

# Ethics and the Church in Today's Culture- a Pastoral Perspective

(Leading with Integrity in Life and Ministry)

By  
Jim Wilbur

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## Chapter One: Introduction

When dealing with the topic of ethics it would be easy to assume that ethics should be a foregone conclusion when dealing with the subject of clergy.

However one glance at the headlines or a hit on the internet will tell you this is simply not true. There is a huge gap between what should be and what actually is when it comes to conduct of a large amount of clergy.

The present crisis in ministerial ethics is both a reflection of our times, as well as an influence on our society. Ethical failure in the pulpit affects the pew. At the same time, clergy morals seem to mirror the general decline in morality among the laity. Our day is fraught with political cover-ups, insider trading on the stock market, savings and loan scandals, and illegal gambling by sports figures. Numbed by it all, people are seldom shocked when they hear of an immoral minister.

(Trull/Carter, 1993, p. 10)

This statement was made several years ago, however it still applies today. There seems to be a huge gap when it comes to integrity preached and what is actually lived out by those behind the pulpit.

Not to pick on one particular group, but as a matter of illustration there was a study conducted several years ago that involved Baptist pastors relating to dismissal from churches. What the study revealed was that in forced terminations the leading cause of dismissal was due to immoral conduct and the runner-up was lack or abuse of communication on the part of the minister.

Part of the problem can point back to the culture that we minister in. The culture in America arouses a desire and passion in many pulpits to be the biggest and the best and in the process of pounding after that position something goes terribly wrong. The result is often catastrophic and results in a collection of clergy checking their integrity at the door on their way to seeking after short-lived success.

Then there are those that do proceed into the pulpit with a measure of integrity and a pure heart only to find out the cold hard truth. They find themselves confused about not only what to do, but also who to serve. Where does the buck stop? Is he to cater to individuals, a denomination, or to God? The minister ends up like a juggler in a cheap circus act attempting to balance the best he can all the competing components of his ministry.

Seminary graduates flutter away from ivy-covered campuses planning to fly high, only to crash into the brick wall of Old First Church. Young ministers quickly discover that pastoral ministry is more like running a secular business than the spiritual enterprise they expected. The weekly calendar is crammed with financial meetings, publicity decisions, personnel problems, and client complaints. When will there be time for theological discussions, spiritual disciplines, or the real mission of the church? ...Every Church has an unwritten list of expectations for its ordained, and similarly, each new church shepherd arrives with a notebook filled with plans and priorities. The two seldom match. (Trull/Carter, 1993,pp.20-21)

This could not be closer than reality from my standpoint. There is such a variety of challenges for the pastor to face that if he is doing it in his own strength he is headed for a disaster. To conclude that just because the person in question is a minister that there will be no problems is, I am sorry to say, living in fantasy land.

The most naïve believe that since the minister is set apart by God, ethics will take care of itself,

for God only calls good people. Others assume that those who preach the gospel must surely live by the Bible precepts and principles.(Trull/Carter, 1993,p.20)

The bottom line truth is that regardless of the spiritual stock or pastoral pedigree ministerial integrity (ethics) is neither simple nor automatic. As a matter of fact ministerial integrity is deliberate and defined.

This does not change or alter the fact that in order to effectively and accurately fulfill the calling of clergy a person needs to be a person with ethics and integrity from the sake of the gospel.

From Biblical times to the present, the moral character of the proclaimer of the gospel was expected to be exemplary and "above reproach" (1 Timothy 3:12). Being a good minister has always meant more than just maintaining minimal standards it is a call for maximum discipleship. To be an evangelist of the Kingdom of God involves Lordship- the rule and reign of God over every area of your life... a pastoral code of ethics include personal habits, financial decisions, family commitments, pastoral responsibilities, congregational

relationships, community involvement and much more.

(Trull/Carter, 1993, p.15)

It seems that the clergy have a difficult and demanding road when it comes to maintaining ministerial ethics. The only meaningful map in discovering truth in regards to this subject is the scriptures. There are timeless and true and remain constant when looking to them for answers to all questions.

It is true to maintain the position that a majority of protestant clergy accept the authority of the scriptures as the main touchable evidence to knowing the will of God. The problem persists that depending on the pastor their perception of and interpretation of the scripture may be limited. The normal view of the Old Testament is to look at it as a book of moral codes and view the New Testament as a advanced ethic of principles. Too simply say "just follow the Bible" does not answer all of our moral questions.

There are some ethically challenging areas like divorce and war that seem to be at times condoned and other times condemned. There is also a number of modern dilemmas like artificial insemination and media morality that did not exist in biblical times in the current context.

In order to rightly apply the ethical teaching of

scripture it requires an ability to skillfully exegete and hermeneutically dissect the divine truth contained in the scriptures.

This remains a challenge for each and every minister. As a minister you never want to twist or taint the scripture to fit your view. The honest desire of every minister that has a heart after God is to rightly divide the truth in love.

That aside the question remains how do we address the matter of ethics in a minister's life? Do we just hope that during seminary there is a divine download in the life of the minister and he is able to apply it? Or do we proactively continue through being real and relevant address these issues and help our brothers and sisters in ministry through the minefields on the battlefields of life, where it seems we are leaving far too many casualties.

Is ethics a matter of character or conduct? Which is more important virtue or values? Does what I am determine what I do, or does what I do shape who I am? The answer to both questions is "yes". Being affects doing and doing shapes being...both being good

(character) and doing good (conduct) are necessary.

(Trull/Carter, 1993, p.45)

On that note we are now going to put this into practice in two areas of importance in a minister's life.

The personal and family life is the first area that we will examine and attempt to give some practical ways that a minister can exercise ethics.

Then we will explore the area of the congregation and the church at large and discover how vitally important it is for the vitality of the church to remain morally and ethically above reproach as he or she ministers to those that God has put into their paths.

## Chapter Two: Where it Matter's Most

One important thing to remember about the life of a minister is that it is not detached from the home. It needs to be clearly understood that a minister's personal and home life will have an affect on their public ministry.

First and foremost what flows from the home will find its outlet in the public ministry arena. A minister should be determined not to be one way at home and another in public.

Being "real" at home and being "perfect" in public can be a recipe for disaster both in the home and in their public ministry, especially in regard to the pastor's children.

The word that best defines what a pastor's life should look like is integrity. This word combines character, conduct, and moral vision. The pastor hopefully prayerfully implements these areas in a life that is wholly committed to God and being and doing the right thing at all times.

Do not misunderstand me I am not prescribing a prescription of perfection; however it should be the aim as the minister focuses of becoming more like Jesus.

As a pastor approaches the many moral choices that he or she will face in life it is not done in a bubble of

bliss. Each person brings to the table their own experiences, traditions, history, and values that have shaped them. This is not to say that these are all correct, however right or wrong they are the elements that drive the decision making process.

The pastor needs to have an ability to analyze situations and scenarios as they are involved in decision making.

In regards to this prayer can never be underestimated because it becomes a lifeline in discerning the mind of God and pursuing the Father's will for their life.

When we began to look at this and understand that decisions are a part of every minister's life we must also realize that despite the circumstances difficult decisions will have to be made. There is no guarantee that they will be easy and that they will always favor the minister.

Part of being a leader is to understand the reality of facing the question not "Have I ever failed?", rather the question is "How do I live as a human in this world and not be controlled by my human appetites and wants?."

Based on that question this statement needs to be made: Morality is intentional. A minister is a moral person because that minister intends to be moral and seeks to

safeguard that morality through out ministry. A minister is accountable to God, the church, their community, and last but not least their family.

It is important to point out that only healthy (or those well on their way) ministers are able to avoid the majority of moral landmines that scatter the ministry minefield that they navigate on a daily basis.

One very important element that is necessary for victory is to have a proper view of self by the minister. The pastor needs to understand deeply who they are in Christ and understand that they have intrinsic worth and value despite what they do or don't do.

Ministers with healthy self-esteem recognize that they have worth, value, and dignity apart from the ministry to which God has called them. Their identity rests in who they are as persons more than in what they do as ministers. (Trull/Carter, 1993, p.69.)

A minister that is whole is able to not minister from a point of need, but is ministering from a place of overflow. The problems that occur on when a minister is attempting to get a need met by someone that they are ministering too. They can develop unhealthy relationships

with the people that they are ministering too and the next thing you know we have another headline that highlights yet one more fallen minister in the minefield of ministry.

A pastor's lifestyle both public and private should confirm rather than contradict the Gospel message.

In the late eighties in the span of just a few months we were horrified by the headlines of the lifestyles of well-known ministers that displayed their life did not match their language from the pulpit. If the truth is to be told it has also happened in the nineties and continues today in the new millennium.

At some point ministers need to take responsibility and declare their reliance on God to help them. This cannot and will not be done in the ministers own strength. There are not perfect people and pastor's are certainly no exception to that truth.

In regards to areas that a minister can highlight to help them live a victorious life health is a very important factor to consider.

Due to the amount of stress and odd hours it is very easy for a minister to neglect their physical well-being.

Ministers must also pay attention to physical health, working to the point of exhaustion, without

days off or vacations, seems like commendable dedication, but actually it may be a foolish expenditure of strength...If dedicated minister's were to pace themselves, care for their bodies, and guard their health, they would then expand their ministries. (Trull/Carter,1993,p.69.)

This by far does not exhaust the subject of physical health, but it does highlight the importance to obtaining wholeness for a minister.

Another area of importance is continual spiritual growth. Just like the body needs to be healthy so does the soul. This is not just referring to an intellectual growth, but a continued change of heart and love for God.

In handling spiritual things regularly, ministers can easily become too familiar with the Holy. What they teach to others by way of spiritual discipline and exercises become perfunctory to them. A serious ethical issue arises when a minister requires of others what they don not practice themselves, or practice so routinely that the spiritual discipline loses all real meaning. (Trull/Carter,1993,p.71.)

As a minister the education process is continual and it never stops. A minister continues to learn things long

after the last hours in a classroom. The minute you stop learning is the moment that you stop being teachable.

Education does not end with seminary. Learning about the Bible, about God, and about the relationship between God and humankind is a lifelong activity. As your life unfolds and new life experiences occur, your understanding of God and spiritual matters as well as your theology grow. (Trull/Carter,1993,p.71)

One of the best illustrations of this point is found by looking at someone who is in the emergency services career field. In my years as a military police officer I experienced unfortunate and disturbing circumstances. You witness violence and say the aftermath of accidents on a regular basis. After a period of time you can become indifferent to what you see.

The same can happen with a minister. You continually are reading and studying the word of God for other people and if you are not careful can become detached from the truth yourself.

It is important to allow God to continue to teach you and draw you closer to Him and never let it become routine or repetitious religion. It must remain a relationship that is rich and not rigid and dead.

These spiritual matters always have a challenge to them and an element of mystery about them. No matter how often you have performed a wedding or a baptism, conducted a funeral, preached a sermon, or offered a prayer, the event must never simply become a repetitious act with no heart in it.

(Trull/Carter,1993,p.71)

Last, but certainly not least in regards to a life of integrity is the handling of the pastors family and the priority he places on them.

If a marriage is to be truly successful, it will be so only as a husband and wife sensitively "fine tune" themselves to the emotional, physical, and psychological needs of the other.

(Anderson,1985,p.93)

A marriage takes work and a pastor's is no exception. It becomes crucial that a pastor places the right priority on his or her family as the number one ministry.

A pastor should be a model of loving discipline. He should love his children more than his job. Be extravagant in his expressions of love for and praise to them, and should treat them as genuine human beings capable of profound thoughts that can

contribute to this life. (Anderson,1985,p.14)

This is very important to remember and can easily be forgotten. A pastor must realize that the hub of his ministry is in his own home.

Other people can easily take the majority of time and talent from the minister and then he is left with only leftover's when he or she returns home and has no energy or enthusiasm to minister well to the family.

The pastor often becomes so busy helping other people who have horrendous problems, that he does not take the time to thoroughly understand the problems of his own household, nor does he consider them serious problems, if he even recognizes that they exist. (Anderson,1985, p.93)

In regards to the pastor's family the marriage should be protected at all costs. As a pastor and a representative of the Father the word divorce should never even be entertained. The reality is that far too often it is not only entertained but engaged as a weapon of mass destruction in the life of ministers and their families.

Divorce isn't even a Christian word. I believe in the sanctity of marriage and that true Christian marriage is "till death do us part!" A pastor, as a

model for his people, should work the hardest of all people to keep his marriage intact and flourishing. Few things bring greater discredit to the church of Jesus Christ than pastors who divorce or are divorced. (Anderson,1985,p.5)

This does not mean that it can and does not happen, however as pastors we should do all that is possible to prevent this from happening in our own families and help others avoid the damage of divorce also.

Commitment is essential in all areas of life, especially in the area of family relationships. Commitment means that no matter what quitting is just not an option.

A major factor in cemented a family together is commitment. There should not be any other option other than total commitment to each other.

Trust is sacred and should be protected like Fort Knox. The result of this complete trust is that the minister and their spouse are committed to each other and that communicates to the children that their mother and father love each other very much. This produces an atmosphere of safety and security where the children can grow and watch relationship modeled rightly.

Chapter Three: What Happens in the Pulpit, Doesn't  
Necessarily Stay in the Pulpit.

It is important to point out that when a pastor fills the pulpit he or she is not in a place that they cannot practice what they preach. The topic that the preacher pounds persistently is usually the area that he or she agonizes with personally.

As a leader you reproduce who you are, not merely just what you teach. This must be done with an attitude of compassion, care, humility, and brokenness. Recognizing that you are no different than anyone else in your ability to be righteous (or not.)

"Ministers should be professionals without being mere professionals. They should always be competent in practicing their ministry, exemplary in their personal conduct, capable of meeting the demands placed upon them, and responsive to calls for ministry. Professional should never mean a cold, calculating, uncaring person."

(Trull/Carter, 1993, p.149)

This does not imply that one is able to do this in your own strength. This can only be accomplished as a person surrenders and allow God to work thru them for His glory.

It is very easy for a minister to think that he or she has to do this in their own strength based on their own intellect, enthusiasm, and creativity.

Life has become exceedingly complex. The work ethic seems to have been replaced by a corporate success syndrome that measures a persons worth in terms of prestige, promotion, wealth and appearance. Many North American men identify the core of their lives with their job instead of with their family life and measure their worth, not by the kind of husband and father they are, but by how well they work. The pastor is not immune from that cultural syndrome. (Anderson, 1985, p.89)

If the pastor does not realize this, not only will he or she being stuck in the performance trap, but they will expect the same thing from the people that they minister to.

Each person should be approached and viewed based on their intrinsic worth and value. The fact is that each person was made in the image and likeness of God.

The goal should never be to manipulate, manhandle, or exploit one of God's image bearers.

The best approach is simple. It is to love the people lavishly and minister the word of God faithfully. In doing these things you are able to approach people with respect and value in turn realizing their potential and not just their problems.

As a pastor your ministry must be firmly planted (rooted and grounded) in the fixed foundation of God's glorious love. The result is that respect flows from the Father's heart to the pastor and then to the people.

Our standard of success can never be based on one another or our own accomplishments. Our standard of measurement is Christ. Our success is determined by obedient faithfulness to Him and the process that progressively makes us more like Him each day.

As ministers as we lead people it should be our aim and focus to help them accomplish progressive daily Christ likeness in several areas as seen in Christ's life and ministry:

- 1) He prayed regularly
- 2) He was an accurate representation of His  
Father's Love

3) He compassionately shepherded his Father's sheep.

It is equally important to note that people are referred to as like sheep, however that is not all of who they are.

Church members are not merely sheep...they are also believer-priests, saints, and ministers of the Gospel, as the Bible makes clear. Leaders are given to the Church for only one purpose to enhance the ministry of those ministers.

(Anderson,1985, p.100)

That is the truth in a nutshell. As ministers we are in the church to become servants to those who are designed to minister. When those that fill the pews become convinced that they really are priests and ministers then they will begin to live up to their legacy.

It is our responsibility to ensure that the people that fill the pews are given the opportunity and the resources to fulfill their potential as they realize their identity.

The most effective model of ministerial leadership was demonstrated by Jesus Christ. It was the model of servant leadership that showed us how to truly serve those God has

entrusted to us. "The minister who acts as a servant responds to the needs of the people, responds to the directness of God, and responds to the guidance of the Holy Spirit." (Trull/Carter, 1993,p.97)

The bottom line in the congregation is also the bottom line in the home. It is all about relationships.

The minister that can rightly demonstrate and practice integrity in the home and the pulpit is a person that will experience satisfaction and success in ministry and life.

This paper does not even attempt to address all areas of integrity and ethics, but only seeks to highlight the areas of great importance in regards to relationships.

As ministers we have an opportunity to be a shining example of ethics or a tarnished and tainted template of what not to do. Ultimately the decision is in your arena and you are the one that can decide to depend on Him for the ability to live a life of integrity.

Especially today the church and the rest of the world needs assurance that the minister of the Gospel is one person they can look to as an example of integrity in all areas of their life.

When ministry is grounded in love and truth and the people are able to trust the minister. This is evident

because it exudes from every area of the minister's life and is an encouragement to all that he or she comes into contact with who now know they are valued for who they are not what they do.

## References

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