

PASTOR-LAYMAN RELATIONS

BY

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Down through the years as an active layman, it has been my privilege to come in contact with laymen from many different churches. Through my various church experiences as a Sunday School director for 25 years, in attending Ridgecrest and Lake Yale and through associational involvement, I have come to know a lot of laymen. Two terms on the State Board of Missions have given me the opportunity to develop some life long friends with mutual interest in the Lord's work. Being a dentist in Ocala for the last 35 years and attending the several dental meetings or seminars over the state each year, I constantly find myself making the acquaintance and often close friendship with dedicated church laymen from other areas. Invariably the conversation with such friends gets around to how things are going in the home church. It is exciting to hear some of the good things that are happening. However, too often the excitement is tempered with "But". Most of these "buts" signaled the frustration of a concerned layman over some conflict with his pastor--either with himself or some other laymen in the church. This has happened often enough for me to question in my mind if there could be some advantage in developing seminars on pastor-laymen relations. These conflicts can be so detrimental to the harmonious work of a church.

Although many of my dearest friends through the years have been pastors, my reference in this paper is primarily the concerns laymen have related to me. I often found it easy to identify with my layman friend in his concern and wonder how his pastor could not see how he erred and could not see the dangers to church harmony. On occasion I had expressed an interest in someday seeing a survey made throughout the state in an attempt to categorize the factors that most often appear as detriments to pastor-laymen relations. Such a seemingly idly expressed interest on my part apparently reached a meeting of the Florida Baptist Historical Society. As a result, this body commissioned me to do a research paper on pastor-laymen relations.

Though tremendously challenged and humbled in contemplating such a paper, I did feel that a unique background equips me to see the subject pastor-laymen relations in at least a fairly unbiased approach. My own father was a Baptist minister as well as two uncles, a brother-in-law, a son-in-law, and many of my closest friends.

It has not been anything like a chore at all for me to devote many hours to this research. It has been with keen interest that I have personally interviewed countless laymen and pastors from many different denominations and from many areas of the state and some from other states. The research involved the reading of several good and appropriate books and articles and studying the results of a questionnaire that was sent to approximately 100 individuals in the state.

It is with appreciation that I express a special word of thanks to Mr. Keener Pharr, Director of Education Division of the Florida Baptist Convention. His background of work over the years and his present position with the Florida Baptist Convention has helped him develop a very keen insight into the subject of pastor-laymen relations.

Unfortunately pastor-laymen relations too often deteriorate, much as husband-wife relations, to a point that insurmountable walls are created before real communication and help is actively sought, and then it is too late to experience a return to harmony. The hurt, dislike and distrust are too evident to be broken down. When does it all begin and what could be done in the beginning and along the way to preserve harmony?

Some interesting revelations came out of our survey. To begin with, we tried to keep it simple. I thought we would get about 102% response, but my wiser and more perceptive wife predicated that people are too lazy and indifferent to bother, especially if it requires a little thinking on their part. We were very appreciative of the approximately 30 out of 100 responses however and received some very interesting and helpful answers.

We requested that no pastor or church name be indicated in any way, but did ask for the church membership size. The questionnaire requested that they analyze two ministers---their strong points and their weak points. We asked for characteristics that were beneficial or detrimental to the harmonious relationship of the pastor and his membership. It was suggested that they might want to evaluate his strengths in the pulpit, in church administration, and from a ministry standpoint. A majority seemed to suggest that most churches had pastors that rate fairly high with their people in sermon preparation and visitation. Certainly this is very important. A pastor must be used of God to proclaim the word and express a love and compassion for his people through visitation. One man stated his pastor was poor in visitation, but he accepted this fact because the pastor saw to it that visitation did get done through others. Some of the detriments to harmony were ego, interest in personal gain, dictatorial attitudes, absent from the pulpit too often, and poor staff relationship. It would behoove a pastor to try to determine any annoying habit or trait that he might have, and I hope to suggest how this might be accomplished further along. One thing that concerned me in the responses was the large number that stated their pastor was poor or very poor in administration. In fact, more of the respondents reported this a problem than not. I am sure this would arouse justifiable response from our ministers in their defense.

There were three responses that particularly caught my attention. One was from a very intelligent and dedicated layman from one of our larger churches. He stated that “where there is a visible growth in Sunday School and people are experiencing spiritual renewal, that particular church is on the road to successful pastor-laymen relationships.” This is so true, and I am grateful to him for sharing this with us. I am glad that he did say “on the road to”, however. It could possibly be oversimplifying it to suggest that no matter how well intended and how dedicated we might be to the Holy Spirit’s leadership, we laymen or pastors are not infallible and not immune to some of the frailties of human beings that can bring about conflict. Another layman summed it up in a unique way when he stated, “Pastors are under tremendous amounts of pressure in today’s society. They need reprimanding, understanding and most of all support from each of us.” My good friend, Dr. Robert Pinder, a professor at Texas Tech, made this statement in reference to the pastor. “The real issue, I believe, is the person. Whether he puts the emphasis on preaching, administration or ministry is not as important as the spirituality, maturity, and loving care relationship of the pastor to his people.”

Recently my wife and I had the privilege of having a good layman friend from another town as our guest for dinner. He made a statement that I had to challenge. It all started when I expressed appreciation for his former pastor in a series of messages we had heard. I asked my friend if my analysis of this pastor was not correct in thinking that he was quite reserved and possibly a little aloof. He said yes, that this pastor was very particular not to make close friends or to let anyone get close to him in any way. This pastor was also very careful never to attend a social with only a small group present. This pastor is a man of great ability, spirituality and a soul winner. My friend went on to ask “can a man be a good joe and a real leader?” My immediate response was, “Yes.” There are many laymen and pastors that fit into this picture. I know a pastor does have to be very careful about “cronyism”. However, we all need significant persons that we can let our hair down with. We need some friend that we can confide in, pour our heart out to and get some feedback from. A Christian counselor once told me that one of his surprises had been the number of ministers that sought counseling in his office.

When I graduated from dental school it was in conjunction with the Emory medical students. I remember only one thing our main speaker said to this large group that had worked so hard and for so long to reach their goals. He said that it might shock us to know that with all our training, 85% of our success depended on our personality. Grant you, God can use a burning desire to reach lost souls in spite of a sometimes drab, negative personality. But what more could he do with a radiant Christian personality? I have spoken to men’s groups a number of times on a subject I have called “The 10 Commandments of a Christian Personality”. One statement I always make is, just because we are born with a stinking personality that doesn’t mean we are stuck with it. Just as Luke 9:52-56 tells us that God changed John, James’ brother from an abrasive type personality to one of love and tenderness, so can he change our personality. It must be a genuine change however, for even a small child can detect insincerity. The spirit of meekness will achieve far more than a critical and censorious spirit.

Emotional immaturity is often reflected in the performance of deacons and other key church leaders when they have exaggerated opinions of their influence in the church. The deacon or deacon body that conceives of its role as “running the church” is destined to result in pastor-laymen problems. Emotional immaturity in the personality make-up of either the pastor or key laymen is often the basis of many relationship problems.

What can be done when undercurrents develop? We can do as Matthew 18:15 tells us. Go to the source. Have a meeting of the minds with a Christian attitude. We need to be a good listener---not with just our ears but with our heart also. There is a real need for an attitude of love and understanding. Too often we hear of pastors who look on opposition to their pet programs as a threat and from then on that otherwise faithful leader is sidelined---excluded in many ways. We need to have open minds and a benevolent spirit. A frustrated pastor might do well to consider Proverbs 3:11-12, that he despise not the chastening of the Lord. Sometimes the Lord has a message for us in our reverses. It is scriptural for us to glory in our adversity. We need to ask God what lesson he has for us in it. E. Douglas Kenny recently stated in a businessman’s publication: “The government is apparently trying to deny everyone the opportunity to fail. The one thing I would most hope for in the future is that we will be provided with an opportunity to fail, because it is the only way our kind of society is going to prevail. It is unhealthy for the country; it is unhealthy for the leader, if we are protected to this high degree.” It would be good to know if Mr. Kenny is a Christian and know how scriptural his statement is.

To quote Dr. Sander’s book, *Spiritual Leadership*, “spirituality does not equate infallibility. The fact that a person is indwelt by the Spirit and seeks to be led by the Spirit will doubtless mean that he is less liable to make mistakes than those who are not, but since he is still in the flesh, he is not infallible. Even the divinely called and Spirit filled apostles made mistakes which required divine overruling.” Dr. Sanders goes on to say “a leader must be a man of conviction and be prepared to stand for what he believes, but that is different from assuming virtual infallibility. Willingness to concede the possibility of an error of judgment and to defer to the judgment of one’s brethren enhances rather than diminishes influence.”

There has been some new concepts of pastoral leadership developed in recent years that present some problems for strong laymen in the churches. These concepts describe the pastor of growing, successful churches as being strong, authoritarian leaders in the churches. A study of the “Super” churches which have achieved significant results in growth, baptisms, etc., most often reveals the pastor as strong, dominant, and in many instances almost “dictatorial” in his leadership concepts. When a pastor, with this concept of leadership accepts a church in which there are strong, able deacons who have in past years exercised strong leadership in the churches---this often is the basis for problem areas in the church.

Over the years I have attended a number of dental practice management seminars. You can always glance around and quickly ascertain that the majority of the audience are young dentists in the early years of their practices, eagerly devouring every word of the clinician---hoping to learn how to make it big in his average small town. You can always know the program speaker is some “hotshot” from Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, etc. Twice over the years one of these young dentists have come to me with a tale of woe about his practice and wanting to know the reason for some of his doctor-patient conflicts. It was not hard for me to quickly tell each of them that you cannot apply everything these big time clinicians say into their small town practice. A dentist cannot go to one of these seminars without learning something helpful to his practice, but it is imperative that he use a little common sense in what his clientele would accept. Many of the seminars available to our pastors today understandably feature pastors from our so-called “super” churches in Florida and elsewhere. This is good; we need to hear them. Things are really happening in their churches. In this day of changing times and ways, a business as usual approach often fails to reach people. However, our pastors need to know their congregations and use a little common sense in just what they can bring home and expect their people to accept.

The physical plant, the budget, the staff, the ministry, and many aspects of the large city church are somewhat different from the smaller town or rural church. Pastor-laymen conflicts in the larger church are often not felt in the way that they are in the smaller church. That is not to say there may not be any. They are more often minimized by being lost in the crowd. It is possible that the average large city church

laymen would have difficulty identifying with pastor-laymen relations in the smaller church. I believe all this was borne out by the lack of response to our survey by the major city churches in Florida as compared to a much higher percentage of responses from the town and rural churches. Yet a lot of our pastor-laymen conflicts are brought on by laymen not readjusting their attitudes toward and expectations of a pastor who can no longer have some of the personal contact with his membership that he could have had had the church remained smaller. A pastor of a large viable city church is said to have told his people that they did not want to see him come to their doors because it would mean they had a death or serious illness in the family. The lay membership needs to understand a hard working pastor's limitations---that he cannot always be strong in the pulpit and all things to all people during the week.

Pastor-laymen conflicts could sometimes be avoided if there could be more candid, objective, and honest conversation between the Pulpit Search Committee and the prospective pastor. A thorough investigation by a Pulpit Search Committee would always reveal the leadership "balance" in a pastor's present place of leadership and make it possible for the committee to evaluate that balance so far as the requirements of their church and congregation are concerned.

In the course of my research for this paper, I found a couple of areas in which there is apparently some need for study and evaluation by our denominational membership. One that brings out a lot of varied reaction is the involvement of the pastor in an interest or business outside the church---even on his own time. In the day, when a majority of working age wives are involved in supplementing the family income by some kind of work, we are finding more and more of our pastors with outside involvement. Personally, I have very mixed emotions about this. Many would quickly say there is a difference, but I would react very negatively to being told that I, as a dentist must divest myself of my active involvement in banking, cattle and the nursery business. Pastor-laymen conflicts often develop from a pastor having outside interest even though his participation is limited to his off time. A pastor must look very carefully at this matter lest his involvement prove detrimental to his ministry and his pastor-laymen relationships. He would do well to be completely open in any outside involvement. On the other hand, we laymen would do well to reassess our attitudes toward this matter.

A very large percentage of the respondents to our questionnaire reported a weakness of the pastor in administration. This question was raised in our interviews with pastors and consistently they suggested that although courses were offered in the seminaries in this area, many seminary students fail to realize this need 'til they have been in the pastorate a few years. Some of our seminaries and Nashville are becoming more aware of such needs and making available one to three week courses of study in several areas of administration. Our churches would do well to have a benevolent attitude toward encouraging our pastors in time and financial assistance to take such courses as he might feel the need.

Pastor-laymen relations can often be influenced by pastor-staff relations. Dr. Jerry Brown in his book *Church Staff Teams that Win* states, "...working on staff relationship is some of the most productive time spent for the long range life of a church." Dr. Brown goes on to suggest that "...ministers often experience loneliness and have a real need for significant others who are willing to walk with him in his need." This could be a good sounding board for the pastor to receive a little dialogue on some of his feelings and some of the responsiveness of the people to some of his methods or programs. It is vital for a pastor to know the feel of the people and to possibly become aware of areas that might bring about disharmony.

An outstanding Methodist layman recently got my attention when he related something to me of the Methodist Parish-Pastor Relations Committee. It apparently works real well for them when the committee is carefully selected by the church nominating committee. Our Baptist churches would do well to consider the work of such a committee to meet with the pastor on a periodic basis to evaluate a number of aspects of his ministry and to possibly act as somewhat of a mediator when conflicts do arise. One Baptist leader projected the thought that a pulpit committee might continue functioning as such a committee.

At times a pastor might look to his deacons with the encouragement to help him know the feel of the people. The church staff members individually or collectively should be of help in maintaining good pastor-laymen relations. A pastor might follow a routine of say, annually calling in each church elected

head of the different organizations with an expressed interest in their organization, their goals, their needs and to give them an opportunity to express how he might more effectively aid their work. Much too often, we hear these organizational leaders express dissatisfaction with a pastor's interest in the work of their department. Many times a pastor probably does not realize that he doesn't appear supportive of these organizations, yet they are all vital to his ministry and the ministry of the church.

Finally everything we do should be preceded by a prayerful attitude that we be in the will of the Lord whether we be pastor or laymen. We need to suppress our own ego and be sure that we not get ahead of the Lord's will in what we plan or do. There is no better way for us to overcome any immaturities that might be ours, whether pastor or laymen, than to be consistent and faithful in our personal bible study and prayer life.