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ON STANDARDS IN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

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One need not be an astute observer to recognize an expectation, even in the non-Christian world, of particular standards of conduct from the leadership of the Christian church. The Christian laity, as well, demand of their leaders, norms, albeit often ill-defined, that they are quite unwilling to apply to themselves. For example, common folk frequently talk as though there are certain activities which they practice that should not be done in the preacher's presence. The preacher's children are expected to behave somewhat differently from those of other members of the church. Greater stigma is attached to the pastor's running off with his secretary than to a businessman's committing the same offense. The word of churchmember-in-the-pew is sometimes accepted with more reluctance than that of the pastor.

If we suggest that this attitude implies an unfair double standard, that all Christians stand together as condemned sinners and recipients of the grace of God, and that the very highest ideal for Christian living is demanded of the most humble saint, we are met with the Biblical statements regarding bishops in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 which seem at first glance to support the popular notion. It would seem better therefore to approach the matter by distinguishing standards for living from qualifications for office.

Ethical systems have traditionally been worked out relative to a highest good--that end which is to be supremely desired. The very first problem of moral philosophy is the determination of this highest good. All other particulars are related to that summum bonum. For the Christian, too, who is interested in moral problems this is the appropriate starting place. We do well to remember, in the words of the Westminster theologians, that "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." This first answer in the Shorter Catechism was neither a hasty nor careless formulation. It is doubtful if the matter has ever been expressed so accurately and succinctly. The Christian leader must constantly be reminded that nothing less than the glory of God is his ultimate moral standard. Every other consideration must be brought into subjection to this one goal. This Christian standard immediately puts the Christian ethic on a level infinitely above any other human formulation. At the same time, we should observe that the Christian ideal does not in any a priori sense abnegate the legitimacy of specific observations in the history of human philosophy. The Bible teaches that all of human life with its pleasures and potentialities is the creation and gift of God. It is therefore sanctified and to be received in its entirety with thanksgiving.

The Bible is saturated with ethical teachings both in direct declaration and by implication. Christianity is an ethical religion. While we do not presume to set forth here the general

teaching of the Bible on ethical matters, there are summary statements at key places in the Scriptures which succinctly draw together the Biblical teaching. For example, Jesus himself said:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and foremost commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22: 37-40, N.A.S.B.)

The Apostle Peter quotes the following summary of Old Testament teaching from Leviticus 11, 19, and 20:

You shall be holy, for I am holy. (I Peter 1:16)

However, the Biblical material bearing directly on the issue I have raised is found in two short passages, cited here in their entirety.

It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (I Timothy 3:1-7, N.A.S.B.)

If any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. (Titus 1: 6-9, N.A.S.B.)

It is significant that in these passages the statements which have to do with moral requirements are no different from the general requirements for all Christians. In cases where there appears to be a different standard, I urge the following propositions:

1. The nature of the pastoral office demands that the pastor be an example (Phil. 3:17; II Thess. 3:9; I Pet. 5:3). It is therefore only reasonable that the pastor and his family should have attained a higher degree of sanctification in their present Christian life in order to be a

good example and to be able to lead the church to higher spiritual attainment. But this is a qualification for office, not a separate nor different standard for living.

2. Some evils though forgiven all Christians by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, none the less leave lasting effects that would be detrimental to the exercise of the Christian ministry. These include at least the following: (1) sexual deviations, (2) temper tantrums, (3) unbelieving children, and (4) improper household management.

3. Certain qualifications are necessary for the proper execution of the pastoral office, though if they be absent in another Christian there is no offense. These include, (1) the ability to teach, (2) experience in the Christian life, and (3) facility in doctrine and apologetics.

If we properly distinguish ethical requirements from official requirements, we avoid the problem of a double ethical standard or the improper elevation of a clerical class. It is important that leaders in the church understand the distinction and be reminded often of the standards they must maintain. Likewise, those who aspire to such positions of leadership must be warned of the prerequisites laid down in the Word of God.

Although the texts which contain the pastoral requirements seem altogether perspicuous, they have, nonetheless, occasioned considerable difference of opinion in their interpretation and application. This is not surprising when one considers the obvious practical problems involved in their implementation. I would suggest that the difficulties in interpretation have arisen more from exegetical expediency than from exegetical honesty. It is not hard to misunderstand what one wills to misunderstand. Perhaps we should also be willing to admit that at least some of the problems of the church are traceable to our reluctance to apply these requirements without discrimination.