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The Misfit Pastor

by David Sherwood

Benedict Elza had been a part-time professor at the Bible College for a long time now, nearly forty years. He prided himself on being called "Bubba" by the students, while most of his more insecure colleagues made the students call them "professor," or "reverend." Tonight would be one of his favorite subjects, apologetics-- proofs for the existence of God. He drove his old Buick a bit too fast tonight, and it was kicking up a dust cloud on the back roads of Hall County, Georgia. He didn't want to drive this fast, but ole widow Narny was a bit too talkative today and he barely got out of the house at all with her chattering. She was a sweet ole coot, and he genuinely loved her, but visiting the old shut-in was always a half-day event. Lemonade, cookies, stories about the good old camp-meetings. She chewed tobacco, a gross habit, and kept a mason jar by her chair, spitting into it mid-sentence all the time. He just never had the heart to condemn her for it, and though he should have, he always just thought it was sort of funny.

"But when she's dead," he thought to himself with some smug satisfaction, "it'll make a great illustration for the young bucks." And then he thought about her being dead, he didn't mean to, and he tried to shy it away with turning the radio on and singing some old camp-meeting songs. But it didn't work. So he just let the thoughts flow. She was loaded, and he had to admit that part of why he was going there every week was an investment in the future. She had no children or kin, and she used that to lure him over there every week. She knew that the church needed the money, and while she had accepted the fact that nobody loved her, she was willing to live a lie just so somebody would come over and talk to her every week. She got up every Tuesday knowing that Ben would be coming by that day. She cleaned up the place, put on some perfume and baked up some cookies. She also made it a point to remember, by looking at her wallet which she had placed deliberately on the coffee table, to ask what needs the church had financially. She always cried when he left, she didn't know why...but then she'd watch Oprah and it would be

alright.

Ben was probably 2 miles from the Bible college when he saw the police lights behind him through the brown haze of the road. He pulled over, and pulled his Bible out to put on the dashboard, strategically. It was an old trick he had learned from his father in the ministry. The police car pulled up behind him, and the officer took his sweet time about getting out. This greatly agitated Ben, for several reasons. His testimony was at risk by this appearance of evil, he would be late to class which again was a bad example, he didn't have the money for a ticket (poor preacher that he was), and it was bad stewardship of the little martyrdom money he had. Finally, after a sweaty and dirty eternity, the lawman approached the car.

"Do you realize you were speeding sir?" he politely asked.

He gauged his response. "Yes sir I realize I was speeding, I am a pastor and a professor at the Bible college down the road. I just left widow Narny's house and was running late for my preaching class. I'm completely in the wrong sir, and I apologize." He looked down, away from the eyes of the officer, contrite and confessional. He even slouched his shoulders in shame and resignation, he just knew it would work.

The officer measured him up, thought about the good the ole country preachers did, and decided to cut him some slack. "Well pastor, you won't be doing anybody no good down here if your dead. You get on to your meeting, and keep it under 50 through here, ok?"

"Yes sir," Ben said "I promise it won't happen again." With that he started the old Buick back up, said a thanks to the Lord, and rushed down to the college.

He was only 5 minutes late. He thanked God again for his mercy and grabbed his tattered old briefcase and headed inside. The students were waiting inside, rows and rows of proud crew-cuts and dark suits. Some of them were fine prospects for Bob Jones and the rest would make fine deacons. He placed his briefcase on the table by the

podium and carefully and deliberately pulled out his King James Bible. Opening to 1st John he sat down and called the class to order. "Gentlemen," he said, "tonight we are studying apologetics, open your Bibles to 1st John, chapter 1 and then we will pray." Dutifully, the Scofield reference Bibles swung open, and the students flipped in one-accord to the right passage. He was so proud of them, they knew right where it was, this was the sort of generation that would win godless America back to Jesus. They were sharp, teachable, and full of passion. He smiled, then closed his eyes.

"Jesus we ask you to be here tonight," heads nodded and bobbed in agreement. "We ask that you would show us how to love each other, as a mark of true discipleship, and as a witness to the world of the truth of your existence." Many an "Amen" floated in the air. "We ask now that you would teach us through the inerrant truth of your holy word. Amen." And more Amen's thundered in the room.

He went on with an excellent exposition of 1st John which was met with many laughs and Amen's for an hour and a half. They always took a break at 7 for a brief chapel service. He had been asked to speak that night on what was happening in the Episcopalian churches concerning homosexuality. The dean knew Ben was good at current issues, so he loved to let Ben 'mix it up' every now and then with contemporary topics.

"Gentlemen, I come to you tonight with a heavy heart. For what we will talk about here and now is nothing less than a Judas moment in time for some churches in America. While we all might secretly wish that there could be one ecumenical church..." (there were some gasps, but that was half the fun of being considered edgy) "... we know that heresy, false teachings, and liberal blasphemy has all but ruined the reputation of God in America." (more hushed Amen's, and Yes Sirs). "There is a need for a remnant to stand up for righteousness' sake, someone must stand up and say no-more-- this is the line in the sand. This is a sin so grave and brazen, so hellish and nauseating that fire and brimstone came down and devoured the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Are we ready for this to happen to Atlanta? No brothers, this is not our prayer. We must not pray for Gods wrath, but for his

mercy..." (he noted confused looks and stares) "...and we must throw aside our cowardice and preach against this sin in the very streets of Atlanta,"(then broad smiles and more amen's). "And the Episcopalian and liberal churches who allow this sort of gross sin must be confronted as well!

"I have two sign-up lists for you today. One is to street preach with me this weekend, and the other is to protest at a few churches over the next several weeks-- you can sign-up after chapel today in the foyer," he heard the regular rustling of possessions and continued. "Finally, let me say this: I know this is hard....and it might feel like condemnation to you, but it isn't-- this is tough love. Love that is tough enough to face humiliation and rejection for the greater cause of Christ. Sometimes to kill a cancer, and incision must be made, and our fellow churches need someone brave and loving enough to challenge them biblically on this issue." His conclusion was met with hearty amen's and a big smile from the dean.

He sat down, awash in the glow of nods of approval and wry smiles from fellow preachers. The dean was talking now but Ben didn't hear any of it. He spent a little time critiquing his own presentation, and concluded that it was alright and that next time he would do better. He also had a nattering thought that just wouldn't go away. He had never talked to a homosexual who went to church in his entire life. He imagined how they would defend themselves and what his responses would be. Then for some unknown reason, he imagined two men kissing, and the thought was so revolting to him that he literally jerked up and out of his thoughts and re-engaged what the dean was saying.

"In conclusion, dear brothers, I have some good news. A certain widow in these parts has promised all of her estate to this college. After she crosses over to Jordan, this formidable estate should even make it possible for me to go full-time here in the near future." He then seemed to look right at Ben and smile. "You are all dismissed."

"What did he say? What other widow has an estate big enough to do this?" Ben thought. He knew most of the people in the county and

Narny was the only one he knew that was loaded. His thoughts raced. "Maybe I've been suckered, maybe he goes over there on a different day of the week, maybe he knows what I have been doing there."

Then the floodgates were opened. "That old Bitch! I have been there every week for 10 fucking years." He was almost shocked by his own thoughts, but by now all the fuses of restraint had been blown. "And that little devious weasel, he's wanted to go full time here for years because he's a failure as a pastor. I've got all sorts of people in my church that have told me what an awful preacher and pastor he was. Hell, if I'd schmoozed like he did, I'd been running this place. Everybody knows the students love me. I'll bet the little weasel just puts on a show for me to keep me in line. I can't believe she would do this to me, damn it God, it isn't fair. I've offered her my time and love, and I've given to this school out of my time and love. My church needs the money more than them, think of all the good I'd planned for it, Lord. Dammit it isn't fair."

He was sweating when he reached the classroom. He composed himself and smiled. "That's some great news about the college, isn't it guys?" They responded with their usual grins and Amen's. He launched himself back into the text and the night just whirled by. Nine finally came. A single student approached him at the end of class.

"Bubba," he sheepishly said smiling, "I know that homosexuality is wrong and all, but how do they know that if they don't know God or his word?"

"That's a great question," Ben responded. "What do we see in scripture? We see Lot telling the people that homosexuality is wrong. You see conviction of wrongness and of the need for God both come from proclaiming the truth that 'faith comes by hearing and hearing from the word of God.' So you see, the only thing we can do is love them enough to confront them with the truth and let the Holy Spirit bring conviction." He smiled to himself-- good answer. The student thanked him for a good class, and for being so 'practical' with his

teachings.

It was dark now, but the light of holy indignation was upon him. He resolved himself to drive by the widow's house, just to pray. As he came up the old farmhouse drive, he turned off his lights, killed the engine and just let the car roll up the entryway. He looked in the window, there she was, mixing her tea. Putting in her sugar and herbs, sitting back in her chair. He could have killed her right then and there he was so mad. But he reminded himself to "be angry and sin not." He also reminded himself that "holy indignation" was allowable in the light of sin and injustice, both of which obviously were in the air tonight. He tried to pray for her but couldn't, he just muttered under his breath and drove to the park to think and pray. He got to the park around ten-ish. It took a good half hour to get all of the rage back into the box, and he ventilated most of it to God. He drove home in the hushed peace of rationalization and defensiveness.

As he approached the driveway, lights suddenly cut through the night air. 3 spotlights from 6 or more policecars were upon him. "Pastor Elza, get out of your vehicle with your hands up," a voice boomed from a speaker. What in Gods name was happening? The speeding ticket earlier? What!? His mind raced, and he panicked. His foot hit the accelerator and the car momentary lunged forward before he could slam on the brakes. Now the cops were itchy, but he calmly took off his seatbelt, opened the door, and got out of the car. Next thing he knew he was face down on the ground, cuffed, and hearing, "You have the right to..." His wife was on the front porch, far away crying, and his children just stood there in shocked silence. He kept asking "What's the charge?" but all they would say was that they would talk about that downtown.

Again a blur, there were fingerprints and a mug shot. Then a holding cell with one other prisoner. The guard finally was the one to tell him what his charges were. "Why's ya do it preacher.?"

"Do what," he choked out.

"Why'd ya poison that ole widow? They found arsenic in her tea

already. CSI stuff ya-know. Sides, somebody saw ya snoopin around her place late tonight."

The bars seemed huge. "I didn't do it, I just went by to pray for her."

"Ya, ya ok then good luck, they'll be down to question you in the morning." Ben sat down, his head reeling with possibilities. Then he noticed the guy in the cell with him. He wreaked of booze, urine, and old sweat. His hair was matted, and he looked old. He was bespeckled and had on jeans too tight for him. He had on tan and white shoes with no socks and his ankles were red. He didn't wear a shirt at all, and a black hat was next to him on the cot.

"What ya in for?" Ben asked warmly.

"Murder," the bespeckled old man retorted dryly.

"Did you do it?" Ben blurted out, wishing to pull it back in but realizing it was too late. The man smiled.

"No, I didn't do nothing," he replied... but the grin suggested something otherwise. Ben was nervous now-- he couldn't see his eyes, behind the glasses. They stood there staring for an awkward moment

"Me too," said Ben, trying to be tough, but thinking better of it as soon as he said it.

"That a fact?" the old man replied coolly. "What fool ya done murder?"

"No, no I'm innocent too" he tried to smile just like his cellmate had only moments ago.

"I said I didn't do it, but I never said I was innocent," the man said.

Silence hung in the air for a moment, Ben tried to think. "So you're an accessory then, I guess."

The man smiled. "Ya, I guess I'm always an accessory. Not really doin' nothing and yet sort of getting the rub for everything. Some people are just bad luck. But ain't nobody innocent."

"What do you mean?"

"Well what I mean is we're all guilty of something we ain't been caught at yet. Some men it's adultery, other moonshinin', some are liars. It's just some people ain't been caught."

Ben straightened up. "I know just what you mean. Listen, I'm a preacher and I've been falsely accused, but I can see now why God has let this happen to me."

"Why's that?"

"To tell you about Jesus," Ben offered. "You see you're right, we are all guilty, but God can forgive us our sins through the death and atoning sacrifice of Jesus. If you want forgiveness, even for just being an accessory, Jesus can forgive you right now and come into your life."

"That a fact?" he coolly replied again, just like before.

"Yes, yes it's true-- it's happened to me, and it can happen to you."

"What if I don't want forgiveness for nothin', what if I like bein' mad-dog mean, I don't need no hokey-pokey religious bullshit. Save your preachin' I've heard it all before."

"What have you heard?" Ben asked.

The man sat there silent for a moment. Then his anger or the alcohol got the best of him. "I heard of love, but I ain't never seen it. My daddy was a deacon once, but he got run outta the church when they caught him smoking. He drank himself into the ground, died when I was a pup. Momma had a diner and we served all them fat pompous

church folk every Sunday afternoon. Hypocrites, holier-than-thou, cheap, too. We all hated em. They used to leave these little booklets, along with a coupla dimes, said they won't tip more than their tithe."

"I'm sorry you've faced so much hypocrisy, not all Christians are like that." Ben tried to offer defense.

"That a fact?" he said again and lit up a cigarette. "You different, mister. You don't hate and boil inside. You not jealous, gossipy, ugly and greasy like all them other preachers."

Now here was some trouble, all his thoughts tonight had been pretty bad, but they weren't abiding sins. He thought to himself that this guy must be demonized or something, and he began doing spiritual warfare silently in prayer.

"Got a question, for ya mister-preacher man. Woulds you had run my daddy outta church?"

"I don't know. We probably would have talked with him, and yes there would be some church discipline, but hopefully he would have repented and been restored to fellowship."

"After ya done shamed him?"

"Yes, I suppose, but hopefully it would have just humbled him."

"You ever met a proud man that done be'an humbled and come back to church mister?"

"No, but that's the right thing to do." Ben didn't know what else to say.

"That a fact?" He put out his cigarette.

"What did your father do?" Ben asked, trying to change the conversation, make it less adversarial.

"My daddy was the king of tires for Melas County. Re-treads it's my business now. Tread runs a little low, and I give em a new one. Shitty job, but somebody's got to keep them people movin, they all got important places to go. It's my job makin sure they get there. Wanna know who got murdered?"

Ben was jolted, he had thought the conversation was going well, distracted for a moment while he collected his thoughts. "Yes I suppose, who got murdered?"

"A fag. Some queerbo from Atlanta ended up at my shop, needin new tires for his BMW. God I hate them people, he was all girlish and smiling, with his lisp an all. Anyways, I got to workin on his tires, but never saw him again."

"So how did you get accused of murder?" The conversation had certainly made an interesting turn.

"They found his body in some ravine, then somehow tracked his BMW to my shop. I don't know what they think they can prove, but that CSI shit ain't gonna land on me. Anyhow it don't matter, I don't give a shit."

"You mean you don't care if they find you guilty and your innocent?"

The man spoke matter-of-factly. "Told ya, nobodies innocent."

"But if you didn't do it, you're innocent."

"That a fact?" The phrase was getting hackneyed. "Let's just say I did do it. Let's just say I took the little fudgepacker out and beat him to death. I'd be doin the world a favor."

"How's that?"

"God's will, you ought to know that preacher. I went to Sunday school as a kid, them fags is supposed to die. And if we didn't have pinko, liberal, democrats runnin the country they'd get what they

deserved. Me and God, bubba, we'd weed em out."

Ben was speechless, what was going on? Coincidences, maybe, but what else? Conviction? demons? His imagination looked for an answer.

The old man smiled. "Can't take it, huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"Ah you preachers it's all the same, that's why you're hypocrites."

"What do you mean?"

"Well if you'd do what the bible says, if you had some balls, you'd be out there liquidating queers too. Like that guy in Carolina who blew up them abortion clinics. That was good-- poetic justice, ain't that what they call it..."

"Look, we are called to hate the sin, but love the sinner." Ben repeated a phrase he had said to many students over many years.

"My daddy was a sinner that nobody at the church ever loved. What sinners are your friends preachin to? Got any? Any queerbo friends, and smoking friends, and prostitute friends?"

"No, but my job is primarily to tend the flock, and to be an example who is above reproach, who distances himself from the very appearance of evil."

"That a fact?"

"Yes, dammit!"

"And all your people done want to be just like you?"

"Some I guess yes."

"And ain't none of you friends with no sinners?"

"No."

"Then I guess you as guilty of my daddy's death as anybody." The man moved eerily close.

Ben was thinking hard, but he was also crying. He was afraid, and guilty, and overwhelmed for the moment. He laid down.

"What's the matter preach? It's not like you ruined my life, it's not like you killed my daddy, it's not like you're ruinin everybody's' life for God. Is it!?" He was standing over Ben now, towering and dooming. "Is it? Is it!?" he screamed. Then he slapped Ben full on the face, and spit on him. He stood there laughing waiting for a reply.

Ben finally sat up nose to nose with this stinking man. "I didn't kill you daddy, he killed himself-- I'm sorry he's dead but I didn't do anything."

"That a fact?" was the cool measured reply.

He picked up his black hat, walked over to the other bunk, pulled the hats brim over his face, and looked like he was ready to fall asleep. "Done killed hiself, just like that widder, huh? Maybe you're just an accessory, like me."

He chuckled, then laughing to himself, turned his back to Ben.

Ben had no reply. He fell asleep trying to put the pieces together.

The guards found Ben in the morning, hung by his socks and belt.

The deputies never found anything to charge the old man with. By dawn he was in the office. "Bobby Lee make my bail?" the man asked.

"Yes sir," the deputy said.

"He's a good boy," the old man said. "I wonder who killed old preach last night," he taunted.

"Got a confession to make old man?" the deputy asked. "No, no, I was just wonderin' coulda been God, or maybe Satan, or maybe he just killed himself, or maybe it was me or you. Who knows, right?" He grinned. "Coulda been anybody."

"Well old man," the deputy volunteered warily, "it wasn't me. "

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes sir," the deputy said angrily. "That is a fact. I'm as innocent as the baby drinking her momma's milk. And you're lucky we aren't charging you for this as well you old misfit."

"Ain't nobody innocent, boy. There's just accessories. And that's a fact"

Then Hiram pulled up in the family car.

Inspired by "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'connor.

About The Author

David Sherwood is a pastor at [Mosaic](#) in Fort Worth. He has done pre-doctoral work at Southwestern Theological Seminary, earned his Masters in Biblical Studies and Masters in Education at Dallas Theological Seminary, earned his Bachelors in Organizational Psychology at Gerogia State University, and earned his Bachelors in Education at Gwinnett Hall Baptist College.