

What Can Christian Leaders Learn from Ravi Zacharias' Failure?

Ravi Zacharias could be described as the most well-known Christian apologist over the last 40 years. He authored more than 30 books, founded and led Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), spoke all over the world, and hosted a number of radio programs. After his death from cancer in 2020 at 74, it has clearly emerged that he had numerous sexually abusive relationships with women (particularly masseuses) over a long period of time, all of which were hidden and denied by him while he was alive.

The evidence of long-term sexual misconduct by such a trusted and respected leader in the Christian community is particularly shocking for us. Ravi was not a maverick or nonconformist. He was esteemed and revered by the evangelical community and contributed at the highest levels of evangelical thought. He epitomised the values and beliefs of conservative Christianity.

So there are lessons to be learned from Ravi's consistent moral failure and we leaders must learn them well. Here are ten of my thoughts.

1. The failure of leaders does a lot of damage.

Many people are suffering because of Ravi's failure. Those who have been abused are struggling to understand God's goodness. Those who are in Ravi's family circle are enduring shame and humiliation. Those who have looked up to Ravi are questioning whether they can trust Christian leaders. Those who doubt Christian faith have had their doubts strengthened. The fallout from Ravi's continuing, unconfessed sin is dreadfully damaging. We need to do all we can to confess and root out sin as quickly as possible. This is everyone's responsibility. We need to hold other each other accountable. The leaders around Ravi did not do their job.

2. We are all sinners.

The depth of Ravi's depravity is no worse than other sinners. We all struggle with temptation. We all disobey God. As John said, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). There are no levels of sin as far as God is concerned. Because of its prevalence, abusive nature, blatant hypocrisy and widespread impact, Ravi's sin has had dreadful consequences (see above). Describing us all as sinners is not condoning what he did. It was abusive and horrific and needs to be branded as such. But that must not make us feel smug and self-righteous. Without God's grace and support, we'd all be in the same boat. We're all broken, sinful people who desperately need a Saviour. Praise God for his grace and freedom.

3. We are not to put leaders on a pedestal.

Ravi was held in such high esteem that his dubious behaviour was not questioned by his organisation or his friends. If Ravi denied his involvement with other women then clearly their accusations were unfair attacks that needed to be resisted. Once we find ourselves blindly believing a leader without considering the evidence, we open the door to abuse and manipulation. The elevation of leaders seems particularly prevalent in America. Of course, in Australia, this is generally not our problem. Our "tall-poppy syndrome" pushes us to distrust leaders despite evidence that they are trustworthy. This is not healthy either.

4. We must listen to/champion the weak.

Ravi targeted needy and broken people to meet his sexual needs. When asked why they didn't speak up, a number replied that their word would never have been believed against the word of such a prominent Christian figure. And to our shame, they were right. What a sad indictment on the followers of Jesus who made the poor his priority. James has a strong word about this (Jam. 2:1-12). A Christian leader's role is to protect and champion the weak.

5. **The end never justifies the means.**

One of the reasons Ravi got away with his sinful behaviour for so long was because those around him didn't want to risk their whole ministry collapsing. Surely RZIM was doing such a wonderful job defending Christianity that some personal flaws in its founder could be overlooked. The end (the incredible ministry of RZIM) justified the means (a flawed leader). That all makes human sense, but God's kingdom never works that way. God is incredibly concerned about the means. God's work must be done God's way. Honesty, truth and transparency can be painful, but they are vital to achieving God's ends.

6. **Character trumps knowledge and gifting.**

Ravi was incredibly intelligent. He was a brilliant writer and communicator. He helped many understand and believe in Christianity. But he was deeply hypocritical. As he was strenuously denying any inappropriate relationships with the opposite sex, he was soliciting naked photos from women he knew. Those who questioned him were derided and frozen out. God was disgusted. You see ability and success come as gifts from God, but character is forged in us over time by the Holy Spirit with our cooperation. God is looking for "good and faithful servants" (Matt. 25:21).

7. **Evil grows big without confession and real repentance.**

Somewhere in his life Ravi chose to allow sin to get a grip on his life. It probably started with some small moral failure that was hidden and went unconfessed. But this root grew into a dreadful, hypocritical lifestyle that prevented the Holy Spirit doing his sanctifying work in Ravi's life. Maybe his addiction found fertile ground in some past hurt or insecurity. But this is no excuse. Satan got a hold and Ravi was trapped by addictive lust. If we confess our sin God is gracious in his forgiveness and freedom. If we justify or ignore our sin, entrapment by evil is inevitable.

8. **You're in danger when you start thinking that God owes you something.**

Ravi would constantly say to those he was manipulating, that their sexual favours were his reward from God for all the responsibility and pressure he bore. I'm not sure whether he actually believed that, but when we work hard and give so much, it's possible to start thinking that God owes us something. That's dangerous. God loves to bless and there is certainly reward in obedience, but all that God promises on earth is his love and grace, nothing more. And that's ample.

9. **Accountability is important but not foolproof.**

RZIM had strong accountability practices for its staff that were developed by Ravi. He always travelled with a male companion and assured his followers that he was never alone with a female. These are helpful checks and provide some degree of protection against both temptation and accusation. In practice, Ravi was often alone and would have masseuses come to his hotel room late at night (ostensibly to relieve his back pain). No degree of accountability can protect someone who is determined to do wrong. None of us is completely trustworthy.

10. **Jesus is completely trustworthy**

While Ravi has proven to be hypocritical and untrustworthy, the Jesus he constantly spoke of remains above reproach. 2000 years after his stint on earth, the life of Jesus stands as a beacon of hope. Jesus loved and served. He was humble and gracious. He spoke openly and honestly. He stood against abuse and injustice. He laid down his life for his enemies. He is the one we follow and serve. Jesus is our Saviour and role model, not Ravi Zacharias.