

HOW LONG SHOULD A PASTOR STAY  
ON A CHARGE? HOW SHOULD HE  
KNOW WHEN TO MAKE A  
CHANGE?

Rev. Paul F. Elliott, in *The Pilgrim Holiness Advocate*

The call to preach the gospel is no guarantee that one will succeed in this calling. There are certain conditions to be met in order to make good. Without a doubt, the pastor is the key man in the local church and there is no bigger job than being a successful pastor. The length of time a pastor should stay on a charge will depend to a great extent on how successful he is.

If we would make good, we must learn to be good stayers. No business man can succeed in one year. The efficient school teacher cannot build up a good school in one year. The physician must stay in one locality for several years to establish a commendable practice. The lawyer must stick to one job and to one place for years to build up a great law practice. I think we are all agreed that it is often necessary for our pastors to stay in one field many years to establish strong centers of holy fire. The men who are establishing strong churches are the men who are good stayers, and the men who are good stayers are men who are successful. It will take longer than one year to determine whether a man is a success in his field of labor or not. It may take years to tell the story.

I sincerely believe that all our ministers desire to make good. It is not my aim for you to consider this scribe a pronounced success in the ministry, but the years that I have spent in the ministry as a young man have taught me that there is an art of making good. I have been deeply interested in the success and failure of preachers. My father was a minister, and from my first recollections he served as District Superintendent. This put me in direct contact with many of the problems and perplexities of a pastor. I have known some ministers who seemingly were always having trouble. I said there was an art in making good—the finest art. If a pastor succeeds, I want to know why he succeeded; if he failed, I want to know the why of his failure.

One of the saddest sights one sees is the case of a man who believes God has called him to preach when there seems to be no people called to listen to him. And what is more, there are few men who can command a hearing unless his own people commend him to their friends and neighbors. But as far as that is concerned, I suppose there is no place of responsibility in human affairs that does not depend quite largely upon ability to get along with others and in securing their co-operation.

A man's success or failure as a minister turns at last on his disposition. In spite of fine preaching ability and strong administrative capacity, there are some ministers whom no congregation wants, because of their dispositions.

Every minister who would make a success in his ministry must be a shining example of love in action, must exhibit easily and always the poise that peace affords, must be carried forward and upward on the wings of optimism, and must constantly exercise himself thereunto, through all the varying, trying, painful experiences of the minister's life. In Colossians 3:12-17, Paul tells us that

we should be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and good temper, to forbear and forgive each other in any case of complaint, as Christ forgave us. Above all we must be loving, for love is the link of the perfect life.

Just to keep sweet ourselves is the surest way of making other people sweet. It is the best antiseptic of the poison of biting tongues; it disarms sermon critics; it neutralizes church quarrels; it brings people to church and makes the minister a welcome visitor in every home and means success to him in his labors of love.

Then again a preacher's stay on a charge might be determined from another angle that sometimes, to some ministers, seems of minor significance. There is a sacredness and holy dignity about God's ministers that should be maintained. A preacher should know how to dress. He should not dress like a dude, neither should he dress like a tramp or an object of charity. Clothes will not cause you to say greater words, but they often give your words greater or less effect. A preacher should know that his shoes should be shined, his trousers should be pressed, his hair should be trimmed, his nails should be clean, he should be well shaven, his teeth should be clean, and his breath sweet and wholesome. A preacher should know that his home and children should be kept clean and that there is little reason why it should not be thus. If his wife is not strong, then he should lend a helping hand and see that these things are done. Clothes and personal appearance do not make character, but they do help to make reputation, and thus help you to succeed. I am acquainted with preachers who could be a success, and pastor good churches, and win many more souls for Christ, if they would look after their personal attire more than they do.

I asked Dr. Nathan Cohen Beskin how long a pastor should stay on a charge and he replied, "Stay as long as he can." I then asked some ladies the same question and one of them said, "A pastor should leave when he begins to preach his old sermons over again dressed up under a new subject or text."

The danger of staying too long haunts the preacher who has been on a charge any length of time. I sincerely believe he should consider making a change when the people cease to respond and co-operate with his leadership. Why hang on when the church has ceased to grow, and your vision has been realized? I suppose it is a good thing that some preachers stay until the work begins to lose ground, because the program has been run with such intensity that the average preacher cannot hold it at such a height. It is far better to take a church that has run down a bit than to take one at the height of its progress. I have observed through these years that the more intense pastor remains a much shorter time in one field than the pastor who runs his program with less intensity. Brethren, we must find a logical place to hew us out a kingdom and stay until the kingdom has been hewed out. Do not stay too long and tear up all the good you have done.

Life calls for many adaptations. The scientists tell us that untold thousands of animals have died from sudden geologic changes. Their physical constitution and lack of thought power made it impossible for them to adapt themselves to the new conditions. Hence they passed away. It is said that an ape will warm its paws over a fire left by a

chance traveler, but it does not know how to add fresh fuel. Homes are wrecked, lives ruined, and souls damned all because the responsible persons fail in the art of adaptation. Perhaps few callings demand so great adaptation as the work of the ministry. He who succeeds in it must have some of the unselfishness of Jesus who pleased not Himself, and possess some of that which made Paul all things to all men. There must be no compromise on principle, to be sure, but a noble perspective of life in all its relations and a manly willingness for others to think and act as they please in matters of little or no consequence.

It requires adaptation for the preacher to successfully change his field of labor. Especially is this true when he changes to a widely different section of the country. All too frequently the newcomer assumes that the modes of expression, the customs, and the ways of doing things in the new field are inferior to those practices "over in Cyprus" whence he came. This may be true. No matter where a normally intelligent person goes he will doubtless find much that could be changed to an advantage and some things that are indeed inferior. Nevertheless, it is poor psychology to reflect upon those among whom, with whom, and for whom he must labor. The preacher must remember that his work is to win souls, not to air his likes and dislikes about things which do not matter. Proper adaptation requires that we understand the psychology of those with whom we labor. We must work with them, not against them. People resent, or follow reluctantly, a leadership which savors of the superiority complex; but they are amenable to the suggestions of a capable leader who, as one of their number, labors with them to attain proper and better ends.

Finally, the time element must be taken into consideration when important changes are sought. People of strong mentality do not readily fall for every new suggestion. Preachers have made shipwreck by trying to effect at once changes which could have been made successfully, if more time had been allowed. I am thinking of a pastor who stayed only nine months on a charge just because he wanted to change customs and order of services which had been in effect for some twenty years. He tried to do it in the first six months he was there. He failed because he could not adapt himself to the existing conditions. When efficiency demands that the old machine be overhauled, it should be done by a well trained mechanic who can be trusted not to apply some crackpot invention that will wreck the car. That which cannot be done with a fair degree of unity, in some instances, is best not done at all.

In closing I would say a pastor should move whenever the time comes that he cannot receive the hearty co-operation of his congregation, or when he is insisting on having his own way and the people will not work with him. The sooner he moves, the better it will be for all concerned. As Wesley said, this world is our parish and we have all we can handle to combat the enemy on the outside, without having divisions on the inside. Then, too, I believe if a man will live within the sound of the still small voice of the Master he can know the will of God in the matter of moving.

Discretion is the salt and fancy and the sugar of life: the one preserves and the other sweetens it.—Bovee.