

## Protagonist Corner

O. Benjamin Sparks III

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee

The source of inspiration for these reflections is an essay in *The Power to Comprehend with All the Saints* (Alston and Jarvis, eds., Eerdmans, 2009) by Cynthia Jarvis. Her title suggests my direction, “On Not Offering Psychological Banalities as God’s Word: A Reformed Perspective on Pastoral Care.” That set me thinking about the entire practice of ministry and about the responsibility of us preachers to and for Holy Scripture, and for its interpretation in the life of the church through preaching and teaching. I thought as well about the encouragement we receive (or do not receive) to be faithful to those tasks as well as for the sacramental life of congregations. If you are ordained to the ministry and are not engaged in these regular practices that are basic to the life of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, then you need to proceed directly (without passing Go or collecting \$200.00) to a pastorless congregation near you which desperately needs you to meet your unique responsibilities on its behalf.

Further, since I have become interim pastor of a large, theologically and biblically literate congregation, I am even more convinced that the presbyteries do hardly anything to encourage faithful ministry and have failed and continue to fail pastors as we go about the daily tasks of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. To say that differently, especially for us who are organized for governance and ministry with a parity of lay and ordained officers making decisions, we have too often offered psychological, organizational, and sociological banalities for how to support pastors, how to encourage congregations, and how to undertake mission. The institutional church, beyond the congregation, continues to flounder, to lose the interest of the best and brightest (and most faithful) among us, and at the national level, reports rather staggering annual membership losses.

For example, in a required interim ministry seminar, the overwhelming emphasis was on how to “fix” broken congregations, and on how to deal with the grief of losing a pastor. Finally one bright spark in the room said, “All we’ve heard for the last few days is a model for helping sick and grieving churches. Do you have a model for healthy churches?” The hesitant, honest answer came back, “No, we really don’t.”

Surely it should be the primary concern of every governing constituency of ministers (presbytery, diocese, conference, and classis) to encourage/require theological reflection among the ministers – using the tools of our trade. These tools would be the Holy Scriptures studied together – not just for preaching, but for spiritual insight; confessions of faith (for those who depend upon such documents for theological, ecclesial identity), primary theological texts (Augustine, Edwards, Barth, Niebuhr, Tillich, Moltmann, Bonhoeffer – in addition to a variety of emerging theologians); and working papers from, and essays on, developing world churches as well as the emerging church. Each of us would add to or subtract from that list, but the substitutes ought not include “how to” manuals on church growth or counseling for niche members of our congregations with conditions so arcane that we might only see two or three examples in a lifetime. One wonders why interim ministry seminars don’t major in the theology and practice of ministry and require us to read similar theo-

logians and books on preaching rather than trying to teach us how to diagnose and tinker.

In addition, governing bodies, were they truly involved in the support of pastors, charged as they are to hold us accountable, would require annual reports about substantive theology read and require written reports on what has been learned. Likewise they would require pastors to be mentors and helpers of each other in “companies of pastors,” for mutual support and prayer, for theological discussion, and for encouraging one another in the joys, obligations, and tribulations of ministry.

In addition to the banal emphases to which the American church has succumbed in the past three decades, we have been obsessed by human rights and justice. That language has crept into ecclesial discussion, sometimes masquerading as inclusivity and hospitality, but all centering on self-righteous attempts to denigrate those who are homophobic, gay, straight, liberal, or conservative. This is accompanied by sneers and guffaws about those others – who themselves feel victimized. No matter which hat you wear, we are all of us, far too often, caught in destructive efforts to gain theological, political, and moral advantage.

Yet if governing bodies would take responsibility for bringing pastors together for mutual help and support, if we saw ourselves as a community in need of the means of grace so that we might be expositors of and leaders toward that grace in our congregations, then the whole tenor of mainline Christianity might begin to change direction. Our hearts of stone might break in each others presence; we might discover instead hearts that engage each other in love, in upbuilding and encouragement for the sake of the whole church – and not just “our kind” or our faction.

Several years ago I had the privilege of attending the opening worship of a gathering of homiliticians in Williamsburg. The guest preacher was James Forbes of the Riverside Church, and his sermon was on the gift of preaching and the joy and difficulty of being a pastor. In the middle of this sermon, he told a story that has stuck with me – not only because it struck a nerve, but because it reveals what every preacher needs and how difficult it is to maintain if we try to go it alone.

There was a Baptist preacher who had labored long and hard in the vineyard of a congregation where he was not appreciated. But he preached faithfully every week and visited the members and moderated the board of deacons where, sometimes, he actually received attacks on his character. He was unfailingly kind to every one, even his detractors, especially when those critics were sick in hospital or had pastoral needs.

One evening after deacons meeting, some of the deacons were standing out in the parking lot chewing over the decisions they had made, as well as criticizing the preacher for his preaching and for his lack of administrative skills. They fastened on just about anything they could find to tear him down in their own eyes and make themselves feel better.

Finally, one of them told the others to stop because he had finally figured out what was wrong with the preacher. “I’ll tell you what’s wrong with that man; he really believes this shit!”

And of course that is what is right about this man – and about all of us. Though we are often racked with doubt, not just about the gospel, but about ourselves and our inadequacies, we are made strong for effective ministry when we are encouraged to believe, to trust, and when we don’t have to go it alone. Even our weaknesses are made useful in Christ’s strength.

To the extent that all of us preachers – now and then – have just the same experience as that faithful African American preacher, then the mutual support of our sisters and brothers becomes crucial. Theological and ecclesial conversation will then strengthen the body and soul. Who knows, such companionship in Christ may even help begin a reformation of the mainline church in our time. Banalities be damned.