

“With energy and intelligence ...”

by EARL F. PALMER

How would you answer if someone asked you to make this as a personal vow: “*Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?*”

In fact that question is one of eight asked of Presbyterian elders, deacons, and pastors at the time of our ordination. It is a promise about excellence as a goal for ministry. It promises that we will love people and that we will also be competent, well-prepared, and hard-working servants.

This vow evokes memories of the ancient Hippocratic oath that a physician makes “to do good and not to do harm” in the practice and skill of medicine. Both promise to pursue professional competence. The Church’s leaders are aiming toward the goal of excellence in our unique ministries as a future elder, deacon, or pastor, and within everything to love the people.

Should pastors and church officers make such a vow or any vows?

Vows themselves, like all affirmations of intent, have a mixed track record; some are good and some are not. The pursuit of such religious dedication has written many heart-warming, inspirational personal stories, but it has written almost as many cruel and destructive ones. Sometimes highly committed people vow to cause harm. Religious and political fanatics make commitments. The book of Acts (23:12 – 25) tells of a vow made by forty fierce men that they would neither eat nor drink until they murdered the Apostle Paul. They scheduled an exact time for the ambush, but a Roman Tribune spoiled their plans, and by surprise Roman soldiers transported Paul under heavy guard from Jerusalem to Caesarea. The book of Acts does not tell if these conspirators actually died of starvation because of their solemn vow, but we are grateful that their plot failed.

As with commitment so with excellence: Evil-doers may pursue their vocation with precision and superior skill. The result will sing destruction in *fortissimo*.

For a Christian, the content of vows must be measured by the standard that is beyond itself. We need a test that asks two fundamental questions: (1) What is the goal of my vow, and (2) how do I propose to reach my goal?

With those questions about goals and means I

can then submit every discipleship vow and the journey that goes with the vow to the healthy discipline of the witness of the Bible, its texts of Old and New Testament, as they point to the living center, Jesus Christ. The Biblical witness to the law and the gospel together become the check and balance as well as the hearty encouragement of Christian discipleship goals as well as the Christian discipleship journey that works toward the goals.

Each of us as individual Christians must in the end stand up and make our own decisions about the vows we make. Each of us must take responsibility for the practical steps we take to achieve those vows. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend, Eberhard Bethge, that when he was a student at the University of Berlin he remembered a debate between two theologians about the question of *ends* and *means* and the importance of each. The question was whether

in great historic movements the grand primary goals of a movement were the most important clue to a movement or was it the smaller secondary goals that were the most important. Bonhoeffer observed that

when he was a student he was certain that it was the former but now as an older man writing from prison he knew that it was the latter. The secondary means we use to achieve our goals outlast the primary goals because they shape what we really are and do on a day-by-day basis. Grand visions of justice are easy to endorse, but what lasts are the daily decisions and behavior choices we make in our quest to fulfill the goal.

Excellence remains a sound objective for my life work, so that I feel good about my hands and also my head; like every human being, I need to know that I am good at something. But, what I do is not the source of my belovedness, because we have received God’s grace before we have done anything, and we are loved while our doing is unfinished. We are loved even while we are asleep. But this belovedness has never been a Christian argument against excellence. Knowing of our belovedness motivates us by setting us free from the suffocating fear of failure, as if my failure would cancel out God’s promise. Therefore because of grace I take risks and without risks there is rarely excellence.

I favor the ordination question. I want to promise it. But when uttering it, in my heart I’ll add six more words, in no way to weaken the promise, but to make it possible: “Because of the Grace of God.”

EARL F. PALMER is pastor of University Church in Seattle, Wash.

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