

Pastors Who Won't Be Preachers: A Polemic Against Homiletical Accommodation to the Culture of Contentment

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Official preaching has falsely represented religion, Christianity, as nothing but consolation, happiness etc. And consequently doubt has the advantage of being able to say in a superior way: I do not wish to be made happy by an illusion.

If Christianity were truthfully presented as suffering, ever greater as one advances further in it: doubt would have been disarmed, and in any case there would have been no opportunity for being superior – where it was a matter of avoiding – pain.

*The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*¹

Recently I was part of a group that interviewed more than a dozen seminarians upon the eve of their graduations. We asked each person, “What is your particular gift, the special passion that you bring to the pastoral ministry?” They spoke about their enjoyment of counseling, their eagerness to work with people, how kind and sensitive they are in ministering to people in need. Not one single seminarian mentioned preaching.

Just for today I’m thinking that the saddest moment in the recent history of my church was that day, sometime in April 1951, when those who had always been known as Methodist “preachers” began being referred to as “pastors.” On that day we exchanged the external, divine, extraecclesial, theological, and biblical authorization of our ministry for more tame organizational, parochial, anthropological standards. We preachers swapped effectiveness for truthfulness, made peace with the gospel, bedded down with our people, and began our harried attempt to meet their felt needs. Pastoral Care trumped homiletics as a dominate seminary discipline, we put our ear to the ground, engaged in empathetic listening, sensitive caring, and well, the rest is history. The therapeutic culture has got us. Joel Osteen and T. K. Jakes are us all over. In a multicultural environment it is my judgment that the predominant culture of our middle to upper middle class congregations is the culture of the therapeutic. Trouble is, we cannot be faithful pastors if our ministry is not to some great degree countercultural to this oppressive, imperialistic culture of contentment.

So I have for you a simple thesis that goes against just about everything you think about pastoral leadership today: *To be a preacher is to be called to love God more than our congregations.*

Faithful preachers exist in an ambiguous, potentially contentious relationship to our congregations. The congregation is the Body of Christ, that gathering whom God has convened to hear the royal proclamation, but the congregation is full of the same incomprehension, cowardice, disbelief, and rebellion that is found in any human gathering when it is assaulted by the Word. We preachers meet no resistance to the

Word that was not first encountered in our own hearts, and in the hearts of our most regular listeners. As Karl Barth might put it, the church is just full of “religion” and therefore full of idolatry and credulity, resistance and artful dodging of the Word. Though the church may say it wants to hear the Word of God—to be addressed by its Lord and Savior—the church lies. Perhaps resistance to the Word is even more pronounced in the church because the church knows firsthand that God’s word is always a summons, an address, a vocation, and an obligation; and that God has great work in mind for the church, and therefore the church is justified in feeling some fear and consternation in the face of that vocation and therefore is full of resistance to that Word. Church thus tends to be not only training in discipleship but also in various techniques of avoiding the transforming Word of God. A major means of Word-avoidance today is the culture that says that we pastors have no greater purpose than our people.

Although Barth speaks of preaching as an ecclesiastical activity – “Preaching must be done in the sphere of the church, i.e., in concrete connection with the existence and mission of the church”²—Barth constantly contended that preaching is prior to and superior even to the church. Preaching is the peculiar speech of the church, but it is not authorized or dependent upon the church and therefore may often be experienced as against the church, in order to be for the church.³ The words of the sermon are not a congregationally derived Word; that Word comes from God to the church. Preaching is what God says to the church, not what the church musters in its own behalf. Therefore, preachers must be willing to risk conflict, resistance, and rejection by the church in order to be faithful to the church’s peculiar vocation: joyful subservience to the Word. Preachers are to serve the Word, not to be acquiescent to the congregation. In a day when pastoral care for and caring about the needs of the congregation has virtually overwhelmed much of Christian ministry, Barth reminds us that the best and most loving service we clergy can render to our people is utter subservience to the Word. There is therefore a great need among us pastors to free ourselves from mostly sociological descriptions of the church and reclaim the theological significance and basis of our primary vocation to be preachers.

Church development guru, Tom Bandy, has been most helpful to us in North Alabama as we think our way into the future. While Bandy is somewhat of a sociologist, expert in thinking about systems theory applied to the church, he also believes that most of our pastoral problems stem from a failure to have a theological construal of our ministry. In a recent book, *Mission Mover*, Bandy says to us clergy, “Once upon a time when preparing for ministry meant meetings, political activism, counseling, now it’s preparing to interject Jesus into the conversation and a willingness to relinquish control.”⁴ Nowhere do we do that more effectively and explicitly than when we let go and preach.

We clergy are called by the church to talk about God, to interject Jesus into the conversation and, in Bandy’s words, to be willing to “relinquish control.” Alas, most of us who have been to seminary are better trained to analyze and to construe the human condition through mainly sociological, political, or economic categories than essentially theological ones. We adopt the language of anthropology and relinquish our peculiar theological speech.

We are to be “God people,” those who “interject Jesus into the conversation” in a world that would rather think in exclusively anthropological categories. To be a

preacher is to be trained to talk about what God wants to talk about and to talk in the way that God talks (i.e. *Scripture*).

Recently somebody wrote to me complaining about some political statement that was made by the National Council of Churches, criticizing their stand and saying that it was “unpatriotic” and “not supportive of our troops” and the “war effort” and therefore we ought not to send any more good Methodist money to the NCC. I replied that, while I had no great interest in pumping up the waning influence of the National Council of Churches, I was a preacher, a person who was supposed to talk about Jesus and the Bible rather than to be concerned with less significant matters like “patriotism” or “the war effort.” I therefore was uninterested in his complaint against the National Council of Churches.

Bandy goes on to say that, “Yesterday’s challenge was to find leaders who could help people discern Christ in the midst of godlessness, today’s challenge is to find leaders who can help people discern Christ in the midst of rampant godliness.” I like that. Yesterday we were worried about secularism, atheism, and what was required of us to get a hearing from Christianity’s cultured despisers, godlessness. Today our concern is “rampant godliness,” vague and free-floating, undemanding and vacuous “spirituality.” Our task is to help people look at their lives not in terms of some amorphous sense of the “spiritual,” but specifically in the light of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Lords, Prince of Peace. We have got to give some content and challenge to the “rampant godliness” that infects our culture, to point to the specific, discipleship demands of Jesus Christ, rather than allow folk to slip into an inconsequential morass of the merely, vaguely, helpfully spiritual.

Veteran church observer Bill Easum, like Bandy, has been helpful in rethinking the peculiar nature of pastoral leadership. Bandy makes an interesting distinction between the pastor as “enabler,” as “care giver,” and the pastor as transformative leader. Easum is critical of the way we pastors have so wholeheartedly adopted a model of ministry where we become the pastoral giver of care rather than the homiletical-spiritual leader. Here is Easum on the problem of pastors as mere enablers:

Enablers are people who above all else love caring for people so passionately that transformation or discipleship is seldom a concern. They often exude the Great Commandment, often to the extent that they have no time left for the Great Commission. Because they care so deeply about how others feel, they usually:

- Allow everyone else to set their agenda instead of letting the call set it,
- Avoid controversy rather than address it,
- Wait to take action until they are forced, instead of being proactive.

Often, this desire to care goes to the point that the enabler depends on his or her church to need him or her. In the most severe cases, the enabler needs the church to need him or her in order to gain self-worth.

Enablers usually have such a high level of mercy in their personality or gift mix that they render themselves ineffective. All of us have some mercy in us. The key is, does our tendency toward mercy dominate our lives? Mother Teresa had great mercy, but also great leadership skills and used her mercy to fuel her mission. Mercy is good if it fuels the mission; it is

disastrous if it stifles or sidetracks it. With most enablers, mercy derails the mission.

The statement...that best defines enablers is: "I enjoy visiting people in parishioners' homes, hospitals, and nursing homes and giving people spiritual comfort."⁵

This is one reason the designation of pastors (and even bishops!) as "servant leaders" is not quite right. Too often the term "servant leader" is code for servility to the congregation. We can't be faithful servants of our congregations, as *Christian* congregations, without being (in Luther's favorite designation for pastors) *ministeri verbi divini*, "servants of the Word." One reason the preaching office is primary is that it is a primary means of forming us preachers into the sort of people who take God more seriously than ourselves or our congregations. To be a preacher is to be trained and formed by the weekly disciplines of bending our interests to the countercultural concerns of the Word. I'm concerned that too many recent books on preaching are mostly about our listeners, analyzing the limits and the interests of our congregations and their ability to hear, when they ought to be most interested in what the Trinity is able to speak.

I think it was this sort of pastorally unctuous, congregation-corrupting preaching that caused Father Wesley to rail against the people pleasers of his day:

Why, this is the very thing I assert: That the gospel Preachers, so called, corrupt their hearers; they vitiate their taste, so that they cannot relish sound doctrine; and spoil their appetite, so that they cannot turn it into nourishment; they, as it were, feed them with sweetmeats, till the genuine wine of the kingdom seems quite insipid to them. They give them cordial upon cordial, which make them all life and spirit for the present; but, meantime, their appetite is destroyed, so that they can neither retain nor digest the pure milk of the word.⁶

Kierkegaard couldn't have said it better or more bitinglly. It is all well and good to urge us pastors, as many now urge us, to be more culturally sensitive, to speak our words in ways that are aware of the cultural embeddedness of our congregations. But we preachers must always keep before us the understanding that there is no way for us to preach the gospel faithfully that is not an attack upon the dominant, prevailing culture or an attempt to form a new "culture" called church.

Thus, in our ministry, preaching has theological precedence over all other pastoral activity. In preaching we are most explicitly attached to the Word; we demonstrate the external authorization for our ministry; we model for the congregation what a life commandeered by the Word looks like; we rise above sentimental servility to our people and their narcissism and call them to their higher vocation. We become more bold than we would be if left to our own devices.

In my bureaucratic office in Birmingham, we are establishing a "Hall of the Saints," or something to that effect. It's to be a collection of photographs and descriptions of Alabama Methodists who did the right thing in the 1960's. There are stories of preachers who, after a Sunday sermon, had to pack up their families, under cover of darkness, and flee for their lives. One preacher had the distinction of having

a cross burned, not once, but twice, in front of his parsonage before he hung it up and got out of preaching for good.

Dan Whitsett's picture is going to be placed upon that wall. Dan was both admired and despised for his sermons. First Methodist, Sylacauga, Alabama, both grew in numbers and lost members because of Dan's courageous pulpit leadership.

One of my pastors gave me a sermon he found in the library at Sylacauga First, a sermon that Dan preached on Independence Day Weekend 1953, titled, "Fidelity to the Faith of Our Founding Fathers." Dan began with history, recalling the faith of our nation's founders in a land that would truly be a place of justice for all. He then spoke up for racial justice, specifically in regard to the schools of Alabama. He launched into an attack upon the evils of then-current McCarthyism in America that made Edward R. Murrow sound like a wimp. He reminded the congregation that while some of the state's demagogic politicians were busy fighting change in Alabama, we are Christians who take our marching orders not from tradition, not the "Southern way of life," not from the Supreme Court, but from Jesus. He said that we were blessed to be living in a time when the distinction between a follower of Jesus and an ordinary American was easy to see. Dan said that we ought to thank God that the Christian way is so clear and simple in the present conflict.

I'm sure that Dan got some negative response to this sermon. Eventually, Dan left Alabama, forced out, it is said, by his preaching. He continued his ministry in Massachusetts. (He returned to Montgomery for retirement.) Reading Dan Whitsett's sermon reminds me of the awesome responsibility that we preachers of the gospel bear. I haven't preached as powerful or courageous a sermon as Dan's. But I ought to take him as my example, my homiletical mentor, a witness from the past who speaks us into the future, a man who loved being a faithful preacher more than being a caring pastor.

Today, when some layperson whines, "Why don't we have more great preachers," I tend to respond, "Because you ran off the good ones."

In my first year as bishop, I've gotten maybe two dozen letters complaining about pastors who are under my appointment. Some complain that their pastors are spending too much time with the young and neglecting their duty to visit and care for the old. Other letters charge that the pastor is tardy in her hospital visitation or not sufficiently accommodating to the aches and pains of the congregation. Not one single letter complains about the pastor's preaching.

I'd give anything to get a letter, like the letters that some bishop before me surely got concerning Dan, some letter that says, "Our preacher had better stop preaching the gospel, or we're going to kill him—before he kills us."

Notes

1. *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 437.

2. Barth, *Homiletics*, 56.

3. This is what concerns me, not only about some Evangelical Christians' embrace of Catholicism, which substitutes a tame ecclesiastical *magisterium* for less manageable biblical authority, but also about some expressions of "Christian communitarianism," as espoused by Hauerwas, Willimon, et al. Any community in Christ, even a community of "resident aliens" is no match for the Word, the *verbum externum* (Luther) that is the persistent authorization for and the primary judge of the community.

4. Thomas G. Bandy, *Mission Mover: Beyond Education for Church Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 27.
5. Bill Easum, with Linnea Nilsen Capshaw, *Put on Your Own Oxygen Mask First: Rediscovering Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 79-81.
6. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1979) vol. 11, 491.