

Can We Prevent Sex Scandals in the Church?

Those of us who care deeply about the health of the global church have been in mourning the past few weeks as yet another sexual scandal has surfaced, this one involving 25,000-member Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago and its founder, Bill Hybels.

I was hoping this was only a nightmare, but it's really happening. We'd rather sweep the whole mess under the rug, but apparently there has already been too much cover-up. Repentance requires us to face the ugly truth. It also requires us to have the courage to treat victims of abuse with compassion rather than silencing or shaming them.

All told, 10 women have come forward with allegations that Hybels, who is 66, engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior with them when they were on staff at Willow Creek. Hybels has denied the charges, but the entire elder board of the church and two lead pastors resigned this month because they believe they mishandled the accusations.

Hybels also announced back in April that he was stepping down six months in advance of his planned retirement. As Willow Creek begins a slow and painful process toward recovery, many questions will have to be answered: How does a church handle allegations of abuse? How can leaders avoid the temptations that come along with ministry? And how do potential victims of abuse respond when a powerful, charismatic leader lures them into wrong behavior?

It's not like these issues were never discussed before. After all, Hybels' book *Who Are You When No One Is Looking?* has sold more than 300,000 copies. He has made a career of teaching leaders how to develop character and personal integrity.

Hybels is the guy we consulted when other leaders disappointed us.

This latest scandal is a huge reminder, for me, that no one is infallible. There is nothing you or I can do to guarantee 100 percent that we will never stumble. We are all flawed. We all live with the possibility of failure. But in times like these I go back to some simple guidelines that have helped me to avoid becoming another statistic:

1. Keep the Spirit's fire burning. No man or woman who prays regularly, worships God intimately, reads the Bible consistently and knows God's grace personally is going to fall into sexual sin. When we are full of God's Spirit, His fire will keep us far away from the edge of moral failure. It's only when a person loses his first love for Jesus that he drifts toward sinful desires.

2. Avoid every sexually compromising situation. It's never wise to play next to the edge of a cliff. Yet Christians today seem to think it's spiritual to flirt, literally, with danger. The Bible says: "Flee from youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22a, NASB). "Flee" does not mean linger, loiter or dawdle, nor does it mean wink to see if you get a wink back. It means run!

If you are guilty of making suggestive come-ons, counseling people with no precautions in place, sexting or letting friendships become romantic entanglements, you are headed toward a moral failure. Repeat this over and over: "Don't be stupid. Don't be stupid." Stop compromising. Draw boundaries, and live as far from the edge of sexual sin as possible.

3. Be on guard for traps. In Proverbs, the author warns his son never to go anywhere near the adulteress' house. He also says of her: "For the lips of an immoral woman drip as a honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil" (Prov. 5:3, MEV). The reason so many great Christians fall into sexual sin is that they don't realize its deceptive power.

Immoral sexual attraction clouds judgment and makes men and women do really dumb things that mess up their lives. (Consider King David, who murdered a man to hide his sin after he caught sight of the guy's wife while she was bathing!) The best way to steer clear of sexual sin is to stay 50 miles away from the person who is sending the subtle hints. Don't be fooled by another person's seduction or by your own seductive urges.

4. Keep your mind cleared of sexual debris. I counsel many Christian guys who battle with pornography. Technology has made it more accessible than ever, but that doesn't change the fact that porn works like a computer virus to destroy your moral resistance. A man with "porn on the brain" is much more likely to end up in bed with someone who is not his wife. If you have this problem, get your brain debugged as soon as possible.

5. Don't live in spiritual isolation. Almost every minister I know who fell into sexual scandal was living in a private world with no accountability. If you study the habit patterns of adulterers you find that after they start going down the path of sin they become distant and secretive. God has called us to live in the light (see 1 John 1:7), and that means we should give our close Christian friends the right to confront us and ask hard questions. Don't live in isolation. Be transparent.

6. Keep your own marriage exciting. If you are married, one sure way to stay out of someone else's bed is to be satisfied with your own. Solomon told his son: "Rejoice in the wife of your youth ... be exhilarated always with her love" (Prov. 5:18b, 19b, NASB). Never talk yourself into believing that you have a "right" to adultery because the sizzle went out of your marriage. Your selfish attitude is probably the reason the sizzle died.

Moral failures will continue to scandalize the church, and we

will continue to extend grace and forgiveness to those who have fallen. But with Jesus, sexual purity is possible. Let's do a better job of teaching Christians to walk in it.