

# What You Should Do When a Spiritual Leader Falls Into Sin—and What You Shouldn't

*Note: Today is the 25th anniversary of prolific writer Jamie Buckingham's death, yet this column he wrote for Charisma in 1992 still speaks a powerful word for our culture.*

When Dan Rostenkowski, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, was asked by a reporter if any of his checks had bounced in the congressional bank, he swore—and sneered, “None of your business.” The question, he said, was an intrusion into his private affairs.

My older brother, a retired Army general who served at the Pentagon, says there are two worlds in Washington, D.C.: one inside the Beltway and another, the real world

Sometimes I think there are two worlds in the kingdom: one in the church and another, the real world.

Jimmy Swaggart, following his last escapade, stood before his congregation in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and told them it was “flat none of your business” what he did with his personal life. That's not living in the real world.

Swaggart's case is sad, but remember this: The same thing could have happened to thousands of others caught in “private” moments. Yet his situation once again proves a basic spiritual principle exemplified by the life of Samson: If God's servant—especially a leader—will not discipline his own life, God will send the Philistines to discipline him.

In late November, Diane Sawyer and ABC presented a *Prime Time Live* exposé of three other well-known televangelists: Larry Lea, Bob Tilton and W.V. Grant. The media presentation raises

serious questions on both sides of the camera.

First, when a major network sets out to discredit a major Christian ministry, accusing it of dishonesty, is it right to use dishonest methods to obtain information? In the case of ABC, they used hidden cameras, lied to some people they interviewed and misrepresented their intentions to others. As usual, they edited the tapes to make the people say exactly what they wanted them to say.

That's gross dishonesty.

On the other hand, if men of God are misrepresenting facts on television—telling their viewers one thing and doing another, and sometimes, outright lying—they need to be exposed.

Some of the things revealed on the *Prime Time* program, if true, are a disgrace to the kingdom. To his credit, Tilton went on television the next day and tried to honestly answer the charges. That's better than the standard approach, which says the Philistines are once again persecuting the good guys. Unfortunately, some of those accused have used the exposé as an opportunity to raise money to fight the "persecutors."

God requires more from leaders than cheap theatrics and glitzy lifestyles. Leaders are called to set an absolute standard of personal purity and frugal living. That's the way it should be.

What should we do, then, when a leader is exposed in his sin? To start, we ought to weep. Then we should do our best to rescue and restore, reaching out in hopes the wounded one will reach back. Remember, none of us knows what is going on in the "heavenlies." This is certain: God cares little about "ministries"—neither their size nor their image. He often allows entire institutions to crumble—just to get leaders to the place where they no longer rely on self, but rely on Him.

God's greatest enemy in humans is our self-confidence.

Everything He does is determined to tear that down. If we will not humble ourselves before God, He will use the media or any other Philistine force to humiliate us before others.

One TV preacher who drives a \$100,000 automobile seemed genuinely baffled when he was criticized in the press as being “flamboyant.” I asked him: “But why do you drive a \$100,000 car?” He replied with a straight face: “A man in my kind of ministry needs good, solid transportation.”

He, too, is out of touch with the real world.

In the movie *City Slickers*, a conversation takes place between two married men who go on a vacation to a western ranch without their wives. Around the campfire, one asks the other if he would commit adultery if no one else in the world ever found out.

It’s a good question, for it strikes at the heart of all ethics. Actor Billy Crystal gives the right answer: Values are not determined by who knows. They are absolute even if no one else is watching.

Unfortunately, sticking with values because they are right—not because you might get caught if you violate them—seems to be a fading character quality.

*Time* magazine criticized the members of Congress for placing themselves above the law. Some Christian leaders have done the same. They don’t know how to live when they are their own employers.

Here’s a basic truth: If we don’t discipline ourselves, God will make certain we are disciplined by others. It’s just possible the media might be His gift to the church—a Philistine force designed to keep us truthful. {eoa}