



Practical Ministry Excellence (Part 1)

by Chuck Gianotti

Excellence should describe the ministry of the local church. The American Heritage Dictionary defines this word as “to be preeminent or perform at a level higher than that of another or others.” Translators of Psalm 8:1 used this word to describe the One we serve and worship: “O Lord, our Lord how *excellent* is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8:1 NKJV). The Hebrew word can be translated “majestic” (NIV) which means to have or show “lofty dignity or nobility.” The psalmist challenges us to consider the perfection of the Lord’s work in creating the universe in general and mankind in particular. The writer of Hebrews uses this passage to speak of the excellency of Christ (2:6-8). Yes, the Lord does all things well (Mark 7:37)—nothing shoddy about it.

If we worship and praise a God whose name is “excellent” and whose work is excellent, then this ought to be the standard to which we aspire in the local church. Appropriately, the Lord instructs us, “...whatever is excellent...think about such things” (Phil 4:8 NIV). While the primary meaning of this word has to do with individual moral virtue, we are well within Biblical parameters to apply this to the local church as a whole. In this series, we encourage you to move toward excellence in various areas of local church work.

Excellence in teaching and preaching

Titus 2:1 tells us that “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” Without the solid, excellent foundation of truth, a church easily falters. The Lord, whose name is excellent, is honored when we hold tightly to truth. Excellence embraces no shred of error, but rather holds tenaciously to the pure, unadulterated word of God.

We must also show excellence in *how* we teach God’s truth. While, the Holy Spirit brings conviction by empowering His word as it is taught through human instruments, the elders should watch over “how” the flock is fed. The truth should not be simply “thrown” at them, but rather taught in ways that are effective. What are some practical ways elders can move toward excellence in this? Here are a few suggestions:

First, elders must take responsibility in this area. While some may have a public speaking gift, such is not a requirement for their role as elders. However, elders do have the responsibility for watching over this ministry. When people stray toward to false doctrine, it *may* be that they are not being taught well.

Recognizing that God may raise up a variety of men as preachers or teachers, look for those who study hard and don’t just “wing it” on 2-3 hours preparation. I know of men who spend many evenings over two weeks in preparation for a single message. The church should develop a good resource center (library) to assist elders and preachers in their study.

Be selective about visiting speakers, and don’t just “fill slots” in the preaching calendar. Ask, “Why are we asking *this* individual?”

Pride should be kept in check. Where else can

a man have a captive audience for 30-45 minutes and the opportunity to speak authoritatively—and with little formal training? Heady experience for a carnal man! Pray for humility.

Recognize that not every man is called to preach—we do a disservice to the people of God by being careless in this essential ministry. Don’t distort the biblical doctrine of the “priesthood of the believer” and allow the fear of “one-man” ministry lead you to adopt an “any man ministry.” Avoid wrongly elevating the speaking gifts to a “pinnacle” to which all men should aspire. Is the eye of the body more important than the ear (1 Cor 12:14-26)? Each one should aspire to the “most excellent way” of love (1 Cor 12:30) and, then to the gift God distributes as He alone wills (1 Cor 12:11).

Many churches provide training in communication skills—preaching and teaching, at the core, is all about communicating God’s word. Video tapes and books on preaching can prove helpful. When I hear a good message, I try to analyze it and learn from what made it a good sermon. Why not have one of your own messages videotaped, then watch it a week later when you have some emotional “distance” from it? This could be one of the most eye-opening experience of your ministry!

What about topics? You as elders are in the best position to know the needs of the flock, assuming you are walking in step with the Spirit. Consider what one assembly does—with much prayer and deliberation, the elders select topics and the various preaching series ahead of time. The speakers, then, gather to discuss the series and exchange ideas. During this time, informal cross-training takes place along with coordination and a commitment to “speaking with one voice”. Differences of interpretation can be discussed at this time as well.

How do you know if you are “hitting home”? Relying on your wife’s response may not be objective enough. Consider a feedback system, like comment cards in the bulletin. This could provide helpful information that the Spirit of God will help you evaluate. Caution, if you are insecure in your preaching, you may want to reconsider this!

There will be times when people have no clue what was being said! Their glazed eyes and yawns squeezed out “between the teeth” give them away! Admit it, this has happened to you on *rare* occasion. It has to me! Resist the temptation to think too often, “I’m preaching to the level where they *should* be.” Why not, instead, try to determine how you missed meeting them where they *are*.

Finally, have you considered following Jesus’ example by using visuals as, for instance, when He invited His audience to consider the flowers and birds. You might use projectors, signs, banners, flannel graphs, drama, chalk, etc. Consider giving out “listening aids” like a simple outline on half-size sheets that can be filled in as you speak. Creativity shows itself in all God has done in creation; it ought to show in the communication of His truth.

The public ministry of God’s word should be characterized by excellence—for this reflects a God whose name is “Excellent”!

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When studying the work of elders, we sometimes use terms that help us understand the broad categories in which they serve. We have done this in the past using descriptive words like “feed,” “lead,” “oversee,” and “protect.” Residing quietly within these duties are many administrative skills upon which elders rely year after year. Often overlooked, they are, like many of life’s seeming details, critical to successfully working with people. If I had to choose two administrative skills that are crucial to good leadership, I would mention first, the skill of facing and dealing with problems in a timely manner, and secondly, the skill of communication clearly. These are worth some serious thought.

The one I place first is dealing with potential problems swiftly. Or to say it another way, elders must not procrastinate. Now, someone reading this may be shaking his head in disagreement; “Let’s not be hasty brother; haste makes waste. What about the many warnings about waiting on the Lord? We can’t have a rush to judgment in the church of God.....” Let me state emphatically that I do not advocate undue haste in the work of the Lord. But let the reader ask himself a question. Looking back over your years

in the Christian community, have you seen fellowship suffer more because sins and problems were dealt with too quickly or too slowly? Answers will vary, but if the concerns expressed to me by sincere believers over the years are any indicator, most will think of more occasions when problems were not addressed but allowed to drag on, sometimes for years. In fact, it is probably not an

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exaggeration to suggest that this is one of the greatest faults of leaders today.

The key word is “timely.” Problems must be addressed in a timely manner. That means not looking the other way while a situation worsens, and it certainly means not running ahead of the Lord. Good lessons may be learned by considering the example of the apostles’ approach to problem solving as recorded in the book of Acts. Several notable examples are found.

In Acts 5, two individuals in the church pretended to give all to the Lord from the sale of land when in fact they gave only part.

Perhaps if that happened today some might suggest that they should go for counseling or describe their sin as “a little white lie.” Peter saw it differently, saying that they had lied to the Holy Spirit. They died on the spot and fear came upon the whole church. In Acts 6, the complaint of certain widows who felt neglected was reported to the apostles. Interestingly, the apostles never blamed the people for complaining. Although no exact time frame is given, the text implies immediate action as capable men were chosen to address the problem. Finally, in Acts 15 a doctrinal question threatened to divide the church. After some disputing, a group of representatives was sent to Jerusalem, thus referring the problem to the place from whence it had come.

Now in all these cases, there is no hint that much time was allowed to pass. No statement can be found to indicate that the situation was steadily growing more serious, much less that the work was beginning to suffer. Nothing, not even prayer is cited as a reason for delay. The apostles acted (doubtlessly with prayer) in a way that underscores an important truth: every day is crucial when dealing with a spiritual infection in the body. One measures the spread of leaven throughout a lump of dough in

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Wives’ Corner

Accepting Our Present Season

by Maria Forcucci

Seasons. Spring, summer, autumn, WINTER! Brrrr! We’ve seen too few double digit temperatures here in recent weeks. I’d like to ask the Lord if I could borrow nature’s thermostat for a few days and begin a spring thaw. Wouldn’t He enjoy a mighty chuckle while shaking His head at my presumption?

But don’t we do this regarding our “seasons” of service for the Lord? Bored with one thing while anticipating something more interesting, we can badger the Lord to somehow make things more comfortable for us. Or the opposite might be true. We hold on for dear life to a ministry the Lord has long since called us out of because it’s familiar or convenient.

I know I’ve asked questions like these: “Lord, when can I stop changing diapers?”—“Lord, will Mrs. Doe ever have her own vehicle?”—“Lord, can my Bible Study go on forever?” Yet, we have about as much control over the seasons of our daily service as we do over the summer’s heat or winter’s frost. And, like Martha, we can become frustrated when our service is either shortened or prolonged as measured against “our” goals.

Proverbs 21:1 states, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water, He turns it wherever He wishes.” (N KJV) If this is true of the non-regenerate king who could care less about pleasing God, shouldn’t the Lord have an even easier time directing His servants to do His will?

The word *service* seems to have a driving, “must do” connotation to it. For some of us, getting out and getting busy would be God’s perfect prescription for us—applying all the great teaching we’ve sat under. Then there are those of us who need to STOP! Perhaps God has us needing to be content in doing the mundane...cleaning out that closet or sorting through that recipe box. Most importantly, we regularly need to sit at Jesus’ feet for refreshment and guidance.

Being aligned with God will help us enjoy our present season. If you’re in a quiet season right now (sickness, new environment, empty nest, etc.), use your time to “gird up your loins”, “For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray unto You in a time when You may be found...” (Psalm 32:6) If you’re in a busy season (raising

kids, teaching, discipling, etc.) then be content. “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.” (Gal. 6:9)

Whether a ministry’s season goes on for years, or is just a one time deal, one thing we can be sure of is that our present season *will* change. “And He changes the times and the seasons; he removes kings, and raises up kings...” (Daniel 2:21) Perhaps we can conclude then that two key elements to effective ministries are 1) being content right now in today’s “season” and 2) being prepared to change course.

As I sip my steaming tea, I can imagine all the great things I could do outdoors when spring comes. Until then, I can sit at my desk and read, write, pray, and find that the Lord and I agree: winter is not such a bad season after all.



[Editor: Substitute the word “elder” for the word “pastor”. We need this message.]

Rebuke Well Taken

As a seminarian, I was asked to write and deliver a paper to a special forum of students and faculty. Typically, I put off writing the paper until the deadline loomed and then cut two days of classes to complete the assignment. When I had finished reading the paper and the audience had responded with applause and left the auditorium, a professor whose classes I’d dodged in order to write the paper found me and said, “Gordon, that was a good paper, but it lacked the possibility of greatness. Do you want to know why?”

I could hardly say no, and so he continued. “You sacrificed your routine responsibilities to write it,” he said. “Your ministry will not be successful if you make this sort of a thing a habit.”

You listen carefully to an insight like that because it comes from a man forty years your senior whom you respect. He was less interested in the content of my presentation than he was the character pattern that framed its writing. The paper would soon be forgotten (I can’t remember anything about it now), but the work habits it revealed would continue the rest of my life if I didn’t alter them.

He saw this; I did not. His rebuke caused me to reform my work ethic.

In the earliest days of my ministry, I cultivated the habit of meeting with our board chairman every Monday morning to gain his perspective on how things were going. That’s the good news. The bad news was that I apparently bridled whenever he told me unpleasant things (is there an Ahab in me?) that he was either seeing or hearing about.

One time when I may have sulked a bit, he leaned across the table and said, “Pastor, you have a trait that you’re going to have to whip. It’s over-sensitivity. We’re not talking about you or how we feel about you; we’re talking about your ministry and how we can make it better. Stop injecting your feelings into these discussions.”

Listen carefully to such a rebuke! Your whole future may be marching before your eyes. Suddenly, someone has put a finger on a character quality that stands between you and your dreams. The man gave me a treasure of an insight. I hear it to this day—thirty-five years later—every time my wife, my friend, my partner, or my enemy begins to say something I don’t want to hear. A spiritual mentor once rebuked me when he heard me say something mean-**spirited** about a common acquaintance. “Gordon,” he said, “a man who loves God does not speak that way about a brother.” It was as if he had stabbed me with a knife. The pain was harsh, but he

was right. Twenty-seven years later, I hear those words afresh every time I am tempted to say something demeaning about anyone...*anyone*.

Rebuke By Significant Others

My wife, Gail, has been a first-string player on my rebuking team. “Has it ever occurred to you that most of your sermon illustrations are about people who are prosperous? Every business person you mention is always powerful or well connected. Every scholar is the best at this or that. Every athlete is a record-setter. Every organization is the biggest. Best, best, best!”

“You need to ask yourself if you’re not sending the wrong message: that the only folks you care about are those who are successful.”

“Your wife is one of God’s most precious gifts to you,” a mentor had said to me a week before I married Gail. “He’ll speak truth to you through her if you are willing to listen. But if you won’t listen, she’ll learn that you’re not interested in this gift, and she’ll shut up. But you will become a loser as a result.”

The mentor was right.

On this occasion, Gail’s rebuke about my sermon illustrations was followed up a few days later by a woman named Marilyn who rebuked me without really knowing she had done it. Because she had serious emotional problems, her medications left her constantly in a daze.

May I be blunt? She was the kind of woman you are tempted to avoid whenever she comes in your direction.

I was standing in the lobby of our church talking to someone when Marilyn came through the door. When I saw her, I called out, “Hello, Marilyn, how are you?” And I immediately turned my back and resumed my conversation with my colleague, hoping, I guess, that Marilyn would go the other direction.

But she didn’t. A moment later she literally inserted herself in the middle of my conversation.

She said in a slow, medicated voice, “Pastor Mac, you say, ‘Hello, Marilyn, how are you?’ but you really don’t want to know. You don’t have time for a person like me. You only talk to important people.”

I think that was the day I started losing my desire to pastor a large church. Marilyn’s rebuke pointed out to me all the realities of calling myself a pastor in a large congregation where 90 percent of the people could hardly ever engage me in substantial conversation without an appointment weeks in advance.

Marilyn was right: I didn’t want to

know how she was because I didn’t have the time or the curiosity to find out. I was too busy for the “smaller” people.

Gail and Marilyn had hit me with a one-two rebuke.

A homeless man in New York City rebuked me one day. I found him going through a trash can on the side of our Manhattan church building. Frankly, I was irritated, and I said, “Hey, when you’re through with the can, put it all back and make sure the lid is on.” I started to walk away.

“Just a minute,” he called out. I turned to face him. He said, “I’ll be glad to do what you asked if you ask me respectfully.”

Respectfully! He had me. This man knew disrespect when he heard it.

I sucked in my breath and said, “You’re absolutely right, and I’m so sorry. Sir, when you’re finished, it would mean a lot to me if you would please make sure the area is tidy.”

“I’d be glad to,” he responded. We shook hands.

Such rebukes live on and on in my mind and provide a measure of discipline each time a similar occasion arises. I can attach a name to each of these rebukes, and each name represents someone who loved and cared enough about me to insist I face a piece of truth.

Certain Rebuke

There is a great temptation to get angry when we are rebuked. Or to become defensive. Or to cut ourselves off from the one who had the courage to speak truth. Or to withdraw into denial or self-pity. All of these reactions are guaranteed to cut off growth and maturation—the very thing a Christian leader needs most.

“I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you,” wrote Paul (2 Cor. 2:4). His was tough love for the folks in Corinth. But it apparently paid off.

Remember that I told you of my habit of meeting with the chairman of our board each week? Some years later there was another one of those men who—like all the others—kept the same routine with me.

One morning over breakfast he said, “Gordon, you’re very good with people. And I’d like you to be even better.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

From his pocket he took a package of breath mints. “These might make you a little easier to talk to,” he said with a smile.

I think it qualifies as a rebuke. But I’m not sure.

When YOU Do The Rebuking

For pastors, it’s not necessarily easier to give than to receive. A majority of pastors are

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“feelers,” meaning that the feelings, the dignity, and the approval of people tend to rank high in their decision-making process.

Since I am by nature a “feeler,” having to rebuke someone has always been difficult for me. I would rather be rebuked than to rebuke. Why? I struggle with the confidence that my judgment of a person’s actions or attitudes is the correct one because I tend to see many sides to every story. I fear the possible loss of a relationship. I do not like to wound people.

The following are principles of rebuke that I have found helpful:

1. Make sure that there is no way my rebuke can be misunderstood.

2. Never rebuke someone when my anger is hot.

3. Don’t rebuke in writing or by phone; only face to face (and, if necessary, with a witness).

4. Don’t destroy the other’s dignity.

5. Make sure I have the whole story.

6. Make sure my own motives and purposes are clarified.

7. Make sure that I identify the implications of the behavior.

8. Always provide an opportunity for the person to acknowledge wrong and gain a new start.

A single man in our congregation was behaving inappropriately toward women. He badgered some women with unwanted phone calls. His conversations were reportedly marked with sexual suggestiveness. The situation required rebuke, and, if that was not effective, discipline. I asked this man to meet with me.

“I have been made aware,” I said, “that a number of women in our congregation are offended—some quite angered—by things you have been doing. Let me be specific. You have raised inappropriate sexual subjects in conversation. There have been women who have re-

ported that you have phoned them in a manner that they consider harassment. I’ll be glad to give specific examples if you feel you need them.”

The man cautiously admitted that there was substantial truth to the reports. Then I went on.

“I want you to hear me very carefully so there is no misunderstanding between us. I have thought about this for several days. I have asked God to give me wisdom, and I want to speak in Christian love and respect to you.

“But I want you to know that I am one who has a responsibility for the spiritual leadership of this congregation. Your behavior has been unacceptable according to Scripture and according to the covenantal life of this church. People have been hurt, and you have lost your credibility in their eyes.

“Christian men do not, as they say, ‘hit’ on women. They treat them with respect and honor. And if you do not understand how this is done, I will be happy to team you up with a man who can provide instruction for you.

“If there is one more instance of inappropriate behavior of this kind, I will immediately bring your name before the board of elders and ask them to put you under discipline. Have I made myself clear?”

The man assured me that he understood. I concluded our meeting with prayer, acknowledging God’s presence in the conversation.

Later he took me up on my offer to connect him with a mature man who could provide guidance that he clearly had not received from other sources. I never got another adverse report about him again.

[Gordon MacDonald is editor-at-large of Leadership and chair of World Relief.

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hours, not days or weeks! We can only surmise what might have become of the church had the apostles followed the time table of some church leaders today.

To sum up, in each of the incidents referred to above, three elements may be traced. Inquiry was made through questions or testimony, decisive action was taken and finally, the result clearly communicated. This last point should be taken to heart. In the matter of the Acts 5 story of the couple who lied to the Holy Spirit, young men who seemed to have some involvement in the work were aware of the problem and its conclusion. In the other two passages the entire assembly participated in resolving the problem, and in the latter, letters were written and sent along with those who could bear witness to the facts. No wonder there was great joy among the churches and the work grew strongly.

How can all of this help us? What steps can be taken? Elders, let us hear the concerns of the flock, especially those who have labored among us with a track record for faithfulness. Let us not become defensive, branding as a complainer the one who brings the concern. Let us be more concerned about “Is it true?” than “Who said it?” And most important, remember that very few problems “just go away by themselves.” Someone must do the hard thing, ask questions and discover the truth. Often it is thankless work, but in the long run, it will be verified as one of God’s primary means of preserving and blessing His church. 

[Next issue, we’ll take a look at the second skill, communication].

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