

How Does a Pastor Finish Well?

Last Thursday, Steven Earp, a sharp young pastor from Oklahoma, visited me at my office and asked me, “How can I win long-term and finish well?” Our conversation prompted me to write this commentary. But I’m curious: How would you have answered?

Earp’s visit came the same week as another pastor in my city admitted to having an affair. Lee Grady wrote about it here with some very impressive insights, and Jennifer LeClaire commented on it this week with “Why Megachurch Pastors Keep Falling Into Sexual Immorality.”

Earp, at only 38, is the lead pastor of Elevate Church in Moore, Okla. It is a 19-month-old church that has already about 300 members. We met through a mutual friend from Oklahoma City who told me that Earp is “the real deal.”

That was evidenced by the maturity of his questions:

- What are problems to avoid as I get more influential and more known in my corner of the kingdom?
- You have seen up-close successful leaders grow, win and fall. What are the common problems to avoid?
- How can you tell when a guy is on a dangerous path, or do you have to get up close and personal to know what to look for?
- How can I win long-term and finish well?

I was surprised by the questions, because I thought he was coming for a social visit and not for counsel. However, I have been asked these questions before, and I’ve had to grapple with these issues in my own life and in the lives of close friends.

I told him of these ways that people get into trouble, whether they are in Christian leadership or just church members: money, power and sex. Or as someone else put it: gold, glory and girls.

I also told him that, in everyone's life, there will come times of crisis. And sometimes the crisis is not of our own making. A close friend of mine is going through the worst time of his life because his very sharp 25-year-old son, who had overcome addiction and was enthusiastically serving Christ, died after a momentary relapse and overdosed on drugs.

I told Steven that you have to expect these crises and plan how you'll respond (a point that Lee Grady makes).

But I told him that the answer to his questions boils down to one word: *humility*. If we are humble before the Lord, we will know we are vulnerable to fall. We will also be careful not to have what Mike Bickle calls the "2 percent wiggle room," in which otherwise mature Christians will allow themselves to compromise in small ways.

Humility will also cause someone to have the kind of transparent, accountable relationships that prevent a lot of other problems, such as greed and the lust for power.

Do you agree with me? If he had asked you these questions, what would you have said? Please share any comments below.

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