

Should We Restore Todd Bentley Again?

In 2008, Canadian-born evangelist Todd Bentley became a household name in charismatic circles when he aired nightly revival services from Lakeland, Florida, for several months. Bentley was known for shouting, “Bam!” as he smacked people on the head—or kicked them—during prayer for healing. He claimed that an angel had been sent by God to bring a great revival to America that would start in his meetings.

But as quickly as Bentley could say, “Bam!” the so-called Lakeland Revival imploded. The meetings, broadcast by GOD-TV, were shut down after news that Bentley had been carrying on an extramarital affair with a woman who had served as his family’s nanny. He later divorced his wife, Shonnah; married the second woman, Jessa; and moved to North Carolina to be quickly restored to ministry by author Rick Joyner.

Immediately after the first fiasco, Joyner provided spiritual oversight for Bentley and eventually became convinced the fallen preacher was ready to go back on the road. Bill Johnson, pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California, released a 2011 statement saying that he felt Bentley was ready to be back in the pulpit.

Fast-forward to 2019, and another Bentley scandal has erupted. Stephen Powell, who leads Lion of Light Ministries in Pineville, North Carolina, released a public statement last week saying he has evidence that Bentley has been engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior with both men and women over the past few years. Powell, an estranged protégé of Bentley’s, says he took his accusations to Rick Joyner and that Joyner didn’t do anything to protect the people hurt by Bentley.

Powell said he had evidence that, among other things, Bentley

solicited sex from a male intern for money, asked a female intern for nude photos and engaged in binge drinking after revival meetings.

“I believe Todd has proven over more than two decades of ministry, moral failures and abuse of others that he cannot be trusted with the care of God’s people,” said Powell in an Aug. 22 post on Facebook. “I believe Todd is not fit for public ministry. On top of his sexual sins, he has proven to be a compulsive liar, he lacks financial integrity when handling God’s money and he is a substance abuser that has drawn many others into these sins with him over the years.”

Bentley posted a rambling response to his former associate on Aug. 23. While admitting that he does “have a past,” he called Powell’s charges gossip and hearsay. “The majority of these accusations are absolutely not true. Not all, but the majority,” Bentley said. “However, there are some that are true, some that even are partial truths. Much are exaggerated and are based on personal speculation.”

Joyner also posted a video response, saying he completed Bentley’s restoration process in 2012 and no longer provides spiritual covering for him. Joyner also accused Powell of “witchcraft” for coming forward with the embarrassing charges.

This ugly scandal, which feels like deja vu all over again, has triggered numerous questions from ministry leaders and people in the pews about how to deal with preachers who fail morally. How long is a restoration process? How long should a fallen leader step out of ministry? Should there be a “three strikes and you’re out” rule? Is a leader ever permanently disqualified?

Obviously, the Bible offers all Christians forgiveness after a serious failure—and Galatians 6:1a (NASB) calls us to restore anyone who is “caught in any trespass.” But does that mean we automatically put fallen leaders back in their positions, even

if their sins hurt people deeply? And what if the leaders don't exhibit true repentance?

Prophet and author Loren Sanford stepped into the discussion this week and posted a sobering video response to the Todd Bentley scandal—and he didn't dilute his message with cheap grace. Sanford actually said Bentley should never have been allowed to go back into ministry after his 2008 failure.

"If Todd had been under my care," Sanford said in a Facebook video posted on Aug. 26, "he would never have been allowed to stand on a stage again. Based on what he did, I don't believe he can ever make his current marriage right. That doesn't mean I reject him as a Christian. I would accept him in the church as a layperson, but never again as a leader."

I totally agree. I would never tell anyone that they are beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. I can accept Todd Bentley as my brother in Christ even if he has made horrible mistakes. But that doesn't mean I would trust him to lead a ministry—especially if he has not shown the necessary signs of repentance.

Paul warned Timothy not to lay hands on a young leader too quickly because he would "share responsibility for the sins of others" (see 1 Tim. 5:22). That means if we put a leader in a position of influence when we know he has the potential for harm, we are partly to blame for his abuses.

This latest situation is a disaster—for Bentley, for the interns and other associates who were hurt by him, and for the countless people who followed Bentley for a second time. When the Lakeland Revival crumbled in 2008, many people quit church altogether because they felt defrauded. Now it has happened again. And it makes the charismatic church look foolish, because we don't have systems in place to protect people from leaders who look great on stage but secretly live in sin.

Personally, I blame the system for this current mess. We

charismatics are more enamored with “the anointing” than character. We run after healings and miracles, even if they are questionably manufactured. We chase gold dust, feathers, goosebumps and smackdowns instead of holiness, biblical revelation and true repentance. We are addicted to hype.

More than a decade ago some people put Todd Bentley on a pedestal because he claimed to have exotic supernatural powers—and many didn’t care that he abandoned one wife for another. Now we are paying for that folly. It remains to be seen whether we will clean up our act this time. {eoa}