
STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

The most important task a professional youth minister can do is be a faithful teacher of the biblical faith—emphasis on *teacher*. Every good result of ministry (evangelism, discipleship, prophetic relevance, etc.) will naturally flow from its *teaching* source. By teaching I mean the serious and steady biblical study with youth that enables them to understand and study the Bible for themselves so that they become not only reactive, but proactive Christians. The world needs not only young Christians who respond to leaders, but those who read the Bible for themselves and understand what they are reading, because they have discovered for themselves the trustworthiness of the Bible in their own daily discipleship. They become the ones who, in their first year away from home, take the initiative to find other Christians, to share their faith, to start small Bible study groups themselves.

But how does a youth worker gain the expertise and find the time to be first-rate in the calling of a teacher, while at the same time caring for all the non-teaching details of youth ministry? Will a congregation and his colleagues support a youth worker who is serious about teaching in the church, seeing how teaching requires so much time for personal study?

“Caught, Not Taught”— Oh, Yeah?

We must face the fact, first of all, that not everyone in the Christian church is sold on the importance of teaching as a means of communicating the Christian faith. Remember the epigram “Christian faith is caught, not taught”? It sounds so persuasive,

though even the first time I heard it I was uneasy about it. The saying advocates a lived-out, modelled faith in Christ: like friendship, Christian faith is caught not by lectures but by simply living. The problem with the maxim is that it slanders learning and teaching. The fact is that, yes, Christian faith is a relationship, but a relationship founded upon truth—a truth that deserves to be carefully, faithfully, and accurately taught. Rooted in the concrete, historical event of Christ’s word and work, our faith in him needs thoughtful explanation—especially if we’re making disciples.

Earnest learning and teaching erodes relational faith no more than learning the history and studying the interests and convictions of a close friend ruins a friendship. When I first met my life partner, I discovered a person from a different background than my own. My background is English; Shirley’s is Volga German. From both Prussia and the Russian Volga, her grandparents came to America during the reign of Catherine the Great. Knowing Shirley’s history and ancestry has become part of the joy of our relationship. This kind of knowing is not caught—it is quite definitely taught, requiring books, maps, and study.

Learning biblical facts about Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior always enriches our relational faith. Preaching in the Christian church, therefore, should never be an event in which a Christian leader, intellectually unprepared in the content of biblical faith, relates personal anecdotes and contemporary experiences of God’s grace. The *intra nos*, inside-ourselves sharing of personal spiritual experiences is a legitimate endorsement of God’s faithfulness to us. But the sharing of the gospel is an objective message; it is *extra nos*, outside ourselves, before it is *intra nos*. The gospel is the good news about the event who is Jesus Christ. He

is who he is whether or not we validate him by our admiration or personal experiences. Jesus Christ is *the* Lord, not only *our* Lord. He is Lord whether we confess him to be or not.

Hallel-ed or Killed, Still Lord

Jesus confronted the Pharisees with this matter on the Sunday preceding his crucifixion. They challenged Jesus to silence the crowd that was shouting out the Hallel from Psalm 118, which describes Jesus as the Messiah. “I tell you,” Jesus replied, “that if they were silent the rocks would cry out.” Jesus knew the extent of the crowd’s loyalty, knew that within the week the citizenry—no longer an approving crowd—would chant something other than the Hallel outside Pilate’s chambers. The fact that becomes clear during Holy Week is that Christ’s Lordship is no founded upon the adoration or recognition of the crowds; His Lordship is not called into being by our word of testimony in his behalf.

So each Christian minister has fundamental, scriptural mandates to preach this objective gospel. We are to tell the truth about who Jesus is and what he has done; to affirm the good news that this word of Christ is the good news to us; to call ourselves and others in order to receive its healing, transforming gift of relationship with Jesus Christ himself. These truths are wonderfully relational yet profoundly and concretely true, rooted as they are in Old Testament and New Testament history and teaching. These themes deserve to be carefully and thoughtfully taught so that, then, relationship may be caught.

This is why I believe that Christian ministry to youth needs steady, regular, serious, thoughtfully studied

expository teaching that enables a text in either Testament to make its own point.

Teaching need not be a theologically necessary drudgery, however. It can become downright contagious, for who can deny the power of the Bible's subject matter (teaching) as well as of the connection of that subject matter with a student learner's own reality (preaching)? Preaching has to do with interpersonal fluency, with prophetic listening and prophetic communication in which a minister is able to sense where people are in their thinking and in their faith journey. This ability to connect is what a teacher needs to mix with his scholarly grasp of the objective content of Christian faith. When these two are put together the church is enriched. A healthy tension between these two skills of teaching and preaching, then, must be cultivated in a youth worker.

But cultivation takes time, time for study and research. And how can an ordinary pastor find such quality time? I've carved out such time three ways: by developing a rhythmic week to live in, by lowering the I've-got-to-have-something-to-say-this-Sunday pressure each week, and by earning the right from other colleagues and from his congregation to take the time to study.

Friday Sabbaths

Rhythm means balance—and there can be no quality moments or hours for much of anything without the balance in our lives that makes us whole human beings. Six days shall we labor, the Lord told us, and one day we shall rest. The fourth commandment teaches a rhythmic life within a seven-day cycle of

work and rest, of time with people and time alone. We need quality times for our families and for ourselves, quality time for study and research, time with people, time alone with books. I'm talking about a rhythmic week that compensates for its intense and demanding days with its easier, more leisurely days, and without the week's pressures encroaching on them.

And for how many years of Fridays has the thought dropped on you, "Oh, no—Sunday's virtually on the doorstep, and I still have to prepare"? To avoid this syndrome, I've deliberately created a two- or three-day buffer between the time when my preparation is due to be finished and the time I must teach it. If I complete my sermon, for example, on Thursday, I still have Friday for a study day that's not sabotaged by the tyranny of the urgent. Friday can become a more relaxed day for in-depth study, research, manuscript work on a proposed book or article, or simple reading without feeling like you need to quote from the book that Sunday.

Paying the Rent

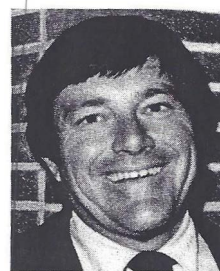
Finally, carving out quality time for teaching preparation has required me to first earn from my congregation the right to study. It's like paying the rent—before the freedom comes, you pay the rent. You pay the rent, and only then are you set free by your congregation in amazing ways. If you don't pay the rent, on the other hand, then you'll have little freedom—regardless of the job description.

How do you pay this kind of rent? In my case, my people first had to understand my faith in Jesus Christ. My flock needed to see what I believed, needed to see me grow as a Christian. Then they had to experience my demon-

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strated love for them and my concern for what was important to them. My rent was finally paid up when my people saw that I worked hard. When the people in my church caught these three things about me, then they became a lot more comfortable trusting the priorities I set for myself and for my ministry. Pastoral demands and denominational standards won't get you anywhere nearly as neatly as will your people's freeing you—and that happens only when you pay your rent.

When these human, fragile pieces of the congregational puzzle come together then your people can listen to you and learn from your teaching and grow in their own faith. ♦



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