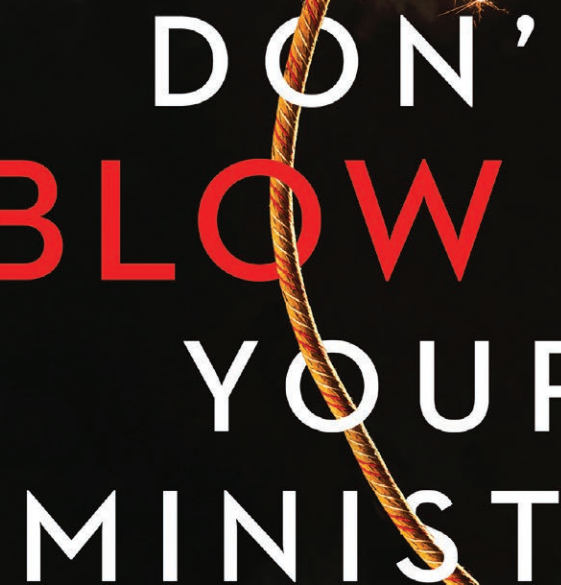


FOREWORD BY MARSHALL SHELLEY
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DEFUSE THE UNDERLYING ISSUES
THAT TAKE PASTORS DOWN



DON'T
BLOW UP
YOUR
MINISTRY



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HOW ONE PASTOR BLEW UP

WHEN WE HAVE QUESTIONS about God who do we look to? The pastor. That is a lot of pressure on one individual.

With pressures like that, it is easy to see how an explosion can occur.

But out in the world there are even more dangers for the pastor than those questions. Here is one account of a pastor who did not take stock of the dangers facing him and the stress that would eventually take its toll. By looking specifically at one instance we can see how quietly and secretly these dangers can slip into our lives, like a person infiltrating with a bomb to be set off later.

Pastor Craig came to a Marble Retreat. He had been caught having an affair with a woman in his church.

This event would not seem to depict the man who grew up as an average kid in Ohio. His was a nice family, but he might use a different word than *average*. He had very perfectionistic expectations in his home.

“I wasn’t able to meet up to Mom and Dad’s feelings about my school performance and my attempts to be an athlete,” he said. “I regularly fell flat on my face compared to Dan, my brother. He scored high on all his tests and made great grades, and he lettered four years in basketball and football.

“My average abilities were not enough. So my motto became, ‘Work harder to make up for my lack of natural gifts.’ With hard work I used what God had given me and stretched myself as far as I could.”

Craig was creative. He was intelligent. He was articulate. He was passionate about God using him to do great things. And God did.

Pastor Craig was in a ministry for many years as an associate pastor. And then he got a call to go to a church that had leveled off over its last several years at about two hundred people. They asked Pastor Craig to come and lead the church. The community was growing and there was a lot of opportunity for the church if they could get moving in the right direction.

Craig is full of vision, ideas, and passion. He is a cheerleader. He is an equipper who can get older people on the move and excited. So he went. Things began to happen. God began to work and expand his ministry.

But Craig told us something wasn’t right; life was off a little to one side.

“I still felt insecure and inadequate. I felt like an impostor; a cover up was going on in my life.”

What did he use to cover up his insecurities? More plodding on the path of work and climbing the hill of accomplishment.

“I felt I could basically fool people into believing that I was a more intelligent, more faithful man than I really was if I hid behind this curtain of work,” Pastor Craig said. “If people really got to know me well, I sincerely felt the show would be over . . .”

Reality seemed to confirm Craig's strategy. The church began to take off and went from 200 to 300 to 400 to 500 people. They went through a couple of building campaigns that resulted in a new multimillion-dollar facility that would seat 2,000 people.

Craig was grateful for his success. Still the feelings of inadequacy and insecurity grew. So did the expectations that every Sunday he would take a big swing from the pulpit and knock it out of the park. Which he did. Naturally people expected more and more. The board members and congregation wanted a new and bigger vision for the expanding ministry as it grew. Craig attacked the challenges the only way he knew how.

"I ended up working longer hours. I stole time and energy from myself and from my wife and family. I depleted myself emotionally and spiritually . . . then she came along."

Samantha, a young, attractive woman with her own problems, came to Pastor Craig for counseling. Her marriage was falling apart. Samantha began to sympathize with Craig's unbelievable burdens of ministry and the challenges he had with the overall growth and certain individuals who regularly challenged him. She empathized and it felt good to him. Someone finally understood the sacrifices he was making for the church and for members like her. Hardworking Craig could have heard some of the same sympathy from his wife; but he was too busy.

Craig began to break his own boundaries about meeting with a woman alone. He met with Samantha behind closed doors for coffee. The conversation began to slide into personal conversations of frustration with marriage and with family, and of course with the church. She grew in her care and compassion for him and eventually it led to the slippery slope of a sexual affair.

The church leadership found out about the affair when she confessed it to Craig's wife and the elders. Then the damage started

happening. The church terminated him. The church started struggling without a leader. His marriage was hanging by a thread. And Pastor Craig came to a Marble Retreat for counseling as do many pastors with feelings of despair and self-hatred.

The big question in his mind loomed. “Why, why did I do this? I had my dream job and everything was going great. God was blessing everything I touched. And why would I blow this up now? Why would I blow up this ministry and my life when I had finally arrived at where I wanted to be as a church leader, a pastor, and a man? Wasn’t a large and successful ministry what I’d always wanted?”

When you are sitting with someone, even a ministry leader, who has made some very bad choices and is reaping the fallout you see the human tendency to blame surface issues such as “I was tired and working too much” or “my wife and I were not connecting anymore.” You also see the human tendency to want to just clean up the mess and go back to doing it the same way. Seeing this tendency can be very convicting as I can see how I do the exact same thing in my own life. As a Christian therapist I believe and see how God desires to do so much more in us. Heart change. Soul healing. This gives us a completely different vantage point from which to do life and ministry. So we go beneath the surface to the rest of the iceberg.

Craig did not realize how underlying issues had affected his choices. They kept him from facing his problems head on. Perfectionism and insecurity drove him to prove to others he could do what he set his mind to. He believed that his willingness to work harder than everyone else would gain affirmation from others and especially from women.

He added one fallacious statement after another: “If I get good enough I’ll keep growing the church and that will keep everyone happy.” “Raise the budget and then everything will be okay.”

CHALLENGES IN THE PASTORATE

While numerous pastors stay healthy and serve faithfully, many are hurting. Barna's state of pastors report in 2017 found some of the areas in which pastors struggle:

- More than one-third of pastors are at high or medium risk of burnout, and three-quarters know at least one fellow pastor whose ministry ended due to stress.
- Forty-three percent of pastors are at high or medium relational risk, whether they are experiencing challenges in marriage, family, friendships or other close relationships.
- One in five pastors has struggled with an addiction—most commonly to porn.
- Almost half of pastors have faced depression.¹

When a pastor leaves ministry because they have fallen morally or burned out there is a huge ripple effect on the congregation and community they were serving.

GOING DEEPER

Craig came to Marble and we began to dig around in what was going on underneath, because he knew it wasn't just lust that got him into this. The affair was just an indicator of why it happened.

We talked about the need for affirmation, compassion, empathy, and feelings of concern that drew him into the affair. Samantha convinced him he was not alone when they were together. But he searched for affirmation in the wrong place. And her confession to the elders sealed that wrong choice.

Craig needs a sense of adequacy and security first and foremost in Christ. He needed to let God touch and heal the shame he had been carrying his whole life. He needed intimacy with his wife,

which had been missing for many years. He needed to get off the treadmill of proving himself and be free to be who he was and walk in *his* calling. God had gifted him in many ways. He did not have to prove that to anybody.

These were some of the things Craig came to realize were driving his affair. But at this point he had caused a lot of damage. Sadly so. During one of the group sessions or “intensives,” as we call them, he said, “I just wish I had come here ten years ago. I wish I had realized these things. I wish I had taken precautions and dealt with what was in my own heart and in my own home. And maybe I would not have gone down this road.”

Pastor Craig felt great grief and shame about the disgrace he had brought to God’s name and the church’s name.

But there was redemption. There was forgiveness and there was grace for him. And we’ll find those responses in the stories of this book.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Do you relate to Craig in some way?
2. Are there some behaviors in your life or way of doing ministry that you are concerned about?
3. Do you see your own personal or family of origin issues trailing along with you?
4. Can you connect the dots of how your own brokenness could lead to blowing up your life and ministry?
5. If you are not getting help with your struggles, what is keeping you from doing so?

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