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THE CALLING OF THE PREACHER

Victor Gordon

God blessed me with a call and wise counsel. It was the fall of my junior year at Stanford University. I was heavily involved in high school ministry with Young Life and went to a weekend leadership conference at Mount Hermon in the beautiful Santa Cruz mountains. I had never considered being a pastor, but before the weekend was over, there was nothing else I could do with my life. God made it crystal clear, and I have never doubted in the twenty-seven years since that this was his will for my life.

Rev. Earl Palmer, then pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, was a speaker that weekend, which seems so long ago, and yet, to me, as if it was yesterday. Palmer's style and model of ministry attracted me, and the Lord used him to call me into the pastorate. Shortly after that milestone weekend, I made an appointment with Palmer in his office at Berkeley. I am sure he has long since forgotten our meeting, but what he said marked me forever. After I shared my story, he affirmed God's work in my life and offered this piece of counsel: "A pastor has to love two things. He has to love to study and he has to love people."

A quarter century of searching the Scriptures and ministry experience has convinced me that Palmer was exactly right. Every congregation needs at least one person whose passion and priority are to exegete the Scriptures and to exegete the congregation and bring them together. This person is the pastor. The entire pastoral ministry can be

summed up in this: knowing and loving the Word of God while knowing and loving your parishoners, and working in the power of the Spirit to bring the two together to build the people up in Christ for the glory of God. A pastor is called to bring God and his Word to people and to bring people to God and his Word.

This, then, is the unique calling of the pastor. One who is called, gifted, equipped and prepared, committed and disciplined to study the Word and to love people: that is the job description of a biblical pastor! Pastors should be unique in their congregation in respect to calling, giftedness, preparation, commitment and discipline. All of this is for the purpose of bringing the Word of God and people together. This is the only thing the pastor can do for the congregation which the congregation cannot do for itself. Someone must be called of God to serve in this capacity for each local congregation.

How tragic it is, then, to read the words of Eugene Peterson:

American pastors are abandoning their posts, left and right, and at an alarming rate. They are not leaving their churches and getting other jobs. Congregations still pay their salaries. Their names remain on the church stationery and they continue to appear in pulpits on Sundays. But they are abandoning their posts, their calling. They have gone whoring after other gods. What they do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn't the remotest connection with what the church's pastors have done for most of twenty centuries. . . .

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are the churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns—how to keep customers happy, how to lure customers away from competition down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.¹

I must sadly conclude that Peterson is correct. Where are the pastors today who love to study the Word and love people? Where are the shepherds who exegete the Scripture and exegete their congregation and bring the two together? Where are the Ezras, who set their hearts to study the instruction of the Lord, to live it, and to teach his Word to their people (Ezra 7:10)? Where are the Pauls who commit themselves to speak and live the truth in relationships of love (Ephesians 4:15)? Why do we let so many other things get in our way?

I need to frequently re-examine my calling from God and my actual passions and priorities in everyday ministry. God continually calls me back to knowing and loving the Word and to knowing and loving his people whom he has entrusted to me, to seeking to bring the Word and the people together. If you are a pastor, how about you? Are you being faithful to your calling? Are your passions and priorities to know the Word and love your people and feed them the enriching and edifying truth?

This article is not just for pastors. Notice that the main thesis is that every congregation needs a pastor like this. Is this the kind of pastor you desire? Do you give your pastor the time, freedom, resources and encouragement to be faithful to his calling from God? A congregation that does not have a pastor who is trying to bring the Word to the people and the people to the Word is incapable of being the community God calls it to be. The calling of the church is in part dependent upon the calling of the pastor. If the pastor is unable or unwilling to carry out this calling, then the congregation will inevitably be impoverished. Congregations and pastors need to work together in understanding the calling of a pastor and in implementing pastoral ministry that is faithful to God's biblical pattern for pastors.²

The implications of such an understanding of the pastoral ministry are far-reaching for both local congregations

and individual pastors (indeed, also for seminaries and denominations!). The pastor's roles as exegete, lover and communicator affects and defines every aspect of the pastoral ministry. The rest of this article focuses primarily on preaching, but most of what is said regarding our proclamation ministry has application to all the other dimensions of pastoral ministry.

If the pastor is called by the Lord to bring God and his Word to people and to bring people to God and his Word, then preaching is obviously vital to pastoring.³ Indeed, it is accurate and helpful to define preaching itself in this very way: bringing the Word of God to people and people to the Word of God. This is the preaching task! We want people to hear God and be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ as a result.

This approach to pastoral ministry is obviously Word-centered (as well as Christ-centered and people-centered). It demands a confidence in God speaking his Word to us in and through the authors of the Bible. Of course, if this trust in the authority of Scripture erodes, one must find another way to pastor! I am convinced that this is exactly what has happened. It is no longer in fashion to proclaim one's confidence in God's communication to humanity in Scripture. The Bible as our only final authority, a long-time Baptist distinctive, is ignored, embarrassingly given quick lip service, or boldly denied. However the loss of confidence expresses itself, the result is always some type of redefinition of pastoral ministry.

I have never met a pastor who did not claim to preach the Bible, despite, I would argue, clear evidence to the contrary.⁴ While preachers claim to preach biblically, it is not difficult for a careful listener to discern rather quickly if a preacher is proclaiming the Word of God from Scripture, or if other authorities are being trusted. Maybe they preach with no authority at all.⁵ Is a particular preacher really con-

cerned with helping the congregation understand what the Bible is saying? Does the minister call the community to obey the teaching and live life based upon what it says? Does he proclaim the counter-cultural mandates of Scripture regardless of his own ideology or the expectations of his congregation? Does the preacher truly allow the Scripture to critique personal lifestyle issues, or does the preacher sit in judgment over the Word? Biblical preachers are easily recognized as biblical! Watch the text the preacher is supposed to be preaching, and listen carefully to the preacher. It will not be difficult to determine if the preacher is truly biblical. Indeed, as a preacher, I must continually ask myself these same questions. I say I preach the Bible, but do I?

The image of exegesis is very helpful here. The word comes from two Greek words, the preposition *ex* ("out of, from") and the verb *egeomai* ("to lead"). So, exegesis literally means to "lead out." The image is leading out from the text the meaning that is in the text. Thus, the meaning of exegesis is often "explanation, interpretation." The suggestion that exegesis means "read out" of the text, not "into" the text (eisegesis), is sometimes used to clarify the meaning. In short, biblical exegesis is the process that seeks to determine the original meaning of the text.

In order to be a faithful biblical pastor, a significant amount of time must be spent in the work of exegesis. What does the biblical text mean and say?⁶ The best exegesis is done by working with the text in the original language with the best lexical and grammatical tools,⁷ by studying the most helpful critical commentaries,⁸ by consulting solid works of biblical theology,⁹ by learning from the historical theology of the church (best understood as a history of the interpretation of Scripture),¹⁰ and by immersion in contemporary works of systematic theology.¹¹ Now, does Peterson's comment hit home?

My purpose is not to make anyone feel guilty nor to raise impossible standards for pastoral ministry. No person could possibly do all I am suggesting to the fullest measure. But my purpose is to call us to be faithful pastors and faithful congregations. It becomes readily apparent that Earl Palmer was on to something when he said a pastor needs to love to study! If a pastor's task is to bring the Word of God to people then there must be personal immersion in the serious study of Scripture. There is no other way to be faithful to the pastoral calling. Karl Barth said something similar to Earl Palmer's counsel in 1935 in his formal farewell to his students in Bonn, just before his expulsion from Germany by Hitler:

We have been studying cheerfully and seriously. As far as I was concerned it could have continued in that way, and I had already resigned myself to having my grave here by the Rhine! . . . and now the end has come. So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis! Keep to the Word, to the Scripture that has been given to us.

I believe God is calling pastors and congregations to a new faithfulness in pastoral ministry. Each of us pastors, and I commit myself to this, needs to be seriously engaged with Scripture to the best of our ability (giftedness) and training (preparation). Each congregation needs to both expect and help their pastors to be deeply involved with the Word. Let us all "keep to the Word"!

But pastors are not only to know the Scriptures, they must also know their people. A preacher cannot bring the two together if both of them are not understood. For this reason the image of exegesis also applies well to the pastor's relationship to the congregation. To preach effectively, the pastor must always be in a deepening personal relationship with the congregation. Bringing the Word to people

and people to the Word requires exegesis of the people as well as the text. Hence, Palmer's concern that pastors love people is again on target.

Responding to the call to understand their congregation leads pastors directly into both of Palmer's loves: love of people and love of studying. Preachers must become students of people! They need to learn all they can about humanity in general.¹² Preachers also need to do all they can to understand the history and current state of our own culture.¹³ They must focus especially on their own local community and context.¹⁴

But a pastor's special concern is always one's own congregation. One gets to know a person only by spending time with that person. A significant amount of a pastor's time must be spent with the people, as well as with studying the Word. Pastors need to take every opportunity they have of being with people to get to know them. Pastors must "study" their people—in a loving, respectful way of course. Parishioners are not data to be analyzed, but persons to be caringly understood and joyfully experienced in relationship. Indeed, one of the great privileges and joys of pastoral ministry is the feast of personal relationships available to us and required of us.

A preacher, by definition, does a lot of talking. The pastoral responsibilities of preaching, teaching, discipling and leading demand that the shepherd address the congregation frequently. The pastor, to be effective, must develop into a good listener. Preachers necessarily have to cultivate the skills of listening and discipline themselves to use them often. Those of us who are pastors already have our "pulpit," and we must learn to switch into "the listening mode" when we are with our people. We have a responsibility to allow and encourage our people to talk to us.

Not only do pastors need to listen and let others talk, they must also develop the skill of asking good questions.

We pastors will learn to do this with kindness, care and wisdom, but learn we must. How else will we probe the depths of those to whom we minister the Word of God? How else will we give our people the freedom to share their deepest longings, fears, hopes and hurts in an environment of love, encouragement and confidentiality? How else will we discern their idols and discover their needs, both felt and real?

Pastors are to love and understand people, taking genuine interest in the people of their congregation. They need to enter into genuine relationships with their folk, caring enough to speak, to listen and to ask pertinent questions about other persons' lives. Their preaching will not connect with their congregations unless they work hard to know them well.

So, as preachers grow in their understanding of the Word of God and of their congregation, they become more effective in preaching sermons that bring the two together. This connection characterizes true preaching. God speaks his Word to a specific congregation through a specific preacher in just this fashion. Preachers must tailor-make each of their sermons for the unique congregation which they know, love and serve in the name of Christ. For this reason, I am becoming more and more convinced that the people who can best evaluate the effectiveness of a sermon (given that the message is faithful to the meaning of Scripture) are the hearers in the congregation to whom the sermon was delivered.

In conclusion, I commend to those of you who are pastors this pastoral methodology, and more specifically this preaching methodology, of knowing the Word of God and knowing your congregation and seeking to bring them together. Paul's marvelous description of the pastoring process as "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15) is as relevant and helpful today as ever! To every American

congregation, I commend this kind of pastor and encourage you to help your pastors to be faithful to this high calling, which you need so much!

Author

Dr. Victor Gordon is senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Wichita, Kansas, where he has served since 1988. Previously he was chaplain and assistant professor of biblical and theological studies at Wheaton College (1983-88) and chaplain and assistant professor of religious studies at Sioux Falls College (1978-83), Sioux Falls, South Dakota. A graduate of Stanford (A.B.), he received his M.Div. (1973) and Ph.D. (New Testament, 1979) from Fuller Theological Seminary. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 1. Emphasis his. Peterson argues pastors should be about "matters of God and the soul and Scripture."
2. There is an abundance of evidence that this understanding of pastoral ministry is fully biblical. For starters, check the Pastoral Epistles and the examples of Moses, the Old Testament prophets, Jesus and the apostles, especially John and Paul.
3. Obviously, preaching and teaching are indispensable to the pastoral calling as I understand it. Pastoring and preaching go together like hand and glove. In this day of specialization and pastoral teams/staffs, there are some "pastors" who never or rarely preach to the entire congregation. However, these pastoral team members must have a significant teaching ministry with their ministry group if they are to be considered true pastors.
4. See, e.g., David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), 251-53.
5. The authority often becomes the person of the preacher. This, if one is honest, has to be a very difficult way to preach! Do I really want to take up all these people's time with my opinions? J.I. Packer helpfully writes, "I build everything on biblical exegesis and application. . . . in preaching . . . I find an enormous difference between the feel of putting out my own ideas and the feel of simply echoing and enforcing what God has said in his Word. You have liberty and authority when you allow the Bible to talk through you, a liberty and authority you don't have if

- you're offering your own ideas or cherished notions" (*Leadership*, Summer, 1998), 110.
6. I realize the difficult hermeneutical distinctions between the ancient meaning of the biblical texts and the contemporary meaning of these same texts. While "exegesis" may not be the best way to speak of what God is saying through Scripture today, exegesis of the texts (dealing with the ancient meaning) and exegesis of the congregation is a helpful way of arriving at the contemporary meaning. This has been helpfully called a "fusion of two horizons," which yields contemporary meaning (always our goal) or, simply, an interpretation of a text. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980); *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992).
 7. I am thinking here of such tools as Walter Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and adapted by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (Chicago: Cambridge, 1957); F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, R. W. Funk, trans. (Chicago: Cambridge, 1961); G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, editors, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, G. W. Bromiley, trans. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964-77); and Hebrew and Greek concordances. The more the preacher is able to deal with the original text, the better. The ideal is to make your own translation of the text to be preached on specifically for your congregation, whether you share it with them or not.
 8. Critical commentaries dig into the meaning of the original text in ways that devotional or homiletical works often do not. Some helpful examples here are such scholars as C. K. Barrett, F. F. Bruce, Donald Carson, C. E. B. Cranfield, Gordon Fee, Gerald Hawthorne, I. H. Marshall, Leon Morris, John Stott.
 9. Some biblical theologians who are always helpful include such writers as G. R. Beasley-Murray, Oscar Cullmann, J. D. G. Dunn, Leonhard Goppelt, Martin Hengel, George Ladd, N. T. Wright.
 10. Bernard Ramm first introduced me to looking at historical theology as a tool for biblical exegesis. "What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God: this is Christian doctrine." So begins Jaroslav Pelikan's massive five-volume history of Christian theology (*The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971], 1). I have been greatly aided in my understanding of Scripture by such luminaries as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley and Barth.
 11. Examples of contemporary systematic theologians I find helpful include Donald Bloesch, Gabriel Fackre, Stan Grenz, Alister McGrath, Thomas Oden, Bernard Ramm, Wolfhart Pannenberg, T. F. Torrance, David Wells.
 12. All the fields of the liberal arts are relevant here, especially biology, the social sciences (particularly anthropology, psychology and sociology),

- history and literature.
13. There are some excellent analysts of our contemporary culture such as Robert Bellah, Peter Berger, James Davison Hunter, Christopher Lasch, Lesslie Newbigin, Neil Postman, Robert Wuthrow, etc. One should also pay particular attention to the emerging cultural movement termed "postmodernism." For helpful introductions to postmodernism see Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996); Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995).
 14. This concern highlights the importance of being involved in one's local community and being especially attuned to what is happening in one's city and neighborhood. For instance, daily study of a good local newspaper seems indispensable for these purposes.