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Minister's fall another lesson Shield of faith doesn't prevent bad decisions, Christians say

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Whatever the truth is about the Rev. Ted Haggard, his story highlights a theological fault line that could send aftershocks into American culture - and into Tuesday's election results.

On the one hand, Christianity teaches that everyone is a sinner. On the other hand, many Christians believe that their faith offers some protection against falling into sin.

Until he stepped down Thursday after being accused of paying for gay sex, Mr. Haggard was pastor of a Colorado megachurch and president of the National Association of Evangelicals. Theologians say that the fall of one more high-profile pastor should not shake the faith of the faithful.

But surveys suggest that a significant minority - those who particularly place their faith in God's worldly protection - might shift some beliefs and behaviors. About 20 percent of white evangelicals belong to this group, which tends to vote Republican, pollsters say.

The scandal may also nudge a few more people away from organized religion, experts say. About 15 percent of Americans say they belong to no particular religion, and this group tends to vote for Democrats, pollsters say.

The twin strains of Christian thought - inevitable sin and faith's protection from sin - can be found in many Bible passages.

"You have numerous biblical great figures who are seen as being very devoted to God and yet fell," said Darrell Bock, professor for spiritual development and culture for Dallas Theological Seminary. Mr. Haggard's story was Topic A for faculty and students Friday, he said.

The list of biblical sinners includes: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the Israelites worshipping a golden calf at the base of Mount Sinai, David and Bathsheba, and Peter denying Jesus.

But there are also passages that suggest faith is transformational. Ezekiel says that God told him, "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them." And Paul describes a "shield of faith" in his letter to the Ephesians.

But that shield doesn't prevent bad decisions, say Christians across the theological spectrum.

"As long as we have freedom to make choices and we remain human beings, we are sometimes going to make bad choices," said the Rev. C. Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance.

Mr. Haggard's congregation, New Life Church in Colorado Springs, claims 14,000 members. He was elected president of the National Association of Evangelicals in 2003.

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This week, a self-described male escort went on the radio to accuse Mr. Haggard of paying him for sex once a month for three years and of having him buy illegal drugs. Initially, Mr. Haggard denied it all. Some admissions have dribbled out from his church and Mr. Haggard himself, but he still denies having had sex with the man.

What difference will this scandal make?

The Barna Group is an evangelical Christian polling organization. In 1988, in the wake of the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals, Barna did a national survey.

Most people said the scandals would have no effect. But 35 percent said it was less likely that they would watch any TV preachers. And 14 percent said they were less interested in Christianity.

A new Barna survey, fodder for an upcoming book, indicates that scandals don't simply vanish, said Barna vice president David Kinnaman.

"Many people's negative perceptions about Christianity are reinforced by - often even created by - scandals, sometimes whether those events are true or not," he said.

Christians should draw a lesson from Mr. Haggard's story, said Dr. Robin Lovin, an ethics professor at the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

"It reminds us again of the importance of not relying on leaders and spiritual guides," he said, "but of having our own moral convictions and strength."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S): (BARRY GUTIERREZ/Rocky Mountain News) The Rev. Ted Haggard and his wife, Gayle, leave their home in Colorado Springs, Colo., a day after Mr. Haggard resigned as president of the National Association of Evangelicals and stepped down as pastor of his 14,000-member church.

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