

What Happened to Holiness?

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 in 1996 to launch a church that aimed to pull teens out of trouble. New Destiny Christian Center grew fast, and Tims was soon a regular on Christian television.

But things unraveled in 2009 when the young preacher was caught in an affair with a stripper he met in France. He admitted to an "indiscretion" and got counseling, but he didn't take serious time off for rehabilitation. Riva divorced him for his infidelity.

The 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 face enormous grief, I'm also grieving over the fact that the body of Christ has yet another embarrassing religious scandal to explain.

There are so many questions. How did Tims get involved with a stripper? Why didn't he 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 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 still don't know yet why Tims died in his room on the 37th floor at the W Hotel in Manhattan. But this tragedy could have been avoided if Tims and 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.

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 a popularity contest for saying this. But 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).

Judgment begins in the house of God. 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.

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.

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

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