

BGR 2.0

Contextualizing the Billy Graham Rule for Cross-gender Ministry Teams

Curated by Gene Roncone





Rocky Mountain Ministry Network

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Curated by Gene Roncone (May 2022)¹

In 1948, Billy Graham and a few other prominent evangelical leaders met in Modesto, California, to discuss ways their traveling ministry could avoid the pitfalls of moral impropriety.² The Modesto Manifesto or the Billy Graham Rule (BGR) was one of the outcomes of that meeting. BGR has since become an extrabiblical Christian practice among many evangelical Protestant men by which they avoid spending time alone with females to whom they are not married. It was adopted as a display of integrity and means to avoid sexual temptation, the appearance of doing something considered morally objectionable, or being accused of sexual harassment or assault.

Although wise in its time and appropriate for a traveling ministry, the rule is not supported by scripture, always achievable, or relevant in our current ministry context. The challenge is that over seven decades have passed since 1948 when the Modesto Manifesto was written. Since that time, many God-called and Spirit-empowered females have been credentialed and are faithfully serving as General Council executives, regional leaders, district/network officers, executive presbyters, sectional presbyters, lead pastors, and associate pastors in our local churches. We are now faced with a need to update the rule to successfully accommodate the increase of women in ministry as well as acknowledge the expanding reality of same-sex attraction within our culture.³

The question is how do we preserve the wisdom of BGR without marginalizing ministry leaders, overcomplicating administration, neglecting cross-gender mentoring, and diminishing accountability. Even Jesus was willing to wrestle with this tension in His own interaction with women and contextualize His own society's version of the Billy Graham Rule. In [John 4:7-30](#), He breached societal boundaries and the rules of His culture by intentionally talking to a Samaritan woman in private during the least trafficked time of the day. He knew the Jewish law forbade Him from talking to a Gentile—let alone a woman with a complicated past with men. However, Jesus cared more about her soul than adhering to a law that diminished her intrinsic value as God's image bearer.⁴ [Matthew 27:55-56](#), [Mark 15:40-41](#) and [Luke 8:1-3](#) also mention women who were part of Jesus' inner circle of disciples and even traveled with His team to different ministry locations.⁵ As much-needed female leaders join our ministry teams, we must navigate these situations with the wisdom and discernment of Christ.

The purpose of BGR was threefold: First, to avoid settings where temptation and opportunity to sin might be more likely, second, to preserve the integrity, testimony, and reputation of a minister by avoiding the appearance or accusation of impropriety, even if none existed; and third, to avoid bringing dishonor to the cause of Christ. BGR was also wise in foreseeing that a false accusation can be as damaging to a person's credibility as if it had actually occurred.⁶ To honor the spirit of BGR, I assembled a team of male and female licensed counselors, scholars on this subject, sharp RMMN pastoral thinkers, and our Network Presbytery to make recommendations on how the Modesto Manifesto might be contextualized.⁷ Those recommendations are summarized in the form of a one-

sentence statement, situational applications, concluding thoughts, and discussion questions for clarifying conversations that follow.

1. Modesto Manifesto (BGR) Contextualized

Ministers are strongly encouraged to avoid spending unwise amounts of personal (nonprofession-related) time in private, nonpublic, nonprofessional settings with a member of the opposite gender to whom they are not married.⁸

2. Situational Applications

Views concerning the application of a principle are usually more diverse than agreement with the principle itself.⁹ Consequently, in the interest of practicality, the Presbytery suggests our RMMN ministers consider the following applications of the contextualized version of the Modesto Manifesto mentioned above.

- **Pastoral counseling.** Ministry leaders are often called upon to give biblical advice and counseling regarding marital problems. Should this occur with a member of the opposite gender, we recommend pastors consider limiting counseling to 2-3 sessions before referring them to a professional therapist in the event more counseling is needed. At a minimum, it is advised that counseling take place in offices with door windows or a clear line of sight to those outside the room. Environments with higher accountability are preferred.
- **Transportation.** It is common for ministry teams to rideshare to or from meeting destinations. We recommend that ridesharing with members of the opposite gender be limited to short commutes of under two hours and that participants maintain a sense of accountability by communicating with their spouse or lead pastor beforehand.¹⁰ It is recommended that longer commutes that would require two members of different genders and extensive travel include other passengers or a second vehicle.
- **Local church staff interaction.** It is also common for lead pastors, whether male or female, to need to meet alone with staff members, executive team members, or parishioners of the opposite gender to discuss confidential or administrative matters. We recommend that one-on-one meetings with staff members of the opposite gender be no longer than 2-3 hours and take place in a public setting or in offices with door windows or a clear line of sight to those outside the room.
- **District/Network deliberations concerning moral failure.** The facts from investigations into the moral and sexual misconduct of ministers must be presented to the network's Executive or full Presbytery for final decisions regarding a potential rehabilitation or termination of a minister's credential. The details and depth of sexual behavior often need to be discussed to determine what level of infraction occurred and what outcome the network may recommend. When these meetings involve both male and female leaders, it is advised that there be a minimum of three persons present with one gender represented by at least two appropriate members of the Presbytery or credential team.
- **National deliberation concerning moral failure.** Meetings and situational briefings between district/network and national leadership are at times required to seek advice from a member of the Executive Leadership Team concerning how to navigate a situation involving sexual accusations against a minister and the investigation thereof. The details of these situations

often determine whether a minister may qualify for a restoration program with the Assemblies of God. When these meetings involve both male and female leaders, we recommend a minimum of three persons be present with one gender represented by at least two appropriate officials.

3. Concluding Thoughts

As our ministerial community becomes more diverse, it is important to remember that friendships and professional relationships can still be cultivated without the need to be “alone” in settings absent of accountability. The scriptures caution us saying, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” ([Proverbs 4:23](#) NIV). Following are a few ways to do that:

- **Heed the scriptures.** Moral purity does not require either gender to be viewed as an inferior source of temptation or vice to be avoided. As imperfect humanity, we are all capable of moral failure; therefore, humility requires scriptural admonitions to be prioritized over social trends or current political correctness. These clear and wise admonitions include overseers being above reproach, blameless, and not open to criticism ([1 Timothy 3:2](#) ESV), setting an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity ([1 Timothy 4:12](#) ESV), and abstaining “from all appearance of evil” ([1 Thessalonians 5:22](#) KJV).
- **Involve your spouse.** If you are married, the best and easiest way to provide accountability is to include your spouse in an ongoing discussion and information loop. We suggest married ministers have clarifying conversations with their spouse about situations needing mutual accountability and that spouses be given veto power over any situation or relationship with which they may be uncomfortable.
- **Respect warning signs.** Do not be overconfident or minimize your weaknesses or vulnerabilities. Instead, be mindful of the disintegration of healthy relational boundaries through repeated meeting requests, texts, emails, app messaging, physical touch, attraction, sexual innuendos, inappropriate humor, and transparency about marriage disappointments ([Genesis 4:7](#) NIV, [Proverbs 6:27-28](#) NIV, [1 Peter 5:8](#) NIV). In his book, *Anatomy of an Affair*, Dave Carder identified 19 warning signs that a friendship is crossing over the line into a romantic relationship. Those characteristics are listed in the footnotes of this document.¹¹
- **Plan for accountability.** Although it may be logistically challenging at times, be intentional about proactively planning and staying out in front of unhealthy settings, spontaneous situations with low accountability or the appearance of questionable conduct. Without equivocation, we must abstain from all appearance of evil ([1 Thessalonians 5:22](#) KJV). Single ministers are encouraged to steward their liberty with proper discretion.
- **Follow your discernment.** It is important to note that the cultural realities of same-gender attraction now require us to expand our discernment beyond the traditional boundaries of gender.¹² Should your lead pastor, spouse, personal preferences, or sense of discernment call for stricter boundaries than these, we appeal to you to follow your heart and err on the side of caution.

The harvest is calling, and we must mobilize every asset the Lord has provided, including our sisters in the faith who share our divine gifting, calling, and empowerment ([Matthew 9:37-38](#) ESV). In the words of one of our female counselors and member of the Network’s credential team, “As we strive to give women more room to minister and wrestle with same-gender attraction, we will need to be as

wise as serpents and as harmless as doves more than ever” ([Matthew 10:16](#) NIV).¹³ Therefore, let us also remember that prevention is always better and easier than a cure.

4. Clarifying Conversations

To facilitate meaningful thought and clarifying conversations about this topic as an individual and with your spouse, ministry team, and board, we have provided the following discussion questions.¹⁴

A. Individual reflection for ministers. A person’s greatest strength should be knowing the parameters of their personal weaknesses. Reflect upon the following questions concerning your own self-awareness:

- What unique weaknesses or past vulnerabilities might the enemy use to disqualify you from ministry ([1 Peter 5:8](#) NIV, [Genesis 4:7](#) NIV)?
- What unique boundaries or accountability structures might you need to compensate for your response to the previous question?
- If married, what challenges/problems might you and your spouse have that need attention or resolution? What specific steps can you take to address them?
- If married, are you finding your heart being distracted or excited by anyone other than or more than your spouse? If so, what steps are you taking to bring it into the light?
- If married, how do you foster and discuss trustworthiness with your spouse in a healthy and balanced manner?

B. Conversations with your spouse.

- Are there any concerns about time spent in other relationships that the two of you should discuss?
- How would you be able to bring up related concerns in a healthy manner?
- What healthy boundaries can we both agree upon to preserve trust and safeguard our marriage.
- Are there any concerns or weaknesses in our marriage that the two of us need to focus on to minimize potential trust issues ([1 Peter 5:8](#) NIV, [Genesis 4:7](#) NIV)?
- How do we both continually invest in and strengthen our relationship by adding to our current marital foundation?

C. Team discussions for church staff meetings.

- How might the team better preserve their integrity and guard against unfounded accusations in this area?
- How might the team be sensitive to other team members who may prefer higher levels of accountability?
- How might the team foster an environment that encourages each person to support and challenge one another as it relates to matters of trust and accountability?

D. Board/Elder discussions for organizational impact points.

- What physical and environmental modifications might need to be made to assist your church staff in this area? Examples of environmental modifications might be installing video cameras, door windows, or a designated meeting room that has windows and video

(but no audio) recordings to facilitate longer, private one-on-one meetings between staff members of the opposite gender.

- What expectations do you as a board have regarding matters of trustworthiness for your ministry team? What reasonable accountability structures might be implemented to carry out these expectations?
- What policies or procedures may need to be updated or implemented to embrace your own unique and contextualized version of BGR?

Endnotes

¹This collaborative project began January 24, 2022 with an invitation to male and female scholars, ministers, associate pastors, lead pastors, co-pastor teams, executive leaders, presbyters, and licensed counselors associated with the Network asking for their input. Contributors were requested to reply within two weeks on how they would update the Modesto Manifesto to be relevant today in the areas of pastoral counseling, ridesharing/transportation, meetings with staff, and interaction with district/network and national leaders of a different gender when discussing details resulting from an investigation into the moral failure of a minister. Thirty leaders chose to participate in this collaborative project by providing feedback. Gene Roncone then began summarizing those observations, identifying common denominators, and even identifying differences of opinions. A draft document was then sent back to the participants for final review and comments before review by the Executive Presbytery and recommendation to the Network Presbytery. The document was discussed, reviewed, and unanimously recommended by the Executive Presbytery to the Network Presbytery on February 23, 2022 for consideration and discussion by our Network ministers and churches. On May 18, 2022, the RMMN Presbytery unanimously approved it as a recommended resource for our Network churches and ministers.

²Billy Graham Rule (May 2021), Retrieved January 26, 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Graham_rule.

³ In addition to these reasons there are other factors to consider when attempting to apply the BGR to today's ministry context. (1) The BGR was written over 70 years ago and is from a different era. During this time, men and women did not work shoulder to shoulder in ministry leadership as they do now. (2) The BGR was the product of a group of ministers who held a complementarian (the belief that the Bible prohibits women from serving in ministerial leadership positions), not an egalitarian, theology of women. Therefore, the women in their context were most likely hotel employees, secretaries, waitresses, and nurses — not ministry colleagues. (3) BGR was written by a traveling evangelistic ministry that required their team to travel for extended periods of time and be isolated from the accountability structures of their normal lives. (4) Pastoral ministry in the local church involves more cross gender interaction between staff and volunteers than a traveling ministry.

⁴Saehee Duran, "The Billy Graham Rule in the Leadership Development Context," March 10, 2021, Southwestern University, DMIN 8143: Culture, Context, and Mission, student paper.

⁵ Charlie Self, Ph.D. (RMMN minister, ministerial educator, and consultant), February 5, 2022, email.

⁶Alex Lucero (RMMN Assistant Superintendent), February 5, 2022, email.

⁷Superintendent Gene Roncone assembled a team of certified Christian counselors, a female scholar on this subject, and sharp RMMN pastoral thinkers to make recommendations on how the Modesto Manifesto might be contextualized. Listed in alphabetical order, those who participated were: **Juanita Blevins** (Associate Pastor, Praise Church, Pueblo, Colorado), **Linda Bottoms** (RMMN Assistant Director of Church Ministries), **Brandon Bradford** (Certified Professional Life Coach, Ranch of Hope), **Mariah Bradford** (Counselor and Intervention Specialist, Ranch of Hope), **Yolanda Brown** LPC (RMMN Credential Team and Licensed Professional Counselor), **Jim Brummett** (RMMN Network Presbyter), **John Bryant** (RMMN Network Secretary/Treasurer), **Troy Champ** (Lead Pastor, Capital Church, Salt Lake City, Utah), **Steve Chavez** (RMMN East Slope Executive Presbyter), **Josh Cook and Sara Jane Cook**, (Co-Pastors, Victory Life Church, Fruita, Colorado), **Saehee Duran**, DMin (Lead Pastor, Life360 Intercultural Church, Springfield, Missouri; and National Training Coordinator, Network of Women Ministers, The Assemblies of God U.S.A.), **Lewis and Heidi Franco** (Associate Pastors, Abundant Life AG, Salt Lake City, Utah), **John Gowins**, PhD (Eagles Nest Retreat Ministries), **Todd and Kelly Hudnall** (Co-

Pastors, Radiant Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado), **Daran Lemon** (RMMN Utah Chi Alpha Director), **Noreen Lemon** (RMMN Network Presbyter), **Alex Lucero**, (RMMN Assistant Superintendent), **Glenn Lutjens**, MA LMFT (Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist), **Chris Peterson** (RMMN Network Presbyter), **Jared Pingleton**, PsyD (Director, Mental Health Care and Ministry of the American Association of Christian Counselors), **Kelly Preston** (RMMN Utah Executive Presbyter), **Shawn Reine** (RMMN Director of Church Ministries), **Rob Rocca** (RMMN Presbyter), **Gene Roncone** (RMMN Network Superintendent), **Tim Sanford** MA, LPC (Licensed Professional Counselor), **Dr. Charlie Self**, Ph.D. (RMMN Minister and Ministerial Educator), and **George Stahnke** (Renewal Ministries of Colorado Springs).

⁸Original summary provided by Tim Sanford, MA LPC (Clinical Director of Counseling Services) and revised by collaborative feedback.

⁹One of the interesting observations resulting from this collaborative project was the diverse feedback from our female contributors. While all felt that BGR needs to be contextualized, females involved in local church ministry were more comfortable navigating the relational gray areas of contextualization; however, females serving as certified counselors seemed more committed to embracing clear and professional boundaries. It appears those who deal with the tragic consequences of moral failure possess a stronger sense of caution when it comes to prevention.

¹⁰Examples given by contributors of ways a minister can maintain accountability and avoid misleading conclusions were to text or call their spouses before and after an appointment or commute to inform them of the nature and length of the meeting/ride. If it were a long meeting, a minister could even post a positive statement on social media about the meeting and participant(s). An example of this was provided by contributor Saehee Duran and may consist of posting a picture with a caption such as, “Here at Starbucks with my fellow minister pastor, Saehee, sharing ministry joy and burdens together! Grateful for her leadership! Learning so much from this woman of God! #bettertogether #pastoralmeeting.” Other recommendations included environmental considerations such as meeting in rooms without locks, rooms that are set apart for privacy but open and in view of others, or rooms near high traffic areas and even near security cameras that record video but not audio.

¹¹ Carder, David, *Anatomy of an Affair* (p. 53). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition. Dave Carder identifies 19 warning signs that a friendship is crossing over the line into a romantic relationship. Those 19 characteristics are: 1) Saving topics of conversation for your “special friend”. 2) Sharing spousal difficulties with your friend (“My husband (or wife) never...”). 3) Allowing the friend to share their relationship difficulties with you (“My boy/girlfriend always...”). 4) Anticipating seeing this person more than your spouse. 5) Comparing the friend and your spouse (“If only my spouse was nicer to me like s/he is...”). 6) Providing ‘treats’ for your friend (coffee, snacks, etc.). 7) Being concerned for your friend’s welfare (“How did you sleep?”). 8) Fantasizing about marriage to your friend. 9) Spending more time alone with your friend than your spouse. 10) Not allowing your spouse full access to all your modes of communication (ie., email). 11) Spending money on your friend without your spouse’s knowledge. 12) Arguing with your spouse over the relationship with the friend. 13) Lying to spend time with the friend. 14) Hiding interactions with the friend. 15) Jealously develops on the part of your spouse (“He sure pays attention to you...”). 16) Developing rituals (any experience anticipated by both parties, like coffee together). 17) Experiencing a ‘shiver’ when your friend shares feelings or touches you. 18) Allowing sexual content in your conversations with your friend. 19) Corporate dating: taking advantage of business trips to spend quality time together.

¹²Daran Lemon, January 27, 2022, email; and Mariah Bradford, January 28, 2020, email.

¹³Yolanda Brown, LPC (RMMN Credential Team and Licensed Professional Counselor), January 26, 2022, email.

¹⁴The list of discussion questions were the collaborative efforts of John Gowins, PhD (Eagles Nest Retreat Ministries), Glenn Lutjens, MA LMFT (Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist), Shawn Reine (RMMN Director of Church Ministries), and Gene Roncone (RMMN Network Superintendent).