

Mama, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Pastors
by Rev. Whit Malone
Springdale Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Kentucky
October 27, 2002

Qualifications of Bishop (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

3 The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. 2 Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way— 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

Tending the Flock of God (1 Peter 5:1-5)

5 Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you 2 to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. 3 Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. 5 In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Titus 2:7-8

7 Show yourself in all respects a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, 8 and sound speech that cannot be censured; then any opponent will be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us.

For the past couple of weeks we have been talking about our expectations of each other in the church as members and as leaders. Last Sunday, we were affirming the church's need for leaders—that it needs people who ensure that to the best of our ability we are doing what Christ would have us do. Though different church bodies have different positions and offices and call their leaders by different names, the church's need for leaders is an objective fact. In our particular system of church government, we have the offices of Minister of Word and Sacrament, elder, and deacon that need to be filled. What is not so objective is the process of choosing these leaders. Identifying and calling persons to assume these positions is a far more subjective endeavor.

Last Sunday we looked briefly at three dimensions of God's call in our lives:¹ first, the call to be a Christian, to follow Jesus; second, the call to devote one's life to serve God's purposes—to not only follow Jesus but to serve Jesus by serving others; and third, the call which some

receive to particular service or ministry at a particular time and place. It is this third dimension of call that, for Presbyterians, involves the act of ordination.

We typically think of ordination as that “liturgical thing” we do each year (in this church we do it in early January) in which the church, with prayer, lays hands on several kneeling people and sends them off to serve three years on the session. That’s correct to a point—the liturgical act is part of the whole ordination process, certainly the most visible part. But it is only part, because ordination refers to the whole process by which church leaders are identified and called. Here’s how it works.

First, the church identifies what it needs. The church decides what kinds of leadership positions are necessary for it to fulfill Christ’s purposes. As Presbyterians, the roots of this decision go back to the earliest churches we read about in the New Testament who determined that these necessary positions are preacher (or teacher) of the Word, elder (or overseer), and deacon.

Now, remember these positions (these offices) are always related directly to something the church needs. They are always related to a particular, practical function in the church like preaching or teaching or administrative oversight or evangelism or caring for the lonely or poor. And once these functions are identified, they are given a job description of sorts—or to use human resources language, a position description.

Next, with these *position descriptions* in hand the church decides what kind of persons are needed to fill these offices—what kind of particular giftedness, character, and knowledge will be needed by any who occupy this office. This is kind of like a *person description*, and what you’ll notice if you gather together all of the New Testament words related to church leadership, is that the person description gets way more attention than the position description. Skill and training and talent were, of course, important, but for those earliest churches the emphasis was not as much on what these leaders could do, what they could accomplish, as it was what sort of persons they were, what sort of lives they lived.

Finally, after the position and person descriptions are done, the church begins to identify (from within the church body) those who qualify. Assuming a posture of openness and prayer, confident of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church searches for those whose gifts and character and knowledge coincide with the particular need for leadership. And when they are found, these persons are affirmed by the whole body by a formal election. This is not the decision of just a few people; the entire body must confirm the call of these persons. And it is only after all of this has taken place that we participate in the liturgical act of ordination by the laying on of hands.

Now, there is one aspect of this whole ordination process that I have yet to mention, and it is the *response* of the one who is called to ordained office. I’ve talked about the church identifying those individuals it believes God has called out for leadership. What I haven’t mentioned is that this call requires a response. It requires some sort of confirmation in the heart of the person being called.

In response to his vision of God in the temple, Isaiah replies, “Here am I, send me” (Isaiah 6:8). Mary, the mother of Jesus, responds to the angel announcing her call with, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). *Extending* the call is only half of the process. The other half is receiving the response of the person being called.

Furthermore, we Presbyterians don’t believe in cajoling people into positions of leadership. We don’t coerce ministers and elders and deacons to accept their offices. And the reason we don’t is because we believe part of the work of the Holy Spirit in the church is the work of calling and equipping leaders—creating freedom in which people can answer God’s call to lead.²

God’s call to leadership is, no doubt, very compelling. Just ask Isaiah and Mary and any number of those who have heard it. But clearly, God will not coerce. God wants willing disciples. God wants joyful servants. God wants leaders who have responded freely to the call. And we happen to believe that as part of the ordination process, God provides for the ordering of God’s church by freeing those whom God calls to respond, “Here am I, send me.”

I want to share with you my take on what you can expect from those of us who are ordained to office in the church. Or to put even more strongly, I want to share with you what you *should* expect from your pastors and your elders. What I’m about to share is specific to pastors (although much of it can be applied to elders as well). It is what I consider the baseline expectations—the very least you should expect.

Expectation # 1: At the very least, you should expect your pastor to study, teach, and preach God’s Word and to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That expectation is contained in the very name of the office to which we are ordained—Minister of Word and Sacrament. Though pastors share most all the other functions of leadership with elders and deacons, it is the unique responsibility of the pastor to proclaim God’s Word and administer the sacraments.

Having said that, I will also say that with all the other demands of ministry, with all the other hats a pastor is asked to wear these days, it is really, really hard to keep the ministry of Word and Sacrament central. Steven Covey talks about “keeping the main thing, the main thing.” Well, for this pastor, anyway, that is a struggle. But you should expect me—and Jean, our associate pastor—to do that. You should hold us accountable if we get distracted by other things.

Expectation # 2: At the very least, you should expect that your pastors will pray with you and for you. When you are in the hospital, when you come to us to share your struggles, just when you ask for our prayers, you should expect that we will pray with you and for you. One of the structured ways we do this is Monday mornings, first thing, when Jean, Nancy Dutton, and I gather in my office and pray for the needs of our members. Some of you might have gotten a note telling you that you were held up in prayer that day.

Of course, what this means is that we cannot pray for you or your loved ones unless you tell us. Of all the things Jean and I learned in seminary, of all Nancy learned in nursing school, the

ability to read minds was not among them. But if you tell us you should expect that we will keep you in our prayers.

The other way we pray for you is for your ministries in and through this church. We routinely lift up our Springdale “Friends” in their ministry of care giving. We pray for our teachers and youth leaders. We thank God for our singers and bell ringers and musicians. We remember our elders and other staff members in their work.

Expectation # 3: At the very least you should expect that your pastor will hold in trust and confidence what we know about you and your lives. We consider it a sacred privilege to be allowed into your lives, to have you share your deepest needs, your most private struggles, your darkest failures, and you should expect that we will never, ever violate that trust. When it comes right down to it, the criteria I use to measure the success of a pastoral ministry is not the ability to preach a good sermon or teach an interesting class or build a wonderful new building. It is the depth of trust that a people has for their pastor, and that a pastor has for his or her people.

Expectation # 4: At the very least, you should expect that your pastor will always have the best interest of this church and its people at heart. You can expect that Jean and I will always try to say and do that which is best for this church and its people.

Now, it may not always appear that way. For example, in our attempt to be true to scripture and to preach and teach Jesus, I can see Jean or me occasionally ruffling some of your feathers and stepping on some of your toes. After all, that is the nature of scripture. Jesus did his share of feather ruffling among the good, religious folk of his day. But if we do step on your toes some Sunday, you can expect that we will do so with humility and with grace, and that we will be holding ourselves under that very same hard word we preach to you.

Another example: as pastors we are asked from time to time to do things that violate either the letter or the spirit of our calling. Weddings for people who basically just want to use the church and its minister as a stage for something that has very little to do with Christian marriage; baptisms for a grandchild whose parents have no connection with a faith community; use of our building for something that has little or nothing to do with our church’s mission and ministry. We make people (sometimes members of this church) mad sometimes. But you can expect that your pastor will seek to always have the well being of this church and its members at heart.

Expectation # 5: At the very least you should expect that your pastor will have integrity—that he will walk his talk, that she will be on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday what she preached on Sunday. This ministry to which Jean and I have been called and ordained is, for the pastor, a vocation, not just a job. And you can expect that we will serve you and this church as if we were serving Jesus himself. In other words, pastoral ministry is about our lives, our whole lives—public, private, family, financial, moral, ethical, as well as the church—not just the part of our lives we spend in gainful employment.

Which brings us to the question that has been lurking around this whole discussion of our expectations of each other: is the bar set higher for those who are ordained to office in the church? Is there more expected of those who are ministers and elders and deacons than of members?

According to the Bible, the answer is clearly yes! You heard what Paul writes to Timothy, "... an overseer must be above reproach..."; and from Titus, "Show yourself in all respect a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity..."; and finally from the *Book of Order*, "Those duties which all Christians are bound to perform by the law of love are *especially incumbent* upon elders because of their calling to office and are to be fulfilled by them as official responsibilities." That was the original intent of the title of this sermon in your bulletin. The expectations are high. There are certain sacrifices a pastor and his or her family are called to make. So "Mama, don't let your babies grow up to be pastors."

You know, I could also spend the rest of the afternoon telling you what a wonderful privilege it is to be a pastor. I could go on and on about the joys and blessings of pastoral ministry, but that will have to wait. The point is that, at the very least, you can expect your pastors to live lives worthy of the gospel. Not perfect lives, not sinless lives, but lives that are "true to" and "worthy of" the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In conclusion let me say that the purpose of all this ordering of the church's life and governance is found in Jesus' words to his disciples: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). The purpose of having ministers, the purpose of having elders and deacons is to encourage and equip and strengthen the church for its mission to the world. It has no other purpose but *mission*. For, "all ministry in the church is a gift from Jesus Christ. Members and officers alike serve mutually under the mandate of Christ who is the chief minister of all. His ministry is the basis of all ministries; the standard for all offices is the pattern of the one who came 'not to be served, but to serve.'"³

Amen.

¹ From "A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 28-29.

² Proposal, p. 29.

³ *Book of Order*, G-6.0100
