

# A Crack-Pot Ministry

sermon digest

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2 Corinthians 4:1-2, 5-10, 16-18

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I was only six years old and in the first grade when I first began to claim a place in church. I found a friend, David. The two of us were nearly always in Sunday school and ready with the memory verse that had been assigned for the day. One Sunday morning after David and I had performed our verse in unison, Ms. Eden said, "I do believe that you boys are going to grow up to be preachers!" I have never forgotten that public announcement, and I have sometimes wondered if Ms. Eden planted a seed in my head. If so, it didn't seem to bother David; he became an airline pilot.

At age sixteen I announced to my family and church that I had been called to ministry. About half the kids in my teen group had made a similar declaration, and a surprising number of us followed through. The church had become the center of my life. Our large suburban church had two excellent mentors, young ministers just out of seminary. Fritz was minister of music and Edith minister of youth. Along with an excellent high school choral director, Fritz taught me to love music and to appreciate the classical worship literature. Edith was a very special lady who treated all of her kids with respect and nudged us in healthy directions. She was in her late twenties, unmarried. Edith grew up with a serious curvature of the spine. Her drive to overcome adversity had been a key to the development of character. Edith bought her first car, a '48 Plymouth. At sixteen my friend Wayne and I gave her driving instructions.

Edith counseled that in order to become a pastor I would need further education, and I made a critical choice in life. After high school, I left home for Baylor University. That was a beginning of a long educational journey and a love for learning that has never ended. The first step toward a life in ministry, I had viewed as preparation, moved to the center; education became the ongoing foundation for ministry.

Primitive Baptists believed that the only necessary equipment for ministry was a calling from God; you served in the condition in which you were called. Country preachers were sometimes illiterate, and preparation of sermons or worship was viewed as a violation of Spirit leadership. Early Baptists in America had a love-hate relationship with educational institutions; they established colleges and universities that they later abandoned or attacked. I found that the battle was not over. As I was coming of age, my denomination began to affirm the education side of calling to ministry. As I was coming to the end of my formal education, the attacks on seminaries and universities were growing, and large segment of my life as a pastor has been encouraging churches and laity to support the schools. I still have a strong sense of calling to pastoral ministry, but the work of serving the people of God is as much about growing in understanding as it is about doing. But I have learned something important. Education is a process of disillusionment.

Looking back over fifty years of pastoral ministry, my most startling discovery has been the persistent inadequacy of the church and of my own inadequacy to speak with authority to the challenges of real life. I began with a very high view of myself and of the orthodoxy of my church, and I have grown through the process of disillusionment to find that we are all made of clay. The death of my wife in 1968 was the shocking discovering that I do not have a special pass to avoid personal catastrophe. In the victory of Fundamentalism in my denomination I learned that Baptists, Southern Baptists in particular, were not immune from the conflicts and controversies that had plagued the church throughout its history.

***The church, the body of Christ, is a community of crack-pots.*** Paul has a very high ecclesiology. He originated the figure of the church as the body of Christ, a continuation of the Incarnation. Just as the unseen, transcendent God of creation had entered into the visible, tangible flesh of human life in Jesus, God in Christ continued to be present in the world in the church. Paul was constantly reminding Christians to remember you are Christ's body, his presence in the world; you must behave like the body of Christ. As he was, so are we in this world. But, the church is not Jesus. Paul also kept reminding Christians that Christ is the head of the body.

We need that affirmation of our role as the body of Christ, but we need to keep our perspective. The church has not been given a carte blanche authority to rule the world or credentials to overrule all other human disciplines. The Protestant Reformers got a hint of the humanity of the church in their resistance to the absolute rule of Rome, but they never completely overcame their sense that the priests of God were in some sense the parsons, the persons, to lay down the truth for all of the rest of the world to follow. The age of the Enlightenment brought a healthy challenge to church authority, and the age of science brought the conflict into a major war.

I sometimes think that the worst enemy of the church is success. One of my teachers Glenn Hinson

raised the warning forty years ago, that Baptists were selling their souls for success. In an age of population expansion, global human hunger, and growing inequality of races and nations around the world, our denomination had begun to claim the successful business model as the new figure for the church. Pastors had become CEO's, while deacons were the Board of Directors of the corporation church committed to her own success with little or no concern for the people being trampled at the bottom of the pile.

It was shortly after my last ministry had come to an end, and I was feeling like Elijah all alone and persecuted. The Tates called and came by to visit on their way to a vacation down the road. Marvin was an Old Testament professor at the Seminary. The Tates were members of our church in Louisville. The Seminary was also under fire, and professors were being summarily dismissed for insubordination to the new Southern Baptist regime. I expressed my utter exasperation at the behavior of the church. Marvin chuckled as he said, "Don't you know that the church has become the pits?"

The situation of Paul in the Second Corinthian letter is not so different from the modern age. I am reminded of the statement of ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta: "God has not called us to be successful, but to be faithful." Paul was dealing with "super apostles," who knew better than everyone else the formula for success. We are living in the age of the Electronic Church and the Mega Churches. I was warned by a denominational leader in 2002 that the small churches were going to disappear, that only the successful big churches were going to succeed. But he had not been reading history. Throughout the ages of the church the gospel has survived in the servant communities more than the success churches. In many ways our transition to Grace Covenant Church in 2004 was the best move we ever made. As I look back over the years of ministry, I was constantly under pressure to put the institutional church ahead of everything else.

***We have feet of clay all the way to the tops of our heads.*** The second creation story is in Genesis. Adam, the man, is made from the ground, *adamah*. To be human is to be mortal. That means not only that we become dirt when we die, but that we are about as smart as dirt in our ability to understand the real world. Paul said it best, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, clay jars." The "power," that is, the authority and understanding of things, belongs to God and does not originate in his ministers.

Paul left us a wonderful legacy of pastoral letters to the church at Corinth. We have two in our Bibles, but most scholars believe that there were more and that Second Corinthians may have been three letters that were later pieced together. Corinth was a Greek center of commerce and pagan religion, a community of faith that Paul had helped to form. Paul had his work cut out in overcoming the challenge of a deep-seated pagan culture, but he claimed the authority of an apostle. The early church was a hierarchy with apostles at the top of the chain of command. It would seem that all Paul had to do was pull out his apostolic credentials to get the church under control, but it wasn't that easy. Paul and his associates came under attack. They were followed by itinerant preachers whom Paul labels "super apostles." The church had broken down into warring camps with competing leaders and conflicting theologies. In the first epistle, Paul addressed problems of leadership, sexual promiscuity, schism, arrogance, competition, and the absence of Christian charity. He had to defend the scandal of the cross and the meaning of the resurrection. By the time of the second epistle, Paul was under fire, and his tone is defensive.

In reading Paul, I have often been turned off by his sense of self-importance. It seems that he is always on the defensive, having to assure his readers that he is a real apostle. I can understand his problem. He probably never saw Jesus, and the Twelve were companions in service with Jesus. But Paul claimed to have been called lately, to have seen, not the historical Jesus, but the risen Christ. And his calling was to take the gospel of Christ to gentiles, like the folks in Corinth.

Somehow the combination of competing religious charlatans and the rising criticism from the congregation was getting to Paul, and he wrote his letter of defense. He refused to send letters of recommendation to gain approval, though he claimed that the Corinthians were his recommendation. He refused to demonstrate rhetorical superiority, although his words seemed carefully chosen. He refused to take an income for his services, but pled for an offering for the Jerusalem church. He refused to claim his high status in the Jewish faith although in fact he was probably the most literate church leader of his time. Paul made the very important case, "we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake."

I understand Paul's arrogance, his defensiveness, and his struggle to hold his ground every time I look in the mirror. The calling to ministry seems to touch on the big ego of most people in ministry. A part of the

whole picture is a love for the limelight and an appetite for leadership. The ability to say with the prophets, “thus saith the Lord,” arises in the dreams of most young ministers. What a shock to discover that we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that God has not put us on thrones with kings and princes but in servitude washing feet with Jesus. The very word *ministry*, *diakonia*, deaconing, is one that Jesus accepted, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life.”

For Paul to confess that the ministry is not about me was a great sign of growing up. Some of the most challenging moments in ministry in my fifty year trek have been the times when I fully was aware that I was in way over my head, that unless I had help from God, I had nothing to offer. That was a regular discovery, but at two points in this journey the truth has been magnified.

I was in my office in Louisville one afternoon, when a police officer phoned. A member of our church Dick Cornwell had been shot and was on his way to the hospital. Could I meet the police officer at the Cornwell home to help break the news to his wife? It turned out that an angry employee had emptied a 38 revolver in Dick’s chest. It was too late for Dick; we needed to turn attention to Ruby. In the hours and days that followed, it was not just Ruby who needed reassurance of the presence of a loving God, the whole church was called to the work of grief and ministry together.

Then there was that phone call in the middle of a deep sleep by an anguished husband. His wife had taken her own life, and he needed for me to speak to her parents. Again, I realized that we are not alone out here in this unfriendly world. God not only gives presence in our time of need, God surrounds us with the presence of a loving church family. Christ the wounded healer brings us together as the body of Christ and brings our broken selves together into wholeness through the world of wounded healers. You might even call them crack-pots, for we have this treasure in earthen vessels.