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Biblical Leadership: Distinct from the Model of Preaching

Back to our unreal, but somewhat real, kingdom. The problem is not structure—at least, not theoretically. The problem is not having the wrong king on the throne. The problem is not oral, but moral. The problem is following through. It is matching our hips to our lips—so-to-speak!

What Christian church today denies the authority of Jesus Christ? What church refuses to see Him as Head of His Body corporately, and local assemblies specifically? The answer, of course, is “none.” The problem is not what we say, but rather how it is worked out. William Thurston, president of GenRad, said, “The way we choose to look at things can be as significant as the things we are trying to see.” Basic, but true.

Today a number of Christian leaders believe that the pastor has singular authority in the church because of the biblically historic record of preaching in the New Testament. That is, the pastor is in charge, and has the uniquely distinctive responsibility to preach. This has led bible schools and seminaries to dedicate themselves to the primary educational mission of “preaching the Word.” Certainly, this is a commendable Christian ministry. The Word, unquestionably, is central. The question is: Is preaching, with its attendant authority,¹

the principle requisite and definition of the pastor and shepherd of the New Testament flock?

It should be noted that this second way of thinking is closely related to the one examined in the preceding chapter of this book. Just as many think the pastor functions similar to the prophet, so his speaking, as a prophet, is called preaching, and, consequently, is authoritative. While it is certainly true that these two things logically follow, it remains to be seen whether it can be proven biblically.

THE POWER OF THE PULPIT

The equation of prophet to preacher, of preaching with authority, and of authority with the vital needs of the Church, has been documented for some time:

The Church of today urgently needs to be more prophetic....If the Church is not prophetic, the reason is that those who stand in its pulpits are not prophets....Only a prophetic ministry can call the Church back to her true mission.²

Clearly, the connection between prophet, preaching, and the pulpit is readily made. Further, Eugene Merrill notes:

God's gift to the Church of the prophet as a herald of the kerygma (Eph 4:11) continues, however. In an age when men are called prophets because they overturn, disturb, and confuse, it is reassuring to know that there are genuine spokesmen for God—men who are prophets not because they proclaim creative messages of the imagination but because they rightly divide the word of truth. And they preach it with conviction that comes from knowing they have been divinely chosen and ordained to minister.³

Dr. Merrill draws from all the basic assumptions, and in this case,

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turns over all the traditional stones. Pastors are authoritative because they, as the ancient prophet, know their calling, and preach it with conviction. There, again, are the connections: pastors as prophets who preach in our pulpits. The thinking is clear. Is it valid?

First, we need to know what preaching is. Preaching comes from the root word which mean “to herald or proclaim.” It speaks of a special messenger—one who is a spokesman in a model similar to the prophet.

The problem comes in linking the valid ministry of preaching, or heralding, with the pastoral function. Scripture clearly distinguishes the herald, or preacher, from the apostle and teacher of the New Testament. Paul testified about himself:

I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles (1 Tim 2:7, cf. 2 Tim 1:11).

Paul was an apostle, and a herald, and a teacher—all distinct ministry functions sovereignly provided for his life. Further, Paul identifies a basic tenet of his ministry to the Gentiles as the taking of the gospel,—the evangelizing, or heralding the Word—to the Gentiles (Gal 1:16).

If, then, preaching, or heralding, is distinct—that is, different—from the office of apostle, or teaching, what is it? The answer to this comes from a text like one seen in Romans:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:14-15).

The function of biblical preaching, then, is evangelism. Preach-

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ers are evangelists, not pastors. That, of course, is not to say that pastors (as well as all other believers—hopefully) do the work of evangelism as a part of their life even more than their vocation. But to do evangelism as an expression of the multi-faceted commands of the New Testament—to one who is concerned with being spiritual and obedient—is quite different from the necessary equation of pastor to preacher, which justifies an imbalanced view of the pulpit, and brings with it a number of attendant problems.

Two well-know texts need a further word. First, Eph 4:11 notes that Christ gave the Church apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. It should be seen that evangelists are not the same as apostles, nor are they the same as prophets, nor, additionally, are they the same as pastors and teachers. They were a distinct group—and their purpose was preaching.

Secondly, John and Ken were both trained to understand 2 Tim 4:2, where the phrase “Preach the Word” occurs, as applying to the pastor, and principally, to his pulpit ministry. But, interesting, this phrase is but a short hop away from 2 Tim 4:5, which says “do the work of an evangelist.” From the above observations, as well as from the rule of near context, it seems reasonable to observe, again, that preachers are evangelists—as illustrated by word usage, and the life of the apostle Paul.

THE PERIL OF THE PULPIT

To this point, it might seem like we are anti-preaching. Actually, it is quite the opposite. Rather, we are attempting to biblically demonstrate the primary versus the secondary aspects of pastoral ministry. Primarily, we see no justifiable link between pastor, prophet, and preacher. As such, this pastor does not have the singular authority of the prophet or preacher. Secondarily, there is a place for teaching and instruction on Sunday morning. But it is better, in attempting to think clearly on the New Testament model of leadership, to

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understand that these elders are men who are primarily pastors and teachers—not prophets and preachers.

Reminding ourselves once again that the motivation, for these erroneous assumptions, has been well meaning, but the issue is not motivation. The issue is more the action and the result. Because the pastor, or the congregation, has assumed the pulpit to represent prophetic or preaching authority, a number of attendant problems have followed. They include seeing the pastor’s teaching as the most, if not only, authoritative teaching in the church (as opposed to the teaching of elders, Sunday school teachers, etc), strong excesses in church buildings as necessary for ministry, misunderstanding revelation from God versus revelation from the pulpit, and a confusion about the nature of motivation and maturity in the Church.

THE PROBLEM OF CONTENT

If the pastor is seen as having the authority of a prophet or preacher, then his words are *assumed* to be tantamount with Gods—that is, revelational in nature. This conclusion, almost unspoken in most churches, is usually deduced by the following reasoning:

1. God’s authority is in the person who speaks His Word to the church.
2. Some special *prompting* of the Spirit of God provides the preacher with the text, convictions, and applications that become “Thus says the Lord” to that church.
3. As such, this pastor becomes the mediator between God and the church—again, primarily on Sunday morning.
4. Conclusion: believers are to come, listen, agree, and obey.

The difficulty in analyzing these thoughts comes in separating the good from the bad, or incorrect. The problem is not that God’s

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people do not need to hear the Word taught, or that they do not need to obey it. The problem is in the assumptions made about what they heard, and from whom they heard it.

The primary authority for the Church is the Word of God, or the Scriptures. As pastors teach the truths and doctrines of the Scriptures, it is crucial that believers do two things together: first, that they listen carefully, and, secondly, that they determine to take what they have heard, study it out, and make personal conclusions and convictions accordingly. This model is beautifully illustrated by the Berean church:

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thesalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)

Can you imagine *second-guessing* the apostle Paul, in a sense. These believers were the more noble, because they listened, studied daily, and determined things to be believed and lived.

Whatever authority pastors and elders have is subsequent to, and following from, the authority of the Scriptures. Since no one understands the Scriptures perfectly, it is the all-the-time responsibility of believers to evaluate and appraise what they hear—whether it is from the pulpit, the radio or television, or in the books (including this one!) that they read. To assume pastors speak with the authority of the revelation of Scripture is to open ones thinking up to the cultic excesses of the last few years. There is a distinct difference between the authority of the Scriptures, and the resultant authority of biblical teachers who both exposit, and direct the attention of the saint to, the written Revelation.

Evaluate and appraise. Those are hard words. This makes the believer's job harder, but the Church is better off for it. Most believers simply defer to the professional minister because of his background, training, education, or knowledge of the original languages. But none

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of those factors—supremely true of the apostle Paul—kept the noble Bereans from the process of evaluating, appraising, and coming to individual convictions that might have—but not necessarily—agreed with Paul’s teaching.

This process cannot be overestimated. Ask the leaders, that you listen to, for the *biblical proof* for their conclusions—if it is not readily available in the things they say. Then read it for yourself. Compare it to other similar issues in the Scripture. Apply diligence and perseverance on a daily basis. Ask other respected Christian leaders for alternative views. Take the time, and the effort, to be obedient to truth you know—not just truth you have heard.

THE PROBLEM OF CONTEXT

Sometimes, the support offered for linking pastor to prophet to pulpit-preaching comes from the issue of edification. Edification means “to build or to erect.” The observations are that since prophesy results in edification, which it did (1 Cor 14:3-4), and since leadership was given to the Church for edification, which it was (Eph 4:11-12), then it must follow that prophets are equivalent to pastors are equivalent to preaching.

But the mistake in this thinking is readily apparent. Just because two attendant grace-ministries by God accomplish similar results does not mean the two are one-in-the-same. Forgiveness and judgment on Israel, and surrounding nations in the Old Testament, does not equate Israel with her neighbors. Raising godly children in a Christian home does not equate the contributing roles of father and mother. Thus, producing growth in the Church does not equate the distinct, but equally valid, first century ministries of prophet, and Church leadership.

A related, and very familiar, emphasis comes from this errant thinking as well. It is an emphasis on building churches . . . buildings, that is. This is a problem for the American Church that is, simply, *colossal* in nature. The thinking is to *build buildings to build people*.

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That is, exposure to the pastor, who has the authoritative teaching, is the key to successful church growth.

The truth of the above premise must be admitted. Building buildings, and focusing on the dynamics of an eloquent speaker, will bring in people. That is simple fact. But the issue is not whether it works, and not whether good results come from it. The issue is: Is it the best emphasis for an assembly, and the leadership of the church—given the instructions of the Scripture?

If the ministry is bigness, other groups are beating us at our own game! Certain deviant religious groups, and cults, produce numbers that stagger evangelical comparisons. But if bigness is right, then why build different church buildings? Why not build, or rent, the town or cities largest assembly hall, and gather all the Christians from that community or area together to hear the best? The reasons that would not be good—even if it were possible to convince Christians to cooperate—is that it would not accomplish the *people-building* agendas of the New Testament, and it would, again, direct the authority within the Kingdom of God away from the King and Shepherd, and to a regional ruler, or under-shepherd, whose responsibilities are primarily *relational* as he gives the Word to the people of God.

Remembering that “the Church is never a sacred building, but always a believing assembly,” and “it is you who pray, and not where you pray,” the issue of the ministry of edification takes on different dimensions. The responsibility of the leader is much like the waiter in a restaurant. He is given the food by the Chef in the kitchen. The source of our life is Christ, and His Word. The pastor serves it to people needing it—at the tables. This elder’s job is to deliver the food with a minimum of spilling! Certainly the appreciation of the people is to the servant who has delivered the food. But the greater love and devotion is from the now-satisfied-saint toward the kitchen, and the King and Chef, who is the source of this life-sustaining nourishment.

Concerning church buildings: every assembly, or church, needs

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a roof to keep the weather out, and the pre-schoolers in! But interests in this area should be modest, and should not be seen as any more necessary than for a person to rent a home. What makes a house a home? Or what makes a home a family? While we use the words interchangeably, they mean very different things.

Can you imagine someone telling you that he or she is convinced that they had no real family as a child because they never owned a physical structure? You would take issue with that, and them, immediately. Family is defined in terms of relationships, not mortgages. Similarly, church is defined in terms of relationships, not buildings. Just because there is a general community assumption that a church building is essential, and just because various saints, for investment or misdirected theological reasons, think a building is essential, does not a good-decision-make!

Currently, John is part of an assembly which has been renting a school building for six years, and channeling the majority of the church's assets—both in terms of money, and people—into local and overseas outreach. Regularly, these saints are reminded that there are no pending building programs—and that they may be renting until the Lord comes! Traditional thinking and expectations die hard, but they do die. It comes with gentle and patient instruction, and with lives that match up with words.

One final note. Misunderstanding these issues also confuses the issue of the place of godly women in public ministry in two ways:

1. If the pastor's pulpit-authority is from the ministry of the prophet, and prophesy, then women, who similarly prophesied in the Old and New Testaments, can *preach* in those selfsame pulpits.
2. If the teaching from the pulpit is considered uniquely *authoritative*, then women would be restricted from that ministry, but could teach in any other *non-authoritative* contexts besides the pulpit ministry—regardless of whether, or not, they were teaching men.

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But the Scriptures are more definite:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner (1 Tim 2:12-14).

While this issue is complex, the above illustrates how our assumptions, theologically, can move us into the back door of a Christian ministry, which ends up denying the clear teachings of Scripture. There is no clear biblical evidence that the pastor is the prophet, and is the preacher—using the persuasion of the pulpit as his primary ministry-authority. Understanding this helps us move more closely to the New Testament model of leadership, and guard against confusion in distinguishing valid ministry-roles in the public meetings, and in the Church.

THE PROBLEM OF COMMITMENT

Confusing the place of pastors with prophets and preachers not only blurs the distinctive ministry of prophetic foretelling and forthtelling, and the distinctive model of preacher or herald who evangelizes—or brings the gospel to those who have not heard or responded in saving faith, but it also distorts the issues of motivation, application or commitment. While many reasons contribute to the problem of immaturity in the Church, one of the determinative reasons, in our judgment, is the misemphasis of the Sunday sermon, and the role of the *preacher*.⁴

As will be seen more fully in the next two chapters, the role of the elder as pastor and teacher is to take the learner, or believer, from immaturity to maturity. This involves both verbalizing the truth, and visualizing the truth. Biblical teaching does not take place until both happen. Truth must be heard, and it must be wedded to life. It must be heard and seen, or modeled.

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It is functionally impossible for this to happen from behind a pulpit! Certainly, teaching illustrations help. Expository skill goes a way toward this goal. But there is little of relationship, and virtually nothing of relational intimacy—that is, shepherds knowing the sheep, and sheep their shepherds—that can happen on Sunday morning. That means that public reading and teaching have good, but limited, value on Sunday morning. Actually, our whole purpose for gathered meetings needs to be rethought.⁵ Worship needs to be rethought in terms of praise, proclamation and prayer, not pews, performance, and persuasion!

The sad reality of most churches is that pastors, short of crisis situations, do not know their people. John remembers a rather candid pastor who spoke at a pastor's conference at Multnomah School of the Bible in the early 1980's. At the end of one of his messages, on the subject of shepherding, he stated insightfully, "I want to admit to a reality. One of the reasons I was invited is because I am the pastor of a church numbering some 2,000 people. If my church totaled 50 believers, I would not have been invited. But the truth of the matter, from a shepherding perspective, is that pastors of churches with 50 people are likely doing a much better job of pastoring than I am in my church!" The Scriptures would likely agree.

In addition, Ken sat in amazement as a leading church growth spokesman, who has authored numerous books on the subject, transitioned in his presentation from illustrating the pastor as a shepherd (in a smaller church body) to illustrating the pastor as a rancher (in a larger church body). Having presented biblical support for the shepherd analogy, the speaker neglected to do the same for the rancher analogy. Nevertheless, the rancher concept was presented with the same fervor. Ken, however, had heard the principles of the rancher concept presented before—at business school, since he has an undergraduate degree in business. Obviously the rancher management style needed no biblical support in business school, but the pastors in attendance absorbed these typical business management techniques as biblically based and thus applicable for their ministries.

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Sheep do not grow corporately or individually—we mean really grow—in matters of loving the Lord more, and loving others instead of themselves, as they are herded in and out of a building to hear a rancher feed them from a distance. Pastors are shepherds, not ranchers. And sheep need a flock-relationship where they know their leaders and are encouraged to grow as they hear and see the Word lived out. No Church Growth formula has ever, from the days of Palestine to the designs of microprocessors, improved on that *method* for raising sheep.

CHRIST IS THE ANSWER—BUT PASTORS AS PREACHERS IS ALSO THE WRONG QUESTION

The questions might be raised: if this thinking, of equating pastors and prophets and preachers—authority-wise—comes from well-meaning thinking and men, then why rock the boat? Isn't God satisfied if we mean well?

The answer, seemingly, is that sincerity is appreciated, but is never a substitute for truth. Sometimes we illustrate this fact by asking the following question, “If we could prove to you that Christianity was false, would you reject it?” When we ask that, eyebrows raise, and people start confirming their suspicions that these guys are heretics after all! So, we have to ask them to “play by our rules” for a few minutes.

Again, we repeat the question. Objections are offered: “You can't disprove Christianity. That's impossible. I'll never deny Christ.” All those observations are well-and-good, but not for the illustration we are trying to make. So, we say, “Okay, suppose we produce the physical body of Christ. Would that cause you to disbelieve in Him?” After convincing our skeptical audiences that we could do that, in this pretend illustration, what percentage of that audience—granting the premise we first suggested concerning our ability to prove Christianity false—do you think agrees to deny Christ, and Christianity? Consistently, it is about twenty percent.

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Is that good or bad? We suggest that the percentage is way too low! The reason is that we are, first and foremost, to be lovers of truth, and God. There is nothing especially commendable about blind or unquestioning loyalty. Read Fox's *Book of Martyrs*. That was unswerving faith in hundreds of cases. But it wasn't blind faith. It wasn't faith without truth or facts. It was faith in Christ and His redeeming work.

If we could prove Christianity false—and we cannot!—then one hundred percent of the saints should jump ship. Why? Because we are committed to truth and to God—not to good feelings about our salvation and faith or secure conclusions concerning our eternal destiny.

We can feel good about our salvation, and we are secure in our relationship to Christ, but it all hangs on Him who is the Way, the *Truth*, and the Life. That is the reason that sincerity is no substitute for truth. It is because our faith is not rooted in feelings, but in the facts of the cross and the Messiah.

It is not sufficient to leave well-intentioned conclusions alone. We all have the ultimate model of the Bereans, who are to be pressing on nobly, we trust, in the pursuit of truth, and that which best approximates the New Testament model for the Church and its leaders.

Now, please reconsider your suspicions about us as heretics. In the contexts we find ourselves, we occasionally smell warming tar!

