



by DAVID GUNN

# Preventing Ministry Collapse

My hometown, Chicago, is known for many things—some of them popular, others less so. Most people love our pizza, Italian beef sandwiches, and skyline. The political corruption, bad traffic, and high taxes, not so much. But it's a fascinating city with an interesting history and a culture all its own, and most of the time it's a great place to live.

Until recently, Chicagoland also had the distinction of being home to two of the highest-profile megachurch pastors in evangelicalism: Bill Hybels and James MacDonald. These two were powerhouses. They worked tirelessly at their preaching and writing ministries, achieving, at least in human terms, an astonishing level of success. Countless multitudes were influenced by their teaching. "Willow Creek" and "Harvest Bible Chapel" were more than just church names—they were built up into *brands* worth millions of dollars. In some sectors of Christendom, Hybels and MacDonald were revered and treated like celebrities. Their ministries seemed unstoppable and destined for greatness. Everything was coming up roses for Bill Hybels and James MacDonald.

Until it wasn't anymore.

Funny thing about secret sins: they tend not to stay secret forever. And when God sovereignly brings to light the things that we would prefer to conceal, the consequences can be devastating. They certainly were for Hybels and MacDonald,

and not just for their personal relationships and reputations. The churches and ministries these men spent decades building are now saddled with the stigma of controversy and scandal—maybe permanently. The cause of Christ and His reputation take a hit every time something like this happens. The long-term damage caused by these high-profile ministry collapses may be well-nigh incalculable.

Of course, the Hybels and MacDonald implosions are bound to receive a great deal of public attention, since these men were public figures. But all around the world, churches and parachurch organizations of all shapes and sizes are vulnerable to ministry collapse. And it isn't always because of secret sins or improprieties on the part of the pastor or ministry leader; churches and ministries can find themselves imploding for any number of reasons. This can be a painful thing to think and talk about, but the threat of ministry collapse is something that all Christians should carefully consider and take steps to guard against. Of course, there are no panaceas that will infallibly inoculate against the possibility of ministry collapse. But I'm convinced there are steps we can take and attitudes we can internalize that will go a long way toward preventing these kinds of tragic downfalls. The bulk of this *Baptist Bulletin* issue considers three important preventative measures: prioritizing personal sanctification, understanding Biblical servant leadership, and following New Testament patterns for congregational church polity. The articles by Drs. Taylor, Slusser, and Straub will flesh these concepts out in greater detail. But first, I'd like to sketch them out in a more general way.

## Prioritizing Personal Sanctification

Ministry is hard. It isn't for the faint of heart or the easily distracted. A minister's schedule can be incredibly time consuming and emotionally draining. When the demands on a minister's time begin to pile up, it isn't uncommon for things to get shoved to the side. After all, there are only so many hours in a day. To fit everything in that *must* be done, sometimes we neglect to do some of the things that *should* be done.

All too often, that includes the pastor's pursuit of his own personal sanctification. In his busyness tending to the spiritual needs of others, a minister can easily fall prey to neglecting his own soul-care. "I'll get back into the Word tomorrow," he tells himself. But tomorrow never seems to arrive. The next thing he knows, several months have gone by, and the pastor is spiritually depleted and cruising toward burnout. Even worse, he's opened himself up to temptation by failing to actively abide in Christ, the source of all strength and spiritual vitality.

Simply put, moral failure doesn't happen overnight. A spiritually healthy Christian who is actively pursuing Christ-likeness through the process of sanctification doesn't just wake up one day and decide out of the blue to embezzle money, abuse power, or pursue an adulterous affair. These kinds of failings usually don't happen until after a multitude of smaller, less overt moral and spiritual compromises have already taken place. Usually those compromises are difficult to detect because they occur in the battlefield of the mind, not in the world of tangible shapes and concrete acts. That's why Jesus warned us to take heed of our motivations and the inner life of our hearts, not just of our external actions (Matt. 5:21–6:18).

The best remedy to this downward spiral into compromise and spiritual decay is to follow Jesus—imperfectly, of course, but intentionally and steadfastly—every single day. None of us can be spiritually vibrant and pleasing to God without regularly pursuing Christ through the spiritual disciplines.

## Understanding Biblical Servant Leadership

Ministry is both a privilege and a responsibility. With it comes a certain amount of power and influence, and we are responsible to use that power and influence in ways that are faithful to Scripture and honoring to God. In short, we are called to exercise *servant leadership*.

The Bible's view of leadership is shockingly counterintuitive. By nature, humans tend to be drawn toward authoritarianism. We are wired to crave and pursue status and power and to use them for personal enrichment. This is how most leaders down through the centuries have wielded their power.

Not Jesus. He came not as a CEO but as a servant. Numerous passages speak to Jesus' servantship, but perhaps none more directly and cogently than Philippians 2:5–8. Here we read that Christ, "being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of

death, even the death of the cross."

Jesus Christ—Israel's Messiah and God the Son incarnate—possessed within Himself all power and authority and majesty. Of all people, He could have led with an iron fist. He could have asserted His rights and claimed His due. He could have trampled underfoot all who did not share His concerns or cherish His priorities.

But He didn't. Jesus came as a servant, and He chose to subject Himself to disgrace, humiliation, and even death in the pursuit of serving others. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve," He said. And so also should we—especially those of us who are privileged to minister in Christ's name. Simon Peter—who had to learn this lesson the hard way—put it well:

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. (1 Peter 5:2–4)

## Following Congregational Church Polity

Lord Acton famously remarked, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." It's a very bleak commentary on the character of human leaders, but all too often it's true. And Christian ministers are no less vulnerable to the corrosive, corrupting effects of power than the unregenerate.

One of the tried and true methods for combatting this effect is to decentralize and divide power. I suspect that is one of the reasons that the clear New Testament pattern for church polity is *congregational* in nature. Pastors and deacons are given considerable decision-making power in the life of a church congregation, but ultimate power is not concentrated in their hands; rather, it is dispersed throughout the entirety of the congregation.

The theological case for congregationalism is rooted in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Since all the redeemed are alike children of God, recipients of the Holy Spirit, and able to approach the Father through the intercessory work of our Great High Priest, all are therefore to be involved in the governance and decision-making processes of the local church. This can be messy sometimes, but as Jeff Straub cogently argues, it is the New Testament pattern. And one of the many benefits of responsibly implementing congregational church polity is that it mitigates the cultivation of corruption and heavy-handed leadership practices among officers of the church. When power is shared, it becomes much more difficult for a single person or small group of people to abuse that power toward unsanctified ends. And that, in turn, tends to decrease the chances of ministry collapse.

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