



Outsourcing our Job Description? A Plea to Fellow Ministers

"Given all the demands on my time every day, it's really hard to invest a lot of hours in preparing my sermons."

I hear this sentiment a lot out there these days. It's expressed in a series of clips for a new service. The ad invites pastors to take advantage of an energetic team of researchers who help do a lot of the legwork for sermon-writing. Explaining *"what we do,"* the site offers the following services: "(1) *Research Briefs* (stories, statistics, quotes, connections to culture, theological insights, exegetical analysis of Scripture)"; (2) book summaries: *"content you need to know but don't have time to read"*; (3) book projects, including *"research, editing, and collaboration."*

I understand the challenge. There are many demands on a pastor's time – even distractions that are part of the legitimate calling of a minister. However, are we turning to a Wikipedia-style of ministry? Some pastors in recent years – even in our own circles – have been brought up on charges of "borrowing" sermons verbatim from well-known preachers. I suppose this new service isn't as bad as outright plagiarism. But what does all of this mean for the ministry? I've been asking that question as I run into aspiring pastors who don't think they need a seminary education. After all, there are so many on-line resources. Apparently, we're way beyond that now.

It's not just that people think they can teach themselves the languages, the art of biblical interpretation and biblical, systematic, and historical theology, or the practical insights from God's Word in how to preach and apply God's Word. You can even refer to the Hebrew and Greek of a passage without ever having actually studied the languages. Ironically, we teach students to study a passage in the original languages without showing their work in the sermon; increasingly, ignorance is being passed off as skill. It's one thing to Google-search a figure or date; quite another thing to write a doctoral dissertation as a web-surfer. You wouldn't go under the knife of a surgeon who learned medicine from You-tube clips. Why would you entrust your knowledge of God and his truth from someone who didn't actually know how to *"rightly handle the Word of truth"* for himself?

The deeper question is this: What has become of the pastoral office when many who hold it seem to think that they are too busy to study, pray, read, and deepen their own understanding of God's Word so that they have more to dish out?

Do we really believe, as the apostles and the reformers did, that the church is the *creatura verbi* – "creation of the Word"? That faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ as it is proclaimed by those who are sent? That the heart of sanctification is the renewing of the mind by the Word?

Pastors would never tell their congregations to outsource their discipleship to others: to pay someone else to pray, read the Bible, and witness for them. Why do some think that it's fine for them to do this, especially when – unlike their parishioners – pastors are called to devote their full time to this work?

The tragedy is that pastors are often overwhelmed even by important things that are nevertheless subordinate to their ministry of the Word and the sacraments. Too often, elders are taken from the ranks of leaders in business, industry, and other professions, even if they lack the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3. Not surprisingly, the church is run like a corporation, with the pastor as the CEO. Or in other contexts, the pastor is the young and independent entrepreneur more like Mark Zuckerberg

than St. Timothy. He has to keep reinventing himself and his ministry and this requires enormous energy. But what really matters?

Amid these obvious extremes there are the faithful pastors who are wearied by parts of their job description that are in fact mentioned in Scripture. They may have godly elders who rule well and generous deacons who look out for the temporal needs of the sheep. Yet even with such blessings it's difficult to avoid the constant interruptions.

What are those "other things" that have pastors so busy? Are those other things as explicitly mentioned in the job description laid out by Christ and his apostles? Or are we – even in "gospel-centered" and "Bible-believing" circles – coming to recast the office in terms more aligned to the managerial, entrepreneurial, or therapeutic styles of leadership that our culture prizes? A minister friend recently quipped, "The most embarrassing question you can ask a group of pastors in our circles today is, 'What's the latest book you've read?'"

Last week, after explaining my symptoms, I asked my doctor about a prescription that I saw advertized. The ad sold me. Sounded like my symptoms and promised to solve them (with the appropriate qualifications at the tail end). My doctor said he had prescribed that very medication many times, but after reading a ground-breaking report he was taking all of his patients off of it. I'm glad he keeps reading.

Imagine your pastor exhorting the congregation next week to stop coming to church and simply visit websites to become "self-feeders"? Well, perhaps that's a bad illustration, since it's actually happening today.

It takes a long time to become a craftsman, a skilled expert, and a wise steward of natural gifts. If pastors expect Christ's sheep to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Savior Jesus Christ," then are they exempt from first-hand study? Who are these people writing up the quotes, cultural connections, and even theological points and exegesis? Are they seminary-trained? According to the site I saw, yes – they have Master of Divinity degrees or more. If so, then why not attend their church instead of the one where the heavy-lifting is farmed out?

Even after seminary, habits of lifelong study and prayer are essential. Pastors are spiritual craftsmen, not the equivalent of busy guys who buy a Home Depot book to construct their patio. Even the best seminary education can merely equip ministers with tools that they can use and develop in their own ongoing study.

We typically invest our time in things that matter to us, things that we're called to. And we typically appreciate – and patronize – those specialists who focus on the quality of their work. Comedians and other entertainers might have other people write their material. But if we farm out our sermons, aren't we assuming with the world that there is some other story that's more ultimate than the new creation that God is summoning into being by his Word and Spirit?

Isn't there something a little contradictory about shepherds touting the virtues of truth, spiritual maturity, and knowing God through his Word while they outsource their own study? If a pastor is too busy to mine Scripture to distribute Christ's treasures to his people each week, what does that say about the priority of "*the ministry of the Word and prayer*" that Peter identified as the pastor's primary job description (Acts 6:4)? That's why deacons were appointed: to take care of the temporal needs of Christ's flock.

Paul was absorbed in his calling, which he defined with laser-sharp focus:

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 3:7-10

What a calling!

The prophets actually served those who now bring the good news, *“in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look”* (1 Pet 1:12).

Those who labor in preaching and teaching are especially to be honored (1 Tim 5:17), though they are also held especially accountable (Jas 3:1). *“Until I come,”* Paul counsels young Timothy, *“devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the presbytery laid their hands on you”* (1 Tim 4:14). Don’t get entangled in *“civilian pursuits,”* he exhorts. Teach God’s Word and then *“entrust (it) to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”* (2 Tim 2:1-4). *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth”* (v 15).

He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep’ ... And after saying this he said to him, ‘Follow me”’ (Jn 21:15-19).

Bottom line: *“I charge you in the presence of God and of Jesus Christ, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching ... Do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry”* (2 Tim 4:1-2, 5).

To follow the Good Shepherd as his emissaries is to feed his sheep. It’s a calling not to be taken up lightly. If we’re going to take it up, we need to prepare for it. And then we need to keep ourselves in his Word and in whatever resources that can help us deepen our own wisdom rather than outsource it to others. Great numbers of pastors out there are fulfilling this calling “in season and out of season” today. Nevertheless, there is a troubling proliferation of preachers who are not so much lazy as distracted by expectations either their own or those of others – that turn the pastor’s study into an office, building their own ministry rather than serving Christ’s. Here, as always, we all need to be reminded that Christ is the only head of his church. We didn’t write the job description and he knows best what his people – and we ourselves – need most.

In his last reported conversation on earth with Peter, Jesus asked solemnly, “‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ He said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ He said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’

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