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Disgraced Preachers

The Word Is *Malpractice*



by Daniel R. Mitchell

M*alpractice* is a term applied to individuals in the professions who violate the legal or ethical code they vowed to uphold. A lawyer who misrepresents the truth in court may be censured or disbarred. A medical doctor who violates the Hippocratic oath may lose his license to practice medicine. Doctors who dupe ailing patients with placebos and false promises, lawyers who fraudulently fleece clients, or engineers who design defective buildings could injure many unsuspecting people. When this occurs legitimate professionals are obliged to sit in judgment on them. Failure to do so casts suspicion on all. If a widow is to open her bankbooks with the confidence that her accountant is not going to pilfer money out of her accounts, the profession must have a reputation for policing itself.

We may not always agree with the standards used. For example, some states consider chiropractors to be quacks and will not allow them to practice, while other states impose no restrictions at all. Many people travel great distances to receive innovative cancer treatment disallowed in their own countries. Nevertheless, when a life-threatening disease strikes I take comfort in the knowledge that my doctor cannot practice medicine unless his peers consider him to be knowledgeable, responsible, and trustworthy.

If a doctor loses his license because of malpractice, he still has every right to receive the best medical service he can find if he needs it. If a lawyer is disbarred, he still has the right to legal council. That is, they still have the right to the *benefits* of their professions, but they may not *practice* them.

Malpractice is the term we must also

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apply to professional ministers of the gospel who violate their trust. Preachers who raise money for themselves and not the work, who use people instead of serve people, who lust for power and sex and status, and who use their platform to satisfy their greed violate the code of the spiritual elder (1 Tim. 3). People who are guilty of these and worse offenses cannot continue their work without making a travesty of the ministry.

Ironically, disgraced preachers still have supporters. They say God has forgiven him. We must do the same. He wept and repented on national television. Now we should restore him. Why is this wrong? It is wrong because forgiveness and restoration are not equivalents. Forgiveness is a benefit of the gospel and available to all believers, as well as to sinful preachers. But restoration to official ministry is another matter.

The privilege of preaching the gospel is reserved for those who have met the biblical standards for church leadership. An ordination examination for ministers corresponds to the bar exam for lawyers.

It is the church's way of certifying those who officially represent Christ, expound God's Word, and exercise spiritual leadership in the church. When a person violates the trust given to him with his ordination we must withdraw it. A disbarred lawyer needs more than forgiveness to practice law again. A disgraced preacher also needs more than forgiveness to be restored to the pulpit.

Is the standard for the preacher of the gospel any less than that of the medical or legal profession? Absolutely not! Indeed, there is no higher calling. We must correct the crisis in confidence that is generated by the present situation. More is at stake here than just the credibility of an offending preacher. When we fail to impose discipline, fallen preachers drag every minister of the gospel—indeed the gospel itself—into the mire with them. Legitimate preachers and church leaders must call each other to accountability and demand compliance with God's standard for ministry.

This is not a new problem. The church has had to fight against corruption and secularism almost since its inception (read 1 and 2 Corinthians). The scandalous reputations of the itinerant preachers of medieval Europe and the Old West still haunt us. But several factors aggravate today's situation to an unusual degree.

Much of American Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism exists without any hierarchical or denominational oversight. Every church does what is right in its own eyes. If the local congregation does not have the inclination or the power to oust its wayward pastor, they often do nothing. Unbelievably, I recently heard of a pastor who threatened his congregation with a "visit in the night" by strong-arm men if they ever testified against him in court. In the absence of any denominational authority there is

virtually no control over this sort of abuse.

A second factor confronting today's church is the general corruption of our culture. Paul wrote as he did to Corinth, and not to Thessalonica, because Corinth was "sin city" and Thessalonica was a quiet coastal town. The believers in Corinth had to cope with problems that saints in more respectable communities did not. Likewise, immorality, materialism, secularism, and corruption permeate our culture. And the church has not been exempt from this influence. Living clean in Corinth is always more difficult. This does not mean we should relax our standards. It means we should enforce them all the more. It might also mean we have a shortage of qualified leaders.

Then there are the media ministries. Today's technology enables man to communicate more effectively than ever before. Theoretically we can speak to the entire world at once. This has been the dream of every preacher since the Great Commission nearly 2,000 years ago. No wonder gospel preachers seize on this medium! But there are inherent and serious dangers here. How does one qualify a "paid religious broadcast"? The station manager is certainly not trained to make such judgments. Then there is the medium itself. The television preacher is not only capable of incredible outreach, he is also untouchable. And along with this, in many cases, he is answerable to no external authority, with the exception of the Internal Revenue Service.

A national television evangelist with tears streaming down his face confessed to his audience, "I have sinned against you, you who remain nameless and faceless and whom I will never see." This is an awesome statement when we consider the millions of lives personally and profoundly touched by his preaching. But this is the nature of the medium. This does not happen in a local church. There, if the pastor blunders he must face his flock—and the music. In other words, he is much more answerable to those whom he serves.

What can we do? Before any solution will be too little or too late, the church must accept responsibility for its leaders and restore confidence. People have a right to know that the gospel and those who preach it are honorable and worthy of their trust. We must distinguish between forgiveness and restoration.

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Forgiveness is always available to those who are rightly related to Christ. However, *restoration* to ministry is governed by the same standard imposed for *elevation* to ministry.

First Timothy 3:1-7 is explicit. This passage deals with the candidate's abilities to lead, teach, and minister. It especially addresses his relationship and reputation with his wife and children. The biblical principle is this. If you do not have respect in a small circle, don't enlarge the circle! You must acquire your reputation the old-fashioned way—you must *earn* it. This takes time and commitment, not just tears.

Denominational leaders responsible for qualifying ministerial candidates must give much greater attention to these standards. We simply cannot accept weak or questionable candidates. Likewise, the preacher who violates his trust starts over at ground zero. He must rebuild his reputation in and outside his home and the church. This cannot happen in a few weeks. Reputations, like the giant redwood, grow very slowly. It takes years. And when they are cut down they can never be expected—in one lifetime—to grow as tall. This control is not to punish the offender. It is to protect the gospel, the church, and all who labor faithfully in God's work.

Independent churches must also address the problem of their vulnerability where no higher court of appeal exists. Perhaps one solution would be to organize independent councils comprised of pastors and leaders of sister churches. These could serve as advisory boards for member churches. The pastor would

have to submit to the scrutiny of such a board whenever evidence is brought to light reflecting on his character or qualifications for service. This also holds the congregation accountable in situations where there is reluctance to take appropriate action. Paul exercised such authority over the Corinthian church, exhorting them to deal with the sin in their assembly or else he would come down and do it for them (1 Cor. 5).

The structures for such boards probably already exist in loose "fellowships" of churches and ministeriums organized for mutual encouragement. Such councils would then serve the same function as the state bar does for the legal profession. The preacher would then be answerable to a body of his peers, as he should be, and not function as a law unto himself.

Policing media ministries is more difficult. No one in America is about to advocate governmental control of ministry. Again we must police ourselves. This is where an agency like the National Religious Broadcasters is helpful, establishing an independent agency to "accredit" legitimate ministries and provide appropriate standards for them. Station managers could appeal to such a board when examining specific programming for airing. Preachers who refuse to undergo such scrutiny or who fail to measure up would simply be denied.

The problems are as varied as the churches and ministries. Here of course we are not concerned with doctrine but with *purity* and *credibility*. We must expect those in positions of spiritual leadership to be faithful to their calling. If the lost cannot trust the preacher, how can they trust his message?

If we do not police ourselves the government will not likely step in and dictate control. Instead, station managers who choose not to air religious programs, and viewers who opt to watch something else, will dictate new policies.

In short, we need to go back to the biblical standards for ministry, and we must strictly impose these standards on candidates for the ministry. We must view failure to maintain these standards as ministerial malpractice worthy of public censure and/or removal from ministry. The crisis in confidence threatens us all. Failure to take appropriate action will surely lead to continued widespread skepticism. Unless we take immediate action, we stand to lose the most powerful communications medium ever devised. ■