

The Neglected Qualification

Black Sheep in Pastors' Homes



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PREFACE

The Shallow End of the Pool

For various reasons, we need to spend some time considering what might be called “the neglected qualification.” The spiritual state of the preacher’s kids has long been proverbial, and not in a good way, and yet we continue to have the following in our Bibles.

“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife . . . One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) (1 Tim. 3:2,4-5).

“For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless . . .” (Tit. 1:5-7).

The majority of the Christian world has work-arounds and explanations for these verses, while the minority that wants them to mean what they appear to mean, sometimes applies them in a wooden or legalistic fashion. While wanting to avoid both extremes, we still need to affirm that these words mean *something*, and

that they apply *sometime*. I want to explore what that something might mean, and when that sometime might be.

Let us throw all the difficult cases on the table right away. This is talking about making someone an elder, not talking about someone who has been an elder for thirty years already. We are not told what to do if the child of an elder sins significantly, but repents just as thoroughly, and is now walking with the Lord in the state penitentiary. We are not told if the passage applies to an elder whose five natural children are all faithful, but the crack cocaine baby they adopted when she was just a toddler has completely fallen away. Suppose the wayward child is the oldest, a stepson to the minister, and all *his* children are faithful. One of the reasons we need judicious and godly men to be our elders is that they must make decisions like this. And I grant that the right process for dealing with all such tangles is not easy, simplistic, or formulaic.

I also grant that there are textual and broader theological issues. What about Jacob's children? They were kind of a mess, especially Levi—destined for ministry. And then King David had a bunch of kids that we wouldn't exactly put on the cover of a homeschooling magazine. What about them? These guys can have kids that are a disaster zone, and they can write a bunch of the Bible, but if a man has a kid who is only one tenth that bad, he can't preach from that same Bible? Okay, I get it.

But if we want reformation in our time—and we should—we need to return to the Bible, whether or not we are flattered by what we discover there. Our task

should be to seek out what faithful obedience in this area might mean, what it might look like, and then to obey. This obedience is not just to be found at the individual or familial level. This is an area where the entire church needs to be involved in learning together, and coming together. Until we come to a consensus on how to draw this particular line, we will continue to be frustrated by a pandemonium of voices from every direction.

Suppose we tentatively set a very straightforward standard. Suppose we said that if the child of an elder or minister is ever excommunicated, then the elder or minister in question will submit his resignation. And if there are extenuating circumstances—as there will sometimes be, no doubt—then the decision about any exceptions will be referred to presbytery, outside the context of the local church. We would be applying the wisdom the Westminster theologians showed on the subject of divorce—saying that in such tangles those most closely involved should not be judges in their own cases. Suppose we started with something like that?

I want to argue for this kind of approach in the sections that follow, and I do want to cover the subject as thoroughly as I can.

As has been said, obedience is the great opener of eyes. Drawing the line in the wrong place is preferable to refusing to draw it at all. Once we start doing something together when a child is excommunicated, we might be in a position to deal with, say, high scandal repented of. As we begin to obey, the Lord may continue to give us more obedience. But in order to wade in from the shallow end of the pool, we do have to get into the pool in the first place.



CHAPTER 1

Leaving the Ninety-Nine

Over the years I have written a good deal about the great neglected qualification for the ministry. Paul tells us plainly that a man whose house is not in order is not qualified to be a steward in the household of God. The stewardship abilities required in the one setting are comparable to those which are needed in the other. The texts seem plain enough.

But having stated the hard center of the position, let us go on to acknowledge that life is messy and the texts are not plain enough to apply themselves. Somebody has to make decisions about it, and there will be complications. For example, the requirements have to do with making someone a minister—sacking a minister two years before his retirement is not in view. We also have to decide where the enforcement line for others might be. A man might have one line for what would require his own resignation, another one for how much he would say if a friend asked his advice, and yet a third for what he would fight about at presbytery.

Another question concerns what scale of blameworthiness we are using—do we wait until excommunication? Or is the line crossed as soon as the wife of

the head deacon sees the teenaged son of the minister sneaking into the back room of the video rental store? Okay, so life is messy, and we have to make decisions, and we have to do so non-legalistically, and do so without treating personal pastoral problems like we were stacking no more than five wooden blocks. Got it.

That said, I want to offer another consideration for men who are in such messy situations, and who truly desire to know what the Lord would have them do. I do not offer them a rule, and certainly I am not handing a rule over to the self-appointed chairman of their lynching party. I don't want to lend encouragement to any "tag, you're disqualified" factions within the church. Sometimes people confuse settling scores with holiness. I simply offer something to consider, and here it is.

Not all disqualifications are the same. Some men are disqualified from the ministerial office down to the bone. Given the nature of the case, they are probably disqualified in other areas as well, but when it comes to the Christian family, they don't have a clue.

Many years ago, back in our Jesus-people days, when I was a very young pastor, a gent rolled into town, and "felt led" to join in with us on the leadership team. Only problem was, he had been married six times—and the last two wives were in his Christian phase. Um, let us think about it, no.

Let's say a pastor has six kids, all of them hellions, from the three-year-old, whom the child care workers at the church have affectionately named Demon Child, to the eldest boy, who is sixteen and has already gotten three girls in the youth group pregnant. How all this could possibly be happening is a grand mystery to

Dad, and he feels greatly put upon if anybody is legalistic enough to bring it up. Whatever happened to grace? This is disqualification *simpliciter*.

But there is another sort of qualification issue that is in a different category entirely. It is not the revealing of an utterly unpastoral heart, but is rather closer to what I would regard as one of a pastor's final qualifying exams, an advanced test. A pastor has a number of grown children, walking in the Lord, and one black sheep. Does the Bible give directions to shepherds about the sheep who can take care of themselves for a bit, and the one who obviously can't? Yes, it does.

“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing” (Luke 15:4-5).

There are two elements here—the obvious one is finding the lost sheep. But the other element is that of leaving the ninety nine. In this scenario, with this consideration, the disqualification would not be in the fact of the sheep wandering—that does happen from time to time. The potential disqualification comes in not going after the wandering sheep. The “reveal” is not found in the fact that a pastor's kids can sin, sometimes grievously. I would want to argue that a pastor's kid can sin grievously without disqualifying his or her father from the ministry. But what happens after that? When a child sins in this way, it is not so much a disqualification from ministry as it is a drastic invitation to radical ministry.

So this is just a consideration. When should a good pastor leave the 99? “For the Son of man is come to seek

and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). The answer is some form of “when there are just 99.”