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Greeks contradict, Samaritans disbelieve, heretics mutilate.
Contradiction is manifold, but truth is uniform.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM

It comes then to this, therefore, that these men accept neither Scripture nor tradition. Such are the adversaries with whom we have to deal.

IRENÆUS (A.D. 180)

The creeds thus served, and I believe continue to serve, as tokens or badges of Christian identity. They provided and continue to provide a norm both for reading the Scripture and for evangelization and instruction. They provide a means of recognition for God's people, scattered as they are among the peoples of the earth. They have served both as a means of identity and as a basis for unity. Perhaps most of all they contain the basic confession of Christians—a summary of their witness about the truth of God in Christ Jesus. Creeds are outlines of instruction, but they are also forms of witness, and thus they came, in time, to occupy an important place in the public worship of the Church.

BISHOP PHILIP TURNER

Faith is to believe what you do not see, truth is to see what you have believed.

AUGUSTINE

Classical Pastoral Practice for Today:

Warning: Pastoral Ministry May Be Hazardous to Your Health



Thomas N. Smith

His name was Clifford. He had pastored several smaller churches in England and the United States. While pastoring in England he suffered from chronic diarrhea. This condition brought him under a physician's care and pastoral counseling with Dr. Graham Scroggie. Upon returning to his native Oklahoma, he assumed the pastoral role in a Southern Baptist church, a congregation with a notable history of conflict. After a short while, Clifford suffered a complete mental and physical breakdown. If the gossips are to be believed, "the men in the white coats" came for him and he had to be physically subdued. This took place while he verbally assaulted his attackers with language more in line with his military background than his ministerial profession. The men in the white coats and the filthy language were remembered. The reasons for his breakdown were not. The last time I saw him alive he was sitting on the edge of his hospital bed in one of those pathetic gowns that does nothing for human dignity. It was only after I explained who I was that he registered any recognition of me at all. I think he was probably acting.

He must have been in his late fifties when I first met him. I was a twenty-year-old "preacher boy." We talked long about books and preachers (he had sat under Martyn Lloyd-Jones as well as Scroggie while in London) and preaching. He gave me

avuncular advice and kindly encouraged me in my plans to enter the ministry. Without my knowing it at the time, Clifford also stood as a warning of one of the hazards facing me in my career choice. He never again regained his health after that time in the hospital. After a year or so, he quietly died. For the most part, he has been just as quietly forgotten.

"I may say to him that snatcheth at the ministry, as Henry the Fourth to his son, that hastily snatched at the crown, 'He little knows what a heap of cares and toils he snatches at,'" says the Puritan, John Flavel. "What a heap of cares and toils"! I sometimes think that there ought of be packaged warnings available to men who aspire to the gospel ministry similar to those warnings found on toxic products: "Warning: may be hazardous to your health!" Perhaps we could put on such warnings faded photographs of Clifford and the legion of men like him who have been broken, who have been consumed by the cares and toils of the ministry. Perhaps we could conclude each of these warnings with the terse advice once regularly given to prospective ministerial candidates: "If you *can* do anything else, do it."

Before the Reformation, ministers took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Protestant ministers after Luther expected to be poor and persecuted. Baptists were once flogged in Virginia—for being Baptists. Methodists were pursued by attackers and hecklers throughout the eighteenth century. And all of this took place in addition to the worries these men had because of the churches they served. Many of them would have chosen the persecution of the world any day over the stresses and strains that came with the congregations they cared for. Flavel goes on to quote Luther, "The labors of the ministry will exhaust the very marrow from your bones, [they will] hasten old age."

The causes for the stresses and strains in the ministry are not hard to discover. There is the normal difficulty that all human beings find in getting along. We find too quickly that "my wants" and "your wants" come into conflict. Added to this is the enormous work of communication. We do not understand one another; we do not find it easy to speak clear-

ly; we do not listen well and sympathetically. When suspicion and hurt feelings further cloud the landscape, communication is well nigh impossible.

Add to this the attitude that most people in our society have toward authority of any kind. Most Americans in 2003 consider themselves to be autonomous, free from any authority that they do not *choose* to submit to. Furthermore, they consider themselves to be authorities on those subjects they take seriously. It is not uncommon for doctors to have their patients give them medical advice because of things they have seen on the *Discovery Channel*.

This creates an adversarial relationship between those in places of authority and those under that authority. Because ministers are invested with authority from God through his Word, the proper exercise of that authority is fraught with difficulty. This is aggravated by those (too many) instances where there has been an abuse of pastoral authority, where authority has been perverted into authoritarianism.

When confronted with proper authority, people react variously. Some simply leave churches and go to others. The fact that within sectarian Protestantism there is no interconnect- edness between churches makes such moves easy. Indeed, it is possible (and many of us have experienced this) for people under church discipline for egregious moral failure to join other churches without those churches making any inquiries or taking any action to address the situation. Still others, when confronted with correction by a pastor, choose to stay in the church and cause as much trouble as they possibly can. One woman, in my experience, when gently confronted about her abusive behavior toward others, said to me with pure venom, "I can split this church!" (She, in a small but painful way, did.) Sometimes, the pastor himself leaves, on his own or because he is released by the church. In either case, the emotional fallout is huge and horrible. Remember Clifford?

The fact is that pastors, typically, are like most creative people, sensitive to the point of being hypersensitive. This is a part of the necessary equipment for being a good pastor. Just think of Paul's tears and his hurt feelings displayed for all to

see in Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians. As an old English preacher-professor used to say to his students, "Gentlemen, the minister of the gospel wears his heart on his sleeve and the crows of the air come and pick it apart!"

So, if we are to be engaged in this work, the work of the ministry, we may expect assault and insult, hurt and harm, stress and strain, grief and groans. How are we to cope?

Well, we must be sure of a divine call to the ministry, a call that we are convinced has come directly from God. This is a call that is confirmed with the necessary gifts and disposition given by the Holy Spirit and recognized by the Church. Without this, we will emotionally perish. Furthermore, we must be men of faith and prayer. Add to this our need for a few close friendships, inside and outside of the churches we serve. And don't forget the need to "get away," in the sense of time away (take a vacation and take a weekly day off!) and of serious (but fun) avocations.

But, to return to Flavel: Flavel's whole message from which the earlier quotations were taken was a sermon from Matthew 24:45-47. We are doing this for the Lord Jesus. We are doing this to please him. We are doing this to receive this declaration of approval in the Great Day. If we are the objects of his approval, then the disapproval and disgust of men is a small thing. Even for those who end like Clifford, this is not the end. The end will be when we hear Jesus the Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord."

But, on the other hand, if you *can* do anything else, do it.

Author

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