

FOREWORD BY JACK GRAHAM
BOB RUSSELL

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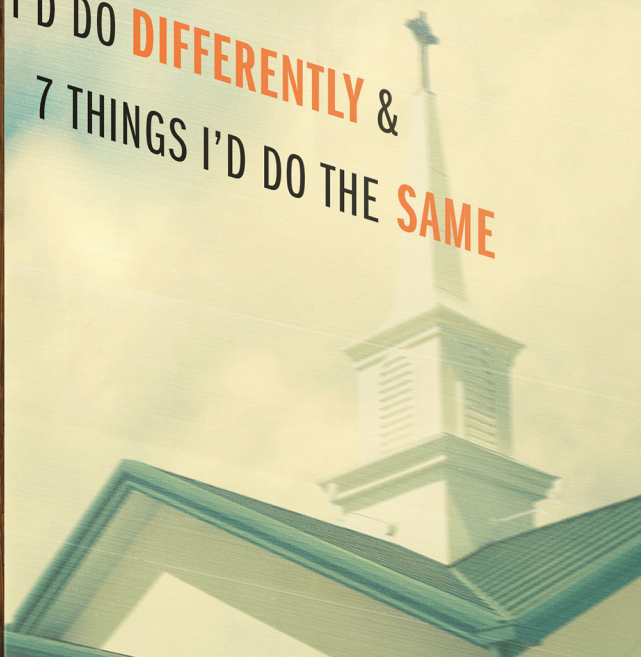
AFTER
YEARS

OF

7 THINGS

MINISTRY

I'D DO **DIFFERENTLY** &
7 THINGS I'D DO THE **SAME**



7 ► I WOULD NEVER AGAIN ATTEMPT TO COVER OVER A STAFF MORAL FAILURE

So if you find yourself in a difficult spot, remember: you are there by God's appointment, in His keeping, under His training, and for His time. And all evidence to the contrary, there's no better place to be.

—ROBERT J. MORGAN

Years ago in my ministry I had one of those *How am I going to handle this?* moments.

There was a guy on our staff whom I'll call Mark. He was gifted, likeable, worked well with the team. Mark and I were pretty close.

And one day I learned that Mark was cheating on his wife and had been for some time. I was devastated, disappointed, angry, and fearful. I pounded my fist against the wall out of frustration. I felt betrayed. Betrayed—and duped. How could I be so naïve? I was apprehensive about how his infidelity would impact our church. I

was uncertain about what my course of action should be.

Later that morning I called Mark and left a message: “We need to talk.” He sensed his secret was out and didn’t return the phone call. Later that day he and his mistress took off, intent on leaving their families and beginning a new life together.

WHAT TO TELL THE CONGREGATION

That distressing news came on a Friday morning. And Sunday was coming. What was I going to say to the congregation? I immediately called the chairman of our elders and informed him of the situation. He called an emergency elders’ meeting on Saturday morning.

After much discussion the elders wisely concluded, “Bob, here’s what we’d like for you to do. Begin the service tomorrow by announcing, ‘We regret to inform you that Mark has been dismissed due to a family problem. We ask you to pray for him and his family that there might be reconciliation. If you feel you need additional information, the elders will be in the lobby and you can talk with them individually.’”

Some preachers complain about their lack of support from elders and lay leaders. But I’ve been blessed over the years to have wise, godly elders who have encouraged me and provided good counsel. This was one of those times when they were a huge help. If I had gone on my own instincts that Sunday morning, I may have given too little information and the congregation would have felt we were covering something over, or I would have given too much detail and the congregation would have concluded we were throwing the associate under the bus and not giving him any chance for restoration.

The elders' balanced counsel and transparency that day was appreciated by the church. Our congregation was brokenhearted to hear the tragic news. But the church remained united and we went on to continued harmony and growth. The apostle Paul wrote, "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning" (1 Timothy 5:19–20).

Paul's counsel is that when a leader stumbles and falls, the church should not cover it over and pretend nothing serious has

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happened. Leadership requires a higher standard. A leader's failure is to be made public, with discretion, so that others realize that sin is serious and

the church is to be distinctive from the world. It also provides the most likely scenario for the fallen leader to be restored.

Two days after announcing the dismissal of the staff member, I received a phone call from a young woman who had not attended the worship service on Sunday. She said, "Bob, there is a terrible rumor going around . . ."

I said, "That's not a rumor. That's the truth. I'm very sorry." Sometimes the truth hurts. But the truth also heals . . . and sets you free. In two weeks there was nothing more to talk about. Truth has a way of stifling gossip and uniting a church. Had we attempted to sweep the unpleasant truth under the rug, people would have been lifting up the rug and searching for dirt months later. I was thankful for elders who led in handling a terrible disappointment biblically.

SAFEGUARDS TO PREVENT IMMORALITY

Following that difficult experience I established some safeguards against immorality based on guidelines I had read that Billy Graham established for himself and his team. Billy Graham had a guiding principle that he would not meet, travel, or eat with another woman alone. It came to be known as the Billy Graham rule and has been widely embraced by evangelicals over the past sixty years to prevent infidelity or even the “appearance of evil.”

I set forth the following principles for our church staff:

1. Staff members are not to ride in a car alone with a member of the opposite sex (other than their spouse) except in cases of emergency.
2. Staff members are not to meet a member of the opposite sex for a meal unless at least one other person is present.
3. Staff members are not to counsel a member of the opposite sex for more than three times. There is always to be a person in the adjacent room and preferably a window in the door.
4. Staff members are not to go into the home of a member of the opposite sex when there is no one else in the house (or the person is quite elderly).

Recently an article appeared in a national publication suggesting the Billy Graham rule should be discarded because it hasn't been effective in curbing infidelity. The author quoted a recent survey of 1,050 evangelical pastors in 2005–2006, in which 30 percent

said they had been in an ongoing affair or a onetime sexual encounter with a parishioner.

According to the author, “The rule (often accompanied with a ‘danger’ story about an affair) has framed relating with the opposite sex with fear. When the other gender is kept at a distance, there is less chance for mutual respect and trust to grow. Our fear and distancing diminish mutual respect and create the kind of environ-

ment where inappropriate relating is more likely to occur.”¹

A total abstainer never becomes an alcoholic. A person who refuses to be alone with a member of the opposite sex won't have an affair.

I disagree. It seems obvious to me that 30 percent of ministers committed adultery because they failed to implement the Billy Graham rule. Those cautionary guidelines just

make common sense. A total abstainer never becomes an alcoholic. A person who refuses to be alone with a member of the opposite sex won't have an affair.

When I occasionally shared our staff guidelines with our congregation in a sermon, business leaders would ask me for a copy. Since infidelity in the workplace created a major problem they were considering establishing similar rules at their place of business.

While those guidelines are helpful and establish important parameters and expectations they are far from being a cure-all. If leaders lack character, they find a way to disregard the guidelines and get involved in prohibited relationships.

ANOTHER MORAL FAILURE!

A few years after the devastating incident described above, I learned that another staff member was guilty of “inappropriate relationships” within the church. My immediate reaction was, “Oh, no! Not again! Our church can’t go through this a second time. This will hurt so many people.”

I looked for an easy way out and made two mistakes. First, I overlooked the reality that whenever you initially hear of a problem, it is usually a lot worse than what you learn at first blush. It’s human nature to minimize the horrid nature of sin. For example, if you hear \$3,000 has been embezzled from the church treasury, it’s probably a lot more than that. So when I heard that there had not been actual physical intimacy involved, I wanted to believe it. I learned later that was a lie.

The second mistake I made was that I decided not to take the situation to the elders but to handle it on my own. If I went to the elders there would be no containing it. They would probably respond too harshly and a public disclosure would follow. Surely there could be some way out without bringing so much pain to the congregation.

I informed the erring staffer that I was aware of the “inappropriate behavior,” and I set a two-month deadline for finding employment elsewhere. Otherwise, I would have to inform the elders. I also urged repentance, and confession and reconciliation at home. I was assured these things were happening.

A few weeks later I received a phone call from a church in another state asking for a recommendation for this associate, who had applied for an opening on their staff. They were impressed with

what they saw and wanted my opinion about whether this person might contribute to their ministry. I now regret that I told them nothing but positive things. They were all true, of course. This person was quite gifted and had done many good things at our church. I simply didn't mention the dark side. I basically covered for our church . . . and myself.

When that church hired our associate, I breathed a sigh of relief. We provided a decent send-off, said all the expected things, and life went on. A few years later, however, that same person had another affair, got divorced, and tore apart another family in that church. To this day I regret mishandling that situation, and I feel partly responsible for two broken homes and a wounded church.

I wish I could turn back the clock. I wish I wouldn't have been so naïve and believed a lie. I wish I had taken the situation directly to the elders. I wish I had been totally honest in my recommendation to the other church. I wish I had learned from the earlier experience that handling disappointments with biblical transparency is always the best procedure.

HINTS FOR DEALING WITH LEADERS WHO HAVE FALLEN

When there is unethical or immoral behavior on the part of a church staff member I believe local church leaders would do well to respond according to the following guidelines.

(1) *Tell the truth and trust the Lord to handle the consequences.* We are tempted to speculate about all the scenarios that could happen, and then choose the path that seems the safest way out. The appropriate response is to be obedient to God's Word. We should "trust in the Lord and lean not to our own understanding."

If the Bible says to confront or to rebuke the offender, or to share the information publicly, then let's do what God's Word requires and trust the Lord to handle the consequences.

(2) *Don't focus on restoration until there has been evidence of repentance.* Our first reaction is to forgive, embrace, and attempt to expedite the restoration to fellowship and even leadership. But John the Baptist urged the Pharisees to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8).

When King David was confronted with his sin with Bathsheba, he quickly produced fruit in keeping with repentance. The evidence of repentance includes an open admission of guilt, a contrite spirit, a transformation of behavior, an attempt at restitution, and a willingness to assist others in overcoming the same temptations.

(3) *Remember God's kingdom is bigger than just your local congregation.* The temptation is to protect your territory and disregard what may happen in another church. The mature leader keeps the big picture. God's kingdom in another state is just as important as it is in your community. That means we handle problems God's way and don't try to secretly smuggle a flagrant offender into someone else's camp.

(4) *Be tactful but courageous when informing a search committee from another church about the negatives of a candidate.* If you are aware of serious character flaws or sinful patterns in the life of a staff person being considered, it's probably not wise to put your concerns in writing but do find a way to communicate them verbally. You are less likely to encounter legal complications while at the same time fulfilling your responsibility to be honest about potential problems.

(5) *See your church as more resilient than you imagine, and remember that sticky problems can stimulate maturity.* Shepherds tend to be overly protective of their flock. We want to shelter new believers from any disappointment and disillusionment. We can be so overly protective that they miss opportunities to mature in their faith. Even new Christians need to learn that human leaders have feet of clay. And better they hear it from you early on than from an outsider later. There is no minister who merits total allegiance. Only Jesus is worthy of our complete trust.

(6) *Expect the majority of the congregation to react as you do.* There's an old saying, "The mood of the leader is the mood of the team." If the church sees you are hurt but still able to move forward they will likely respond in much the same way. If they sense you are secretive or disingenuous they will lose confidence and wonder if it's all a sham. If they sense you are transparent and genuine, you will gain credibility.

Of course not everyone will follow your lead. Moses had critics who refused to follow him even though God parted the Red Sea under his leadership. So don't be shocked if some are suspicious or rebellious, but for the most part the congregation's reaction will mirror that of the minister.

"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

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