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Serving at the Banquet: The Pastor as Leader



by Jack Vos

In the twenty-eight years I have been in the ministry, I have had my ups and downs. There have been times of deep satisfaction. There have also been times when I looked for any decent excuse to get out. On balance the joy has far outweighed the burdens, and it is also true that the hardest years have led to the greatest growth. If someone should ask, "Would you do it again—

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choose the gospel ministry as a calling?"—my answer unhesitatingly would be "Yes."

In spite of initial hesitation, I find it a joy to be able to share some thoughts on the topic of the pastor as leader. I will write from the heart. If you respond likewise, I am sure that together we will grow in appreciating the mystery that limited mortals like ourselves can be used to be leaders on the Lord's behalf.

To lead requires that we serve. For the "Son of Man came not to be served . . .," and "the servant is no greater than his Master." To lead also requires that we give ourselves to the specific assignment the Lord has given us. A true story about a boy who had to serve at a hockey banquet illustrates graphically the fulfilling of a specific assignment. The guest speaker for the occasion was no less than Bobby Orr, possibly the greatest defenseman the game has known. Bobby Orr has a weakness for dinner rolls. Because of the overflow crowd, the sponsors had hired a boy to assist in serving. His assignment was to hand out the butter, one pat per plate. When he came to Orr, he gave him one pat of butter. But with three dinner rolls on his plate, Orr asked for more butter. The boy said, "I'm sorry, sir, I have my orders." "Look," said Orr, "do you know who I am?" "No, sir, I don't," replied the boy. "Well, I'm Bobby Orr!" "Is that right?" said the boy, "but do you know who I am?" "No," said Orr, "I don't." "Well," said the boy, "I'm the kid who gives out the butter."

Whatever else the boy didn't know, he knew how to obey. To lead means obeying our specific assignment for the Master. But how? Let's begin by looking at a scenario possibly familiar to you.

A Familiar Scenario

Do you remember your visit with the council when you came to look over the call from the congregation? The council favored an imaginative outreach to the church's youth, much greater use of the gifts of members of the congregation, and a serious effort to reach out to the unsaved in the community. They also told you that, in the good providence of the Lord, you were the right person to lead them in this direly-needed spiritual work. Then you went home, talked and prayed a great deal, accepted the call, and began the work.

The council's response to you was gracious, and soon they began to love you. But after working there for a while you began to suggest some changes which the council members themselves had favored during that pleasant visit. But no sooner had you suggested the changes, than you encountered a series of shocks.

The first shock was that *you* remembered far more clearly than they did the changes they wanted so badly. The second shock was, not that their love has changed, but that they still love in spite of everything you are working to develop. The third shock comes a little later. You hear from the grapevine what the council members have been saying to each other: "Our pastor just doesn't understand this congregation; *we* will have to provide the leadership, for the good of the church." Just then, to spice your experience, someone breezes in and says, "You must be really happy here, with such a fine congregation and all!"

At such a time, probably with your spouse, you sit down and try to sort it all out. You ask yourselves, "Where are we at? Is our ministry being received at all? Are we being unrealistic and unfair to the church? Do we fit here? What *are* we up against?" Nor can you at that time suppress that other question that in the pastor's home always lies on the shelf like an enticing dream: "Have we been here long enough to consider another call?"

For the pastor as leader, what comes out of that discussion is crucial, at that precise point we make extremely significant decisions about our ministry in that congregation. Do we remain enthusiastically committed as servants of the Master? Or will we inwardly withdraw, as if to protect ourselves from further disillusionment, and begin a ministry of duty, of going through the motions? The way we

go will determine whether we will earn the trust and love of the congregation we serve. The decision we make at that point can easily be based on a faulty understanding of what is happening in the church and its council. For, in resisting some proposed change, the council is communicating an important message to you. It's not a spoken message; therefore you won't hear it. It's not a written message; therefore you can't read it. It's a message which the messengers themselves don't even know fully. Let me put that message in the words of a prominent elder.

"Pastor, when, at that meeting, I talked to you about outreach and youth and members' gifts, I meant it. And I still do. I want you to know that I love the Lord, and his Word, and his church. I appreciate your doing a good job in bringing the Word. I want your ministry to be a success. But—and this you have to hear no less clearly—I do not want your ministry to be so successful that I have to *change*. Let me tell you why. I have in my life a carefully worked-out balance. A great number of things are involved in that balance: my feelings about myself as a person, the good and the bad of all my family relationships, the kind of interactions I have with my friends and important colleagues, the things I feel confident about and the things that make me afraid, and the whole complex of my interactions with God. To achieve that balance is tough. I still have to shore it up every day. You can understand why this balance is important to me, so important that I don't want it disturbed. Pastor, please believe me, I don't wish you ill and I do want your ministry to be successful. There are even small changes that I will go along with because I know you mean well. But with respect to any big changes in my life, I am committed to finding all the reasons in the world to avoid them as long as I can."

That's the message. He is the person, they are the people to whom you and I have to be a leader, people with a delicate inner balance and afraid of change. In our preaching, in pastoral care, and in the larger community work, we have to be willing to be the kid who hands out the butter on behalf of the Master.

How we do that depends on two sets of factors, the first set involving our views on preaching, pastoral care, and work in the community. The second set is personal. Let's first look at the personal factors.

Personal Factors Which Affect Our Leading

The first personal factor is our own understanding of what it means for a servant of Christ to lead.

Our View of Leadership

When I think of the call to lead, I include the following components.

a. To lead, we have to know that the Lord of the church has appointed us, that it is he who has tapped us on the shoulder to serve at the banquet table. Without that sense of divine appointment, success will make us act like lords in the church, and resistance will make us run for the hills.

b. Second, we have to have a vision of what the Lord wants the church to be. We need this vision to correct our natural narrow-mindedness and to stimulate us in zeal.

c. Third, we have to be able to define our specific task. Our task is not to convert, but to bring the Word which has the *power* to convert. Our task is not to please people, but joyfully to point to him whom to know is joy everlasting.

d. Fourth, when working with God's people, we have to aim to work ourselves out of a job. God wants all his people to grow to maturity, to become equipped and energized for ministry. Without this goal, we become self-important, set ourselves up for martyrdom, and rob others of the opportunity to serve and grow.

e. Last, to lead means to treat persons as the special objects of God's love. It means getting beyond likes and dislikes, beyond issues of support and non-support, beyond good or bad life-styles, and to a freedom to bring people into contact with the God of salvation. I will come back to this crucial component later.

Without any one of these components, at best, our leadership will limp along. At worst, it may render us totally ineffective. From my own experience in ministry, I have become convinced that a regular personal review of what it means to lead is essential if we are to remain fresh in our commitment to serve on the Lord's behalf.

The Inward Freedom To Function as Leader

The second personal component is our inner freedom to serve as leaders. That freedom, or the lack of it, exerts an enormous influence on how we do our work. What does that freedom consist in?

It consists in knowing ourselves and being persons of faith in Christ our Lord. Knowing ourselves is much more complicated than for many years I thought it to be. I functioned in the ministry for years without knowing some basic things about myself. That complicated my work.

The story is told of a young man who sought the assistance of a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist, in trying to diagnose the source of the young man's difficulty, drew two circles on the blackboard and asked the man what they reminded him of. Surprisingly, the young man said, "Two people in bed making love." Then the psychiatrist drew two parallel lines and asked what they reminded him of.

Preaching is to make human beings aware of God as he has revealed himself in Christ according to the Scriptures.

The young man replied, "Two people in bed making love." The psychiatrist then placed two X's side by side and inquired what *they* reminded him of. Again the young man said, "Two people in bed making love." So the psychiatrist said to him, "It seems as if you have a hang-up about sex." "Why me?" shot back the young man. "It's you who's drawing all those dirty pictures!"

Do we recognize that young man in ourselves? I remember preaching a sermon some years ago on the "Joy of the Ascension." A few days later a kind young elder put his hand on my shoulder and said, "There were a lot of good things in that sermon, pastor, but you didn't communicate any joy!" I had hammered away at the lack of joy, and, because I hadn't known myself, illustrated perfectly how it ought *not* to be. A colleague of ours, now serving elsewhere, for years never made specific applications in his sermons, and it wasn't until a crisis developed that he could own up to the real reason: unChristian elements in his own lifestyle. Another angered the members of his congregation by attacking their worldliness until it was discovered that he couldn't handle his own sexuality.

To lead, you and I have to be ruthlessly committed to knowing ourselves. We need to ask these questions again and again:

a. How much do I need the pulpit and the church for myself?

b. How dependent am I on the causes for which I fight?

c. Am I so rigid that I think my way is the only way of doing things?

d. Do I find myself being anxious? About what?

e. Do I need people to like me? To agree with me? Can I allow people to be different? Can I appreciate difference?

On this personal factor I have come to an important conclusion, one that you may want to challenge. Unless you and I think deep in our hearts that, in spite of sin and weakness, we are persons worth knowing, worth loving, and worth trusting, we will not lead well in Christ's church. For, invariably, our ministry will show the *hard time we have in living with ourselves*.

The point I want to register is that to *serve well* we need to know ourselves. What texts we select, what we pick up out of those texts, how we apply them, with what tone and attitude we bring the message—all this is significantly affected by who we are and how we live with ourselves. A scary thought is that we color the gospel. Leading effectively means preserving the gospel's natural color!

Against this background, it is a stunning experience to read Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. There Paul gives some instructions that are person-related and some that are task-related. Among the latter are commands to teach and not to teach and to rebuke in a certain manner. Among the person-related instructions are to be hospitable, gentle, steadfast, willing to be a model. What is surprising in those letters is that the person-oriented instructions outnumber the task-oriented ones by five to one! The point is beautifully captured in one of Paul's favorite phrases when addressing leaders: "Take heed to yourself. . . ."

This knowing of ourselves may be rooted in the forgiveness we have in Christ and in the newness we receive from him. There is no greater aid to living with ourselves than to be able to confess with Paul, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17).

The Pastor as Leader In Ministry

How do we lead through preaching? There are many good books on that subject. Two relatively recent ones I have benefited from are John Stott's *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the*

Twentieth Century, 1982, and Sidney Greidanus' *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 1988.

Leading Through Preaching

Let's go back to that elder who loves the Lord, the Word, and the church, but who resists significant change as long as he can. What does he need? What do the council and the congregation for whom he speaks need? Some time ago I listened to a sermon on Jesus' announcement of Peter's denial as recorded in Luke 22. That sermon assumed several facts, namely, that everybody in the audience was a Christian, that no one had trouble believing, and that all knew biblical times well enough to understand the expression "sift as wheat." The sermon did not explain how this demand to "sift" the disciples is part of Satan's entire demonic program, how it comes to particularly strong expression in half a dozen instances in Luke 22, how it is aimed, not at private individuals, but at the eye-and-ear witnesses of Jesus Christ to destroy the apostolate. The sermon did not even deal with the obvious question of why Jesus would talk about this matter with Peter beforehand. When I got home I could no longer remember what positive message the minister had derived from the text other than the unconditional announcement that, no matter how much we sin, the Lord will hold on to us. I was working on this material at the time, and I remember asking myself, "How would such a sermon help that elder, his council, and his congregation?" Judging by my own reaction, I would have to say that in such a sermon there was nothing to provide the trust needed to risk growing and risk changing. The application of the sermon muddied the text, and any element of appeal or admonishment was ignored. Such preaching is, it seems to me, inexcusable, and councils do a favor neither to their preachers nor to the church by allowing it to go on year after year.

That elder needs honest preaching. And preaching is in one way very demanding, requiring us to grow as long as we continue to preach. On the other hand, preaching isn't that complicated, for it is simply to make human beings aware of God as he has revealed himself in Christ according to the Scriptures. The focus is always on God as he comes to us in Christ. His character, his presence, his work—those are the factors that need to shape our faith as well as all our action.

Honest preaching comes when we excitedly remember that we speak for God. We address people who need to hear God. One of the prime privileges of the preaching ministry is that we may speak first of all to ourselves. When we handle the Word of God honestly, we ourselves will be the hard-working farmers who get the first share of the crop. Our hearers pick up quickly enough whether we are existentially involved in the message or not.

In thinking about leading through preaching, I feel the need to make the following four points. First, preaching must carefully and sensitively explain the biblical text. Second, preaching must help people to love the basic redemptive lines of Scripture. Third, preaching is incomplete if it does not involve response and self-learning by the hearers. Fourth, preaching requires love. Just a few comments about each.

1. Why expository preaching or preaching that explains? There are many reasons. As I think about the specific settings in which pastors work, three settings stand out. Back in 1910 J. Van Andel wrote in *Vadamecum Pastorale*, "If you want to become a preacher who captures your hearers, let the text capture you." How can the text capture us? Only if we spend time with it. Van Andel adds that many texts are like flowers whose beauty can be discovered only with a magnifying glass. That involves hard work. But with the hard work we begin to see the beauty of the text, to become excited about sharing with others another powerful, fascinating, awesome, loving aspect of God's character and work, and sharing what differences that can make in our lives. We need expository preaching to experience the power of God's saving word for ourselves. And as our preaching convinces our elder of God's power and love in Christ, he will garner the trust that with God it is safe to grow and change. But he will garner that trust only when he is convinced that this is God's word speaking to him.

A second reason we need expository preaching is created by the culture in which we live. Os Guinness in his book *The Gravedigger File* estimates that in the free West 1,800,000 walk away from the Christian church every year. That's 5,000 per day. Why do they leave? Because they experience the appeal of secularism more strongly than they do the appeal of the gospel. How can that be? A substantial part of the cause rests with the church and its preachers. If they feed people self-improvement programs, religious entertainment, and unconvincing little

assurances that no matter how much they sin, Jesus will always hold on to them, people will not experience the power of the gospel. Many sermons are simply no match for the smooth and refined sales pitch of the gospel of secularism. But if we confess as we do, that the Word of God is like a fire, like a hammer that breaks the rocks in pieces, then let's serve up that Word. For not our little thoughts and suggestions, but God's Word alone has the power to withstand and to conquer. To quote Van Andel again, "Anything that comes to stand between the text and the hearer breaks the power of the text." In a culture drenched by secularism, people need the Word itself.

*Love in preaching helps
create the trust needed by
people to risk growing and
changing.*

The third reason for expository preaching also comes from our culture. For we live in a culture in which people read less and less. According to present estimates, 20 per cent of the population is now functionally illiterate. The figure is probably somewhat less in our churches, but we can't, on that account, ignore it. The fact is that our culture profoundly affects all our hearers, especially the younger generation. Nor may we forget that it is part of our calling to reach the functionally illiterates as well. To counteract large-scale ignorance of the Bible, we need to open up that Bible and teach people how to read it and apply it for themselves. There is no better *model* than faithful expository preaching with the rich visual imagery that is characteristic of the Bible as a whole.

2. My second point on leading through preaching concerns *doctrinal preaching*. That term conjures up tough sermons on topics about which people are not concerned and for which they need a university education to appreciate. I mean something different. Why does the Bible talk about covenant? Why does it present God to us as an electing God? Why does it speak of atonement and glorification? Because people in those days needed to know about them in order to know God, to trust him, and to live with him. And while cultures may change, people don't change. I personally wonder whether there has ever been a culture in which people need to know as

urgently as today that God is a covenanting God and an electing God! When I think about preaching on the Bible's revelation about these subjects, an analogy comes to mind.

A 35-year-old woman has had a friend for quite some time. The relationship goes on smoothly and with satisfaction. Unexpectedly, the friend proposes marriage. As a result, that 35-year-old begins to ask serious questions. "I have enjoyed being his friend, but what about being his partner? What is he really like? Is he reliable, thoughtful, a good planner? Should I become ill or unemployed, will he be there for me? Will he be faithful? If I marry him, will I grow as a human being, or will I have to gear myself down? Will living with him stretch and challenge me, or will it be a bore after a while?" Those are, if you will, doctrinal issues.

Being *curious* about God and life with him is one of the key traits we have to nurture in ourselves and in our hearers. And as we do, we will find that the main lines of revelation about God's character and work revealed in the Bible are endlessly fascinating, profoundly reassuring and always challenging. And the bigger that God becomes in our eyes, as well as in the eyes of our elders, the more we will be stretched for growth in faith, love, and wisdom.

3. The third point on leading through preaching is that preaching is incomplete if hearers do not learn of and respond to the Word of God. The day of the passive pew is over. Passive pew-sitters will never acquire the spiritual strength to follow Christ in the midst of our culture. And if we can get our elders to articulate what they are hearing, and to express whether what they hear actually comes out of that text, and whether therefore they must encourage themselves to do this or change that in their life, then they will grow in faith and knowledge. Responding is so important for preaching that it deserves separate treatment. Generating congregational response through cell groups, evangelism training programs, and stewardship projects deserves a separate presentation.

4. My last point on leading through preaching has to do with love. To preach is to be the voice of the shepherd. In John 10, the greatest chapter about shepherding (though Ezekiel 37 is powerful too), the key characteristic of the good shepherd is his *identification with the sheep*. He is so invested in the well-being of the sheep that he will risk even his own life, should that be necessary. That is why no effec-

tive leading through preaching can occur unless love is communicated.

When we think of that elder and his council, the church they represent, and their resistance to spiritual growth and change, our natural instinct is to stop shepherding and to start bullying. Then we ourselves become an obstacle to their growth. Only when we keep on loving can we expect to be instrumental in nudging them along, for love is a creative power. To quote Van Andel again, "The love of the preacher paves the way for his word to the hearts of the hearers."

Nowadays we talk much about being efficient, setting goals, and being professionals, and it's true that we won't accomplish much if we pay no attention to these things. But let us never forget that without love our entire ministry loses its soul. As Van Andel warns us, "Don't think for a moment that all your hard work and all your faithfulness will ever compensate for your lack of compassion." The apostle John reminds us, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I John 3:16).

Such love in preaching helps create the trust needed by people to risk growing and changing.

Leadership Through Pastoral Care

A second main area through which we provide leadership in the church is pastoral care. Here the general love for the flock as a whole gets to be focused on each individual member. I find moving the description in Matthew 18 of God's special concern for each individual "little one," a description that includes the parable of the caring shepherd, the instruction to seek to gain our sinning brother, and the command to forgive seventy times seven times. But how do *we* carry out this love?

Let me present some all-too-frequent scenarios. After a woman loses her husband, the pastor makes one twenty-minute call and never shows his face again. Another pastor works with a couple who are in deep marital difficulties; yet in a period of more than a year, he never once prays with them. Another rarely prays with any member he visits. Then there's the pastor who has time to visit only those who agree with him; the rest he avoids or refers to his elders.

What is going on here? It is clear that such non-performance undercuts his overall leadership. It will also affect how people will listen to his sermons.

The biggest problem here, I think, is not laziness, though laziness often enters at some point. If I am not mistaken, *fear* is the major culprit here, a distrust in one's ability to edify some kinds of people. I dare say that most of us have too much of Harry Stack Sullivan in us. Rollo May tells a famous story about an encounter he had with Harry Sullivan. Sullivan had just addressed a large gathering of psychologists and psychiatrists. It was a moving and effective speech. Shortly afterward when Rollo May found Sullivan sitting all by himself, completely dejected, he asked, "Why are you sitting here by yourself so completely dejected?" Sullivan replied, "I always turn everyone off." Rollo May said to him, "You haven't turned me off." Replied Sullivan, "But you don't count!"

This fear, this lack of trust in ourselves, is a major obstacle to effective pastoral care. People quickly pick up our discomfort, and the more uncomfortable we are, the more uncomfortable we make them. Frequently the result is that issues for which they need us don't get put on the table.

A specific form of this fear is our not being able to *fix* whatever problem we encounter in our visits. Behind it lies the mistaken notion that we're spiritual medicine men who can restore every loveless marriage and cure each prayerless life. Let's not be so hard on ourselves and load on our shoulders such unreasonable expectations!

In many ways pastoral care is like preaching in that it is demanding and we have to continue to grow in it. On the other hand, it is quite straightforward. When visiting with people we try to come with the *attitude* of Christ. We *listen* with the willingness to help. As much as possible, we try to let some word from *Scripture* speak to the person involved, and then in prayer we lovingly lift the person with the need up to the Lord, the great Shepherd.

Represent the love of Christ! Often we don't give ourselves the room to *feel* the love of Christ in our hearts for them. But if you love, go with it! It is a wonderfully creative power. Then, if problems persist when you leave and differences have not been resolved, the troubled persons will have experienced you as standing alongside of them as the representative of the Lord Jesus himself.

That's leading through pastoring. It does not consist in solving all kinds of problems; in fact, often people have to solve their problems themselves. Rather it is to bring the parishioner personally into

connection with the magnetic power and love of Christ. From him, through the Spirit, they can receive comfort, wisdom, power, growth, new beginnings.

I strongly suspect that the most under-used instrument for real pastoring is prayer. That is a pity, because, together with love, it is the most powerful tool we have to express Christ's love. When we're afraid of a member, or angry with one, through prayer for that person the Lord always sets us free, free to minister.

Our leadership in pastoring is not only what we do through our own visiting. It also expresses itself in our training elders and deacons and members of

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the congregation to minister to each other. As dramatically new needs for pastoral care come to our awareness, like those occasioned by incest and other forms of abuse, or by other forms of breakdowns in the life-support structures of our society, we will also have to utilize specialized skills which the Lord makes available to us.

A number of years ago, Dr. W. D. Jonger of Holland wrote a little book about the office in the church. He gave it the title *Like a Reed in the Wind*. Therein he depicts a sense of loss about what it means to serve as pastor in a church. In the confusion surrounding office today, some long nostalgically for the good old days when a person had a great deal of authority because of his title. Those good old days are gone. Nor were they so very good. Today we have to *earn* respect for the office. That's not impossible, as long as we are willing to be honest servants of the Master.

Good Friday and Easter mark a combination of unbelievable love and unconquerable power. On those days we observe, not the end of Jesus' ministry, but the beginning of a dramatically new phase of it. That's the setting in which we serve. That's the background of our calling.

Shall we commit ourselves now to being the best possible servants we can be? That will mean that we must be honest about any obstacles to maximum

service in our life and deal with them. That will take courage and it will involve pain. But after the crucifixion of Christ, why should we fear a little pain? And why should we be afraid of failure? Why

allow ourselves to feel as if we are but a reed in the wind? Our Master has risen from the dead. It is he that we serve!