

Paul never expected to find his private life under scrutiny when he signed up to become a local preacher. Recently he has been taken to task by someone in his local church who took exception to a rather risqué joke that he posted on Facebook. They told him that they “expected better of a Methodist local preacher”. Paul says it was only a (rather funny) joke. He meant no harm and he wishes some people would get themselves a sense of humour and a life!

He asks..... Isn't everyone entitled to a private life? Why should local preachers be any different?

Paul, I have to say that you really had it coming with this one! Even kids at primary school these days are being taught that there is nothing private on social media. What goes up there, either by way of your own posts or by what you get “tagged” in can potentially reach a much greater number of viewers than you ever imagine. Every post creates and projects an image of yourself, your personality, your values and your priorities. When you put up a picture, share a joke or even “like” something you have to realise that it will be seen by “friends” in all sorts of different contexts. What might seem hilarious in one setting might cause misunderstanding and offense in another. I therefore seriously question your judgement in all this.

It's clear to me that you are embarrassed by what was said to you. That in itself seems to imply that you're not comfortable with the joke being seen by the people to whom you preach. You need to think carefully about this. Integrity means somehow being the same person wherever you are. You cannot stop being a local preacher when you go to work on Monday or go socialising on Saturday night. It's a matter of consistency.

In 1 Timothy 3 the Apostle Paul had a lot to say about what should be required of church leaders – they were to be “above reproach,... temperate, self- controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money...”. Deacons, he says, must not indulge in much wine, not pursue dishonest gain and “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience”. Of course much of this applies to all believers but Paul really spells it out for leaders – and whether you like it or not local preachers today will always be seen as leaders as well as preachers.

Scripture then gives us a lot to live up to. If you think that's scary you should read John Wesley's rules for his preachers. To spare your blushes I'll quickly skate over No.2 which says “Be serious. Let your motto be “Holiness to the Lord”. Avoid all lightness, jesting and foolish talking”. We'd all be banged to rights with that one! More challengingly he tells them to “act in all things, not according to your own will but as a son in the Gospel”.

There is something very wise in that final rule of Wesley's and it gets to the heart of the issue you're raising about whether a local preacher is entitled to a private life. You see whether we like it or not when we stand in a pulpit we are there to advocate and commend gospel values. Of course, none of us is perfect and we all fall short of what we proclaim but we preachers must be careful at all times not to deliberately do or say anything that contradicts or opposes the Gospel we preach. Each time we fail in this we detract from our witness, call into question our

credibility, and more importantly put what St Paul called a “stumbling block” in the path of other impressionable believers.

So what do church people have a right to expect or not to expect from their local preachers? Well, they certainly don't expect us to be plaster cast saints. They know us well. Over the years they have sat on committees with us, taught Sunday School and run youth clubs with us and heard us get things wrong many times. They understand that we are ordinary people like themselves. What they do expect from us however is sincerity. They want to know that we really believe and mean what we preach. To do anything that creates a different impression is a serious breach of their trust.

I think that your question raises something that all preachers, ordained and lay, need to take seriously. In your case someone was offended by a dubious joke. Perhaps in another instance someone struggling with an alcohol problem might feel let down by a picture of a local preacher raising a glass in a local hostelry or a church member might be shocked when a preacher or minister “likes” a post or a movie containing language that is highly questionable. How sad if our thoughtless and careless behaviour had the effect of making it more difficult for our message to be taken seriously.

We live of course in an age that stresses tolerance. There will always be grey areas – activities on which Christians disagree with regard to what is appropriate and permitted. Perhaps it seems unfair that you should be asked to scrutinise your behaviour in this way and always think before you act just to please those you think should “get a life” – but so it has always been in the Church. Leaders never act as individuals. We have responsibilities to the people to whom we minister.

And to finish on a positive note, remember that social media present us with wonderful opportunities to share our faith. There are so many wonderful faith enhancing stories out there which can be posted and shared – things you would be proud to be associated with and which make the right sort of impact. There are more ways to preach than standing in a pulpit.