



Chapter 7 Sensitive Leadership in the Pulpit

The pulpit, ah yes, that great bastion of truth, that parapet of pontification, trusting in the general good manners of the listeners to tolerate almost anything before they will either get up and leave, or worse yet speak out in opposition to what is being said. It's amazing how many strange things are said from pulpits, and how long people will tolerate hearing those strange things said. It's as though the pulpit represents a place where preachers are allowed to speak their minds and be appallingly off base and yet no one hardly ever stands up and says, *"Now wait a minute, prove that statement."* Or, *"That was an insensitive thing to say. What gives you the right to say such things to a captive audience who want to honor your position and calling, and yet don't want to be bludgeoned by your pontifications?"*

The Pulpit - Bunker, Benefit or Bummer?

I can't remember the last time I heard someone cut a preacher off in the middle of his message. People will tolerate an amazing amount of insensitivity from the pulpit before they will either stand up and challenge it, or even walk out of the gathering. It has always amazed me how long people will put up with insensitive communications from the person behind the pulpit, that they would never stand for in intimate relationship and conversation outside of the pulpit. Why is this?

As I said before, there should be great suspicion of the use of a pulpit for any reason in the Church gathering. The dangers far outweigh their value. I'm sure there will and should be times, when men and women should be allowed to communicate an entire message, more or less uninterrupted by questions or concerns, but these should be few and far between, and not the norm. The whole notion of standing behind such a contraption as a pulpit raises suspicions and concerns. Do we like them because we know we can get away with saying things that are unprovable, insensitive, arrogant, and foolish, because we know that only the most uncultured or nearly insane person would even dare to challenge us when standing behind it?

When I think back on the times I have used the safety and security of the pulpit to take disguised shots at those who hadn't heeded my counsel in private I can hardly believe they tolerated it. Or did they? I'm sure you have never done that before, but I have, and frankly I am embarrassed now, as I think about it. But I'm even more quizzical over why congregations tolerate it. I imagine it is the fear of rebuking an elder, conditioned training, maybe the fear of resisting the anointing of God, or fear of failing to submit to those who rule over you, as if submission meant the willingness to endure all manner of insensitive and negative communications that come from the pulpit in the name of God.

A discussion of the authority of leadership in the Church would not be complete without taking up this issue of sensitivity in the pulpit. Something needs to be said about the danger of the power of knowing you have a captive audience. Those who lead must do so all the more sensitively from the pulpit.

Over the years I have had frustrated students, from my Bible College classes, come to me afterward and share, very carefully with me, their concern for something I had said in class. I can hardly believe now, as I look back on some of the things I have believed and taught in the past. Those poor students!

Some of my most frustrating days in ministry have been due to having a senior shepherd, I was serving under, say something in the pulpit that wounded one of the sheep I was counseling with, and then not be able to help him to see how insensitive his comments were, because he was the man driving the bus, and he could do no wrong. How sad! How unfair it is for ministers of the Gospel, to stand in their pulpits and decry the unfaithfulness of the people, or how they have been wounded by insensitive Church members, when Church members “*never*” get anything like equal time to express how they feel about leaders who abuse or misuse their authority in the pulpit.

Devastation Monitors

I have often thought how insightful it would be to have a Church electronically outfitted with encephalographic brain electrodes connected to stereo walkman headphones. One for each person in the pew. When the sermon starts each listener would put on their headphones, and all of the cords would run to a pulpit monitor where a red light would flash every time the speaker said something that wounded the listener. I wouldn't want it so sensitive that it would pick up the conviction of the Holy Spirit, just the things that speakers say who have not taken the time or interest to realize how hurtful their statements are; things that Jesus would never say because He loves people too much to say it.

I've had people come to my office the next week, or call me from across the country, after a shepherd's sermon, and share with tears, how hurtful his comments were; how confusing they had been. Not only people in the Church I served in but people from other Churches and other shepherds. This malady is by no means limited to just one Church, or just one shepherd. This is a widespread problem. These were people who sincerely loved Christ and wanted to be everything that God wanted them to be. They weren't perfect people, nor did they think they were. They were people “*in process*.” I would do my best to support the shepherd and yet help them through their pain. I knew what the shepherd was trying to say, and I knew how the people were taking it. What concerned me the most was the shepherd's unwillingness to really listen to the cries of his people. So, many left angry, wounded, and confused. I would watch them leave, and think to myself, “*No one should ever be allowed to do this from the pulpit and get away with it just because they are the Senior Pastor.*” There needs to be a greater humility in the pulpit, a greater sensitivity, and a greater accountability. The pulpit should never be a place where speakers are allowed to say hurtful things and not be challenged. I weep even now as I consider some of the hurtful things I have said, telling myself that they needed to hear it. Hard heartedness is amazingly arrogant isn't it?

A Formula for Painful Pulpiterring

How do these things happen? Simple, here's the formula: a pinch of pastoral thinking that they are “*In charge*,” a consistent reinforcing measure of teaching that the people are to submit to the authority of the pastor, both in and out of the pulpit, a cup of fear producing examples of people who challenged pastoral authority and had troubles because of it, a teaspoon of faithful yes men around the shepherd, who either derive their position or salary or worse yet both, from his say so, and there you have it, a recipe for unchallenged insensitivity from the pulpit. Scary huh? But sadly this goes

on from Church to Church. And the people put up with it, tithe to it, berate themselves when they question it, and wrestle with incredible guilt when they finally leave Churches where it happens more than they can take any longer.

Do you wonder why James shares the following chilling words:

James 3:1 (NKJV) My brethren, let not many of you become *teachers*, knowing that we shall receive *a stricter judgment*. 2 For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. 3 Indeed, we put bits in horses' mouths that they may obey us, and we turn their whole body. 4 Look also at ships: although they are so large and are driven by fierce winds, they are turned by a very small rudder wherever the pilot desires. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh. 13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.

God notes Insensitivity

Maybe we have a hard time dealing with insensitive preachers, but God has His ways of working on them. And if they escape it in this life, then my guess is that their tears were the tears Jesus referred to in the book of Revelation that He is going to be wiping away. When they see all the people their words drove into the valleys and distant hills it will break their hearts. Listen to Ezekiel describe it. Even though it is a fairly lengthy passage its poignancy makes it worth quoting:

Ezek 34:4 (NKJV) "The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. 5 "So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. 6 "My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them." 7 "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: 8 "as I live," says the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock"; 9 "therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD! 10 "Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; *for I will deliver My flock from their mouths*, that they may no longer be food for them." 11 "For thus says the Lord GOD: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. 12 "As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. 13 "And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. 14 "I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. 15 "I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord GOD. 16 "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment."

I am not suggesting, by the use of this passage, that everyone who leaves a local Church, frustrated with its leadership, does so by the leading of God, or as a result of bad shepherding. There are some who leave for purely carnal and self centered reasons. Even the best of leaders will

experience this, but before we too quickly tell ourselves that those who have left our Churches have done so for their own self centered reasons, we had better be sure that is true. I know for a fact that I have met and known scores of people who have left due to the abuse of authority and insensitive pulpit, and private counseling, ministry. It is these we need to be the most concerned for. It is these that Ezekiel prophesies about. And, it is these that God Himself is so incensed in behalf of.

These are such strong words, but can you hear the heart of God? These are some of the most powerful words in the entire Bible. God loves His people! He will not take lightly those who hurt His people.

Preaching is to Heal not Make Sick

Those who minister the Word are responsible to do so in a healing manner. I am 55 years old, and in all of my years of being involved with the ministry I have never known a time where more wounded people are coming into the kingdom of God. They come from sexual abuse, satanic ritual abuse, physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, drug abuse, alcoholism, and every other imaginable form of abuse. I sometimes wonder if we are experiencing the last of the last days, just because of how badly the devil is beating up his people. These people come into our Churches hurting so badly that if their internal wounds were suddenly made physical and externalized we would all gasp in horror and run to get bandages and healing ointments. I have never seen a time like we are living in. I will never forget speaking in one of my Bible College classes, and all of a sudden the Word of the Lord came to me, and He said, *“Tell them that those who are anticipating entering full time Word ministry had better prepare themselves for the most incredible flood of broken, hurting people that this generation has ever seen. Tell them that they will need two things; the greatest heart of compassion they can believe Me for, and a revelation and understanding of How I want to heal the people. Tell them, this will mark those whom I will powerfully use in the days to come. The need will be great, and therefore the compassion will need to be great.”* I remember it like it was yesterday. Every year since that day has gotten worse. The statistics of abuse are beyond anyone's imagination.

If we who share the Word of God don't do so with the highest degree of sensitivity, to those who come bleeding into our Churches, God will send them away from us and to a place where He can heal them. He will take them from us and give them to shepherds who will care for them.

Over the years I have watched members of Churches leave their Church and heard shepherds say, *“There was nothing we could do for them. They developed a bad attitude and we couldn't reach them.”* In so many cases this just isn't so. I've said it myself, and I was more often wrong than right about it. I have sat with many who have told me they were going to leave their Church. The pain was incredible. In many cases they were leaving friends they had known for years. They had given thousands of dollars in support of building projects, missions, and Church programs. The decision to leave was not an easy one, and it was certainly not done purely out of a bad attitude. They were wounded by those who were supposed to heal them, and they had to escape before their entire relationship with God was destroyed. And if it isn't enough that some shepherds deceive themselves into thinking that the people leaving are leaving due to bad attitudes, they don't even go after them. They just let them go. Or if they go after them they just lay some heavy fear of judgment upon them. I'm telling you, God weeps when He sees these things take place. Shepherds need to bury their pride and arrogance at the base of the cross and let Jesus fill them with compassion and sensitivity for those who are hurting in their congregations.

If you are a shepherd, and you are reading this, I would only ask you take a little time to sit before Jesus. Ask Him what He thinks. If you are certain He has told you their leaving was their

own problem and not yours, then pray for them to come to their senses, and leave them in the hands of God. But if you see a tear in His eye, and can hear Him try to bring back to you some of the things you have said from the pulpit, or in private, that people have told you wounded them or a friend, then listen very carefully and quietly. Let Him share His pain for them with you. It will break your heart, and well it should. But, it will also heal you too. Then go to the phone, call them, and set a time to meet with them and apologize. No matter where they are, no matter how long ago it was. Do it, not because I tell you too. I am nobody. Do it because the love of Christ so constrains you that you must, or else what Christ is trying to do in you will be missed, and those who are hurting may never be healed in this life.

The Mouth can be Deadly

Notice how God says He will deliver His flock from these insensitive shepherd's mouths. Obviously He isn't addressing cannibalism. It is words that are destroying His sheep. Harsh words, insensitive words, arrogant words, words spoken by men who are too impressed with their own opinion or position. You know the old adage, "*Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.*" Your mom probably told you that so you wouldn't be quite so hurt by your mean friends in the neighborhood. It didn't help you did it? And it didn't because it isn't true. The reason that it isn't true is because in Genesis chapter one God built the universe and everything within it "*By a Word.*" Powerful thought isn't it? Words are creative, either for good or for bad. Listen to the writer of the book of Proverbs:

Prov 11:9 (NKJV) The hypocrite **with his mouth destroys** his neighbor, But through knowledge the righteous will be delivered.

Prov 12:18 (NKJV) There is one who *speaks like the piercings of a sword*, But the tongue of the wise promotes health.

Prov 15:4 (NKJV) A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, But *perverseness in it breaks the spirit*.

Prov 18:21 (NKJV) *Death and life are in the power of the tongue*, And those who love it will eat its fruit.

These verses are chilling, but they illustrate the point so well. Words are powerful.

God will go after those who are wounded and give them to shepherds who are willing to listen to the pain they are in. Many have been concerned about the psychology movement, and in some cases it was well that they should be. There were extremes and some were brought into more bondage through it than they were before they got involved in it. But God was bringing a truth to us and hopefully we are getting it. People are wounded in heart and spirit and need gentle shepherding to get them back on their feet again. They don't need their shepherds to spend every day of the week, for years, listening to them pour out their past hurts, but they do need shepherds who are willing to listen, try to understand, and then speak encouraging words. Sometimes this may involve a couple of sessions, and sometimes it will take several, but the time spent and the compassion shared will be well worth it, both in terms of how it will be used by the Spirit of God to heal their flock, but also in terms of the message it will send to the entire flock.

If the people of God don't see God as a compassionate and listening God then they will never learn to bring their pain to Him. Shepherds who miss this principle will end up driving their flock away, to shepherds who have embraced it. The pulpit is the place to heal your flock. You don't have to do all of the counseling in your Churches, but if you let your people know that you support them in their time of need you will send them a message you will never regret. But, if you let them think that you believe that one or two quick prayers, to confess their sins, and ask God to heal them, will do everything for them that they need, then you will be guilty of minimizing the seriousness of their need and God will send them somewhere where a shepherd won't do this.

Healing wounded hearts always takes time. Certainly there are those wonderful occasions where God touches a person and moves them far forward in their healing process quickly, but God never heals a person whose heart is seriously wounded, in a single encounter. The shock and pain would be too great. Healing requires revelation, and revelation needs to come in small doses, lest it overwhelm the recipient and they are crushed under the weight of it. I'm talking about cases of extreme abuse, but the principle holds true for lesser cases as well. Healing is progressive and even takes God time. Shepherds need to be lovingly supportive of the process, from the pulpit (if one is used), and in private, and let their people know they are with them all the way.

No Personal Counsel from the Pulpit

Pulpits (when occasionally used) are not places where shepherds are allowed to deal with struggling counseling cases they have been dealing with earlier in the week. This requires such a profound commitment to sensitivity. If you have counseled someone on Friday, who just couldn't quite embrace your counsel, you must not indirectly address them from the pulpit on Sunday morning. You may tell yourself that you are doing it because you believe in the power of the anointed and preached Word, but you are deceiving yourself and destroying your sheep. Probably every shepherd has done this at one time or another, but again, if you even think you have done it, right now, call them on the phone and apologize. If you hadn't offended them they will be impressed with your sensitivity, and if you had you may well restore a wounded heart. It will be time well taken, and the best advertising for the love of Christ that you can give.

Invite Censorship

When a member of your flock, and the flock you speak to, comes to you and tells you that you hurt them by what you said, for love's sake listen to them. I mean really listen. Stifle your pride and belief that you have to be right all of the time. You don't. Stifle your tendency to try to turn around their offense and put the blame on them for wrongly interpreting your words, or resisting the Holy Spirit who was trying to speak to them through you. Just listen. They may be wrong, and they may be over sensitive, but if they are wrong and they are over sensitive you won't have helped them by rubbing their noses in it. Take the time to listen and apologize, and then ask them how you might possibly improve your communication on that issue. Often, if they were overly sensitive, they will end up realizing they don't know how it could be better said, and that in fact something did need to be said, and that perhaps they were overly sensitive. It is better that they come to this revelation through this means, than by you pointing it out to them. And, if you were wrong, then you will have been helped by their confrontation. Your encouragement to them to express their opinion and suggestion needs to be genuine and if it is, God will generally move in and do some amazing things to reconcile the both of you and bring out some profound wisdom. Sensitivity and gentleness is never wasted.

Let me say a few words here, to the false teaching surrounding "Covering." Somewhere along the line, almost surely during the time of Constantine and forward, the notion of "spiritual directors," developed, and out of that strong teachings on how the body was to be accountable to their leadership. Nothing could be further from divine truth. There is nothing in the NT to even suggest this idea.

It is true the body is to submit to the grace and wisdom of Christ, as expressed accurately through the leadership, but this is not to say that accountability is essentially upward or hierarchical in nature. Every member of the body is to submit to, and be accountable, to every other member of

the body, and as such, whether it is a new believer or a seasoned one, Jesus may choose to address, confront, and correct any one of us through any other member of the body. To honor Him, and honor the body, we must remain open for this process to take place anytime and anywhere. It keeps us on our humble toes, to be willing to receive this from all.

Opinions aren't Gospel

And just a few thoughts on leadership expressing their personal opinions in the pulpit, or in simple dialogue gathering. Everyone does it and it is virtually impossible to avoid, but there needs to be a few guidelines. The first and most important one is that humility needs to pervade the expression of personal opinion. Shepherds must recognize that their flock wrestles with a very real tension. They know their shepherds are just humans, but they so innately confer divinity to their statements that they don't even realize they do it. So when a leader makes a statement from the pulpit, or in dialogue, that the people know is just their opinion, a very strange thing takes place in the minds of those who disagree with their opinion. An inner wrestling with guilt is experienced. The hearer won't necessarily be able to identify why they feel guilty for disagreeing, but the feeling will pervade their emotions. Leaders often fail to recognize the power of their position and opinions when behind the communicate. If a leader speaks error, as if it were truth, and the people disagree with them, it's not like disagreeing with one of their friends. Subconsciously they feel like they are disagreeing with God, and thus feel the attending guilt for having done so.

If opinion is going to be shared then as often as possible the speaker needs to make a purposeful statement indicating so. *"This is just my personal opinion. I feel strongly about it, but if you disagree with it don't feel like you are disagreeing with God."* This does two things. First it relieves the hearers of guilt if they disagree, and second the people grow to love and respect their leadership for their sensitivity and humility. Dogmatism in the pulpit and dialogue, where it is not backed up with clear statements of Scripture, is generally a very dangerous thing. Those who are characterized by dogmatic statements should not be surprised if they regularly lose members of their flock who grow weary of wrestling with this guilt/disagreement syndrome. And, if they don't lose them, they run the great risk of developing unthinking clones who agree with them, not so much because of the accuracy of their dogmatism, but because of the persuasive manner, and seeming authority in which it is shared. Either way, it is inappropriate, and is best left to be shared with God or very close and intimate friends who feel the freedom to tell you that you are wrong.

Anointing doesn't equal Divinity

When you step into the pulpit, or share in the gathering, your leadership there reflects on God perhaps more directly than at any other time. People anticipate a greater anointing on your life at that moment than at any other time. If you use that moment to preach your pet peeves, your personal opinions, scold the flock, or intimidate them into submitting to your will for them, you are going to reap some pretty painful tares. Tare bread is pretty tough stuff to swallow, but swallow it you will. God's love for you and for His people will motivate Him to deal with you until you realize the power of your words. Formal communication is a sacred thing because of the anticipated anointing. Don't take God's anointing for granted, and don't use it to your own ends. He didn't give it to you to glorify your flesh. He gave it to you to heal his people and feed them the best of bread.

And a word on *"anointing;"* take it seriously. No minister of God's word has any right to address God's people without God's anointing. New Testament truth makes it so clear that anointing comes through obedience and time spent in the presence of Christ. For those of us who will communicate to God's people and teach His Word, we must be certain that we are truly dialed in to His heart and mind. Nice sermons, simple homilies, personal pet doctrines, and insensitive

communications will only serve to discourage God's people. Our people are counting on hearing from God when we speak, we must not let them down. We need to spend adequate time alone with God to be sure we have really heard from Him before we speak.

Why a Pulpit Anyway?

Finally, before we leave this thorny subject, I want to pose a question to you that I believe you would do well to consider. Why do we have pulpits anyway? Are we so certain they are needed or called for by God? Are they really the best way to communicate?

From the time of John Calvin forward we have not questioned the place of the pulpit in our gatherings. It is likely the only reason we don't question it is because anyone who questioned Calvin in his day lived to regret it, or were literally burned at the stake for it. So the pulpit became a fixed item in our gatherings. But should it have?

There is no indication that such a thing had any place in the Early Church. I know it is hard to imagine what a service would be like without one, but we should be asking it. For one thing, the Early Church didn't need one because their gatherings were comprised of a small enough number of people that pulpits and sound systems would have been unnecessary. Secondly, it is clear from 1 Corinthians 14, their priority was not on hearing one man speak, but on hearing the Holy Spirit speak through the many. Strange isn't it that we traded the many for the one? Why do you think we did this? It's really pretty simple, just ask John Calvin. He communicated to the people that because he had such vast knowledge of the Scriptures he should be heard and they should be quiet. I wonder though, do you think he had more knowledge than Paul the apostle? What do you think? He taught the people to utilize "Dialogue" as their means of gathering communication style. He seemed to believe that even where there were those who had vast knowledge of the Scriptures it was best to allow the Holy Spirit to speak through the many. Too bad we stopped believing this. Ultimately, it comes down to a plain and simple fact - we preachers are an awfully arrogant lot, who believe that we are the only one's worthy of being heard. Sad isn't it?

But, you say, how could we adequately communicate with a thousand people in our mega Church auditorium/sanctuary if we didn't have one person speaking from behind one pulpit? It would be pandemonium and cacophony if we let everyone share. Ah, my point exactly. Why have mega Churches, which make it virtually impossible to honor the Spirit of Jesus in the life and mouth of all the saints? Why have an environment where people are taught to sit quietly and believe they have nothing from God worth sharing? Why tell the Holy Spirit He is only allowed to speak through one person, when He set it up that He would speak through the many? Obviously the issue of the pulpit and the error in it's creation is just another strong reason why there is such a need for the Church to look at it's gathering and reconsider the house or small environment. If we ever hope to activate the saints, teach them to hear His voice, and encourage participatory, rather than spectating attendance, then we are going to have to take a long hard look at this thing we call the pulpit.

I leave you to ponder this subject. It is my prayer that it will not leave you quickly.