



The pastor as attorney

It is to be feared that many in our day do not have a clear understanding of what a pastor-teacher (commonly known as a pastor or a minister) does or is supposed to do with his time. This is due to a whole host of factors, including a lack of knowledge of the Scriptures, the confusing array of examples set by those who are pastor-teachers, and social forces that have been at work for many years.

An illustration

It is not our purpose here to present the biblical evidence for a particular view. Rather, assuming the general correctness of the view that the pastor-teacher is to devote himself to study, preaching and teaching, we wish to set before the reader an analogy in hope of enabling him to understand the logic and the reasonableness of this view. And the analogy is that of the Trial Attorney.

The work of the attorney involves his functioning well in two arenas: private and public. In his private work, the attorney meets with clients, takes depositions, confers with judges, etc. In his public work, he argues his case in court. But in order for the attorney to function well in these two arenas, he must spend the bulk of his time engaging in two other activities:

1. research, study, writing and reflection which relate directly and obviously to his functioning in the private and public arenas, and
2. research, study, writing and reflection that have more to do with keeping himself abreast of developments in the law, i.e. his own continuing education.

People understand that, in order for the attorney to be effective and useful where it matters most (i.e. when he is interacting with people), he must be devoted to books, journals and ongoing interaction with the professional community. He needs to spend the bulk of his time there and not with people. In fact, were it to become known that a particular attorney was a great 'people person' because he spent 80-90% of his time with people, it could probably be concluded that he cannot be very competent in doing the actual work of an attorney, because he is not taking adequate time to prepare. If he is to size up skillfully the needs of his clients and argue their cases persuasively before judges and jurors, he needs to be a man of wide and ongoing learning, a man who is reputed to have his 'nose stuck in a book', a man more at home in the law library than, say, on the golf course.

The minister and his time

It is our contention that this basic breakdown of responsibilities provides a helpful model to understand the work of a pastor-teacher in the church of Jesus Christ. There can be no gainsaying the fact that, apart from his time spent pleading before the throne of grace, the most important time that a pastor-teacher spends is with people. Whether it is instructing people in the things of God in private and helping them to resolve questions of conscience (analogous to the attorney's client work), or proclaiming the whole counsel of God before the assembly (analogous to the attorney's work in court), this is where he makes a difference. This is the most important dimension of his work. But in order for him to be effective and useful in the pulpit and elsewhere, he must spend the bulk of his time engaging in thorough and adequate preparation.

This preparation consists of the study, research, examination, discussion and reflection necessary to proclaim biblical truth in the week or month ahead. But it also consists of the ongoing saturation of one's mind with the deep things of God, even when the pastor-teacher may not know how what

he is learning will enhance his ministry. He may devote a week to the reading of Jonathan Edwards, or two days to the intensive study of biblical church government, or an afternoon and evening to a perusal of the history of the Great Awakening. He may have no intention of incorporating his findings in the lessons of the next Lord's Day. Yet he presses on in his studies, unyielding to the tyranny of secondary matters, deaf to the cries of those who insist he ought not to be so 'bookish' and thereby thoroughly equips himself, in various and sundry ways, to be a competent minister of the Word.

In fact, between the time it takes for him to prepare for his interaction with people in a given week and the time spent on ongoing education, the pastor-teacher may well find that the bulk of his time is entirely taken up. This is as it should be. And were a particular pastor-teacher to become known as a great 'people person' on the grounds that he spends the bulk of his time with people, it could probably be concluded, his popularity notwithstanding, that his lack of preparation has rendered him incompetent to function as a faithful steward of the mysteries of God. He may be well liked. He may well fit the culture's understanding of a pastor and his work. But he probably cannot be faithful in fulfilling the task to which he has been called and for which he has been equipped: to proclaim the whole counsel of God.

None of the above is intended to deny that the pastor-teacher should, in fact, be a 'people person'. This is true not only of the manner in which he communicates the Word of God, but also of his work as an elder and as a shepherd, i.e. those responsibilities which he shares with the other elders. Indeed, we would go so far as to say that the pastor-teacher who does not cultivate good relationships with people will not be very effective in any of the work he does. But, these things understood, it needs to be clearly seen that the reason why the pastor-teacher is in the church's employ is so that he may proclaim the Word of God. And while this is most conspicuously a matter of practice (i.e. the actual doing of it), it is also most definitely a matter of preparation. Our contention is that, if the pastor-teacher is to do his job well, the major part of his time should be spent in preparation, however that is to be defined in any particular case.

It is a great temptation for the pastor-teacher to immerse himself in a whole host of administrative and social activities. In so doing he may even become regarded as 'omni-competent' and as having 'a great way' with people. He will certainly avoid the accusation of being 'bookish' or the like. But sadly, he will in all likelihood fail to feed the flock, fail to demonstrate himself to be a well-approved workman who has no need to be ashamed and so fail to excel in the one thing that he is uniquely called and qualified to do.

It would be hoped that, as God's people reflect on these things, they will come to value the true work of the gospel minister and that they will not grudge him the time he needs in his study to do it properly.

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