



## A must for a faithful pastor

Pastors have a dizzying array of responsibilities. But for most of them, it comes down to two basic things: preaching and teaching. Every week, ministers are teaching their flocks through catechism, visits, and other means. Each Sunday, ministers preach and teach the Word of God from the pulpit. Within that task of preaching and teaching, we find a number of subsets. For instance, in 2 Timothy 4:2 we read, *“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”*

Despite this, it seems that when it comes to the ministry of the Word, some believers have somewhat of a different idea. Some believe that pastors, in their preaching and teaching, must only be positive. Ministers should speak the bare minimum (if that) about sin, God’s holiness and wrath, and hell. They ought only to speak on positive themes of grace, hope, redemption, and the like.

People with such thinking are correct insofar as the Christian minister must speak on these positive things – for the Word of God itself demands it. Woe to the minister who does not make it his aim to have his congregation impressed with the wonders of our God and his Son Jesus Christ. But these people are wrong in saying that the faithful pastor will restrict himself to speaking on the positive elements of the Christian faith. In fact, a faithful pastor must sometimes speak words that challenge or unsettle us. Here too, the Word of God demands this from the minister. Like Paul, ministers today have to preach the *“whole counsel of God”* (Acts 20:27).

### **False teachers**

Let’s see how this works with one particular area of concern: false teachers. By *“false teachers”* we mean particularly those in broader Christian circles who are teaching things patently false, things that militate against the Word of God and the doctrine derived thereof in the confessions.

There are those in our churches who say that pastors must not identify false teachers by name. They say that exposing false teachings and false teachers has no place in our worship services. The preaching should just stick to the Word of God and then especially to the positive parts.

What do we do with this? One’s first inclination as a minister is to remember the promises that were made at his ordination and installation. Every minister in our churches has signed a Form of Subscription. Though this form may differ to a small degree from one church to the next, it basically boils down to the same thing. Our pastors have promised that they will diligently teach and defend the truth found in the confessions of the church. But they go even further when they promise to not only reject all errors but to do *everything in their power* to oppose, refute, and prevent such errors. Therefore, when a minister mentions a certain false teaching from the pulpit and shows how it is in error and warns the congregation about it, he is simply keeping the promise he made when he became a minister of that church.

Of course, the question can be raised whether this is a legitimate promise to make. Does it fit with what the Scriptures teach about the office of a minister? Let’s survey some passages that speak about ministers and false teaching.

### **What does the Bible say?**

The most obvious place to start is in the so-called pastoral epistles. In 1 Timothy 1, Paul explicitly mentions two false teachers named Hymenaeus and Alexander. These men taught that the general resurrection was already past. This was regarded as a serious false teaching and Paul

warned Timothy about these men. In 1 Timothy 4, Paul speaks more about false teachers in general. In verse 6, he tells Timothy to instruct the believers about these false teachings. In other words, as a faithful pastor Timothy had to preach and teach the truth, but he also had to expose falsehood.

In 2 Timothy 2, Hymenaeus reappears with Philetus as those *“who have strayed concerning the truth.”* In the following chapter, Paul describes again what false teachers will look like. Among other things they have a form of godliness, but deny its power (3:5). Then, in chapter 4, Paul instructs Timothy to be diligent in preaching – that includes convincing, rebuking, and exhorting. Why do these things have to be done? Because there will come those who cannot *“endure sound doctrine.”* These false teachers will *“turn their ears away from the truth and be turned aside to fables”* (4:3-4). The task of convincing, rebuking, and exhorting is therefore connected with exposing and answering false teachers and protecting God’s people from them.

In Titus, we find Paul telling the Cretan minister/missionary that an overseer has to be able, through sound doctrine, to be able to exhort and convict those who oppose it (1:9). Why? Because, says Paul, there are many false teachers, especially those who teach that a good Christian needs to be circumcised. The elders of the Cretan churches had to be men who could defend the truth and expose error for what it is.

Outside of the pastoral epistles, we have Romans 16:17-18, which teaches believers then and now to take note of those who cause divisions with their false teachings. Believers are called to take note of the false teachers and avoid them! But how can we do that if those who are leaders in the church don’t identify the false teachings and those promoting them?

Finally, we ought to take note of the ministry of the Lord Jesus Himself. In passages such as Matthew 16:5-12, our Saviour warned God’s people about the scribes and Pharisees. In Revelation 2:20-23, Christ warned the church at Thyatira about a specific false teacher, a woman who had the nickname of Jezebel. If our Lord exposed false teachers, and if ministers are ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), then it follows that these ministers will follow in his footsteps and do the same. Moreover, as noted above, this was done by the apostles and they in turn instructed the first generation of pastors to do the same.

The Scriptures are clear that ministers of the gospel are to publicly expose and refute error. To be sure, the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word does not centre on this. For all the passages mentioned above, we could probably line up several times more to show that the preaching of the good news of Christ is to be central. But it is exactly because the good news of Christ is so valuable and so treasured that we need to be sensitive and aware of false teaching and false teachers who might endanger that good news. A good shepherd of the flock (1 Peter 5:2) is naturally going to warn the flock when they are in danger! The man who would not do this is a poor shepherd who does not really love the sheep. As a good shepherd, Paul warned the church at Ephesus that wolves would come in after his departure and that is why he didn’t stop warning them “night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31). All of this biblical data is why the Form for Ordination, in line with the Form for Subscription, mentions this as a duty of the minister: *“He shall expose all errors and heresies as unfruitful works of darkness...”*

## **Okay, but how?**

So, let’s say that we grant the point that faithful pastors are, for the benefit of the whole congregation, to publicly identify, expose, and refute false teachings and teachers. That then brings us to the more practical matter of how. The first thing to consider is the appropriate time. Since we are in the area of doctrine (teaching), it is most natural to deal with false teachings in the catechism preaching. The nature of confessions also lends itself to this. One of the reasons why we have confessions is to defend and promote the truth of Scripture. The word *“defence”* implies false teachings which would attack the truth and so, in catechism preaching, one can expect a minister, from time to time, to expose and refute teachings that militate against what we confess. Catechism preaching is the most natural place to do this, but it may happen that a given Scripture text also naturally leads the preacher to expose and refute an existing error.

That brings us to the question of identifying false teachers and teachings that are threatening or attacking the truth of God's Word. There are literally thousands of false teachers in the world today, but not all of them are making inroads into the Canadian Reformed churches. Some errors are obviously errors, but others are subtler and ensnare people more easily. Pastors need to be aware of whom their sheep are getting their food from and whether that food is nourishing or whether it is poison. On the other hand, we also need to be aware that, historically speaking, Satan and his minions are unoriginal. Doctrinal errors and false teachings of the past creep up time and again. Contemplative spirituality, for instance, is simply regurgitated gnosticism or, at best, incipient gnosticism. Open theism is basically socinianism with another name. And so we could go on. The point is there is also value in mentioning errors of the past because more than likely these errors will reappear.

Finally, there is the perennial question of Matthew 18. Are ministers required to follow the route of Matthew 18 when dealing with false teachers? Do we first have to speak face to face with these false teachers before we can expose and refute them publicly? First, we should note that Matthew 18 does not apply to public matters. Most of us instinctively recognize that when we write a letter to the editor about some error we spot in an article. Moreover, we're speaking here about false *teachers*. These are men and women who have written their books and articles and staked their ground. These are not weaker brothers and sisters who simply do not know better, who write and teach out of their ignorance and who are humbly waiting for us to instruct them in the truth. The congregation needs to be warned about false teachers and there is nothing that requires ministers to first address these men and women personally in the manner of Matthew 18. Besides, if that were the case, we would never be able to speak about Arius and his false teachings on the Trinity, since Arius is long dead.

### **A time to bark**

Somewhere John Calvin is quoted as saying, *"A dog barks when his master is attacked. I would be a coward if I saw that God's truth is attacked and yet would remain silent."* Calvin was right. We could take it further and say that not only would such a pastor be a coward, he would also be a rotten shepherd who does not really love the sheep. To protect God's honour *and* to protect the sheep, a faithful pastor has to speak up when God's truth is attacked. Like Christ and the Apostle Paul, he has to name names and clearly indicate the errors that threaten. This is one way that the Lord Jesus will use to protect and advance the spiritual health of our churches.

To conclude, let me relate an anecdote. When I was a young(er) man, I was an avid fan of Norman Vincent Peale. In fact, at that time I was the typist for the bulletin of our local churches and, space permitting, I would often put quotes from Peale in the bulletin (please forgive me!). I believed Peale to be an orthodox Christian. That all changed when I took a trip to the Fraser Valley and sat under the preaching of a certain minister. As he was preaching, he mentioned a false teacher by the name of Norman Vincent Peale and he showed how Peale contradicts what we believe and confess. It unsettled me and shook me up, but it changed my mind and brought me back. I thank God for that faithful pastor. Today, I'm very grateful to serve alongside him in the same church. Let's pray that we continue to have pastors who faithfully carry out *all* the tasks that God gives them, including the exposing and refuting of errors and heresies.

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