

A Hero Has Fallen

Pride is usually the root of most moral failures.

Most people had never heard of Ted Haggard when I sat down with him at a restaurant in Colorado Springs in 1993 to conduct one of his first interviews with the Christian media. He talked about his many nights of prayer near Pikes Peak. He shared that witches had left animal parts on his doorstep. He told how he “prayer walked” a segment of property near his church and claimed it for God—and how it was later purchased to be the headquarters for Focus on the Family.

When I wrote a cover story about Ted for Charisma I made a new friend, and I even considered going to work for him. His gregarious personality, his refreshing commitment to teamwork rather than the one-man-show, and his passion for prayer and evangelism made me want to pull up roots and move to the Rockies.

I almost became a Ted Haggard groupie. And who wouldn't want to follow him? He is funny, open about his personal struggles and eager to connect leaders in the church who don't see eye to eye. He became a role model and a standard-bearer.

I wasn't surprised when Ted's New Life Church began to experience explosive growth. With that growth came more media exposure—and soon Ted was the poster child for American evangelicals. His boyish grin appeared in major newspapers and he often was asked to provide the obligatory Christian response on news programs. Most of us were relieved that someone with such an honest, nonreligious style could be our spokesman.

But we all gasped collectively in November when Ted admitted that he'd been involved with a male prostitute in Denver. It seemed like a bad dream when he abruptly left his pastoral position and resigned from his post at the National Association of Evangelicals. For me, the reality didn't hit until he told his church, "I am a liar and a deceiver."

Boom. Just like that, another hero had fallen.

Ironically, it was Ted who gave me hope that American church leaders could become relevant to their culture. Ted also taught me valuable lessons about integrity and personal accountability. That's why it was so devastating that this man had such a humiliating moral failure in front of a hostile audience.

Sin doesn't make sense, so we'll probably never completely understand why these tragedies happen. But I've nailed down three things we must remember as we assess this situation:

1. Ted deserves our long-time support. Leaders of New Life Church have already removed him from his pastoral role—a disciplinary action that he and his wife, Gayle, supported. Proper biblical discipline was applied, swiftly and with dignity. What the Haggard family needs now are our prayers for full recovery.

2. We must guard ourselves from the snare of pride. The Ted Haggard I knew in 1993 didn't care if anyone noticed the work he was doing. But after 10 years passed, he found himself in some heady situations, including conference calls with the White House and appearances on TV talk shows. Could you stay humble with those kinds of opportunities?

After televangelist Jim Bakker fell into adultery and went to prison for his financial misdeeds, he admitted that his big mistake was pride. It is usually the root of most moral failures. When we fall into pride, the grace to resist temptation wanes.

3. We must address homosexuality head-on. When news of Haggard's sin hit the fan, the gay community went ballistic over the apparent hypocrisy of churchgoers who publicly oppose homosexuality while they participate in it secretly. Homosexual activists want us to change our message to say that some people are born gay and are entitled to enjoy gay sex with God's approval.

We can't rewrite the Bible. Neither can we simply condemn homosexuality without giving a skeptical world proof that God's grace can overcome any sinful behavior. Although Ted Haggard fell from that grace, he has placed his life in the hands of the One who can repair his brokenness. Hopefully his eventual testimony of restoration will help many others do the same.

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