

## On the Ravi Zacharias Scandal

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Ravi Zacharias was a prominent Evangelical apologist and founder of the ministry that bore his name (Ravi Zacharias International Ministries – RZIM). His global reach means that his ministry was known worldwide, regardless of the merits or demerits of Zacharias’ apologetics. Zacharias passed away last year in 2020, seemingly a godly man who has reached many people for Christ. However, shocking revelations of sexual abuse have surfaced, and an investigation that has just been completed by Miller & Martin was shocking in its validation of the credible nature of many of these accusations.<sup>1</sup> RZIM has in turn wrote an open letter apologizing for the misconduct of its founder, promising restitution and reform.<sup>2</sup> These revelations have troubled many Evangelicals. With Zacharias’ reach being global in nature, the revelations of his immorality have resonated around the world.

I myself have heard Ravi Zacharias’ talks in my adolescence, and have spent quite a sum on his tapes and CDs back then. However, in the course of my life, I have moved away from Evangelicalism in general, and Zacharias’ view of apologetics in particular. Thus, while I understand why revelations of Zacharias’ immorality would upset many people, I do not feel upset myself. As far as I am concerned, Zacharias’ immorality is merely a natural pitfall within Evangelicalism. The question is not why Zacharias has fallen; the question is why there are not more like him. But before I go into that, let’s just state a few preliminary remarks on the whole sordid episode.

### *1) Sexual immorality and abuse is sin, and we need to stop winking at sin.*

This should go without saying. What Ravi Zacharias did was sin, and a violation of the seventh commandment. There is no way to whitewash it by invoking nonsense phrases like “judge not” or phrases like it. Sin is sin, and it is high time Evangelicalism stop trivializing violations of God’s commands. What Zacharias did is not sin just because of its particular egregious nature, as if we can wink at it if it were just one episode of lust.

The problem with much of Evangelicalism is its trivialization of the Law of God. Many are functional antinomians, where the line between acceptable conduct and non-acceptable conduct is not determined by the Word of God but the culture we are in. If a sin is socially acceptable, or even socially respectable, we downplay it. Why do we sprout unbiblical distortions like “judge not” when people point out sin? Isn’t it because we refuse to be

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<sup>1</sup> Associated Press, “Law Firm Details Sexual Misconduct by Global Ministry Leader,” *U.S. News*, accessed Feb 17, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2021-02-11/law-firm-details-sexual-misconduct-by-global-ministry-leader>

<sup>2</sup> RZIM, “Open Letter from the International Board of Directors of RZIM on the Investigation of Ravi Zacharias,” *RZIM*, accessed Feb 17, 2021, <https://www.rzim.org/read/rzim-updates/board-statement>

biblical and return to what the Word of God says to evaluate whether something is acceptable or not, but instead let culture dictates that?

Before we deplore Ravi Zacharias for his immorality, perhaps we should examine ourselves first. What is the first thing to do when we see others pointing out sin? Is the first thing on our mind “judge not,” “you Pharisee,” “you’re not loving,” “you have no grace” or other such sentiments? If it is, then *you are part of the problem* that allow people like Zacharias to get away with their sin.

### *2) God is not limited due to sin*

Despite Zacharias’ sin, God can and has used him for good. God used Pharaoh to display His glory, God used Saul to deliver Israel in many occasions, God used Assyria to chastise Israel. As we learn during the Donatist controversy, the failings of God’s servants do not invalidate the ministry done.

Therefore, God has used Ravi Zacharias to lead people to Christ. The good that has been done is God’s work, despite the failings of the instrument Ravi Zacharias. There is no need to be troubled and thus invalidate the good that has been done by Ravi.

### *3) God is sovereign and His work continues still*

Ravi Zacharias’ failings are his moral failings and his alone. God is sovereign and He is not surprised by them, neither do they reflect on Him. It is to God that Ravi Zaharias will answer for his immorality.

God is sovereign, and salvation belongs solely to Him (Jn. 6:44; Rom. 9:15-18). Therefore, there is no need to worry about whether this scandal will ultimately affect the salvation of the saints. Those whom God has chosen for salvation will be saved, and therefore we should not lose heart. The failure of Zacharias should not be a source of discouragement for Christian ministry.

With the preliminary remarks done, here is my case for the main problem behind the scandal:

### *4) There is no real accountability in RZIM*

The lack of accountability in RZIM is recognized by everyone including RZIM itself. However, how can one actually implement accountability? Implementing the world’s idea of accountability may work with the world, but how compatible is it for the church?

Assuming a system of accountability analogous to safeguarding of children in schools is implemented, one can expect accusations of impropriety to be caught earlier and investigated. Furthermore, the morally dubious idea of allowing Zacharias to purchase

ownership in spas would probably be prohibited. However, this form of accountability catches people after the act. While certainly better than no accountability, I do not believe such a system would work well for the church.

#### *5) No church accountability*

That brings us closer to the main issue, which is that RZIM is a parachurch organization not accountable to any church body. Ravi Zacharias was himself ordained in the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA), an extremely low-church Evangelical denomination.<sup>3</sup> Christ instituted church assemblies for the good of the church, and one purpose is for accountability of her leaders. Zacharias, while ordained by the CMA, has no ecclesiastical accountability because the CMA has an unbiblical ecclesiology.

We see here that one's doctrine of the church, while an unimportant issue within Evangelicalism, is actually of importance for ministry. Zacharias has no ecclesiastical oversight, and his work has no relation to any church body. This is where Evangelicalism's idea of serving the "Church" and "all Christians" without any link to any particular church and denomination shows itself to be half-baked semi-gnostic nonsense. The whole idea that one is just "Christian" without church affiliation is ahistorical and unbiblical. Christ instituted the church with officers (c.f. 1 Tim 3, Titus 1), and the idea of ministries and Christian service apart from the institutional church, while fashionable within Evangelicalism, is alien to Scripture and the history of the Church prior to the advent of Evangelicalism.

#### *6) No transparency*

While accountability is a general term, "transparency" refers to accountability to the whole church. There are many in Evangelicalism whereby the leaders form a sort of oligarchy whereby their accountability is only to each other. They do not see themselves as being accountable to the laypeople, in a posture that can be called "transparency." Of course, for there to be transparency, Zacharias must be a member of a church whereby there are *actual* members that can hold him accountable. One can hardly be accountable, neither is it practical to be so, to nameless "evangelicals" all around the world!

With all the traveling all around the world, which local assembly is Zacharias accountable to? Who knows the person behind the persona, the family behind the family picture? Which church member (not just leader) can hold him responsible for anything he does?

#### *7) The need for theology and the Ministry of the Word of God*

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<sup>3</sup> "Ravi Zacharias, 1946-2020," TheAlliance, accessed Feb 17, 2021, <https://www.cmalliance.org/news/2020/05/19/ravi-zacharias-1946-2020/>

Part of the reason why I had moved away from Ravi Zacharias is that he is almost a one-trick pony; after some time, what he says sounds almost the same. Zacharia's approach to apologetics is what I would call the worldview approach, pioneered by Francis Schaeffer. In this approach, the case for the Christian faith is painted broadly along social and cultural perspectives, arguing for the superiority of the Christian faith against its rivals. The allure of Zacharias is his eloquence and how he brings his arguments down to relate to his audience. In content however, apologists like Schaeffer are much better.

The main issue here however is that one does not get much theology from Zacharias. Rather, what one gets is mostly philosophy centered around the exclusivity of Christ and the supreme reasonableness of the Christian faith. But I have not heard a true study of God's Word, and philosophical ruminations on the Word of God do not count!

This ties in with the accountability section, where those who are in ministry are also ministers of the Word of God. Francis Schaeffer for example is an ordained ministry who begun as a minister in the Bible-Presbyterian Church in the US. In other words, the whole idea that someone can be in ministry without ministering the Word of God in some manner is an oxymoron in the context of Christian ministry.

If faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Rom. 10:17), and it is the Word of God that makes one pure (Ps. 119:9), that it is the Word that trains in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16-17), then surely one main reason why Zacharias fell is that his ministry does not have enough of the Word of God in it. We must remember that there is no office of apologist in the Scriptures, because there is no true apologetic without the Word of God.

#### *8) There is no depth in theology leading to transformation of life*

If the Word of God is the way that leads to the path of righteousness (Ps. 1, 119; 2 Tim. 3:16-17), then it must be said that the way towards godliness is to be more in depth in the Word of God.

Human are limited. And ultimately, the best system for accountability can and will fail. But God does not fail. The way of righteousness must come from within more than from without, from transformation by God instead of even laws and measures ordained by God. Zacharias' shallowness in theology is one reason why his fall was not surprising. Most certainly, it is grievous to many, but what else can be expected?

Much of Evangelicalism continues with its anti-intellectualism regarding theology. Evangelicals are only interested in "practical Bible study." Is it no wonder that their shallowness does not lead to deeper life transformation? They think that theology is for theologians, not understanding that while theology can be complicated, it is the call of all believers to study and understand God's Word and thus know theology.

### 9) *Compromised theology can show a compromised life*

Humans are not always logically consistent. Therefore, we see moral people who are however heretics, and immoral people who are orthodox in their theology. However, if a greater depth into God's Word transforms life, then surely it would not be surprising if compromised theology goes together with a compromised life. After all, good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruits (Mt. 7:17-20).

In 2012, my friend the later pastor Ken Silva warned against the doctrinal compromise of Ravi Zacharias, who had compromised the faith in partnering with the Word-faith heretic Joyce Meyer.<sup>4</sup> Of course, his letter to RZIM was ignored, which goes to point 1 about how sin is tolerated within Evangelicalism. For his concern for Zacharias' sin, Christians like him were mocked as those who "attack others," "Pharisees," and other such names. But his compromise here on doctrine reflects here the compromised life that he has lived even at that time. I hate to say "we told you so," but in some way those of us who warned others against compromise within the church can say "we told you so." Bad trees bear bad fruit. While not all who compromise on doctrine will compromise in their lives, it should not be surprising that such should occur.

Back to the issue of compromise, which in God's sight is worse: Zacharias' compromise with Joyce Meyer, or his sexual avarice? If you think that his sexual avarice is worse, then you have the values of the world, reflected as it is in the values of Evangelicalism. In God's eyes, spiritual adultery is worse than physical adultery, in the same way as spiritual murder is worse than physical murder. The reason why Evangelicalism thinks the opposite is true is because we have imbibed the world's view of religion – a personal private relationship between human and the divine. We seek God for personal fulfillment, instead of God as the Creator who demands the fealty of all creation. We are antinomians, believing that God's grace negates the Law of God, seen in our taking secularism as an *a priori* instead of a this-worldly compromise. Is it no wonder when Christian celebrities are celebrities precisely because of their worldliness, and thus comprise in faith and life?

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Ravi Zacharias scandal is not surprising to me. The main problem resulting in the scandal is Zacharias' failure in ecclesiology and failure of grasping the Word of God. When someone compromised on the Word of God, we should not be surprised if moral failure is present as well. After all, why should one compromise on one and not the other also?

The scandal is and must always be said to be owned by Evangelicalism (or "Big Eva" if you like the term). It is Evangelicalism that rejects biblical ecclesiology. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Silva, "Apprising Ministries' Letter to RZIM Re. Ravi Zacharias Praising Joyce Meyer," *Apprising Ministries* (Dec 12, 2012), accessed Feb 17, 2021, <https://www.apprising.org/2012/12/19/apprising-ministries-letter-to-rzim-re-ravi-zacharias-praising-joyce-meyer/>

Evangelicalism that tolerates doctrinal compromise. Therefore, it is Evangelicalism that owns this scandal. Those of us who warn against such compromise, while demonized by Evangelicals, just look on with sorrow. Continue to reject our critiques all you want, but the bill of compromise will keep piling up. Ravi Zacharias may be a big profile scandal, but I can assure you, he will not be the last.

## **Addendum: The problem of victim virtue in emotional satisfaction**

Sexual abuse is wrong, and most certainly repentance and restitution for sin ought to be done. There is nothing wrong with supporting victims of sexual abuse, or any abuse. However, I have come to perceive that there might be a problem in abuse advocacy: that of victim virtue in emotional satisfaction.

Sin such as abuse hurts people. The victims of these sins understandably are emotionally scarred by these sins. From these scars comes a demand for justice that is raw and sometimes mingled with a desire for vengeance. The biblical response is repentance and restitution where possible. However, restitution is to be objective not subjective (c.f. Num. 5:7), proportionate to the offense (Ex. 21:24), and any addition also objective and done probably for the inconvenience due to the crime.

Therefore, while repentance and restitution ought to be done, there seems to be a problem with victim advocacy whereby what is demanded is restitution according to what the victim thinks of as adequate. Emotional satisfaction has to be rendered to the victim, and here we see the statement of contrition by RZIM seems overly emotional. In this time, we must notice how modern victim advocacy has moved from supporting victims to demanding things be done to reject “a culture of abuse,” as seen in Gregoire’s article lumping abuse in with changes in the ESV and doctrinal difference concerning the Trinity.<sup>5</sup>

While the statement by RZIM does not necessarily indicate that victims would dictate the terms of restitution, the emotional statements in the open letter are not cause for confidence. Whatever RZIM chooses to do, I am not confident that the open letter comes from the heart instead of being a letter no different from how the world deals with abuse, and have no confidence biblical restitution will be given rather than worldly restitution.

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Wray Gregoire, “No more Covering up Abuse of Covering for Abusers – A Plea for Churches,” *To Love, Honor, and Vacuum* [blog] (Jun 12, 2018), accessed Feb 17, 2021, <https://tolovehonorandvacuum.com/2018/06/sbc-and-women-for-such-a-time-as-this/>