

A Sober Warning

Back in January we invited dozens of Christian leaders to Charisma's offices in Florida to talk honestly about the state of the American church. One of the people who attended that meeting was Joyce Rodgers, an evangelist who is well-known within her own denomination, the Church of God in Christ. Because I view Joyce as a respected spiritual mother and a true prophet of the Lord, I asked her to pray over the editors who work on this magazine.

When it was my turn, Joyce laid hands on me and prayed with her characteristic zeal. The Holy Spirit's encouragement flowed forcefully through this woman like water gushing out of a fire hydrant—and the spiritual strength I received that day gave me new courage to stay in the fight. I love it when God does that!

But as Joyce was about to end her prophetic utterance, she tacked on some words that haunted me for days. "Lee, don't ever lose your integrity," she said. "For if you lose your integrity, you will lose your power."

Ouch. That's not exactly the kind of prophecy that flatters the ego. I received Joyce's warning because I know the mark of a genuine prophet is that he or she not only brings encouragement but also is willing to confront sin, deal with wrong attitudes and uncover motives that are concealed in hard hearts.

So I took this admonition seriously. And I want to pass it on to you.

I don't need to convince anyone that we are experiencing an integrity crisis at the moment. The Enron scandal and Martha Stewart's crimes have shown us that integrity is in short supply in the business world. Yet we see the same lack of moral uprightness in the church, and it's on so many fronts:

Financial. Several national ministries were devastated this year by financial scams. Greedy people who professed to be doing God's work tricked other Christians into investing in a Ponzi scheme—and millions of dollars were lost. Message this sent to the world: Christians can't be trusted.

Ethical. USA Today, the nation's largest newspaper, investigated one of its own star reporters and then charged that he plagiarized material or made up stories. And the reporter is a born-again Christian. Message this sent to the world: Christians will lie to get ahead.

Moral. The divorce rate among Christian pastors and leaders today is unprecedented. I know some Bible-believing people who have suddenly thrown everything they ever preached out the window to satisfy a sexual fantasy.

What's bizarre is that entire congregations applaud Christian leaders who go off the moral deep end. I know one church that has kept a pastor in the pulpit even after police arrested him three times for indecent exposure!

Today a pastor can marry his third wife after two divorces and then write a book about how God's anointing isn't affected by a person's past mistakes. Message this sends to the world: Christians will figure out a way to justify adultery.

My prayer is that God will stop this madness before it infects us all. What we need is a healthy dose of His holy fire—the fire that melts pride, burns up greed and causes ministers to handle His Word with the respect it deserves. Let's reclaim our lost integrity before our salt loses all its flavor—and the church loses its credibility in the eyes of a watching world.