

Preaching Priorities

Dear Michael,

So God has tapped you on the shoulder and you are going to pastor. That's great! I cannot think of a greater privilege than to teach the Word of God to the people of God. But let me caution you that being a pastor isn't all it is made out to be. One cynic scoffed, *Pastors don't get paid much, but you can't beat the hours—eleven to twelve on Sunday*. Of all the sick jokes I know, that one is the most anemic! Being the successful pastor of a growing congregation may be the most demanding calling in Christ's entire kingdom.

All you have to do is glance at a minister's PDA to see the dimensions of the assignment. In the morning, a pastor sets aside time for study. He has to be a scholar. People in the congregation expect a minister to know the Scriptures, and to know how to apply them to the living of their days. On a couple of afternoons, the pastor schedules time to visit in the hospitals. Now she is expected to be member of a healing team. On other afternoons, the minister maps out some time for counseling. People in the church and in the community come to him with broken hearts, broken homes, and broken lives, and they expect him to have the glue to put them together again. Added in on short notice are funerals. (People don't die according to schedule.) Now, the pastor serves as a grief therapist. Her presence gives comfort to people wild with grief.

On one evening, the minister meets with the Christian Education committee. As an educator, he helps plan a program to teach everyone from womb to tomb. On another evening the pastor meets with the trustees. Now she serves as a CEO planning a budget and spending hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. And, of course, the pastor is expected to be a communicator. A couple of times a week people expect him to deliver a relevant message from Scripture that will hold their attention and touch their lives. Then, like any Christian, the pastor is expected to be a loving spouse, a devoted father or mother and a contributing member to the community.

One of the occupational hazards of the ministry is vocational amnesia. To paraphrase an old Negro spiritual, the pastor is a *poor little Jesus boy, and he don't know who he is*.

Michael, if you are going to survive in ministry, you must establish priorities. You can't be all circumference. You have to have a center.

Make *yourself* your first priority. God always puts *to be* ahead of *to do*, and you should too. Your character comes before your service. Since your ministry defines your life, you will tend to believe that if your church is successful, you are successful, and if your church fails, then you have failed. That is a myth. I have known pastors who have built large thriving congregations whose spirits shriveled up in the process. You are not a puppet wired for sound. You are a human being who needs to cultivate a lively friendship with God. It is hard to introduce your people to someone you don't know very well yourself. Put yourself

and your own inner life first. Take time to do that—regularly schedule time for reading, reflection, relaxation, and prayer.

Your second priority should be the public ministry of the Scriptures. People expect you to preach. In fact, they refer to you as *the preacher*. A preacher who doesn't preach, therefore, resembles a clock that doesn't run. The clock sits there on the mantle. It looks like a clock and people call it a clock. But it fails in the function for which it was made.

Don't let anyone talk you out of this. Don't believe the trendy lie that preaching *doesn't work anymore*, and that we need new methods for a new day. Poor, dull, insipid preaching has never accomplished anything at any time except to destroy life and hope. The remedy for poor preaching isn't the elimination of public discourse. The only remedy for bad preaching is good preaching. Make preaching your magnificent obsession. Give yourself to it. Read a couple of books on homiletics each year. Study tapes of other preachers. Listen and critique your own sermons. Ask thoughtful listeners in your congregation to evaluate you.

Finally, Michael, let me suggest a project. Since a great deal of preaching is more caught than taught, pick out one skilled preacher each year and study him. Read or listen to his sermons. If he has a biography, read it. If he is still alive, try to interview him in person or over the phone. Good models will mold you into being the preacher God has summoned you to be.

William Butler Yeats defined genius as *living with the major issues in life*. Michael, you can't be all things to everybody, without ending up being of no good

to anybody. Establish your priorities and stick with them. And among those priorities keep the communication of God's message high.

Today as you look forward to ministry, you will say, *I will*. In years to come when you look back on your ministry, may you be able to say, *I did*.

An object of grace,

Haddon Robinson

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Devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching.

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.

1 Timothy 4:13-15