

Lessons from the Hillsong Controversy

Forty-seven years ago this month *Charisma* became “the magazine on Spirit-Led Living,” in the heyday of the charismatic movement. Each week we learned of outpourings of the Holy Spirit on a new church or denomination. It was an exciting time to report what the Spirit was doing in the world—something few other journalists were doing.

We heard of a few ministers stepping down due to indiscretions, but we didn’t report on those because everyone was excited about the good things God was doing. We acted as if the bad things didn’t exist. In 1981, reality struck—my longtime pastor stepped down when a series of affairs came to light. My mentor Jamie Buckingham, who had been crushed by his own moral failures, helped me work through my disappointment. He understood; the pain of his own failures opened his heart to the baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1967.

Then came 1987, when the secular media played up the PTL scandal followed by Jimmy Swaggart’s. I remember how devastating this was to the body of Christ. Large, prospering ministries were winning thousands to Jesus—but now, they were a national laughingstock. In that coming-of-age era for *Charisma*, we tackled the tragedies with a cover story by Jamie Buckingham in June 1987 called “God Is Shaking His Church.”

Which brings us to today, when one of the best examples of a Pentecostal megachurch, Hillsong Church of Australia, is in the news while a critical documentary is circulating. I watched it in disbelief. Hillsong blessed believers with wonderful songs and stood as an example of service to its community. The church’s theology was spot-on and no-compromise when many churches are going liberal or woke.

Like most megachurches, Hillsong has had its critics. When founder Brian Houston ran into legal problems over how the church handled a horrific problem with pedophilia with his own father in the 1990s, it was suddenly front-page news. After the press reported that Carl Lentz, the flamboyant pastor of Hillsong NYC, was having an affair, things began falling apart. As this issue's cover story reports, several churches left the fledgling Hillsong denomination, and additional charges came out about Houston until he stepped down. Suddenly this was a problem that demanded attention, one we have sought to handle with love and mercy.

My purpose in writing this is to help us learn. *Charisma* senior contributing editor Lee Grady and I have written about how celebrity status can lure anyone into deception. A successful entrepreneur, politician or athlete can succumb to fame. But for the rest of us who may never be tempted this way, the enemy of our souls attacks families and churches; people get hurt and are pulled away from Christ. It's sad when these things happen because they shouldn't. But bad things happen to good people, and the Bible is full of examples of men and women of God who failed—yet God used them anyway.

I discuss these issues in my new book that releases in 2023 called *Spirit-Led Living in an Upside-Down World*. I address the Hillsong controversy as an example of how we deal with issues in leadership in the body of Christ. The book's point is that we must be led by the Holy Spirit to deal with woke culture, the march toward one-world government and perhaps the worst of times. But the Holy Spirit must also help us grow and have peace with God and purpose to do His will. He must empower us to continue serving Him and growing in grace no matter how bad things get.

Hillsong is not the worst scandal ever. If anything, it reminds us how the media loves to criticize Pentecostals and is an example of why we must face our problems, trust God and continue to be led by the Holy Spirit.