



Forty Years On

By David Stone

In October, 1980, I was ordained and inducted as a parish minister. Now, forty years on, I sit at my computer writing this article and reflecting on my pilgrimage.

I have been asked to write about lessons I've learned along the way. This makes these reflections personal, but I don't wish this article to be about me. Let your thoughts turn to the Lord as the One who has led me and taught me. Praise and glorify Him for what He has done and continues to do.

PREACHING. I began in the ministry with this great desire to faithfully and truly teach the Word of God. Therefore, my preaching and ministry aimed at doing just that. Surely this was a worthy desire.

However, I increasingly came to realize that biblical preaching is more than this. Preaching is not a lecture, but, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it, "truth on fire". It is a passionate declaration of God's truth. That's what I needed to learn and apply. The eternal condition of people is at stake, and I needed to preach in a way that took this seriously.

I also became more aware of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in preaching. I needed Him to teach and enliven me, to energize the preaching, and to convict and convert and sanctify my hearers. It was an awareness that drove me more and more to prayer, especially prior to my preaching.

I am convinced that what is needed today, as in every age, is passionate, Christ-exalting, Biblically faithful, and prayer-bathed preaching.

BOOKS. Over the years, I have read many different Christian books. When I began in parish ministry, I continued to read

what might be labelled "academic books". College is not the end of your learning. I also read many books that helped answer particular pastoral problems and issues. I fed my mind.

However, what I have increasingly found valuable over the years are Christian biographies and books that stir and minister to the soul. They feed both the mind and the heart, and they would challenge and renew and re-invigorate me as I read them.

Years ago, I read the autobiography of John G. Paton, and my brief comment about it at the time was this: "You'd have to dead not to be moved!" Whatever you do, get hold of this book and read it! Such works as these have nourished and sustained my own spiritual health down through the years.

One of my favourite authors is the nineteenth century Church of England minister, JC Ryle. Why? Because he does me spiritual good. As a Christian, he convicts me and stirs me with holy desires. As a minister, he fuels the fire of zeal in me for preaching and for pastoral work.

I have also subscribed to and read *The Banner of Truth* magazine over the years. It too has fed my mind and my heart, and I commend it to all who might be reading this.

SOME TRUTHS ABOUT GOD. Decades ago, a book was published titled "Your God is Too Small". As I began my pastoral ministry I think that may have been an appropriate characterization of my vision of God - in reality if not in theology.

Thankfully, that is not where God left me. Over the years God has revealed to me more of His character, nature, and glory than I had ever known before. The more I read the Bible (at least once every year), the more I came to see the wonder of God's

sovereign majesty. One effect of this in my ministry is my desire to lead public worship and pray in such a way that people catch a glimpse of the awesome majesty of God and are humbled before Him.

I have also come to know more of the grace and goodness of God to me. I am not by nature bold and fearless as a preacher and pastor, yet that is what God has called me to be. What I needed to become more aware of is His personal presence and trustworthiness, and to hear His voice daily, "I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous." (Joshua 1:5b, 6a)

Ultimately, it has been the ministry of the Holy Spirit at work in my life and ministry. When I began, I knew so little of Him personally (though I did intellectually), but over the years I have experienced His enabling work.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS. I think that I was somewhat insular in my outlook when I first began in parish ministry. Ministering to the people of God was all about my parish. While accepting the wider fellowship of believers, my vision of the church was too small.

Over the years I have come to know the blessing of fellowship in Christ across the denomination, and with believers from other denominations. In the beginning I thought of work outside the parish as a distraction and burden. Now, it is more of a delight. I rejoice in Christian fellowship with believers in many places.

One way I have learned to fellowship more widely in the latter part of my ministry is through prayer. Each year, the denomination produces a directory called *The Key*, which lists the ministers in their parishes and appointments, presbytery by presbytery, state by state.

Starting at the beginning and working my way through, I take one presbytery each Sunday morning and pray for those people

and parishes listed in that presbytery. Some people I know, and some I don't, but I count it a privilege to fellowship with them in their ministry through prayer.

PASTORAL VISITING. When I began as a parish minister, I believed that I should visit my people in their homes. This was part of the "job", if you like. It helped me to get to know my people.

However, over the years, I became increasingly aware that, as a parish minister, you have the privilege of being invited into people's homes and lives. You share in their joys, at weddings and other celebrations. You also share in their trials and sorrows and heartaches; and they confide in you the burdens and worries that maybe no-one else knows of.

In all of this, I sought to bring some appropriate teaching from the Bible.

RESISTANCE. When I first began, I didn't appreciate the reality of the difficulties to be faced in the Christian ministry. Even from within the orbit of the church, there were occasions of resistance to - if not opposition to - a Biblical ministry.

I found this hard, but I needed to learn to persevere, and to value the support of other like-minded believers. How important that there are fellow Christians (wife; another minister; an elder or other mature Christian) you are able to confide in, learn from, and be encouraged by.

I pray that these few reflections might be of some help and blessing to others. The article is, of course, a word about "thus far"; and like you, I don't know where or when the journey ends. Whatever further work of sanctification and public ministry there is, may it be to the praise and honour and glory God.

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