

Ministry by the Generation

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Upon the Organization of Westminster PCA, Vancouver, WA

August 23, 1992

Services such as this one afford a minister the opportunity to address issues which otherwise would rarely come to a congregation's attention. And I want to avail myself of that opportunity this afternoon. What I want to say will serve primarily as the charge which is traditionally addressed to ministers, elders, and deacons upon their installation. But, my remarks concern a matter which profoundly effects the life and well-being of a church, and I hope everyone will find it of interest and importance. I am speaking of the great blessing and advantage which belongs to a congregation whose church officers remain faithfully at work in her midst for many years, if not for their whole lives. It is a matter little considered in our day and little appreciated if we may judge by current practice, even in our own Presbyterian Church in America.

What I am about to give you is not so much a sermon as an address, but I have a text nevertheless. I choose for my text Acts 1:24-25 which recounts the prayer the apostles prayed as they sought to know which of two men God would choose to fill Judas' place among the 12.

"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry. . . ."

And I chose that text for two reasons. First, it reminds us that it is our doctrine and our conviction as Presbyterians, founded on this and many like statements in the Work of God, that ministers, elders, and deacons, hold their offices and exercise responsibility for a certain congregation by the call, the direct summons and appointment of the Almighty (. . . Lord, show us whom you have chosen). Neither the office nor the particular summons to ministry in a given place is of a man's own making nor is he at liberty to change the circumstances of his ministry without the most direct indication that God no longer wishes him to serve this congregation but now would have him serve another.

I wish that I were more often persuaded that ministers, elders, and deacons in our own churches fully accepted the implications of those facts. I fear our church officers today far too frequently shift churches as the working world changes jobs. But no more can they, than could Matthias the new apostle, lay down God's calling without disobeying God, unless God himself should take that calling away.

The second reason I chose Acts 1:24-25 to read as I began is that it was the text chosen for a sermon, preached in 1782, by the Scottish minister and theologian John Brown of Haddington, in which he argued strongly against the practice that was then known rather quaintly as "**the transportation of ministers.**" You have only to consult the PCA's Yearbook to see that this practice is alive and well in our church today. Ministers are being transported all over the place!

Just as an experiment I took two pages from the Yearbook and counted the number of separate pastorates listed for each minister on that page. On each page the average number of pastorates was four in each case, of course, some of those ministers listed were still in the midst of their ministry and might well move several more times.

And what is true of ministers is true for elders and deacons. In our mobile day and age, church officers are scooting around the country and moving from church to church in ever increasing numbers.

No one should mistake the effect of this on the church and on individual congregations. They are less stable, less secure, and more prone to serious disturbances and divisions. They spend more and more of their precious spiritual vitality on making up these losses, and grow ever more anxious to making them up quickly to the further harm of the church.

Anyone with a biblical mind knows that God works with an eye to the long term, the long stretch. In the matter of personal salvation, he works at a pace that will not see the work completed until our lives are done. All of us who have been Christians for any length of time know very well that it is God's way to interrupt long periods of spiritual stasis, or slow spiritual progress with brief moments of crisis: repentance, ecstasy, illumination, or whatever. This is the way he has ordered the history of the church as we see so often in the Scripture. In the life of Israel, most days were days of small things, only occasionally would the Spirit move mightily and the Church either lurched forward under God's hand of blessing or backward under his judgements. God's work takes time.

In all of his promises to his people, he underscores the fact that the significance of present obedience or disobedience is in part the effect it will have on generations yet unborn.

God is not all for the moment as we are. And, accordingly, his officers are to be men who see into the distance, men of lengthy vision, whose work is fully understood to be as much for the distant future as for the immediate present.

A minister in a Presbyterian pulpit has hardly done his job for a covenant child when he has finished baptizing him or her. It is his task to see to it that that child grows up a faithful follower of the Lord, capable of and determined to raise his or her own children for Christ and the Kingdom. A shepherd is not done with the sheep when he has seen the lamb safely born. It is his to care for and protect that lamb until it is full-grown and beyond.

A session and a deaconate have not fulfilled their responsibilities when once they have drawn a wayward brother or sister back to obedience or have helped a needy family back upon its feet. Churches are not a collection of discrete events or of problems to be solved or even opportunities to cultivate. They are people, God's sons and daughters, who are to be safely led all the way from this world to the heavenly country. And those people their whole lives are the sacred calling of the officers of this church.

And, quite frankly, I do not think that very many Christians will receive that kind of care, that kind of leadership who grow up and live in a church whose ministers, elders, and deacons are changing all the time.

Now, don't mistake me. I am not saying that men must never move; clearly they must and clearly sometimes God calls them to do so. I am saying that there is far too much moving about, that it is terribly detrimental to the church, and that these men who are to become your officers should think very seriously about the great importance of their staying here and serving this church for the rest of their lives.

Are you aware that most of the paradigm ministries in Reformed history, the pastorates that have come to represent in our mind what a pastorate should be, were either the only pastorate the minister ever had, or were a very lengthy pastorate following a brief one at the beginning of a man's ministry. I just read another biography of Charles Simeon, the Anglican champion of the gospel in late 18th and early 19th century England, and whose pastorate has long been held up as a model for Reformed churchmen. He occupied the pulpit of Holy Trinity church for 54 years. Alexander Whyte, the Scottish Presbyterian who died in 1921, a hero of mine, after a short pastorate as a young minister, became the minister of Free St. Georges, Edinburgh where he remained for the next 45 years.

Samuel Rutherford's name will be forever linked to Anwoth, his only pastorate; Richard Baxter's to Kidderminster; John Bunyan's to Bedford. Still more, many of our greatest ministers, precisely because of their greatness were enticed over and over again to leave their present charge for another, sometimes a much larger and wealthier church, which enticements they refused over and over again. Robert Murray McCheyne loved his St. Peter's Dundee people too much and had been too much God's instrument of grace and salvation to leave them to some other minister. He died their minister and, no doubt, would have died their minister had he lived fifty more years. But this case is not as noteworthy as that of Thomas Boston's.

Boston had had a shorter pastorate when a young minister and then received a call to the country parish of Ettrick. His parish was full of unspiritual people who resisted his ministry for many years. Indeed, eight years into his work he admitted to his wife that his heart was alienated from his people because of their stubborn refusal to heed the Word of God. Nothing but his conviction that God had called him there could have upheld him through those difficult years. But slowly and steadily his spiritual influence grew; new faces began appearing in church; proud hearts were broken. But, shortly thereafter, the inevitable calls came from more substantial churches who are always on the lookout for successful men. By this time, however, the Ettrick congregation fully understood that in losing Boston, they would lose an incomparable minister. They called a congregational fast to plead with God against the call that had been issued to him from a city church. In those days, Presbyterians didn't allow ministers so glibly to decide that God was calling them to do this or that. Presbyterians were very much involved in determining whether a man should come to a church and whether he should be permitted to leave. And the church courts were of a mind to move Boston to a place where his influence could be larger. And in order to stay in Ettrick, Boston had actually to fight off that call in his Presbytery, in his Synod,

and all the way to the General Assembly. And so he remained the pastor there, with ever increasing authority, until his death.

I want then, to set before you, very briefly, some of the advantages that accrue to men and to their congregations when, as officers, they remain where they are and serve with the distant future in their view.

First, there is a relationship between a church's officers and a congregation, a most sacred and wonderful relationship, a relationship of love, trust, and confidence, which absolutely depends upon it being long-standing.

A congregation cannot love its minister or its elders or deacons as it should and as it would be good for it to unless it has known them for a long time and received their ministry to their own good over many years (nor can office bearers love the people as they must).

A church member will naturally receive even difficult counsel much more easily from a minister who long ago held her in his arms when she was baptized and who saw her through some difficulties when she was a teenager, and who married her, and baptized her children, than she will from a minister who enters her life when she is an adult and leaves again in four or five years. A minister gains authority from that history with her and she gains confidence and trust in him and love for him.

Elders who must deal with church members, are far better able to do that with authority and persuasiveness, if they are truly spiritual fathers in that congregation and have known its people of a long time, know their weakness, know their history, and shared their joys and sorrows over the years.

Deacons likewise, who face some of the most intractable and difficult problems, can do so with good effect so much more easily if they know their people well and are well-known by them and if they have, over the years, won the trust and confidence of the congregation.

The sacred relationship between parents and children is due in part to the life, the personal history they share. They have participated in each moment of their children's lives. Well, the more like that is the relationship between church officers and people, the happier and more fruitful will be their ministry, the more ready the people to receive it and submit to it.

Upon the death of John MacEwan, the faithful old pastor of the congregation in Sliddery, Scotland, one minister commented: ". . . his work is over and he is happier now. He has crossed the Jordan and dwells in the promised land, and no doubt he will be waiting somewhere near the entrance to see, sooner or later, one of his own flock from Sliddery coming in." Or consider this famous verse from Samuel Rutherford through the Scottish poet Anna Cousins:

Oh, if one soul from Anwoth,
meet me at God's right hand,
My heaven will be two heavens
In Immanuel's land.

These, to me, are perfect expressions of the kind of love and affection for a people that ministers and officers ought to have; and a people loved and pastored by such men, are a most favored few in the church today. I don't think that kind of affection, that kind of trust, that kind of love and confidence can be built in five years or seven. It is what comes of giving our whole lives to one another in the church. That kind of bond must be tempered over time in the furnace of many fires.

Second, I think long ministries and long service in the eldership and the deaconate is virtually essential to a congregation's successful management of the passages of life.

It is very difficult for individual Christians to grow and for congregations to grow in spiritual substance, depth, devotion, and purity, if their leadership does not set an example for them in just this way. Have you ever noticed the unhappy fact that most Christians get only so far in the life of the Spirit and never go much further. Indeed, many of them, if not most, go hardly a step further in the things of God than they got relatively early on in their Christian lives. Like Asa and Hezekiah, they began well and finished badly. How often the sad truth is that, though Paul urges the older men and women to instruct the younger, in many churches there are precious few older Christians who have any spiritual vitality and earnestness left to pass on to those coming behind. They've been stuck fast for years. Most of the earnest Christians in most of our churches are younger and if that remains the case, the church is consigned to a state of permanent immaturity. Why are most of the elders in many of our churches are young men? That is not a good sign, and it will be a very bad sign if 10 to 20 years from now the elders of this church are once again mostly young men, because these men have left to go elsewhere.

And I have no doubt that one reason for the distinct lack of older, fully accomplished and practised and profoundly experienced Christians, if not the chief reason in many cases, is that the members of the church have not been pulled along, all along the way, by a minister, elders, and deacons who were growing ahead of them and unwilling to let them lag behind. How does anybody know how to go on from Christian youth to Christian young adulthood and then to Christian maturity and then to Christian old age, unless someone light the way? But that will hardly happen if you have a young minister for five years and after him comes a middle aged man and soon afterward comes another younger man.

Churches need to know what their calling is as they grow older and what they must aspire to be for Christ's sake. But they never will if they are not provided consistent examples of growth in godliness persevered in over time.

And that leads me to my third and last reason why long-standing ministry in one place is to be the norm for all church officers, save for the direct intervention of the Lord to move them elsewhere.

Ministers, elders, and deacons who remain in the same church and office for many years, are, thereby, placed under a sacred obligation to continue to grow up into full manhood in Jesus Christ for the sake of the people of God.

I have no doubt whatsoever that one of the chief reasons for so many moves being made by officers in the church is that it is much easier to start again in a strange place, among people who do not know you, than it is to make one long life of holiness among a single congregation.

A minister can use the same sermons all over again in a new church. He has no mistakes to live down, no failures to make up for as he begins again. Elders and deacons likewise can impress more easily a new group of Christians that don't know them nearly so well. But that is but the appearance of spiritual maturity. What we need, what the church needs, is the real thing, that stands up to the test of the daily observation of folk who have watched a man's life for years. The church will never go down deep and up high in the things of God if its best men are forever making a good impression on a new congregation but then disappointing them as they get better known, only to move on to another church in a few years time. We need the real thing, true holiness that stands true tests.

And nothing else will prevent spiritual dullness overtaking a congregation than that its minister, elders, and deacons, continue to grow in the Lord, continue to discover new wonders in God's Word, continue to test the Lord's faithfulness at ever higher reaches of faith and find him ever more wonderfully faithful, continue to deepen graces and sharpen understanding, continue to become more and more able to detect both the hand of the Lord and that of the Devil in the circumstances of life, continue to grow up further into the life of love, and praise, and worship.

And so church officers who stand pat are thereby laid under a necessity to grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord, to become ever more holy men. They fail the Lord and his church if they fail to do so. If they stop, the church will stop right behind them. Standing pat then is a spur that will spur spiritual men to greater things for the church.

Oh, the favored few churches whose ministers and officers devote their whole lives to them and are still becoming more holy men at the end of their lives and ministry in the church. Those Christians in those churches will attain a walk with God and a measure of usefulness that few Christians in our day attain. I promise you. And so I hope for this great blessing for this church, that years from now, others will speak with deep respect and affection of Bordwine of Westminster, Vancouver, and of the old but holy men who for years and years have ruled and served that congregation and led it unerringly into ever deeper regions of the life of faith and the joy of the Lord.