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Pastors



the eloquence of a life



A fiftieth wedding anniversary, celebrated last weekend in my home town, in the current church building of my old childhood church family, brought back many memories—not so much of the honored couple, but of the two ex-pastors in attendance. And, by extension, every other pastor I had while growing up in that church.

The two men at the celebration are now “retired”—if it is possible for a pastor to retire completely. They are more gray than before, a tad thicker around the middle, and their attire less formal than it once would have been at such an occasion. From across the room Linda and I were struck by the aging that had occurred in them since we last saw them.

Up close, however, shaking their hands and exchanging memories, we immediately saw that they were the same gracious men of character and warmth we had known before. Time does not erase the essentials of someone called by God to pastor His flock. And in a moment we were reminded of all the many reasons these men had held our respect for so long.

the smell of old wood

I grew up in the First Baptist Temple, corner of Second and State streets in Marshalltown, Iowa—a building torn down decades past when the congregation built a larger one on property south of downtown. I don’t remember one word of any sermon preached to me in that long-ago church building—that majestic stuccoed edifice filled with

comfortable, worn oak and old stained glass. During my childhood in that building now relegated only to memories and faded snapshots, a succession of three different pastors, unnumbered interims, and various visiting evangelists held sway over my upbringing. To this day I don't remember a word they said, but I do remember *them*.

Mom and Dad started me going to church while I was still cradled in a woven basket. The smell of old wood and Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes has papered my lungs since birth. While still young enough to play with Dad's mechanical pencil (always carried inside his suit coat) and be entertained by the string of paper figures crafted by Aunt Norma's painted fingernails—while still too young to understand the words being said, I was being influenced by the men behind the pulpit.

Not all were kind men, but all were men of God. All three were great preachers, but only two were great pastors. As those men and their ministry have passed into memory, it is not their preaching I remember, but their *pastoring*.

portraying Christ

The ability of a preacher to rouse the spirit and inform the mind with brilliant oratory is a cherished gift from God. The value of his or her ability to explain the word and ways of our heavenly Father cannot be underestimated in the life and edification of the church. We appreciate their practiced skill at holding our attention while God's word is illuminated. It is a rare and special gift.

But a gift perhaps even more rare is that of the pastor. The two gifts are not always equally combined in one man: One may be a master behind the pulpit, but a miserable failure at the bedside; likewise, one may be filled with compassion and empathy for parishioners, but do a poor job of preaching the word. God does not always give both gifts to one man.

I don't remember the words of the gospel I heard while growing up. I don't remember the stunning orations, the brilliantly crafted, three-point sermons. I don't remember the logic and persuasive arguments used to draw me to the Lord. What I remember are the *men*: their kindness; their behavior,

both at church socials in the basement and on the street; their willingness to counsel a troubled and confused teenager; their steady and dependable presence at times of sickness and death; and, most of all, the simple example of their life.

The sermons were important, to be sure. But I don't believe there was a simple cause and effect relationship—as if the pastor one day offered the evidence, then, having concurred, I walked the aisle to shake his hand. But, small piece at a time, the gospel of Jesus was steadily poured into my heart by both their words and their lives, so that one day, at the tender age of eight, I accepted Christ as my Savior.

That moment of salvation came about because of many influences on a young life. It came, first, as the result of living with Godly parents who loved me and had dedicated their lives to raising me into the image of the Son. It came because of Sunday morning devotions after breakfast, and shining shoes on Saturday night with my dad. My salvation came about as the result of sitting around patient teachers in Sunday School, with their picture Bibles and flannel graph stories, from standing next to Dad's ear-piercing, yet earnest singing of hymns, as well as listening to the more ear-pleasing sounds from Mom singing in the choir, and all of us singing the "Doxology" over heaped offering plates.

All these influences came together to fashion a life—a new life—in Christ, but the pastor seemed to be the point at which they all came together. In that holy, reverent setting of dark-stained wood and old smells, the pastor brought together in an orderly fashion all the pieces of evidence that, when in place, smoothed the way for the supernatural touch of the Holy Spirit.

The pastor's life holds the *evidence* for life in Christ. It portrays Christ to a cynical and doubting world. It proves the veracity and practicality of God's word. It speaks with an eloquence lacking in even the most gifted orator.

Prescribe and teach these things. Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe. Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.
(1 Timothy 4:11-16)

May God bless every pastor.

