

What the Church Should Learn From the Bill Hybels Scandal

Once again, a well-known pastor is making headlines across the country. And, as is too often the case, the story is about sexual misconduct and even sexual abuse.

Bill Hybels, the founder of Chicago's Willow Creek megachurch, was accused by former church employee Pat Baranowski of inappropriate sexual conduct and abuse during the 1980s.

This is not the first time Hybels has been the subject of such claims. In March, Hybels had been accused by several women of inappropriate behavior that occurred several decades earlier. In April, he announced to his congregation that he would speed up his planned retirement by six months and resign immediately.

Two investigations, one by the church and the other by an outside lawyer, cleared Hybels of those claims. But Baranowski's accounts are more serious and indicate Hybel's behavior was ongoing and not an isolated incident. In light of these recent allegations, Willow Creek has vowed to conduct another investigation.

It is important to understand that church leaders are human, and they face the same struggles as everyone else. Pastors are held to a higher standard than anyone else, so when they fall, they fall hard. Sadly, in many situations where a church leader has a moral failing, they are publicly shamed and shafted by the church. This forces leaders who are struggling to keep silent and continue in their downward spiral of destruction. Churches must have in place discipleship to prevent this from happening, and a process of healing for when it does occur.

A Troubling Pattern

Hybels is just one of many ministers to be accused of sexual misconduct. Since the 1980s, preachers such as Jimmy Swaggert, Andy Savage and Ted Haggard have been involved in sex scandals.

Catholic priests, including a number of cardinals, have also been involved in well-known sexual abuse charges around the world.

But it is not just the high-profile stories that are alarming. Many smaller churches have had to deal with similar situations. One denomination reports that in 2016, more than half of minister dismissals involved male pastors engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior.

The Reaction Has Been Intense

Women are breaking their silence. On Nov. 21, following in the path of the #MeToo movement, #ChurchToo was started. The hashtag collects stories of sexual abuse, harassment and other related misconduct by church leaders.

Andy Savage victim Jules Woodson, said, "We as a church, of all places, should be getting this right. It's unfathomable to me that the secular world, Hollywood, is taking a stand. The church should have been the first group to stand up and say, 'We will not allow this.'"

Bryan Born, president of Columbia Bible College, noted, "The church should be out ahead on the issue of sexual misconduct, and not lagging behind."

Is Pornography Involved in This Problem?

But pornography doesn't have any connection to actual abuse, does it? Actually, it does.

For example, Baranowski mentions porn in her account about Hybels. President Reagan had appointed James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, to his anti-pornography

commission.

Baranowski alleges that Hybels made her rent pornography videos and watch them with him.

According to author Jessica Harris, "Let's recognize the movement for what it really is. It is not a war on men, but a call to change a culture shaped by exploitation. To change that, we have to talk about how we view sex. How we consume sex, and how we, ultimately, consume each other. Pornography is very much a part of this conversation. If we ignore that, we'll be living through a #metoo cycle every 12-15 years."

How the Church Must Change

Church leaders must realize that the subject of sex cannot be avoided and ignored. Sermons that tiptoe around sexual addiction and sexual abuse are no longer acceptable. What was once taboo to speak about is now talked about everywhere.

Pornography is an epidemic around the world, and it is an underlying factor in most sexual crimes and misconduct. With over 50 percent of pastors struggling with pornography, the church is in desperate need for sexual discipleship to break the trend of abuse.

Harris writes "Other groups have shown how porn fuels a culture of sexual violence and how pornography ties in with sexual exploitation. I don't think it's too far of a stretch to say the stories we are seeing now are influenced in part by a culture in which pornography consumption is OK."

Men cannot just claim that sexual abuse is merely a "women's issue" any longer.

Author and speaker Eugene Hung said,

"No, men, it is our issue. We are the main cause. We need to own it, take responsibility for it, and change the way we teach and model masculinity for men and boys so that this evil

stops.”

The church must address these issues now. And it must start by helping men break free from porn addiction and renewing their minds.

Change Starts at the Top

If true change is going to take place, it must begin with the church leaders, starting at the top.

Beth Backes, director of pastoral care at Northwest Ministry Network, explains,

“The Barna Group reports that even though pornography use is at epidemic rates, 93 percent of pastors admitted not having adequate ministries in place to help those who are struggling. There is a link between online porn addiction and crimes against women. Addressing the root of sexual brokenness is a crucial step for the church.”

Thankfully there is a growing number of churches who are taking pornography and sex abuse seriously. For example, Southland Church in Steinbach, Canada made a decision to provide sexual discipleship for their congregation, taking 1,300 men through the Conquer Series. The Conquer Series is a cinematic study that has been helping men find freedom in thousands of churches in over 75 countries. But it has largely been men within the church who have made it happen.

Now it must come from the leaders, especially the pastors. Church leadership should lead the way and go through the Conquer Series together. Then they will be in a position to lead their men to victory.

It is not enough for recovery to simply be a side ministry of the church for a couple of men to meet together. In many churches, it is not only the men in the pews that need help, but also the leaders.

The Conquer Series Helps Men Break Free From Porn

The Conquer Series was developed to help men struggling with pornography to find freedom. Each of the 12 cinematic DVDs contains powerful teachings, insightful information from leading medical and counseling professionals, and challenging testimonies.

Study guides and a personal journal help the men grow and stay focused on achieving a porn-free life.

Order the Conquer Series today to begin the process of setting men free from porn addiction.