

What Makes a Ministry Appealing? (Part 1)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

I marvel with gratitude at the wonderful opportunities that the Lord God has given me to learn from some exceptional teachers. My appreciation of this gift only grows as the years go by—and as I speak with other Christian leaders who, for one reason or another, never had such an opportunity.

One of the men who has had the greatest impact upon my theology and thinking is Dr. Myron J. Houghton, about whom I have written before. I had the awesome privilege of studying under him in five courses at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary.

There are many things that Dr. Houghton—now with the Lord—taught me which I will never forget. One such statement came about in systematic theology class one day when Dr. Houghton had his heavily annotated study Bible open to 2 Corinthians 2, reading from verses 15 and 16, where the Apostle Paul is drawing on the illustration of the parade held in honor of a Roman military victory:

For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one *we are* the aroma of death *leading* to death, and to the other the aroma of life *leading* to life.

“Your ministry is like a fragrance,” Dr. Houghton told us in his inimitable voice. “It will attract some, and it will repel others.”

Those words immediately lifted a burden off of my shoulders. The statement gave me permission to believe that I was not responsible to make sure that everyone loved me in my ministry. It also gave me hope that some would at least listen to me.

As I evaluate Dr. Houghton’s comment, I realize that much of the reaction that I will receive is under the sovereign direction and convicting work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-11). I also understand, then, that this entire line of thinking runs counter to pragmatic philosophies of our day, such as the *church growth* mentality.

And, yet, I do desire for my ministry to grow. I want to reach and teach as many people as I can. I yearn to be the most effective tool in the hand of the Lord God that I can possibly be. If people are offended when I preach, I want it to be because of the message—not unnecessarily, on account of me.

So that leads me to a practical question: How can I make my ministry more attractive to more people? I am sure that there are many things that we can do toward this end, but let me share just three suggestions here and in a following article.

1. Know Your Audience

I am, of course, not suggesting here that we will tailor the content of our message to fit the spirit of the age or the desires of a particular congregation (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

On the other hand, we do the congregation no favors if we speak in such a way that people have no idea what we are talking about. There may be times when we need to consider the age, educational level and spiritual maturity of our audience—and tailor our *presentations* to them.

For example, I would submit that few things have helped me to improve my teaching more than the opportunities I've had to speak to classes of grade school and high school students. Teaching children affords you the opportunity to experiment with different teaching methods, and they are also known to provide you with immediate feedback and an instant gauge on your effectiveness.

As preachers and teachers, we love to speak to audiences that desire to go deeper in God's Word—forcing us to mine out all the spiritual truth that we can. But we also need to recognize that not everyone is there, and not everyone responds to every means of instruction in the same way. "I still have many things to say to you," Jesus told the apostles in the Upper Room, "but you cannot bear *them* now" (John 16:12).

There is a place for humor, for a picture or for an illustration—sometimes even at a very heavy point in the message—when used appropriately. Occasionally, people just need a time to breathe, and a little hope and encouragement.

Several years ago, I was called to be the interim pastor at a church following a major division and split in that church body. I believe God pressed one signal passage upon my mind as I entered into that ministry. I never announced it to the congregation, as far as I can recall, but it governed every sermon I gave there. It is 1 Cor. 2:1-5:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching *were* not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

May God help us always to be bold, clear, precise and encouraging whenever we speak His Word.

I will add two more suggested means of making our ministries more appealing in the concluding installment of this short series.

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