

(Tom Stiers) 73

## CHARGE TO THE PASTOR

By Herman F. Reissig

There is no evidence for the belief that once, somewhere, a minister declined an invitation to come to another minister's installation and give advice. Not wishing to be an exception to the rule, I shall now proceed, Tom, to offer some counsel, which, if not apocalyptic, will, I hope, be worth your consideration.

Your main functions include administration, pastoral care and preaching. You are fortunate in working with a minister who does not think he must always be at front center stage while the associate minister works backstage. You are to be a true associate, sharing the whole spiritual leadership of the church.

Concerning administration, I shall say nothing. Almost any minister knows more than I about organizing things. (This is the sort of confession no minister dares make until he is safely retired. Until we are sixty-five we have to pretend we are six different kinds of expert - which often ends by not being really expert in any of the six ways.)

In pastoral care, the main thing is not how many calls you make, how many persons come to see you, or the smoothness with which you conduct weddings. The supreme matter is what kind of person you are. What most people need and down-deep want is not the glad hand, much less the forced and fleeting smile; they want a minister with the smallest amount of ersatz in him that it is possible for a human being to have. It is the most cunning device of the particular devil assigned to politicians and preachers that he persuades them to say what they do not inwardly feel, puts a glaze over their eyes when someone is talking to them and provides them with a permanent professional mask. If members of this church who are here tonight were called to testify, I think they would say they crave above all a genuineness about which no one can have a question.

A minister needs some capacity for self-examination. If he has it, he will sometimes be compelled to admit that here and there he slipped into acting a part, was jocose and, in his own mind, witty, when he should have been thoughtful and receptive. It is one of the marvels of Jesus, on whom to meditate may bring us to our knees, if nothing else will, that he combined the most rugged honesty with a love that made people whole. Or perhaps we should say he was honest with people because he loved them.

It matters little, and is to be expected, that your people will sometimes say about you, "he made a mistake there . . . He was wrong about that." It matters supremely that they should always be able to say, "He's real." Particularly in our contemporary society where, in the professions, in business and in politics, so much sounds hollow and so much attention is paid to one's image, one feels like exclaiming, "My soul longeth, yea even fainteth, for friends and leaders who have a solid core of integrity." There are people like that; they create health around them.

Such spiritual wholeness is not easy to come by. We have to search ourselves, pray, and struggle, really struggle, for inward truthfulness. Always remember, Tom, that of all respectable occupations, the ministry is the most spiritually dangerous.

Now something about preaching. Sermons may not be as important as we used to think. But as long as considerable numbers are willing to subject themselves to a twenty or twenty-five minute monologue from the pulpit, we are in common decency bound to take our preparation with athletic seriousness. When we emerge fresh from the seminary, we are scared and work hard at it. The more we preach, the easier the words come. And there lies the danger. For the easier the words, the less the substance. The thought of a congregation, such as the one that gathers here on a Sunday, sitting there and listening to you ought to put you to some travail in the preparation.

I make three specific suggestions. If they sound as if I think I am speaking to one just out of the seminary, it is only because right up to the last sermon he preaches a minister should ask himself how he can put the time in the pulpit to better use.

First, do, please, be a respecter and lover of the English language. In our use of English, most of us are like a cook who indolently sticks to the same tiresome dishes. Your objective is to build a conduit through which the truth, insight, vision that has seized you will flow into the living persons sitting in the pews. The conduit is made of words. When you have written a sermon, go back over it and ask yourself if it is not possible to say this or that in a more interesting and incisive way. Many words are plain tired; they droop and sag, have lost all their sap. Wear out a thesaurus of English words and phrases about once every ten years. Startle your hearers with a word they did not expect.

Reinhold Niebuhr, lecturing or preaching, often made people laugh. Not by telling a joke, which he never did, and not, oh certainly not by being cute. They laughed because he had put a thought in such deliciously exact words. As when, for example, he said: "The trouble with dissoluble marriages is that they produce indissoluble children."

Every preacher will form his own habits of preparation. The only way I know to stand even a chance of saying things with some grace and lucidity is to have the sermon written by Friday night. On Saturday, then, you take a deep, relaxed breath and go over it - strike out a sentence here, rewrite this phrase, add a clarifying illustration, look in your thesaurus for a less fuzzy adjective. If you say a busy pastor does not have time for such preparation, well then let's not preach.

Second, write your sermons with members of the congregation sitting on the other side of your desk. This seems to me the most important of the three suggestions. The sermon is not an essay; it is supposed to make something happen inside men and women sitting there. Summon up the faces of people you know. Ask yourself how you can make an insight come alive for them. Beautiful tributes to courage are wasted if no one walks out of church with his head held higher. If you wish to say something on a controversial subject, which should be often, that is the time to pray, "Please, God, let me say this so the dissident, the trustee, or deaconess will consider it and not just get mad."

Third, make clear to yourself what it is that you want this sermon to accomplish. Your general objective in preaching will always be the same and you go into the pulpit in dead earnest about it. You are to help the lame to walk, the blind to see, the fearful to be of good courage, the affluent to be uneasy about their affluence. But each sermon will have a particular purpose, and you are not ready to preach it until you can say to yourself, "This is what

I hope to accomplish Sunday morning." When you can put the objective in one sentence, insist that every word march toward it. Many of our sermons remind one of a drunk wending his way uncertainly down the street. Your people will be ready to listen for quite a while, if it is clear you know where you're going.

I do not need to tell you, Tom, that you have a wife who is smart, as well as lovely. I shall therefore end by coming close to effrontery and perhaps stepping over the bounds. I suggest you submit about every third sermon to Brenda and beg her to love you enough to rip into it.