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THE PREACHER AND MORAL FAILURES

by Joe Bob Mizzell

Let's face it, the minister of a Baptist church can be forgiven of almost anything, if he repents and changes his ways, except sexual sins. If a minister gets involved in a sexual sin (adultery, child molestation, homosexuality), he might as well resign and look for a new occupation. Well, maybe not every time, but almost every time. Even if he stays in the ministry, he usually has to move to an office other than senior pastor. Once a diamond is chipped, it may be reground, but it will never be as large as before.

Many are aware of the past history of outstanding preachers who have fallen to the sin of David. The movie about Elmer Gantry, the fictional preacher who fell to moral sin, made many people aware that preachers are human. In more recent times, the moral failure of Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Ted Haggard, and in our state the failure of a large church pastor and successful evangelist, has created news events that reflect poorly on all ministers. Even sadder is the fact that there are hundreds of ministers who fail morally that we never hear about.

In a recent conversation with H.B. London of Focus on the Family, he told me of serving on the restoration committee of Ted Haggard and then he said, "When you hear the names of these great preachers who failed, you never think of their accomplishment because it is always overshadowed by their moral failure."

What is wrong? Why are so many preachers failing morally? Can we trust any minister? What can the church do to make sure they do not call an immoral minister? Is there anything the church, association or state convention can do to keep ministers from failing morally? There are a lot of questions, but there are also some answers.

First, not all ministers are anywhere close to moral failure. Most pastors and staff serve all their lives and never do anything questionable related to moral conduct. The number of ministers who commit adultery is much, much lower than that of the average male population. Today we are made aware of the sexual sins of ministers more so than in past years. The failure of a well-known evangelist was on the first page of the "Birmingham News", on the "Rick and Bubba Show" and even on Paul Fienbaum's sports talk radio show.

The church can do a much better job making sure they do not call an immoral minister. Churches must check out the minister before extending a call. They should run references, talk to directors of missions, check with former church

members, and question other ministers who know the prospect. Don't hesitate to ask any question about the prospective minister. Listen carefully to what the reference may tell you.

The church can do some things in a preventive way to help their pastor when temptation comes. They can give him time off for family. The deacons or others can warn him if they see signs of over-involvement with a particular woman.

The minister is the one who can do the most to avoid sexual failure. He can guard his thoughts. Ultimately, the battle for sexual purity is won or lost in the mind. Those things that could erode your thought life should be avoided. He should make sure that his best time goes to his wife and family. Only great husbands and great fathers can be great pastors. He should resolve never to be alone personally or to be involved emotionally with a woman who is not his wife, sister, mother or grandmother, or at least old enough to be his grandmother.

The minister will do well to remember the cost of sexual sin. A big house may be attractive, but the payments are huge. He should recognize his vulnerability. No one is above sexual temptation. No pastor should destroy his call to the ministry for a moment of pleasure. An effective minister must be a holy minister.

The morally failing minister is usually a loner. He may be in his late 30s in a highly successful church, receiving a huge salary with praise coming from all directions. He may rationalize that he is so capable that God will overlook his moral sins and that he deserves a second or third woman, but he is usually a loner. He may be in his 50s with a troubled church and an unhappy family life, but he is usually a loner. We all need accountability!

We need to attend the associational ministers' conference. We need to have minister friends. We need to have close deacon friends. We need to rely on our director of missions. We need accountability!

The minister should value his family. It is more important than the church, more important than money, and more important than pleasure. Outside God, family is the most important thing in a preacher's life.

Most importantly, the minister must stick close to God. Pray, read your Bible, love your family, minister to your people and please keep your life clean.

(Mizzell is director of Christian Ethics/Chaplaincy Ministries of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions)

*The articles in this issue were gathered from various sources
The opinions in the Christian Life Report are not necessarily the opinions of the Christian Life Commission*

BEING A HEALTHY PASTOR IN UNHEALTHY TIMES

by H.B. London

I'm sitting at my desk in my home in Colorado Springs thinking about the past 33 years of my life. I was just out of seminary, full of idealism and youthful confidence—kind of “I can do anything but fail” mentality.

I began my ministry just before the boom days of the church growth era. For a number of years, I experienced the “Midas touch” of God’s blessing of being in the right place at the right time. But then I realized there were men I knew who were my age who were smarter, more devoted to God, and more in tune with things related to church growth, who never did succeed by man’s standard.

In November 1991, I resigned pastoral ministry to work at Focus on the Family. I wanted to spend the last years of my ministry in rediscovery—in freshness. I wanted a new sense of mission. And I found it—ministry to pastors and their families that would concentrate on spiritual restoration and renewal. I found a ministry to help pastors recapture a dream, re-evaluate their call from God, and emerge with a sense of mission and fulfillment, regardless of the size of their churches or the amount of their paychecks.

We have done a great disservice to thousands of pastors who have never achieved the biggest and the best. We have erred in giving certain pastors rock star status. We have created a distorted sense of prominence in our ranks, especially if God’s job description for His children is to be taken in context.

“He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8, NIV).

What is Success?

What is success? Who is the best speaker? Who had the one paradigm that is surefire? What’s the best way to worship? I don’t know the answers. There was a time when I had it all figured out, but now I am an observer. I watch pastors and their families, not figures. I am most impressed by those who have found a way to balance their schedules successfully, rather than a church budget. I look for peace in a pastor’s life more than a new program.

I’m looking for healthy leaders who know their place is secure in God, regardless of what the tote board reads. Pastors and their families who survive in ministry must rise above the mire and muck of others’ expectations, and see themselves as loved, accepted, forgiven, needed, and gifted representatives of the call of God.

However, what I see so often are pastors burdened by four terrible words that translate into a lifestyle.

Four Terrible Words

• Isolation

Pastors and their families live on lonely islands surrounded by people who want whatever they can give, and more. They are isolated from reality by a call that makes them different—in many ways looking different, living different, and acting different from the rest of society, and not really knowing how it all happened. Many pastors live in fear of being hurt, or abused, or dislodged from their security—withdrawing from expectations that are unrealistic—yet have faith to do an impossible task with grace and love.

Answer: Be yourself. Set your priorities. Put your family above anything else. Realize God called you, not man. Find

your confidence in God’s approval, not numbers. Try not to compare yourself to others. Let the Holy Spirit be the author of your dreams.

• Loneliness

So many pastors I meet have no friends. They live under the false teaching that you can’t have relationships within your congregation, and you can’t trust your colleagues or denominational leaders. You can! It takes courage, but you can. Loneliness creates paranoia.

Answer: Call together an accountability group to ask you big questions and hold you accountable for your spiritual life, your family life, and your personal life. Involve yourself in a covenant relationship with another pastor who will join you in mutual prayer. Be best friends with your spouse. Get out into a community of non-Christians and be something other than a preacher. Trust people even though you lose from time to time.

• Inadequacy

So many pastors I talk to feel they are unprepared to meet the pressures of today. Things are different, they say. Society changes so quickly. The old answers no longer seem to satisfy. How do you measure up to expectations for the family that people place on you? How can you possibly be all things to all people? You can’t! That’s God’s responsibility—you work for Him.

Answer: Concentrate on using your greater gifts. Focus on what you are equipped to do. Manage your time. Be your own person. Don’t let the world or a congregation squeeze you into its mold. Read! Avail yourself of every resource possible. Share ideas. Get counseling if you need it. Admit it when you’re wrong. Preach with confession and transparency. Don’t allow your people to put you on a pedestal. You’re not a superstar. Your strength is God’s strength.

• Insecurity

As I visit with pastors I hear them identify four areas of concern: (1) inadequate financial compensation, (2) limited medical coverage, (3) poor retirement benefits, and (4) forced termination. They are right! The average layperson does not understand the needs of a pastor’s family. To serve successfully, we must be able to live as securely as possible in the real world. The layperson must accept that responsibility.

Answer: Stay out of debt! Save a little every month. Have a three-person committee whose main assignment is to look after the financial and physical needs of the pastor’s family. Know where you stand with your people. Love your people. Acknowledge people. Reward people. Write notes. Make telephone calls. Anticipate. Don’t just say you love your church family. Show them. Establish a foothold in their lives. Read Matthew 6:25-34 and Philippians 4:4-6.

Four awesome words: **isolation**, **loneliness**, **inadequacy**, **insecurity**. Our reaction to them will, in a major way, determine how successfully we survive as pastors. We must do everything we can to keep pastors and their families strong. We must take control of those four awesome words with God’s help, and to His glory!

(H.B. London is vice president of church and clergy for Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, Colorado)

THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF SEXUAL SIN

by "Steve"

I thought it would never happen to me, but here I was, told to resign or be fired for sexual misconduct. A counseling relationship went beyond proper boundaries and I should've been wise enough to see this and retreat. But a number of factors made me a prime target for a downfall. I wish now I'd have asked for a few weeks off and spent time with my wife and the Lord. I suppose I thought I was "ten feet tall and bulletproof," as the country/western song declares. I wasn't.

I soon found myself a pariah. Some church members wanted to minister to me and my family, but leaders made it clear we weren't to return to the church so things were awkward. Many of my pastor-friends ignored me while a few sent me the "God bless you--call me if you need me" notes. I realize now we pastors really don't know what to say to our fallen brothers. What we fallen folk need is our friends taking initiative to come to us since we're too depressed and too ashamed to reach out to them.

It's been a long road these past years, but God has been faithful. My marriage is strong and my wife has modeled God's grace. I'm a bi-vocational pastor and preach every Sunday. I think I preach now with greater compassion for sinful folk like me.

Following are some lessons I propose to my brothers in the ministry.

(1) Exercise care in counseling women. Some ministers refuse to counsel women. Others insist on having a church secretary present in the office and the door open, or limit sessions to one or two before referral. I think I could've selected one of these options and must in the days ahead.

(2) Don't neglect your family. One Christian leader insisted your family are the most important members in your church! It's so easy for us to ride a white horse and try to save the world and neglect our wives and children. I should have been wise enough to follow Ronald Reagan's example. One of his biographers said Reagan often told his staff, "Gentlemen, we've done all we can do today. Let's go home and enjoy our families."

And I should've recognized that the church could get by without me now and then. An occasional weekend off with my wife would've helped our marriage. At the least, the church would've enjoyed hearing another preacher. At best, they'd be happy to see me back the next Sunday!

(3) Find a support group. Much has been written about support groups in recent years. Some find help in gathering

trusted laymen in the church, while others choose to meet with fellow pastors. I believe every minister should meet regularly with a group for sharing and prayer. A group can make us aware of vulnerabilities we might not see.

(4) Count the cost. I heard a teacher say once that the scripture exhorts us to stand firm against all sin except sexual sin. In that instance, the Bible exhorts us to flee. Sexual sin has devastating consequences for years to come. The best option is to run from it.

Realize part of the cost of sexual sin is that you'll not be allowed to exercise your ministry gifts in many churches. Doors are closed, at least for a time. And many ministers, like me, find it frustrating to get connected in another vocation. Churches saw me as damaged goods and the business world saw me as untrained.

One noted Bible teacher insisted that restoration to ministry isn't possible since the scripture doesn't give an example of such. I disagree. The New Testament narrative covers a relatively brief historical period, and other things that are common today aren't mentioned including Sunday School, VBS, choirs and revivals. The principle of restoration is there (Gal. 6: 1- 2), and I don't find in scripture any roadblock to God's grace (with the possible exception of apostasy in Hebrews, but that's another story!)

It's rare that the church where the sin was committed be the restorative agent, but there are other people and other congregations who can and will do this. Thank God I found some loving congregations to serve. God is good.

(5) Be an instrument of compassion. Henri Nouwen popularized the concept of the "wounded healer." It's true that those who suffer can be the best encouragers. But even those who've not stumbled in ministry can be compassionate toward those who have, and this is desperately needed. That's why I've determined the rest of my life to do all I can to offer help to ministers who hurt. And, trust me, their number is legion.

My life has moved in some new directions and I've found fulfillment. However, the story of failure remains and will have to be shared with future employers just as I've done with more recent employers. I'll never escape it.

My parting word to you is it's not worth it! All the heart-break and disappointment isn't worth the few moments of joy from a forbidden relationship. It's so much better to erect safeguards and to remain "pure and faultless in God's sight." (2 Pt. 3: 14, GNB).

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Compiled by Joe Bob Mizzell, Director

Office of Christian Ethics & Chaplaincy Ministries – Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions
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OLDER GAMBLERS

Older gamblers are especially vulnerable to wagering more than they can afford. The number of older problem gamblers is rising as boomers age, while programs that serve problem gamblers are already too few, overextended and underfunded.

The opportunities to gamble are multiplying, too. A wager of some type is now legal in every state except Utah and Hawaii.

AARP Bulletin, June 2007

THE TOLL GAMBLING TAKES

The costs are enormous—more than three times any perceived benefit, argues Earl L. Grinols, the distinguished professor of economics at Baylor University. “Gambling leads to increased crime, to suicides and to people ruining their lives when they get caught up in it,” he says. “If the damage were spread evenly among all of us, there’d be no gambling.”

Several studies in the last decade have documented a connection between the proliferation of casinos and people going broke. SMR Research, for example, found that the bankruptcy rate was 11.2% higher in gambling counties—and 29% higher if there were five or more gambling halls.

Researchers at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., found that personal bankruptcy rates in counties with casinos grew by more than 63% above comparable counties without casinos. Tom Coates, who founded Consumer Credit of Des Moines, a counseling agency, estimates that almost 15% of the people who come to his office for help each month gambled themselves broke. “In most cases, repayment isn’t an option,” he says. “They’ve dug the debt hole too deep.” For them, bankruptcy is the only choice.

Parade, May 20, 2007

PORN

A new federal report tells that 85 percent of federal inmates convicted of child porn have molested at least one child.

Montgomery Advertiser, Kenneth Mullinax, May 21, 2007

ROE V. WADE LOSES PUBLIC SUPPORT

A national public opinion survey released in late May shows that many people who know the facts about Roe v. Wade — the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion — think it should be overturned.

“Public opinion on the Supreme Court overturning Roe v. Wade is significantly affected by a focus on the conditions under which abortion is allowed by the ruling,” the survey report stated.

David O’Steen, executive director of the National Right to Life Committee, said the survey confirms what he’s known for years. “If you just ask about Roe v. Wade, there’s majority support for it. But if you describe what Roe v. Wade does, then a majority doesn’t support it.”

Support for Roe varied depending on circumstances. Seventy-five percent of respondents said they supported abortion when the life of the mother is at risk, and 77 percent said it should be legal if the pregnancy poses a health risk or it resulted from rape or incest. If the preborn child was diagnosed with a “serious physical or mental deformity,” abortion support dropped to 55 percent.

Seventy-nine percent said abortion should not be legal if “the woman does not like the gender of the fetus”; 72 percent said it should be illegal if the woman believes the child would interfere with her life; and 65 percent said a lack of financial stability does not make it right.

Montgomery’s Journey, June 2007



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