

“Disqualified”: What it Means and How a Pastor Gets There

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I'm always ultimately thankful when the Lord uncovers things that are hidden. God is light, which means he reveals. Sin exists in darkness, which means it hides. When God causes things to come to the light, he does so to expose, change, warn, judge, and transform. While having sin exposed is never pleasant, it does always lead to God's glory being vindicated.

With that said, a few questions I was asked at church yesterday which I want to answer today and tomorrow here:

1. What does it mean that a pastor has disqualified himself?
2. How does that happen?
3. Why would God allow a pastor to fall morally?

I'll cover the first two today, and the third tomorrow.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT A PASTOR HAS DISQUALIFIED HIMSELF?

The term “disqualified” comes from 1 Corinthians 9:27 where Paul says that as a pastor and preacher he takes care to maintain his self-discipline so that, after preaching to others, he does not himself become disqualified.

While 1 Corinthians was written before 1 Timothy, the concept of elder qualifications were already in Paul's mind. He understood that the gospel is validated from the transformed lives of its ministers. The holiness of preachers is foundational to the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:12). In fact, the lack of holiness of some of the leaders in the church in Corinth was responsible for much of the turmoil in the church (1 Corinthians 5).

This is why Paul eventually lays out what “qualified” means for elders. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, he lists qualifications of elders, preachers, and deacons. Some of them are general—“above reproach” and “blameless” are examples of these general qualifications

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(1 Timothy 3:2, 10). Then there are more specific qualifications—“one-woman man” or “not a drunkard” are examples of those.

Nowhere does the New Testament teach that *everyone who meets the qualifications should be an elder*, but the New Testament does clearly teach that *everyone who is an elder needs to meet those qualifications*.

The typical way a person becomes an elder is by expressing to the other elders their desire to be one (1 Timothy 3:1). Then over a period of time that person’s life is examined. As their leadership grows in the church, and as they shepherd God’s people, their ability is tested (1 Timothy 3:10; 5:22). Eventually the elders might get to a place where they affirm the person as a fellow elder. This act might look different in different congregations (congregational vote, public affirmation, laying on of hands, etc.). But the bottom line in every congregation is that the act proclaims that the church finds this person “elder qualified.” They are a one-woman man, their household is in order, they are gentle, they manage their money well, they are hospitable, and so forth.

What “disqualified” means is that sometime after that, conduct, traits, or sins come to light in the elder’s life that are not in keeping with the qualifications, and the elders realize that the person is no longer qualified. They have become “disqualified.” When that happens, the person is no longer a pastor or elder.

HOW DOES A PERSON DISQUALIFY THEMSELVES? CAN THEY BE RESTORED?

There are as many ways an elder can disqualify themselves as there are elders who have done so. Nevertheless, there are some patterns that emerge.

The Worst Case Scenario:

The worst case is that an elder is exposed as a fraud. He was never converted. He attached himself to a church, had some natural speaking ability and was winsome. He interacted well with people, eventually realizing that he could get a job or influence or some standing through the church.

This kind of person was never saved, and deliberately hid this reality as they went through the motions of ministry. They were brazenly hypocritical, living one way at church and another way out side if it. This is the [Elmer Gantry](#) of pastoral ministry (would that he had been the [Jayber Crow](#)).

When this kind of person is discovered, it is a massive blow to the church, as people had been duped and fooled.

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The Best Case Scenario:

The best case is that an elder or pastor is tempted in certain areas—perhaps even new temptations that were not really manifesting themselves when he became an elder. Some of these could be circumstantial (such as a trial like cancer or a rebellious child), and others might be personal (such as lust or greed).

In this best case scenario, the pastor goes to friends for help. He confesses his temptations. This kind of person is not hiding anything, but is eagerly seeking help and accountability. Nevertheless, through the process the elders (or maybe even the man himself) decide that the person is no longer qualified. This might be for a period of time, for additional testing, or even as a break way from ministry for prayer.

My experience with this kind of scenario is that the person is generally loved by the church, encouraged, and has a path towards returning to ministry. My experience is also that this kind of person was more than likely ordained to ministry too early, avoiding Paul's advice in 1 Timothy 3:6 and 5:22.

The Most Common Scenario

However, the most common scenario of pastoral disqualification I have seen is neither of which I just described. Instead it is a person who has entered ministry, and grown in the church. Then, at some point, they start giving into compromise or temptations. Only rather than going to friends or other elders for help and accountability, they instead try to cover up their compromises.

One tool they use to cover them up is self-justification. They make up a reason that it is ok for them to sin in the way they are sinning. This keeps their conscience in check, and allows them to continue in that sin.

As they continue in it, a gulf grows between their public ministry and their private conduct. Their compromises grow more brazen, and their ministry grows more shallow. This delta makes confession even harder for them, as they think to themselves, "that ship has sailed, I'm committed to these sins now."

A life like that cannot be held together for long. Eventually the person is caught. And when that happens, their sin is exposed.

The hard thing in those situations is that the elders (and church) no longer know what to believe. *How much of the sin is uncovered? How long has it been going on? What other areas of his life are affected?* There is just no credible way for the elders to know the answers to those questions. Even asking them is assuming that the person who had been trying to

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fool you is suddenly trying to help you make a good decision. It is an impossible situation for the elders to be in.

That is why the general qualifications of “above reproach” and “blameless” are so helpful. The elders don’t need to uncover every jot and tittle of the sin. The man is no longer “above reproach” or “blameless” and it is simply too hard to go much further than that.

When that happens, the goal of the church is “restoration” in the Galatians 6:1 sense, but **not** a restoration to pastoral ministry. What does “above reproach” mean, and how long does it take to be seen? In an elder candidate, his life is examined over a long period of time. In this kind of scenario, it would be even longer. When an elder’s disqualifying sins are uncovered in this way, it is frankly counter-productive to talk about “restoration to ministry.” The goal is that the person would fully confess their sins, and be assimilated into corporate worship and fellowship, **not** restored to being an elder. *Pursuing restoration “to the ministry” only incentivizes the very compromises and coverups that caused the problems to begin with.*

The next post will examine how Christians should respond when a church leader falls into sin, and specifically answer the question “why would God allow a pastor to fall?”

In the meantime, I preached a sermon on this topic. [You can see it here.](#)



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