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Reformation & Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 6, Number 2 • Spring 1997

When my grandfather was ninety years old he told me the secret of plowing a straight furrow with a horse-drawn plow. With raspy voice and well-worn hands he explained, "To get a straight furrow you must first set your eyes on a tree on the far side of the field. Once your eyes are fixed on that distant object, you must then put your hand to the plow and advance across the field, all the time keeping that tree sighted directly between the horse's ears." He guaranteed that this method would not only enable the plowman to get across the field, but to plow a beautifully straight furrow in the process.

I don't think my grandfather really thought I would ever need to plow a field behind a horse. I was growing up in a different era. But he was teaching me an important lesson. God has called me not to be a farmer, but a pastor. God has put me in His "field," and I must plow for Him.

How can I as a pastor be sure to plow *straight* furrows? I am a "goal-oriented" person. I have goals for this ministry and goals for that ministry. Some are weekly goals and some are yearly. A few of my goals extend out for several years. As I look back over my shoulder at the furrow I've been plowing, I wonder how *straight* it is. It seems to zigzag here and there. I fear that I've set some of my goals only a short distance ahead of the plow. Upon reaching that point, I've reset my goal yet another short distance ahead, and so on as I've zigzagged my way across the field in which God has placed me. My problem is not that I'm lacking goals for my ministry, but that I've chosen goals that are too "close." I haven't set my eyes on a goal that is the whole way across the field.

The longer I've been a pastor, the more impressed I have been with the ministry of the apostle Paul. He not only worked hard in the field in which God placed him, but he did so with his eyes set the "whole way across the field." Paul

ministered with his eyes set on eternity. In Philippians 3:12-14 he wrote,

I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Such an *eternal* focus had an obvious effect on Paul's daily ministry. Having his eyes set on an eternal goal enabled him to "plow a straight furrow." This eternal focus *motivated* him to move forward with passion and perseverance.

What if I were to minister with my eyes set not only on one-year goals, five-year goals, or even ten-year goals? What if I were to pastor "my" church with my eyes set on *eternity*? *Why* should I be concerned with *pastoring in light of eternity*? As pastor, when I think about that day when we will all stand before the Lord, what concerns rise up in my mind and heart?

What Will Judgment Day Be Like for My Soul?

Like every Christian, I will stand before the awesome judgment seat of Christ on that Great Day. Paul included himself when he wrote in Romans 14:10 and 12, "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God," and "Each one of us shall give account of himself to God" (See also 2 Cor. 5:10 regarding the reality of each Christian appearing before the judgment seat of Christ.)

I will be treated the same as every other believer in that I must stand before Christ the Judge. But as a pastor, I will be treated differently. There will be a "qualitative" difference in the judgment of pastors (and other teachers) on that day

of accounting. In James 3:1 we read, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment." As I pastor in light of eternity, I must keep in mind that the teaching ministry I have means that I will be treated more strictly than a nonteacher in the church. The increased influence I have as a teacher brings with it increased responsibility. King Jesus will review with me how I have done in feeding His precious lambs (John 21:15-17). The sobering reality that on that Great Day I must give an account for my pastoral ministry should affect my preaching and teaching the Word of God to His blood-bought sheep. Paul's words to Timothy must become a guiding principle in my daily pastoring. "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (1Tim. 4:16).

Focusing on judgment day should bring not only sobriety and carefulness to my regular pastoring of Christ's sheep, but it should also promote a joyful anticipation. Jesus promised, "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done" (Rev. 22:12). As a shepherd of the flock of God I have the encouraging hope that "when the Chief Shepherd appears" I will "receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4).

It is easy to give way to the temptation to work for the smiles and applause of men. I can easily reach for goals that I believe will bring the accolades of my peers and the approval of my parishioners. Accomplishing certain ministry goals or leading our church into numerical growth become means of gaining the applause of men. Yet, I must choose. "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). I must lift my gaze from the short-term goals that bring the

praise of men to the eternal goal of receiving the “unfading crown of glory” from the hand of Him who wore the crown of thorns. For the sake of my eternal soul I must pastor Christ’s sheep with my eyes fixed on that Great Day when I shall stand before my Chief Shepherd to give an account and to hear His “well done.”

What Will Judgment Day Be Like for “My” Church?

It is tempting for the pastor to measure “success” at the wrong time and by the wrong standard. The pressure from books, seminars, fellow pastors, church members, and especially one’s own ego to “produce” and to produce “now” is nearly overwhelming on many pastors. There can be a nearly constant concern over “numbers”—number of programs, number of attenders, number of baptisms. Kent Hughes describes this pressure and its perils well when he writes,

... when the persistent motif is numbers—then the siren song becomes deeply sinister: growth in numbers, growth in giving, growth in staff, growth in programs—numbers, numbers, numbers! *Pragmatism* becomes the conductor. The audience inexorably becomes man rather than God. Subtle self-promotion becomes the driving force.¹

Hughes later confesses, “Instead of evaluating myself and the ministry from God’s point of view, I was using the world’s standard of quantitative analysis.”²

But God *will* evaluate our pastoral ministries. The day is coming when each pastor will have his work “tested” by God Himself. Paul wrote, “Each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work” (1 Cor. 3:13).

Rather than seeking to measure “success” in my ministry

now, I should await That Day. As a pastor, I must heed the warning of the apostle, to “not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes” (1 Cor. 4:5). When I am tempted to “pass judgment” on whether my ministry is successful or not, I should resist. It is not my place and it is not the right time. “Success” or “failure” will be ultimately evaluated on the Day of Judgment. The true value of my labors will be revealed at that awesome event. I must keep my eyes fixed “the whole way across the field.”

Rather than seeking to measure “success” in my ministry by how *I* feel about it or by what *other people* might say, I should look to the Judge Himself for evaluation. *He* will test my pastoral labors by the “fire” of His judgment. The Scriptures are clear. There are some men who will find their pastoral labors “burned up” because they have built their churches with trivial and temporary materials. If a pastor has yielded to the temptation to *look successful now* by building a church from “wood, hay and straw” (1 Cor. 3:12), he will stand in horror as He whose eyes “were like a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14) shows the true worthlessness of his trivial and temporary ministry as the fire of judgment burns it up (1 Cor. 3:15). As F. W. Robertson wrote, “And then, many a minister, who has prided himself on the number of his listeners, will be stripped of his vain-glory, if the characters, which he has produced be found wanting; if that which seems to be souls won for God turns out to be only hearts won for self.”³ But for the pastor who has been careful how he builds, That Day holds no undue fear. If the pastor has built his ministry with “gold, silver, and precious stones,” he will find his pastoral labors surviving the test of God’s holy fire. His work will remain, and he shall receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:14). No doubt it will be a surprisingly encouraging day for many humble pastors who haven’t received many accolades on this earth to see their diligent labors receive the approbation of the King Himself and to personally receive a

reward from His gracious hand.

If I am genuinely concerned for what That Day will be like for the church I pastor, then I will be careful how I build the church now. First, I must clearly acknowledge the *only* foundation for the church that has been laid—*Jesus Christ* (1 Cor. 3:11). I must constantly evaluate if the ministry I have as a pastor focuses on and relies on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Can my pastoral ministry be characterized as being *Christ-centered*, or have I yielded to the foolishness of being *man-centered*? Paul testified that he had been careful in his own ministry *not* to rely on the “wisdom” of this age *which is passing away* (1 Cor. 2:6), but instead “determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Do my preaching, teaching, counsel, and leadership focus on Christ? I must be careful to build on this foundation.

Am I building on this only sure foundation with “gold, silver and precious stones”? Am I building the church—the New Testament temple of God—with truths that are precious and permanent rather than with the trivial and temporary philosophies and methods of the wisdom of this passing age? The “wood, hay and straw” which originate not in the Word of God but in man’s head will quickly vanish.⁴ If I want the church I pastor to survive the fiery test of the Judge on that Great Day, then I must be careful to build the superstructure of the church with materials that are appropriate to the glorious foundation of Christ upon which it is built. To ignore this clear warning of an eschatological testing of my pastoral labors would be to my eternal loss. If I devote my life to building a church on the trivial and temporary philosophies of this age, I shall watch my work being swept away on that fearful day. Lenski asks the probing question, “Who wants to spend all his life in the ministry and then end in such a way?”⁵ Rather than asking, “How big is my ministry *now*?” I should be asking, “How much of my

ministry will survive the fire of God’s testing on that Great Day?” I must pastor in the light of eternity for the sake of the church.

What Will Judgment Day Be Like for My Lord?

The day of Christ’s return is pictured in the Bible as a day of greatly anticipated joy. John writes, “And I saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). He also reports hearing “the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, *for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready*” (Rev. 19:6-7). That glorious wedding day should bring joy, not only to the bride (the church), but to the Bridegroom (Jesus Christ). Do I as a pastor have any part in planning for that day to be a day of *joy* for the Bridegroom?

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2). Homer Kent helps us understand Paul’s analogy by explaining, “In the marriage custom of that day, the legal arrangements and transactions took place at the betrothal. At a later time when the wedding occurred, the primary activity involved taking the bride to the groom’s house and the celebration feast.”⁶ Paul pictures himself in this analogy as the “spiritual father” of the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 4:15). “As it is the father’s right to give his daughter in marriage to an approved bridegroom, so he, their spiritual father, had given them in betrothal to one husband, a Divine Husband.”⁷

As the apostle looked forward to the wedding day, he passionately wanted to keep his word of betrothal to the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. The reader of this passage can

discern the deep sense of commitment on the part of Paul in bringing joy to the Bridegroom's face in the presentation of the promised, pure bride. He writes of having a "godly jealousy" (2 Cor. 11:2). This passionate jealousy "is a form of holy outrage mingled with love."⁸ Paul not only had a love for the Corinthian church, but he also had a love for the Lord Jesus Christ. The church he had betrothed to the heavenly Bridegroom was now being wooed by illegitimate suitors. The church was being tempted to "be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Paul appealed passionately to the church to keep her vows in the betrothal, thus permitting him to keep his promises of delivering a pure bride on the great wedding day.

This burning zeal to present the church to Christ as a pure bride at that eschatological wedding day provides a good model for every pastor. Do we pastors have our eyes and our hearts set on that glorious day in which we will be able to look our glorious Bridegroom in the face and joyfully announce, "I present to You, Your bride!"? Such an eternally oriented motivation should compel us to take great care in protecting the purity of the churches we pastor. Are we doing our best to keep away illegitimate suitors who would lead our churches into spiritual adultery? Are we encouraging our churches to maintain that "simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ"? Such a commitment requires a "godly jealousy" that arises out of a deep desire to bring a smile to the Bridegroom's heavenly face on that glorious wedding day that awaits us.

A focus on that ultimate wedding day could motivate the pastor, not only to protect the purity of the church, but it also moves the pastor to work hard at *preparing* the church as a bride ready for her wedding day. In Colossians 1:28-29 Paul wrote, "And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, *that we may present every man complete in Christ*. And for *this* purpose I

labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works with me." As O'Brien points out, we can see this imagery of *presentation* of the bride to Christ at His parousia.⁹ Paul wanted every member of the church to be "complete" or "mature" on that wonderful wedding day.

The powerful desire to present to the Bridegroom a bride ready for Him propelled Paul to expend himself in ministry. The word used depicts working to the point of weariness. Why would the apostle spend himself so? For some temporal success? No. His eyes were on that eschatological wedding day and he deeply wanted the Bridegroom to be pleased with His prepared bride. Am I as a pastor focused on that coming wedding day? Am I bent on bringing a smile to the Bridegroom's face by presenting to Him a bride that is both pure and prepared? Am I expending myself, "striving according to His power, which mightily works with me"? Am I proclaiming Him" (Col. 1:28-29)? What will that day be like for *Him*? I want Him to smile on *His* wedding day.

Conclusion

Pastoring in light of eternity means that each day I will put my hand to the plow and fix my eyes on that goal that is the whole way across the field. I will fix my eyes on that awesomely glorious day when I will stand before Him. As I focus my gaze on that day, three crucial concerns arise in my mind and heart: (1) What will that day be like for my soul? (2) What will that day be like for "my" church? (3) What will that day be like for my Lord?

As I daily put my hand to the plow I want those questions to guide me and motivate me so that I can cut a straight course across the field, "so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain" (Phil. 2:16).

The praise of men in this life can be sweet, "but the praise from Christ will be sweetest of all, if He says: 'Well done,

good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."¹⁰ With that hope in my heart, may I daily *pastor in the light of eternity*.

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Endnotes

- 1 Kent and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1987), 29.
- 2 Hughes, 30.
- 3 F. W. Robertson, *Sermons on Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 44.
- 4 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 138.
- 5 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 145.
- 6 Homer Kent, *A Heart Opened Wide* (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1982), 162.
- 7 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 374.
- 8 Donald A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 84.
- 9 Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1982), 89.
- 10 A. T. Robertson, *The Glory of the Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 183.