

Prairie Pastors Conference Session 2

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, (Ephesians 4: 14-15).

Tonight, I want us to think and talk together about integrity in preaching. We'll proceed similarly to last night. I'll blather and you'll respond. But first, here's the reason we're dealing with this. From Roman Catholics to Southern Baptists, the news these days is absolutely full of all kinds of ways preachers are failing morally and intellectually to live up to the high calling of God in Jesus Christ. These days, the prima facie response of many if not most people outside the church to anything you and I say is suspicion. And understandably so. And that reality challenges you and me more than ever to be the kind of people whose lives are grown up in Christ. So let's begin.

Some of the integrity issues common to preachers come up as perennially as the dandelions in my lawn. They never seem to go away no matter how often the church tries to dig them out. I don't have triads for you tonight but I will give you signposts as we go along. This presentation has five sections. First, to maintain your integrity as a preacher remember why you're there. Never lose sight of your purpose as God's man or woman in that community. Another way of saying that is take the long view. If you stay anywhere more than a few months, you're going to deal with that community through good times and bad, bumper crops and failures, drought and flood and storm, sins and celebrations. Through all that happens, in season and out, you're there to communicate to those folk as clearly as you can a vision of the church of God in Jesus Christ and what it means for each one of them to be follower of Jesus in that place. And one of the key skills you will need to bring to the pulpit is the spiritual gift of discernment, the ability to know whether and when and how you have to confront problems as they arise. Sometimes it's best to leave things alone. And sometimes it's not.

The first time I dealt with this as a pastor was less than six months into my first pastorate, an old, old rural congregation that worshiped about 50 on Sunday morning. As spring turned to summer that year it became clear to Sheryl and me that something was wrong. They'd welcomed us well enough, but people weren't coming. They weren't giving. I knew I was inexperienced, but I didn't think I was THAT bad a preacher. You got the feeling the congregation was holding its breath. We decided I had to find out what was going on. So I went to visit the two biggest gossips in the church. We already knew who they were, of course. And one of them told me the name of the man. And the other one told me the name of the woman. Two of the main leaders in the congregation were having an affair and almost everybody in that little community knew it but us. The truth was one of the guilty people and the two innocent spouses had made up three of the five people in the search committee that called us. The two couples made up four of the members of the eight person choir. One of them was the Sunday School Superintendent. One was the property committee chairman. One was one of my three deacons. One was the high school Sunday School teacher. They'd been the main supporters of the previous pastor and one of the gossips told me my predecessor had known about the affair and chosen to leave rather than deal with it. In Christian love I could have killed him. So Sheryl and I sat down that night and talked it over. We didn't know what to do. We didn't know who we could trust. The guilty man was a big

bruiser of a tobacco farmer about three times my size. If they chose to, these folks probably had the power to fire us and kick us out of the parsonage before Sunday. The one thing we did know was the reputation of the church of Jesus was at stake. That church could never prosper in that community if I didn't find a way to handle the problem. Nobody would ever believe a word I said from the pulpit. We might as well pack our bags and go. So I handled it. If you want to know exactly how, ask me later. But that's not the point. My point is simple. Your job and mine as stewards of the gospel is to protect and nurture and pass along the faith once delivered to the saints. Whatever else we do, we dare not lose sight of that goal. First, remember why you're there.

Second, be aware of your own perspective. The Presbyterian preacher Tom Long in his book *The Witness of Preaching* writes that ultimately all any of us has to offer is what has happened to us. We Baptists call ourselves people of the Book. We tend to forget that that Book has many interpretations and everyone of us comes from a history and experience that shapes our interpretation. Me, I'm a sixty-nine year old third of five children of an electrician and a shopkeeper. Both my parents grew up dirt poor in west Texas during the depression. They were both Adult Children of Alcoholics. Before I was in fourth grade my Dad worked construction and we moved a lot. Then we settled in Pine Bluff, Arkansas on the edge of the Mississippi delta country, deep in the segregated South. Mama was a Primitive Baptist. Daddy was a nominal Methodist. All his life, Daddy was a union member and a Democrat. I grew up shaped by the civil rights struggle, the Vietnam War and Watergate politically. Religiously I was steeped in an extreme version of Southern Baptist revivalism. On any ordinary Sunday morning it was nothing to go through twenty-five or thirty verses of "Just As I Am" while the preacher begged for somebody, anybody to come forward and we teenagers huddled on the very back row hoping the sound of the trucks on the highway would drown him out. That's my background. Like it or not, it shapes me in ways I often don't even notice. And yours shapes you too!

The danger here is that you and I will preach as Biblical truth, something that may or may not be Biblical but is in fact for us largely a cultural assumption. When I was about fifteen I went through my second conversion experience in that little Baptist church next to the highway. We Southern Baptists got converted a lot. Civil rights was all over the news, and we were hearing a lot about the Northern religious leaders coming south to help the cause. So in the glow of my conversion, I went to my pastor and asked why our church hadn't done anything for the black families who lived in a group of shanties about a hundred yards out in the woods behind the church. And he (It's always he in these stories), he looked at me like I had three heads and answered, "Oh son, don't you know? Haven't you heard about the curse on the children of Ham? Bluebirds and redbirds don't flock together." Even then, I knew that was wrong. And I never really trusted another word that man had to say. As pastors you and I are called in one sense to stand apart from the cultures in which we live and work, and remember always that the gospel critiques and transforms all cultures, all backgrounds, all life experiences, even and most especially our own. Second, be aware of and, as Karl Barth says, be modest about your own perspective. Even if that's what you've always been taught, you could be wrong.

Third, do your own work. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking this, at least, should go without saying and we can shave a few minutes off this presentation. The only problem is, it doesn't go without saying at all. Next to sex and money, I've probably known about as many preachers get in

trouble for plagiarism as any other single ethical issue. I know one preacher, a Baptist denominational official, who lifted a sermon whole from a book of sermons she admired and preached that sermon at a denominational meeting, not this one, by the way. The only problem was there was a bookstore at that meeting and there on sale under someone else's name was the exact sermon she had just preached as her own work. Not long afterward she left her denominational position. So what's going on here? I believe there are several circumstances that lead preachers to think they can make this mistake.

There is the ostensible anonymity that came into our society with the internet. More often than I care to say as a seminary professor I would have to go hunting online for something a student had written that just didn't sound like it could possibly be their own work. We all have distinctive styles of writing and speaking. Words we tend to use more often than others. Phrases characteristic of one region but not of another. And those "tells" are like a poker player's eyebrow twitch. They identify you and me as surely as that eyebrow twitch says the poker player's bluffing. When we moved to South Dakota we quickly learned how to tell if someone was a native or not. For example, when you said, "Hello, how are you?" to a native South Dakotan their answer, 95 times out of 100, was "Not too bad." Not "I'm fine!" or "Good, how about you?" But "Not too bad," as though they'd grown up getting used to disappointment. The same thing that's true of our speech is also true of our writing styles. The truth is there are thousands of decent sermons out there on the internet, some written by some of the very best preachers of our time. And almost all of them are free for the taking. It's easy to take one anonymously and preach it. And it's easy to get away with it till you don't. But sooner or later they'll notice.

In addition, preachers, especially those of us who've been to seminary, can fall prey to the sin of contempt. We don't call it that, of course. But almost always we're the only one in the church, maybe the only one in town with a theological education. Almost anything we say from the pulpit will be new information for most of our folk. And they tend to trust us. They don't know what rotten sinners we are. It's easy to get the idea we're a little bit smarter, a little bit more sophisticated than they are. And that's dangerous. I once caught an ethics student plagiarizing a paper he'd taken off the internet. And when I asked him why he answered that he thought I was more liberal theologically than he was, so he really didn't think he owed me his own work.

Of course the most common reason preachers use someone else's work is simply the relentless, unforgiving, never ending pressure of Sunday. It doesn't matter what else you do for them that week. How many people you counsel. How many times you get called to the hospital. It doesn't matter if you had three funerals or that the one for Saturday afternoon didn't come in till Thursday night. It doesn't matter if your kids are in trouble at school, you still are expected to get up there and perform. Some weeks we end up feeling we can't be a good pastor and a good preacher too. There don't seem to be enough hours in the day.

But here's the ugly truth. It's the struggle they pay us for. Your contract with the church isn't about pretty words. They don't want Barbara Brown Taylor's poetic prose or Billy Graham's orations in front of thousands. They want the best you have to offer, no matter what that best may be. They want the insights and ideas and stories that come to you when you sit with the text and picture them in the pews

and pray to God to bring substance out of your emptiness. And here's the most honest word of testimony you'll get from me this week. In twenty years as a pastor, no matter how busy the week was, somehow God always gave me time to prepare. Every time I went into the pulpit I took a fully prepared sermon I had written out myself. No matter how awful the week was, no matter how little time I had to prepare, God always gave me something to say. And the times I thought it was the worst drivel I'd ever inflicted on an unsuspecting congregation, those were the times inevitably when someone would walk up and say, "Thanks, pastor. That one was for me today." My sisters and brothers, if I can do it, so can you. Third, preach your own work.

Fourth, to preach with integrity, make sure you keep sight of the difference between persuasion and manipulation. This one's tricky. The Christian businessman and preacher Ben Katt released a book in 2006 called *The Power of Persuasive Preaching*. He argued that preaching and manipulation are essentially the same thing and that the difference is intent. Basically do we use our power for good or evil? I don't agree. I believe there is a distinction between preaching as persuasion and preaching as manipulation. And I believe it centers around the question of truth. Preaching that is persuasive but not manipulative should be true in at least four specific ways.

It should be scientifically or factually true. If you believe the world was not created in six days then you can't say from the pulpit it was. You have to teach your people that the opening chapters of Genesis are a different kind of truth. On the other hand, if you believe the world was created in six days then you have to preach that too. On the one hand scientific truth is always provisional, based on the world of observable phenomena. People of faith always believe that more than what we can see is going on. But on the other hand preachers should always be reluctant to condemn scientific truth. A scientific finding that appears to contradict scripture may not in fact do so. The debate over climate change and this spring's Methodist debate about homosexuality are being fought on precisely this ground. Is homosexuality a lifestyle choice contrary to scripture? Or is it an inherent condition determined by genetics and experience in early childhood? Is climate change caused by human pollution or is it another in a long series of natural fluctuations? How you answer those questions determines in large part how you respond to the debate. In the long run, for Christians, whatever is factually true is of God. There is no contradiction between good science and good religion. It's God's world. We're just trying to understand. As best you understand it, what you say should always be factually true.

It should also be doctrinally true. I preached a sermon once on baptism, affirming our cherished idea of the Biblical primacy of believer's baptism. I didn't expect any disagreement. I just thought the folk would nod their heads, think "of course," and start wondering what the restaurant special was for Sunday dinner. On the way out of church that morning, though, one couple who'd been visiting for months and seeming to enjoy themselves indicated they wouldn't be back. When we talked more, I discovered they came from a Reformed tradition that put heavy emphasis on infant baptism as a sign of the covenant and cited the Biblical practice of baptizing households. For them, I'd suggested their own baptisms were illegitimate. I knew them well enough to know they were deeply Christian. And even though I didn't think I'd done anything wrong, I began to realize in a new way that even our most cherished doctrinal truths are also matters of perception. Doctrine may enforce conformity, people may even exclude themselves sometimes because of it, but we must always remember the cross is inclusive

enough for everybody. Lots of Baptist churches these days put a genuine and demonstrable experience of Christ ahead of baptism by immersion as a criterion for membership. I've come to wish the church I served back then had done that too.

Preaching also should be emotionally true. Bill Leonard, who's retiring this year from Wake Forest Divinity School is one of the finest Baptist preachers I've ever heard. He never raises his voice. He never tries to make anyone feel guilty. He's a historian so he tells stories. They're funny or wistful or even tragic, but they're never overdone. They're just real pictures of the way Baptists as a people have really lived through the generations. You listen and you laugh or you cry or you grow angry at injustice or sickened by the reality of evil. And you come away changed. In one of his best sermons he talks about us as preachers. He calls it "Send in the Clowns". You and I, he says, are the clowns. We live a little outside what people call the real world. We believe impossible things. And as ridiculous as it sounds, because we do they can.

Ultimately a sermon must be relationally true you see. Aristotle's treatise on rhetoric says *ethos* is the relationship between the speaker and the people. They'll believe it's true not if you scream it or shout it or cry it from the pulpit. They'll believe it's true if you live it in front of them. And if you never abuse them in the process of preaching. Once in my last congregation we had a missionary speaker who had served in Kosovo. He had seen some awful things. He told us one story about a group of soldiers from one side who had gone into a home from the other side and violently abused the family. One massive soldier had taken a five year old boy, held him up by his hands, and squeezed his fingers till the bones were crushed. It happened that our son was a first grader at the time. And while the missionary was telling that story I watched my son sitting by his mother in the balcony and turning white as a sheet. I wanted to physically shove that man out of my pulpit. He abused the trust we'd shown him when we let him speak. More than that, though, I found out later that he'd told the same story at another congregation in town a few days before and that congregation had already arranged to have the child brought to the US to have his hands fixed. He could have preached good news about that story, but he chose to go for emotional manipulation. It was inexcusable. Our fourth major point on integrity, preach to persuade but never to manipulate.

And fifth, and maybe most difficult, to preach with integrity make sure your preaching reflects your own actual Christian journey. One of the biggest questions many of us struggle with is the question of how much of our personal struggles to take with us into the pulpit. One famous preacher I know did it every Sunday. He called his approach confessional preaching. Every sermon dealt with his own struggles with the faith and people ate it up. Years later I became pastor of that same church where he was beloved and revered. After dealing with them for a couple of years I concluded he'd done a fine job of producing disciples of himself but not such a good job producing disciples of Jesus. One of my own preaching teachers used to say it's ok to refer to yourself and your family in a sermon as many times in a year as there are major holidays in that year. There is no magic answer, but that simple guideline has always seemed helpful to me. If you find yourself talking about your spiritual struggles more than that, maybe you're going too far.

But what about your health? We are first of all physical human beings, short or tall, fat or thin, in shape or out. We grow old. We get sick. Our bodies are vulnerable. Many of us deal with some chronic condition. And handled carefully that can be an opportunity for ministry. If you struggle with your weight, for example, chances are a lot of your congregation does too. Being open about your struggle might help others find ways to cope with their own. I happen to be a type 1 insulin dependent diabetic. I've always been open about that with the church. I don't eat those gooey desserts at church suppers and I always make sure somebody in the leadership knows what to do if my blood sugar unexpectedly goes low and I pass out. I'm aware, of course, that there are likely diabetics in the room whenever I speak. Knowing how I cope might help someone else refine their own approach. The problem is, just as Paul referred to the thorn in his side only when he thought it would be useful to help his readers understand their own relationship to Christ, you and I want to be careful not to let our own struggles get in the way of the Gospel we preach. Our physical condition simply is not the primary issue for human life. Our relationship with Jesus is.

But then, what about our emotions? They have a way of working themselves into our preaching whether we want them to or not. You and I became preachers partly because we're passionate people. We care deeply about all kinds of things. We feel deeply the ups and downs of life. One pastor under whose preaching I sat as a young man would cry during his sermon almost every Sunday. At first I thought it was genuine. Then I began to feel sorry for him. Finally I realized it might be a genuine reflection of his emotional condition but it was also a kind of congregational abuse. Whatever else a sermon may be, it is not your therapy session. If we find ourselves unable to control our emotions in the pulpit, whatever the subject may be, it's probably a sign that that aspect of our own emotional life has gotten out of balance and needs tending.

Inevitably we come back to Aristotle's pesky idea of *ethos*. Preaching happens in the context of our relationships. If our relationship with our spouse is strained that will show in our preaching. If our relationship with the church elders or board of deacons is problematic, that will come out in what we say and don't say from the pulpit. The biggest issue here is anger. For many of us the biggest temptation we face in preaching is to take out our frustration about what is or isn't happening in the church in what and how we preach. James cautions "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not work the righteousness of God." As much as possible we need to work to keep all our relationships healthy. But even when we can't, your obligation and mine is to do whatever we have to do to handle our own emotions in healthy ways. Pray, see a therapist, find friends outside the church, kick a football, pump iron, chop wood, run a marathon, do whatever you must do so you don't use God's pulpit as a venue for your venting. If you can't do that, then you just can't preach with integrity.

Well there you have it. Five aspects of maintaining integrity in your preaching. First, keep your focus on Christ's call to preserve his church. Second, be careful to keep your preaching in line with what you believe. Third, always do your own work. Fourth, never seek to manipulate others, just be sure you're telling them the truth. And fifth, keep yourself spiritually, physically, emotionally and relationally healthy. That's a lot.

Two things I want you to discuss in the time we have remaining. First how do you think your own unique background shapes you and your preaching? You might have to tell the others in your group a bit about you to do this. And second, which of these five areas do you find the most challenging where you serve right now. Chances are you already know which of these is most challenging for you. Let's break into groups of three again and take a few minutes to discuss first how your backgrounds shape your preaching and then which of these ideas is most on your mind this evening.