation. That's sad, but you got to make that choice. It was your choice to make, and you made it. Now you are responsible for it. Whether you want to be responsible for it or not is irrelevant. Whether you take responsibility for it or not is completely irrelevant. You are still responsible for it before God and before the people whose lives you destroyed by stealing their innocence from them — or whatever it is that you did.

The last thing is that a person who truly wants to be reconciled with you will give you all the time and space that you need to heal. That includes letting you go if you choose to do that. They would say, "I did this hurtful thing to you. While I would love to be reconciled to you and have a relationship with you again, I understand how that may not be possible. You are free because I respect you and I respect what you need. You are free to make your own choice about whether or not you want to have a relationship with me. I respect whatever choice you make."

This all goes back to boundaries. When we have healthy boundaries, we respect ourselves and we respect other people. We respect our own choices, and we respect the choices of others. We can respect, for example, that Wes made a choice when he was in his early twenties to have multiple relationships with women who were in his youth group while he was dating the woman who is now his wife. We must respect that that was his choice to make. He gets to do that. It's his life. But everyone that he has harmed also has choices to make, and they get to make their choices about what they are going to do about it. They get to decide if they are going to come out and say, "Hey, he did this to me, and it was wrong. He has gotten away with it. Nobody has held him accountable. He's gone on and thinks he can get any job anywhere he wants in a spiritual leadership position in spite of the fact that he has never, ever repented of his sin."

By the way, repentance is not, "I'm sorry, and why aren't you forgiving me?" That is not repentance! I can't even wrap my brain around how some people think that that is repentance. Repentance is what I described earlier: The acknowledging the other person, the respecting them, the compassion for them, the empathy for the pain that

you caused them, making restitution, and then the stepping down and saying, "I should not be in these positions of spiritual leadership over other people, but I can still work another job. In fact, there are millions of other jobs that don't require spiritual leadership over other people, and I can work one of those jobs and love others in any of those jobs, just like Christ loved me. I can still live a fulfilling, Christ-like life after I have abused someone. What I cannot do is think that I can be in a spiritual leadership position over other people. That is a choice that I made when I chose to screw around with other people's lives."

I think that's really all I wanted to say. There is more that we could talk about as far as reconciliation, but I wanted to talk about that in relation to the whole Wes Feltner situation. If you want to read more about what I have to say, you can visit my website at flyingfreenow.com. If you look in the search bar under "Wes Feltner," you can find my articles about him.