

# Sinning Pastors: What to Do?

On 02 November 2006, the Rev. Ted Haggard, senior pastor of New Life Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado, publicly stated that he “could not continue to minister under the cloud created by the accusations made on [a] Denver talk radio” program. He said, “I am voluntarily stepping aside from leadership so that the overseer process can be allowed to proceed with integrity. I hope to be able to discuss this matter more in detail at a later date. In the interim, I will seek both spiritual advice and guidance.” At New Life Church, Ted Haggard was under the oversight of three pastors from the state of Colorado and one pastor from the state of Louisiana. These four men constitute the Overseer Board.

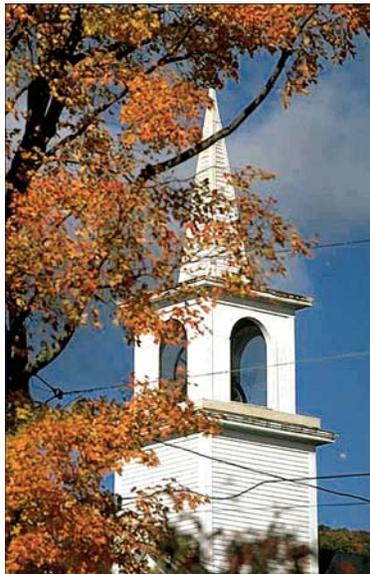
On 03 November 2006, the national media broadcast that Pastor Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, had resigned from the leadership team. Evangelicals were stunned on 04 Nov. 2006 to hear that the Overseer Board announced that they had concluded their investigation and declared that Ted Haggard was guilty of “moral failings.” In a written statement they said, “Our investigation and Pastor Haggard’s public statements have proven without a doubt that he has committed sexually immoral conduct.” The sexually immoral conduct they referred to was homosexual activity. Since then the website of New Life Church has removed the availability to all of his sermons and the former music minister has been given the role of interim senior pastor.

**THE RESPONSE.** In response some people have lashed out against Christians, criticizing them as hypocrites and calling them homophobic. Others have ridiculed the Bible claiming that the Bible does not have anything to say against

homosexuality. Unfortunately for Ted Haggard and the 14,000 men and women who have been attending New Life Church, these days are sad and painful. Those who attend the church were stunned and brought to tears by the pastor’s confession of sexual immorality.

Some in the national media have called for forgiveness and understanding. In contrast, some support the decision of the Overseer Board. How should we respond? Jesus did teach us to forgive, and forgive, and forgive. That was Jesus’ message to Peter.

Then Peter came and said to Him, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus \*said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. (NASB) Matt. 18:21-22



For many people, that is the correct answer. Yet, there is something more.

**TYPES OF SINS.** Most people, Christians and non-Christians, believe that sexual sins should result in a pastor, rabbi, bishop, or priest being removed from his “spiritual ministry.” But what does the Bible teach and are there other sins that should result in one’s removal? If we look

closely at the New Testament, we discover that Christians were rebuked publicly for a variety of sins - not just for sexual sin or divorce.

In Acts 5 we are told that Ananias and his wife Sapphira had sold some land. Then Ananias came to the Apostle Peter and claimed that he was giving all of it to the church. He ignored God’s disapproval of lying, and consequently died. Later his wife came in and made the same false claim. As a result, she died too! The news spread like fire; and in Acts

5:11-12, we discover that non-Christians were afraid to join the Christians. This is an example of sinful behavior that resulted in the discipline of two believers. It was not a sexual sin, and the discipline was public.

In the church at Corinth, Paul encouraged the believers to remove a mother and her son for engaging in sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:13). Paul's concern was two-fold. 1) Sin that is ignored sends the message to others that the sin is acceptable (1 Cor. 5:6-7). 2) Sin that is ignored does not help the individual turn from his or her sin (Gal. 6:1-2). Helping one stop is a true act of love. This was an example of sexual sin. Once again the discipline was public.

In 2 Timothy 2:17-18 we discover that the Apostle Paul openly rebuked Hymenaeus and Philetus for teaching false doctrine about the future or the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is clear from the passage that their teaching was very public. This is an example of false teachers. As a result, they were publicly rebuked.

A very common sin is described in 3 John 9-11. The individual's name was Diotrephes. He was a controlling leader in a church. The Apostle John warned in an open letter, 3 John, that if Diotrephes did not change, he (John) would take action against him. The leader's sin was pride, evil words, sinful conduct, and control of others. The rebuke and warning were public.

In reality, any Christian who exhibits any pattern of sinful conduct and is unwilling to stop should be approached and encouraged to stop. If he is unwilling to stop, then the principles that Jesus gave us in Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2:1-11, Galatians 6:1-2 should be followed. If he repents, we have rescued a brother caught in sin. If he refuses to stop, ultimately he may need to be removed just as Jesus directed.

**RESTORATION.** The goal of reaching out to any believer caught in a pattern of ongoing sin is to help him stop sinning and then restore him. Restoration takes time, and it is not accomplished in days, weeks, or even a few months. For some habitual patterns of sin, it can take years.

For an elder, that is, a church leader or pastor, to be restored to ministry, the biblical qualifications have to be reviewed. The man needs to demonstrate that he once again

is spiritually qualified - his pattern of life is holy. The amount of time varies with the individual. To establish a new pattern of life requires years. Some may never be able to reenter the ministry.

The document *Recovering The Pattern of Biblical Leadership* discusses the qualifications of church leaders and pastors.

**CONCLUSION.** The Apostle Paul taught us in 1 Timothy 5 that even a beloved, gifted leader or a pastor in a church should not be given special favor.

*Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. (NASB) 1 Tim. 5:19-21*

Pastors and leaders are supposed to be examples to the flock,

*... I exhort the elders among you ... be examples to the flock. (NASB) 1 Pet. 5:1-3*

They are not to be an Ananias, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Diotrephes, committing some sexual sin, or indulging in some other sin. If they are guilty of a pattern of sin, God wants us to follow the principles of church discipline and attempt to restore our leaders and pastors, as well as any believer to holiness.

*... like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY." (NASB) 1 Pet. 1:15-16*

May the Lord be honored in our conduct.