

Pastors and Politicians, Leadership Is a Privilege, Not a Right

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford recently admitted to smoking crack—but he said he had a good excuse. It was only because he was in a drunken stupor. Then the next day, a profanity-laced video came to light, where he must have been drunk, high or both. In it, he seems ready to fight someone—and plans to kill him.

Despite it all, Ford will not resign his position. “I was elected to do a job, and that’s exactly what I’m going to continue doing,” he says, adding, “I have nothing left to hide.” Then the video came out.

A few months ago we witnessed the San Diego mayor being accused of multiple counts of sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances. Only after much pressure did he self-sentence himself to a stint in rehab, which he cut short to get back to his important duties as mayor.

And then there is Anthony Wiener, who seems to have an addiction to online fantasies. Despite immense pressure, he vowed to continue his campaign for mayor of New York City. He lost badly.

I am not going to kick any of these guys while they are down. (Although the San Diego mayor’s actions are particularly heinous, because his actions may have caused long-term emotional damage to women.) My concern here is not what they did—we are all capable of sin—but the addiction to power that reveals itself in the aftermath of all these stories.

These men put their families through emotional hell in order to stay in power. I can forgive a leader for falling into sin. I can have mercy on a pastor who makes a mistake and repents.

What I don't understand is the battle that inevitably seems to follow—the battle to stay in power. At a time when most people would not even want to be seen in public, they seem to stop at nothing to retain their control.

In all of these political stories, as well as many I could name in the church, the leader feels he has a right to power. Sometimes, as I noted in my last blog post, he will resort to claims of being God's anointed. But more often the broken leader will say, "The people need me. Things will fall apart without me." They behave as if no action could disqualify them from continuing in their position.

Pastor Ted Haggard, after not only engaging in homosexuality, but seeking homosexual sex from at least one youth minister (who accused the pastor of performing an unwanted sexual act in front of him in a hotel room), returned to Colorado Springs, claiming God called him there. He was oblivious to the pain he has caused to so many people, claiming that his calling was of utmost importance.

I remember, in 2007, when a leading megachurch pastoral couple announced their divorce, the husband said he was now going to devote himself to being the best father and pastor he could be. He didn't seem to understand that getting divorced, without even taking a small break from ministry, would be the exact opposite of being the best father and pastor he could be.

Leadership is hard. We get beat up. Our kids sometimes suffer from the warfare connected to it. But there are standards for leadership (1 Tim 3:1ff). And when we engage in immoral behavior, we are expected to step down—at least for a season of healing (not self-imposed, but a process overseen by others who care for us). We are not to declare ourselves healed and ready to re-enter public ministry, but to seek that affirmation from the leadership team to whom we are submitted.

According to Paul, some things can disqualify one from ministry: "I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27, NLT).

Here are a few things you can do to lower the chances of needing to step down:

1. Surround yourself with godly men who will speak the truth to you. So many leaders just want yes-men and spiritual eunuchs on their team, but Proverbs 27:6 says, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses" (NIV).

2. Have regular meetings with a counselor or life coach with whom you can share everything. Are you being tempted? You need someone to talk to. Are you stuck in destructive behavior but know if you share it with anyone on your team, they won't be able to help you or handle it? You need a trained counselor.

3. Don't present yourself to your congregation—or yourself—as irreplaceable. As the old saying goes, no one is indispensable. Yes, the call of God on our lives means we are uniquely gifted to minister, but God can give grace to another. And if you are unique, use that as motivation to stay on the straight and narrow.

4. Stay humble. As a young elder, I was arrogant and in over my head. People perceived that and did not respect me. I resented this. However, when I humbled myself before the congregation and resigned as an elder in tears of repentance, the congregation gave me a standing ovation. Respect only came when I humbled myself and stopped seeking it. "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6, NKJV).

I pray that you never do anything that would cause you to be removed from ministry. But if you do, learn from the lessons above. Submit yourself to restoration, and don't claim God just can't survive without you.

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