



MAINTAINING MORAL PURITY IN THE MINISTRY

BY MARK MINNICK

Our homiletics professor caught everyone off guard with his questions. “What would you do,” he posed, “if you had been invited to speak at a country church and upon arriving early found that no one was there except one young woman, who was standing outside the locked building in the dark and the rain? Would you invite her to sit in the car with you?”



A MINISTER OUGHT TO FORFEIT NEARLY ANYTHING IN ORDER TO AVOID HAVING HIS MORAL INTEGRITY QUESTIONED.

Not one of us pastors-in-the-making knew how to respond. Leaving a lady out in the rain rankled our sense of chivalry, but even our immature imaginations recognized the danger of having some skeptical saint find us alone in the night outside a dark building with an attractive woman who wasn't our wife. "Put her in the trunk!" one imaginative apprentice theologian offered. A ripple of nervous laughter broke the obvious tension. "And don't close the lid!" someone else followed through. Nonetheless, after serious consideration, we all were baffled. What was the right thing to do?

I've never forgotten that day over 20 years ago when we were confronted with the pinching alternatives of that hypothetical situation. I've never forgotten because that type of situation has emerged in real life many times since.

On a hot day I was driving across town when my attention was drawn to a figure ahead on the sidewalk. It was one of the teenage girls from the church. "Should I stop to pick her up?" I wondered. At the same time I noticed that she was not dressed very modestly. "It's not going to look good to have her in the car, especially dressed like that," I thought. "But if she sees me drive by without offering a ride, what kind of testimony will that be? And what will her parents think of their pastor's apparent lack of common courtesy?"

Here's another dilemma. A woman called the office and started asking

questions about what it really means to be saved. It seemed that she needed counseling that would be difficult to do over the phone. "Should I make a call on this woman alone in her home?" I asked myself. My mind scrambled for an alternative. "I could suggest that we meet for lunch in the mall. At least the mall is a public place. No one could accuse us of being alone together." Then I tried to visualize the scene through someone else's eyes. Somehow a small table in the mall looked too cozy through my imaginary observer's eyes. However, my wife was at home with the flu and there was no one else on the church staff who could go with me. I wasn't sure what else to offer. Sensing my uncertainty about the appointment, she entreated more urgently, "Pastor, I just feel that I'm finally ready to do business with the Lord. Can't you please give me at least an hour of your time today?"

Here is yet a third dilemma. I was staying in someone's home during several days of special meetings at another church. As I started up the stairs on the way to bed, the man of the house commented that he would not see me in the morn-

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ings, as he had to leave the house at 5 a.m. to drive to work in the next county. He then said that his wife would fix breakfast for me whenever I got up. My mind started a conversation with itself. "I had better get up and leave at the same time," was my first frantic thought. "But 5 a.m. is so early! Where will I go?" the more pragmatic side of my brain asked. "And besides, I'll offend these people. They may think that I am distrustful of her; or at the very least, they will be embarrassed to discover that they made me uneasy about the arrangements while I'm here this week." My kind-hearted host did not sense my anxiety. Instead, he reached to turn off the light and bade me, "Have a good night's sleep, preacher."

We all encounter uncomfortable situations. Unfortunately, the resolutions we come up with sometimes feel even more uncomfortable. But over the years I've developed a short list of *nevers* to guide me through the thickets of such challenges. Often they have been difficult to stick with. For the most part, though, I have found that once people understand my sincere interest in preserving not only myself but also them from any appearance of evil, they are more than sympathetic to my suggestions.

The foundational *never* is: **Never risk your moral testimony.** My personal belief is that a minister ought to forfeit nearly anything in order to avoid having his moral integrity questioned. The

pastor who allows a cloud of suspicion to pass over him seldom emerges from its shadow. A fundamental precept for preachers is the Scripture's demand that "a bishop must be blameless" (Titus 1:7). The Greek word used here for blameless means "not called into question."

Admittedly, it is impossible to preclude every accusation; but having certain

inviolable standards will go a long way toward averting suspicion. What a pastor should want is to have such a conspicuous reputation for taking scrupulous care about his moral testimony so that if one person in his congregation heard someone else raise a question about the pastor's actions, his church member could confidently reply, "Our pastor would never do that."

Let me give you some corollaries to "never risk your moral testimony."

Never be alone with a woman not your wife. This includes being alone in an automobile, a church building, a home, an office or any other enclosed space with a woman other than one who is a member of your own family. Nearly always there is a way to avoid making an exception to the rule. I often return to the answer our homiletics professor finally gave to the class. It was so obvious once he stated it. "You never sit alone in a car with a woman who is not your wife. Insist that she get in the car—and you get out and stand in the rain."

Keeping such a standard requires that when one of our youth leaders takes young people home in the church van he never concludes the run with only one young person of the opposite sex. "It requires that when one of our staff meets with a woman in his office, he always leaves the door ajar.

One of the most difficult situations involved our first full-time secretary. How does the pastor of a smaller church have a secretary without their working alone together in the same building day after day? The answer was again obvious but very inconvenient. One of us had to work in another place. In our case, this actually required our finding a different house that had a room suitable to be a study.

Never meet with a woman by herself. I arrange for all meetings with women to take place either at the church office when there are other staff members in the building or at our home when my wife is present in the house.

The guiding principle here is that the appointment appear professional rather than personal.

Hospital calls are an exception to the above guidelines in that the context or the emergency nature of the situation is inherently professional. I will, therefore, make brief calls on church women who are in the hospital. I do, however, leave the room's door ajar. If the call requires a longer stay, I take someone with me.

Never physically touch another woman, other than by a brief handshake. This is a rule that is frequently transgressed by preachers today. There is no compelling necessity for an embrace. Casual hugs tend to break down the inherent physical reserve that men and women have toward one another.

Implementing this policy means that our male staff members do not put their arms in a friendly fashion around the teenage girls in our assembly. Nor do we physically pat them on the back when they have won a race at the summer picnic or have burst through to a major spiritual victory at camp. Nor do we put an arm around the shoulder of a woman who has responded to the invitation at the conclusion of a service. Let your wife be the one who extends

the warmth of those physical expressions of sympathy to the women of your church.

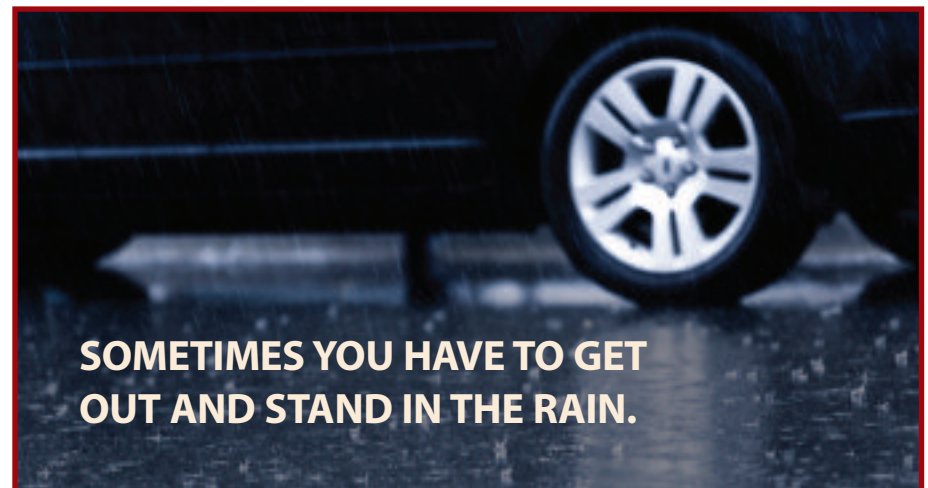
Never compliment a woman on her appearance. You do not want to be known for noticing the appearance of women. Save that attention and those compliments for your wife. In addition, godly women will not be comfortable with your having noticed how they look. In fact, this is one area in which women tend to be more vulnerable to temptation than men. A woman's noticing a tie or the color of a man's suit generally does not unduly influence him. In contrast, a man's complimenting a woman's clothing or attractiveness can linger on her mind, especially if her own husband is inattentive and uncomplimentary.

Compliment the women of your church for their faithful service to Christ, express your appreciation for their good testimonies as wives and mothers—but never compliment them on clothing, jewelry, the color of their eyes or hair, or their complexion. There is no reason for you to do so, and there are many reasons not to.

Again, adhering to these policies may be inconvenient and sometimes embarrassing. There may be times that you will have to "get out and stand in the rain." G. Campbell Morgan's daughter-in-law, Jill Morgan, in her biography of him commented, "No breath of scandal ever brushed his life." Would that others will be able to say the same of us. If they can, it likely will be the result of our lifelong discipline to keep certain *nevers* as consistently and graciously as we could. ❖

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