

Pastoral Paranoia

John R. Cionca

This article first appeared in Leadership, A Practical Journal for Church Leaders, Fall 1985

I began my ministry in Woodbury, New Jersey, on a beautiful autumn day in 1979. With a successful eight-year ministry behind me and a strong conviction of the Lord's leading, I was optimistic about this new pastorate.

It didn't take long to immerse myself in the weekly details of study, administration, visitation, and counseling. I particularly enjoyed guiding the congregation in worship and in the study of Scripture.

I had been preaching regularly for several years prior to this new position, but rarely, if ever, had I given much thought to "how I was doing." My preaching task was simply to present the Word of God to the people of God. Oh, there were times for evaluation, but never had I become deeply introspective.

I began preaching in my new church with that same unself-consciousness.

Toward the end of my first year, however, I began reflecting more on myself as the communicator than about the message being communicated. The freedom of concentration on the Word was slipping. Increasingly my thoughts were What are these people thinking about me? Rather than What are they thinking about the biblical text? I was becoming paranoid in my preaching.

The problem began with a number of "little foxes" that started to create self-doubt. My custom was to provide study outlines to accompany each text, and I began hearing some indirect comments about "all the paperwork we have around here" or "It seems like we're back in school again." The statements were not frequent, but they popped up enough to make me question the value of the outlines.

Another challenge to my preaching style, and more deeply my own person, was a comment by two individuals regarding my use of humor. One man told me he'd heard a powerful sermon the previous day, and the speaker had not shared one humorous incident in the entire message. Now, I'm a smart enough boy to figure out this was not just a nice sermon report. In his own way, Bob was saying what he expected from the pulpit. Were there others who felt that way? Again, doubts were raised.

Then another fox began troubling my mental garden. Occasionally, for illustrative purposes I would mention an individual in the congregation. For example, if I were describing Palestine, I might say that the Sea of Galilee was located by Bill, and farther down the Jordan River the Dead Sea would be located near Ed.

After one service, an individual came up and mentioned that although he was unlearned, he knew you should not mention a person's name in a speech. He said that names made him begin to focus on the person. In fact, on that particular Sunday, he spent the whole service reflecting on the named person's lifestyle at the place they both worked. He said that aspect of my preaching bothered him.

I appreciated Jerry taking the time to share his concern. It sounded valid. Was I, in fact, distracting people from the Bible rather than illustrating it?

By the sixteenth month of my new ministry, I was in the midst of what might be called preaching paranoia. Should I use sermon outlines, should I not? Should I tell that humorous story, or should I scrap it? How personal should I make my descriptions and illustrations? Every time I used a

study outline, I found myself looking at Ted. Every time I told a joke, I had to resist looking to the left side of the congregation to see if Bob was giving me the sanctified scowl. Whenever I mentioned a name, I was wondering if Jerry was moving into his fantasy world. My desire was to be a good preacher. I really wanted to avoid anything that might hurt the communication process.

The situation came to a head when one man took me aside to “share something.”

“Pastor,” said Dan, “sometimes I wonder how sincere you are when you preach. A man of God ought to go into the pulpit with fear and trembling, but last Sunday just before you were to preach I saw you smiling at somebody in the congregation.”

I remembered the incident immediately. During the hymn before the sermon, I looked up from the hymnal and caught a smile from my wife. I smiled back and kept singing that hymn of praise.

To assure Don of my sincerity, I explained my weekly preparation process. Throughout the week I studied, completing my sermon by Thursday. The message would be restudied on Friday. On Saturday evening I would go to the church and preach the sermon in the empty sanctuary. Saturday night after returning home, I would again review my outline. At home early Sunday morning, I would again read the text and go over my remarks. During Sunday school, I would spend the last half-hour in prayer and study for the message. Just before the service our staff would meet in the prayer room to pray together that God would be honored through the worship and preached Word. If that wasn't sincerity, I'm not sure what was.

As we talked, an interesting thing happened. Rather than creating further introspection, the very nature of Don's comment broke the cycle of pastoral paranoia. I knew my sincerity, and I knew my preparation. If the smile offended him, then I was sorry. I could suck on dill pickles before I ascended the chancel, but I doubt if that would please everybody. It was the ridiculousness of the comment that freed me to realize I just can't please everyone. Many people loved the outlines; many responded to appropriate humor; and many more were drawn to involvement through personal illustrations.

That turnaround in the sixteenth month of my ministry has continued. As I reflect, and as other pastors have shared with me similar experiences, several conclusions seem to emerge that can help us cope when pastoral paranoia hits.

Live for Christ, not Ministry

For me, the ministry was my life. I loved the church—not because it's a perfect institution, but because it's God's vehicle for spiritual maturity. My time and energy were given to the church. Ministers don't punch out at night; they bring their work home with them. It's on their minds even as they sleep. The pains of people and the details of the program do not stop at 5 p.m. on Friday.

The loop never closes. As soon as the sermon is given, a new one is already on the drawing board with, at the most, a six-day deadline. There are always people who need to be visited and counseled. There are additional programs to be started and staff to be trained. The sound system is still a pain in the neck; the custodial vacancy has not yet been filled; and the baptismal tank, which is to be used on Sunday, has a rare culture growing in it.

When is enough enough?

The busier I got with church ministry (most of which was good), the less consistent I was in spiritual disciplines. The ministry was my life, but something just wasn't right. The joy of the Lord, the joy of true spiritual service, was disappearing.

One morning while reading in Philippians, the importance of that familiar verse in chapter three again challenged my priorities. Paul's desire was “that I might know him.” The thought occurred to

me, For what shall it profit a minister if he oversees home Bible studies, club programs, church services, youth ministries, ten committees, and preaches—if he loses his own soul, or at least his affection for and close walk with his Savior?

The loop will never be closed. Christ, not ministry, must be my life, I decided. The ministry opportunities and demands would have to be realistically managed.

Maintain a Healthy View of Depravity

The body of Christ is composed of people who have two natures. While we can rejoice that the Holy Spirit has regenerated Christians, there remains within each believer the pull of the old self. At any moment an individual can be following the influence of the Spirit or following the selfish, sometimes ugly behavior of the old self.

I once told our associate pastor, “Rick, if you’re going to survive in the ministry, you have to have a healthy understanding of human depravity.” He learned this lesson quickly one Sunday morning in the church boiler room.

We were in the prayer room just prior to the morning worship service when Rick came in looking like a dog that had just been beaten. I asked what was wrong. He filled us in.

While passing through a class in the basement, he was asked to step into the boiler room, away from people, because Jerry wanted to “share something” with him. (I should have warned him about situations that begin with “I want to share something with you,” especially if the words “in love” are added).

Once inside the small cubicle, Jerry poured out how he felt that Rick had failed him during his convalescence from surgery. Although Rick and I had both personally visited and phoned him, it wasn’t enough for Jerry. The nature of the speech, the intensity of his body language, and his full six-foot-four-inch frame completely devastated Rick.

While much of the criticism we receive is valid and beneficial, a lot of flak is generated because the old nature within people is not yet eradicated.

We continually try to feed and encourage the new self. At the same time we should never be caught by surprise that at any given moment, someone might behave with the ugly, hurtful behavior of the old self. That simply reminds us our job is not yet finished.

Regular, Systematic Evaluations

Proverbs 12:15 states, “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.” While some criticism might be off the wall, other criticism may be very much on target. In order to have a vehicle for that constructive criticism, systematic evaluations can be helpful. Regularly scheduled assessments will help avoid stress-producing showdowns.

Every three years, our board of elders reviews the eleven points of my job description. On each item they make commendations and recommendations. They spend a couple of sessions together, and then their time with me takes from two to three hours.

As they give their assessment, I mainly listen. Sometimes I take notes on the printed evaluation they have provided. Whereas some pastors remain completely quiet at this time, I take the opportunity to interact, to clarify. The printed evaluation serves as a springboard for elaborating on their observations and concerns.

The systematic evaluation provides a vehicle for positive and negative feelings to be expressed. If a vehicle for sharing criticism is not provided, then by default we encourage people to share it among themselves. Indirectly, the formal evaluation is also an assessment of the congregation. If the evaluation reveals that the leadership desires a significantly different style of ministry, then a wise pastor might begin thinking about making a change that would free both parties to best serve authentically and wholeheartedly.

Allowing for Different Tastes

I prize the office of pastor. I often think it would be easier to be the president of General Motors or IBM than to be an effective pastor. Parents work hard at keeping family harmony. Yet in real life children fuss with each other, and even mom and dad have their disagreements. Now put one hundred of these families together in one collective church family, and you can be in for some interesting times.

The pastor is judged by the laity on how well the church functions. At the same time, however, he is dependent on that same group of people for volunteers to provide the effective ministry. They may drop the ball (or never pick it up to start with), and at the same time think the problem is the pastor.

Some people like formal worship, others informal. Musically, some appreciate Bach; others prefer Gaither, Baxter, or Patti. Some enjoy a challenging cognitive sermon, while others like the walls to shake with the threat of fire and brimstone.

When we realize that people have different tastes, we are less troubled by those who are not always happy. In fact, if someone moves on to another congregation, that may be beneficial to both them and the church. Providing an inclusive and diverse program is important. On the other hand, realizing that people differ will also help us avoid pastoral paranoia.

Since I can't please all the people all the time, for God's glory I use the personality, talents, and gifts he has given me to serve wholeheartedly in the church to which he has called me.

I was visiting an elderly man one Monday morning when he said, "Pastor, yesterday I heard three sermons. It's funny. I can remember Jerry Falwell's outline and Charles Stanley's outline, but I can't remember yours."

My first thought was Gee, Jerry and Charles don't even give a written outline. Obviously, the statement was not offered to suggest I change the alliteration on the sermon. It was just a thoughtless, or at worst, cruel statement from one of my dual-natured people. Earlier in my tenure, that comment would have devastated me, but now that kind of statement is not surprising or crippling.

Making Christ our life, maintaining a healthy view of depravity, having regular evaluations, and realizing that people have different tastes—all these free us up to concentrate on the larger goals of the ministry. Our preoccupations become less inward; our time and energy are more concentrated on meaningful service.