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Must a Pastor Be Married? The New York Times Asks the Question

The New York Times has asked the question. How would you answer it?

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Is marriage a requirement for pastoral ministry? That question is not new, having been a major focus of debates at crucial points in church history, but it is being asked once again.

Erik Eckholm of *The New York Times* asked the question in a news story that put a focus on Mark Almlie, a single seminary graduate who has been looking for a pastorate. As Eckholm reports, Almlie, “despite a sterling education and years of experience, has faced an obstacle that does not exist in most other professions: He is a single pastor, in a field where those doing the hiring overwhelmingly prefer married people and, especially, married men with children.”



Mr. Almlie calls this unfair discrimination, and he suggested that the motive behind this discrimination comes down to what Eckholm described as “irrational fears” that an unmarried pastor would be hampered in counseling, might be susceptible to sexual advances, or “might be gay.” In Almlie’s words, “Prejudice against single pastors abounds.”

Mr. Eckholm called me for comment, and included this section in his article:

R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said it was unfair to accuse churches of discrimination because that word implied something “wrongful.”

“Both the logic of Scripture and the centrality of marriage in society,” he said, justify “the strong inclination of congregations to hire a man who is not only married but faithfully married.”

Mr. Mohler said he tells the students at his seminary that “if they remain single, they need to understand that there’s going to be a significant limitation on their ability to serve as a pastor.”

I have received a good number of responses to the article already, and some clearly argue that I am giving students bad advice.

Well, the reality is that the very fact that the article has appeared indicates that I am right in warning students that remaining single will be a significant limitation on their future service as a pastor. At the first level, this is simply a fact — a fact attested by the article and the statistics reported by virtually all non-Catholic denominations. Pastor search committees, reflecting the sentiments of the congregations, clearly prefer a married pastor with a wife and children.

And yet, beyond the indisputable fact that this is indeed the reality, there lies the question of whether it ought to be so.

I made a remark about that as well, telling Mr. Eckholm that the logic of Scripture and the centrality of marriage in

society do justify the strong inclination to secure a pastor who is not only married, but also happily married.

I would base my argument on the most normative New Testament texts that describe the pastor. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, the Apostle Paul presents Timothy, and thus the church, with this instruction:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

This text clearly suggests that the minister will be married, indeed “the husband of one wife.” It does not say, “if married, the husband of one wife.” Now, the text does not explicitly state that a minister is not to be single, but it does hold out marriage as the default and normal state.

Importantly, the text’s concern does not end there. The pastor is to “manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive.” Once again, it does not state that a single minister is an impossibility, but it does hold out the expectation of a married pastor with a wife and a household, including obedient children.

Why is this so? Paul makes clear that this is all part of the minister’s credibility, “for if he does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” Evidently, the ability to lead a family is an important sign of the ability to care for the family of faith.

A similar teaching is found in Titus 1:5-9:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Once again, the normative expectation is that the pastor is a married man with wife and believing children. This does not mean that an unmarried minister is not “above reproach,” but it does indicate a default position of marriage within the context that not only states the fact but also places it within the larger context of the pastor’s qualifications.

Why is this so? Beyond what has already been stated, the married pastor has the protection of a wife, the status of a leader in the home, the fulfillment of the marital relation, and thus the freedom to relate to the congregation as one who is already committed within the covenant of marriage, and who is able to serve as a model for other men within the congregation and the watching community.

So, then, what about Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 concerning celibacy? There are two important passages within this chapter that directly address the question:

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. [1 Corinthians 7: 6-9]

The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.” [1 Corinthians 7:32-35]

Furthermore, Jesus spoke of those whom he described as those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” [Matthew 19:12]

There is obviously great honor directed here to those who can live without spouse for the sake of the kingdom. Paul describes their service, like his own, as undivided in interest. A married man must be concerned about how to please his wife, while the unmarried man has an undivided interest and is thus more free to serve the Lord in what, as Jesus made clear, is service for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

So, this is not a blanket statement affirming the priority of singleness, but instead affirming a state of uncompromised (not burning with passion) celibacy for the sake of kingdom service.

Note that this passage is addressed to all Christians, not specifically to ministers. Without doubt, an unmarried Christian with the gift of celibacy is more free for Gospel service and Great Commission deployment than a married pastor.

But Paul is not contradicting himself, and his advice concerning pastors stands.

I was asked for my advice and counsel on this issue, and I provided it in summary. I stand by my counsel. I do not have the right nor textual authority to state without equivocation that a pastor cannot be unmarried (as in never married), but I can advise that the logic of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 will lead most congregations to a very clear expectation, and that this expectation will be reflected in congregational intuitions as well.

I can also offer my own personal experience. I was called as pastor of a small country church when I was engaged to be married. This sweet church took a risk with a young seminary student who was anxious to be married and just waiting for the date to arrive. I can testify that my ministry was transformed the moment I showed up back at the church with Mary, my wife. My relations with church members of both sexes took on a much more natural shape, and this was amplified with married couples of all ages. When children came, my ministry in later years was also deepened and widened.

My experience is not normative, Scripture is. Nevertheless, my own experience helps me to understand the logic of these key New Testament texts. I know countless unmarried men and women who are serving the Kingdom of Christ with distinction and dedication. I am so thankful for their commitment and service. But this does not change the fact that when the Bible speaks of the teaching office in the church, it speaks of a man who is expected to be married.

If you know of a better way to answer this question, you will serve the church by presenting it and allowing Christians to judge all advice and counsel by the Scriptures. *The New York Times* has asked the question. How would you answer it?

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Erik Eckholm, “[With Few Jobs, a Single Pastor Points to Bias](#),” *The New York Times*, Tuesday, March 21, 2011.

