

A Charismatic Enron?

Those leaders with a spirit of entitlement should be disqualified.

Twenty years ago we were holding our heads down in shame as we endured the ugly PTL scandal—which added new phrases to our national vocabulary such as “air-conditioned dog house” and “gold-plated faucets.” Televangelist Jim Bakker went to prison, and many disillusioned people lost faith in evangelical ministries because donor funds were misused.

Hopefully we learned some lessons from that debacle. Or did we? I don’t know about you, but I’m having flashbacks from 1987.

It was déjà vu all over again when leaders at Oral Roberts University were accused of serious ethical and financial wrongdoing in October. In a lawsuit filed by three professors, ORU officials, including its president, Richard Roberts, were accused of misusing donor funds and violating IRS tax codes. The suit triggered an uproar in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where ORU’s 5,300 students, as well as alumni, faculty and community leaders, are now forced to take sides while the school’s reputation hangs in the balance.

The professors who filed the suit say they took legal action because ORU’s Board of Regents would not listen to their grievances. Before Richard Roberts temporarily stepped down from his post, he told students that the lawsuit is about “intimidation, blackmail and extortion,” and he announced to a national television audience on Larry King Live that all the allegations are false.

It is way too early to make judgments about the case (although that hasn't stopped zealous bloggers from calling for Roberts' head). Our legal system guarantees that people are innocent until proved guilty. I hope things will cool off so that responsible adults can sort through the mess, throw out any false accusations, correct any wrongs and preserve an institution that has served the cause of Christ since it was founded in 1963.

The worst thing that could happen is that the ORU scandal could become our Christian version of Enron. While we pray for everyone at ORU (and that should be first on our agenda), I'd like to challenge all churches in this country to use the unfortunate situation as a learning experience.

If a ministry is getting sloppy in any area of legal or ethical compliance, its leaders should take this simple test—which is based on the word “Enron.” The letters in that infamous name form a helpful acrostic:

E is for entitlement. Do leaders in your church or organization believe they deserve to be treated like kings? That style may work OK in a monarchy, but Jesus said that in His kingdom leaders must behave like servants. Those with a spirit of entitlement should be disqualified.

N is for nepotism. When leaders show favoritism to family members, they create arbitrary double standards. Christian organizations must stop building spiritual dynasties.

R is for robbery. If a Christian leader is using donor funds to purchase lavish perks for himself, he is stealing from God. Let's call it what it is. Though the Bible makes it clear that

a Christian worker is worthy of his hire, it also condemns ministers who have their hands in the coffer. When the prophet Malachi asked the probing question, “Will a man rob God?” (Mal. 3:8, NASB), he was not addressing just the people who didn’t tithe. He was pointing also to priests who stole part of the offerings meant for the poor.

O is for overinflated egos. Too many leaders today are drunk with power. Like Nebuchadnezzar, their pride has caused them to go insane. When an egomaniac drives an organization, you can be sure he will eventually crash—and hurt a lot of people in the process.

N is for negligence. God looks for integrity in the little things. He judges leaders not by the size of the crowd or the volume of their preaching but by the way they conduct themselves when no one is looking. In this hour when our enemies are ready to pounce on our every mistake, we must be faithful in the smallest things. That means we must get our houses in order financially.

As the Board of Regents looks into the allegations at ORU, let’s pray that God will guide the process so the school’s credibility will be restored and its mission accomplished.

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