

Clerical Crisis?

Some Preliminary Comments in the arena of this Concern

For a considerable period of time statistics have indicated that the clerical profession has suffered from a high degree of what is commonly called 'burnout', the inability of clergy to continue in the ministry. Many factors may contribute to this phenomena. In the last few decades there are, I believe, indicators that certain theological beliefs and attitudes may have a significant influence. Let me briefly refer to some of the attitudes which are currently related to the inability of men to sustain biblical ministry.

1. Calling

None would dispute God's 'calling' of the prophets of the OT, nor would they dispute Christ's 'calling' of His disciples. Has God suddenly altered his mode of operation? Just because God no longer 'calls' men audibly do we presume to assert that God' has finished with the 'calling' of men to the ministry?

Men are being taught that they no longer require a 'calling' to engage in biblical ministry. Younger men are being persuaded to enter the Ordained Ministry on the basis of their Christian profession and the possession of the academic ability to secure the necessary qualifications. Such teaching may be well intentioned, but is contrary to clear biblical teaching. While Paul instructs Timothy in 2 Tim 2:2, 'what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also', he is not authorizing an indiscriminate elevation of men to the ministry, even though they be 'faithful men' and 'able to teach others'. Being 'faithful' and 'able to teach' must be balanced with his words in 1 Tim 3:1, "If anyone aspires to the office of a bishop (minister), he desires a noble task." God is able to 'call' men into the ministry today by the inner conviction He gives to certain men to 'desire and 'aspire' after this task. It is an irrepressible desire; a desire that cannot be refused. It is this 'desire' and 'aspiration' that qualifies men to believe they are 'called'. At the heart of such 'aspiration' will be the intention of Paul's injunction in 1 Tim 4:15, 'devote yourself' (to the task of preaching and teaching). The Greek expresses the 'imperative' (command) of the 'verb to be' ie., 'be consumed with these things'; be intensely immersed and absorbed in the study of theology; the pursuit of these things personifies the man; these things become his very being! A man who is 'called' by God in this sense possesses the conviction that he can do nothing else but the task of preaching and teaching.

2. Convictions

A man will only be sustained in ministry if he possess and retains the conviction that the Scriptures are the word of God. He must be utterly convinced of their reliability, trustworthiness and sufficiency. He is a man who, in the words of D M Lloyd-Jones, 'does not sit in judgement upon God's Word but under the judgement of God's Word', and accepts its authority amidst the attacks of human wisdom. See Article 6 of the 39 Articles. He must not be a man who is 'tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine' (Ephesians 4:14). If a man does not possess an absolute trust in the divine authorship of Scripture, an authorship endorsed and elaborated by Jesus Christ, he will not withstand the assaults that constantly threaten this citadel!.

3. Comprehensive biblical grasp of God's Truth/Word

A comprehensive biblical understanding of God's Word is the platform for true biblical ministry. In the interests of pragmatism that platform is increasingly being jettisoned and replaced with a superficial and shallow Christian message. While such pragmatism may be popular, any failure in 'results' are likely to bring disillusionment. If men are expecting that the 'worldly packaging' of the Christian message will make 'converts' they are adopting a recipe for despair. Biblical ministry will only be sustained where men have a firm and comprehensive grasp of biblical truth. In this comprehensive grasp of Scripture you must remain a student of Scripture, not a slave to theological systems. It is only a comprehensive grasp of such truth that can show men the true nature of biblical ministry, and sustain them in perseverance.

For example, the superficial understanding of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (isolating it from the broader context of Scripture) has blurred, unsettled, and confused the distinction between Clergy and laity. Clergy are increasingly unsure of their role if laity are supposedly equally competent in ministerial functions.

4. Centrality of Preaching

*The centrality of preaching is vital to sustain ministry. See 1 Tim 4:11-16; and 2 Tim 4:1-5; Acts 20: 26-32. Men must see the vital role of the Ordained ministry. The work of the pastoral ministry/oversight is to preach and protect the sheep, so that they retain their commitment and stay on the path to eternal life. This role and function is the specific responsibility of the minister. You are 'called' to be a 'watchman'. Therefore, your capacity to 'see' the dangers for the sheep will be intensified above those who do not have this 'Office'; you will 'see' what they cannot see (or see indistinctly), and you are to 'warn' them accordingly, so that they do not stray from the path of godly obedience. The way in which God has designed that they be preserved is by regular and faithful 'preaching' of God's Word. To surrender this vital responsibility is to fail in your responsibility to 'feed' Christ's sheep. The 'individualism' that drives much contemporary Christianity is highly dangerous. Scripture makes clear that the sheep are dependent upon the shepherd for their salvation. (1 Tim 4:16; Hebrews 13:17) Unless clergy 'see' the vital role they play in the scheme of salvation they will not persevere in the vigilance and determination of preaching. You are privileged, having been set aside by God to this **task**. You are privileged by **theological training** to be equipped for this task, and you are privileged by virtue of **time** to prepare sermons to keep you people in 'the way of eternal life'(AAPB). Your people do not have these specific privileges; guard them for the sake of yourself and your people.*

5. Consuming Fire of God's Judgement

In some brief comments on 1 Corinthians 15, Dr Don Carson's says, "this gospel saves us (15:2). A great deal of theology is already presupposed by these few words: in particular, what are we saved from .. This gospel save us – and always we must bear in mind exactly what it is that we are saved from." (For the Love of God Vol 2 -28th Feb) Part of our 'clerical crises' is a result of 'muting' the gospel. We try to pretend that the gospel message is 'attractive' ie., God loves you; Jesus died for you, but we are remiss in not speaking of the requirement of holiness and very reticent to speak of 'hell' for

fear of 'putting off' our intended clientele and placing a barrier to Church growth. Many current 'evangelical' tracts outlining the gospel have no reference to 'hell', and any reference to judgement is 'muted'. Does the Church no longer believe in 'hell'? We must be honest in answering that question. If the death of Jesus means anything, it certainly means that God was going to extraordinary lengths - the hideous death of His Son - to save us from a fate of indescribable loss and terror. The enormity of the One who died on Calvary shows us the enormity of what we are saved *from*! We ourselves, and the people to whom we preach, have a right to know what we are saved "from". If we don't know, or if we are unsure, we will soon tire of ministry and become disillusioned. We will 'hit a brick wall' and want to get out of ministry. It is the intense desire to save 'some' that sustains us in biblical ministry. *You must keep in mind what gospel ministry saves some from, for only some will be saved.*

6. Chasing Contemporary Trends

*This seems to be the current fashion of ministry with the aim of making the gospel more attractive to the outsider. It appears to be a treadmill from which the church cannot step off! Iain Murray reviewing the book, 'Reinventing Evangelicalism' by Rob Warner says, "in some illuminating pages, Warner addresses the 'dramatic rupture' in which contemporary worship' displaced what had been traditional ... Here was worship, 'reflecting the contemporary pop culture far more closely than the traditional church culture', and aimed at intoxicating believers 'to sing themselves into an alternative reality'. The new songs were not simple the old hymns differently presented; the priority is on emotion - 'Ecstatic experience is celebrated as the source of dependable assurance'." (p.24 BT Magazine March 2008) How do we respond to this obsession for the contemporary? Speaking of the Protestant Reformation, Nigel Atkinson says, "all the mainstream Reformers did not see themselves as inventing or creating a new Church. They believed that they were reforming the old Church and that, as a consequence, they stood in *continuity* (emphasis mine) and in direct contact with the church of the early Fathers. Novelty and innovation were furthest from their minds ... On the contrary, they perceived their task as restoring and renewing the one Church of Jesus Christ that had become overlain and encrusted with superstition and idolatry." p.62 Richard Hooker and the authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. The great danger of chasing contemporary trends, the search for novelty and innovation, is not only the loss of '*continuity*' for the Church, ie., worldly culture smothering biblical truth, but the 'search' for novelty also distracts clergy from their primary task. Both cause the Church to be more susceptible to theological 'error' and engender disillusionment for clergy in their calling.*

7. Contemplating History

*Don't be shy of 'small' numbers in your Church. The first question often asked about your ministry will often be, 'What's the size of your Church'? The Church Growth movement that has adversely affected so much of evangelical church strategy was possibly well intentioned, but its principles are theologically unsound. As a consequence it has led to *unrealistic and unbiblical expectations from its application of the principles of secular pragmatism to the growth of the Kingdom of God.**

*Jesus expressed His purpose in coming into the world when He said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Jesus spoke of the growth of His Church/Kingdom as the growth of a ‘mustard’ seed – the ‘smallest’ of all the seeds (Mark 4:31). Jesus also referred to his followers as a ‘little’ flock (Luke 12:32). While Jesus spoke of the ‘growth’ of His followers, it is clear from the Old Testament *history* (God’s ‘remnant’ – the ‘small’ part of Israel that were to be ‘saved’) and the *history* of the Church since Christ, that the ‘growth’ of which Jesus spoke will not be seen until the ‘End’ – when Jesus returns. Secular pragmatism does not sit well with biblical theology. The Church Growth movement (or any who think that you can secure rapid growth in the Church on the basis of the ‘right’ men with the ‘right’ methodology) has delivered great hardship to the Church and the clergy. It leads to those attitudes in the church that the Bible condemns; to odious ‘comparisons’ between both clergy and churches; it despises the fact that there are ‘different’ ministries; it views ‘reaping’ as ‘contemporaneous with ‘sowing’ the seed of the Gospel; it discourages and disheartens those who are seeking to be faithful to a biblical view of ministry. This preoccupation with church size cripples ministers and the work of ministry.*

Christ Conquers Culture

The word ‘culture’ is defined as, *“the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another.”*

Culture has become sacrosanct in our pluralist society. By that I mean it is inviolable; it cannot be violated, touched, criticized, held in contempt or compared unfavourably against differing cultures. One culture is not to be elevated above another or to be regarded as superior to another. This prevailing and politically correct view of culture is espoused as the only way that diverse cultures can co-exist. But such a view is both politically and theological naïve.

Cultures being, *“the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings”* are necessarily the expressions of moral behaviors endorsed and approved by such individuals. The study of human cultures reveals considerable variations in what is morally acceptable. Even with a ‘national’ culture, there are ‘sub-cultures’, which may express considerable variation from the national culture. How does the Christian evaluate the matter of human culture?

One of the incredible features of Christianity, a feature that is unique to its teaching, is the revelation of Christ’s *transcendence* over all human culture. While Christ was born within the Jewish culture, the teaching He proclaimed through the gospel, retained no Jewish elements. His teaching was transferable to any culture as the expression of God’s moral will to all mankind. To the degree in which human cultures submit to Christ’s teaching, that culture will embrace the moral values which are most conducive to the true freedom of its citizens. Not to do so, will *enslave* the culture (either to a greater or lesser degree) in the tyranny of human abuse.

To the degree in which the church reflects the diverse cultures of Australia, Christians of different cultures within the church, will need to examine if their respective culture is usurping the position of Christ. Each culture represented in our churches should set

aside any 'cultural' influence that inhibits the true growth and support of their respective church and stifles individual Christian maturity. Christianity gives men and women the freedom to be released from their respective cultural baggage. This principle is not without its application to the severe plight of Aboriginal people in Australia. Any hope for both the 'specific' and the 'broader' 'redemption' of Aboriginal culture must lie with Christ and His truth; it was Christ that 'redeemed' the mixed bag of English tribes; tribes with cultures steeped in paganism. Only Christ with His transcendence over culture can do the same for the Aboriginal race.

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