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Trying to Please Men: A Practice Filled with Danger

George M. Bowman

Men in ministry soon discover they get a bigger and friendlier response to their preaching when they try to please men and women in their congregations. A. W. Tozer said, "We who witness and proclaim the gospel must not think of ourselves as public relations agents sent to establish good will between Christ and the world."

The number of preachers, evangelists, and missionaries who speak primarily to please people is growing every day. This practice, however, is fraught with danger.

The danger comes when their attempts to please men and women lead to making a wrong choice: loving "the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:43). When they make this wrong choice, they run the risk of displeasing God.

In my judgment, this has come about because they have been led to believe that pleasing people is the best way to build their churches. Focusing on what they and their audiences want, they must make changes that can be devastating to their ministry.

The Bible often warns ministers about pleasing men and the dangers involved in doing so. You can prevent or overcome this problem in your ministry, then, by identifying and avoiding these dangers.

Beware of Setting Wrong Objectives

1. Aiming at respect. Often a pastor's desire to gain the respect and win the friendliness of the people in his church and its community is the beginning of a ministry that can displease God. Having set this objective, he will have to dilute the sound doctrine that holds biblical truth in balance.

For example, to please unbelievers, he will have to take their likes and dislikes into consideration. This is dangerous because the Bible says they love sin and hate righteous-

ness. They have no interest in a God who will call them to give account of what they have done with the life He gave them.

To gain their respect and win their friendliness, the pastor will have to appeal to human reason, emotion and experience. That means he must bypass the authority of the Bible. The sinner desires a god he can manipulate and with whom he can feel comfortable. To please him, the pastor cannot preach about the infinite, unchangeable and holy God of the Bible.

This is why so many man-centered churches and missions have changed the biblical concept of God into a limited god, changeable, and imperfect. God, they say, is going through a maturation or growing process in the same way that man does. This view, of course, leads to the denial of original sin, the need for an atonement, imputed righteousness, and the credibility of God and his Word.

In his book, *Battle of the Gods*, Dr. Robert A. Morey quotes Alan Gomes, instructor in historical theology at Talbot School of Theology, as saying that these false concepts have penetrated such groups as Youth With A Mission. Says Morey, "Gomes carefully documents that such YWAM leaders as Roy Elseth and Gordon Olson teach that God can sin; that God does not know the future; that God is not working out his plan in the world; that God does not have to keep his Word or fulfill his promises" (pp.13-14).

Obviously, many modern Christians are much like unbelievers. They cannot stand to hear sermons on the whole counsel of God. Their superficial lifestyle would make them uncomfortable under the biblical teaching that describes their backsliding, exposes their hypocrisy, and shows their gossip to be as evil as fornication and murder. They could not tolerate a gospel that commands believers, saved by grace, to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow hard after the Lord Jesus Christ.

To gain their respect and friendship, a pastor must water down the gospel doctrine of Christ. He has to change it into a man-centered message of "health and wealth miracles," of "the power of positive thinking," or of "mind over matter."

2. Aiming for easy decisions. A pastor will try to please men and women when he thinks his powers of persuasion can produce a regular increase of new converts. It takes a divinely timed and divinely sent Holy Spirit revival to bring about large numbers of genuine conversions to Jesus Christ. If a pastor cannot wait for God's timing in the business of revival, and he wants to obtain many "easy decisions for Christ," he has to present conversion to Christ as a very simple process that requires no more than making a decision for Christ.

So if he wants many such "decisions," he cannot emphasize all the gospel truths of the Bible. He dare not say that God calls believers to suffer; that faith without repentance is not true faith; that a sinner cannot be saved unless he confesses Christ as his Lord; that faith without obedience is a counterfeit faith. You won't find easy decisionism among people who know that God commands all believers to "pursue ... sanctification without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

The pastor who wants easy conversions will have to make the Gospel attractive to the natural man, something he can enjoy in this world. Many professing faith in Christ today show no change in their former lifestyles because preachers, evangelists and missionaries have watered down the message to get results. Having become obsessed with chalking up a record of many "decisions" for Christ, they have departed from the demanding truth of God's Word.

3. Aiming at building attendance. One of the biggest problems in Christendom today is the large number of unconverted church members. If a pastor has set the increase of his church's attendance for numbers' sake as one

of his major goals, he will have to employ some Madison Avenue promotion techniques to draw people in. Some use Sunday school contests among churches. Some offer prizes to get people to come. I heard of one church that promised to stick ten-dollar bills under some of the seats in its Sunday school buses to lure children to ride them. Others use special dinners, fashion shows, and other forms of entertainment. I cannot find the use of gimmickry in the New Testament. People who went to Christian meetings in the early church didn't expect anything in the material realm except persecution. To believe in Christ in the apostolic age was tantamount to signing one's own death warrant.

With the dilution of sound doctrine and accommodating the Gospel to what the people want, it is no wonder many churches have unsaved members.

4. Aiming at no controversy. Ministers try to please men by seeking to avoid all controversy. In a conversation I had with a Canadian Baptist leader, he described a fellow pastor as "nothing but a troublemaker." When I asked him to explain why he called such a godly man a troublemaker, he said, "He's always bringing up controversial issues."

How can anyone preach the Word of God and avoid controversy? There is a big conflict between God and man; between truth and error; between heaven and earth; between good and evil. If a pastor wants to avoid all controversy, he must throw away the Bible and give the people a steady diet of syrupy sermons designed to please the taste of the natural man.

"I preach a positive gospel," said one pastor, "and stay away from controversial issues."

When asked what controversial issues he avoided, he referred to the sovereignty of God, unconditional Election, particular Redemption and those doctrines that cause church denominations to differ with each other.

One evangelical minister said, to avoid controversy, he

would even accept a person into his church membership with no more qualification than the baptism and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church!

Beware of Losing Acceptance with the Lord

Some pastors see the pleasing of men as the most important aspect of their ministry. One pastor went regularly to the members of his church to ask them what they thought of his preaching. He was so eager to please the people, he had to know for certain they liked his sermons. When some, in all sincerity, pointed out mistakes in his preaching, he couldn't stand it. So he resigned and walked out of the church service without even a word of farewell to the members. There is a lot of emotional immaturity among those who make pleasing men and women the priority in their ministry.

1. Exclusive criterion. I doubt if that kind of preacher is acceptable to God. Paul said he counted it a very small thing for men to judge his ministry because one cannot justify or validate his ministry solely by what men think of it.

"The One who examines me," he said, "is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:4).

We must use the Word of the Lord as the only criterion by which to make an accurate assessment of a man's ministry and conduct. Otherwise, how would we know that a pastor has the approval of God for his ministry? It is not the approbation of man that pastors need, but the approval of God.

2. Laboring in vain. Those who perceive the approbation of men as their priority go out of their way to make their church services pleasing to all. People flock to their meetings to be entertained by pulpit humor and funny stories. They come because they expect to see plays, dramatic presentations, clowns, magicians, ventriloquist dummies, celebrities, sports heroes, television personalities, and the

latest in “gospel” rock music.

The congregation of a pastor who gears his ministry to such entertainment methods may see him as a powerful and popular minister. Having attained that position by trying to please people, he may find he is no longer acceptable to God.

The first objective for the ministry should be to please God by manifesting His glory. Unless God accepts him as His servant, a pastor labors in vain. Everything he does, such as prayer, Bible study, sermon preparation, preaching, visiting, witnessing, and counseling, will lack the presence, the power and the blessing of God.

I wonder, how many pastors minister with the judgment seat of Christ always in view? I wonder, how many of them are aware of the high level of their responsibility, not before men, but before God? How many would feel right at home with the apostles in making this declaration?

Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:9-10).

3. God consciousness. When a pastor tries to please men, he may stop being God-conscious. It is very easy in a popular ministry aimed at pleasing the people to be so taken up with success that one forgets the omnipresence of God. Unless a pastor is acutely conscious of God’s presence and puts Him first in every aspect of his ministry and life, he adopts a very foolish kind of reasoning.

For example, he may think it is more important to take direction from the men he is trying to please than from God and His Word. I wouldn’t mention this, if I hadn’t seen and heard ministers put the opinions of men ahead of the truth of God’s Word. How different such reasoning is from that of

the apostles!

Confronted by men who tried to force them to do their will in the ministry, the apostles didn’t think, “What is the expedient thing to do here?” or “What will be the consequences if we oppose their will?” On the contrary, they “answered and said to them, ‘Whether it be right in the sight of God to give heed unto you rather than to God, you be the judge’ ”(Acts 4:19). A little later, when commanded by the same men of authority to stop preaching, they came right back with, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

4. God’s testing process. When one sets up a ministry that displeases God by trying to please men, he has to forget God’s testing process. There is no part of our ministry or life where we can set God’s interests aside with impunity. God tests the reasons His people give for doing what they do. Especially is this true for those in the ministry of His church.

Paul the apostle said that he and his fellow apostles made it a point to speak to men and women, not to please them, but to please God. The reason he gave was that they knew God was constantly checking their motivations.

“We speak,” he said, “not as pleasing men, but God, who examines our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:4).

5. Alienated by God. Bowing to the likes and dislikes of men could lead a pastor to become alienated by God. If he strives to please men and women of the world, for example, he may find himself so friendly and so identified with them that God sees him as one of them. The man of God cannot afford to mix it up with people of the world because separation from them is a mark of a true minister of Christ.

“Do you not know,” asks James, “that friendship with the world is hostility toward God?” (James 4:4).

Beware of Forgetting You Hold a Position of Trust

Seeking popularity with the people can cause a pastor to forget that God has entrusted him with the great treasure of

His Gospel of grace. In his apostolic ministry, Paul never lost his sense of personal stewardship. He rebuked those Christians who graded their preachers according to their popularity.

People should judge a minister, he said, by his dependability as a steward of the mysteries of God who sees his first responsibility as faithfulness to God and His Word (1 Cor. 4:1-2). He also said that God had condescended to permit such stewardship in men. "We have been approved by God," he said, "to be entrusted with the Gospel" (1 Thess. 2:4).

1. Hypocrisy and insincerity. God's ministers should be like Moses who "endured, as seeing Him who is unseen" (Heb. 11:27). Their eyes of faith should be upon the unseen, spirit kingdom of God, not on the things of this world. When they reject this form of spiritual vision and start looking for the appraisal of men, they fall into the evil that Paul warned about in his Epistle to the Ephesians.

After speaking about obedience to parents and masters, he said that such obedience should be given "not by way of eye service, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6). This also applies to the ministry. A pastor should not seek the look of approval from the people he serves. That is trying to do his work "with eye service, as men-pleasers."

His motivational aim should never be eye service or men-pleasing. As a servant of Christ, he must strive sincerely to do "the will of God from the heart."

2. Edification and profit. The New Testament epistles teach many character-building aids. The apostles made the cultivation of the inner man or the building of Christian character the major part of their preaching and writing. The only legitimate reasons they allowed for pleasing men were the salvation of sinners, the culture of the soul, and the development of a Christlike personality. When a pastor

seeks to please men for any other purpose, he betrays his trust and fails to feed and guard the flock of God.

"Let each of us please his neighbor," said Paul, "for his good, to his edification" (Rom. 15:2).

In their evangelistic work, the apostles also sought to please men for their profit and possible conversion to Christ. In other words, attempting to do them good was their idea of pleasing men. They did nothing to feed the worldly desires of unbelievers. Instead, the apostles sought to profit all peoples without giving offense to either Jews, pagans or Christians. Paul explained it this way:

"Just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many; that they may be saved" (1 Cor. 10:33). Later he wrote, "All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved" (2 Cor. 12:19).

Beware of Losing a Biblical Sense of Values

New Testament ministers felt that if they tried to please men, they would no longer be the servants of Christ. A pastor cannot expect divine support for his ministry if he no longer qualifies as a servant of the Lord Jesus. Like Esau, he has bartered away a great heritage for a temporary gain. He has sold the day to serve the hour.

1. Christ the model. As soon as a pastor sets out to please people, he loses his association with the ministry of Christ. He forgets that the Son of God is the model for his ministry and fails to follow His example. Matthew says that even Christ's enemies, though they spoke with sarcasm, acknowledged that He did not seek to please men, but taught God's truth, accepting the consequences.

"Teacher," they said, "we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You

are not partial to any" (Matt. 22:16).

2. Loss of vision. When a pastor displeases God by trying to please men, he may forget he is no longer his own, for he was bought with a price. Preaching a results-oriented and man-centered gospel can take his mind such a distance from God and His everlasting truth, that he can lessen his perception of the value of his own redemption. Like the man who fails to add the elements of Christian character to his faith, he will lose both his eschatological and historical vision.

Such a man, says Peter, "is blind or short-sighted [that is, eschatological blindness], having forgotten his purification from his former sins [that is, historical blindness]" (2 Peter 1:9).

3. Value comparisons. Constant pleasing of men can change a minister's ability to make right value comparisons. Paul presents redemption as a big reason for us to put the Lord before men.

"For you have been bought with a price," he argued; "therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20). "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor. 7:23).

4. Altering the message. Catering to the interests of men and women, many pastors have changed the message Christ commanded them to preach. Afraid of the disapproval of unbelievers and worldly Christians, they say, in effect, "We dare not speak about anything that does not please them."

How different they are from the apostles! Standing before the highest tribunal in Jerusalem facing the threat of punishment and even death, they confronted their enemies with great courage and said, "For we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

Author

George M. Bowman is editor-director of Operation Balance, a literature project designed to advance sound doctrine that holds biblical truth in balance. He is the author of a number of tracts and booklets which can be requested from:

Operation Balance
190 Hespeler Road, #1504
Cambridge, Ontario N1R 8B8
Canada