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Introduction

We give no offense in anything,
that our ministry may not be blamed.
—2 Corinthians 6:3

The subject of ethics is often in the news. Politicians and priests, business executives and television personalities are called into question for their violations of ethical conduct. Politicians have been brought before ethics panels to question their business practices or personal pandering. Priests practicing pedophilia have been an embarrassment to the Catholic Church. Enron and WorldCom became case studies of ethics gone wrong in corporate America. News anchors have been humiliated for politically-biased reporting of inaccurate news stories, and plagiarizing reporters have been taken to task for their errant journalism.

There is a crisis of ethics in contemporary culture. Postmodernity has embraced a double standard of expectation. In a tolerant society excuses are often made for almost any transgression, then when the misdeed becomes excessive or the wrongdoer appears in the public view, great consternation is expressed and dismay over the breach of proper conduct. It is

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very difficult to be non-judgmental on one hand and then espouse a standard of ethical behavior on the other. Adhering to moral absolutes in one breath and professing to be broadminded about human sexuality in another is a conflict of values. It is an impossible oxymoron of ethics, a deception of conviction.

Regardless of the condition of ethics in culture or the corporate setting, there must always be a superior standard of conduct for Christians. Professing Christians are called to a higher level of ethics. Inherently, people know that Christians are supposed to be people of conviction, moral behavior, and proper conduct. When they are not, there is shock and the credibility of all Christians suffer as a result.

Even more so, ministers of the Christian faith are under the microscope of inspection. At the least bit of questionable conduct the news hounds are alerted and the howling is heard far and wide. If for no other reason than the potential embarrassment of exposure, the conduct of the minister must be held to the highest standards of ethical integrity.

Often in ministry there will be situations where *ethics* are the guiding criteria for a proper response. Ministers and people involved in the ministry of the church should adhere to the highest standard of personal integrity and professional ethics.

Ethics & Etiquette Defined

By definition *ethics* is the study of standards of conduct and moral judgment. It is also understood to be the system of morals of a person, religion, or a professional group, as in *medical ethics* for health care professionals or *business ethics* for those in corporate groups. So, any standard of conduct adopted by an individual, group, or association can be defined as *ethics*—sometimes called a “code of ethics.” It is an accepted standard of proper behavior.

On the other hand, *etiquette* is rules of behavior to define acceptable conduct in the social context. Having a good code of ethics leads to good moral behavior; practicing proper etiquette results in good social conduct.

The principles of ministerial ethics are an outgrowth of godly character, where the rules of etiquette govern acceptable social behavior. Etiquette is about good manners, while ethics dictate good moral judgment.

Biblical principles of morality are not subject to debate, nor are they designed to be negotiable by some conference drawing up a *code of ethics*. Therefore, the effort to develop a study of ethics and etiquette has more to do with good behavior and proper conduct in areas that may not be specifically addressed in Scripture. Morality will be addressed, not as though it was optional, but rather to stress the vital importance of moral purity in the lives of anyone who strives for ministry.

Is it any wonder, as our culture moves away from the moorings of morality, that ethics have no anchor to hold our values?

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Professional Ethics

Those in the medical profession have long subscribed to a professional code of ethics referred to as the *Hippocratic Oath*. It was named for the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates and has undergone various revisions during the last 2,000 years. Many medical schools have adopted some version of the oath, which is accepted and affirmed by each

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graduating class. One version approved by the American Medical Association follows:

*You do solemnly swear, each by whatever he or she holds
most sacred
That you will be loyal to the Profession of Medicine and
just and generous to its members
That you will lead your lives and practice your art in
uprightness and honor
That into whatsoever house you shall enter, it shall be
for the good of the sick to the utmost of your power, your
holding yourselves far aloof from wrong, from corruption,
from the tempting of others to vice
That you will exercise your art solely for the cure of your
patients, and will give no drug, perform no operation, for
a criminal purpose, even if solicited, far less suggest it
That whatsoever you shall see or hear of the lives of men
or women which is not fitting to be spoken, you will
keep inviolably secret
These things do you swear. Let each bow the head in
sign of acquiescence
And now, if you will be true to this, your oath, may
prosperity and good repute be ever yours; the opposite, if
you shall prove yourselves forsworn.¹*

Medical ethics are intended to preserve life and to practice the art in such a way as to bring cures and health to the patient. In the current cultural climate it is not surprising that even longstanding principles of ethics in the medical community are changing. Traditional ethics are being challenged by new medical practitioners who justify the termination of life based on a new criterion—*quality of life*, rather than the value of life.

¹"Hippocratic Oath," *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2000*. ©1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

A medical doctor in the state of Michigan, Jack Kevorkian (dubbed Dr. Death), was embroiled in controversy because he championed the cause of assisted suicide to those who were terminally ill and came to him for assistance in ending their lives. After assisting over 100 patients in suicide, Kevorkian was charged and convicted of second degree murder in 1999 for illegally assisting the suicide of Thomas Youk.²

Jack Kevorkian, who lost his medical license as a result of his activity in assisted suicide, is the exception rather than the rule. Most doctors continue to conscientiously perform their practice with allegiance to an established code of ethics.

Occasionally you may hear of politicians or other professional people being questioned by an ethics panel. Why are ethics questioned when there is no criminal wrongdoing? Though there may be nothing illegal (against the law) in what they have done, there is an ethical standard that has been violated. Professionals in many vocations are expected to live up to a “code of ethics,” a statement of professional conduct, either written or unwritten.

Newt Gingrich became Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1995 after rising through the ranks in the political arena. Through his “Contract with America” he was credited for being the catalyst of change that put the Republicans in power of both the House and Senate in the elections of 1994. Seven years prior to this history moment, in 1987, Gingrich initiated ethics charges against Jim Wright, Speaker of the House. Ironically, he was himself called before the House Ethics Committee in 1996. He was reprimanded for failing to register his political action committee, giving the committee false information, and using tax-exempt donations for political activities. The House disciplined Gingrich for his

² Frontline: *The Kevorkian Verdict*; ©1995-2005 WGBH Educational Foundation; online; accessed June 19, 2005; available from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/kevorkian/chronology.html>.

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ethics violations and fined him \$300,000. He was reelected, but in the wake of controversy chose to resign.

Former President Bill Clinton was called into question over his ethics. He was impeached by the Congress for immoral behavior with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. The Senate stopped short of removing him from office. He maintained that his private moral life should be disassociated from his professional life.



Corporate business leaders have been investigated for questionable business practices. Some large corporations have squandered the retirement savings of their employees while padding their own pocketbooks. Company executives of Enron Corporation were indicted for wrongdoing and some served jail sentences. After the financial collapse of WorldCom, CEO Bernard Ebbers was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for what prosecutors said was the largest securities fraud in history. Five other former executives were implicated for their involvement in the fraud.

In the last few years, a major scandal ripped the Catholic Church as a flood of accusations became public over the immoral practices of priests who were guilty of pedophilic practices and involved in homosexual behavior. More than 200 priests resigned or were dismissed from duties in the nationwide investigation. From Boston, Cincinnati, Phoenix, San Francisco and other cities, victims of abuse began to come forward and tell their woeful tales of mistreatment at the hands of the clergy. One such priest, John J. Geoghan of Boston, Massachusetts, was accused of fondling or raping more than

130 children in over thirty years of parish ministry.³ He served time in prison, all the while maintaining his innocence, until he was strangled to death by a fellow inmate.

While we may excuse ourselves saying, “Well, that’s the Catholic Church,” we must be aware that abuse, infidelity, immoral conduct, and criminal acts have been committed by ministers of all denominations and affiliations. No one is above the law and temptation comes to everyone. Scandal can mar the good name of the church when members of the clergy forget their responsibility as a moral force in the community and as leaders of righteousness.

Ministers of the gospel must never yield to culture’s pressure to abandon absolutes in areas of morality and ethics. While moral conduct may be redefined by a tolerant society and ethical rules are discarded by politicians, corporate leaders, and even religious representatives, the God-called minister must strive to maintain the highest moral virtue and live a life of absolute integrity.

The Minister’s Calling

The minister of the gospel must approach the ministry with certainty. You cannot vacillate in your decision to pursue the ministry; it is vital to know your calling. There will be times when you will question your call, while in the heat of battle or in the aftermath of depression. In those times you must have a deep conviction that you are called of God and you are following His holy urge.

Not everyone has the same experience in his calling. Some may hear a voice or see a vision, while others may just sense a deep drawing of the Spirit to ministry. There are those, like Nehemiah, who have merely responded to a need, only to

³ Azcentral.com, *Abuse in the Catholic Church: Special Report*, online; accessed June 22, 2005; available from <http://www.azcentral.com/news/church/priestindex.html>.

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find themselves in the center of God's work without really planning to enter the ministry. Regardless of the circumstances that brought you into the ministry, you must have a conviction that God's will is the most important thing in life and you are pursuing Him.

Several of the Old Testament prophets experienced an identifiable call, a magnificent moment, an incredible vision, or a divine compulsion. Isaiah saw the Lord on the throne, accompanied by winged seraphim, in a splendid display of God's eternal presence. His call came in the form of a question, "Whom shall I send and who will go?" Isaiah quickly responded, "Here I am Lord, Send me!"

Jeremiah was called before he was born. God said, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). With that sense of destiny he was able to fulfill a difficult ministry of rejection and scorn. He saw himself as "a man of contention to the whole earth" (Jeremiah 15:10), but he was faithful throughout more than forty years of ministry and was an eyewitness to the destruction of Jerusalem that he had long prophesied.

Through the experience of Jeremiah, you can be assured that God already knows the vocation for which you are uniquely qualified. He knows your abilities and disabilities. When He called you, He did so knowing you just as you are. When He calls, it is not just an assignment or an occupation, it is your life! His call says, "*I appointed you — You have a job to do!*"

Amos was a farmer, a man from the fields. He said, "I was no prophet. Nor was I a son of a prophet, But I was a sheepbreeder and a tender of sycamore fruit. Then



the LORD took me as I followed the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to My people Israel.’” (Amos 7:14-15).

When God calls, our background or lack of pedigree is immaterial. Our handicaps become assets. Our deficiency becomes an occasion for His sufficiency. Our need becomes an opportunity for His enablement! Never glory in ignorance nor brag about a lack of education; rather apply yourself to learning and rely on the Spirit of God to prepare you for the task of ministry.

The calling of God is a call to action. It is never a call to sit, but to arise. It is not a call to stay, but to go! Moses ran from danger in Egypt to the security of a deserted desert. He built his new life in the shelter of obscurity and the comfort of anonymity. But God knew where he was and used the desert place to prepare a future leader. A spiritual encounter in an out-of-the-way place, a prophetic voice from the burning bush, translated to a burning purpose for his life. He would never be the same.

Moses was taken from his safe shelter of obscurity to the center stage of Pharaoh’s palace in Egypt with a divine directive, “Let my people go!” It takes a definite call to inspire such bold assertiveness. When the call of God is cemented in your heart and the message is confirmed in your spirit, there is a confident boldness in your ministry.

Elijah fared well in the showdown on Mount Carmel but caved in to depression in the aftermath of his greatest victory. He made the journey from obscurity (during the years of drought), to public notoriety (on Mount Carmel), then to running for his life! Jezebel

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threatened revenge for the slaying of the prophets of Baal. In the midst of despair he cried out to God, "I'm the only one left and I'm about to die." God's answer was a slight rebuke and a shocking revelation, "I've got 7,000 who have never bowed a knee to Baal. Now, go anoint a successor to your ministry!" (See 1 Kings 19.)

Just when you think you are the only one doing the work of God and can never be replaced ... think again! God loves you and will use you in the greatest calling on earth, but it is *His* work and *His* ministry and someday, someone else will take your place!

Wear the mantle well. Be an honorable representative of the calling that God has placed on you. When the day arrives for you to take your heavenly flight, the mantle of ministry will fall on the shoulders of a servant in the next generation.

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The mantle of ministry is a regal robe and a wearisome weight. Sometimes you speak with such anointing and power that you feel as though you were Moses on Mount Sinai delivering the message of God from a personal revelation. Other times you wear the weight of ministry like a ball and chain, delivering a difficult message with the burden of Jeremiah. You can love it and you can hate it, but never dishonor it.

The following verse was used by Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter in an excellent book, *Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders*. From the classic *Canterbury Tales*, this verse speaks to the contemporary issue of ethical conduct in ministry:

Wide was his parish, houses far asunder,

But never did he fail, for rain or thunder,
In sickness, or in sin, or any state,
To visit to the farthest, small and great,
Going afoot, and in his hand a stave.
This fine example to his flock he gave,
That first he wrought and afterwards he taught;
Out of the gospel then that text he caught,
And this figure he added thereunto—
That, if gold rust, what shall poor iron do?
For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust,
What wonder if a layman yield to lust?
--Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*⁴

Of all the classes I have taught at Christian Life College, there is none more vital than the course in *Ministerial Ethics*. The majority of students may never make great preachers. They may be adequate ministers at best, with limited knowledge of the Pentateuch or the mechanics of homiletics. They may fail in their interpretation of the parables or confuse the events in the Historical Books, but they dare not fail in honesty, morality, and ministerial responsibility.

Every time I approach the class in *Ministerial Ethics*, I do so seriously and with passion, knowing that the students I teach today will be leaders in ministry tomorrow. Their success and continued integrity may depend on the principles of ethical conduct I can drill into them in one brief hour each week during the semester. The haunting words of Chaucer challenge me: “*For if the priest be foul, in whom we trust, what wonder if a layman yield to lust?*”

The call to be a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ places demands upon the individual that surpass every other vocation.

⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* in *Ministerial Ethics: Moral Formation for Church Leaders*, by Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

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Of all professions, the ministry must uphold the highest ideals of integrity and ethics.