

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL: THE TRANSPARENT PASTOR

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INTRODUCTION

The familiar language of Eph 4:12 reminds us that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers are responsible to empower every Christian for “the work of the ministry.” Here, God targets His arsenal of elders, ministers, and other clergy indirectly on spiritual and physical need of the lost by emphasizing the building up of the body of Christ. His spiritual body builders are perfecting His body for use. In turn, the body does the building of the Kingdom, “the work of the ministry.”

Accordingly, Christian clergy are mandated to do more than simply preach the Gospel, teach doctrine, or lecture on Christian ethics. If the church is to do the work of the ministry, shepherds must do the work of “perfecting.”

The most common Bible-study or Sunday-school definition for this term, perfecting, is to “complete, outfit, or equip.”¹ To be outfitted and equipped are results of the process of perfecting (*katartizmos*). They are not the process itself. We do our ministry in the perfecting process. We work in the perfecting process, garnering the results of complete and equipped children of God who are fit for the work of the ministry, perfected.

What does the pastoral perfecting process look like? Paul used the root of *katartismos* again in 1 Thess 3:10. There, the term is rendered “to supply what is lacking, (*katartizo*).” According to this passage, we supply whatever our congregation needs to build up their faith and their

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¹W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Iowa Falls, IA: Riverside Book and Bible House 1939), 847.

ability. We supply what is lacking. In turn, they do the work of the ministry.

However, we cannot deduce from this supplying-lack use of *katartizo* that all uses of *katartizo* involve repairing lack or mending what is broken, but the Matt 4:21 occurrence of *katartizo* repeats this repairing theme. In that passage, Jesus finds his future disciples doing the work of “*katartizo*.” At the seashore of Galilee, James and his brother John were “mending (*katartizo*)” broken nets, replacing the old cords with new ones.

The first-century Jewish community had an underlying brokenness in need of repair. For centuries their spiritual leadership placed the emphasis on the performance of the Law. The flesh always de-emphasizes the spirit of the Law, namely, love.

The flesh of man weakened God’s plan. The Law was impotent because of man’s corruption (Rom 8:3). Man corrupted the Garden experience. Man corrupted the Law. What was corrupted or broken? In all both man’s love relationship with the Father was diminished. Now, the incorrupt man, Jesus Christ, is the repair for that brokenness, the *katartizo*, (1 Cor 15:45).

Jesus’ repair did not revise the essence of the Law. Jesus revived it! He mended it, replacing the corrupt with new incorruptible material. Jesus said, “I have not come to abolish them (the Law and Prophets) but to fulfill them (Matt 5:17). To fulfill (*pleroo*) is to fill in what is lacking.

Supplying the lack in our churches (Thes 3:10) is a similar type of fulfilling. Mending the holes in a fisherman’s net (Matt 4:21) is fulfilling. Our work in perfecting the church is the same as Christ’s work in fulfilling, or perfecting the Law. The repair process and material are the same.

Concerning the fulfilling of the Law, John wrote, “I write no new (*kainos*) commandment to you” (1John 2:7). It was not a new *kainos*, kind or species of commandment. It was the old commandment. The old commandment was the commandment based in love. Our repair material is love, and our perfecting process is love.

God’s plan for man is always relationship leading to worship (Eph 1:3ff). His repairing love reached to us in Christ and reestablished a more intimate love relationship with the Father. The redemption was not a new teaching or doctrine but a repairing of the original plan of God. The Fall estranged man from God, breaking the worship

relationship. The Law reinstated a picture of a worship relationship, but it was incomplete (Rom 8:3). Now, Jesus repaired the broken relationship, breaching the estrangement, removing sin, and inserting Himself (love) into the gap. This insertion formed a complete and perfect repair.

Similarly, the call to pastoral shepherding is a call to mend and restore the abilities and talents of the saints of God. We help with broken self-images and failing faith in God's plan. We serve to perfect, build up, mend, fill up, and repair. We are called to be Holy Spirit conduits, motivating and facilitating the workers of ministry to overcome weakness and be filled with renewed strengths in Christ. We are suppliers and encouragers. We are logisticians and motivationalists as well as traditional preachers and teachers. We are integral mechanics in the perfecting process that repairs the working parts of the engine of shepherding and evangelism.

THE MOTIVATIONALISTS

Norman Vincent Peale and protégé Robert Schuller preach the glories of a positive attitude and possibility thinking. Their congregations are spellbound at the thought of their dormant strengths awakening to full potential.² Entrepreneur Tony Robins promotes gatherings to harness untapped abilities, talents, and skills.³ Hundreds of thousands of his disciples hang on every syllable of his energized lectures. These modern motivationalists, both sacred and secular, have great communication and an image of believing in their audience in common. In response, followers identify a sense of confidence. They begin to believe that any success is possible.

We are also called to be motivationalists. To do the work of Christ, believers must know who they are in Christ, who is leading them, and what the work of God is. Furthermore, we must know our audience. We believe in our congregations. We must know that God gave them what is necessary to articulate their portion of the Body of Christ (2 Tim 1:12b).

²Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Walker and Company, 1952), 12. Robert Harold Schuller, *Living Positively One Day At A Time* (New York Penguin: 1980), 82.

³Anthony Robins, *Awaken The Giant Within* (New York: Rissoli International Publications, 1999), 14 .

What is more, they must know us. We know the parking-lot beginnings of Robert Shuller. That miraculous rags-to-riches account evidences the hand of God in his life. This builds our faith. Anthony Robins freely shares his pit-filled climb to success, because this self-revealing encourages those who are struggling in their climb. A transparent, self-revealing message does more than teach. It stands as a relevant, real-life application. Transparency is a testimony and the shortest path to interpersonal relationship. Transparency is the communication that motivates, and we are called to motivate workers of the ministry.

IDENTITY IN CHRIST

What underwrites a Christian's identity as a worker for God? What is the essence of the solid rock spoken of in Matt 7:25? The wise man built his house upon that rock. What is the rock that withstands the worldly winds of change or the flood of temptations from the enemy of our soul? What is the rock that weathers the storm and maintains our spiritual connection without negative effect? The Sunday-school answer is Jesus. Surely, simple belief in Jesus is always efficacious for salvation. However, we are drawn to look more deeply at this rock. This rock of Matt 7 is our foundation, our underpinning, and our source of stability and strength. We must know our Sunday school answer more thoroughly than we did at our spiritual beginning. If we do not, we may find that our house is built on much less than rock.

The rock that followed in the wilderness is identified as Jesus (1 OCR 10:4). However, you don't find Jesus under every "rock" in the Word of God. Though the bulk of Bible references to "rock" refer to the strength of God alone, some are simply geographical (Judge 7:25, 20:45, Job 39:1, 1 Sam 14:4, Matt 27:60), and some have a more complex meaning.

Jesus' mention of the rock in Matthew 16 was not Jesus alone. This rock was a description of the perfect circle of relationship, the two-way communication and mutual knowing between man and his Redeemer.

The Scripture describes God's house, His Church, as being built on a rock, and the gates of Hell (like the winds and the waters of Matt 7) will not prevail against it (Matt 16:16ff). Here, Scripture defines this rock in terms of relationship. In answer to Christ's question, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," voicing his revelation of the messiahship of Jesus Christ.

Jesus answered, "And you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

This rock was certainly not the man Peter or his apostolic heirs. The church of Christ was built on a rock contained within that conversation. In conversation, Jesus and Peter clearly communicated the dynamics of their relationship. Peter knew Jesus as Christ, and Jesus knew Peter as he was, as he could be, and as he would be.

Today, a similar conversation between pastor and member might be: Member, "You are my pastor, and you instruct me in spirituality. Pastor, "You are my member, and (huh) sorry, I've forgotten your name." Member, "That's okay. I really don't know much about you either."

Sadly, this type of relationship model exists in a vast number of churches. In the case of large or mega-churches, it is impossible for the pastor to know the name and life of every member. So, how can we practically model the rock-type relationship that the church is built on in every ministry setting?

Taking a page from the motivationalists, it is essential that every member feels intimately connected to their pastor. Like any great motivator we must be two-way connected. By definition, there is no such thing as one-way communication. We cannot simply lecture or preach spiritual repairs. Like Jesus, we insert ourselves into the repair. This connectivity is necessary in all facets of our ministry, bridging gaps and aiding in the repair.

COMMUNICATION KEY TO RELATIONSHIPS

Christian psychologist and relationship guru Dr H. Norman Wright singles out communication as the primary culprit in failing relationships.⁴ Conversely, he attributes the success of relationships to healthy, well-rounded communication. In Matt 16, Jesus was defining the foundational rock of relationship, communicating transparency. He first asked the question, "How do you know me?" or "Who am I to you?" Though Jesus' messiahship was cloaked in secrecy, and Jesus would not easily ascent to this truth, He did not reprove Peter for his intuitive outburst, "You are the Christ!" He intended to use this truth to reach deeper into their relationship. Jesus would be self-revealing to

⁴H. Norman Wright, *Communications, Key to Marriage* (Ventura: Gospel Light, 1974), 8.

strengthen their bond of love.

Peter's astounding revelation could have immeasurably distanced him from Christ. After all, he was a lowly fisherman. Jesus was the promised and lofty Messiah. However immediately, Jesus reached back to Peter, assuring him that their relationship was intact. In fact, it was even stronger than before. He completed this conversation and defined the relationship with "and I know you."

Peter knew Christ at the center of His person as the Messiah. When Jesus said, "I know you" to Peter, those words also held the force of knowing Peter to his core. The strength of this relationship would withstand Peter's denial of Christ and subsequent admonishing to "feed My sheep"(John 21:17), establishing him as a leader of the first century church. In the Matt 16 exchange, Christ pre-positioned the love and understanding which ultimately held Peter firmly in the faith.

The ability to sustain our spiritual relationship with God was repaired by Christ's life and sacrifice. An honest, open, self-revealing, spiritual relationship with our congregation is still central to successful ministry today. We are God's emissaries, modeling love, care, and forgiveness. If we are not transparent, approachable, and truly loving with our church, if we do not communicate beyond the bounds of our professionalism as preacher, teacher, and counselor, then we create a congregation without the benefit of the relationship rock, and the gates of Hell can easily prevail against that.

Building a relationship with a congregation is a marriage of sorts. You both promise to love, trust, respect, and even obey. The best communications are vital in this endeavor. In a marriage, two distinctly separate lives collide. These individual lives become one flesh.

Inserting ourselves into the lives of our people is of paramount importance to the task of creating workers fit for the ministry. A deep love relationship with our flock is part of the fiber of the repair that builds up these ministry workers. Transparency is an essential quality of that repairing fiber.

THE JESUS MODEL OF TRANSPARENCY

From the beginning of the call of Peter and Andrew to "follow me," Jesus established a relationship model that He would eventually call "This Rock." He ate, slept, and traveled with His disciples. They shared suffering and joy. They saw his strengths: many miracles, Temple cleansing, and power over religious leaders. They were with

Jesus in weakness too. They saw His miracles stymied in Nazareth. They were aware of His temptation and conversations with Satan. They saw His struggle at Gethsemane. In short, they knew Jesus beyond the scope of rabbi, teacher, preacher, or elevated leader. He was their pastor and had become their friend. "I no longer call you servants, because a master doesn't confide in his servants. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me" (John 15:15). He had told them everything. He was totally candid and transparent.

THE POWER OF BEING REVEALED

The mutual understanding between Peter and Jesus was based in more than teaching. "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you." Peter's understanding was not learnable or teachable. It was an understanding based in Christ's transparency.

First, Jesus' day-to-day interaction with His followers revealed his personality, strengths, and weaknesses. He revealed himself on every level to be man and Messiah, the Son of Man and the Son of God. Through His interaction with the disciples, Peter became intimately aware of God's hand in the life of Jesus. He also saw Jesus' slightest struggles concerning God's will and call.

Second, the Spirit of God desires to reveal Himself. A most common definition and use of the word, "mystery," (*musterion*), is a secret that is unknown to the ungodly but revealed to the believer. The mysteries of the Kingdom are revealed to us (Mt 13:11). God self-reveals.

No doubt, Jesus' transparent life prepared Peter's heart to receive the spiritual revealing that Jesus was indeed Messiah. Furthermore, Peter's familiarity with Jesus and deepening friendship allowed Peter to risk the declaration that Jesus was the Christ.

The power of seeing Jesus in strength and in weakness is immeasurable. During his times of discouragement, Peter needed to know that his Savior understood spiritual struggles and battles with self-will. He needed to know that spiritual victory was on the other side of those weaknesses. Peter needed to know Jesus in His strengths and apparent weakness. So, Jesus told the disciples of the tempter's offers. He was visible to them in suffering over complying with God's will in Gethsemane. He was openly angered at the money changing in the Temple gates. Peter could identify with the humanity of Jesus. Peter

could know that there is ultimate victory over his flesh.

Jesus could have kept these apparent weaknesses from the disciples. However, He chose not to hide these moments. Accordingly, these are part of the transparency of Christ and the mutual understanding between Peter and Jesus called “This Rock.”

Jesus knows that people need hope. When the way is difficult, hope is the beginning and the essence of faith (Heb 11:1). Hope is a human necessity across the Testaments. Hope is the proper response to the promises of God. Abraham, although he was very old, he had confidence that God would fulfill his promises. “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed” (Rom 4:18). Like Abraham, we can trust in God’s promises and “seize the hope set before us” (Heb 6:18).

Hope is the great motivator. The conservative Christian community tends to mistrust much of psychological science. This is somewhat understandable for psychology is not strictly a science with totally predictable outcome in every empirical situation. The same data input does not always yield the same data output even with the same human subject under identical clinical conditions. However, psychological theory does offer a platform for postulating.

Abraham Maslow began to work out his theory of human motivation in the 1940’s.⁵ He understood that the human psyche is driven from basic needs toward self-actualization in series of hierarchical elements. From bottom to top, the levels are; biological needs, safety, love, others’ esteem, and self-actualization (realization of full potential).

According to Maslow, the needs at each level must be met before progressing up the needs ladder. Once a need is met, the movement toward successive need gains momentum. I suggest that the interweaving fiber between these stages of need is hope. (See figure 1)

⁵Abraham H. Maslow, *Principles of Abnormal Psychology: the Dynamics of Psychic Illness* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 110.

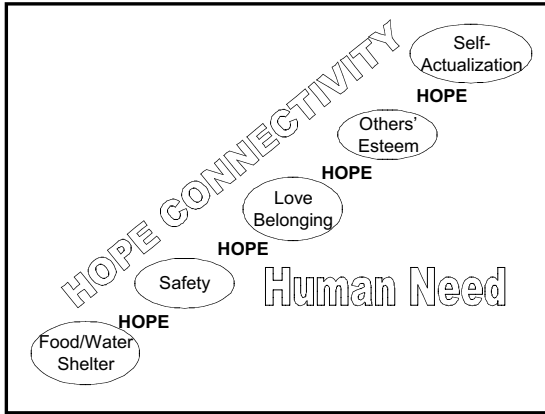


Figure 1

Jesus is not the hope of self-actualization, but He is the hope of glory (Col 1:27).

Jesus Christ, the hope of glory and creator of humanity, understands human need beyond Maslow. We need the interconnecting hope to motivate our growth both physically and spiritually. The Creator of all things also knows how to create hope (Rom 5:1ff).

TRANSPARENCY, A HOPE GENERATOR

Watching Superman leap tall buildings or fly does not give me hope that I will perform similar acts. If he bends steal with his bare hands and encourages me to do so, will his words of encouragement give me hope? I think not. I know that I am nothing like Superman.

Seeing Jesus in struggles with the flesh gave the disciples hope. They may have wanted a leader who was unlike them in every way, a leader who never struggled or appeared to toil in the fight, a Superman version of the Messiah. They needed a Savior who was self-revealing with moments where his humanity burst through. They needed a transparent Messiah, helping them see that the road to victory is dotted with byways of weaker moments. Dr. Charles Swindoll notes, "Becoming a Christian is not synonymous with becoming

superhuman.”⁶ Knowing that weaker moments occur, even in the life of the Savior, gives us hope during our weakest times.

THE CALL TO SELF-REVEALING

Following the Jesus model as a pastor is the ideal of leadership and shepherding care. However, “This Rock,” the strength upon which the church is secured, is costly to attain. The down payment is transparency, the loss of public perfection. Though it is part of God’s plan to yield up mysteries to the believers, it is not within human nature to be self-revealing and transparent. It is within our nature to put up facades, build walls, or erect other opaque means to defend our inner self and protect our delicate psyche. Accordingly, we must examine our ministries to see if we are protecting ourselves against transparency and robbing our parishioners of hope. Here are some suggested questions on that examination.

The Transparent Counselor

What image do I portray in counseling? The arrangement of furniture in my office is generally a clue. There are very few pastoral situations where one can counsel effectively from behind a desk. A transparent Christian counseling relationship cannot begin from behind a wall.

We live in the age of a great availability of counselors. There are social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, self-help agencies (AA-type organizations), group counselors, problem-specific therapists, and more. People choose a pastor from for a counselor for a variety of reasons. It may be a spiritual problem. You may have been recommended. They may be part of your congregation. It may be a simple question of economics. Your services are free. Whatever the defining issue, the common expectation is that a pastor is personable and non-threatening, loving and approachable. After all, you are the representative of God’s love. Clients expect to enter into a more comfortable relationship with you above the Brand X counselor.⁷

Our pastoral counsel should be distinguishable from a Sunday school lesson or Bible study. We cannot keep our distance with a

⁶Charles R. Swindoll, *Flying Closer to the Flame* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 156.

⁷William Miller and Kathleen Jackson, *Practical Psychology for Pastors* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), 2.

didactic approach. If we do not struggle with the issues of gaining trust and being an effective communicator with every client, we may have a problem with two-way communication (remembering there is no one-way communication). We may be less than transparent.

The Transparent Preacher

What image do I portray as a preacher? The answer to the question of preaching transparency may reside in our use of illustrations and sermon applications. How often does our personal story become the subject of an illustration? And more pointedly, how frequently do our struggles with the flesh become part of our interaction with the congregation? We may eke out great Bible truths through diligent exegesis and present them in persuasive oration. However eloquent, it cannot have the pathos of our personal encounter with those same words. There is no greater power in telling God's Word than the power available to an eye-witness reporter. The keenest insights of being out of the center of God's will come from our struggle of being that eccentric one. William Barclay believed, "Perfect performance comes when the deep experience meets the perfect technique."⁸ Our valuable history and experience is afforded us to share passionately. In the example of Jesus, we share our lives from the pulpit. It is the pith of our pulpit sincerity. The eleventh of Barclay's eleven conclusions about preaching reads, "There is one thing without which all preaching is ineffective, and that is sincerity, sheer honesty."⁹

Sermons are not intellectual exercises of three alliterated points and a conclusion, placing the references and logic in such an order as to yield up new thought or inspiration. After the exegesis, the comparative criticism, parallel analysis, and historical/contextual ground-laying, after the outline and passage sub-points, after the presentation and interaction, the application is the high point of the sermon. The application asks the question, "What is God saying about my circumstance today, and what hope is given for my future?"

Is the application personal or personally moving? The preacher who is emotionally moved in the sermon application is transparent.

That preacher is relating to the congregation at the apex of the

⁸William Barclay, *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 78.

⁹Ibid.

message. That congregation is receiving more than a sermon of inspiring words. They receive even more than the Holy Spirit's quickening of those words to their life. They receive hope by the same Holy Spirit through our transparency. They know they are not alone in their emotional (sometimes up and down) relationship with God.

The application that is impersonal is similar to a teaching or an admonishment. The impersonal or didactic application separates the congregation and pastor at the most critical moment, the moment of impact and decision. An intellectual conclusion is more easily intellectually rejected. We cannot teach an application. An application must be applied. We cannot simply tell our congregation what they must do to grow, be healed, or comforted. We can share our growing, healing, and comforting process to foster theirs. We can be transparent.

Every medical worker knows that applications are to be applied. Standing in front of a patient and reading the label of contents and directions is not a treatment. In order to be effective, an application must be applied. However, many pastors continue to teach applications and never enter into the process personally or empathetically. To insert ourselves into the spiritually lacking areas of the lives of our people, we must risk transparency. We need to be humbled in this specific way to offer hope to our people. We need to be "clothed in humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble"(1Pet 5:5). A lack of transparency results in a congregation robbed of hope and the opportunity to effectively enter into the sermon at the point of life-changing impact.

The Transparent Pastor-Administrator

What image do I portray as a pastor/administrator? The pastor is much more than counselor and preacher. Although these responsibilities garner much of a pastor's time, the pastor is also an administrator, staff member, business leader, community spokesperson, and public figure. These are flock-oriented and non flock-oriented positions. Therefore, they may necessitate varying degrees of transparency. Obviously, it is not advisable to be too transparent in a church business deal. There is wisdom in restraining joy at the prospect of buying a new church property in the presence of the seller.

However, it is always appropriate to be open and self-revealing to a pastor's staff, administrators and undershepherds. A staff is something to lean on. Accordingly, it needs to be built up, strong, and fortified,

ready for support in the pastor's weakest moment. Moses' staff was anointed for his ministry. We should consider our staff similarly anointed. If the staff is isolated from the maladies of the pastor, several weaknesses occur.

First, the pastor has no accountability for support in personal growth areas. If your closest co-ministers cannot know where to hold you accountable for weakness, then who will?

Second, the staff of the nontransparent pastor has no one to turn to for their day-to-day spiritual counsel. They don't really know the pastor. Accordingly, they cannot fully trust the pastor. Growth support works both ways. Who will they receive their encouragement from? Where will they get a sense of self worth and value in the body, if not from the pastor? To do this, shared experiences are in order.

Lastly, if the pastor does not share their life with their ministerial staff, a breeding ground for compartmentalized ministry develops. A nontransparent, separate pastor breeds a nontransparent and separated staff.

TRANSPARENT PASTOR-SHEPHERD

What image do I portray to my congregation? A transparent pastor shares more than professional time with their congregation. Jesus shared almost all his time with his disciples. This is difficult to model. We have family and professional responsibilities and much more to keep us out of the center of the flock. However, these responsibilities are not our excuse for a solitary life.

We need other Christians. Do we have Christian accountability? Do we meet with a small accountability group regularly? Do we have a prayer partner beyond our family? Who do we call when prayer emergencies occur? Our congregations are resources of prayer, wisdom, love and helps. If we are not plugged to our own congregation in the above manner, transparency may be a problem.

There's a story of a pastor's son who asked his father in a family conversation, "Is that the truth, or are you just preaching?" We are transparent with our family by definition. We live and breathe together. We share our frustrations and joys together. Does our family sense a tension between the "church us" and the "at-home us?" Do we practice what we preach? Or do we preach with such opaque separation that our family cannot recognize the person in the pulpit. If so, we may have a problem with transparency.

CONCLUSION

The ways in which Jesus communicated himself to us are the ways which we can communicate the heart of God to our church families. If we fail to be like Jesus, we are imperfect. That is not news. Imperfections will surface. However, if we fail to communicate like Jesus, we are impotent. Consequently, our congregations will reflect our lack of strength. We must risk the humiliation of being imperfect, insert our real selves into the lives of our congregations, repair, equip, and perfect our saints with the power of transparent, self-revealing love. Then, they will be equipped for the work of God.