

Things about Ministry I Learned the Hard Way

By Bob Young

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My early training for ministry was, I believe, typical of the times. In the late 1960s, many congregations of churches of Christ, especially in the rural areas where I grew up, were happy to have a minister at all. To have a preacher with a college degree was considered a special blessing. I began my collegiate career at Wichita State University as a mathematics/chemistry and music major. I took typical courses—Philosophical Readings, Rise of Western Civilization, Persuasive Speaking, Interpretive Speaking, literary interpretation and analysis. When I transferred to Oklahoma Christian at the beginning of my junior year to complete a Bible degree, a full slate of Bible, biblical languages, and related courses awaited me. In a process that I only understood later when I began working in the academic world, I escaped courses like homiletics, exegesis, and hermeneutics because of generally parallel courses already on my transcript. (I did not however escape Dr. Dunn’s biology class, despite having 18 collegiate hours of lab science in chemistry.)

When I graduated in 1970, I began preaching full-time in a congregation in southwestern Arkansas. I encountered the usual pitfalls. I had taken all of Dr. Jones’s Old Testament textual courses, and at times I was about as tactful as some of the Old Testament prophets. I had taken enough Greek with Dr. Kelcy to translate the text (and to earn a minor in Biblical Greek), but the process of understanding what the text meant and how to apply it was often beyond me.

I went back to school and eventually earned additional degrees which sharpened both knowledge and skills. Along the way, both before and after my post-baccalaureate studies, have I learned as much from HKU (Hard Knocks University) as I did from OC, HU, PTS, HUGS, or ACU. I share these under three headings: character (connecting who I am with how I live), skills (what I do), and thinking (how I perceive the world around me).

First, I have learned that how one lives life matters. How one lives one’s life is reflection of one’s awareness of God’s calling. My lifestyle can never disconnect from God’s calling and claim on my life. This can be described in many ways. For me, three concepts have continually risen to the top.

God calls us to competence. I was raised to value competence. In my family, it was important to do one’s best. In ministry, the question cannot be escaped: “Does the minister know what he’s doing?” Churches want to know. In Christianity, and thus in ministry, one can never stop striving to be the best one can be. The study, progress, growth, challenges, refreshment, new directions never stop. Lots of short-cuts exist. It is easier than ever to preach somebody else’s sermon (thanks to the Internet). Ministers who make a difference over the long haul will continue to study and grow, and to develop increasing competence.

God calls us to authenticity. Our contemporary world struggles with the question, “What is real?” What does it mean to be real? Churches want to know if preachers are authentic. Does he live what he preaches? Is his life consistent? Is he honest? Is his word his bond? Churches want to know, “Is he genuinely ‘for us’ or are we merely another rung on his ladder? Much goes into authentic living. One cannot ignore the call to authenticity.

God calls us to integrity. Call it what you will—consistency, lack of hypocrisy, dependability, reliability. At the end of the day, the lack of integrity is the undoing of our health and wholeness. After all, that is what the word means: whole.

Second, I learned that knowledge without skills profits little. Three sets of skills have been especially important for me in developing meaningful and effective ministry.

Leadership skills. I have observed that much of what occurs in the local church and in ministry rises and falls on leadership. One may be right, but if no one is following, nothing much will come of it. As teaching requires that one know the material and the students, ministry requires that one know the Bible and that one know people. The leader must be an influencer, a vision caster, and a change agent.

Relationship skills. The saying is true, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” People are a minister’s greatest asset, the church’s greatest asset, with the greatest potential for appreciation in value. I am amazed that ministers spend so little time cultivating people, developing people, and training people. Some of the people that will insure the future of the local church where you attend do not yet attend. A commitment to developing relationship skills forces one to identify the motivational principles that move people. Effective relationship skills employ relationship rules that must never be broken.

Equipping skills. Those that are closest to you will determine the level of your success. Working with other people results in addition. Working without other people results in subtraction. Working through other people results in multiplication. Working in spite of other people results in division. Effective ministers and church leaders recruit capable people who can help them, and train those people effectively. The biblically mandated mission of church leaders, to equip saints for works of service (Eph. 4:11-16), is a glaring omission in many churches. Learning how to involve others will increase your effectiveness. Someone has summarized the Great Commission this way: disciple people, develop people, deploy people. An effective minister understands how to pour one’s life into those with potential, how to equip others for effective ministry.

Third, I have learned that what and how one thinks is vitally important. These enhance and sharpen ministry. It may be possible to minister at some level without these, but these cause “the cream to rise to the top”.

Critical thinking skills. No person is well-educated who has not learned how to evaluate information. Not everything one reads in a book is true. All information is not created equal. One must choose what one reads. Not all information matters eternally. Even more vital in today’s technological world: not everything one reads on the Internet is true. One must evaluate the perspectives we humans share by the way God sees the world. This process is sometimes described as “developing a Christian worldview”.

Knowledge. One will not minister effectively without a commitment to life-long learning. The need to learn never ceases. One can never be satisfied with what one already knows. One must constantly address the temptation to rest on what one already knows. The Bible is an ever-flowing well and one must live one’s life in the story of Scripture, learning and applying, meditating and refreshing the soul. Nor can one limit the need for knowledge to the word of God. One must live with one foot in the story of Scripture and the other in the reality of the world Jesus came to save.

Attitude. I have observed repeatedly that the old adage is correct: Attitude determines altitude. Effective ministry requires **attitude development**. Leading people is emotionally difficult. Leaders must deal with burnout, insincerity (role-playing), and fear of failure. What happens within us is more important than what happens to us. Nothing succeeds like success, so developing a winning attitude is essential. Falling prey to the emotions that naturally arise can be fatal.

May God help us be effective ambassadors of his presence in the world. For those of who are “ministers”—may we be committed consistent disciples who never quit learning from and imitating the Teacher, may we know what to do and how to do it.