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Leadership

Leader's Insight: When Leaders Implode

Ted Haggard, self-destruction, and the consequences we all suffer.

by Gordon MacDonald, *Leadership* editor at large

(Editor's note: What are Christian leaders to make of the spectacularly painful experience of watching Ted Haggard this past week? The president of the National Association of Evangelicals and pastor of mega-church New Life Community in Colorado Springs, Colorado, gradually admitted to purchasing methamphetamines and the services of a male prostitute. We asked Leadership editor-at-large Gordon MacDonald to reflect on what we should learn from this episode.)

It is difficult beyond description to watch Ted Haggard's name and face dragged across the TV screen every hour on the news shows. But as my friend, Tony Campolo, said in an interview last week, when we spend our lives seizing the microphone to speak to the world of our opinions and judgments, we should not be surprised when the system redirects its spotlight to us, justly or unjustly, in our bad moments.

We are still in the process of learning what has actually transpired over the past many months on the secret side of Ted's life. Sunday the leadership of New Life Church has announced that he has been asked to resign. His ministry at New Life Church and as leader of the National Association of Evangelicals is over.

I've spent more than a little time trying to understand how and why some men and women in all kinds of leadership get themselves into trouble, whether the issues be moral, financial, or the abuse of power and ego. I am no stranger to failure and public humiliation. From those terrible moments of twenty years ago in my own life I have come to believe that there is a deeper person in many of us who is not unlike an assassin. This deeper person (like a contentious board member) can be the source of attitudes and behaviors we normally stand against in our conscious being. But it seeks to destroy us and masses energies that—unrestrained—tempt us to do the very things we "believe against."

If you have been burned as deeply as I (and my loved ones) have, you never live a day without remembering that there is something within that, left unguarded, will go on the rampage. Wallace Hamilton once wrote, "Within each of us there is

a herd of wild horses all wanting to run loose."

It seems to me that when people become leaders of outsized organizations and movements, when they become famous and their opinions are constantly sought by the media, we ought to begin to become cautious. The very drive that propels some leaders toward extraordinary levels of achievement is a drive that often keeps expanding even after reasonable goals and objectives have been achieved.

Like a river that breaks its levy, that drive often strays into areas of excitement and risk that can be dangerous and destructive. Sometimes the drive appears to be unstoppable.

This seems to have been the experience of the Older Testament David and his wandering eyes, Uzziah in his boredom, and Solomon with his insatiable hunger for wealth, wives, and horses. They seem to have been questing—addictively?—for more thrills or trying to meet deeper personal needs, and the normal ways that satisfy most people became inadequate for them.

What to watch for

When I see a leader who becomes stubborn and rigid, who is increasingly less compassionate toward his adversaries, increasingly tyrannical in his own organization, who rouses anger and arrogance in others, I wonder if he is not generating all of this heat because he is trying so hard to say "no" to something surging deep within his own soul.

Are his words and deeds not so much directed against an enemy "out there" as they are against a much more cunning enemy within his own soul. More than once I have visited with pastors who have spent hours immersed in pornography and then gone on to preach their most "spirit-filled" sermons against immorality a day or two later. It's a disconnect that boggles the rational mind.

No amount of accountability seems to be adequate to contain a person living with such inner conflict. Neither can it contain a person who needs continuous adrenalin highs to trump the highs of yesterday. Maybe this is one of the geniuses of Jesus: he knew when to stop, how to refuse the cocktail of privilege, fame, and applause that distorts one's ability to think wisely and to master self.

More than once we've seen the truth of a person's life come out, not all at once, but in a series of disclosures, each an admission of further culpability which had been denied just a day or two before. Perhaps inability to tell the full truth is a sign that one is actually lying to himself and cannot face the full truth of the behavior in his own soul.

But then all sin begins with lies told to oneself.

The cardinal lies of a failed leader? I give and give and give in this position; I

deserve special privileges—perhaps even the privilege of living above the rules. Or, I have enough charm and enough smooth words that I can talk anything (even my innocence) into reality. Or, so much of my life is lived above the line of holiness that I can be excused this one little faux pas. Or, I have done so much for these people; now it's their time to do something for me—like forgiving me and giving a second chance.

I am heartbroken for Ted Haggard and his wife and family. I cannot imagine the torture they are living through at this very moment. Toppled from national esteem and regard in a matter of hours, they must adjust to wondering who their real friends are now. They have to be asking how these events—known by the world—will affect their children. Mrs. Haggard will not be able to go the local Wal-Mart without wondering who she may bump into when she turns into Aisle 3 (A reporter? A church member? A critic?). Both Haggards will face cameras every time they emerge from their home in the next few days until the media finds another person with whom to have its sport.

The travel, the connections, the interviews, the applause of the congregation, the organizational power, the perks and privileges, the honor: gone! The introit to people of position and power: gone! The opportunity to say an influential word each day into the lives of teachable younger people: gone! The certainty that God has anointed one for such a time as this: gone?

And what will grow each day is the numbing realization of regret and loss. In time they will be approached by people who will say in one way or another, "I used to trust you, but what you've done has made me very angry." "You've turned my son away from the gospel." "I thought I knew you, but I guess I didn't."

It will be a long time before either of the Haggards feel safe again. Suffering over this will last most of a lifetime even after some sort of restoration is rendered. How I wish this could all be lifted from them. Perhaps there will come a day down the pathway when there will be some kind of return to influence. But right now it is—or should be—a long way in the distance.

Prayer for the fallen and those they hurt

Among my prayers is that the leadership of New Life Church will not assume that "restoration" means getting Ted back into the pulpit as soon as possible. The worst thing in the world would be to raise his hopes that just because he models a contrite spirit he can return to public life in the near future. He, for his own sake, must take a long time to work through the causative factors in this situation. He will not resolve whatever is wrong in his own soul by going back to work.

He and his wife must set aside a long, long time to allow their personal relationship to heal. Forgiveness is a long healing, not a momentary one.

And there are those five children. Thinking of them makes me want to weep.

And then there are countless people in and beyond their church who must take a long time to figure out what all of this means. No, the worst things Ted's friends and overseers can do is to bring him back from this prematurely. The best thing they can do is ask him to retreat into silence with those he loves the most and listen—to God, to trusted elders.

Consequences WE must suffer

The statement issued by the NAE Executive Committee late Friday afternoon seems flat to me. It appears to have been written by savvy PR people who wanted to say all the nice and appropriate things which might mollify the media and cause no heartburn for the lawyers. The burden of the statement seems to be that the NAE is already on to the question of who the next leader will be.

The fact is that, all too often, we have seen the President of NAE on the news and talk shows speaking as the leader of so-called 33-million evangelicals. I'm not sure that most of us were polled as to whether or not we wanted Ted Haggard (or anyone) speaking for us. I know that last time I felt safe about anyone speaking for evangelicals as a whole was when Billy Graham talked on our behalf. But, as of late, an illusion was permitted to grow: that the NAE was a well-organized, highly networked movement of American evangelicals headed by Ted Haggard who, when he spoke, spoke for all of us.

Now, unfortunately, that voice has misspoken, and our movement has to live with the consequences.

I have a fairly poor batting average when it comes to predicting the future. But my own sense is that the NAE (as we know it) will probably not recover from this awful moment. Should it? Leaders of various NAE constituencies are likely to believe that their fortunes are better served by new and fresher alliances.

Ever since the beginning of the Bush administration, I have worried over the tendency of certain Evangelical personalities to go public every time they visited the White House or had a phone conference with an administration official. I know it has wonderful fund-raising capabilities. And I know the temptation to ego-expansion when one feels that he has the ear of the President. But the result is that we are now part of an evangelical movement that is greatly compromised—identified in the eyes of the public as deep in the hip pockets of the Republican party and administration. My own belief? Our movement has been used.

There are hints that the movement—once cobbled together by Billy Graham and Harold Ockenga—is beginning to fragment because it is more identified by a political agenda that seems to be failing and less identified by a commitment to Jesus and his kingdom. Like it or not, we are pictured as those who support war, torture, and a go-it-alone (bullying) posture in international relationships. Any of us who travel internationally have tasted the global hostility toward our government and the suspicion that our President's policies reflect the real tenants

of Evangelical faith.

And I might add that there is considerable disillusionment on the part of many of our Christian brothers/sisters in other countries who are mystified as to where American evangelicals are in all of this. Our movement may have its Supreme Court appointments, but it may also have compromised its historic center of Biblical faith. Is it time to let the larger public know that some larger-than-life evangelical personalities with radio and TV shows do not speak for all of us?

And so I pray:

Lord and Father,

How sad you must be when you see the most powerful and the weakest of your children fall prey to the energy of sin and evil. There is nothing any one has ever done that we –each of us—is not capable of doing. So when we pray for our brother, Ted Haggard, we pray not out of pity or self-righteousness but with a humble spirit because we stand with him on level ground before the cross.

Father, give this man and his wife the gift of your grace. Protect them from the constant accusations of the evil one who will seek to deny them sleep, tempt them to talk too much to the public, arouse conflict between them as a couple and with their children. Send the right people into their lives who can provide the correct mixture of hope and healing love. Deliver them from people who will curry their favor by telling them things they should not hear. Restrain them from making poor judgments in their most fearful moments.

Lord, be present to the leaders and people of the New Life Church. And to the NAE leadership which has to live with the side effects of this tragedy. And to people in the evangelical tradition who are wondering today who they can trust. What more can we pray for? You know all things. We so very little.

Amen.

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