



## Why Churches Hire Pastors with Serious Problems

By Bob DeWaay

Some churches have made news recently for knowingly hiring pastors with serious ethical and moral problems. In one case a church hired a pastor previously convicted of sexual involvement with minors. In other cases high visibility pastors have been exposed for embezzlement, taking illegal drugs, engaging in homosexual behavior, or for having committed other serious sins.

That a pastor or any other Christian could have a serious fall is not completely surprising. Nevertheless, I think there may be a reason why so many are falling and why some churches still seek to hire people with known, serious moral and ethical problems. It has to do with redefining the role of the pastor—why the pastor is hired and what the pastor is expected to do.

The Bible offers no distinction between pastors and elders. In Acts 20:28 Paul assigns to elders the role of “shepherd” of the flock (same word as “pastor” in the Greek). Therefore the qualifications of elders apply to pastors. Two such qualifications that are of particular interest in this discussion are that they must be “*above reproach*” and “*have a good reputation with those outside the church*” (1Timothy 3:2, 7). It is not hard to see that a person will not qualify who recently was released from jail for having illegal sexual involvement with minors. Nor do those who have been convicted of any number of serious crimes. So why do churches remain so eager to hire or keep pastors who do not qualify to be elders?

Surely part of the problem is the church’s desire for success as defined in worldly terms. Rather than looking for honorable elders who “*labor in the word and doctrine*” (1Timothy 5:17), many churches seek a “charismatic” leader—charismatic in the worldly sense of the word. The Seeker Movement in particular has created a huge demand for polished speakers who can “wow” a crowd with looks, charisma, charm, wit, and worldly wisdom. In other words, the modern pastor is expected to have a skill set that has nothing to do with the Biblical criteria for elders and pastors. The reality is that those who possess the skills needed to hold the attention of many thousands of “seekers” with no interest in the pure Word of God are in short supply. So it is a question of supply and demand.

A man formerly an elder in a local church in our area told me an interesting story. Their church was located in a wealthy suburb, but the church attendance had been shrinking. So they called in one of the more prominent mega-church pastors in our area for consultation. His advice was that they had to do things “world class” if they wanted people to come, because people in their wealthy city will not tolerate anything but the best. They had to get the best children’s ministry, the best music, the best facilities, and most importantly they needed a “Five Star Pastor.”

The term “five-star” pastor, by the way, is akin to a Hollywood movie star. Let me show you how. For every great movie star there are thousands of wannabes who simply do not have what it takes. Likewise, because there is so much lust for success in modern churches, they compete for the few persons who qualify according to the redefined standards. So churches are looking for the religious version of the movie star and frankly, there are not enough Joel Osteens and Robert Schullers to go around.

This star quality requirement helps explain some churches’ willingness to put up with moral and ethical failure, and the analogy to movie stars helps explain it. Movie

stars are notorious for failed marriages, drugs, excesses, and other problems. But because they have qualities and talents others do not, they keep getting roles in movies and people keep going to the movies. Similarly, since the movie star-type pastor is in such short supply, some churches feel that they have to overlook certain problems to get their “five-star” pastor or they will never succeed.

Paul discusses a situation like this in the church he had founded in Corinth. After he left Corinth, “super-apostles” came and convinced the Corinthians that Paul lacked the type of wisdom that had been popularized by the Greek sophists—specifically, rhetorical skills. So Paul’s critics suggested that because of his apparent lack Paul ought not to be listened to. In fact, Paul quotes some of his critics: “*For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible’*” (2 Corinthians 10:10). They even questioned his message of the cross which seemed to them (the Greeks) “foolish” (see 1 Corinthians chapter 1).

Paul defended himself and his message throughout the Corinthian correspondence with comments like this: “*Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God*” (2 Corinthians 4:1, 2). Did they want the pure truth of the gospel from a man with integrity . . . or did they prefer falsehood and human wisdom from men with great looks, charm, and rhetorical skill?

Today, many are choosing the latter. I am not saying it is sinful to be handsome and eloquent if one happens to have such qualities. But such attributes are not necessary qualifications for pastors and elders. If churches make worldly attributes necessary pastoral qualifications, they can expect to end up with worldly pastors. If pastors crave worldly success, they are likely to compromise to get it.

Paul’s personal presence was considered unimpressive and his speech contemptible, yet he claims this:

*And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (2 Corinthians 2:1-4).*

Paul was not a five-star candidate and would not have been hired. Yet the answer is to follow Paul’s example.

Nothing is more important than to preach the cross and not to adulterate the Word of God, while at the same time keeping oneself disciplined so that no needless offense comes to that Word. Churches should look for pastors like that, and pastors need to pray to God for grace to live like that. May God provide such grace to those of us committed to this work.

Critical Issues Commentary

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