

The Preacher's Challenge: to Walk the Talk

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Summary *This essay affirms that clergy ethics is the resultant life and personal activity which are derived from a transformed character, developed and shaped by faithful obedience to the practical instruction concerning relational responsibilities found in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and integrated into a life of integrity which gives credibility to the Christian message and the viability of the New Testament Church. By sketching some of the New Testaments promises of transformation as the work of God in the life of a believer and identifying a sampling of the admonitions and concrete teachings found in the Gospels and the Epistles which are to be practiced by the follower of Jesus Christ, I seek to show how the ethics of the Christian minister can attest to the validity of his message rather than be a reason to reject or ignore the Christian message. Offered as a challenge to those of us who dare to preach or teach new life in Christ and the possibility of an authentic New Testament church, this essay seeks to call preachers and church leaders to purposefully live in a way which will authenticate the Gospel for the 21st century and be a tool for contemporary evangelism.*

To affirm that “post-Christian” Europe has little or no trust of organized religion requires very little documentation. Near empty church buildings for regular worship tell the sad story. Although the church attendance in the USA is still strong, the attitude there toward “religion” is only a few years behind Europe. A few years back the “Christian Century” (104. D 9 1999, p. 1128) announced the results of a poll taken in the USA. The findings revealed the “public confidence in Clergy had reached an all time low.” Those polled gave ministers only a grade of 39% in honesty and ethical standards. Even the most casual reading of the literature which focuses on the religious culture reveals that the major problem is not that religion is organized; but rather with the “organizers of religion.” It is the individuals who create the structure, who administer the organization, and who represent the religious structures who have eroded public confidence in the Christian religion.

No doubt every reader of this essay has been saddened by stories carried in the public media of the moral failures of pastors, priests, and rabbis. But more

tragic yet is the reality that too many of us have personal knowledge of individuals who have betrayed themselves, the church and Jesus Christ through their abuse of the privileges and responsibilities which accompany the call to lead the church as pastor, preacher and teacher. Although the blatant contradictions to the Christian life captures the attention of the media and becomes fuel for religious gossip, the more common, day to day inconsistencies to the standard set by Jesus may be as deadly – perhaps more so.

Those who know the preacher best, family and close friends, listen to the sermon on Sunday and then watch the life the rest of the week. The sermon illustration drawn for a family experience may have *only* the core of truth. The family lived the experience, then heard the story. They know the difference. But, it is “no big deal;” it was only a “preacher story.” Preachers often embellish the story to make a point. However, the unspoken question, perhaps the sub-conscious question is, “How much of the rest of the sermon is embellished?” How much is true, and how much is “just preacher talk?”

Then, there is the use of resources. The internet has made sermon preparation much easier. It has been a busy week. Borrow an illustration, maybe a whole sermon. Pass it off as yours. Who will know? You know! Perhaps someone in the pew today was surfing the web last week. He may have read the same sermon you read, the one you copied and preached as your own. He will know. Who will know? Far too many! That is the problem; we are seen and known. However, that so *many can see and know* us could be, and actually should be, our opportunity.

We sit in the café and joke about a brother, or worse share a sad story about him, one that may or may not be true. At the table behind us sits one who hears the tale, knows the person. He hopes that we never know him. His drinking buddies are more loyal!

This essay will not sensationalize the sin of moral failure, nor will it indulge in self-righteous critique of the sinfulness of “those who have been caught.” Rather, these thoughts are presented as an encouragement to each of us to hear in a fresh way the call of Christ, the challenge of faithful service, and the high ethical demands incumbent upon those who dare to “preach the Word.” When the search light of Scripture illumines the task of ministry, there should be universal agreement with J. Barrington Bates as he writes, “Clergy whose words are at odds with their behavior only serve their own desires and not the will of God” (Barrington, 2002,16).

This essay had its genesis with the reading of *Ministerial Ethics, Moral Formation for Church Leaders* by Joe E. Trull and James E. Carter.¹ They describe the

¹ This book provides core information and challenging insights for any minister who wishes to be faithful to the task of leading a church. Their 2nd chapter, “The Minister’s Moral Choices” reminded me that the basic elements of ministerial ethics are “character, conduct and integrity of life.” These basic elements provided the working outline for the above reflections.

moral life of the minister with the term “integrity, which unifies character, conduct, and moral vision into a life worthy of the calling one receives.” (Trull and Carter, 46) While every individual who is a Christian is “called” by Christ to reflect the character of Jesus, to do good deeds as defined and taught by Jesus and to develop a “Christ-like view” of the world, the pastor or preacher is uniquely called to teach Christian “integrity” not only in word, but by the example of his life. “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1) should not be reserved for the apostle only but the humble and honest affirmation of all who lead a congregation. This essay will explore why and how this is so. If the Gospel message is to get a hearing in the post-modern culture of Europe and the USA, the life of the proclaimer must be consistent with the message.

Gordon Fee has pointed out that in our postmodern world

[T]he church is regularly viewed as irrelevant at best and Neanderthal at worst. Frankly, much of the fault lies with the church . . . all too often our orthodoxy has either been diluted by an unholy alliance with a given political agenda, or diminished by legalistic or relativistic ethics quite unrelated to the character of God. (Fee, 1996, XIII)

Simply stated, “relativistic ethics” can have no place in the daily life of one who heralds the Good News of the Kingdom of God. Those who dare to offer an authentic message from God, must present an authentic life which bares witness to that message. Such authenticity begins with having the character of Jesus Christ. The promise of Jesus is that those who have an abiding relationship with him will bear fruit, indeed much fruit (John 15:5). The debate over the identity of “fruit” (making of new disciples or expressing the fruit of the Spirit) is not really a crucial question. Beasley-Murray is to the point when he writes,

If we are to ask what fruit bearing signifies, the broad answer of Bultmann is adequate: “every demonstration of vitality of faith, to which, according to vv 9–17, reciprocal love above all belongs”; we may add, in the light of v 16, “to which also effective mission in bringing to Christ men and women in repentance and faith belongs. (Beasley-Murray, 2002,)

Surely this fruit includes the fruit of the Spirit [love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control] (Galatians 5:23-23). These qualities describe the character of Jesus. If the character of a messenger does not exhibit the character of Christ, perhaps a question can be raised about the “abiding relationship.”

The possibility of a transformed character is an amazing part of the evangel. The promise of the apostle Paul was, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come.” (1 Corinthians 5:17). He boldly wrote to the Colossian believers, “In Christ all the fullness of the deity abides and *you have*

been given fullness in Christ . . .” (Colossians 2:9-10). Whatever else this “fullness” includes, it surely must include the moral character of Jesus. In writing of his own conversion experience, Paul asserts, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). According to the apostle, when an individual participates by faith in the “gospel event,” the radical experience of transformation takes place.²

The possibility of “Christ-like” transformation is more than theological dogma. To the believing ones the Spirit of God gives the freedom to “reflect the glory of the Lord with ever-increasing glory” (2 Corinthians 3:15-18). Because believers were dead and now are alive, the transformed ones can live out what they have become – the “Christ-like ones.” This becomes why the believers were called “Christians.”

The coined name was really a great compliment. Paul’s vital preaching of Christ, the new life “in Christ,” and the power of His indwelling as the secret of lasting joy and peace, had led non-Jews, Greeks, Romans, rich and poor, prominent citizens and converted prostitutes, into a strong and inclusive church. (Ogilvie, 1983, 42)

In almost every letter Paul affirms who and what the believers are. Then he challenges them to live up to what God has made them to be. They can “put to death” the old life. Believers have the power and possibility to be different “walking in the newness of life.” They can “put off the old clothes of their old life,” and they can put on the clothes of the character of Jesus.³

Like Paul, Peter affirms who and what believers have become because of their faith and response to the Gospel. Those born anew now have become like Christ and have “sincere love for their brothers” (1 Peter 1:22). The believers are chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people who have the purpose of declaring the praises of God. Because of who the believers are, they can live such good lives that the very pagans who accuse the believers of doing wrong, will in the end glorify God (1 Peter 2:4-12).

Who one is determines what one does. While it is true that *doing* shapes and develops *being*, the way of Christ requires a new beginning, a “new birth.”⁴ A fundamental difference between other ethical systems and the “way” described in the New Testament is the promise that those “in Christ” have the power through

² See 1 Corinthians 15: 1-8 where Paul identifies the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus as the gospel. Then see Romans 6 and Colossians 2:9-19 where Paul reminds the believers of their participation in that event and the subsequent promise of new life in relationship with Jesus.

³ See these startling images in Colossians 3:5-15, Ephesians 2:1-10.

⁴ The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus is as challenging and perplexing to the religious of the 21st century as it was to Nicodemus. But Jesus forthrightly announced the necessity of a spiritual birth from above.

the Spirit to do good.⁵ Although this new character needs to be shaped and developed, the affirmation of the New Testament is that the baptized believer has a new life with a new heart which translates into a new character that has the power to *be* and *do*. In addition to the basic transformation experienced through participation in the Gospel, the Christ-follower is given the community (the church) by which his character continues to be formed, both consciously and unconsciously.

The truth briefly described above is what is routinely preached by evangelistic pastors and teachers as the promise of the gospel. Many individuals in our post-modern society respond in their thoughts if not their words with a “show me” attitude. Too many promises about religion, philosophy, and consumer products have been heard that do not deliver. If “a transformed life that produces a Christ-like character” is preached, then the one preaching must exhibit a life that reflects the virtues, the values, and the concerns of the Christ whose title is owned. Transformed character requires transformed conduct if the message is to have any credibility.

The movement from *being* to *doing* is both natural and necessary. In the “Sermon on the Mount” Jesus affirmed what *being* was like and then affirmed what *being* does (Matthew 5–7). The first part of Paul’s epistles presents the theology of transformation and then follows with the applied theology of resultant activity. The grace of God provides the miracle of transformation. That same grace should produce gracious conduct. The promise of the Holy Spirit was for power to *be* [my witness] and then to *do* mighty works. As the Holy Spirit provides gifts for supernatural activity, he also provides strength to exhibit his fruit, and ability to “live such good lives among the pagans . . . that they may see your good deeds and glorify God” (1 Peter 2:12).

A striking observation from the admonitions of the writers of the Epistles is that the conduct that gives credibility to way of Christ is expressed in every day deeds of goodness more than extraordinary miraculous activity. The “good deeds” which conform to the transformed life according to Paul in the Roman epistle are seen in humbly finding and fulfilling ones function in the Body of Christ, in genuine devotion to one another, in truthful and gracious speech, in loving acceptance and forgiveness, in being non-judgmental in areas of opinion, and in generous sharing.⁶ The challenge of Paul to the new Christians in Thessalonica was to respect those working among them, to express patience and kindness, and to live at peace with each other.⁷ When Paul communicates with

⁵ See the teaching of Paul concerning this promise in Romans 8 and Galatians 5:16–6:10

⁶ In chapters 12–14 of Romans Paul is especially concerned with “good deeds” that express genuine love within the fellowship of the church.

⁷ In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul gives more attention to values than to specific deeds. But the values of

the church in Colosse, he affirms the transformed life and then identifies values and deeds of everyday life which should naturally follow. Language becomes important. Slander and “cutter-talk” goes. Truthful and gracious words are to demonstrate the changed life. Forgiveness, patience, kindness, and gentleness are to become common conduct traits; so obvious are they to become that these traits are like the clothes one puts on his body. Perhaps the most succinct statement which Paul wrote about the conduct of the believer is

Whatever you do whether, in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:17).

Paul is always consistent when writing about deeds and words which were part of the pre-transformed life. Activities which reflect “sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, or greed” have no place in the life of the believer.⁸ Conduct which sprang from the sex-charged, self-gratifying culture of the 1st century Greco-Roman world was not considered immoral to the non-Christian; nor is such conduct considered generally wrong in the post-modern cultures of 21st century. However, any such activity in the life of professing believers, especially church leaders is clearly viewed as inconsistent with the basic Christian message both by the church and by the prevailing non-Christian culture.

There are other expressions of “pre-transformation” conduct that are equally inconsistent with the Christian message. They are not as blatant as sexual immorality or impurity, but perhaps are even more hurtful. This is conduct which springs from values that is contrary to the way of Jesus. The Jesus of the Gospels was unique, not only because he did mighty deeds, but even more because of the way he related to God, and the way he dealt with people. His life and words demonstrated obedience to what he identified as the “greatest commandments.” The Gospels provide vivid pictures of his love for the Father and his love for his “neighbors.” Contrary to the values of the Jewish leaders who made their self-appreciating “religious activities” the corner stone of their life, Jesus reflected the people centered values affirmed by the prophet Micah.

He has showed you, o man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8).

love and respect for each other produce deeds which would reflect encouragement, patience and seeking peace.

⁸ Paul in Romans 1 writes such deeds bring the wrath of God. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 ff Paul insists that those engaging in these deeds “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 reveal the similar ideas, if not the same words and phrases. It is from this ungodly list that the temptations relating to sex, power, and money result in “fallen clergy” that too often scandalize the church and undermine the Christian message.

As Jesus interacted with individuals, the accounts make it clear that Christ valued people more than rules or tradition or the accepted interpretation of Scriptures. To illustrate: Sabbath keeping was a cardinal rule, which resulted in accepted traditional practices that were based upon years of rabbinical interpretation. Both the words of Jesus and his deeds which involved people and the Sabbath make clear which he valued most.⁹ For Jesus the needs of people always supersede religious activity. What was so good about the “Good News” was that God loves people and is actively concerned about their needs. Spiritual authority is not about manipulating people, nor is power about controlling others. True spiritual authority and power are God-reflecting as they compassionately meet the needs of people to effectively bless them.

The value which Jesus placed on people extended to *all* people. Women were as important as men.¹⁰ Teaching adults did not take precedent over time to bless children. He identified a Samaritan as “good.” He gave “sinners” not only his attention, but also his presence at table. The deeds of Jesus which involved individuals always reflected this value. All people, even sinners (especially sinners), are important. They are even worth dying for.

The conduct of the Christian minister is to become an extension of the conduct of Jesus, reflecting his values. More important than our plans and programs are the people for whom they are developed. The policies and rules established in the religious structure must be to bless and serve persons, not to advance the organization or promote the minister’s new understanding or even to make successful some activity of the church. The words and deeds of the “Christ-following” preacher must offer acceptance not rejection. Mercy and forgiveness should be evident instead of accusation and condemnation. “Holy living” becomes more self-sacrificing, Christ-reflecting than adherence to carefully developed rules of religious behavior. The rules of conduct which provide the parameters of the life of the preacher are for *his* protection, *his* growth and development, not to be imposed upon others. From an intimacy with God done in private the deeds of mercy and compassion must flow. The everyday actions of the church leader which touch people must reflect not only the mission of Jesus but also the way Christ values people.

There are other values identified in the Gospels that are important to Christ. But none are more important than the value Jesus placed on the relationship his

⁹ “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27) states the final judgment of Jesus on the matter. God’s commandment is for the good of people not arbitrary law or rules. Hermeneutical principles must be people centered. Tradition must give way to the needs of people.

¹⁰ The first person to whom Jesus identified himself was the woman at the well in John 4. The first to see him after the resurrection were women according to Matthew 28.

followers had with each other. During his last meal with his disciples Jesus modeled serving love, commanded mutual and sacrificial love, and prayed that they would exhibit that love to the world (John 13-17). As Jesus gave those closest to him his final instruction, he made it clear that the truthfulness of his claim to be the Son of God would be judged by the way they loved one another. The validity of their discipleship would not be evaluated by their effective preaching or by the mighty works that they might perform, but in their love and unity.

Although the death and resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit is God's validation of the message and claims of Jesus, the Lord on his final night told his followers that the world would believe it *only* as mutual love and supernatural unity was expressed in the relational activities between his followers. History gives testimony to the prophetic words of Jesus. It was the amazing community of love that arrested the attention of the pagan world in the early years of the church. Secular writers do not so much write about their skillful preaching or their miraculous deeds which caused the church to grow. They write of their love and care for one another.

The sad reality is that the lack of growth in the church, the lack of interest that the world has in the Christian message can likely be accounted for by the lack of unity among believers, and the lack of mutual love and determined care that acknowledged Christians have for one another. The greatest responsibility for conduct that "fleshes out" this crucial value is in the hands of church leaders. It is activity that flows from trust or lack of trust that proclaims our unity or division. Sheep follow their shepherds. The world watches the sheep. And the western European world now calls itself "post-Christian."

Trull and Carter affirm, "integrity best describes the ethical wholeness of life demanded of the Christian Minister" (Trull and Carter, 59). Integrity is more than honest speech. It is even more than determined faithfulness to live out the principles and rules that we impose on others. Christian integrity is faithful "followership" of Jesus Christ. Experiencing the transformation that the Gospel offers and then allowing the Holy Spirit to use the teaching and life of Jesus, the message of God through the ages as revealed in Scripture, the instruction of the apostles, the fellowship of the church, and the experiences of life to point the way as one follows Christ. It is faithful discipleship to which Jesus has called Christian leaders. It is the integrity of faith and practice that is the challenge of the Gospel, the truth of Life, and is the hope of the church. It is the ethical integrity of the church that belongs to Christ, lead by leaders of Christ-like integrity that will win public confidence in the way of Christ.

The watching, yet skeptical world will know if preachers accept the challenge – to walk our talk.

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Izazov propovjednika: Živjeti govor

Ovaj esej potvrđuje da je etika klera rezultat života i osobne aktivnosti izvedene iz promijenjena karaktera, razvijene i oblikovane vjernom poslušnošću praktičnim uputama o odgovornosti unutar odnosa, pronađene u Isusovim učenjima i učenjima apostola te uključene u život integriteta koji daje vjerodostojnost kršćanskoj poruci i pravomoćnost novozavjetnoj crkvi. Ocrtavanjem nekih novozavjetnih obećanja kao Božjeg djela u životu vjernika te identificirajući djelić upozorenja i konkretnih učenja pronađenih u evanđeljima i poslanicama koje Isusovi sljedbenici trebaju izvršavati, želim pokazati kako etika kršćanskog službenika može posvjedočiti vjerodostojnosti njegove poruke umjesto da postane razlog za odbacivanjem ili ignoriranjem kršćanske poruke. Ponuđena kao izazov onima među nama koji se usude propovijedati ili učiti novi život u Kristu i mogućnost autentične novozavjetne crkve, ovaj esej želi pozvati propovjednike i crkvene vođe da svrhovito žive na način koji će zajamčiti vjerodostojnost evanđelja u 21. stoljeću i biti alat za modernu evangelizaciju.