

Why Bishop Eddie Long Should Be Transparent

The church has had enough spin, denial and closed-door settlements. Leaders must demonstrate humility and repentance.

A few years ago a minister in my city went through a divorce, and the messy details of the settlement between the pastor and his wife were reported in our newspaper. But when the divorce was finalized there was no public statement. The man's wife disappeared from the stage, her photo vanished from the church website and nothing further was said. Zip. Nada. No comment.

The message: It's none of your business what happened between the pastor and his wife. He's the anointed messenger of God. Just follow him.

"People who talk out of both sides of their mouths certainly cannot preach an uncompromised gospel. And liars cannot be trusted to give us the truth."

Another pastor in my city stepped down from his pulpit briefly for unknown "indiscretions"—and then it became known that he had been carrying on an affair with a stripper from France. The man never resigned from leadership, and his wife eventually

divorced him. Today, this preacher appears on Christian television, and he still has a following.

The message: Anointing is what's important. Character is secondary. If a guy can preach the paint off the walls and get everyone shouting, then relax—it really doesn't matter how he runs his personal life.

Then last month, Bishop Eddie Long of Atlanta settled out of court with four young men who had accused him of using gifts, trips and jobs to entice them into sexual relationships. The pastor of 25,000-member New Birth Missionary Baptist Church told his congregation last fall that he would fight the charges. But in late May, Long agreed to pay an undisclosed amount to the four men, and the terms of the agreement were sealed. The church said in a statement that the settlement was engineered "to bring closure" and that the congregation will now "move forward with the plans God has for this ministry."

The message: Case closed. We are never going to tell you what happened. It really doesn't matter whether your pastor committed serious sins.

Is this how we're supposed to run a church? I don't think so. Neither does Bishop Paul Morton, founder of the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship and a former colleague of Eddie Long's. Morton rebuked Long in a recent sermon and demanded that he come clean about what happened with his accusers.

Morton aired his public message to Long on June 19, saying: "If you have repented, show me some signs. Show me some humility. You can't just come and tell me nothing. Tell me something. Those who have stood with you, tell us something. Tell your church something."

The issue at stake here is crucial: Should a pastor who falls into serious sin—or who is just accused of a serious sin—respond publicly and address the charges? Does he need to be open with his congregation? Or does the Bible give him immunity? Does his standing as a Christian leader give him permission to hide his faults from view?

In the squirrely world of independent charismatic churches, where accountability is sometimes a dirty word, some pastors think their ability to make people shout and swoon on Sunday mornings gives them a Get Out of Jail Free card whenever they commit a heinous sin. But I don't see that concept in Scripture, especially when I read the Apostle Paul's list of required qualities for church leaders in 1 Timothy 3. Notice these:

"An overseer must be ... above reproach" (3:2, NASB). The King James Version translates this as "blameless." That doesn't mean leaders never sin. But it means his or her record is important. The Greek word is *anepileptos*, which means "cannot be laid hold of; not open to censure." In other words, if a man

bilked people out of thousands of dollars, he's not qualified to be in ministry now because his reputation would bring a reproach on the gospel. A Christian leader should not have a dark cloud of scandal hanging over his head.

"An overseer

must be ... the husband of one wife" (3:2). Christians have argued for years about whether this verse disqualifies people who have gone through a divorce. Regardless of that aspect, most scholars agree that the sense of the phrase means "a one-woman man"—in other words, sexually pure. Church leaders should not be involved in adultery, fornication, homosexual affairs, perversion or sex with minors. Period.

"An overseer

... must have a good reputation with those outside the church" (3:7). Again, the inference here is that a leader's past is important. If he is dragging the baggage of past marriages, children out of wedlock, rumored affairs or criminal activity, he has no business in the ministry unless those issues can be fully resolved.

"Deacons ... must not be double-tongued" (3:8). While this qualification is mentioned for deacons in Paul's list, I mention it here because we charismatics are the masters of spin. "Double-tongued" comes from the Greek word *dilogos*, which means "saying one thing with one person and another thing to another, with the intent to deceive." Sound familiar? People who talk out of both sides

of their mouths
certainly cannot preach an uncompromised gospel. And liars
cannot be trusted to
give us the truth.

God has abundant mercy and forgiveness for all of us
when we fail Him. But when a leader fails, he must walk
through the humbling
process of restoration—and this requires full confession,
authentic repentance,
willingness to accept discipline from others and the good
sense to step out of
the pulpit, when necessary, until he can be trusted again.

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