

What We Must Learn From the Zachery Tims Tragedy

God has something sobering to say to us through the death of this popular preacher.

Zachery Tims' story had a great beginning. As a young man he met Jesus and was saved from a life of crime and drugs. He and his wife, Riva, moved from Baltimore to Orlando, Fla., in 1996 to launch a church that aimed to restore families and pull teens out of trouble. New Destiny Christian Center grew fast, mostly because of Tims' passionate preaching. He was soon a regular on Christian television.

But things unraveled in 2009 when Tims was caught carrying on a yearlong affair with a stripper he met in France. He admitted to an "indiscretion" and got a few weeks of counseling, but he didn't take serious time off for rehabilitation. Riva divorced him for his infidelity. The billboards that once featured photos of the happy couple were changed. By 2011 the roadside ads featured a shot of Tims by himself, with this slogan: "A Family Church Meeting Family Needs."

This story did not end well. On Aug. 12, Tims was found dead—at age 42—in a New York City hotel room. His four children lost their dad, and his church lost their beloved leader. But while Tims' family and friends are grieving their loss (and I'm not minimizing that because the pain is real), I'm also grieving over the fact that the wider body of Christ has yet another embarrassing religious scandal to explain. We can't gloss over this.

There are so many aspects of this story that should cause us to lament. How did a preacher get involved with a stripper? Why didn't Tims put himself on the bench for at least a year

after his sin was exposed? Why did Christian television keep him on the air after his affair became public? Why did his church continue to attract crowds when people knew Tims' behavior did not match the biblical standards of morality required for church leaders?

It's especially troubling that the people closest to Tims—church elders, advisers and mentors—didn't hold his feet to the fire. They were in such a hurry to “restore” him to the pulpit that they ignored his need for personal healing. They were so eager to exonerate him from all wrong that they couldn't wait to see the genuine fruit of repentance—which takes time to develop in a person who has been living a life of denials, deception and secret sin.

Now a man is dead. We don't know yet why Tims died in his room on the 37th floor at the W Hotel in Manhattan. Police are still investigating. But I believe this tragedy could have been avoided if Tims and the people in his inner circle had followed the forgotten principle of biblical discipline.

Some critics have called me a judgmental stone-thrower because I believe leaders should step down for a year or more after a moral failure. In our permissive culture we've lost the will to confront. God's commandments have become suggestions. Accountability is viewed as legalistic. Morality has been redefined. And we've dropped holiness from our vocabulary.

As a result of our spiritual laxness, congregations not only tolerate but celebrate leaders who are unrepentant about their moral failures. As long as adulterous preachers tickle ears and soothe guilty consciences with empty words about prosperity, big crowds will keep the offering plates full. This fake religious game is a mockery of all that is decent and godly.

I won't win any popularity contests for saying this. But I believe the Lord is speaking a sobering message to us through

the death of Zachery Tims. God will not be mocked. As in the days of Isaiah, the Lord is saying to His people: "I've had enough!" (Is. 1:11, NASB).

The Lord is weary of our religious games. He's going to close down the show. Judgment begins in the house of God. The fire of His holiness is going to be unleashed on the American church. Ministries that have been built on personality, pride, hype, charlatanism, fakery and compromise are going to crumble.

Leaders who strut on the stage, pretending to be men of God while hiding gross immorality, are on a collision course with the same God who struck Ananias and Sapphira dead in the book of Acts. We who celebrate God's kindness must also know His severity. We who love to preach about His mercy must also know "it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). We who sing about heaven must also warn people about hell.

God said to His wayward people in Isaiah 1:24-26: "I will be relieved of My adversaries, and avenge Myself on My foes; I will also turn My hand against you, and will smelt away your dross as with lye and will remove all your alloy. Then I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning; after that you will be called the city of righteousness, a faithful city."

As we mourn the death of Zachery Tims, let's pray that the Lord's fearful judgments will lead His people back to true humility and faithfulness.

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