

## Perennial Pastoral Pitfalls

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One of the by-products of this journal is the not infrequent request for advice that comes to me from younger pastors. It is for this reason that I write this article. Here I want to indicate a few of the mistakes that young pastors need to avoid.

(1) The first is *the danger of trying to bring into operation the exercise of faithful church discipline single-handedly*. Now it is certainly true—as the great Belgic Confession reminds us—that discipline is one of the three predominant marks of a true Church. It is also true that in far too many of our American churches *faithful* discipline has been neglected. This is due, in part, to one of the main features of what could well be called “the American national character.” It is the exaggerated individualism which—even in the Christian Church—verges on autonomy. By this I mean the mental attitude which says “I am the final authority in my life, and no one is going to tell me what I have to do.” This is, of course, the exact antithesis of the fourth membership vow which has been taken by all communicant members of the OPC. But it is also due, in part, to the reluctance on the part of our ruling elders to do what ought to be done. In most congregations there is at least an outward semblance of peace. And yet, because people are easily upset and offended, elders are often reluctant to “face the music.” Indeed, it is my view that this is a weakness of major proportions in too many of our churches.

It is not uncommon for elders to argue that things may get better by themselves if we just give them time! But I cannot reconcile this with the words of our Lord (see Matthew 5:23,24; and 18:15-20), and neither can some of my younger brethren who have recently entered the ministry. Burning in their hearts is a zeal for the honor of the Lord of the Church and the Church of the Lord. And so—out of a deep sense of responsibility to correct these things—they often make a tragic mistake. The mistake is that they go forth on their own to deal with some of the discipline problems by way of admonition and rebuke. The result often is that the elders who should have been greatly upset because of the disobedience of certain people under their oversight, suddenly become alarmed at the way the new pastor is upsetting people. And before long it comes to pass that in order to restore a semblance of peace in the church the elders come to reluctantly agree that the young pastor has to be sacrificed.

We must not overlook the fact that when this happens—when a young pastor

who is zealous for truth and righteousness is sacrificed in this way—the elders are certainly culpable. But my purpose here is to issue the warning that may help a young pastor to avoid needlessly exposing himself to this danger. And the way to do this is to recognize—and act on the basis of the fact—that the exercise of church discipline is not a “one man” affair. My advice to young pastors is therefore this: (A) Do not even try to *begin* dealing with serious disciplinary needs in your new charge *on your own*. You may have to “grin and bear it” for a time while you get your Session in order. But it is absolutely essential for an effective exercise of discipline that Session members agree on what they are required to do, and how they are to go about doing it. (B) When you do go forth to deal with neglected disciplinary problems *always go with a brother elder*. It may even be better—and often *is* better—if two ruling elders go and say what has to be said. It does not take a congregation very long to learn the difference between a Session that is like a Ping-Pong ball—bouncing back and forth between loyalty to you and sympathy for touchy church members—and a Session that has firm principles and a united testimony against sinful behavior. (C) A third principle that you will need to faithfully follow is this: *get your Session to deal with the most serious cases first*. Let me explain what I mean. Here is a church that has an older person who is supremely autonomous. But he also has money, and perhaps a large number of family members in the church who kowtow to him. Everybody in the church knows—down deep—that this man ought to have been disciplined long ago. But no one has had the courage to do it. Yet when some young woman gets pregnant there is a great show of righteousness and indignation against sin as she is put under discipline! Where this scenario exists, and we know that it too often has existed, people (especially the young people) become cynical about discipline. But when the Session gets itself in order, acts on principle instead of expediency, and is united, the man is finally confronted and dealt with faithfully. Then, I can assure you that—difficult as it will be to accomplish this—blessings are certain to follow. People in the church will begin to respect the Session— young people, especially. Others in the church, who may also need discipline, will understand that the Session is no respecter of persons. And the whole program of faithful oversight can go forward.

(2) A second pitfall to be avoided is *the tendency to try to avoid the unpleasant later steps in discipline by going back to “square one.”* In Matthew 18:15-20 we have our Lord’s command concerning the progressive steps of church discipline. He says we are to start with step one (one person confronts another) and then, if this fails, we are to move on to step two (taking one or two more along when you again confront this person). Finally, if this also fails, we are to “tell it to the church.” This involves nothing less than a full report to the Session as the church’s ruling body, and subsequent action by the Session. But all too often it is right there that the danger arises.

One of the elders that went, in step two, to confront a delinquent member of the church is disliked by that member. The delinquent member insists that “the way this elder spoke to me was offensive.” So, when this is reported to Session, one

of the other elders suggests that the whole process be started over again with a different (“more acceptable”) elder. This scenario often arises, in my opinion, because of a desire to avoid the unpleasant. But the short-term gain (if there is any) will be at the expense of a long-term loss. Why? Because a little leaven leavens the whole lump. That is, other delinquent church members will see that if they use this “offensive personality” strategy they can get the Session to back off. But how different it is when there is unity in the Session, and when the Session stands behind the imperfect efforts of the various elders as they strive to do their duty.

But what if elder so-and-so really has wronged this particular member in some way? Is it not the Session’s duty to see that justice is also done when one of the elders has offended? Of course it is! But the way to deal with this is *not* by derailing a legitimate process of discipline already underway. No, the way to deal with this is to insist that the offended member himself (or herself) follow the very same step by step process. The Session must learn to say, to such persons, “Look, if you have a legitimate complaint then go to your brother alone and deal with it; if he repents of the wrong you accuse him of then forgive him and that is the end of it. If he does not repent of that wrong, then one of us will go with you to fulfill the requirements of step two—and if necessary, in due time, it will be dealt with by the Session. But in the meantime you must not try to use this as a means of evading the same process as it respects your own wrong doing.”

A young pastor, without experience, will often be tempted to go along with “ad hoc” attempts to find a solution to a sticky problem. When there is a tense situation and the pressure is on it is very easy to give in to these pressures. But if this principle is clearly understood, and calmly and persistently insisted upon, many worse evils can be avoided. (3) A third pitfall to be avoided is *the use of the pulpit to try to deal with specific disciplinary problems*. Young pastors often become frustrated because they find it so hard to get the Session to do its duty. Here is where the apostolic requirement that a man who holds this office must be able to exercise self-control.

It is for this reason, among others, that orderly preaching (whether catechetical or expository) is a very wise safeguard. If you are expounding the book of Ephesians it may be several weeks, or even months, before you come to that text that so-and-so needs to consider. Well, just be patient. You will get there in due time, and when you do, even that person who needs it so much will not have any reason to accuse you of taking personal advantage. But if you suddenly go out of your way, so to speak, to deal with a subject that has particular application to a certain individual in the church, there is every likelihood that it will be seen as an unfair attack from the pulpit. And it is rightly judged to be so! Why? Because everyone has the right to try to clear himself (or herself) in disciplinary matters. And it is precisely this which is denied to one who gets a personal attack from the pulpit.

(4) A fourth pitfall is *the failure to establish a set of proper priorities*. Let me explain. Some of the greatest disasters that I have seen in the ministry have come from a failure to distinguish between major and minor. When a young pastor with a burning zeal begins his work in a new charge he will very often feel almost overwhelmed by the sheer number of things that need attention. And right there is the danger, because there is no way that *all* of these things can be simultaneously corrected. What is needed, therefore, is a wise ordering of priorities—the need to put first things first, and second things second. Let the things of lesser importance wait their turn, in other words, while the things of supreme importance are dealt with.

Take the Session itself, for example. It may well be that the greatest need of all is a program of education. Many of the other problems may be due to the fact that these particular elders that God has sent you to work with just do not have an adequate understanding of the teaching of the Bible concerning their office and function. For many young men it is hard to sit there in study sessions while these pressing disciplinary problems are not yet dealt with. But I believe that this is a case in which nothing else will ever get done in improving the church unless—and until—some-one does this necessary repair work at the very foundation.

(5) Having said all this, however, a fifth pitfall to be avoided at all costs—because it is the most fatal of them all—is *a gradual adjustment to (or acceptance of) the status quo*. It is our conviction that much of the Protestant Church in America today is in a pitiful state. And one of the main reasons for this, in my view, is the failure of whole generations of ministers who have given in—little by little—to the defection of the times. It was not so with the founding fathers of the OPC. No, the very thing that “made them tick,” as we say, is that they were *not* prepared to give themselves up to a detestable neutrality in the cause of God. And so it must be with you.

There will be times—probably not a few—when you will be tempted to give up. (Plenty of ministers *have* given up because they just couldn’t stand it any longer.) When such times come you will need to reconfirm your call from God to the arduous task which belongs to you as a minister. This was Jeremiah’s experience too! He was so discouraged that he said “I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore in His name.” But as he wrestled with God and his own discouragement he found that he just couldn’t keep silent. Why? Because—as he said—“His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not.” It is my conviction that this will always be the number one need of every divinely called and commissioned minister of the Word of God. For, as the book of wisdom says you must “Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life” (Pr. 4:23).

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