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The Prior Scandal — An Absence of Accountability

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The expanding scandal now associated with Bishop Eddie Long of the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta is only the latest to dominate the nation's media attention. Four young men have filed lawsuits against Bishop Long, accusing him of trading gifts for sexual favors while they were still teenagers. Long told his massive congregation yesterday that he would fight the charges like David fighting Goliath.

But, as Tom Breen of the Associated Press reports, the larger issue here is the lack of accountability in many Christian ministries and independent mega-churches.

As he reports:

It's too early to say whether the sex allegations against Bishop Eddie Long, the famed pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta, will spur the kind of soul-searching that followed the downfall of the Rev. Ted Haggard in Colorado.

Regardless, pastors and experts say the Long case demonstrates how vulnerable the country's independent churches still are to being damaged by the misbehavior — sexual, financial or otherwise — of leaders whose considerable influence often comes with temptation and little accountability.

The prior scandal in so many of these cases is the lack of accountability in these ministries. Many of these independent mega-church pastors are de facto dictators, totally without accountability structures. The congregations lack the discipline of a denomination, and the pastors or leaders often lack any accountability at all.

At the end of Breen's article, Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School points to the congregation as the instrument of accountability. Breen writes:

"The main check on leadership that goes berserk is really the congregation," said Harvard Divinity School professor Harvey Cox, an expert on Pentecostal and charismatic churches. "You've got to keep the congregation with you, or they can toss you out."

Well, the problem is that these ministries are built on charismatic leadership, so the congregation rarely tosses any leader out, regardless of behavior. In a confrontation with a Senate committee, Bishop Long was asked if he, rather than the church's board of directors, was in actual control. We are about to find out.

What about at your church?



Tom Breen, "[Some Churches Like Georgia Pastor's Thin on Safeguards](#)," *The Washington Post*, Saturday, September 25, 2010.

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