

The Landscape of the Character of Preaching¹

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“There are some things that are expected of you
just because you are a preacher.”²

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the landscape of preaching today and investigates the challenges that preachers face on a number of levels—moral challenges, consumer-driven challenges, the challenge of the cult of personality, and the challenges of seminary education in the training of preachers. The author offers initial conclusions.

Introduction

As preachers and teachers of preaching we want to gain a perspective as to the nature of preaching today. By so doing we will be able to see where we are and what we are to do about it as we engage with preaching and its concomitant inscription of character in the process of discipleship. The question, then, what does the landscape of preaching look like in North America? To answer this question, we will explore the challenges preachers face, the moral challenges of preachers, the challenge of consumer-driven Christianity, the challenge of the cult of personality, and the challenges of seminary education in the training of preachers. We will end by drawing some conclusions.

¹ This Article is adapted from a Paper presented at the annual meeting of the 2014 Evangelical Homiletics Society.

² Theodore Adams, “A Preacher Looks at His Preaching,” 1956 E.Y. Mullins Lecture on Preaching in *Preaching with Purpose and Power*, ed., Don M. Aycock (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1982), 133.

The Challenges Preachers Face

These are not necessarily great days for preachers. Preachers are facing termination, experiencing marginalization, confronting conflict in the church, and undergoing stress that is evidenced in stunning ways. A study conducted in 2012 discovered that 28 percent of Christian ministers faced a forced termination, while another study notes that anywhere from 19 percent to 41 percent of all ministers are terminated.³ The 41 percent statistic reflects the high termination rate among Assembly of God ministers.⁴ The 2003 study by London and Wiseman notes that about 20,000 preachers a year leave the ministry for good, some of them are the result of forced termination.⁵

The unintended consequences of poor health are reflected in preachers who have been terminated or have experienced difficulties in pastoral ministry.⁶ In 2010 the Clergy Health Initiative, which is a seven-year study of 1,726 Methodist ministers in North Carolina, published its first findings and noted, "Compared with neighbors in their census tracts, the ministers reported significantly higher rates of arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure and asthma. Obesity was 10 percent more prevalent in the clergy group."⁷ Similar results are found in internal surveys conducted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. They report that 69 percent of their pastors stated that they were overweight,

³ Daniel Schutz, "Forced Clergy Transitions," *Congregations Magazine* 2:2 (July 2013): 1. Interestingly, Schutz notes, "Some congregations are repeat offenders: one study found that just 7 percent of congregations were responsible for 35 percent of the total reported conflict" (p. 1).

⁴ Marcus N. Tanner, Anise M Zvonkovic, Charlie Adams, "Forced Termination of American Clergy: Its Effects and Connection to Negative Well-Being," *Review of Religious Research* 54:1 (March 2012): 1-17. Religion and Philosophy Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed 17 January 2014), 1.

⁵ Tanner, Zvonkovic and Adams, 1, quoting London and Wiseman, 2003.

⁶ Tanner, Zvonkovic and Adams, 12.

⁷ Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell and Sara LeGrand, "High Rates of Obesity and Chronic Disease Among United Methodist Clergy," *Obesity*, 18 (9), 1867-1870. DOI: 10.1038/oby.2010.102

<<http://www.nature.com/oby/journal/v18/n9/full/oby2010102a.html>>

See also: Paul Vitello, "Taking a Break From the Lord's Work," *The New York Times* reprints (1 August 2010).

with 64 percent reporting high blood pressure and another 13 percent admitting to taking antidepressants.⁸

A study on pastor well-being conducted among Canadian evangelicals noted that on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is no stress and 10 is high stress, the question was asked, "How stressful is your pastoral work right now?" The results showed, "The average was 5.86, although nearly a quarter of the pastors (23.8%) rated their stress at 8 or more, and another 20% rated it at 7."⁹

It is not surprising that preachers are facing difficult challenges in ministry with a church and culture in turmoil. Pastoral Care, Inc., reports the top ten reasons why pastors leave the ministry. These include, (1) Ministers have a vision, the church doesn't; (2) lack of denominational support; (3) feeling alone; (4) stress on family and health; (5) can't be real but have to be most spiritual; (6) not appreciated; (7) stress and burnout; (8) lack of motivation; (9) low income resulting in low self-esteem; and (10) lack of vision.¹⁰ In light of this list, Spencer, Winston and Bocarnea provide the following insight:

The term vision conflict does not exist as a named dimension in any literature associated with research involving clergy. However, numerous scholarly and popular press sources discuss clergy's feelings of disparity between what they expected to happen by answering the call to ministry and the events that actually take place.¹¹

Preachers face the challenge of their calling in the midst of a changing landscape. Their health, family relationships and church expectations,

⁸ Vitello. The Duke study on Methodist pastors will have additional information on depression in a forthcoming pdf article. See: <divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/clergy-health-initiative/what-we're-learning/published-research-0>

⁹ Sam Reimer, "Pastoral Well-being: Findings from the Canadian Evangelical Churches Study," *Church & Faith Trends* 3:2 (August 2010): 3.

¹⁰ "10 Reasons Why Pastors Leave the Ministry," Pastoral Care, Inc., 2013 <<http://www.pastoralcareinc.com/articles/10-reasons-why-ministers-quit/>>

¹¹ J. Louis Spencer, Bruce E. Winston, Mihai C. Bocarnea, "Predicting the Level of Pastors' Risk of Termination/Exit from the Church," *Pastoral Psychology* 61 (2012): 91-92.

among other concerns, provide us with a picture of the challenging personal life of a preacher as he or she intends to live out the call to ministry even at the risk of losing it.

Consumer-Driven Christianity

North American culture is dominated by consumer-driven, technologically-powered Christianity. Christians and the wider culture view churches more as worship “stores” where if one is dissatisfied with the product (sermons, programs, etc.) then one goes to a different store to find what he or she wants—most likely not what he or she needs.

This trend toward consumer-driven religion has demonstrated growth over the last fifty years. A Gallup poll reports that only 15 percent of all Americans in 1955 noted that they had turned from the faith of their parents. But by 2008 the number had risen to 44 percent.¹² Pastors have seen their job descriptions reworked in light of these changes. There is a new way clergy are expected to operate in this consumer-driven culture. Theologian and social critic David Wells notes, “Modern clergy are inclined to let professional functions determine the shape of their ministerial service.” He continues:

In this new clerical order, technical and managerial competence in the church have plainly come to dominate the definition of pastoral service. It is true that matters of spirituality loom large in the churches, but it is not all clear that churches expect the pastor to do anything more than to be a good friend. The older role of the pastor as broker of truth has been eclipsed by the newer managerial functions.¹³

Wells made these observations over twenty years ago—and the challenge has only increased. The impact that a consumer-driven cultural stance has on preaching is palpable. One preacher observes that preachers are “no longer expected to offer moral counsel in pastoral care sessions or to deliver sermons that make the comfortable uneasy. Church leaders who

¹² G. Jeffrey MacDonald, “Congregations Gone Wild,” *New York Times* Reprints (7 August 2010). MacDonald quotes the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

¹³ David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 233.

continue such ministerial traditions pay dearly.” He reports, “A few years ago, thousands of parishioners quit Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minn., and Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Ariz., when their respective preachers refused to bless the congregations’ preferred political agendas and consumerist lifestyles.”¹⁴

G. Jeffrey MacDonald, a pastor in Massachusetts decries the pressures he feels as tries to minister in the midst of North American consumerism. His story is baldly clear:

In the early 2000s, the advisory committee of my small congregation in Massachusetts told me to keep my sermons to 10 minutes, tell funny stories and leave people feeling great about themselves. The unspoken message in such instructions is clear: give us the comforting, amusing fare we want or we’ll get our spiritual leadership from someone else.¹⁵

Navigating the contours of consumerism and the call of the sacrificial gospel is a pressure which preachers face as they strive to be faithful in this ever-changing society. Personal pressures and a culture of consumerism are two challenges to preachers.

Technology and Theology

Another cultural challenge that often locks arms with consumerism is the rise of the use of technology in preaching and worship. The virtual self is projected from one venue to another, on the computer screen or in a video—without the face-to-face engagement with the preached Word. I am no Luddite, but I do question the headlong rush into the use of technology without considering the theological implications.

The seemingly lack of careful thoughtful theological reflection and justification for technologies that enable, for example, multi-site ministry that uses projected or virtual communication for worship services, among other resources raises some questions, including: what is worship? What is the church? What is presence? Are our pragmatic approaches squashing our ability to consider the broader theological

¹⁴ MacDonald.

¹⁵ Ibid.

implications of why we do what we do? Was Marshall McLuhan right when he says, “The medium is the message?” Is the medium the message? Or has the medium become the message?¹⁶

Lori Carrell who has engaged in considerable research on the preaching of the sermon notes what she calls, the “diminishing power of the spoken word with new technologies....” She says that such decline in the strength of the spoken word “is only imminent if we choose such a route, if we allow the disintegration of face-to-face public interaction. Might we? Yes. Must we? No. Should we? These are questions worthy of our thoughts and actions as we examine the vitality of preaching....”¹⁷

In a later study commissioned by the Alban Institute, Lori Carrell provides these assuring words: “Though some analysts predict that a few podcasting superpreachers will soon proclaim to a great global pew, right now, Christ-followers are seeking spiritual direction from the public spoken words of their pastors.” She continues, “Your physical presence in the congregation creates the opportunity for relationship with the listening community. The credibility emerging from that relational connection is a critical contributor to the potential power of your preaching.”¹⁸

The personal challenges preachers face are real and unavoidable. Navigating a consumer-driven culture and engaging and evaluating the preacher’s relationship with technology is also a stark reality for preachers. These realities push at the core of our commitment to Christ and our calling as preachers.

The Moral Challenges of Preachers

Preachers are tempted like anyone else, but it is how they respond to temptation that makes the difference. Scanning the newspaper headlines may not provide the best encouragement for those who preach. Larceny, sex-abuse, assault, homosexuality, plagiarism, and other offenses make the headlines about wayward preachers.

¹⁶ See: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT, 1964, 1994).

¹⁷ Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton: Mainstay, 2000), 23.

¹⁸ Lori J. Carrell, *Preaching That Matters: Reflective Practices for Transforming Sermons* (Herndon: Alban, 2013), 9.

In 2010 Vaughn Reeves was sentenced to 54 years in prison for “pocketing millions of dollars that investors believed would be used to build churches.”¹⁹ Still other pastors are accused of embezzling.²⁰ Alberto Cutie, a former Roman Catholic priest admitted to having a girlfriend and fathering a child with her while a priest. He later left the priesthood and married the girlfriend.²¹ Ted Haggard had his own troubles when he was discovered to have had an ongoing homosexual relationship while he was pastor of his church and president of the National Association of Evangelicals.²² Serial philanderer Pastor A.B. Schirmer was placed behind bars for the murder of his first and second wives.²³ One preacher, Rev. Slim Lake was arrested for food stamp allegations. He queried, “How can you put someone in jail for feeding the hungry? If that’s a crime, then put me in jail.”²⁴ He served three years

¹⁹ Associated Press, “Ex-pastor gets 54 years for bilking investors,” Boston Globe 8 Dec. 2008: A2.

²⁰ Associated Press, “Pastor, wife charged with embezzling,” Boston Globe 30 Jan. 2010: B2; “Pastor resigns amid finance investigation,” Boston Globe 20 June 2010: B5; Emma Stickgold, “Priest is charged with stealing from Haverhill church,” Boston Globe 8 Nov. 2010: B12; David M. Halbfiner, “Authorities arrest 44 in N.J. corruption case,” Boston Globe 24 July 2009: A2.

²¹ Eric Gorski, “Celibacy questions plague Hispanic priest at heart of scandal,” Boston Globe 17 May 2009: A13; Associated Press, “‘Father Oprah’ preaches in Episcopal Church,” Boston Globe 3 June 2009: A2; Associated Press, “Miami priest in scandal weds girlfriend,” Boston Globe 17 June 2009: A2; Associated Press, “Ex-priest rips church leaders on romance,” Boston Globe 4 Jan. 2011: A2.

²² Kim Nguyen, “Colorado Evangelical tied to sex scandal dismissed,” Boston Sunday Globe 5 November 2006: A25; Colleen Slevin, “Evangelist confesses to ‘sexual immorality,’” Boston Globe 6 November 2006: A2; Associated Press, “Disgraced pastor to launch new church,” Boston Globe 30 June 2010: A2.

²³ Michael Rubinkam, “Arthur Schirmer, Retired Pastor, Killed Both Wives, Jewel Schirmer And Betty Jean Schirmer, Cops,” Huffington Post 29 September 2012 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/29/arthur-schirmer-pastor-killed-wives-jewel-betty-jean_n_1925198.html>

²⁴ Associated Press, “Robin Hood or hood? Preacher charged,” Boston Globe 17 Nov. 1996: A20.

for that crime and subsequently ended up in prison for six more years on a separate charge of money laundering and forgery.²⁵

My work in the area of preaching and plagiarism reveals similar concerns in which preachers engage in questionable activities.²⁶ Since the publication of the book in 2008, I have continued to gather material on plagiarizing preachers. However one regards the act of plagiarism, it is a failing of judgment and will have consequences.

Spurgeon puts it bluntly, “Open immorality, in most cases, however deep the repentance, is a fatal sign that ministerial graces were never in the man’s character.”²⁷ Whether or not Spurgeon’s perspective is correct, preachers, like others, are confronted with temptations common to men and women and still other temptations common to people in their position as public figures and moral leaders.

We are well aware of fallen preachers and the carnage they leave behind. From the fictional—yet all too real Elmer Gantry²⁸ and Rev. Jonas Nightengale in Steve Martin’s portrayal in “Leap of Faith”²⁹—to the indictment of Pastor David Yonggi Cho founder of the largest church in the world for an alleged stock scheme³⁰ to the denial of faith as expressed by former evangelist Charles Bradley Templeton who preached widely with Billy Graham.³¹

D.L. Moody reportedly said to a group of preachers, “The man I have had the greatest trouble with in all my ministry is a fellow by the

²⁵ Casey Sumner, “Preacher returns to streets, ministry after prison release,” *The Blade* 16 July 2012 <<http://www.toledoblade.com/local/2012/07/16/Preacher-returns-to-streets-ministry-after-prison-release.html>>

²⁶ Scott M. Gibson, *Should We Use Someone Else’s Sermon? Preaching in a Cut and Paste World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

²⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1960), 14.

²⁸ Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (Oxford: Oxford, 1983, 1927).

²⁹ *Leap of Faith*, dir. David Pearce, perf. Steve Martin, Debra Winger, Paramount, 1992.

³⁰ Melissa Steffan, “Founder of World’s Largest Church Could Face Indictment for Alleged Stock Scheme,” *ChristianityToday.com* 1 March 2013 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/march/founder-of-worlds-largest-church-could-face-indictment-for.html>>

³¹ Charles Templeton, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996).

name of Dwight L. Moody.”³² I tell my students that as preachers we can easily get in our own way. Whether it is a distracting mannerism while preaching or a glaring moral or spiritual failure, we get in our own way and prevent others from seeing the Savior.

The Challenge of the Cult of Personality

Bishop Gore wrote over a century ago, “the disease of modern preaching is its search after popularity.”³³ “There is a disease sweeping through the body of Christ,” states Pastor Steve Hill in 2008. “It’s infectious sickness I call ‘the man of God syndrome’ or ‘the celebrity syndrome.’ It rears its ugly head in the form of self-adulation and self-promotion.”³⁴ It has long been a problem in a consumer culture that takes advantage of technological advances with comfort and ease and with little critical theological engagement, that we are not surprised to observe the rise of the cult of personality among preachers. Star preachers appear on television, the Internet, conferences, the publication world through books, tours, the speaking circuit, magazine features, polls, etc. These preachers are raised to pedestals and platforms, adored, almost worshiped in a twenty-first century marketed way. We live in a culture of self-importance.

Of course, the tendency of people being attracted to star-power is not new to the human race. Throughout the ages men and women have been hailed by their contemporaries and adulated. The Bible charts the cry of Israel for a king—and they got one, even though their king took attention away from God, the ultimate King.³⁵ Saul the first king was compared in the popular culture of the day to the up and coming eventual candidate for king, David. Following David’s defeat over the threatening Philistine Goliath, the heart of the crowd went toward the young,

³² Quoted in Adams, 132.

³³ Quoted in James S. Stewart, *Heralds of God* (Vancouver: Regent College, 1946, 2001), 29.

³⁴ Steve Hill, “Celebrity Syndrome: Jesus called His followers to be servants but in today’s flashy church scene some leaders have become superstars,” *Charisma and Christian Life* (1 February 2008): Christian Periodical Index, EBSCOhost (accessed 19 January 2014).

³⁵ Deut. 17:14-20; 28:36; 1 Sam. 8.

handsome victor. “Saul has slain his thousands,” the people chanted, “and David his tens of thousands.”³⁶ The cult of personality has begun!

Popularity has become part of what it means to be a preacher in popular culture. There has been Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, Wesley, Edwards, Spurgeon and thousands of others. In his 1893 lectures on preaching Robert F. Horton laments, “And before I go any further, let me utter my protest against the danger of popularity. Popular preacher! it is a term that fills one with misgiving. What has a preacher to do with popularity! It is not enough that the disciple should be as his Lord?”³⁷

Andre Resner comments, “And all things being equal, who would not want a minister who was tall, thin, athletic, well-dressed, good-looking, game-show-host-gregarious, permanently smiling (with really straight, white teeth), positively peppy and never sad or negative, with a good sense of humor, nice and friendly to children, older people, and animals, and always available for a chat, a cup of coffee, a tee time (or tea time), or to be a reassuring shoulder to cry on—oh, yes, and non-judgmental of our greed, prejudices, and any other glaring ways in which we are inconsistent with the gospel?” He continues:

Show me such a person, add a soothing, upbeat message of health, wealth, and happiness, and I will show you someone whom American Christianity will reward generously. American pop culture triumphs when the mind-set of churchgoers increasingly turns from understanding of church as a community of disciples formed by its prophetically cruciform-shaped beliefs and practices and instead reflects a consumer’s mind-set where people’s unreflective appetites and felt needs are fed, entertained, even pampered, and whose cultural prejudices are tolerated and even reinforced, if necessary, so long as they attend and give money. This is a picture of church and ministerial character sold out to culture.³⁸

³⁶ 1 Samuel 18:7b.

³⁷ Robert F. Horton, *Verbum Dei* (New York: Macmillan, 1893), 245-246.

³⁸ Andre Resner, “Character,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, eds., Paul Scott Wilson, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008): 225-226.

The problem is not particular to evangelical Christianity—with our wide margins of expression—from rigid conservatives to fluid Pentecostals. Yet, regarding the cult of personality one Catholic writer complains:

We have seen it over and over again with entertainment celebrities, businesspeople, politicians, and world leaders. Sad to say, we also have cults of personality in our church—on both sides of the ideological spectrum. In fact, you can quickly identify which way a Catholic leans by who their heroes or heroines are: Mother Angelica or Joan Chittister? Fr. John Corapi, or Fr. Roy Bourgeois? Padre Pio, or Oscar Romero?³⁹

A possible reason for the emphasis on popularity in the current landscape of preaching may have to do with the desire for power as Os Guinness notes: “Confusion about the character issue also stems from our preoccupation with power.”⁴⁰ Not only does power feed one’s ego, but it also displaces the Lord with the much less important popular preacher.

Another reason for the preacher’s desire for popularity may be the lure of ambition. One’s ambitions are to be checked by the microscope of motives. Web Garrison notes, “In order to be used for the highest ends, the element of ambition must be recognized. One cannot dam a destructive stream and turn its waters into irrigation ditches until he discovers that the problem exists.”⁴¹

Some years ago I asked one of the young men whom I was mentoring at the time what he wanted to do in ministry. He replied, “I want to be famous.” Gratefully, fame has not yet paid a visit to this now more mature preacher. But, obtaining recognition for the wrong or the even right reasons can be dangerous. Kent Edwards acknowledges,

³⁹ Heidi Schlumpf, “Dangers of Hero Worship: Cult of personality feeds *human love for stories*, but we need to keep focus on God,” *National Catholic Reporter* 47:16 (27 May 2011): 22-23. Religion and Philosophy Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed 19 January 2014), 23.

⁴⁰ Os Guinness, *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in and Age of Image* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2000), 19.

⁴¹ Webb B. Garrison, *The Preacher and his Audience* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1954), 39-40.

“Pride is the Achilles heel of many preachers.”⁴² Or, as Cornelius Plantinga puts it, “The Bible and Christian tradition tell us that sinful pride (*hybris*) is an enemy of God.”⁴³ Edwards continues, “We can preach, teach, engage in ministry all for the wrong reasons. Furthermore, he says, “When some measure of fame comes knocking, it often holds the door open for pride to pay you a visit. When your ego gets tied up with the success of your ministry and popularity begins to become important to you, you are in serious trouble.”⁴⁴ We begin to believe our own press. Our motives become mixed and we begin to drift. When this happens Warren and David Wiersbe note:

The servant of the Lord can’t minister effectively if mixed motives compete in the heart. Love of attention and praise, love of money, love of authority, even love of ministry, can never glorify God or carry God’s servant through the hills and valleys of spiritual service. Only a love for Christ can do that.⁴⁵

William Still agrees, “Many men make names for themselves in these pursuits as speakers, organisers, writers, good committee members, even as entertainers. They sustain a calling almost independent of, or that has very little to do with, the task of the pastoral ministry of feeding their sheep, from which they derive their daily bread.”⁴⁶

But to their detriment because of crowd mentality, those who listen to sermons are more drawn to personality than to content, further exacerbating the problem. John Koessler laments, “Today’s listeners are more conscious of a speaker’s image than they are of a sermon’s line of reasoning, strength of argument, or its biblical content.” He continues, “We who preach to them have also been steeped in this culture and are

⁴² J. Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching: Creating Sermons That Go Beyond the Superficial* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 54.

⁴³ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 84. See Prov. 8:13; Jer. 50:31; James 4:6.z

⁴⁴ Edwards, 54.

⁴⁵ Warren W. & David W. Wiersbe, *10 Power Principles for Christian Service* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997, 2010), 40.

⁴⁶ William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1984, 2001), 86.

tempted to try to hold their attention by the power of personality alone.”⁴⁷

The soup is mixed when it comes to the cult of personality. There are popular preachers whose content is insipid, while other famous preachers are solid theologically. Yet both have this in common, their ministries are often defined and determined by the person, the pastor—themselves. My doctoral research focused on the life and work of Boston Baptist preacher A.J. Gordon (1836-1895). Gordon was theologically sound. He was not a huge personality, but widely recognized in his day. His preaching and ministry attracted thousands. He served the Clarendon Street Baptist Church for twenty-five years and died suddenly at the age of 58. The church was never the same after he died. No pastor could fill his shoes. No one could match the strength of his gentle personality. The church died a long, slow death, finally closing in 1982.⁴⁸ This story is repeated again and again in churches where the personality of the preacher dominates the ministry. Consider Russell H. Conwell and his ministry at the Baptist Temple in Philadelphia, or Charles Haddon Spurgeon at New Park Street Church, London, or Martin Lloyd-Jones at Westminster Chapel, London, or William Henry Porter at Walmer Road Baptist Church, Toronto.

The painful episode of the fall of pastor Ted Haggard of the 14,000 member New Life megachurch in Colorado Springs in 2006 raised the question in the press, “So when Haggard fell spectacularly from grace in a scandal involving drugs and allegations of gay sex, many wondered if New Life, so tied to his public persona, would crash with him?”⁴⁹ The church did crash and declined in attendance by almost half.⁵⁰ As Phillips Brooks reminds us, “It was not good that the minister should be worshipped and make an oracle.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ John Koessler, *Folly, Grace, and Power: The Mysterious Act of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 94.

⁴⁸ Society Minutes, Federal Street Baptist Church (Rowe Street/Clarendon Street), Archives, Jenks Learning Center, Gordon College, Wenham, MA.

⁴⁹ Rachel Zoll, “Haggard case raises questions about ‘superstar’ pastors,” *The Salem News* 11 November 2006: A10.

⁵⁰ Patton Dodd, “New Life After the Fall: How the megachurch healed—by remembering what it means to be the church,” *Christianity Today* December 2013: 36-43.

⁵¹ Phillips Brooks, *Eight Lectures on Preaching* (London: SPCK, 1959), 66-67.

Fill in the blank, “That is so-and-so’s church.” Whether it is New York City, Toronto, Los Angeles, Dallas, Halifax, or Boston churches are often identified by who the preacher is. What are we doing? Is it really the case that Piper or Hybels or Young or Keller or Chan or Evans or any preacher is the focus of any church?—“I will build *my* church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.”⁵² These words from Jesus are a fresh reminder of who really is in charge. Preachers come and go, but the Lord’s church will continue.

Nineteenth-century preacher R.W. Dale reflected on the challenges of the popular preacher. He wrote, “But preaching may seem to be very effective, may attract great crowds, may produce intense excitement, may win for the preacher a wide reputation, and may yet be practically worthless and even mischievous.”⁵³

Our culture is one fascinated with personalities. We live our lives through the lives of others—and we sometimes do the same thing with preachers. Every generation has done it. We follow after the preacher who meets our needs, agrees with our perspective, has all the answers, says the right things, is the best looking, has the most convincing ethos, etc. What is worse, since we live in a culture of self-importance some preachers have believed their own press and have encouraged the cult of personality by promoting themselves on blogs or personal websites—selling oneself, leveraging marketing techniques, even enjoying recognition, or falling prey to the lure of money, among other insidiously destructive tactics.⁵⁴

The cult of personality shows up in North America with the establishment of satellite sites. Instead of planting churches where other preachers can nurture a congregation, one’s “influence” is leveraged. Instead of personal presence the preacher is piped in virtually—raising all kinds of issues regarding ecclesiology, worship, etc. Surely there are trained pastors who could be given the privilege of shepherding a congregation on their own. Do we really think that the building of the kingdom depends on the building of our own personal empire? The

⁵² Matthew 16:18.

⁵³ R.W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1896), 25.

⁵⁴ Warren Wiersbe and David Wiersbe note: “When God decides to magnify a servant’s name, that’s one thing. When we start promoting ourselves, however, that’s quite something else” p.78.

Apostle Paul nurtured pastors in order to pastor. They were to imitate him as he did Christ. What about us?

The cult of personality is real, dangerous, even poisonous. It is something that will not soon go away. But preachers and people have the responsibility to recognize it and to quell its dreaded impact on the soul of the preacher and the soul of the church, Christ's Church.

The Challenge of Seminary Education

Where does theological education fit into the landscape of preaching? Why include this category in this study? I am convinced that one of the most strategic places in which character development through discipleship can be enhanced, engendered and modeled is in the seminary. The discussion on the why and how of discipleship and character formation in seminary education has been taking place among academics for decades. As one theological educator observed over thirty years ago:

Character development has, does and will take place in theological education. Frequently this development occurs haphazardly and with a significant number of hazards and casualties for both the teacher and learner. I think that theological educators and theological institutions should be intentional in educating character for ministry.⁵⁵

Theological training has tended to take on the features of the academy rather than the inspiration of discipleship and development of character. Classes have become substitutes for discipleship and grades replaced the markers of maturity and character.⁵⁶ Theological educator Douglas John Hall remarks:

⁵⁵ Henry Edward Everding, Jr., "Shaping Character for Ministry: A Task for Theological Education," *Ilfiff Review* 40:2 (March 1983): 11.

⁵⁶ Barna notes: "Getting good grades on papers and exams about ministry does not ensure that these students will be able to apply that knowledge and to be effective ministers," in *Today's Pastors: A Revealing Look at What Pastors are Saying About Themselves, Their Peers and the Pressures They Face* p., 141.

To speak concretely: for how many thousand of seminarians has it been the case that their earlier, no doubt tentative and vulnerable sense of vocation to Christian discipleship has been replaced, in the space of two or three years, by a more comfortable if not unquestioning confidence in the capacity for the ministerial office? This transformation of “the freshman” into “the graduate” is regularly regarded as a success story; and indeed the educational process seems to demand some such movement from hesitancy to confidence. But the pedagogical gain is frequently (not always!) accompanied by spiritual loss. Over the course of three or four years, the candidate has acquired the knowledge and skills which fit him or her for ‘professional ministry,’ as this has been enshrined in the conventions of this or that ecclesial community; but the very possession of this ‘know-how’ may have deprived the candidate of many of those qualities of character that, from the perspective of biblically-informed faith and theology, at first commended him/her: the sense of personal unworthiness, inadequacy to the task, humility *vis a vis* the tradition and the disciplines which seek to comprehend it, respect for authority, anticipation of discovery, awe before the unknown, a feeling of comradeship with those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” including those who are not given the opportunity for higher theological learning (the laity!), etc.⁵⁷

The call to character development and the uncertainty of how to do it is echoed in the conclusions of two Canadian authors who studied a broad spectrum of master of divinity students in Toronto. The authors complain:

However, despite foundational courses in spirituality and the existence of chapel services, seminary administrators and faculty members sometimes seem uncertain about how to foster the

⁵⁷ Douglas John Hall, “Theological Education as Character Formation?” *Theological Education* Supplement I (1988): 62–63.

spiritual growth of their students or how to relate spirituality to the “academic” offerings.⁵⁸

The emphasis in the study leaned to the importance of developing personal piety with no real reference to a life of discipleship, which led the authors to note, “We conclude that many current seminarians are, to a considerable degree, missing connections between Christian spirituality and public life.”⁵⁹

The curriculum or the structure of the courses and how they relate to each other and the practice of ministry is a challenge in an entrenched tradition of theological education. One critic of theological education comments:

The seminary curriculum does little to produce a coherent understanding of the *telos* of ministry. The division of the curriculum into separate areas of specialization, developed under the influence of the German model at the end of the nineteenth century, exacerbates the problem by separating ministry from the other theological disciplines.⁶⁰

Seminaries are between the proverbial rock and a hard place. They have a product to offer—the degree—and need students to fund it. A study done by the Alban Center for the Study of Theological Education reveals, “Theological schools are not highly selective (data from other sources show that half accepted 87 percent or more of those who apply). A majority of students apply to only one school. Only a handful says that they were not accepted by their first choice of seminary.”⁶¹ Barna made a similar observation:

⁵⁸ Jeffrey P. Greenman and Yau Man Siew, “Spirituality and Public Character: A Qualitative Cross-Sectional Study of Master of Divinity Students in Toronto,” *Theological Education* 38:1 (2001): 1.

⁵⁹ Greenman and Siew, 19.

⁶⁰ James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 10.

⁶¹ James P. Wind and Gilbert R. Rendle, “The Leadership Situation Facing American Congregations: An Alban Institute Special Report,” (September 2001): 12. The full text of the study: Barbara Wheeler, “Is There a Problem: Theological Students and Religious Leadership for the Future” (New York: Auburn Center

Indeed, we also found in our research that because of financial difficulties, seminaries are less demanding of the eligibility requirements they place upon applicants. In other words, because seminaries are forced to be financially stable, which requires a certain number of students to pay the bills and justify the scope of programs and facilities available, the quantity of students invited to attend has superseded the quality of students who are admitted.⁶²

The above observations present a challenge to theological educators and even the churches from which these students come and to which these students will go.

Conclusion

What is the landscape of preaching today? What is its over-all health? From what we have discussed above, one may conclude that the landscape of the character of preaching is in a serious predicament. Mainline African-American professor of preaching Katie Geneva Cannon gives a dour assessment of preaching in the mainline. She comments:

Generally speaking, it is most definitely shallow and in the shallows. It is shallow in content as it relates to the deep issues in contemporary life. And it is definitely in the shallows in interest as it relates to being significant to most people trying to find answers to problems of life here and now. Most people, when they got problems, they don't even think about the preacher any more. The preacher is that fellow who gets up there and talks real light and doesn't know anything.⁶³

for the Study of Theological Education, 2001), p. 3. Available online at www.auburnsem.org/studies/pubs.shtml

⁶² George Barna, *Today's Pastors: A Revealing Look at What Pastors are Saying About Themselves, Their Peers and the Pressures They Face* (Ventura: Regal, 1993), 140. Although the data are twenty years old, the issues seem to remain the same.

⁶³ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Teaching Preaching: Isaac Rufus Clark and Black Sacred Rhetoric* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 57.

What are we to make of this vast landscape of the character of preaching? Reflecting on what we have explored, I suggest the following to consider as we move forward in the examination of the way discipleship shapes character—particularly in the life of a preacher of the gospel.

First, in light of consumerism and the challenges of technology, preachers have sometimes failed to navigate these challenges well. Instead of critically analyzing the onslaughts of culture, we have welcomed cultural shifts with open arms. We want thoughtful, theologically engaged preachers who understand the challenge of living a life of discipleship in the midst of an alien culture. As Jonathan R. Wilson notes, “True discipleship to Christ and life in the kingdom make no sense in the context of modernity and a consumer culture.”⁶⁴

Second, the position of the popular preacher as demonstrated in the cult of personality is a poisonous challenge for the present-day preacher. As Peter Kreft acknowledges, “Our civilization’s fundamental goal is one of pride....”⁶⁵ We could become disheartened by the rough terrain this portion of modern landscape exposes—proud, self-promoting preachers who preach one way but live another. The rawness of what we hear and see challenges us in how we are to live and preach. In trying to piece together the sinfulness we have and the life to which we are called to live, Cornelius Plantinga comments:

Observing character ironies of these kinds, we naturally conclude that human beings are inexpressibly complex creatures in whom great good and great evil often cohabit, sometimes in separate and well-insulated rooms and sometimes in an intimacy so deep and twisted and twined that we never get to see the one moral quality without the other.⁶⁶

Although Plantinga’s words bring a measure of comfort, we want to move beyond the observation that we are complex creatures and to determine to have our lives shaped by Christ, our singular focus, in order to put to death—sanctify—our lives in becoming more and more like Christ.

⁶⁴ Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry, and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 94.

⁶⁵ Peter Kreft, *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom For Modern Moral Confusion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 101.

⁶⁶ Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 81.

Pride, self-promotion, pursuit of recognition shields us from Christlikeness. Kreft notes, “The deepest reason God hates pride, the reason pride is so hellish, is that it keeps us from knowing God, our supreme joy.”⁶⁷ And we want to remind the church that Christ is the head of the church, not any pastor. We do damage to the preacher and to the church when we amplify the preacher and not our Lord.

Third, diligent commitment to Christ is key for pastoral integrity and character. Recommitting ourselves to the biblical markers of believers—which we will discuss in another lecture, obtaining a mature mentor, among other helps will reinvigorate our lives as disciples of Christ. Puritan Richard Baxter encouraged pastors toward this end when he wrote:

Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling blocks before the blind, as may the occasion be of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives, what you say with your tongues; and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labours.⁶⁸

Fourth, theological seminaries, Bible Schools and Christian higher educational institutions would benefit the Kingdom—and those under their care—by taking a fresh and bold look at why they do what they do—and retool themselves. To make theological education fit into the broader goals of discipleship we are called to rethink what we are about. As Douglas John Hall suggests:

If it is true that spiritual maturity is the consequence of a trust in God which entails transcendence of self, then such maturity can only be expedited by an educational method which *concentrates* on the ‘study of God’ (*theou-logos*). The one engaged in such ‘study’—the disciple—is by no means excluded; but his/her role is understood from the outset as being one of

⁶⁷ Kreft, 102.

⁶⁸ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979 reprint), 63.

discernment (*discere*), of orientation towards ‘the other,’ of ‘following’—in short, of discipleship.⁶⁹

Hall clearly articulates, “The end in relation to which theological education is a means is Christian discipleship—meaning not only the discipleship of the individual student of the theological disciplines but of the Christian community of which the learner is a one ‘member.’”⁷⁰

A reorientation about what is done in theological education to shape disciples toward maturity in Christ is key. This rethinking means an overall theological/philosophical commitment in all aspects of the institution. Trustees, administrators, faculty, staff and students will understand what it means to be a maturing disciple if everyone is committed to the same goal. Ten Elshof and Furrow similarly advocate:

Christian theological education has to look less like an impersonal institution producing candidates for ministry employment, and more like a biblically nurtured Christian education community. Within this community the mentoring and nurturing of students has to become a priority so there is training for godliness, Biblically, holding to sound doctrine is essential for church leaders, but godly character and attitudes are expected to accompany such doctrine (Titus 2:1).⁷¹

If institutionally there is a commitment to a discipleship model of theological education, the difference will be seen in the seminary or Bible college community and the impact will be felt by everyone. “The part of the equation that is sometimes omitted is the growth of Christian character,” as one study notes. “It cannot be developed simply by taking courses, attending chapels, and hearing sermons. Christian character must be learned by seeing living models—such as professors, advanced

⁶⁹ Hall, 59.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷¹ Judith K. Ten Elshof and James F. Furrow, “The Role of Secure Attachment in Predicting Spiritual Maturity of Students at a Conservative Seminary,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28:2 (2000): 106.

students, and campus leaders in the faith—who inspire students to become more mature.”⁷²

Pastor Mark Sayers observes that there is a common problem shared among megachurches, medium-size churches and small ones, too—and dare I say theological education. Sayers writes:

As I traveled around speaking at churches of all shapes, approaches, and flavors, I noticed that despite their completely different approaches, they had a common problem. It did not matter if the church was a small, emerging missional community; a traditional liturgical church on the corner; or a multisite contemporary megachurch. There was a basic problem of discipleship. The best way to describe the problem was to say that it was a crisis of identity.⁷³

The crisis of identity is discipleship, the consistently missing ingredient that makes mature believers and preachers in the church and through theological education. The call is for a robust theology of discipleship for the preacher, the church and academy.

⁷² Carey Lampton and Gary J. Oliver, Everett L. Worthington, Jr. and Jack W. Berry, “Helping Christian College Students Become More Forgiving: An Intervention Study to Promote Forgiveness as Part of a Program to Shape Christian Character,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 33:4 (2005): 278.

⁷³ Mark Sayers, *The Vertical Self: How Biblical Faith Can Help Us Discover Who We Are in and Age of Self Obsession* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), xviii.