

WHY HAVE STANDARDS FOR CHURCH WORKERS?

December 27, 1997 (first published August 20, 1997) (David W. Cloud, Fundamental Baptist News Service, 1701 Harns Rd., Oak Harbor, WA 98277) - When I was saved in 1973, I began to search for a biblical church to join. I was led to the Lord by an old-line Pentecostal while traveling. I met him near Miami, Florida, and we traveled together from there to just across the Mexico border near Brownsville, Texas, and back to Daytona Beach, Florida. The last night we had together, the Lord lifted the blindness from my mind and opened my heart to Christ and the Bible. The prayers of many loved ones were answered that night. The next day this brother went his way and I went mine. I went back home rejoicing in my newfound faith in Christ; I reconciled with my father against whom I had long been in rebellion, got a job, and began to look for a church. I was thrilled when I did find a church that I felt was sincere in serving the Lord and separating from the world. It was a little independent Baptist church. From there I attended an independent Baptist Bible School, and then began deputation for our missionary work in Asia.

It has been 24 years since the Lord converted me and turned my life around. It has been 24 years since I first joined an independent Baptist congregation and became involved in the independent Baptist church movement in North America.

Many things have changed since then, and one of those things is the deterioration of moral standards in our churches. I am finding that the attitude of many members of Independent Baptist churches today is akin to those in ecumenical churches who rant against me on the Internet. They are stubborn and rebellious against high moral standards and they are caught up in the phony cry against "legalism." Even when their pastor preaches against wearing indecent clothing such as skimpy shorts and halters and tight pants, they flaunt this type of clothing in public. Even when their pastor warns against watching wicked movies, they go to the theaters and view PG-13 offerings and even bring R-rated videos into their homes.

THE DETERIORATION IN THE HOME

A chief reason for the drop in moral standards in our churches is the deterioration of the spiritual condition of the homes. In too many cases we have brought the world into our homes via unwholesome television programming and unwholesome video recordings and violent, weird, and otherwise impure video games. Too many of God's people spend more time with Hollywood movie stars or the characters in romance novels than with godly, Spirit-filled people; more time listening to country-western music or to secular talk radio than to the great hymns of the faith and the eternal Word of God; more time following some vain sporting team than in seeking the face of God and winning souls to Christ. In too many cases we have not worshipped the Lord vigorously in our homes through family Bible reading and prayer and discussion of Bible topics and singing of hymns and listening to sermons. All too commonly we have not served the Lord together as families, each member, instead, going his and her own way and doing his or her own thing; and we have not sought to bring missionaries and preachers into our home so that our family can be blessed with the presence of zealous God-loving people. Too many of our homes are carnal and worldly, and it is reflected in our churches. Carnal families put pressure upon pastors to lower church standards. It is the pastor's responsibility before God to resist this pressure, but the sad fact of human nature is that many will not do so.

THE DETERIORATION IN PREACHING

Another reason for the drop in moral standards in our churches is the deterioration in preaching. A quarter century ago one would often hear powerful and direct preaching against immodest clothing and wicked movies and television and social dancing and rock music. The Neo-fundamentalist types often charge that preaching on standards in decades past was a "hobby horse," that many men preached more on hair than on holiness. I do not believe this charge, and I was there. No doubt there were some who went overboard with a focus on the externals, but I do not believe this was a common problem among fundamental Baptists in times past. Those who make such charges are blowing a smokescreen to hide the fact that the new generation has lowered the standards of morality. I can testify that it was such preaching that encouraged me to start cleaning up my life and to separate from the world. One rarely hears such preaching in many independent Baptist churches today, though, and even when some of these things are mentioned briefly in passing, it is done almost apologetically. This is a crime. Preaching the Word of God is more than merely reading the Scriptures publicly. The preacher's duty is to proclaim God's Word boldly and apply it to the everyday lives of his hearers.

THE DETERIORATION IN THE ENFORCEMENT OF STANDARDS FOR CHURCH WORKERS

Another reason for the drop in moral standards in our churches is the deterioration in the enforcement of standards for church workers. Here we arrive at the main object of this article. A church cannot enforce standards on every church member, but it can enforce high standards of dress and behavior for those who are in teaching and leadership roles. There is clear example of this in the Scriptures. Consider 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 2 Corinthians 8:18,22.

I realize there are churches which have abused the matter of standards; emphasizing the external and ignoring the internal, which is far more important; promoting standards in an ungracious manner; not being patient with new Christians who are immature and ignorant of biblical holiness; etc. I realize that it is possible to be squeaky clean outside even while being unholy inside. One

can be the poster boy for fundamental Baptist standards and be as carnal inside as a Corinthian. I understand that, and it is something we cannot lose sight of. To focus on the external and to neglect the matter of inner holiness is hypocrisy. On the other hand, a Spirit-filled person will care deeply about the external, because the externals affect the heart. Proverbs 4:23-27 exhorts us to keep the heart with all diligence. How is this done? This passage tells us that to keep the heart means to guard what the eyes see and what the ears hear and what the mouth speaks and where the feet go. The externals affect the heart.

"Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee. Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil" (Proverbs 4:23-27).

The fact that the issue of standards has been abused is no excuse to throw away the very concept of maintaining high standards for church workers. EXTERNALS ARE NOT ALL IMPORTANT, BUT THEY ARE VERY IMPORTANT. If ever there were a day in which churches need to require high standards for workers and teachers, it is today!

FOLLOWING ARE SOME OF THE REASONS WHY THE CHURCHES MUST SET FORTH AND ENFORCE HIGH MORAL STANDARDS FOR THEIR WORKERS:

1. HIGH STANDARDS RAISE AND MAINTAIN THE OVERALL STANDARDS OF THE CHURCHES.

God requires high standards for church leaders because they are examples for the congregation and they represent the church in the eyes of people in the community (Titus 2:3,4; 1 Peter 5:3). If Sunday School teachers or Youth Ministry workers do not have high moral standards in their personal lives and homes, it brings down the standards of the entire congregation. The students who sit under the influence of these teachers are impressed more with their teacher's lives than with their words. The teacher might say it is important to be holy for the Lord, but this will sound hollow if that teacher is involved in carnal and worldly things and if they do not exemplify the things which are preached from the pulpit. Young people are already powerfully enticed by the world. If their teachers are worldly, they will be doubly encouraged to go in that direction and they will be even more worldly than their teachers. If the teachers watch PG-13 movies; the kids will watch R-rated ones. If the teachers wear skirts one inch above the knee, the kids will wear skirts two or three or four inches above the knee. A church absolutely must set forth and enforce the highest moral standards for its workers in order to raise and maintain the standards of the entire church.

2. HIGH STANDARDS CHALLENGE CHRISTIANS TO HIGHER LIVING. As a new Christian I was happy to find a church which held forth high standards. It was an encouragement to me. I still smoked, had long hair, cussed a little, listened to rock music, went to indecent movies, etc., but I knew instinctively that the church is supposed to practice and preach holiness. I did not look for a church where the people lived like I did as a brand new Christian; I looked for a church where the people were striving to walk in Bible holiness. I was challenged to begin cleaning up my life because the workers in the church held forth a high standard before me. If that had not been the case, I could have been comfortable in my immature worldliness and it is possible that I would not have changed. The pastor challenged me from the pulpit and the workers challenged me with their lives. I also learned that the Bible School I wanted to attend did not allow worldly things, and I was challenged by this to raise my personal standards. I have never regretted this. Today, though, churches are allowing the bogus and carnal cry of "legalism" to intimidate them into dropping their standards. As a result, new Christians are not challenged to live a holier lives, to separate from the world. They can be comfortable with worldliness because that is what they see in many of the workers.

3. HIGH STANDARDS PROVIDE TEACHING OPPORTUNITIES. When my wife was a teenager and a new Christian, she was excited about her newfound relationship with the Lord and with a Bible-believing church. She went out and bought a nice dress for church meetings. Her heart was right, but the dress was improper. It was tight and short! She did not have anyone to help her understand these matters. Her mother was a new Christian and the rest of the family members were unsaved. Thankfully, her Sunday School teacher was a godly man, and he took her aside and kindly explained some of the basics about modest dress. My wife was a little embarrassed, but she was also thankful that someone took the time to instruct her about right and wrong. She learned to dress modestly and has done so ever since, and has trained our 20-year-old daughter to do the same. High standards challenge new members and also provide a teaching opportunity to instruct them in holiness.

4. HIGH STANDARDS ENCOURAGE AND SUPPORT THOSE WHO HAVE HIGH STANDARDS. It is a tremendous frustration for a family to have high standards if workers in their church do not have the same standards. Likewise, if the church maintains high standards for its workers, it is a tremendous encouragement to the families who are striving to maintain good standards. It reinforces their position. Consider this situation: Some families in the church have never allowed their children to watch anything other than carefully selected G-rated videos (this is just one simple example of many which could be given). There are teachers and youth workers, on the other hand, who allow their children to watch PG, even some PG-13 movies, and even allow them to go to theaters where advertisements for R-rated movies are shown. This creates tremendous confusion and great potential for problems. The parental standards are undermined. The parents' job is made more difficult. The young people are sorely tempted to fault their parents with being unreasonable legalists. The youth workers cannot back up the parents because they live contrary to those standards, and they are made uncomfortable and are tempted to speak against those parents and label

them as "legalistic," "self-righteous," "holier than thou," etc. The parents who have the higher standards can be seen as the "trouble makers" no matter how perfect their hearts are toward the Lord.

5. HIGH STANDARDS ARE NECESSARY TO MAINTAIN THE CHURCH'S GOOD REPUTATION.

The workers and teachers represent the congregation in the eyes of the church members and the community. The church as a whole will be judged by the lives of its workers. If the community observes Sunday School teachers and youth workers from the church dressed immodestly, it will assume that the church accepts this. If the deacons rent PG-13 (or worse) movies, the community will assume this is the standard of the church itself. And in one sense they are correct. If a pastor does not maintain definite and high standards for all of the church workers, he is sending the message that these matters are not important, and the community hears that message loud and clear. Of course, these things are often done without the pastor's knowledge and against his will.

6. HIGH STANDARDS EXPOSE THE HEART ATTITUDE. It is possible to be right in the externals and to be unholy inwardly, but those who are holy inwardly are not careless and rebellious about the externals. Those who wrestle against written standards for church workers are demonstrating the condition of their heart.

"For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God IN YOUR BODY, AND IN YOUR SPIRIT, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20).

"Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from ALL filthiness of THE FLESH AND SPIRIT, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Those who love the Lord are sensitive in regard to anything and everything that would affect their testimony for Him and their fellowship with Him.

"Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22).

Those who love the Lord are also submissive to authority. The Bible says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). Those who love the Lord are not stubborn toward their pastors. They have an obedient spirit. When the pastor preaches solemnly against immodesty and wicked entertainment, etc., they submit. One's attitude toward such preaching exhibits the heart's condition.

Those who love the Lord are also careful about how others are influenced through their behavior.

"But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak" (1 Cor. 8:1).

"Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (1 Cor. 8:13).

"But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:15).

Christians who reject standards of dress and behavior, usually claim they have liberty in Christ to live in a different manner, to dress in ways we consider immodest, to watch things we consider evil and destructive, to listen to music that we consider carnal, etc. Even if this were true (and we do not believe it is), there is a responsibility to live not to please oneself but to edify others. When you lower the standards of your church, how walkest thou charitably toward those who are striving to maintain high standards? We have liberty in Christ, but we don't have the liberty to sin.

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