

What Disqualifies a Pastor or Teacher For the Ministry

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By Prof. Irwin J. Habeck

Thank you for granting me the privilege of serving you. As I understand it, the choice of topic was determined by several occurrences in your area which raised some unanswered questions. Since it was feared that if one of your number were to present a discussion of these questions he might run the risk of being suspected of grinding a personal ax, it was deemed to be the wiser course to import a neutral essayist. A few of these questions were mentioned to me and I shall attempt to weave the answer to them into this presentation. There may be other questions in the mind of the one or other of you already or questions may come to mind during the course of this presentation. Make a note of them and raise them during the discussion period.

Alternate introduction: (I'm here in response to an invitation extended by Prof. Petrie of your assignment committee. In his archeological research he discovered that I had presented this essay to the Dodge-Washington Pastor-Teacher Conference on January 25, 1980. Prof. Petrie thought that it treated the kind of topic which would evoke interest and provoke discussion. I shall read my essay in its entirety. If it raises any questions, jot them down and ask them when I have finished. Since the essay is a model of brevity, your conference schedule should allow for enough time to answer and discuss all of your questions. The topic of this presentation is: "What Disqualifies a Pastor or Teacher for the Ministry?") In treating the topic I shall explore two lines of thought:

- I. God establishes the qualifications required for those entrusted with the ministry
- II. Those who lack them are disqualified

I do not propose to embark upon a long study of the various qualifications which God requires in those who are entrusted with the ministry. You work with the list whenever you study the Table of Duties with your students. To refresh your memories, however, permit me to list them briefly as they are summarized on pp. 3-7 in The Shepherd Under Christ.

Positive qualifications: blameless (Gr: anepileptos, NIV: above reproach); sober (Gr: sophron, NIV: self-controlled); vigilant (Gr: nephaios, NIV: temperate); temperate (Gr: egkrates, NIV: disciplined, Tt 1:8); of good behavior (Gr: kosmios, NIV: respectable); just (Gr: dikaios, NIV: upright); patient (Gr: epieikes, anexikakos, NIV: gentle, not resentful); meek (Gr: prays, NIV: gentle); enduring afflictions (Gr: kakopatheson, NIV: endure hardship); a lover of good men (Gr: philagathos, NIV: one who loves what is good - Tt. 1:8); given to hospitality (Gr. philoxenos, NIV: hospitable); holy (Gr: hosios, NIV: holy); apt to teach (Gr: didaktikos, NIV: able to teach); faithful (Gr: pistos, NIV: reliable, faithful). These qualifications are not negotiable; a bishop "must" have them.

Negative qualifications: not covetous, not given to filthy lucre (Gr: aphilargyros, aischrokerdes, NIV: a lover of money, pursuing dishonest gain); not given to wine (Gr: paroinos, NIV: not given to much wine); not a brawler, not soon angry, no striker (Gr: amachos, orgilos, plektes, NIV: quarrelsome, quick-tempered, violent); not self-willed (Gr: authades, NIV: not overbearing).

The entire tone of the list reflects the Lord's concern for the souls who make up His church. If a man lacks these qualifications, Paul asks: "How shall he take care of the church of God?" (1 Tm. 3:5). Remember how Jesus probed Peter to determine that his threefold denial of Jesus was not evidence of how he

really felt about Jesus, but that he really did love Jesus. Only then did Jesus reinstate Peter as apostle by entrusting him with the care of His flock. The Lord is concerned about the qualifications of those in the ministry because of His concern for the welfare of His believers.

A second reason also surfaces in what we read and is more precisely expressed by Paul elsewhere: "Giving no offense in anything that the ministry be not blamed" (2 Cor. 6:3). Out there beyond the confines of the church are people whom the Lord wants to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. His own people are to be His agents by serving as a salt to expose sin and a light to reveal the Savior. But if those out there had to shake their heads over the attitude and conduct of the leaders of the church, they would be offended and refuse to put any stock in what they had to say. The Lord's concern also for the unconverted is revealed in --the qualifications which He requires of those entrusted with the ministry.

Who determines whether an individual possesses the required qualifications? Some of that goes on in the family circle. It goes on in the educational agencies of the local congregation. You have tried to encourage some promising boy or girl to consider the ministry because you were convinced that he had the necessary qualifications. Maybe you have also had to face a situation where a D average student told you that he wanted to be a pastor or teacher and you had to discourage him because you were convinced that he could never make it, he just lacked the mental qualifications.

A more intensive screening and testing takes place at our worker training schools. All the while that they are imparting knowledge the faculty members are also trying to size up their students. In the great majority of cases they come to a sufficient consensus in the evaluation of students that they are ready to recommend them to the church as qualified for the ministry.

But there are exceptions. I don't have to tell you that there are times when a student has to be suspended or expelled. Suspension usually has a time limit attached to it. The student is told that he may resume his enrollment after a given period of time. Expulsion means that the student is informed that he for cause is no longer considered qualified for the ministry. Every case calls for the exercise of sanctified good judgment on the part of a faculty and that means on the part of those who are not infallible. But they are in dead earnest. There is no superficial approach. For example, if a student has to be expelled because of a public violation of the 6th commandment, it is not so that faculties have a rule that if he sits out a year or two he is automatically eligible for re-enrollment.

In this kind of situation there is bound to be tension between two concerns. When we consider how earnestly our Lord Jesus has taught us to pray for more laborers, when we consider what a comparatively rare occurrence the desire for the ministry is, we shall do all that we can to salvage a potential minister who is salvageable. On the other hand, we must be on our guard against letting sentimental considerations outweigh the concern for the church and the concern for those out there which led our Lord to lay down His qualifications for those who desire to enter the ministry or are already in it.

It is not quite precise to say that our worker training schools recommend graduates to the church because it is their conviction that they have the requisite qualifications. The good order which we in our Synod have adopted holds District Presidents responsible for the supervision of doctrine and practice. This involves recommending qualified candidates to calling bodies. There have been exceptional cases where they have recommended candidates with whom our training schools were not involved directly. This happens when candidates who were previously not of our fellowship are recommended if they have successfully passed a colloquy. This happens too if someone with the consent of a District President has successfully completed a course of private study and passed a colloquy. But by and large it is the training schools who recommend

graduates to the District Presidents, constituted as the Committee on the Assignment of Calls and recommend them as qualified. Because of the mutual confidence which prevails, the Assignment Committee accepts the recommendations and assigns calls to those who have been recommended.

In the case of subsequent calls District Presidents function independently in presenting lists of candidates to calling bodies. They provide the lists, they approve additional candidates who might be proposed by the calling body. They may solicit suggestions or information, as is frequently done in the case of preparing lists of teacher candidates, but the ultimate responsibility is theirs.

So much then for the fact that it is the Lord who establishes the qualifications which must be possessed by those who want to serve in the ministry. Now our second point: Those who lack these qualifications are disqualified for the ministry. Here we shall have to come down to cases.

First we look at cases of a more general nature. We speak of misfits. Our training schools make every effort to impart not only theoretical knowledge, but also practical experience. But there are those rare cases where someone just doesn't work out. He may possess a lot of learning, but is just not able to put it across. He talks over the heads of people, he cannot organize his material so that people can know what he's driving at. Or he can't command respect. Or he can't control his emotions, raging and ranting one moment and going to pieces the next. It boils down to not being apt to teach.

Then there are cases where there can be no doubt that discipline is being maintained. But it is motivated by fear. This fear is induced by threats. We call it legalism. You won't find "legalistic" or its counterpart "evangelical" in the familiar lists of qualifications. But 1 Pe. 5:3 says: "Neither as being lords over God's heritage" and that makes it plain that those who consistently disregard this command are not qualified for the ministry.

Then there are those who consistently show poor judgment who always seem to manage to put their worst foot forward. Maybe they lack good manners, maybe their speech is vulgar. They make suggestions which violate good common sense. They cause people to shake their heads when they see how they conduct themselves. They end up losing the confidence of those whom they are to serve. They lack leadership qualities. 1 Tim. 3:2 has a word which KJV translates "sober," NIV, "self-controlled." The Greek term has the idea "of sound mind," only that term won't work today. So let's say it means "of sound judgment." It's hard to pinpoint, but where it is lacking, an essential qualification for the ministry is lacking.

Now we come to the area of those matters which are generally mentioned in congregational constitutions as disqualifying a man for continuing his ministry. The first is "persistent adherence to false doctrine."

Congregations are committed to a confessional position. They acknowledge the supreme authority of the Bible as God's Word. They recognize the Lutheran Confessions as a true and correct exposition of biblical teaching. When they install a minister, they require him, to subscribe to their confessional position. If a minister consistently takes a contrary position on any doctrine, he has disqualified himself for future service in their midst.

It is comparatively easy to spot deviation from the doctrinal position set forth in the confessions. But the fact is that the confessions do not express themselves on everything that the Bible teaches. So there are those who try to hide behind the silence of the confessions to espouse views which are contrary to Scripture.

For example, in the confessions you won't find an article on woman's place in the church. The historical situation at the time when the confessions were drawn up did not call for it. Now the Bible is plain: "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission as the Law says" (I Cor. 14:34). But there are those who argue: In Paul's day women were held in low esteem. Paul as a child of his age is merely reflecting popular thinking. Today, however, there is a higher regard for women. Therefore we in our day need to reflect contemporary thinking. So what about the person who says that he agrees with the confessions and that to opt for woman's suffrage in the church does not violate his confessional position? But that ignores the fact that we first of all subscribe to the Bible as inspired and inerrant. To compromise that confession violates the basis on which a call was extended to a minister, for it was taken for granted that he shared our confessional position.

Just another quick example. The confessions contain no article on the manner of creation. There was no call for it at the time when they were drawn up. The First Article of the Creed indeed speaks of creation, but not about the details of Genesis 1 and 2. Now there are those who say that the evidences for evolution are so great they demand acceptance. But they say that that does not prevent them from accepting the Bible because the creation account in the Bible is not history, but a story told to teach that God is the creator. The Bible, they say, teaches the who of creation, evolution, the how. If someone were to hold that position by rejecting the historicity of Genesis 1 and 2, he is no longer saying what people thought he was saying when he subscribed to the Bible. He has disqualified himself.

Congregational constitutions mention scandalous conduct as disqualifying a man from continuance in office. Examples that come to mind might be dishonesty, immorality, or drunkenness. The picture in the word "scandalous" is that of a trigger in a trap. The animal springs the trigger and is hurt or killed. Scandalous conduct not only shocks people, it harms them spiritually. A pupil seeing his teacher drunk may be led to ask, "How can I believe anything that teacher told me? He said that it was a sin to get drunk and now he goes and gets drunk himself.

Scandalous conduct may require more than removal from office. If the offender is impenitent and remains so in spite of admonition, he will have to be excommunicated.

But what if he repents? Must we not forgive him? By all means. If we forgive, must we not also forget? Doesn't that mean the penitent sinner who had become guilty of scandalous conduct may be allowed to continue in office? In 1 Tm. 3:2 the Lord requires that a minister must be blameless, in his public record there dare be nothing that can be held against him. If that is not the case, he is no longer qualified. He can serve his Lord faithfully, but not in the ministry. In that same list these words occur: "He must have a good report of them which are without." Again we see the concern of the Lord both for the flock and for those on the outside.

Another cause for removal from office according to most constitutions is willful neglect of duty. I don't suppose that there is anyone here who more than once hasn't gone to bed at night feeling guilty because he failed to do something that he had on his schedule for the day as something that ought to be done. Perhaps we were really not guilty at all, perhaps we only overestimated our capacity. But if we were guilty and it bothered us, I'm sure that we made amends as quickly as possible. That's not willful neglect. But if it were to happen repeatedly that a pastor failed to call on a sick member even though he had been asked to do so, we would be justified in calling that willful neglect of duty. I believe that we would level the same charge if a teacher consistently refused to help slow learners. Neglect of duty becomes willful either when it is defended or when it is habitually repeated.

The last reason for terminating a call is the inability further to perform the duties of the office. This could be the result of growing older. Memory, hearing, sight, strength may fail. Our educational institutions have a policy which requires the boards of control to make annual contact with professors who have passed the age of 65. Three questions are asked: Do you want to continue with your present teaching load? Would you like to have a lighter load? Have you considered retiring? I believe that it would be wise to extend this policy to all of our called workers to be carried out by circuit pastors or school visitors.

But there could be other factors causing inability further to perform the functions of one's office. A deteriorated physical condition, or a progressively deteriorating physical condition or emotional illness are examples.

What is to be done when a situation arises which disqualifies a man for the ministry?

The person who is involved may take the initiative himself. There are those who realized that they never had or do not have the qualifications for the ministry and have resigned. The man who was guilty of scandalous conduct does not have to say, "I'm waiting for the Lord to show me whether I should resign." The Lord has told him in the list of qualifications which He requires. The teacher who had a stroke which left him with slurred speech has been shown that he is no longer apt to teach.

Is it possible to resign for only a limited period with the idea of returning to the ministry? In evangelical liberty this device might be used in specific instances. A teacher who suffered from a ravaging illness may consider it wise to take a year's leave of absence or to quit teaching for a while before returning to the rigors of the classroom. On occasion we have had to advise someone to resign from the ministry because his finances were in a mess. He no longer had a "good report of them which are without." But the understanding was that when he had established his financial competence, he would again be recommended for a call. Other examples could be adduced. But the expedient needs to be handled with care, lest by being employed too frequently it becomes an evidence of treating a divine call lightly by treating it like an "in again-out again" proposition.

If one who has lost one or more of the qualifications for a call stands pat and insists upon continuing in the ministry, somebody else has to act. Christians don't ignore the Lord's directives. Here we operate in concentric circles. While an individual Christian may initiate proceedings, if nothing happens he will approach the official group which is closest to the one being dealt with: the board of education in the case of teachers, the elders in the case of the pastor. If further steps are required, there may be a question as to whether the council comes next or the circuit pastor. At any rate the circuit pastor ought to become involved if the case is made a matter for the voters' assembly. The final recourse is the District President.

We have covered a wide range of examples and not all that is applicable in one instance is applicable in another. But one thing is sure: in a matter as serious as establishing disqualification for the ministry we must be sure that we have our facts straight. The evidence must be solid. None of us can go through life without making some enemies and if someone is out to hang us, he can usually find a rope with which to do it. Therefore we dare not let hearsay or mere supposition or suspicion lead to the initiation of proceedings. If we suspect that someone is guilty, but can't prove it, our hands are tied. We shall commend the matter to the Lord. But if the evidence is clear, we dare not let selfish or sentimental reasons keep us from acting. Souls are too precious.

The tone of this presentation has been largely negative. The nature of the subject made that necessary. But before we close, let's think of what our ministry involves: reflecting our God's concern for the

church and the world. We are permitted to act for Him in all of the glorious ways of which each new day's activities remind us. Who is adequate for the task, who is qualified? We dare to say with Paul: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry" (I Tm. 1:12). With such appreciation for the grace given to us we shall never treat our call lightly but cherish it for what it is, a gift of grace.