

# THE PTL SCANDAL

The author of the best-selling book *Money, Power and Sex* tells why it happened and how it can be prevented from happening again.

By RICHARD J. FOSTER

**O**ne year ago this month the PTL scandal broke and the American consciousness of religion was irrevocably changed. After 52 weeks of media bombardment, of accusation and counter-accusation, it is time for assessment and perspective. Questions loom large, questions that demand answers.

What really happened? Why did it happen? What lasting impact will it have? What should you and I do?

The readers of *Charisma & Christian Life* are well acquainted with the details of adultery, hush money, financial mismanagement, "holy wars" *ad nauseam*. But as sad and as bad as the sexual infidelity and the money problems at PTL have been, they are *not* the central issue at stake in all this.

Power is the real issue. The jockeying for position, the ego clashes, the

*continued on page 40*

*Editor's note: This month marks a dubious anniversary—it's been one year since Jim Bakker shocked the church world by confessing adultery and stepping down as head of PTL. In the pages of Charisma & Christian Life we have reported on the events and changes at PTL and we have tried to add perspective in how to understand what has transpired.*

*Jamie Buckingham wrote about how God has been shaking His church (June 1987); associate editor Steven Lawson interviewed then-PTL chairman Jerry Falwell (August 1987); James Robison wrote a challenging and controversial open letter to Falwell (September 1987); and we interviewed new PTL trustee David Clark (February 1988).*

*This month we have asked a popular author and commentator on trends in the church to examine the PTL crisis and to analyze how it has affected us all. Richard Foster wrote the best-selling book *Money, Sex and Power* and is a professor at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. Foster, a Quaker, takes an eye-opening approach to understanding what has happened in the past 12 months.*

desperate grab for privilege and status—this was what made the PTL scandal so scandalous. If the Bible tells us anything, it tells us that a “haughty spirit” does not belong among the people of God—and certainly not among their leaders. The fruit of the Spirit is not strife, jealousy and envy; nor is it climb, push and shove. Humility, gentleness, meekness, temperance—these are the kinds of values Jesus prescribes for those who live in His kingdom.

The great offense of the PTL situation then is that her leaders turned away from

Christ’s way of living and leading. (And this remains the great offense of many Christian organizations around the country.) I am sure that many—if not all—of these leaders began with genuine sincerity and ardent faith, but they turned from the servant way of Christ.

Among the most dangerous people in our media-soaked culture are leaders who believe their own press releases. They begin to perceive themselves above common rules of accountability, integrity and morality. They begin to consider that they have certain “rights”—rights that

justify all the perks and privileges. And all the time they fail to see that the “rights” of a Christian leader are the rights of servanthood, the rights of discipleship, the rights of self-denial and cross-bearing.

Of course, all of us suffer from vanity’s lures, not just leaders. But leaders are especially susceptible today because of our cultural infatuation with the media. The media can invest people with instant spiritual stardom. Isn’t it strange, for example, that we unquestionably assume that being on television is some kind of honor? Only a moment’s reflection reveals to us that those who are truly worth honoring are seldom interesting enough for the media gurus. After all, to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8, RSV) is not the stuff of high ratings, even in the religious media.

When we turn to the question of *why* the PTL scandal happened, numerous areas cry for discussion. I mention four.

*First*, we must understand that what happened to Jim and Tammy Bakker is only a microcosm of a condition which permeates the church in the United States today. PTL is not an isolated incident, but a sign of the sickness of the church. On the whole, the American church has embraced wholeheartedly the values of our society. We have allowed the world, the flesh and the devil to tell us what is important and who is important.

Paul’s litany of the works of the flesh—“fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing” (Gal. 5:19b-21a, RSV)—are rampant in the church and especially so among her leaders. There is backbiting, greed, adultery, bestiality, pride, egomania and more. Now, I wish this were an exaggeration, but, unfortunately, it states plainly what is actually happening. The American church is desperately in need of the gift of repentance and the grace of holy living.

So what happened at PTL only reflects a much larger problem that pervades the church, a problem that still needs to be addressed.

*Second*, the nature of television itself intensifies the problem. I am not referring here to television’s ability to catapult individuals into instant stardom, with all the attendant vices of egoism and conceit. Nor am I referring to its ability to provide a base of huge financial empires, with all the attendant vices of greed and

avarice. I'm not even referring to its power to influence vast numbers of people, with all the attendant vices of presumption and audacity.

All these dangers are self-evident and, in themselves, enough to tempt even the hardiest of souls. However, I am thinking of something much more simple—namely, television's inability to handle complexity. Inevitably television tends to oversimplify and even distort. As a result, many of those who have something significant to say tend to shy away from TV.

Furthermore, programs with Christian content at one time became locked into the television ghetto of Sunday morning. The response has been the emergence of religious entertainers, and Jim Bakker understood this role better than most. The unfortunate fallout, however, has been to put a very high premium on easy answers and trite cliches. The tough issues of faithfulness, discipleship and service haven't been given the careful attention they deserve. This, coupled with the almost total lack of accountability that such a media empire affords, almost makes virtues of simplistic thinking and high living.

*Third*, an exaggerated emphasis upon wealth has sown the seeds of disaster. While Pentecostalism has had a very honored history and theology which witnesses to simplicity in manner and lifestyle, this has been challenged in more recent years by an emphasis on the blessing which God gives to His children. In its best form this teaching has encouraged believers to receive all the inheritance God has for them; in its worst form it is a crass appeal to the greed and avarice that drives so many people, encouraging them to "love Jesus and get rich." At any rate, Jim and Tammy Bakker embraced this more recent teaching in Pentecostalism.

Most Bible truths come to us in a creative tension, and the Bible's teaching about money is no exception. Scripture gives us both a radical critique of wealth as well as an understanding of the way by which money can be used to enhance our relationship with God and bless humankind. The moment we begin to stress one side of the tension to the neglect of the other, we are in trouble.

It is very easy to witness to the light side of money—its blessing and goodness—and then neglect its dark side—the demonic way by which money becomes idolatry. When we do we begin to accept a half truth. This faulty theology is one

**I**t is very easy to witness to the light side of money—its blessing and goodness—and then neglect its dark side—the demonic way by which money becomes idolatry.

of the reasons for the PTL scandal. How much better it would be to recover the earlier Pentecostal witness to simplicity of life as one of the marks of sacrificial discipleship while not forsaking the good in the teaching that God desires to bless us and use us to bless others.

*Fourth*, the situation at PTL reflects a misunderstanding of the dynamics of spiritual growth and maturity. Piety—even genuine piety—does not guarantee a true spiritual life. People can be baptized in the Holy Spirit, exercise various spiritual gifts and still have lives firmly rooted in harshness, bitterness and covetousness.

Spiritual growth is a process which involves both group and individual life through which there is built within us ingrained habit patterns of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22, RSV). This process includes many things: mutual accountability, solitude, a life of prayer, confession and more. Such "spiritual exercises" will deepen us, discipline us and quiet us. Without them our lives will be marked by exactly the same characteristics as the world around us, even though we dress them up in religious garb.

*What impact has the PTL scandal had?* The answer must move in several directions—short term and long term, national and international.

The short-term effects in the United States are substantial. The Christian's integrity before the watching world has been discredited. The trivializing of the gospel has hurt us. The vicious backbiting and divisiveness have hurt us. The celebrity status and crass materialism have hurt us. As a result, we have lost

a precious opportunity to penetrate society and become the leading interpreters and shapers of contemporary culture.

Internationally, the PTL scandal has had little effect. The Pentecostal and charismatic movements in Third World countries have had to deal so courageously with the issues of faithfulness and suffering love that they have seldom been drawn into an unhealthy emphasis upon wealth and blessing.

The church is growing in unprecedented numbers in Africa, South America and some parts of Asia. The hand of God is upon these Spirit-filled believers and they may be the best hope for bringing balance to the American church as they teach us the meaning of obedience.

Historically, the events of the past year at PTL will have virtually no impact. This long-term perspective has been obscured by all the media hype and excessive statements about the PTL scandal being the worst offense in the history of Christianity.

Frankly, the media are myopic—they cannot go beyond the present. And we all tend to think we are the most important people in history and contemporary events are all significant. Such is simply not the case. As offensive as this scandal has been, it does not even come close to many of the offenses in the church's past. Indeed, in the history books this event will deserve only a footnote, if that. And in the economy of God, the entire PTL enterprise is of minor significance. Throughout the world today the work of God is going on in great power and will continue to go on in great power.

*In the light of all the events of this past year, what should you and I do?* In the words of the prophet Ezekiel, "How should we then live?" (Ez. 33:10, KJV). Here are several suggestions:

*Let's go public.* Few of us can resist the pressure to become corrupt when our activities occur behind closed doors. Let's allow God to say over all we do, "Let there be light." Illicit love affairs do not survive in well lit places. Financial hanky panky cannot continue in the face of full public audits. Everywhere—in our local churches, in our para-church organizations, in our schools and in our denominational headquarters—now is the time to insist upon full disclosure. Let's allow respectable, independent groups to evaluate our practices. Those who walk in integrity have nothing to fear by openness and public disclosure.

*Let's develop accountability.* Part of

the function of the body of Christ is to lovingly watch over one another. Of course, this gracious ministry can be abused (as the "shepherding" controversy illustrates), but it must never be neglected. None of us can thrive for long without accountability. Boards that truly oversee their organizations, superintendents and bishops who truly oversee their pastors, pastors who truly oversee their people—this and much more is the stuff of accountability.

There was once a time when Christians were expected to meet weekly in small groups to watch over one another and to help each other process decisions and evaluate conduct. It is a practice we would do well to revive.

*Let's stop the hype.* At the turn of this century Christians experienced one of the great waves of the Holy Spirit, beginning at Azusa Street and flooding across one country after another until every continent on earth was touched. With that move of the Holy Spirit came godly truth, godly power and godly compassion. Unfortunately, as the power of that wave began to wane, people started overpromising and overstating what was happening.

We now have a situation in which there have been many years of exaggerated promises with precious little product. Now is the time to insist upon an unvarnished, honest statement of what is actually happening among us—the old writers called it "plain speech." If the power of God is operating among us, no exaggeration will be necessary; if not, all the hyperbole in the world will be unable to make up the lack. Let's once again have the simple integrity of allowing the events to outstrip our claims.

*Let's confess and repent.* In the early days of the PTL scandal, many people said God was cleaning house and ridding the church of her iniquity. If so, I see few signs that we have gotten the message. For the most part, Christians have tended to see PTL as a local problem which affects only those directly involved rather than seeing it as symptomatic of a much larger immorality which has engulfed the whole church.

In the church today the grossest of sins abound and we wink at them. We must learn once again to call things by their true names—an illicit affair is not a sexual tryst, but adultery; opulent extravagance is not a right of the King's kids, but the love of money; power brokering is not holy boldness, but a haughty spirit; inflated claims are not expressions of

faith, but lies.

There was once a time when it was commonplace for believers to wrestle mightily at a prayer altar to overcome the lust of the flesh or the pride of life. And loving, caring friends would wrestle with them and examine their own lives in the process. It is time to ask God in His mercy to once again give the church the gift of repentance so that we may be healed.

*Let's show grace and mercy.* We all live under the cross. We all stand mightily in need of the grace of God, the forgiveness of God, the mercy of God. And to the extent that we have received it from God, we are enabled to extend it to others, including leaders.

Leaders, of course, are to be held to a stricter accountability because of their modeling role—the Bible is clear about this. So what are we to do? My counsel is this: When leaders have fallen, they should be under the loving care and spiritual direction of mature believers for at least two years. If, during that time, they make true confession and repentance and experience spiritual growth and maturity, they should once again be candidates for full leadership among the people of God. Moses was mightily used by God even after he murdered the Egyptian. David was anointed of God even after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. Our leaders need discipline and accountability—they also need forgiveness and restoration.

In seeking to give perspective to this past year's events, I must add that the work of the kingdom of God is beyond all of the media hooplah surrounding PTL. The kingdom of God is going forward and will continue to go forward. In one sense the media exposure, while negative, affords extensive opportunities to witness to the way of Christ. People are more eager than ever to hear that Christ offers real transformation—a life penetrated throughout by love, the power to do right and withstand the forces of evil, the faith to see everything in the light of God's governance for good, and the strength to bear hardship, suffering and death.

Your task and mine is a simple one: "So you, by the help of your God, return, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God" (Hos. 12:6, RSV). ■

**Richard J. Foster** is a professor at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, and a best-selling author. His most recent book is titled *Money, Sex and Power*.