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PRIORITIES IN THE PARISH

By Ken Moulder

The monthly Diocesan Mailing arrives through my letter box with a heavy thud. I wonder what delights there will be contained this month. There is much of the usual information but also one additional item. It is an invitation to Ministers. It reads; 'Would ministers please be prepared to give both time and financial support to the campaign for free-range eggs'. The organisation to coordinate the campaign is to be called 'Chickens Lib'. Worthy though a campaign to support the rights of chickens may be it crosses my mind that this may not be the sort of commitment which a minister of the Gospel should be taking on. The phone rings and it is a regular church member who wants to tell me that she has been talking with her neighbour, who takes the parish magazine and has been surprised that the Vicar has never been to see her. Would I please call in when I have a few spare minutes. There is a ring at the door bell. Someone has left the organisation of their Banns of Marriage rather too late. Could they please sort them out now as time is pressing. The morning is disappearing fast and I have yet to get down to some serious reading and study.

THE PROBLEM

These incidents highlight the particular problem which is to be the focus of this article, the problem of maintaining a right sense of priorities in the parochial ministry. The battle to keep first things first is for most ministers a constant struggle. The Scouts, the Brownies, funerals, hospital visits, home visits, the deanery chapter, circular after circular all clamour for attention. And the belief that the minister is to be 'Jack of all trades, master of none' exacerbates the problem.

The aim of this article will be twofold: to address the issue of the biblical pattern for priorities for the minister of Christ; to make suggestions as to the areas of ministerial life which will need to be kept under constant review in the light of these priorities.

BIBLICAL PRIORITIES

It is in the pastoral epistles that we find fundamental and invaluable principles. Note the following references from 1 and 2 Timothy.

1 Timothy 4: 13

'Until I come devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching'.

1 Timothy 4: 15-16

'Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.'

1 Timothy 6: 20-21

'Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith.'

2 Timothy 1: 13-14

'What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.'

2 Timothy 2: 1-2

‘You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.’

2 Timothy 4: 2-5

‘Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.’

In the above passages the following are inseparably linked: 1. Preach the truth - That is the apostolic truth. The Bible. 2. Do the work of an evangelist. Work for conversions.

PREACH THE TRUTH

The minister is to be first and foremost a bible teacher. In 2 Timothy 2: 14-19 Paul describes two kinds of workmen. One is ‘approved’; the other is ‘not approved’. The difference between the two is explained as being all to do with the words that they teach. It is fundamental to the biblical view of the ministry that the elder or overseer should be a workman of the word. He will aim to speak with *accuracy* and *clarity*. He will avoid wandering or swerving from the apostolic Truth like the bad workman of 2 Timothy 2: 16-18. It is a whole-time task to do this well and therefore other matters will inevitably need to be set aside to do it.

THE WORK OF AN EVANGELIST

It is clear from the passage in 1 and 2 Timothy that the preaching of the word is not an end in itself. Paul’s concern is the salvation of men and women. The reason for guarding, contending for and proclaiming the biblical truth is that people may be saved. It is this message alone which brings into being spiritual life and this word alone which can sustain it. Paul is so anxious about the truth (1 Timothy 6: 20, 21) because apart from this gospel people will be lost eternally. The minister must therefore labour at the word and also do the work of an evangelist, meeting and teaching individuals and groups, the faithful and the unconverted in order that there will be those ‘to teach others also’ and that some may be saved.

Therefore the two questions which it seems to me need to be asked of all parish activities are these. 1. Does this activity further the bible teaching ministry? 2. Does this activity lead to the gospel, and have evangelistic concern and impetus?

If the answer to both questions is ‘no’ we may well question whether there is any place for the activity at all. At the very least we would apportion an appropriate amount of time to it, conscious that it is very difficult to stop peripheral things becoming central.

REVIEW

May I suggest some areas for review:

1. Am I caught up in a reactive ministry?

There is a tendency for Christian ministers and workers to take on one activity or engagement after another until the diary is full, rather than to apportion periods of time to the tasks which are deemed to be of first importance. Control of the diary is crucial if right priorities are to be maintained. I

need to ask myself regularly if the Bible is setting the agenda for how I use my time. It may be that the telephone and the post-bag have a greater influence than I care to admit.

2. Am I more concerned with efficiency than effectiveness?

There is an enormous pressure, particularly on ministers, to ensure that everything runs smoothly. A clear desk and no 'loose ends' however does not equal effective Gospel ministry. Nevertheless it is of course true to say that inefficiency may hinder the Bible teaching and Gospel ministry. It is a question of making sure that tidiness does not rule. One friend of mine exasperated his wife by removing the seat belts from the rear of a 'new' second-hand car because he thought that they made the back seat look untidy. There is a danger that we do this in a spiritual sense when appearance is all.

3. Am I at the mercy of other people's expectations?

There are a number of ways to check this. Do I respond to the '**need-to-be-seen-to-be-busy**' pressure? This is best spotted by the putting in of an appearance, infrequently and irregularly. This, of course, simply has the effect of sanctifying by casual presence the particular group. (Scouts, Derby and Joan, Tenants' Association). If you are going to do it, do it with an evangelistic goal. This will require far more than an infrequent appearance.

Visiting. Do I visit simply in response to crisis situations or in response to my own guilty feelings? Does my visiting have a Gospelling or Bible-teaching aim? Random and erratic visiting is next to useless.

Funerals. A good deal of moral blackmail goes on here especially from funeral directors. It is always worth having in the forefront of the mind when dealing with them that they are in business and are doing it for the money! For myself I take no funerals in the morning in order to keep free for preparation, for preaching and for reading. It is seldom absolutely necessary for a funeral to be in the morning. It is possible graciously to make clear to Funeral Directors that you will only conduct funerals in the afternoon and that if families really want you they must fit in. In the Anglican scene most funerals are from families with whom we have no contact. Once a rule is established it is possible to allow the occasional exception.

4. Do I know how to say 'No' to the good for the sake of the best?

Do I really believe that my Bible teaching preparation is the most important part of the week? If I don't do it then I'm not sure that I can say that I believe it. The servant of the Gospel must be committed to a proclamation ministry. Is this reflected in my time allocation?

There are many other 'good' things in which I could be engaged but should they be my priority if I am supremely to be a Bible teacher?

There are sure to be others who can put on the heating in the church building, cut the grass or paint the railings! This is not to say that the overseer does nothing on the practical side.

Finally, do I still believe in the place and importance of prayer? In Acts 6: 2-4 we are reminded: 'The twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."'

Again it is no good me saying that I believe in prayer and its importance if I do not do it. This is not what the Bible recognizes as Christian belief.

CONCLUSION

May I conclude by making it plain that I write as one who is by no means always maintaining the clear sense of priorities of which this article speaks. There are occasions when 'the sideshows' do become central. But it is on these occasions that I need to return to the issue of what is my business, what I should be doing as a minister of the gospel.

If this article assists others to avoid the problem of being diverted from the matters of first importance for the minister, and church families to know what to encourage their ministers to do, then I will be delighted.

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