

**DOES  
CHARACTER  
MATTER  
ANymore  
IN MINISTRY?**

**BY SHAWN NELSON**

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By Shawn Nelson

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# Erosion of Morals in the Ministry

Something is very wrong with the 21st century church: there is a lapse of morals within her walls today and every denomination seems to be affected:

“Two of the greatest blots on the church are clergy misconduct and the failure to hold abusive ministers accountable... No denominations or theological perspectives are immune to misconduct or the failure of accountability. The issue crosses all lines of age, wealth, ethnicity, and even gender.”<sup>1</sup>

Ministry scandal has seemingly become the hallmark of our day. Some now say today’s church is worldlier than the world.<sup>2</sup> Each month brings a fresh round of fallen pastors. In a recent survey of 1,000 protestant pastors, *half* said they know a fellow peer who should step down from the pulpit while their church investigates misconduct.<sup>3</sup> Historically the church has long faced

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, *The Pastor as Moral Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 103, 104.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 45.

<sup>3</sup> According to data from a telephone survey released by Nashville-based LifeWay Research in Emily Mcfarlan Miller, “Can Pastors Make a Comeback After Scandal?,” *The Gazette*, May 15, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://gazette.com/can-pastors-make-a-comeback-after-scandal/article/1575987>.

scandals but today's church seems to be facing a moral epidemic.<sup>4</sup> Just how bad have things become? Consider just a handful of high-profile examples over the past decade.

## High-Profile Examples

Ted Haggard was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals and founding pastor of New Life Church. Haggard's 15,000-member church was considered by some as the "nation's most powerful megachurch."<sup>5</sup> However, Haggard resigned from both in 2006 after admitting to involvement with a male prostitute and use of methamphetamine.<sup>6</sup>

David Loveless was the founding pastor of Discovery Church in Orlando.

"Discovery has been recognized as 'one of the 10 healthiest churches in America' and 'one of the fastest-

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<sup>4</sup> The Church's first scandal is mentioned in Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira).

<sup>5</sup> Patton Dodd, "New Life After the Fall of Ted Haggard: How the Megachurch Healed—by Remembering What It Means to Be the Local Church," Christianity Today, November 22, 2013, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/december/new-life-after-fall-ted-haggard.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

growing churches in the US during the 21st Century,' according to Loveless' website. The website says Discovery also was featured in the book 'America's Most Influential Churches' and Loveless was recognized as 'one of the top 20 Christian leaders in the US to watch.'"<sup>7</sup>

However, Loveless resigned in 2013 from the 4,000-member church after admitting to an extramarital affair which spanned multiple years.

Bob Coy was the senior pastor Calvary Chapel Fort Lauderdale. In 2005 the burgeoning church was described as one of the largest in the nation:

"On an average weekend, 18,000 adults and children throng four services. It is the largest church crowd in Florida and one of the largest 10 in the nation. The church has a \$40-million annual budget and employs 550 people."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Kunerth, "Discovery Church Pastor Resigns After Admitting to Affair," Orlando Sentinel, May 6, 2013, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/religion/os-discovery-church-pastor-admits-affair-20130506-story.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Vogel, "Big Box Worship: Florida's Biggest Church Is a \$40-million-a-year, 550-Employee Enterprise — One of 80 Megachurches in the State That Are Succeeding at Mass-Marketing Faith.," Florida Trend, December 1, 2005, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.floridatrend.com/article/11417/big-box-worship>.

Yet, Coy admitted to an ongoing extramarital affair. He resigned from the church in 2014 and his media ministry was immediately suspended.<sup>9</sup>

There was the Ashley Madison scandal of 2015. Ashley Madison is a dating website for people desiring to have extramarital affairs. The user database was hacked and then leaked to the public. It was claimed that many names of pastors were found in the system. At the time, popular writer Ed Stetzer said, "I estimate that at least 400 church leaders (pastors, elders, staff, deacons, etc.) will be resigning Sunday."<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to measure whether Stetzer was correct. However, one name on the list was Pastor John

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Popular Pastor Resigns After 'Moral Failure,' but Followers Still Want His Sermons," Christianity Today, April 7, 2014, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/april/popular-pastor-resigns-moral-failure-bob-coy-calvary-chapel.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Ed Stetzer, "My Pastor Is On the Ashley Madison List: Too Many Christians Have Been Caught Using Ashley Madison, Many of Them Pastors and Church Leaders. What Now?," Christianity Today, August 27, 2015, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/august/my-pastor-is-on-ashley-madison-list.html>.

Gibson. The “seminary professor with a sense of humor” committed suicide six days after the data was made public.<sup>11</sup>

## Types of Scandals

The scandals just mentioned involve adultery; but there are many other types of scandals that have garnered much public attention. They include fraud, larceny, narcotic and/or alcohol abuse, homosexuality, spiritual abuse, sexual abuse and child molestation.

Consider fraud. \$37 billion worth of “ecclesiastical crime” was reported to have occurred in 2014 alone. This represents 6% of money given to churches that year.<sup>12</sup> It is as easy to find examples of fraud inside the church as adultery. Just six months ago, a popular pastor in Georgia was caught stealing over \$250,000 from tithes and offerings. He took the money

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<sup>11</sup> Laurie Segall, “Pastor Outed On Ashley Madison Commits Suicide,” CNN Tech, September 8, 2015, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/09/08/technology/ashley-madison-suicide/>.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Pavlo, “Fraud Thriving in U.s. Churches, but You Wouldn't Know It,” Forbes, November 18, 2013, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/walterpavlo/2013/11/18/fraud-thriving-in-u-s-churches-but-you-wouldnt-know-it/#233ccb056fea>.

over a ten year period, spending it at retail stores like Victoria's Secret, and currently faces eighty-five counts of wire fraud and twelve counts of mail fraud.<sup>13</sup> Six months before that, the founding pastor of one of the largest churches in Asia was found guilty of \$35-million in fraud. He was sentenced to eight years in prison. Five other leaders at his church were given prison terms as well. They were all found guilty of selling fake bonds to help launch a music career for the senior pastor's wife.<sup>14</sup> There is also fraud *outside* the church. Three months ago, a Long Beach pastor pleaded guilty to bankruptcy fraud after he was caught collecting \$3 million in fees from property owners facing foreclosure.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Associated Press, "Georgia Pastor Stole \$250,000 in Donations from His Church and Spent It at Stores Like Victoria's Secret," Daily News, May 5, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/georgia-pastor-stole-250-000-donations-church-article-1.2626623>.

<sup>14</sup> Anugrah Kumar, "Megachurch Pastor Kong Hee Jailed for 8 Years for \$35-Million Fraud," The Christian Post, November 21, 2015, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/megachurch-pastor-kong-hee-jailed-for-8-years-for-35-million-fraud-150601/>.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah Dobruck, "Long Beach Pastor Admits to Running \$3 Million Mortgage Scam," Long Beach Press Telegram, August 25, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.presstelegram.com/general-news/20160825/long-beach-pastor-admits-to-running-3-million-mortgage-scam>.

Consider drug and alcohol abuse. Four month ago, Perry Noble, a highly popular author, founding and senior pastor of NewSpring Church, was fired over alcohol abuse.<sup>16</sup> Two months ago a Connecticut pastor was arrested with bags of cocaine during a sting operation.<sup>17</sup>

Or consider arguably one of the worst scandals of all: sexual abuse. Many are aware of the modern sexual abuse problem within the Catholic Church. But it has recently been revealed to be even *worse* within Protestant churches.<sup>18</sup> It is astounding: three insurance companies reported receiving upwards of 260 reports each year of young people under 18 being sexually abused by Protestant clergy.<sup>19</sup> This is equivalent

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor Berglund, "Pastor Perry Noble Fired After 16 Years at NewSpring Church," Charisma News, July 10, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.charismanews.com/us/58283-pastor-perry-noble-fired-after-16-years-at-newspring-church>.

<sup>17</sup> Jessilyn Justice, "Pastor Caught with Cocaine in His Car: The Devil Is a Liar," Charisma News, September 14, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.charismanews.com/us/59889-pastor-caught-with-cocaine-in-his-car-the-devil-is-a-liar>.

<sup>18</sup> Walid Shoebat, "There Is More Sexual Abuse in the Protestant Churches Than Catholic," Shoebat Foundation, May 6, 2014, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://shoebat.com/2014/05/06/sexual-abuse-protestant-churches-catholic/>.

<sup>19</sup> This can be compared to the annual average of 228 "credible accusations" in the Catholic Church. See Bob Allen, "Insurance Companies

to one child being sexually abused in a Protestant church every 1.4 days! The problem “is not one of corrupt doctrine, but of individuals being unfaithful to the most basic precepts of their own religious belief.”<sup>20</sup>

## Biblical Criteria

There is a growing disconnect between biblical portrait of leadership and that portrayed by the evening news. Clearly, moral character ranks high up the list of biblical requirements for leadership. The Apostle Paul says 1 Timothy 3:1-7:

“This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must

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Shed Light On Extent of Sex Abuse in Protestant Churches,” Ethics Daily, July 6, 2007, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/insurance-companies-shed-light-on-extent-of-sex-abuse-in-protestant-churches-cms-9149>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

Titus 1:5-9 contains a similar list of qualifications from Paul:<sup>21</sup>

“...appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.”

However, one of the most disturbing trends in the church today is the disregard of biblical qualifications for pastoral leadership.<sup>22</sup> Why is this the case? One reason could be widespread disagreement over what these requirements actually are.

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<sup>21</sup> 1 Tim 3:8-10 are the requirements for deacons which logically apply to pastors as well.

<sup>22</sup> John MacArthur and The Master's Seminary faculty, *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 67.

# Widespread Disagreement over Requirements

There seems to be much confusion over biblical requirements for leadership. Take Paul's use of the word "blameless" at the beginning of the list (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6). What could it mean that one must be "blameless?" Concerning its use in 1 Tim. 3:2, most major translations translate it "above reproach."<sup>23</sup> However, it can also mean "beyond reproach, above criticism," or simply "without fault."<sup>24</sup> Did Paul really mean to say that a pastor must be *absolutely perfect*? Chuck Smith (the founder of my denomination) considers this problematic:

"As Paul lists these qualifications, it seems as if he pretty much eliminates everybody, even with the very first requirement alone: 'blameless.' ... Paul's list isn't a legalistic sieve through which we strain out all transgressors. If it were, none of us would make it through the net, and the church would have no leaders."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Timothy (Exegetical Summaries)* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2009), 159.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Chuck Smith, *Living Water: the Power of the Holy Spirit in Your Life* (Costa Mesa, CA: The Word for Today, 2007), 255-256.

John MacArthur's camp concurs: "'Above reproach' cannot refer to sinless perfection, because no human being could ever qualify for the office in that case."<sup>26</sup> So then why did Paul use this word in his list of requirements? It remains debated.

There is also the requirement that a pastor is required to be the "husband on one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6). There are *four* general views of this phrase: it either (1) prohibits adultery; (2) prohibits remarriage after a wife's death; (3) prohibits remarriage after divorce; or (4) prohibits polygamy.<sup>27</sup> Practically speaking, can a divorced man become a pastor or not? Or, can a pastor divorce, remarry, and all the while remain working in the ministry? The answer one gives depends on which of the four interpretations one holds. There are arguments and supporting scripture for each view.

What about Paul mention of a candidate's children? In Timothy he says they need to be "in submission with all reverence" (1 Tim. 3:4) and in Titus "faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination" (1 Tim. 5:6). For

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<sup>26</sup> MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry*, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Harold Greenlee, *An Exegetical Summary of Titus and Philemon*, Second Edition (Exegetical Summaries), 2 ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 26.

those with children, is it realistic to say that *any* of our children have been completely faithful at all times? What exactly is the objective standard for determining whether a child is “faithful?” Is the requirement that children need to “full of faith” in the Lord (i.e., they must be regenerate believers) or is Paul saying they need to be “faithful” (i.e., obedient) to their parents? Again, there are different interpretations.

Should these biblical requirements be set aside for our lack of clarity? Certainly not! There is still much that can be gleaned with certainty.

## What is Clear: Godly Character

We should all be able to agree from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 that godliness matters. Simply put, the biblical requirements say that a godly leader will have moral character, a healthy marriage and children that are likely believers themselves (or at least respectful to their father). Or, stated negatively: bad character, an unhealthy marriage and an unhealthy family are signs that a person should not be a leader in the church. Smith agrees with this assessment: Paul

“gives a general picture of the kind of man whom God calls into leadership; not a perfect man, by any means, but one who is committed to His Lord and who is growing

in grace through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul isn't looking for perfection; he's looking for maturity.”

These are things we should all agree on: there should be requirements for those desiring leadership roles in the church and those requirements can be summed up as spiritual maturity and godly character.

## Importance of Modeling Character

Why is moral character so important? One answer is that the modeling of godly character is an important part of God’s plan.

Jesus modeled. At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry he selected twelve disciples “that they might be with him” (Mark 3:14). Central to Jesus’ plan was the fact that “the disciples were apprentices, not mere learners.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus *was* what he taught: “His lifestyle was no put-on, conceived to reinforce His words. Jesus simply lived what He taught. What He taught flowed out of who He was.”<sup>29</sup> Jesus embodied what true

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<sup>28</sup> William Yount, *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, 2nd ed., ed. William R. Yount (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), 50.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

ministry was: true ministry is an overflow of a godly life, a life dependent upon the Father.<sup>30</sup> This kind of ministry—and *only* this kind— is powerful and effective.

The apostles would eventually learn their teacher's lesson. Peter said to his fellow pastor/elders: "Shepherd the flock of God... *being examples* to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2,3; emphasis mine).

Other leaders in the early church placed a premium on modeling. Paul exhorted young Pastor Timothy to "*be an example* to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity." (1 Tim. 4:12; emphasis mine) He encouraged Pastor Titus "in all things showing yourself to *be a pattern of good works*, in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned, that one who is an opponent may be ashamed, having nothing evil to say of you." (Titus 2:7-8; emphasis mine) Paul championed Christ-modeling to the point where he could say without hesitation: "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ." (1 Cor. 11:1)

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<sup>30</sup> MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry*, 94.

The Bible is clear that God is in the business of character building. With God, character certainly counts. "Growth should characterize all His 'saints,' but the New Testament holds those recognized as church leaders especially responsible to be examples. They are visible and derived moral models for the Exemplar's ἐκκλησία (ekklēsia, 'church')."31

## The Lack of Modeling/Discipleship Today

Modeling is best done within the context of a one-on-one discipleship relationship like the one Jesus had with his disciples. One-on-one discipleship involves a mature Christian spending time with a younger believer in the faith, modeling godly character traits, and teaching practices that will promote character in the follower. However, this type of discipleship is becoming non-existent in the context of today's mega churches. It is quite a marvelous thing how discipleship has taken a back seat in many churches considering how much emphasis it is given in the New Testament. The modern church's blatant lack of discipleship has been called "the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 217.

elephant in the church.”<sup>32</sup> Many churches today do not have a simple, straightforward system in place for discipleship.<sup>33</sup> “The latest evidence is overwhelmingly disappointing... according to the latest research, the state of discipleship... is at an all-time low in America.”<sup>34</sup>

“And no one denomination appears to be excelling above any of the rest. Regardless of religious affiliation, “most church leaders would agree that many American Christians are weak in their commitment to spiritual disciplines, lack boldness in their witness of Christ, and *have lifestyles almost undistinguishable from unbelievers.*”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998), 301.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Howell Lynn, “Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Investigating, Identifying, and Implementing an Effective Discipleship System” (PhD diss., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 48-49, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1923&context=doctoral>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Crabtree, “The Crisis of Discipleship in the American Church,” *Enrichment Journal*, [http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200801/200801\\_022\\_Discipleship.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200801/200801_022_Discipleship.cfm) (accessed February 6, 2014) quoted in Lynn, “Making Disciples of Jesus Christ,” emphasis mine.

# Obsessed with the Wrong Results

If pastors are not concerned about discipleship—if they are not making the modeling of godliness and character a high priority—then what are they concerned about? Many churches today have substituted something else for spiritual maturity: people-units, dollars and buildings. Sadly, a pastor’s performance can even be directly evaluated by these three criteria alone. “The more of each, the more successful is the pastor.”<sup>36</sup> There has been a fundamental shift in the role of “the pastor” in our culture.

“Gone is the older model of the scholar-saint, one who was as comfortable with books and learning as with the aches of the soul. This was the shepherd who knew the flock, knew how to tend it, and Sunday by Sunday took that flock into the treasures of God’s Word. This has changed. In its place is the new ‘celebrity’ style. What we typically see now, Nancy Pearcey suggests, is the leader who works by manipulating the feelings of the audience, enhancing his own image with personal anecdotes, modeling himself after the CEO, and adopting a domineering management style. He (usually) is *completely results-oriented, pragmatic, happy to employ*

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<sup>36</sup> Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People On to God’s Agenda*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2011), 19.

*any technique from the secular world that will produce the desired results.”<sup>37</sup>*

## How Far the Church Has Fallen

The emphasis of the 21st century church is not on godliness. Discipleship is near non-existent. Pastors are not lining up with the biblical criteria. And the church is plagued with ongoing scandals. How did we get here? Four cultural shifts that are to blame: (1) the pragmatism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; (2) the Postmodernism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; (3) the changing view of marriage from the 1960s on upward; (4) and the technological revolution of our modern day.

### First Cultural Shift: Pragmatism (19<sup>th</sup> Century+)

Pragmatism is a philosophy that originated in the United States under William James in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of James’ beliefs was “Whatever works is true. Whatever works is

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<sup>37</sup> Cited in David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 40, emphasis mine.

right.”<sup>38</sup> Philosophers before James debated what reality *was*, then they debated what our limitations might be in knowing this reality. However, James was not as concerned about what reality was or with our limitations in knowing it. His concern was with the tangible difference one’s belief actually made in one’s life. For James, each person should find out what works best for him or her.<sup>39</sup> The worldview that produced the best results was true. This came to be known as pragmatism.

This “whatever-it-takes-to-get-the-job-done” mentality permeates our business culture today. It is also having a strong impact on our churches. The result is that today’s churches are being run like businesses with the pastor being seen as the CEO. With each expansion project, pastors look less like humble and meek Jesus and more like the capable and aspiring Steve Jobs. Wildly successful ones write leadership

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<sup>38</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 375.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

books for younger church planters who secretly dream of becoming the next well-oiled production.<sup>40</sup>

Results—not godliness—have become the new target of the church work effort. “In an age of pragmatism in the secular world, where the end justifies the means, the temptation is for leadership to prostitute Christian character for the sake of success.”<sup>41</sup>

## Second Cultural Shift: Postmodernism (20<sup>th</sup> Century+)

The second cultural shift responsible for the erosion of morals within the church is the Postmodernism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Our ability to know and understand reality has been under attack since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, from the time of the great skeptic David Hume<sup>42</sup> and the great agnostic Immanuel Kant.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> See Kade Hawkins, “Parody of Our Modern Church Service” (video), October 21, 2010, accessed November 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RJBd8zE48A>.

<sup>41</sup> MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry*, 232.

<sup>42</sup> Hume believed that “a total suspense of judgment is here our only reasonable resource” (skepticism). Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, VIII.

<sup>43</sup> Kant believed we must use our mind to understand the thing in the real world—but our mind can never truly know the thing as it is. We

Since then, every possible philosophical viewpoint has been exhausted—the mental straining in turn has completely exhausted the intellectual mind! The Western world has officially arrived at a “post-modern era.” Ours is a world characterized by not only the “death of God”<sup>44</sup> in culture but also the death of everything else with Him: the death of objective truth (relativism); the death of exclusive truth (pluralism); the death of objective meaning (conventionalism); the death of thinking (logic; i.e., anti-foundationalism); the death of objective interpretation (deconstructionism); and the death of objective values (subjectivism).<sup>45</sup>

This anti-anything-concrete cultural mindset is becoming increasingly prevalent in our churches today. There is a growing liberalism. More churches are jettisoning a belief in anything absolute—include moral absolutes. As a result, fewer

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can only a thing as is seems to be *for me*. This is epistemological agnosticism.

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche was famous for exclaiming “God is Dead!” See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann Viking Portable Library (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 124.

<sup>45</sup> See the topic of “Post-Modernism in the Church: The Emergent Church” in Norman Geisler, “History of Philosophy and Christian Thought II” (lecture, Veritas Evangelical Seminary, Murrieta, CA, 2013), lecture 7.

and fewer people are concerning themselves with dubious things like whether it is immoral for their pastors to watch porn on Monday mornings. It is simply irrelevant.

Another effect of Postmodernism has been the erosion of biblical inerrancy. Protestant denominations are departing from the long-held view that the Bible alone is the rule of faith and practice. Full inerrancy is the view that all statements and propositions in the Bible are binding on the life of the believer because the Bible is inspired (from God), infallible (cannot fail) and inerrant (without error). However, as leaders continue to accommodate neo-evangelical views of inerrancy, this deals a damaging blow to the Bible's inspiration and infallibility.<sup>46</sup> As inerrancy is redefined or jettisoned altogether, more people in the church are becoming willing to consider portions of Paul's writings—such as the requirements he gives for ministry or his writing against homosexuality—to be merely his opinion, and not morally binding. When inerrancy goes, so goes the church's epistemological foundation—and with it the church's moral standard.

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<sup>46</sup> See Shawn Nelson, "Inerrancy: What's at Stake for the Next Generation?," *Defending Inerrancy*, 2014, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://defendinginerrancy.com/inerrancy-next-generation/>.

## Third Cultural Shift: Purpose of Marriage (1960s+)

Pastors who decide to divorce and remarry are following a radical shift in the way our culture views marriage. Sociologist Robert Bellah says we have replaced the older “obligation” model of marriage with a newer “therapeutic” model. “Where previous generations saw marriage as a social relationship bringing enduring obligations, many contemporary Americans define marriage as an expression of individual freedom and *a path to self-fulfillment* and growth.”<sup>47</sup> People are more acutely concerned about their own levels of satisfaction within a marriage context. When a person is no longer happy (even pastors)—when they feel their needs are not being met—they are more likely today to leave their relationship in hopes of achieving a more fulfilling partnership. Divorce and remarriage with the goal of obtaining a more optimistic relationship has become more acceptable.

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Bellah quoted in Stevenson-Moessner, *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, 80, emphasis mine.

There are fewer people outside the church today speaking out against divorce because divorce has become commonplace within our culture.

“Fifty percent of all American marriages begun in the late '60s have already ended in divorce. We saw a 250 percent increase in divorce between 1960 and 1980. While divorce rose sharply, marriage rates declined by 30 percent and cohabitation rose by 600 percent (Gallagher 1996, 5).”<sup>48</sup>

More than one out of three American children are now from broken homes (thirty-seven percent).<sup>49</sup> Even more alarming, this increase in divorce has actually fueled more divorce and broken homes. Children from divorced homes divorce at higher rates.<sup>50</sup> They also marry at lower rates.<sup>51</sup> The rate of children born outside of marriage (thirty percent) has nearly tripled in two decades.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>49</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: the Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), 80 quoted in Stevenson-Moessner, *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, 79.

<sup>50</sup> *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, 79.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

There are also fewer people *inside* the church speaking out against divorce. “Many members of the clergy, especially mainline Protestant pastors, stopped speaking out against divorce so as not to alienate struggling congregants.”<sup>53</sup> “Where Christian texts from earlier generations were unambiguous in their judgment of divorce and adultery, some recent books offer little or no judgment.”<sup>54</sup> Divorce is not as taboo of a subject as it once was—even among the clergy.

## Fourth Cultural Shift: Technological Revolution (1995+)

A fourth major factor is the recent technological revolution. Modern media has increased temptation and many in the church are its victims. “We live in a world where stimulation confronts us from every angle. The messages and

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<sup>53</sup> Julie Zauzmer, “How Decades of Divorce Helped Erode Religion,” The Washington Post, September 27, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/27/how-decades-of-divorce-helped-erode-religion/?utm\\_term=.1773d1b73933](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/27/how-decades-of-divorce-helped-erode-religion/?utm_term=.1773d1b73933).

<sup>54</sup> The Pastor as Moral Guide, 81.

images in the media elevate the probability of failure.”<sup>55</sup> It is very easy today for a pastor to be involved in secret sin. Smart phones can access anything computers can access, yet they are mobile and activity can be easily hidden from others. Nearly any type of content can be streamed on-demand.

“Pornography is everywhere, and it isn’t going away anytime soon. The horizon is dark with porn’s presence. The age of mobile devices has increased accessibility to porn at nearly all times in nearly every place. With technology advancing, the presence of Virtual Reality equipment only makes the offerings of sin more enticing. Jesus promised temptation will come, and he was not lying (Luke 17:1).”<sup>56</sup>

Cultural attitudes about pornography are changing as well. It used to be taboo to talk about the subject in the past. Today, according to data collected from the Barna Group, it is clear that pornography does not have the same social taboo it once did.<sup>57</sup> While most Americans still believe porn is “bad for

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<sup>55</sup> Ray Carroll, *Fallen Pastor: Finding Restoration in a Broken World* (Folsom, CA: Civitas Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>56</sup> Garrett Kell, “12 Observations After Reading the Porn Phenomenon,” Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, August 3, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/12-observations-after-reading-the-porn-phenomenon>.

<sup>57</sup> David Kinnaman, “The Porn Phenomenon,” Barna, February 5, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <https://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/>.

society,” this trend is changing. “Attitudes are shifting toward neutrality or ‘good for society’ among younger generations.”<sup>58</sup>

“When they talk about porn with friends, 89% of teens, and 95% of young adults say they do so in a neutral, accepting, or encouraging way. That is, only one in 20 young adults and one in 10 teens say their friends think viewing pornography is a bad thing.”<sup>59</sup>

The Barna data also shows that slightly more than half of pastors (53%) do not think pornography is a problem at their church.<sup>60</sup> Yet 68% of church going men regularly view pornography. Three-quarters of young Christian adults (76%) in church are actively involved in it. Nearly half (49%) believe “all or most of their friends” view it.<sup>61</sup>

Pastors themselves are not immune to this increase in tempting media. Josh McDowell recently commissioned a

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Emily McFarlan Miller, “Summit Hopes to ‘Set Free’ Christians from Porn,” Crosswalk.com, April 6, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/summit-hopes-to-set-free-christians-from-porn.html>.

<sup>61</sup> “Porn Use in Church Continues to Escalate,” Charisma News, September 1, 2016, accessed November 21, 2016, <http://www.charismanews.com/sponsored-content/59612-porn-use-in-church-continues-to-escalate>.

survey through the Barna Group to see how devastating pornography has been to the church.

“Most pastors (57%) and youth pastors (64%) admit they have struggled with porn, either currently or in the past. Overall, 21% of youth pastors and 14% of pastors admit they currently struggle with using porn. About 12% of youth pastors and 5% of pastors say they are addicted to porn.”<sup>62</sup>

It is alarming to think that *most pastors* in across America have struggled with pornography. What was the condition of their family, marriage and ministry life like during their time of struggle? And what about the one out of twenty pastors (5%) who admitted they are currently outright addicted to pornography? How can these things be?

## Treasures in Jars of Clay

It’s a well-known adage: “There is no perfect church because churches are made of people and people aren’t perfect.” Evangelicals firmly believe that effective ministry comes from the filling of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has a central role in building Christ’s church. This can be seen in Luke 24:49 when Jesus told his disciples to “tarry in the city of

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<sup>62</sup> Miller, “Summit Hopes to ‘Set Free’ Christians from Porn.”

Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.” Christian ministers are merely instruments through whom God produces kingdom-building results on earth. Yet no instrument on this side of heaven is perfect. Not even Paul (who gave the list of pastoral requirements above) claimed to be perfect. He flatly denied that he had “already attained, or am already perfected.” (Phil. 3:12). While Christians have all sins forgiven they still retain a fallen, sinful nature. Paul himself described a struggle coming from his sinful nature this way:

“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do... But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” (Rom. 7:14-15, 17)

The biblical promise is that those who “walk in the Spirit” are the victors who “shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” (Gal 5:16; Jn. 15:1-8). But the challenge is that the Christian minister, like any Christian, lives in a world of tension between wanting the leading of the Holy Spirit and following the promptings of the flesh (Mt. 26:41; Mk. 14:38).

Because of this tension, Rebekah Miles, a Professor of Ethics and Practical Theology, says that we need both a higher

and lower view of ministry.<sup>63</sup> Pastors are idealists but they also need to be realists. They are idealists in that they strive to be like Christ and carry on the Great Commission in the power of God but they also need to be practical. On one hand, their job consists of kingdom work; on the other hand, their job consists of bane duties like any other non-clergy related job.

“Pastors and parishioners expect too much of ordained ministers, romanticizing both the role and person. A more realistic view of pastors and ministry would plan for sin, prompting Christians to set up procedures to protect pastors and parishioners from pastors and parishioners... Ordained ministry is no more free from toil, sin, or impermanence than other jobs.”<sup>64</sup>

The cold, hard reality is that pastors will sin. It is precisely for this reason that books such as *Sexual Temptation: Establishing Guardrails and Winning the Battle* and *Dangers, Toils, and Snares: Mastering Ministry* openly talk about the need for setting up an accountability for moral protection.<sup>65</sup>

“Given the right circumstances, the best among us is capable of

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<sup>63</sup> The Pastor as Moral Guide, 121.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Sexual Temptation: Establishing Guardrails and Winning the Battle* (Sandy, OR: Eternal Perspective Ministries Publishing, 2011).

the most unimaginable sins.”<sup>66</sup> As such, we need a hopeful realism but a chastened idealism. Pastors are sinners with greater responsibility.<sup>67</sup> We need to expect the best but plan for the worst.<sup>68</sup> Planning for the worst involves taking proactive steps to ensure that a pastor does not “suffer shipwreck with regard to the faith.” (1 Tim. 1:19)

## Example of Practical, Preventative Steps: How to Avoid Adultery

How can preventative steps be taken to avoid moral failure in ministry? Consider the scandal at the topic of the list: adultery. *The Pastor as Moral Guide* suggests that adultery can be avoided if a pastor is aware of three job-related risk factors unique to the parish.

The first risk a pastor factor is the nature of the pastor’s counseling relationship. It is the pastor’s job to meet with vulnerable churchgoers experiencing crisis. In most cases the

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Exley, Mark Galli, and John Ortberg, *Dangers, Toils and Snares: Resisting the Hidden Temptations of Ministry* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1994), 113.

<sup>67</sup> *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, 121.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

parishioner has unmet needs and a desire to be heard. Through counseling, a deep and emotional intimacy is formed between the counselee and counselor. This intimacy, if not bridled, can become the forerunner of sexual intimacy between the two through ever escalating advances.<sup>69</sup>

The second risk factor is the role between pastor and friend is blurred. People going to a professional counselor or therapist normally do not see each other outside the counselor's office. They meet for a fixed time and keep the discussion on topic. However, the pastor is more than a counselor—and is expected to continually interact with and work alongside the very people he counsels.<sup>70</sup>

The third risk factor given is clerical bad habits:

“Pastors work longer hours and have greater job stress than most professionals. They isolate themselves, not seeking support from colleagues or intimacy with friends. Many pastors have high needs for praise and approval. They like to be needed. All of these factors can raise a pastor's risk... The problem could be depression, work burnout, trouble with marriage or other significant

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 110.

relationships, or any other factor that leaves the pastor more vulnerable and needy.”<sup>71</sup>

By proactively watching for danger signs and setting up procedures for accountability pastors can avoid wandering down the wrong path.<sup>72</sup> Examples of practical prevention include exhortations to: “Watch for signs that you are attracted to a parishioner.”<sup>73</sup> “Watch for signs that a parishioner might be attracted to you.”<sup>74</sup> “Be especially vigilant in times of vulnerability.”<sup>75</sup> “Be particularly attentive if the parishioner is having marital problems.”<sup>76</sup> “Counsel in your office only when other people are in the building. Leave your door unlocked. Consider getting rid of blinds or curtains. Have a window put in the office door and position your chair where you (but not the parishioner) can be seen at any time.”<sup>77</sup> “If you need to meet a parishioner outside the office, find a public place.”<sup>78</sup> “If you are

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

uncomfortable or sense that the other person is uncomfortable, refrain from touch.”<sup>79</sup> On the positive note, there are many pastors who are successful in avoiding adultery by mitigating the risks. “For every pastor who has wandered into misconduct, there are twice as many who narrowly avoided it.”<sup>80</sup>

Practical preventative steps can be done to curtail sexual abuse as well. Churches can and should conduct background checks, install windows in nurseries and play areas, and require at least two adults in a room with a child.<sup>81</sup> Preventative steps can be taken to help with pornography abuse: such as requiring staff to have filters installed on computers, giving spouses passwords and passphrases to phones, having periodic accountability meetings where tough, direct questions are asked about the usage of pornography. The same meetings could include discussion of other temptations, such as drug/alcohol abuse or whether any financial compromises were made since the last meeting.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>81</sup> Allen, “Insurance Companies Shed Light On Extent of Sex Abuse in Protestant Churches.”

# Returning to Ministry after Moral Failure?

What about the possible return to ministry after moral failure? These types of discussions typically surface with moral failures such as adultery, pornography, narcotics and/or alcohol abuse and extortion. What if a pastor is involved in one of these areas but then restored over time to a Christ-like walk? Is the pulpit an appropriate place for a pastor who has had a catastrophic moral failure?

In the case of adultery there are scholars on both sides. John MacArthur adamantly says no return is possible after adultery: "We believe the Bible clearly teaches that once a man fails in the area of sexual morality, he is unqualified for pastoral ministry any longer."<sup>82</sup> Others find room for restoration, albeit with proper caution. Focus on the Family says that a return should be rare: "Restoration to the pulpit after a moral failure should happen on very rare occasions and only after much

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<sup>82</sup> MacArthur, *Pastoral Ministry*, 68.

prayer and firm assurance that the fallen pastor has truly found healing and forgiveness from God.”<sup>83</sup>

Those advocating a return to ministry emphasize using caution because the immoral pastor is used to being a liar and hiding the activity. It is easy for an immoral pastor to deceive both others and himself. “He has grown accustomed to living with self-deceit. He has developed an elaborate system to rationalize his inexplicable behavior.”<sup>84</sup> He will often rationalize or minimize his behavior.<sup>85</sup> The prospect of losing wife, family and career (i.e., income) can further pressure the fallen pastor to minimize and dismiss sin.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Chris Fabry, *Pastoral Restoration: The Path to Recovery* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family, 2007), 11, accessed November 21, 2016, [http://media.focusonthefamily.com/pastoral/pdf/PAS\\_PastoralRestoration.pdf](http://media.focusonthefamily.com/pastoral/pdf/PAS_PastoralRestoration.pdf).

<sup>84</sup> Exley, *Dangers, Toils and Snares*, 146.

<sup>85</sup> Stevenson-Moessner, *The Pastor as Moral Guide*, 116.

<sup>86</sup> Earl D. Wilson, *Restoring the Fallen: A Team Approach to Caring, Confronting and Reconciling* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 19.

## Proper Concern for the Pastor

The author of *Restoring the Fallen* gives three general responses churches have to fallen leaders: (1) "Cheap grace" proponents advocate immediate forgiveness and restoration of responsibilities upon confession without any long-term evidence of repentance and correction. (2) "Banish" proponents follow a legalistic approach which "cast[s] the sinner out" swiftly so church life can continue with as little interruption as possible; (3) "Ignore" proponents simply ignore the problem pretending it never happened.<sup>87</sup> However, "The missing component in each of these commonly applied methods is true restoration; bringing a person back."<sup>88</sup> While the Lord is very concerned about His church, he surely is also concerned about the fallen pastor's heart and the broken lives of those in his immediate circle who are feeling the pain. The church must not only be concerned about its health but also the welfare of the pastor's heart.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 13-16 and 126.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 15

# Determining if a Return is Possible

The following counsel is given to help determine if a return to ministry is possible. Was the fall a one-time event or was there a pattern? Consider adultery again. If there was an ongoing pattern of immoral conduct this is a good indication of deeper rooted addictive behavior. The pastor who has a pattern of ongoing failure is likely to commit it again if nothing changes.<sup>89</sup> Extra caution should be given. "There is a difference between the minister who falls once, voluntarily confesses his sinful failure, and submits to a restoration process, and the minister trapped in an immoral lifestyle."<sup>90</sup> Ongoing adultery, for example, is a complex set of issues.

"The way the man relates to his spouse, his self-image and sexual identity, his lifestyle and work habits. These cannot be worked through in a brief encounter or in a few days away in retreat. Nor can they be adequately addressed while the minister is still enmeshed in ministry. The pressures are simply too great, the temptation to

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<sup>89</sup> D.A. Carson, "The SBJT Forum: Do You Think That a Fallen Christian Leader Can Ever Be Restored? If Not, Why Not? But If So, under What Conditions?," Gospel Translations, June 9, 2010, accessed November 21, 2016, [http://gospeltranslations.org/wiki/The\\_SBJT\\_Forum:\\_Do\\_you\\_think\\_that\\_a\\_fallen\\_Christian\\_leader\\_can\\_ever\\_be\\_restored%3F\\_If\\_not,\\_why\\_not%3F\\_But\\_if\\_so,\\_under\\_what\\_conditions%3F](http://gospeltranslations.org/wiki/The_SBJT_Forum:_Do_you_think_that_a_fallen_Christian_leader_can_ever_be_restored%3F_If_not,_why_not%3F_But_if_so,_under_what_conditions%3F).

<sup>90</sup> Exley, Dangers, Toils and Snares, 143.

return to the familiar routine too compelling—a routine that originally contributed to the problem. Therefore the fallen minister must be removed from active ministry if he is going to be restored both spiritually and vocationally.”<sup>91</sup>

Another question is whether the fallen pastor’s witness and credibility has been destroyed. D.A. Carson puts it this way:

“Sometimes a church is so sentimentally attached to its pastor that even when he falls into grievous sin, many in the church, perhaps even the majority, will be happy to let him remain in pastoral office, provided he shows adequate signs of repentance. But what about the outsiders? Do they look at his adultery, nod knowingly, and smirk? Is Christ’s name debased, not only because the pastor has committed adultery but also because the church has indicated it does not mind being led by a man who cannot keep his zipper up? Has this pastor so lost his credibility that when he preaches on anything to do with morality and integrity, a surfeit of polite sighs will escape from either the believers or the unbelievers or from both?”<sup>92</sup>

There is also the question of time: how much time should a pastor wait before reentering ministry? Overnight restoration cannot be healthy. D.A. Carson stated, “We too are appalled

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>92</sup> Carson, “The SBJT Forum: Do You Think That a Fallen Christian Leader Can Ever Be Restored?”

by the 'quick and simple' restoration to leadership we often see today. Restoration is a process, not an instantaneous event."<sup>93</sup> But is three months enough time? It is likely not enough. Carson added, "I am quite certain that the kind of three month, self-imposed withdrawal of Jimmy Swaggart, followed by his self-declared fitness for return to pastoral office, is a sad joke."<sup>94</sup> What about twelve months—or two, three, even five years? Those who advocate a return to ministry is possible are not as concerned about time requirements as whether a true restoration has actually taken place. In one case, a team of people involved in the restoration of a fallen pastor allowed a return to very limited formal ministry involvement at the end of his third year of structured restoration process.<sup>95</sup> But each case needs to be evaluated on its own.

## The Road Ahead

No church wants to go through a fallen pastor restoration process. But the truth is that pastors do fall—and they are falling at an alarming rate. The decline of moral character has

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Wilson, *Restoring the Fallen*, 167.

put the church in a precarious position today. While we agree with the idea that morals matter in the church, our practice often denies this. The first step to any serious change is to become aware that an issue exists. It is my sincerest desire that this short book has served to make the issue aware to more people within the modern church. May the Lord have mercy upon the 21<sup>st</sup> century church and help us to make godliness, holiness and moral character the center of our activity once again. Amen!

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