

The Shape of Pastoral Ministry at First Presbyterian Church

By [Sean Lucas](#)

Well good evening. It's a great pleasure once again to be with you all. I was going to mention once again some of those connections between Dr. Hutton and William McIntosh who was the long-serving pastor at First Pres. Hattiesburg. We actually are celebrating our 130th anniversary this year so we are remembering you all as we all down south have been celebrating as well.

One of the things that I wanted to talk to you all about tonight was the shape of your faithful ministry at First Presbyterian Church Jackson. Really for over 175 years the keynote of your church has been a faithful ministry, throughout the history of the, Southern Presbyterian Church in all of its manifestations. Whether the old school Presbyterian Church or the Presbyterian Church in the United States or now in the Presbyterian Church in America, First Presbyterian Church has been known as a church with a faithful ministry. And this faithful ministry has been exemplified most obviously in its pastors but also in your elders and in your Sunday School teachers, or as they were called back in 1848, your Sabbath School teachers. Your youth directors and Christian education directors, your camp directors — all along the way, among all the people who have served your church, it's been shaped and offered a shape of what a faithful ministry looks like.

Now we often think we know what we mean when we say those words, faithful ministry. But I think it would help us tonight, briefly, to think a little bit about, "What is the shape of a faithful ministry?" When we look for a faithful ministry, what is it? How do we recognize it? And particularly for you, First Presbyterian Church, as you celebrate 175 years, what is the shape of your past faithful ministry that will direct you into your future as you seek a faithful ministry? Well, I think the reason this church's ministry has remained faithful throughout its history is that it's been committed to the ordinary means of grace and its ministry and to Gospel ministry as its spiritual mission. And specifically there are three things that I want to mention tonight that provide the contours or the shape of what faithful ministry at First Presbyterian Church Jackson has looked like.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

First of all, and you've heard all of these in the vignettes, which were wonderfully done, first of all the centrality of the ministry of the Word, second, a dedication to pastoral care and discipline, and then third, a commitment to evangelism and

missions. So first then, think with me about a faithful ministry as being centered on the ministry of the Word. I think if there has been a most important mark of your congregation's 175 years it would be the centrality of the ministry of God's Word, and particularly the pulpit ministry of this church, but also in the Sabbath School that was started in 1848 and the Bible studies for men and women that have been a keynote of your church from the Civil War forward. All along the way the centrality of the ministry of the Word has been a central characteristic of your church, even in times of difficulty — Civil War and reconstruction, yellow fever, financial or political panic, world wars, civil rights unrest. Throughout its time of difficulties, the church has maintained a regular, consistent, focused commitment to the ministry of God's Word.

For example, the commitment was clearly displayed in the reconstruction period, particularly when other congregations, most notably First Baptist Jackson — it's always good to run down the Baptists! But particularly as First Baptist Jackson during the reconstruction period really, really struggled, First Presbyterian Church maintained throughout the Civil War and the reconstruction period, a regular ministry of God's Word. For example, in his diary, which is a real treasure in your all's history room, John Hunter noted when political visitors showed up but also how the Word of God dealt with his congregation in the midst of all the crises of the reconstruction period. So in a one month period he wrote some of these things:

On August 20, 1865 he observed that,

a congregation large. Members of the 1865 Constitutional Convention present. I spoke with interest though using an old sermon.” (laughter) It's good to know that he did that too! (laughter) Two weeks later as Hunter preached on Acts 10 he noted, “The congregation tolerably large and attentive. May God increase household religion, a subject too large to be fully treated in a single discourse. It is undoubtedly one of great interest and importance.” When the church observed communion in mid-September 1865, he said he, “spoke with ease and some tenderness on 1 John 3:2. Service solemn and impressive. Some federal officers communed, one a Presbyterian from Chicago.” Such was a typical month in Hunter's ministry as he watched God at work in the congregation's life. It was a month that would be replicated time and time again over his thirty-seven years as pastor of this church. As a preacher, Hunter was remarkable. According to one remembrance, “As a minister, Dr. Hunter was always earnest and attractive, carrying conviction by his logic and sledgehammer blows. He was always straightforward, pointed and directed, believing that language was intended to express thoughts rather than to cloud ideas.

R. Q. Mallard who was a minister from New Orleans noted that,

As Hunter preached he would begin in a low, deliberate, almost hesitating tone with his eyes fixed on his own feet, nervously rubbing his hands together. But then Hunter became like a locomotive,” Mallard claimed. “Directly the piston rod began to pulsate, gradually increasing its speed until the form became erect and the eyes squarely faced the audience as he plunged along a line of well-formulated thought with force and directness of a steam-charged engine.

Now Hunter's approach to preaching, both earnest and Bible-centered, has typified the ministry of the Word from 1858 on here at First Presbyterian Church. From J. B. Hutton's almost lyrical style thrown into a kind of verse by his son in a collection of Hutton's sermons, to Gerard Lowe's winsome expositions that were featured on *The Presbyterian Hour*, and Wednesday night Bible studies that offered overviews of the Bible long before Mark Dever was alive (laughter), from John Reed Miller's determination to win people with Gospel preaching Sunday morning, engage people for the Gospel on Sunday night, and teach people the Bible on Wednesday night, on through Ligon Duncan's consecutive expositions through Bible books, the shape of the ministry at First Church has focused on the earnest preaching and teaching of the Bible as God's inspired, inerrant Word.

And because this is the case, FirstChurch's ministers prayed that God's people would gather regularly so that the church's ministry would be effective. Every minister in this church's history could echo the words first spoken by J. B. Hutton in his inaugural sermon at FirstChurch in 1896. In applying Acts 10:29, the text in the King James Version goes, “I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me,” in applying that text to the congregation, Hutton said this:

“If I am to come here to speak to empty benches, it will not only be of no special inspiration to me, but of no profit to you. If I am to come to prayer meetings and to Sunday preaching services and you were to remain at your homes, at your places of business, or at other places, your call to me to be your minister cannot mean good to you. For a minister to do effective service, regularity in attendance upon the ordinances of God's house is essential. Nothing can be more discouraging to a pastor than irregularity of attendance on the part of those who have called him to preach. But aside of this discouraging of the pastor, irregularity of being in your place at the Lord's house is hurtful to the life of individual Christians and is disastrous to all helpful working in this church.”

A faithful ministry of the Word required a faithful hearing and obeying of God's Word by God's people to be fruitful. And by and large throughout your history, First Church has demonstrated both a faithful preaching of God's Word and a faithful hearing of it as well. So that's the first mark, first contour, first line of the shape of a faithful ministry that's been your blessing — the centrality of the ministry of God's Word.

A DEDICATION TO PASTORAL CARE

But the second mark is this — a dedication to pastoral care and discipline. Throughout the church's history there has been a profound dedication to this, to this pastoral care, to this discipline. One kind of faithful pastoral care, one that ministers from the very beginning of this church to its present day have done, is to be with people as they are dying. In March 1867, the session convened at the house of Susan Saunders in order to hear the profession of one J. H. Young, a dying man who had been confined to his bed with a protracted illness. And the session minutes recorded, "After free conversation and examination in which J. H. Young made a satisfactory expression of his repentancy and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, he was admitted to membership in this church. They served him communion that same day; he died the next."

Several months later, Hunter was by the bedside of his father-in-law, Stephen Perar. He recorded in his diary, "After the room was cleared, I sat down by him and asked him about his hopes in Christ. They were firm. No cloud rested upon his mind. He said that he was unworthy has a Christian and hoped for acceptance through the merits of Christ. After this profession and a time in prayer Perar sank into a lethargic state and several hours later he calmly fell asleep in Jesus." A month after Perar died, Hunter went to the home of a Mrs. Hawkins who was dying after delivering her son, Milton. That Saturday night attended a dead bed for Mrs. Hawkins, baptized her child, Milton, whom she dedicated to God in her last moments. She died at midnight hoping for a blest resurrection. This is the shape not just of Hunter's ministry but of all your ministers throughout your history.

Sometimes faithful pastoral care meant intervening in difficult interpersonal relationships. Duling in particular, wrote significantly during the reconstruction period and caused the 1868 State Constitutional Convention to make it a significant crime. Sometimes though, more severe consequences were unavoidable. Hunter recorded on January 8, 1866 in his diary, "A sad difficulty occurred between Erskine Helm and Pembroke Garland. They used pistols and wounded one another mortally. A few days later as he was dying, Pembroke desired to make a profession of faith in Jesus and the church's elders went to his house and after a full length conversation and examination in which Pembroke Garland made a satisfactory expression of his repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ he was admitted to membership in this church. The man died an hour later. Erskine Helm followed him in death three days later."

While the church's leaders were unable to prevent the Garland-Helm duel, they were able to stop another one involving J. L. Power who would serve this church as an elder for over thirty-five years. Then, though, Power was a deacon and the co-founder of *The Jackson Clarion Ledger*. And he and a man named Edward M. Yeger, Edward M. Yeger, who would later gain distinction by stabbing the active mayor of Jackson to death in 1869, got into some measure of conflict in August

1866. In fact, that month the session received news about a proposed duel to be fought between the two men in Vicksburg. They were able to meet with Power and discuss the matter with him. It was a serious matter as the session believed that, "Dueling is a practice utterly antagonistic to the letter and spirit of the Gospel." No duh! (laughter) Sorry, that was an editorial comment! "A practice wholly inconsistent with the conduct of a Christian professor," and on they went. Thankfully Power saw the error of his ways and confessed that in the acceptance of said challenge, he grievously sinned against God, that in so doing he forfeited his right to the privileges of God's church and also his position of superintendent of the Sabbath School. And in response, the session accepted Power's repentance and did not remove him from his positions of service within the church. Even more, in light of Yeger's later actions, they probably saved Power's life.

Often though, faithful pastoral care involves church discipline, not just for fantastic sins but for more common ones as well. In 1874, the session had to deal with a woman who had, at various times within the past year, had lived in fornication with a man at her home in Rankin county. Twice they cited her to appear before the session but she failed to do so. And so on July 19, because she had failed to appear and because she had admitted the act previously to Hunter, "It is therefore judged by this court that she, for her said violation of the seventh commandment, be and she is hereby excommunicated from the visible church of Christ." A few months later the session had to deal with a man who had engaged in disorderly conduct. He was cited to appear before the session to answer to the charge of drunkenness and other unchristian conduct. The man wrote a letter to the session in which he admitted to the charges of intoxication and conduct on becoming a Christian and member of the church, and in response through Hunter, the session admonished him against a repetition of the offense and urged him to greater Christian faithfulness.

This was true of the church in the 19th century and continues on to this day. Your church, like First Church Hattiesburg and other faithful churches practices pastoral care and sometimes has to practice church discipline. It's a mark of the true church, not just of First Presbyterian Church but of any true Gospel church that she practice church discipline. And throughout your church's history, pastoral care and church discipline has not been punitive or harsh but restorative and gracious. To use the language of the PCA *Book of Church Order*, throughout its history the First Church session has played, "the part of a tender mother correcting her children for their good, that everyone may be presented faultless in the day of the Lord Jesus." Such is the heartbeat of true pastoral care and discipline, and such has been the commitment of a faithful ministry here at First Presbyterian Church.

A COMMITMENT TO MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM

So two marks — centrality of the faithful ministry of God's Word, commitment to pastoral care and discipline. The third is a commitment to missions and evangelism. While some Presbyterian churches have moved away from the spiritual mission of the church to be involved in political or social causes, First Presbyterian Church has demonstrated a consistent commitment to the church's spiritual mission. And this has been particularly seen in your commitment to evangelism and missions. From its earliest days, the church has focused especially on evangelizing young men. In 1870, the sessions submitted a report to the central Mississippi presbytery in which they observed, "with sorrow that a very large proportion of the male population of our community are seldom seen in the sanctuary on the Sabbath and never in the prayer meeting. This portion embraces numbers distinguished for educational talents and influence. They seem to live only for the world and tend only on temporal things, regardless of the future life." The session was determined to reverse this negative trend through a renewed emphasis upon outreach and discipleship of men. They said, "It calls for increased effort on our part to secure a learned and efficient ministry and greater zeal in the enlargement of our Sabbath Schools and Bible classes."

And so in order to meet this need, the church not only placed emphasis on Bible study but they began sponsoring evangelistic meetings that focused on reaching young people with the Gospel. Starting in the 1880's the church held meetings with such noted evangelists as Sam Jones, the Presbyterian evangelist, El Gurrant, J.S. Hillhouse, and C.P. Bridewell who was one of the great preachers of his era. In the new century the church would join in union meetings with the Baptists and Methodists in order to reach the city with the Gospel. They sponsored Samuel D. Gordon who was the author of the widely read, *Quiet Talks*, series. He came in 1915. Gypsy Smith in 1922 and in 1928. G. Campbell Morgan came under the auspices of the church in 1923 and Billy Sunday in 1924. First Church also sponsored Presbyterian evangelists such as William Crow, who pastored the Idlewood Presbyterian Church in Memphis and later the wonderful Westminster Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. And Weightsy Smith who was a former First Church deacon who entered the evangelistic ministry and who preached twice here at protracted meetings.

Now this commitment to mass evangelism was about reaching young men and young women with the Gospel. And it continued throughout the church's history in the 20th century, sponsoring twice Billy Graham in 1952 and again in 1975 and sponsoring a ten day crusade with Billy Graham's then twenty-four year old associate and brother-in-law Layton Ford in 1956. The church's commitment to evangelism sprung from the realization that men and women were saved primarily when they heard God's Word read and God's Word preached. It was that same realization that fueled the church's passion for international missions. For First Church, your commitment to missions began in November 1897. That month, J. B. Hutton advised the session that he wished to begin two new

departments — the women's missionary department and the men's missionary department. These two departments were to select, equip, and maintain a missionary who would go to another part of the world to share the Gospel. In the following year, the session wrote to S. H. Chester who was then secretary of the foreign missions committee for the PCUS, the Southern Presbyterian Church, requesting his assistance in selecting a missionary.

And Chester suggested that the church assist Annie Rowland Houston Patterson who served with her husband Brown Craig Patterson in China. And not only was supporting the Patterson's amenable because Brown Patterson had been J. B. Hutton's classmate at Union Seminary in Virginia, but it also energized the congregation to get to work. And what was even more amazing was that Annie Patterson didn't simply assist her husband by loving him and caring for their children, she was a full-fledged licensed and degreed medical doctor herself. So their ministry in China was actually pioneer mission work. She would treat the women's physical ills and sometimes would do surgery with another doctor on staff. And the medical work provided an opportunity for the Gospel. The Patterson's would go to various towns around their home base for a day to a week, do medical work, share tracts, offer the Gospel. There was house to house visiting, periodic protracted meetings. The Gospel fruit that they had was small and yet provided the foundation for the modern day explosion of Christianity in that country. Who's to know that the hundred million Christians that they think there are in China do not have some small root in the ministry of the Patterson's and in your ministry through the Patterson's.

In order to support Patterson, the women raised two-fifths of her salary and the men and the children raised the rest. By focusing on this one missionary - and her name was listed on the worship bulletins through all the years the church supported her as the church's missionary. By focusing on this one missionary the beginning of First Church's international mission outreach was born. Not only did the church maintain relationship with the Patterson's until their retirement in 1940, but the church began to raise money above and beyond what was necessary to support the Patterson's to begin to support others. Of course you know that your commitment to missions has flourished through the years, especially with John Reed Miller's leadership in developing the world missions conference beginning in 1960. And also vital has been your commitment to developing giving to missions which has allowed you to expand your missions ministry exponentially.

But it was all rooted in a commitment to the ministry of the Word. It was rooted in a commitment to send people with the Gospel because the Gospel is life giving and it is rooted in and inspired in an inerrant Word that much be read and preached for men and women to be saved so that there might be further pastoral care and discipline so that men and women might make it home safely. Now there's a great deal that could be said. You've got to read the book in order to find out more, but these three marks of First Presbyterian Church's ministry

should be enough to give you a sense of what your ministry has been for 175. The centrality of the regular ministry of the Word, dedication to pastoral care and discipline, commitment to evangelism and missions, these emphases continue today with the result that your congregation is a blessed Zion. For tens of thousands in Jackson's history and hundreds of thousands in this country and who knows the countless thousands around the world. As such, your congregation has reason to say in the words of Psalm 48, "Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! For within her citadels, God has made Himself known as a fortress!" Thanks be to God.

Would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, we do thank You for this wonderful time of reflecting on Your work because after all, this is Your ministry that You have done in and through all those saints who have been in this place through 175 years. This is Your church, it's Your Word, it's Your covenant, it's Your Spirit, it's Your glory, it's Your Spirit. It's all Yours, Jesus. You use us as Your vice-regents in this work, as stewards of this ministry, but it's Your ministry. Jesus, we praise You tonight for Your faithfulness over 175 years to this people called First Presbyterian Church. Surely it is right for us to sing Your praise. Surely it's right for us to raise our voices with the angels and praise the Triune God for Your faithfulness. And so Lord, give us hearts and voices to sing Your praise now. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

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