

The Work of the Minister—What Members Expect

By Bob Young

We usually think of the work of the minister in terms of “pulpit to pew,” that is, how does the minister define and accomplish his ministry. This article seeks to understand the work of the minister from the point of view of the pew. Across 40+ years of ministry, I have received many comments from the pew, and a few letters—most complementary, a few less so. What do those who sit in the pew think is the work of the minister? What are the expectations of members? The article also suggests some important principles to help the minister meet those expectations.

First and foremost, the minister as is expected to preach, and to preach well. Teaching and evangelizing are often considered secondary. Alexander Whyte wrote, *“Surely they are the happiest and the most enviable of all men, who have been set apart for nothing else but to the understanding and the opening up of the hid treasures of God’s Word and God’s Son.”*

The priority of preaching. In one sense, preaching is the number one priority of the minister. This is especially true among the churches of Christ, where in times past ministers were often called preachers. This is not to deny the importance of leadership, service, and caring roles. Preaching is a primary way in which the minister accomplishes these other functions. In the interaction of good preaching, the church is encouraged and motivated, the church is served, and the church feeds on the Word of God. Phillips Brooks wrote, *“The preacher needs to be a pastor that he may preach to real men. The pastor must be a preacher, that he may keep the dignity of his work alive. The preacher who is not a pastor grows remote. The pastor who is not a preacher grows petty.”*

The importance of preaching. Biblical preaching is irreplaceable. Preaching does something that cannot be done by recordings and video. Preachers are pioneers, ever conquering new territory in that they bring a specific word from God into the life of the church at an exact moment of need. This cannot be done by “canned” sermons or borrowed sermons. The preacher who is in touch with the congregation will reflect that contact in the task of preaching.

The influence of preaching and the preacher—joy. A preacher who has lost the joy of preaching will not preach effectively. The contrast between the attitude of the elder brother and the prodigal son provides a helpful parallel. The preacher who does not experience joy in preaching often sees himself as a slave more than as a child of God. He may perform his duties and tasks, but such is drudgery. He can easily lose the richness of life, love, and deepening fellowship in the body of Christ. He will, like the elder brother, have deep, hidden desires in his heart, but not find the way to fulfill those desires. Over the long haul, such preachers and preaching make others miserable.

The task of preaching. Preaching is a grave responsibility, awesome, audacious. It is no small thing to preach God’s truth—to say that when the preacher speaks one is hearing the very word of God. Because preachers are called to be practical theologians (or theological practitioners), the task of preaching always includes application. The task is not only mental—that others may know and understand the word of God. The task is also practical—that others may apply the word of God.

Dangers in preaching. Perhaps the gravest danger for the preacher is to lose sight of his own personal spiritual life. A second danger, especially hazardous because it is so subtle and often unrecognized, is this. Too often, preaching in the context of a local church focuses more on the inside and internal matters, church problems and challenges, doctrinal questions or wrangling, and efforts to “fix” the local church, members, and leaders. Preachers must maintain a balance, never forgetting that a primary role of preachers, reflected in the New Testament terminology “evangelist” is to focus on the outside, to imitate Jesus and to work in Jesus’ ministry of seeking and saving the lost. The local church will take on the personality and focus of the preacher in this area. When the preacher begins to see everything wrong in the local church, the members will do likewise. Other danger areas can be listed

and expanded—pride, laziness, lack of focus, lack of organization, lack of renewal in the dry times, lack of study of the biblical text, lack of freshness....

Second, the minister is expected to lead. There is a prophetic element in ministry, not in the sense of foretelling but as a spokesman and herald for God. The preacher leads by word, and even more so by example.

The preacher leads by example. The preacher is a student of the word. The preacher reflects careful preparation and study, awareness of the word of God. The preacher leads in spirituality.

The preacher leads by sharing the word of God. The preacher demonstrates the study, understanding, and application of the word by modeling the process and helping others learn how to use the word of God in their own lives. The preacher

The preacher leads by helping others toward ministry. This concept is captured by the word administration (“ad” means toward, that is, administration moves others toward their own ministries). The preacher does not lead by doing it all. The preacher leads by helping others toward greater involvement.

The preacher leads by developing leaders, especially in the development of other preachers. The preacher does this personally, as Paul taught Timothy and Titus. The preacher helps others learn how to share the word (2 Timothy 2:2). The preacher helps in the development of leaders within the local church (Titus 1:5ff; 1 Timothy 3,5).

The minister is expected to serve. The preacher must always see himself as a servant. The local church members will be ill-prepared for the works of ministry if the preacher does not take the lead in developing a servant heart. New members and new Christians will not “get it” and learn the necessity of involvement and ministry unless the minister is guiding the attitude of the church in that direction.

Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve.

Service involves looking at spiritual things through spiritual eyes.

Service involves letting go of self.

Service requires that one forego comparisons with others.

Service involves self-sacrifice.

The minister is expected to be pastoral. One cannot escape the pastoral aspect of ministry. I use the word “pastoral” on purpose. Most ministers are not officially designated as shepherds or elders in the biblical sense, but they nonetheless have a pastoral role. The members belong to them and they belong to the members (Romans 12:5).

The minister is usually the one who has greatest access and available time during difficult times of illness, death, and family stress.

The minister is often the one who is best prepared to provide counseling and spiritual help—by education and by experience in and knowledge of the Word of God.

The minister is frequently the one with the deepest relationships with members and with non-members, and thus a person of influence.