

Are There Sins That Disqualify The Ordained?

By Rev. Phillip D. Mosher © 2013

“If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”
(Psalm 11:3 NASB)

Today we are seeing a deterioration of the church of Jesus Christ. The Apostles warned that this would happen. We are shedding long standing traditions, even removing traditional names (e.g. *Baptist* replaced by *Community*). We have replaced fact for a feeling based theology. We preach love void of obedience. We have replaced hymns for choruses without theological content and with a loud beat, etc. George Barna, a Christian statistician, has discovered that most who claim to be Christians no longer want Bible doctrine (*The Seven Faith Tribes, Who They Are and What They Believe*).

When it comes to church leadership, many contemporary churches have left the tradition of ordaining men to the gospel ministry as a prerequisite to being a pastor. Standards for men in the ministry are becoming none existent. We now have a national divorce rate that is around 55%. When one counts remarriages that end in second and third divorces, it is 70%. It is estimated that over 50% of couples living together are not married. It is becoming difficult for traditional, fundamental Baptist churches to find a pastor who has not been through a divorce, stolen from the church, committed adultery, watched porn, etc.

Our question is: *Can an ordained man who has divorced his wife be a pastor?* From various authors, one can find any position he favors on the issue of an ordained minister continuing in the ministry after a divorce. What is the biblical standard, and what has been the custom among fundamental Baptist churches over the centuries? Baptist roots go back to the early churches founded by the Apostles.

Most churches have pastors. Even in some areas the Catholic Church now has pastors. Biblically there is no office of “pastor.” Some will turn to Ephesians 4:11, “He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers” (NASB), and say that the “New Testament does mention the office of pastor.” I will point out that this passage, in context, is saying that God has given the church gifted men. During the apostolic era God gave apostles and prophets, as seen in the book of Acts. Today the Lord is giving men to the church with the gifts for evangelizing and shepherding (watching over and teaching the people). This passage is not about officers of the church but about God giving to the church men with special abilities.

Traditional Baptist churches usually have Pastors and Deacons. Some will add a third, Trustees. The New Testament gives two, Elders and Deacons (1st Timothy 3 and Titus 1). I refer you to my book, *This We Believe*, and to the chapter “Doctrine of the Church” for a thorough treatment of this subject. Baptists will agree that the men they are placing in the office of *pastor* are fulfilling the role of the *elder* (overseer, bishop) in the New Testament.

Traditionally Baptists have always ordained men into the Gospel Ministry. This would be for missionaries (elders who do outreach) and pastors (elders who shepherd the flock). Some ordain deacons. Ordination comes from the time when Moses dedicated Aaron to the office of High Priest and his sons as priests (Leviticus 8). Ordination is a very old tradition—been practiced for some 3,500 years. When I was ordained by Palmcroft Baptist Church in

Phoenix in 1965, I had to have shown through ministry that God's hand was upon me for ministry, to write out my conversion, calling, and doctrinal beliefs including Baptist Distinctives, and to pass the examination of an ordination council of some 22 pastors plus a few deacons. After this, the church had a special service where Ruth and I were called to the front, where prayers were offered with many hands placed upon both of us.

These are Baptist traditions that I believe go back through the centuries of church history, and the roots are founded in the Old Testament laws regarding priests, primarily in Leviticus. A priest was one who ministered before God. He represented God to the people and the people to God. He was also responsible to teach God's Law to the people and to encourage them to live morally sound lives in the fear of God. These are responsibilities a pastor has as well.

Though I believe there are other sins that disqualify one from being a pastor, herein I am focusing on one and the question: *Should a man who has been ordained hold the position of pastor of a church once he has been divorced?*

Regarding divorce, in my book there is a chapter that covers this subject, so it is not my purpose to go into detail on that subject here. Jesus said, "What God has joined together let no man separate" and "because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way" (Matthew 19:6 and 8). Jesus reinforced the eternal truth that it has always been God's plan for a married couple to remain together. Men, due to the "hardness of their hearts," are disobeying the divine plan. Yes, divorces will happen. Yes, divorce is sin, and we all are sinners. Yes, the Lord forgives sin.

Regarding sin, when Jesus shed His blood and died on the cross, he paid the sin-debt of all humanity. He died for all sins, including the sin of divorce. When one appropriates the salvation offered by God through His Son (John 3:16), that payment is applied to his/her account; and "*there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1 NASB). There is no sin so abominable that it is beyond the scope of God's forgiveness. Jesus forgives any and all sins. He loves us and is in the business of picking up dirty sinners, forgiving and making them clean, placing them on a solid Rock, and giving them peace with God and joy in the soul (Psalm 40:1-3). Though God "hates divorce" (Malachi 2:16), His Son forgives sins, and divorce is a sin.

God forgives homicide too; but there are people on death row who have repented of their sins and asked the Lord to save them. Though they sought the Savior for forgiveness with many tears, in this life they will still suffer the consequences of that crime. Sins leave scars, and some scars go with us for life. There are actions that pastors can do, and though the Lord will forgive them, such deeds can impact people's lives for the remainder of their years on earth. One of them is *divorce*. This sin has deep repercussions for the family and all who go through it, but especially so for the ordained man.

Some go to 1st Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6, "husband of one wife,"¹ to support their belief that a pastor (overseer in the text) is not to have been divorced. Though I believe this analysis has value, I must be honest and add that this phrase is not clear; and one can find various opinions on its interpretation. But, just as we go back to the Pentateuch for the historical foundation for the ordination of men to serve in church leadership roles, we will go there on this matter as well.

God expected His chosen people to be distinctively different from the world around them (Leviticus 20:7, in this verse that is what is meant by “holy”). He gave them Sabbath laws, dietary laws, ceremonial laws, etc. that made the Israelites distinctively different from the nations around them. He promised Israel great blessings for faithfulness to those laws. God’s purpose was for Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). A priest represents God to the people and the people to God. In this matter, the nation of Israel was chosen by God to represent God to the lost world and the lost world to a forgiving and loving God. They were to be an example of godliness before the nations, and through this reach them for the Lord and teach them the truths of God and to fear Him. The Lord’s purpose has always been to save the lost; and in this Church Age, He has chosen to use the saved to be His kingdom of priests to a lost world (1st Peter 2:9) and has given them gifted leaders.

The High Priest and the other Levites were to live by a higher standard than the other Israelites. For example in Leviticus 10:9 God declared a standard for the priests: They were not to drink wine when entering the Temple ministries, “so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, and so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them through Moses” (Leviticus 10:10-11 NASB). Note, they teach by example. Though God wants all to live holy lives, the expectation of those in His service has always been much higher. They *must* live by the rules—“above reproach” (Titus 1:6; 1st Timothy 3:2).

In Leviticus 21, God lays out special rules for the priests. Some having to do with marriage:

Verse 4, “*But* he shall not defile himself, *being* a chief man among his people, to profane himself.” (KJV)

Verse 7, “They shall not take a woman who is profaned by harlotry, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for he is holy to his God.” (NASB)

Verses 13-15, “He shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or a divorced woman, or one who is profaned by harlotry, these he may not take; but rather he is to marry a virgin of his own people, so that he will not profane his offspring among his people; for I am the Lord who sanctifies him.” (NASB) Note that his actions will impact the children.

It should be pointed out that in the Old Testament culture women did not divorce their husbands. These verses do not directly address the possibility of a priest divorcing his wife. When asked about divorce, Jesus made it very clear that God intended for a married couple to remain united. He said that from “the beginning” (Matthew 19:4) this has been the case. The passages about the responsibilities of a priest make it very clear that they are to live a holy, spiritually dedicated life to God and His ways, one above reproach. So, since priests are to live an exemplary life before God and the people, why would there be a law regarding a priest getting a divorce? They are to be examples of holiness. Divorce is not addressed because such a man should not even think of such a thing much less do it. Divorce was not God’s plan for any man, much less so for a priest.

Notice that the priests were to marry virgins from their people, which I interpret to be Levites; but it definitely teaches they are to be taken from the people of God and not from the unbelievers. Our belief that Christians should marry Christians comes from this Old Testament principle. If his wife were to die, he was permitted to marry only another virgin. He was forbidden from marrying anyone else. This standard is higher than the marriage laws for the common people. Though they were not to marry unbelieving gentiles, there is no requirement regarding virginity. Evidently someone in the tribe of Judah married Rahab

the harlot because she is in the ancestral line of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Though a believer, no priest could have taken her as his wife.

Following in our Baptist tradition, which I believe to be biblically founded, divorce would exclude a man from being a pastor. Many Baptist churches apply this rule to deacons as well (1st Timothy 3:12). This is not because we do not believe in divine forgiveness. My heart cries for those who have experienced divorce. I do have some understanding and sympathy in this matter; but because those in the ministry are held to a higher standard, I believe that once an ordained man has been through a divorce, and especially so when he instigated it, he has disqualified himself from the pastorate.

Charles Ryrie and Charles Stanley have both been divorced. Neither sought or wanted that. Their wives did that to them. Both have remained in ministry, though many have criticized that action. These men have not remarried. In this instance, I believe that makes the difference. Had they been the ones to file for the divorce, or had they married another, my feelings would then side with the critics.

From 1966 to 1998, Ruth and I were church planting missionaries in the interior of Brazil. Within that span, we got to know a lot of missions, denominational and nondenominational. I do not know of one evangelical mission society that would accept someone who has experienced divorce to be a church planting missionary. This tradition has been practiced over a broad spectrum of evangelical Christianity. Because I am a Baptist, my focus has been on that group's historical attitude toward ordained men who have been divorced. Baptists have not had the practice of accepting divorced men as pastors, and many even will not place a divorced man in the office of deacon. Among Baptists, a higher commitment to God and to His standards has been expected of their spiritual leadership. Pastors are to have a life-style behavior that surpasses that of the person in the pew (1st Peter 1:15-16). Sins leave scars, and some disqualify a man from being a pastor, divorce being one.

End note

ⁱ "Husband of one wife" in the original is *one woman man*, commonly translated *husband of one wife* (1st Tim. 3:2 and 12; Tit. 1:6). Some interpret this phrase as meaning that he is not a polygamist (not common in Rome). Some think it means that he is not a womanizer, is faithful to his wife. Because of our currently high divorce rate, this view is common; but this opens Pandora's Box. In other words, he only has one wife at a time and is faithful to her, no matter how many he has divorced, he's okay. Others believe that the phrase means that he is dedicated to one woman (wife) for life, will never divorce her; and some will take this meaning a step farther and believe it means that if she dies, he will not re-marry. I would have to say that this is what is implied in 1 Tim. 5:9 where the widow is to be a "one man woman," and this seems to have been the attitude of Anna the prophetess (Lk 2:36). Is Paul saying an elder/deacon cannot be a man who has been through a divorce? Though some think that this phrase is not clear, I believe it is and that that is the case. In the qualifications sections of Timothy and Titus *Paul is addressing character traits*. Paul has set a high standard for spiritual leadership, as did Moses. The elder and deacon are to be a *one-woman type of men*. No matter how one slices it, *a one woman kind of man would not divorce his wife*. In no way was a priest to divorce his wife and neither should an overseer (pastor) and deacon. By going to typology and taking this a step farther, we praise God that Jesus will never abandon His bride. Since pastors have a high and holy calling, neither should they. Divorce disqualifies a man from being in the office of pastor and deacon.