

**MUSINGS OF A SELF-CONFESSED MAVERICK
ON MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES
OF
CRITICAL CONCERN
FOR
PASTORS AND CHURCHES**

by
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(This paper represents a talk presented in an abridged form to a meeting of Portland area CBA pastors held on February 13, 1986, at the time when I was chairman of the Division of Ministerial Studies at Western Theological Seminary. Snatches of this appear in my book, *Dispatches from the Front Lines: Reflections on the Glory and Grind of Pastoral Ministry*.)

When I was a young pastor back in West Virginia I became a friend of a local atheist. When he was drunk, which was often, he usually visited me. I didn't see him much when he was sober since he couldn't handle the reality therapy.

But I had a tendency to keep a look out for him. One dank, damp early spring day as I was passing from the church toward the parsonage up the street, I happened to glance over in the direction of Jim's apartment. I was alarmed at what I thought I saw. My eyes told me that there in his backyard was a human form covered with blood and dirt sprawled out on the cold, wet ground.

I raced over to check it out and found Jim smashed and gashed but feeling no pain. He had run his arm through a plate glass door and was caked with blood from a horrible wound. I called to a nearby neighbor to bring a sheet to wrap his arm. I wrestled him into the car and hustled him to the nearest hospital. Finally after a struggle I managed to get him inside to the emergency room where a couple of doctors and several medical attendants began to strap him down and clean up his arm for suturing.

I stood by near his head as the doctor worked on him. By now Jim had settled down to fate and mellowed out a bit. More sociable by now, Jim wondered if the doctor was acquainted with me. When the doctor admitted that he wasn't, Jim introduced me to the medical profession with a manner unprecedented for an atheist.

"Doc," he rejoined, "this is a good man. I'm a Baptist and he's my damn pastor!"

I must forewarn you that before I am through you may feel a certain ironic propriety in that. Doubtless some will not agree with some of the views I am about to share. In that case I will respect your right to differ with me. However, before you can responsibly dismiss my opinions, you need to be very sure that your contrary convictions are rooted in good reasons and not just prejudice and ungrounded sentiment. If I am wrong, at least be able to do more than say, "I disagree." Be able to explain why I am in error in my judgments. In that way the clash of ideas becomes useful in surfacing wisdom.

Even if you have no great quarrel with my sentiments, you may still have reservations about what you might perceive as negativity. That reaction always chagrins me, but it is not unexpected when one is being critical. Unfortunately some people have been so conditioned by modern marketing techniques that anything negative is viewed as a violation of the Eleventh Commandment. Before we buy into that doctrine as a form of Christian orthodoxy I would simply remind you that judged by the standards of the positive thinking cult, the prophets would never measure up. Biblical writers and characters (John the Baptist, for example, and James) at times virtually oozed with blistering negativity. The mission of a prophet, as someone once noted, is not only to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable. Anything less is a deformity.

Let me explain where I am coming from. It is my feeling that most people, including many pastors and laymen, just go along with whatever comes along. Most folk, however good hearted, sincere, and well intentioned, lack the biblical foundation and/or the critical turn of mind to challenge the validity of both tradition and innovation. Most people, however intelligent or educated, simply are too socially dependent to risk thinking for themselves. They can't handle the threat of isolation. It's no fun to stand alone.

Of the more independent types who are adventurous enough to fly in the face of conventional opinion, some just like to be different and others do so in the self-assurance of better light. That confidence may be due to residual arrogance or the courage of convictions born in the womb of God-given wisdom.

Whether my views have their roots in a perverse taste for being contrary or stem from a gift of wisdom is not for me to say. As for the other matters, I do confess a critical (although constructively intended) mindset. I am not by nature one inclined to accept at face value either the claims of tradition or of innovation. I also will admit that I am predisposed by philosophy, but not invariably so, to come down on the side of tradition rather than on the side of innovation. (It should be noted, however, that my taste for tradition often sets me against the status quo. If it seems like it should be the other way around, just remember that in our society, with its love of novelty, what is common represents a break with what has been historically. There is a tendency to confuse tradition with the status quo, but very often the status quo has more connection with the fads of the hour than with the roots of our past.)

The reason for my traditional bias is simple, philosophically speaking: whatever has withstood the judgment of time becomes traditional and for that reason, tradition, except in the area of technology, usually has a better right to life than innovation. In matters where the wisdom of the generations has sanctioned one option over other alternatives, I for one am uneasy about setting aside long-standing wisdom without a compelling reason. I applaud creativity, but only when it results in a new and better way of doing things, not merely a different way for the sake of being novel.

If philosophically I lean toward traditionalism (and against the status quo, which usually opts for fads and novelty), temperamentally I tend to be a maverick. Some people do not readily go along with whatever comes along in the way of fashion or ideas. They are not herd animals. In fact they distrust the herd. Anytime they see a sort of stampede in some irregular direction, it raises their suspicions. They operate on the assumption that herd instincts are not to be trusted, but tested.

Rightly or wrongly, I admit right up front that I tend to fit that description. Some people tend to look to the future for answers; others are more inclined to look to history to rediscover what has been lost. Some people want to discover a new world; others want to recover the best from the past. For whatever its worth in understanding my concerns and criticisms, I identify more with the latter personality in both instances.

Now that you better understand my frame of reference, perhaps you can be more sympathetic with what may seem negative. Like an old Western cowpoke, it is my business, as I see it, to ride herd, looking out for strays, and trying to do my part to keep the drive on the trail. With that mental metaphor in mind, the cowboy is always looking out for trouble, for danger, and trying to help the herd avoid disaster. So it is natural for him to look for trouble and to wear an air of concern. It's his job to find trouble before it finds the herd. Nobody wants to hear that the waterhole has been poisoned or that the herd is being rustled or that anthrax is spreading among the cattle. But better to find out in time than to discover the problem too late. Better to tell the truth when it can help than to hide it lest we disturb our world of make-believe. Better to be a realist who can confront the negative and deal with it than a positive thinker who deals in magic.

Deals in magic? Of course. He lives in a world of illusion where he imagines that he can sweep reality under the rug and, by pretending it isn't there, it will go away. They are superstitious about negative thinking (and, of course, that includes all critical talk and any mention of unpleasant realities). It's sort of like walking under a ladder or letting a black cat cross your path. Only bad things can happen. You might let reality reign. You activate the curse. The only way it can be neutralized is by mind control. What is, is what you think is.

Personally I don't subscribe to that kind of propaganda. It's just another piece of modern psychology that I failed to digest along the way. Somehow I don't feel deprived or any worse for it.

Now I have been invited to share with you as a former pastor and now a seminary professor training young men for the ministry, some issues of critical concern. By 'critical concern' I mean issues that, depending on which way we come down, will have a significant impact on the effectiveness of our spiritual leadership and on the health of our churches.

But first let me preface my concerns with a couple of observations which in my mind should greatly encourage us all, whatever our differences and deficits. In my travels I encounter so many different people and churches. Two impressions from these experiences constantly renew my enthusiasm for the ministry.

In the first place, I am constantly reassured of the awesome power of the Gospel. I am amazed again and again not only where it succeeds, but also how it succeeds in the face of every disadvantage imaginable! Since I have recently been in the Bay Area for conferences for several consecutive weekends, let me share a few instances of that power in churches there.

The wife of a staff member in a large church there where I have frequently ministered shared with me this inspiring story. In their local area a Zucchini Festival is held each year. The church as part of their outreach strategy secured a booth this past year. Some people would stop by and pick up free religious literature and that frequently would lead to conversation that would allow those manning the booth to share their faith.

One evening when this staff wife was on duty there, she happened to be teamed with one of those irregular people, who though ever so sincere and zealous for Christ, are nevertheless socially maladroit. The poor fellow could barely read the Four Spiritual Laws. How could he ever share them? If that wasn't bad enough, the situation was even worse. Herb (we'll call him) didn't have a lot of couth. To complicate matters even more, he had brought along his son, an undisciplined, interruptive little urchin with catsup and mustard dried on his dirty little face.

My friend was inwardly lamenting the impossibility of situation when she noticed what she described as "a successful looking, BMW type in a jogging suit" curiously eyeing the booth as if he wanted to stop but couldn't quite bring himself to do it. He passed by several times but always just far enough out of reach that my friend could not make the appropriate contact. His furtive interest was obvious enough that she was concerned to get to him before Herb noticed and "messed things up."

But alas, too late! Herb spotted the timid stranger and bolted from the booth with his Four Spiritual Laws. Inwardly his partner buried her head in her hands as Herb struck up a conversation. But to her surprise the executive-looking stranger didn't walk away! He actually seemed to be listening. Momentarily they sat down on a bench near the booth as Herb began sharing the tract. My friend winced as she eavesdropped. Listening to him was like watching a disaster. What a mismatch! To make matters worse, the little kid kept interrupting. My friend would try to intercept him, but Herb would excuse himself to attend the youngster.

As my friend retreated back inside the booth with an air of resignation, she noticed something totally unexpected as the man turned his head in the light. She saw tears trickling down his cheeks! The man later bowed his head there and invited Christ into his life. Who would have imagined that the Gospel could overcome such obstacles! And what an illustration of the quiet desperation of men! What an example of the irresistible force of the truth when God has prepared a heart for its reception.

I could multiply examples like that. In the midst of our problems and concerns we need to beware that we never become so myopic that we fail to appreciate the transforming power of the message we have been called to communicate. We have the answer to human needs. What we need to do is intensify our efforts and resurrect our boldness in proclaiming it. We need to expend less energy modifying our constitutions and expend more testifying to the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Second Advent of our Savior. We need to spend less time mending our fences and more time assaulting the fortresses of unbelief with the truth of the Gospel.

In another church near Santa Cruz I met a wealthy young housewife about three years ago. She shared with me how she had come to know Christ. How many times we have heard it before! She had everything money could buy and a few it couldn't, including a faithful, generous, loving, but unbelieving husband, but she was miserable. She had taken all the trips spoiled rich girls get on, but none brought satisfaction. She couldn't account for her emptiness in the midst of so much abundance.

Although an atheist, she got out of bed one night, unable to sleep, and in her despair, cried out, "Oh, God, if there is a God, I want to know You." Even atheists may have a Bible around the house and she was no exception. She dug it out and in the middle of the night began to read through Romans. She continued for several days reading the Bible, especially Romans. With no church teaching to fall back upon, with no previous background that would help, somehow the light of the Gospel broke through and convinced her of the truth. She was off and running for Christ before she

ever saw the inside of a Church. Nobody to disciple her! Nobody to support her! Yet the power of God sustained her and nourished her in the incubator of His Word! We assume so much responsibility as if everything depends on us and the piddling 'power' we possess! God does use us, but let us understand that we have been harnessed to the greatest power in this universe and that the Gospel can work its transforming wonders with or without our feeble contributions!

Secondly, I have been impressed, despite all the deficiencies and even disasters one can find in the churches, by the evidence of reality I see everywhere. The radically committed may not be the norm among church members, but neither are they all that rare.

Today that young housewife from Santa Cruz is doubly rich and one of the most radiant Christians you would ever meet. Recently she and her husband built a new home. When they put their former residence on the market, Coralee covenanted with the Lord that she would share Christ with everyone who became involved in the sale. Like so many of us who may have had to move in recent years, they had trouble finding a qualified buyer. They went through nine escrows before finalizing a sale. But in the meantime she followed through on her commitment to the Lord. As a result, she told me, seven of those people had received Christ.

I know another housewife in the Bay Area whose material circumstances are better than most. But her affluence has not mitigated her Christian compassion. There is a woman in her church who has a loathsome physical affliction. She has sores all over her body. They are ugly and runny. She is rather obese and I understand that under those folds of fat, the sores can really be gross. Despite that disease which repels most people, Susie reaches out to her, but with more than a friendly greeting and a handshake. More than once she has taken that lady to her expensive home, personally bathed her in her own facilities, and medically treated her sores. Besides that she has taken the woman on as a sort of social project, trying to help her function in a socially normal manner.

Anecdotes like these prove nothing, of course, unless they are representative of a larger pattern. And, of course, that is my point. I could duplicate them from my experience many times over and, if you think about it, you probably can do the same. We get so focused on the goats among the flock that sometimes we fail to appreciate how many real sheep God has purchased for his pasture. Hypocrites there are indeed! And by design the Church is an open door for the lame, the halt, the sick, and the blind. Many are called---and they show up and bring their problems with them. Too many times their problems only multiply our own. But let us never forget that out of the called, some are chosen---and they act like it too.

Now let me share with you some issues of critical concern, at least in my view. I see some tendencies in pastoral leaderships and church life that in my opinion are unhealthy. These are matters that I believe we ought to reassess. Because of wrong-headedness (or so it seems to me) about some of these things, far too many of our churches are in a terminal condition and many others are floundering.

Now I don't pretend that my critique covers the gamut of critical issues. Nor would I suggest that their order of discussion reflects their order of importance. These are simply some of the issues about which I personally have strong feelings and want to vent my soul. The limited scope of this talk forces me to limit my objectives. My purposes are simply 1) to surface some of these issues for those

who may not have considered them, 2) to reassure those who share these views that you are by no means alone and 3) to challenge the ways of those who may have drifted uncritically into unwise manners and mindsets. With respect to the latter objective, I just want to serve notice, in case you had assumed too much, that these issues are still in court.

Of course, my logic is not sufficiently amplified here to deal adequately with all your questions or objections. And naturally there will be some. But at least we can surface some of the issues and fuel the dialogue.

I. THE PLACE OF PREACHING

One dangerous fault in our ranks is a burgeoning tendency to disavow the centrality of preaching in the pastoral ministry and to debunk its influence.

That attitude made its rounds in liberal and social gospel circles in the 60's. About the time when they began to perceive their wrong-headedness about the influence of the pulpit, some conservatives started occupying the ground the liberals had vacated.

Evidence of this disillusionment with preaching leaks through in a number of ways. Sometimes evangelical men have vocalized their doubts openly. A few years ago at the seminary I took a survey of student attitudes. I was amazed how few seminarians viewed preaching as the central and most critical duty of the pastor. Of course actions speak louder than words. Men will invest their energies in those endeavors that they think will bring the best return on their labor. Assuming the validity of that premise, I see little evidence that the average evangelical pastor places a high priority on preaching.

If someone wants to argue that people are weary of preaching, let me remind you of two things. In the words of John Killinger, cited by Daniel Bauman, what most people are sick of is not preaching, but "non-preaching, of badly garbled, anachronistic, irrelevant drivel that has in so many places passed for preaching because there was no real preaching to measure it against." Even if it were true that people were fed up with preaching, preaching is still the best offence a pastor can muster against the world, the flesh, and the Devil. That is why Paul counsels Timothy to preach the Word and to preach it in season and out of season, i.e., when conditions were ripe for it and when the climate was not so receptive to it. Whatever is wrong with the Church at any given time is best remedied by a steady onslaught of biblical preaching.

If you are one of those who has lost your vision and keeps casting about for creative alternatives to preaching or is tempted to retreat into dead liturgy (art is the favorite refuge of a religion that has lost its heart), may I remind you of a couple of things:

1) The health of the Church historically has always followed the health of its preaching. As preaching goes, so goes the Church. Great preaching and great churches (not to be confused with "big" or mega-churches) go hand in hand. If you think you have seen churches thrive without a better than average preacher, you have only seen, as in the parable of the sower, the quick sprouting of a plant in shallow soil without roots. Its day is short. It is only a flash in the pan. It won't last. Like a sparkler it will flicker spasmodically for a brief time and then it will wither. The reason is no mystery: sound biblical preaching is the catalyst of all the essential ingredients of healthy church life. It fertilizes everything. You minimize it and soon that will neutralize you.

2) Experience suggests, in the words of Elton Trueblood, that "the men who derogate preaching are, for the most part, precisely those who cannot do it well." There comes a point when a man must ask himself whether his deficit is by default or by design. If by default, then the problem is infidelity rather than its invalidity. And if by design, the problem is not that preaching is out of step, but the preacher is out of place.

II. PROFESSIONALISM IN THE MINISTRY

In conjunction with that issue is another that greatly concerns me, namely, professionalism in the ministry. By "professionalism" I mean two things:

1) the growing habit of viewing the pastoral office as a matter of personal choice rather than divine calling; and

2) a tendency to trust modern management and church growth techniques for success rather than depending upon the wisdom and promises of God.

Let me amplify upon these two deleterious phenomena.

First, the matter of calling. In the early sixties, I suppose, when the Church rediscovered the doctrine of spiritual gifts, the emphasis on individual giftedness and the interdependence of the Body was a needed corrective. But like most neglected truths, the correction became an over-correction to the point that people began to teach, against the whole analogy of revelational history, that *nobody* was "called" to special service, but that everybody was gifted for ministry.

Now the half-truth of that position was very deceptive, as half truths tend to be. For the last proposition was certainly biblical, but that truth did not exclude or negate the fact that among those gifted people are some whom God has separated from all secular enterprise and commissioned to serve the Church in behalf of the Gospel.

Paul speaks of such a commission in 1 Cor. 9. He refers to Timothy's commission in both 1 and 2 Timothy "through the laying on his and the elders' hands," a reference to a special ordination. In fact, as far back as you care to go in Biblical revelation one can see a pattern of divine selectivity in the choosing of not only the heirs of promise, but also in various paths of service all the way from prophets, priests, kings, and even disciples from among disciples. There is no biblical reason why God should change that obvious perennial pattern. And there is no historical reason to think that He has. From ancient times His servants have acknowledged the call of God upon their lives. We ought to think twice about discarding a doctrine with so much biblical precedent and supported by so many historical testimonials to such an enlistment.

But why do I make such a fuss over it? There are two reasons:

1) Once a man gets it in his head that he has as much right to sell shoes as to preach the Word, he most likely will wind up selling shoes. A sense of calling is the tie that binds us to the mast when the howling storms of heartbreak and opposition break over the bow of our ministry.

2) This phenomenon is creating a catch-22 situation. As ungifted and un-commissioned men (and now women) fill the ranks of the pastoral ministry, that ministry is degraded in the eyes of the churches. The more it is debased, the less careful churches become about whom it ordains. Incompetence breeds contempt and contempt breeds more incompetence. Men who are in the pastoral ministry by choice are more likely to encourage others to follow suit. Hence it is no surprise that our seminaries are overrun with low voltage, wimpy, limp-wristed, hyper-relational other off-brand types who don't have enough gifting in the Word to stir soup.

Next, let me expand upon my distaste for the modern management syndrome:

Please understand that I am not indicting sophisticated management. The church is an organization as well as an organism. Organizations have to be managed or supervised. Things have to be done decently and in order. Jesus, if you will recall, organized the feeding of the 5000. The apostles organized the distribution for the needy. Management in itself is not a dirty word any more than diligence is.

A Christian, for example, ought to exercise diligence in supplementing his faith with its attendant virtues. But he would be wrong to trust in diligence. In the same way, it is wrong to trust in human management skills to make the work of God fly. It is wrong to put our eggs in a basket of church growth techniques that have been proven successful in growing churches---evidently whether they are biblical or not!

Whatever can grow apart from the work of God is not the work of God. Any seed that can flourish apart from His blessing is not of His planting. Why is it so hard to see that? And if we do see that, by what logic do we persist in pinning our hopes on 'smart' strategies that presumably will work whether God works or not?

It seems to me that the hidden agenda behind this mentality is a different model of success, namely, institutional expansion rather than personal discipleship. The minister becomes a manager whose agenda is the imitation of a corporation rather than a shepherd whose agenda is the imitation of Christ. Managers are satisfied with a lot less than ministers. A shepherd is never content with any strategy that fails to produce spiritual growth. An executive is satisfied merely with church growth.

III. THE PROLIFERATION OF CHEAP GRACE.

A pastor from a large church in California told me recently this story. A pastor there was exposed as a flagrant adulterer. The following Sunday he made a tearful confession. Who knows whether tears of humiliation or of contrition. Afterward he tendered his resignation. The official board asked the congregation to stay while it convened in executive session to consider the offer of resignation.

Shortly, as I understood it, the Board returned to the auditorium and announced its verdict. The pastor had made a terrible mistake, but then we all are sinners. Whoever has not sinned, let him cast the first stone, was their stance. Impressed by the appearance of genuine repentance, the Board not only refused to sack the errant minister, but as a token of their confidence in him they agreed to give him a raise! Who says crime doesn't pay!

Thankfully most people who hear that story still blanch.

That example may be a bit extreme, but similar things are more and more common. Obviously the Scripture admonishes us to forgive and to restore to health those who repent of their sins. But more and more a very fundamental distinction is being blurred. That is the difference between restoration to fellowship and restoration to office. The former does not necessarily entail the latter.

The violation of a sacred trust is a very serious matter. A man who will betray a trust, particularly a sacred trust, is most untrustworthy of all. May I remind you that just about all the qualifications for eldership in Scripture function as tests of credibility or trustworthiness. Faithfulness is of the essence of qualifications for Christian leadership.

Any man who scandalizes his office has an enormous credibility problem. To restore such a man to office before there is a sound basis for trust is not grace, but gullibility and irresponsibility. It shows not the spirit of Christ, but contempt for the ministry when any but men of the highest integrity are allowed to inhabit that office. The incidence of recidivism among these kinds of offenders is too great for the risk. There is too much at stake for the Church to risk its witness on retreads whose rubber has already failed its road test.

Not only is there a tendency to blur the difference between restoration to fellowship and restoration to leadership, but there is also the failure to understand the function of church discipline. Some fail to comprehend that the purpose of church discipline is not simply to correct the offender, but also to deter imitators. Discipline is not only for healing the offenders, but also intended to inhibit repeaters. And only if the discipline is equal to the enormity of the sin will discipline serve its objectives. In my opinion, some of our lenience reflects not so much on the magnitude of our mercy, but on our minimizing of sin, of sacred office and the holiness of God.

Before you start writing me off as a self-righteous Pharisee and questioning the integrity of my Christian spirit, may I remind you that my stance has the backing of evangelical tradition. Until lately evangelicals have never had much patience with ministerial miscreants. Personally I am always a little suspicious of 'wisdom' recently arrived without the sanction of history. The venerable Spurgeon obviously would take my part in this debate:

"The highest moral character must be sedulously maintained. Many are disqualified for office in the church who are well enough simple members. I hold very stern opinions with regard to Christian men who have fallen into gross sin; I rejoice that they may be truly converted, and may be with mingled hope and caution received into the church; but I question, gravely question whether a man who has grossly sinned should be very readily restored to the pulpit [emphasis mine]." ("Lectures to My Students", pp. 13-14)

Spurgeon of course was not an apostle. He could be wrong. But frankly I think down through the ages most of the Church would defer to his judgment in this matter. And action in the name of grace that has the effect of minimizing the imperative of personal holiness is "cheap grace."